

# *Forgiving and Forgetting: A Post-Holocaust Dialogue on the Possibility of Healing*

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*Their conscience is our laundry  
Hung in the wind  
Without a trace of genocide.*  
—D. Weisstub, “Retold Memory” (1998)

*I believe with full faith that the liberal judge  
gave names while interrogated and was released  
into the street with enough guilt to last  
a lifetime.  
I believe with full faith that the president  
of the psychiatric association sits dispassionately  
counting the profits of the junta, now deposited  
many shores from Buenos Aires.  
I believe with full faith that the government  
official lives in the statistics  
that he believes are official lies.  
I believe with full faith that the patient  
who testifies to acting and poetry  
is brain damaged from needless drugs.  
I believe with full faith there are people present  
who have tortured and compromised out of fear  
and love of power.  
I believe with full faith that saints are absent  
where we are present, and that our collective  
responsibility condemns us, now,  
and for the days when we remember.*  
—D. Weisstub, “Argentina, O Jerusalem,”  
in *Graven Images*, vol. 1 (1994)

*No person can deny, no reasonable person, that this Cen-  
tury is mine!*  
—Paraphrase of Al Pacino as Satan in the 1998 motion  
picture, *The Devil’s Advocate*

At the end of this century there are so many occasions, so many residues of the most violent of times, that challenge the very idea of forgiveness—residues personal, political, social, and cultural. The harms are vast and yet close to home: alcoholism takes its toll on relationships, divorce undermines love, parental harshness and abuse create generations of problems for offspring, addictions of every sort turn humans into caged spirits. Additional and even greater challenges include infidelity, breaking public promises, political power plays, torture, genocidal slaughtering of races and tribes, civil and cultural wars, ancient enmities—Northern Ireland, Bosnia, the Tutsis and Hutus, the Shiite and Suni Moslems, the settlers and African immigrants in South Africa, indig-

enous populations against the dominant culture. The open violence and rapaciousness of human enmity can be viewed now in the displacement of masses of people in Kosovo. Said the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, about the Kosovo crisis: "It is frightening . . . that this century, as in its darkest hours, should end with the mass deportation of innocent people."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, there are so many harms and injustices, killings, and suppressions one scarcely knows where to start. This violence seems endemic to the human spirit, and is not an exclusive feature of one or another oppressing culture. Just as one cannot do bioethics today without memory of the Holocaust and these past and present animosities,<sup>2</sup> so too a worldwide bioethics requires that we pay attention to the destructive tendency toward violence even in what appear to some to be "noble" political and religious causes. As Robert Burns said, "The best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft a-gley."

Yet how terrible the toll on those persons and societies that fail to forgive, that harbor and nurture hatred and revenge. Ironically, hatred and vengeance are appropriate and natural responses to repugnant conduct and situations. When injustice occurs, rectifying it is a virtue, as are the social virtues of loyalty, kinship piety, and group solidarity with people who have suffered. Yet to swallow the harms without forgiving those who inflict them makes those hurts fester until they later explode into retaliation wars, murder, and personal mayhem. We are cut down by the very responses we employ to honor the memory of those who have been treated unjustly. If we truly feed our hatred and revenge, we arrive at the same immoral, impossible place that the perpetrators were in when they executed their murderous actions on others. We have met the enemy, "and it is us."

To honor the Millennium, and place our violent twentieth century behind us, we would like to tackle in this dialogue the deeply problematic virtue of forgiveness that leads to healing. If nothing else, we agree that bioethics, law, indeed moral conversation in any field, cannot neglect the Holocaust. Our dialogue parallels conversations and meditations we have had during our personal friendship and professional collaboration on international conferences and projects. It is also distilled from our personal lives and friendships with many others who struggle with forgiveness. Because of our respective religious traditions, we focus on Western Civilization nurtured by the Judeo-Christian heritage, and common and distinctive philosophical and religious tenets. The examination, however, is philosophical.

We share a common Judeo-Christian culture that requires atonement and forgiveness. In different ways these requirements mark the recognition that pure secular humanism is flawed, given that human beings are flawed and their institutions are flawed. Because of this recognition, to forgive is truly divine because it is a leap of faith into the dark side of human capacities. We also share the conviction that a decision not to forgive is dangerous to health, healing, and one's moral compass. Our dialogue is created by different strategies that arise from our thinking, relationships, culture, and faith. We found that the strategies themselves reveal underlying cultural and religious differences that should not be lacquered over. Thomasma starts the dialogue and Weisstub responds. Two short responses follow in turn.

## DCT

I have been beset for many years by my own depth of resistance to forgiveness. I can only begin to imagine how difficult it must be for those who have far

more reason than I to reach out toward those who have seriously harmed them. All of us have close friends who carry around with them the anger and mistrust born from their experiences. The exasperations they harvest from this loyalty to the dead, to memories of victims of injustice, are bitter indeed. More so, because the inability to forgive not only shapes but also scars their lives. The memory of those loved ones lost to the madness of the modern state—victims of the Holocaust for example—must permanently require vigilance and caution about both the good and evil capacities of human beings and their concurrence. This is important for the process of forgiveness, I will suggest, because our attention must focus on both the good and the ill in human nature.

More than any other era, the twentieth century magnified those capacities. Technological and artistic strides are present in every century. So too are the faults the same. Primitive peoples also attacked one another. But the vastness of scale, the immensity and rapidity, and the universal consequences for all citizens (of germ warfare or nuclear destruction) are new. Propinquity to the consequences of one's conduct has been lost, as have been the valuable lessons for correcting one's behavior. Now it is common to abjure one's personal responsibility in favor of social goods or the good of the state. This release from the horrors of one's actions is new insofar as these actions now affect billions of people, rather than a smaller number within one's tribe or region, and such actions can and have wiped out whole cultures and natural environments.

Given these challenges, what are the possible responses to harms? It seems fruitful to look at them in four categories:

- Neither forgive nor forget.
- Forgive but do not forget.
- Do not forgive but try to forget.
- Both forgive and forget.

I will just introduce these ideas here and leave for the rest of our dialogue whether and how each of these responses is a justifiable and defensible moral avenue.

By neither forgiving nor forgetting, one perpetuates the memory of those who have been harmed or killed. To forget them is quite impossible. And the easiest way not to forget them is never to forgive those who have harmed them. Yet one finds that harboring hate means that one cannot move on with one's life—and a human being is meant to continually grow and develop; otherwise one ceases to be a moral agent. To be locked in a particular moment of time and place is, at least partially, to become spiritually, emotionally, and sometimes physically frozen. It is a jail sentence that survivors impose on themselves out of love for others who suffered the ultimate sacrifice of their lives.

Perhaps the hardest pathway to follow is to forgive but not forget. One honors the memory of the victim by not forgetting, by holding as a treasure within us their lives and their values. By refusing to become like the evildoers, however, a danger of neither forgiving nor forgetting, one opens and expands one's human capacities for moral growth. The entry point to this pathway is letting go of the pain. "The pain is the shelter that encloses your understanding," as Kahlil Gibran says in one of his poems. Acknowledging the source of the pain and anguish, one begins to understand not only the cause of the criminal trespass but also the failed humanity of the criminal.

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The first pathway, neither forgetting nor forgiving, is far easier work for a human being than is this second one. For in the second one, a person is unwillingly faced with the horrible vision of evil within another's life, connecting thereto through compassion and forgiveness by "doing unto others as we would have them do unto us." Understanding and accepting that evil within others and within oneself transforms it. It no longer exercises the power over us it once had. The evil itself is absorbed into good.

In the Lord's Prayer, the Christian asks to be forgiven as she forgives, and asks God to "deliver us from evil." The evil from which to be delivered is the evil of not having a choice—in this case, of being so overwhelmed with feelings of hatred and anger that one strikes back to destroy others as we ourselves or our loved ones have been destroyed.

Forgetting but not forgiving seems, on the face of it, an impossible approach to an assault on our loves and values. How could one forget the racist and his genocide, but not forgive him? This question occurs in the aftermath of slaughters like those of Hutu and Tutsi neighbors who must learn again to live with one another in a common society. Most did not have the courage to resist their tribal affiliations and the threat to their own lives if they did not kill their neighbors as directed.

The only starting point to a new life in such circumstances is to forget the rage and madness of the times, but not wholly to forgive those one once trusted. Hanging on to the pain but letting go of the memories may make social repair possible for the immediate moment. This pathway, however, is the one most often detected in centuries of animosity and hatred, like that of the Serbs toward the Moslems who once defeated them, or the Irish toward the Orangemen Scots who settled in their country centuries ago, or the perpetual border disputes created by colonial divisions of tribal boundaries into modern countries. In these feuds, these celebrations of identities, "The Martins and the Coys, they was restless mountain boys," the originating assault is forgotten in the mists of time, but the current rage and revenge is very much present in the lives of the descendants.

Finally, the hardest of all pathways: both forgiving and forgetting. One sorts through the pains and eventually totally forgives by forgetting the trespass. We will be examining much further this ideal because it benefits us to let go and continue our own moral development without nurturing and perpetuating the harms done us, so turning them over and over again into the soil of our spirit that we lock up in a paroxysm of self-pity. Of course we do not forget the victims, but we eventually choose to honor them by incorporating their best qualities and most humane features in carrying out our own lives.

In opening this dialogue, I have suggested that the source of repair is an acknowledgment of human capacities for good and evil, a gradual assimilation of understanding about those capacities, and the moral growth that is almost forced on us from this understanding and subsequent reconditioning of our lives as well as that of civil society. The process is "divine," both because it requires us to step out of the circumstances of our own history and adopt a universal view of human nature, and because this adoption is so difficult that, when it is successful from time to time, it is seen as a grace, a gift of divine intervention, a sacramental union of hard human work and transcendent holiness.

Even for those who are not believers in a higher power, this century has certainly demonstrated how human beings, in the name of a perceived good—

say, ancient tribal loyalties, racial identifications, nationalism, capitalist expansion of markets and products, and socialist reactions—have hacked and maimed individuals and whole peoples into oblivion. If nothing else, we can see the fruitlessness of continued revenge, since all of us have been infected with this evil virus simply by being historical entities living out our lives in the aftermath of past harms. To be historical is to live in “original sin.” The “sin of the world” is precisely that—an inheritance of both nature and culture that is built on misdirected good.

Our common heritage in the Old Testament can be read, as can the New Testament, as a struggle with this problem of evil. How did it come about that high mindedness ends in disaster, from the Tower of Babel to a socialist state? Why do relatives kill one another, from Cain and Abel to those who use the Saturday Night Special on family members? Why do bad things happen to good people, from Job to the nonviolent Gandhi, King, the Dalai Lama? Why is suffering so all-pervasive in human life, more so for the most vulnerable, from the scriptural “widows and orphans” defended by the prophets to the poor in barrios and inner cities of the twentieth century? The harms and their mysteries abound. The answer of our common heritage is that:

1. It is not supposed to be this way. God created us to live in peace and harmony.

2. Part of the reason it is this way is human choices. The myth of Adam and Eve is meant to portray the need for freedom to grow morally with its downside of choosing what appears to be good but may not be.

3. The temptation of good and evil is just that—there are temptations to do evil when we know it is wrong. But there are also far more subtle temptations to do good that sometimes leads to insufferable evils.

4. The human task (with often exasperated Divine help—God is portrayed as being overwhelmed by the hardening of hearts) is to recreate the intended social peace and harmony of the Garden of Eden.

5. This task is so close to our natures, so compelling a vision of an ideal human society, that it can account for many of the evils of modern history, colonialism, the settling of the New World, the communist dictatorships, even Naziism itself. The myth of the origins of evil and the desire for a more perfect, more orderly society, becomes itself a propellant of evil.

6. One must therefore forgive oneself to forgive others. No one is pure before the “Refiner’s Fire.”

## DNW

I agree that cycles of violence and ethnic hatred are ultimately self-defeating. Not only because the intensity for revenge increases exponentially with the generations but also because hatred, as an emotion, paralyzes the individual and eats away at one’s inner soul and spirit. Your remarks eloquently reiterate this truism through the optic of a Christian humanism. Reflections like yours point us in the direction of a higher morality that we should attend to in seeking to arrest our instincts, and to redeem suffering through meting out punishments, just or otherwise.

Yet your analysis opens a series of questions for further discussion and reflection, as we intended in starting this dialogue. Although we might respect the paradigms of response to harms you propose, I suggest that we cannot

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expect to find credibility in asking others to behave in ideal ways, nor even asking that of ourselves, to respond in an ideal forgiving way, unless certain other pressing moral questions are first addressed.

### *Judaism and Christianity*

To me, the core question is whether Judaism and Christianity stem from a shared history or concept in action on the notion of forgiveness, or rather, despite certain similarities, they have truly divergent views. Both traditions address the matter of atonement within their prayers, liturgies, and theological doctrines and, because of their joint Old Testament heritage, including prophetic writings, both traditions can relate to the merciful God who is the comforting presence in Isaiah, the good and caring Father in many acts of mercy and rescue that occur throughout the complex history of the patriarchs and the people of Israel, and most certainly in the psychologically rich dialogues with the very different personalities to be found within the prophetic experience.

However we would be irresponsible not to admit that Christianity has held a view about Judaism, arguably from its inception, that the great difference between the two belief systems lies within the fact that Christianity is a religion of forgiveness, whereas Judaism emphasizes the wrath and vengeance of a tribal deity. This distinction lies at the heart of many anti-Semitic diatribes, and we would be remiss in our historical obligations if we were not to acknowledge that many Christian commentators, from theologians to biblical scholars, have come out on the side of seeing the people of Israel as a people who, by dint of living by the sword, must equally be condemned by it. That is, what mercy should be shown to a people who both through its actions and collective psychology, have nurtured the world view that we should be unforgiving toward those who have transgressed the laws and whose obedience has been put into question? This concept, at least from the Christian point of view, of rigid and unthinking bending before an autocratic deity is precisely the reason why Christianity had to emerge, so the thinking goes, and provide an improved, more universalist and charitable morality.

In their own defense, Jewish thinkers have provided extensive commentaries throughout Christian history to reveal that the core values and attitudes of Christianity are present within the Old Testament tradition, including the writings of the Midrash and the Talmud. Ancient Judaism, they assert, was a highly developed morality system with a concretized respect for slaves, women, children, orphans, strangers, and the poor. It is also argued by Jews that humility and the obligation to treat others according to the terms of expectation for one's own welfare (the Golden Rule) were not only seeded in, but also part of, the Talmudic pedagogy in which original Christianity was rooted. Despite these ongoing debates, there has never been an easy resolution between the perceived differences that Jewish and Christian believers have determined to exist between their respective religions.

To make matters more complex, the actual history of Judaism, with respect to the experience of suffering, redemption, and forgiveness, is often something like the reactualizing of the life of Jesus. That is, the Jewish people have, rather systematically, been the victims of Christian aggression, almost diabolically vindicated by the Crusades, pogroms, and extensive acts of humiliation and

degradation. The notion exists that the Jews as a people are a scourge of history and must be forever punished rather than forgiven for their act of Deicide.<sup>3</sup> Correlative with this understanding has been the attitude that Judaism promotes material rewards rather than spiritual, and that also it is a religion obsessed with hard justice rather than mercy (“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”). This has backed up the view that Judaism is Shylockian and that the sociology of Jewish life, both within the ghetto and without, puts Judaism closer to the devil than to the saint.

Such attitudes about Judaism have fueled philosophical outbursts of anti-Semitism and theological critiques, and can be connected to the fact that popular attacks on Judaism and on Jews usually had the support of more sophisticated brands of ethnic hatred to be found in such luminaries of profoundly different character as Luther and Marx.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, I would insist that a conflating of Judaism and Christianity sharing the heritage on the issue of forgiveness is too liberal a washing of our disturbing historical laundry. Instead, I would insist that we confront history in our mindsets in order to get beyond the impasses that have prevented forgiveness within the context of an open and mutually respectful dialogue. In other words, I would like to suggest that our dialogue begin with a problem rather than with a solution.

Difficulties are further compounded by the fact that Judaism over the centuries has been Christianized, even if we agree that there is a fundamental difference of emphasis within the two traditions. Furthermore, early in its history, Christianity began to show signs of its Old Testament influences. Within Christianity, the structuring of theocratic state entities, religious empires, and elaborate justifications for tight rule systems and harsh treatments of persons deviating from the laws, could, if anything, make classical Pharisees look like an embryonic and underdeveloped group in the habit of theocratic obedience. If anything, we might be justified in asserting that Christianity, over time, has had a parallel history to that of Judaism, revealing contradictory tendencies toward forgiveness on the one hand and harshness of judgment on the other.

Speaking about Christianity without its rule foundation is like speaking about Judaism before its covenant. The real issue then with respect to forgiveness is when and how to forgive, and, furthermore, from whose perspective?

### *Human versus Divine Forgiveness*

A series of dilemmas arise about who has the proper right to forgive, which raises the issue of whether humans are entitled to indulge what rightfully may be the entitlement only of a divine overseer. If great human suffering has occurred, where victims have been sacrificed or even cruelly violated, what should be the parameters of our discourse in dealing with the theological directive of forgiveness? The victims have died in the process. Do we have the moral right to forgive on their behalf? Can we stand in their shoes in order to be merciful?

If they remain alive and imbued with a compelling necessity to have hard justice delivered, wherein lies our right to dissolve the legal process, if there is one, or to judge a moral process if one unfolds? Can we justify putting the parties face to face if the trauma will be inevitably reinvented and vivified? Is it,

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so to speak, un-Judeo-Christian to allow victims to become judges in certain instances? In what way does it defy our moral-legal standards?

### *Responsibility for Society and Future Generations*

Apart from our own mental health, one of the main reasons we so desperately want as much participation as possible in a forgiveness process is that, if we do not, we fall into the trap of succumbing to our own anger and desire for vengeance. Forgiveness is not loving but it is closer to that dimension of the human experience than hatred, which, from a psychological point of view, gets in the way of redemptive emotions helpful in liberating the creative spirit and allowing the self to achieve some sense of happiness and well being in the world. If we believe that we are deserving of love and do not suffer from self-hatred, the psychologically healthy vehicle available to us is to find the good in others, even if only a potential good, and thereby to relate to more positive forces even in people who have done evil acts.

Furthermore, to allow the evil actor to find in himself the capacity for good brings a net improvement to the world, leading to a net gain, not only for the individual but for society, and even potentially over the long term, the lives of a persecuted minority. This is related to the perspective that positive change must come from within and real rehabilitation flows from inner discovery, from being loved rather than being hated, or indeed punished. With this insight we are then armored with the plan for the moral reeducation of our environment.

If we are to break a cycle of violence we need to take a leap of faith on behalf of future generations. If our concern is for our children and grandchildren, it follows that any decision which is taken about forgiveness where the acts of perpetrators have been traumatic for certain symbolic families, groups, or even whole societies, the course of action taken for redressing the wrong and seeking out certain forms of forgiveness will have far-reaching moral and social consequences.

This action for future generations is highly burdensome because, on the one hand there is the moral obligation to respect the generations that have fallen, and on the other hand to create the conditions for positive moral viability in the long term. Balancing the past against the future is a truly Herculean moral challenge for cultures and for our social imagination.

You make the point that the hardest of all pathways is both to forgive and forget. As you submit, this is deserving of an in-depth reflection. How do we sustain our own moral development and that of the next generation while still keeping the victims of immense harm in our living memory? This challenge is not easy to figure out with respect to a future course of action. How much of the past do we want to earnestly tell to communities that have been traumatized and badly treated? To what extent do we want the offspring of certain communities to relive the familial or cultural degradation so as to be truly sensitive to the suffering of their forebears? You make the point that "we eventually choose to honor them by incorporating their best features in carrying out our own lives."

Both Christianity and Judaism struggle with the balance of relating to the pain of suffering, in dealing with the crucifixion and with Jewish martyrdom. The answer should lie in the act of moving from sensitivity, even hypersensitivity, to the positive reenactment of past moral glories. In the process of



reeducating generations, it is a natural human tendency that many of us find ourselves living within the negative experience. But the moral question still remains, pedagogically: how can we be truly and meaningfully positive without having to relive the pain? There is a point at which forgetting is a luxury that we cannot give to future generations. And yet the cost of never truly forgetting is to lock certain people up in what you have called “paroxysms of self-pity.”

It seems to me that the required balanced path should be as follows. Forgiveness should be a subtle process that requires variations based on different contexts in order to know what our true moral entitlements are, either as victims or as social caregivers. Forgetting can only appear in the act of forgiving as an instrument for moral reeducation and for self-development both for oneself and for future generations. It, too, must respond fully and adequately to suffering and the problem of evil. Furthermore, there has to be some relationship established between morality and legality. Finally, forgetting may only be justified as the final stage of moral evolution, when forgiveness has been arrived at through a difficult and often painful voyage. Mere forgetting as a way of moving on should be regarded as morally unacceptable. Mental health is no replacement for moral responsibility, which must include duties and responsibilities to the victims themselves.

### *Reciprocity and Reaching Out*

Forgiveness often does not occur in situations where there is a kind of imbalance between parties on the moral plane. That is, the abuse of persons is often the result of a perspective the perpetrator holds that the other is inferior or even subhuman. Once the violation has occurred, the thought that one can relocate the equilibrium between persons and work out a mutually supportive outcome may in fact be idealistic thinking. In many cases where there is a reaching out, it occurs in circumstances where the perpetrators know fully well that to behave nonreciprocally or nonrespectfully will result in grave social injury to themselves, will lead to their incarceration or death. Self-interest, even enlightened self-interest, seems to be an inappropriate cause for asking for forgiveness or receiving it. When political power on the side of victims becomes a reality and the legal system backs up the moral exchange, there is some hope that the reaching-out process will preclude further humiliations for the victims. That may be the case in much of what has happened in the Reconciliation and Truth Commission in South Africa, but I dare not make assumptions about it.

On the other hand it seems difficult to accept that the Nuremberg experience went anywhere in the direction of forgiveness. The genocide was too great and the reaction of the world community was to come face-to-face with the enormity and depth of the evil in the face of the judging community. The perpetrating community remained guiltless in its self-perception and fundamentally committed to the view that its victims were rightly destined to be removed from the social order. In postwar Germany and in the world, which has had an ample opportunity to reflect repeatedly on the genocide of World War II, we wish to assume that perpetrators are somehow aware, more so than at Nuremberg, of their wrongful participation in breaking universal codes of respect for citizens. However, in at least some of the cases in the South African experience, for example, we can assume that the perpetrators will remain unreformed in

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their perspectives on these matters, since they considered themselves acting out of self-preservation. Do we have a moral obligation to reach out to perpetrators when no moral reciprocity is evident? Or that even the possibility of reciprocity cannot be part of our calculation? At what point does it become ignoble or disrespectful to the victims if we persist in forgiving those individuals who at best may make only a partial moral recovery?

### *The Auschwitz Paradigm*

For Jews, but probably for many Christians as well, Auschwitz remains a term of reference for setting the standards of meaningful forgiveness. The perpetrating system itself was so complete in defining the victims as subhuman, and the apparatus so monolithic in destroying every member of the target group, that we cannot avoid asking whether a social commitment to forgiveness must in certain instances reach its limits. If we are not willing to take the whole road toward forgiveness, what does partial forgiveness mean from a moral point of view? Furthermore, in such examples, do we have the right or have we been given any serious moral mandate to speak on behalf of the millions of elderly, children, and other specially vulnerable populations who met startling and sudden deaths?

The list was long at Auschwitz. After the Jews came the homosexuals and gypsies, political dissidents, and people of other cultures regarded as inferior to the Aryan race. The list was also vast in the gulags of the Soviet Union where many different populations were captured and led to death. In some cultures the categories are simpler and easier to understand: Protestant or Catholic, native peoples, women, physically or mentally defective persons. When we change the contours of the categories, should our approach to forgiveness be altered? Does the depth of a genocide, or its reach, make a difference?

### *Passivity, Humiliation, and Human Dignity*

*Repeat them to your children.  
Or may your house crumble,  
Disease render you powerless,  
Your offspring avert their faces from you.*  
—*Shema* in Primo Levi, *Collected Poems* (London, Faber & Faber 1998, trans. Ruth Feldman & Brian Swann)

The expression “never again” is a refrain that resounds in the hearts of survivors from varying experiences. It is linked to a proposed course of action that, ideologically speaking, may lead directly to an antiforgiveness stance. Passive reactions, which must involve a process of forgiveness, may only further contribute to the humiliation and denigration of the class of victims. We may wish to commit ourselves to developing a strengthened moral capacity, caring first for the victim group and then for larger frameworks, if and when we can satisfy ourselves that there has been a proper reconstitution of a self among the perpetrators, a reconstruction that can be also admired. This process of helping to bring about the conditions of healing, before actually forgiving, then becomes a challenge and a paradox for our moral path.

We might want to submit that only when the Native American in some significant sense can feel again a warrior rather than a defeated party, the Black a political player and in control of her own political destiny, that humiliation can be properly alleviated. This point of view has been the force behind some liberation movements and the creation of certain states. It has been set against select species of colonialism and imperial rule. If we need to pass through certain stages in order to achieve mental health and human dignity, can we ever be justified in saying that forgiveness is a stage in both moral and political evolution that has to be weighed against other necessities? If so, then any profound sense of Judeo-Christian forgiveness that we hold is not only not absolute but seriously fractured.

In some cases, passive resistance and/or passivity is not only virtuous, but is also a pathway of power, as the nonviolent responses of Gandhi and King have shown in our day. However, passive resistance is also a luxury that often would have no impact on the desire to injure that emanates from a pervasive commitment to humiliate and even annihilate a group. Passivity of any kind in Auschwitz not only made no moral statement of any kind to the perpetrators, it also resulted in almost immediate death. For family members who wanted to survive in order to protect their offspring and dignify their own extended community, human dignity could only be achieved through reasserting the will to live and thereafter to bring perpetrators to some form of justice.

Certain acts of heroism can meaningfully be called moral acts when there is a symbolized triumph, where, for example, innocent victims are being avenged. We celebrate a rebellion in Auschwitz or Buchenwald because in such cases some dignity is being given back to the victims. Here again, forgiveness is awarded after experience but does not morally precede justified heroism. The same issue is presented in cases of justified warfare, on the taking up of arms where there is no supportive or trustworthy legal system to go through a normalized procedure of need, assessment, and judgment. Once again we must ask ourselves, where in the trajectory of responses do we locate the rights of intervention to demand of ourselves and of others that forgiveness be attended to?

### *Forgetting: Dissociation or Diffusion of Hatred?*

The mental health element of forgiveness is relevant, and must be unpacked with care. The assumption that we are better off by not hating nor by seeking revenge is basically true, but it has to be looked at cautiously. If we prematurely or in some way even superficially get people to dissociate themselves from the indignity that has been suffered, we may be doing so at our peril. We need to achieve an emotionally integrated working-through of the injury. Otherwise, we achieve a ritual rather than a moral-psychological integration.

Forgiveness asks a great deal of victims and is heart-wrenching but it also has to be credible at the emotional level in the long term. People who have gone through a moral catharsis may have indulged in a Judeo-Christian value, but we must assess whether in the aftermath of such experiences individuals may feel wronged in the normal requirements that we make on a repeated basis in our legal system that there be some balance between crime and victim. Victims may ask themselves why it is that certain groups of despised minorities

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have been historically called on to practice Judeo-Christian virtues more than others, whether it be Blacks, Jews, or Native Americans, to name a few historically noted examples.

There is noticeable social discomfort throughout the world with the repetitious requests of Jews to bring Nazi criminals to justice. There is a great acclaim for the Black community of South Africa to forgive its torturers throughout apartheid. And yet such forgiveness would seem not to make the same point in the prisons of North America, where the vast majority of those imprisoned are Blacks, Native Americans, and so on. What can we demand from each other and who is the right reference for each other? Jews talking to Jews is one reality. Black Africans talking to members of their own tribe or to a political majority of Blacks, is another reality. Holocaust survivors to other survivors, a third reality. In another's experience of being the last member of a tribe that had been systematically annihilated, for example in the hinterlands of the Amazon, by what moral authority can we demand that people forgive each other? And if forgiveness means relinquishing a legal path toward justice, who among us should be entitled to make that moral judgment on our behalf?

The argument can be made on pragmatic grounds that certain judgment practices can be shown to function like a cancer in a society. For to accuse one is to accuse such large numbers that we could not possibly proceed, because we would end up condemning too many of our idols, too many of our families, and too many, ultimately, of society in general for us to move on and function normally. We wake up from certain horrors realizing that, through fear or brainwashing, we have been carried away by the forces of Wotan, by the dark side of our propensities toward evil. Following such mad and collective upheavals, we are wont to blame charismatic leadership, overriding totalitarian regimes, militarism, or even technology run amok as the forces of such magnitude that we have lost all capacity for freedom of action. Therefore, because the numbers are too vast and the nature of the all-encompassing experience so deep, we make the move to forgive everyone, lest we find ourselves in the position of forgiving no one. This is not unconnected to the familiar thesis given about the banality of evil, to the effect that once the forces are unleashed, people at the top function more like bureaucrats than like torturers. In fact, the torturers and psychopaths are a tiny element within a given population. Does our judgment then flow from theological charity or from pragmatic calculations that have little to do with Judeo-Christian values?

### *Collective Guilt*

*Is this to say that I subscribe to the theory of collective guilt? Of course not. You are not responsible for the crimes of your fathers. Committed before you were born, the Nazi atrocities concern only their perpetrators. If you yourself are insensitive to them, to the point of ignoring them in your own behavior, again that concerns you and only you. Still, you must agree, this lack of sensitivity places you in the present—and the present is your responsibility.*

—Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After* (New York: Random House 1970, pp. 160–161, trans. Lily Edelman & E. Wiesel)

Collective guilt is at once both fashionable and objectionable. The notion that we take responsibility for the actions of those closely associated with us is ethically sophisticated and currently in vogue. It suggests that we can go beyond our individual responsibility to acknowledge that we are not ethically isolated in time or place. However, it does not necessarily mean that we blame everyone of the same social identity for the actions of particular persons. This would be objectionable. It does mean that we become open to exploring the causal connections between our own actions and those of the culture or society that has influenced those actions.

In meting out judgments, we are often faced with the predicament that those who design evil are not necessarily those who give effect to it. Those who distort the ideas of humanistic thinkers to incite the perpetration of evil are difficult to condemn for the actual acts committed by others. Nonetheless, philosophers and political thinkers who motivate the masses to abuse vulnerable parties are eventually condemned by wiser philosophers. Yet, in these cases, we are still puzzled at what to do about punishments and public censure.

The cases of totalitarian leaders, the Stalins and the Hitlers and the Idi Amins, are more straightforward. They are causally linked to the acts of evil that result from their direct orders. We have no reluctance in condemning them for the evil that results. As dictators, their hand was on the trigger.

When the first causes of evil acts become further removed down the line of command, our confusion about moral responsibility increases, even in those cases where the evil is great. For instance, a prisoner in a concentration camp who is ordered by a camp commander to shoot innocent victims (i.e., a capo) would be regarded by some as equally a victim. Some prisoners sought out the role of capo as a means of saving themselves; however, not all capos who were designated for that role sought it out. In either case, it is arguable that the concept of the evil which ends in such commands was far beyond the mentality of the capo to originate. The prisoner, as capo, is then redefined as a person living like a gladiator in a world where he must kill or be killed. Apparently this also happened to many Hutus who were ordered to kill their Tutsi neighbors or be slaughtered themselves.

But the victims of the capo or racially allied neighbor clearly see the matter differently. They see the capo who is doing the killing as being a part of the system of evil. To his or her victims, the capo is, at least in some, or indeed in most, instances, a self-elected pervert or torturer. Where it could be shown that the torturer did so defensively to save his or her own life, the normal defense of necessity should prevail. Where the lives of others were being saved—for example, those of family members of friends—the acts are further removed from immediate necessity, and the moral questions are inevitably difficult and perhaps unresolvable.

But what we are searching for here is leeway for arguments or claims we might wish to make to justify our collective guilt. Who should be the subject of such claims? Is it morally acceptable to judge a nation for its genocidal practice? For its theorists of evil as well as for its practitioners? And for how many generations?

It is often a liberal humanist contention—and on occasion a supposedly Christian one—that one ought to forgive, and thus “turn the other cheek” to aggression. This is an understandable humanistic ideal, not just for martyrs, but also for those who on pragmatic grounds want to educate a peaceful

society. However, the application of such an ideal—which, incidentally, is not substantiated by the actual history of Christianity in Western society—is morally questionable for victims of real genocide. Passive resistance becomes a moral luxury that few would support in the face of such evil, to the point where we might even say that to require passivity in response to evil is a perversion of the Judeo-Christian ethic. Thus it is one thing for Gandhi to resist the English, when the assumption could be made that at one point they would stop the shooting; it is quite another for victims of a genocide to passively resist when they know very well that the aim of their aggressors is to murder them all at the lowest possible cost.

Jews fear the notion of collective guilt in Western society—one so powerful that it has persisted even to the present day—because it conjures up images of inquisitions and pogroms. For centuries, young and old alike were rounded up and condemned for the acts of their ancestors, alleged to have caused the murder of the Christian deity in far-off Roman times. However, as victims of the Holocaust, Jews themselves have not been averse to believing that the German nation should admit a collective responsibility for what was a unified majority front in provoking the systematic destruction of millions of people.

Thus, the question must be posed whether collective guilt is warranted in some circumstances and not in others. Is the difference between a group's killing of one person and a person or persons unifying to kill an entire nation a difference only in quantity? Or is there a fundamental difference of kind or quality in the nature of the evil and therefore in the nature of the collective responsibility involved?

Throughout history, families, gangs, and communities have singled out other groups or persons who were said to embody an intrinsic evil. This tendency has not been restricted to tribal societies or ancient civilizations. In North America, we are familiar with the history of the Salem witch trials, the Southern lynchings, the vengeance of family feuds, ethnic and racial warfare, gang slayings in urban America, and reprisals against immigrants, aboriginal peoples, women, and minority groups. At what point are we justified in holding our society collectively responsible, or as candidates for collective guilt, in the face of such pervasive or serious cases of socially practiced evil?

For example, one modern controversy questions whether it is justifiable to hold men collectively responsible for male chauvinism and the maltreatment of women. Many men are uncomfortable with such a proposal and they object on moral grounds to the idea that, as individuals, they should be forced to apologize for the aggressions of other men. Believing that they themselves have not committed any wrongdoings and that they do not subscribe to the beliefs under criticism, they protest being tallied into the guilty category of "all men." A similar response is elicited from the members of other groups who have become the subject of collective historical guilt, among them Jews, Christians, Germans, and whites.

In view of all the claims and accusations that have been made throughout history regarding collective guilt, and because the debate continues today, we must be careful to outline the parameters of collective responsibility and therefore of collective guilt, in order to clarify the morality of contentious claims made by groups and societies against one another, and any command for forgiveness. For instance, is it meaningful to argue that the notion of collective guilt is a high rather than a low point of morality if we can show certain

conditions fulfilled? Could we say that, at a certain point, a society or a group becomes responsible and should experience guilt for the consequences of acts practiced at large within it? Pervasive participation in a society of the wholesale denial of certain members' rights could be one term or condition set down for a comprehensive description of validly placed collective guilt.

When hatreds and hate-actions are pervasive within a society, there is also the issue of social determinism—in other words, the cultural variable. How far may we go in holding individuals responsible for hatreds that have come to them with their mother's milk? Because an evil practice or belief is inherent within a cultural tradition (nurtured, as contrasted with being natural), may we speak against the idea of individual guilt but nonetheless press the point of collective guilt, which is the sum total of individual actions raised to a higher level of social responsibility?

Collective guilt and responsibility may, in fact, be moral claims made directly on social leaderships and governments or, indeed, religious institutions that have fostered, ideologically created, and perpetrated evil practices. If we do not first deal with the issue of collective moral guilt, and therefore of the collective forgiveness this should inevitably imply, then we may not find it possible to forgive individuals, if we have not already unjustifiably condemned them for that which they had limited liberty in creating. This is not simply a matter of finding no one to blame; worse than that, there is no one to hold responsible.

History may compel us to struggle with the idea of collective guilt and responsibility if we are to retrain our societies in how not to repeat traditions of hatred. For if histories do not, in absolute terms, repeat themselves, we might at least say that ghosts of the past have a way of continuing to haunt us. By coming to grips with those moral claims that we are justified in making about collective guilt and responsibility—based on definitions for valid collective guilt that we must undertake to evolve—we may give ourselves the opportunity, at least, to progress morally. Our historical acceptance of moral and ethical backwardness as the norm has been at the expense of global social peace.

Sometimes, victims of collective oppression cannot make their voices heard or understood unless they confront the issue as one of collective guilt. This has been the case, for example, with the aboriginal peoples of North America. Until they were able to get a sympathetic response to the idea, which was only recent, that there was a conspiracy or even a genocide being committed against them in North America by the nonindigenous population, their voices were rarely and barely heard. There had been the tendency to think of Indian killers as deviant wild men, or as soldiers acting under orders, but not as the community of nonaboriginal persons at large from which these killers emerged. In studying this phenomenon, are we to conclude that the appeal made to collective guilt is nothing but a matter of opportunistic strategy, rather than a valid claim justified on moral grounds?

The same issue is at stake with questions raised of the legal and moral liability for wrongs perpetrated by certain corporate entities, such as pharmaceutical manufacturers. Are we justified in viewing an entire market sector as responsible for the specific injuries caused by a particular company? Must we single out the perpetrator, or may we look to the damage caused by a single company as the consequence of a group corporate stance in the same marketplace, which is lacking in ethical and moral ownership for its acts, and there-

fore morally and legally negligent? A ripe debate has entered the courts concerning theories about market deterrence in the torts system.

How can we differentiate examples of collective responsibility in the torts system from collective guilt or responsibility that we can attach to certain social groups, including social classes, or particular societies? How, in good conscience, do we determine the lines of responsibility for the production of evil or wrongdoing?

Increasingly, we see not only corporations but social institutions such as the Church taking collective responsibility for the wrongdoing of individuals. Apologies by Cardinal Bernardin in Israel to the Jewish people was a step in the right direction. Another example: in recent years, numerous cases have come to light regarding sexual and physical abuse of children by clerics. Public outcry has raised the questions of whether we should hold the Church collectively responsible and whether the Church should be straightforward in confronting the issue of collective guilt. In addressing the question of collective guilt, do we assume that in some deep structural sense it is the Church that has created the problem? Or must we conclude that because only certain members have acted badly, the institution merely be asked to bear responsibility to the same degree and in the same sense that companies are responsible for the acts of their employees? In the legal profession, this theory has been well stated in the law of torts as vicarious responsibility.

In practice to date, however, it seems that collective guilt and collective responsibility are being increasingly invoked in support of collective reparation. Thus, the collective is more likely to be viewed not merely as vicariously responsible, but in some sense actually responsible, for endemic or widespread practices produced out of its midst. Something in its structure requires amends to the victims and emends for the corporate body.

This tendency is similar to what is happening when we are prepared to say, for example, that South African society was evil because of its practice of apartheid. A society that has certain regulations, laws, and policing functions produces a consequential set of attitudes and wrongdoings. When we begin to question the extent to which we, as that collective society, produce a specific set of problems such as urban or adolescent violence, we are quickly led to reflect on what we as a collectivity of individuals have done to bring about these social evils.

It is perhaps on the point of experiencing collective guilt and acknowledging collective responsibility that we begin to experience appropriate moral maturity. We could say that collective guilt brings us closer to primitive vengeance, and that collective responsibility is an ethic contradictory to the Western idea or ideal of individual responsibility. Or we might rather say that it is in going beyond our private egos that we can begin to think creatively about expanding ourselves into the collective self, opening up possibilities for collective action to redress the wrongs and to reeducate a populace in policies designed for the avoidance of evil.

In most cases where collective guilt is at issue, we are asking the more powerful to consider and make reparation for the moral consequences of what they have done or are doing, as a group, to those who are less powerful. It is important that the admission of guilt by the collectivity should not be required in such a way that it annihilates the inherent humanity of the perpetrators. That is because the objective is not only to redeem the abused, but also to redeem the abuser.



It may be seen as the moral strength of the notion of collective guilt that we ask individuals to reflect on their collective responsibility rather than fixating on the wrongs committed as individuals within the system. Collective and individual guilt and responsibility, however, are not mutually exclusive. It would be the intention in many cases of such collective reflection that the individuals involved would also want to feel personal guilt and enact personal responses of reparation.

For moral advancement to occur, the sense of participation in the collective guilt and in the reparation for its wrongs must extend even to those individual members who may not have participated in the wrongdoing. A collective commitment to acknowledging responsibility, feeling guilt, and making collective reparation should not, however, mean the condemnation of individuals who have truly been cogs in the wheel. The admission of collective guilt by those societies or social groups whose tenets and assumptions produced the oppressive mindset should impart the example of moral courage to individuals so that they may experience personal regret or remorse and a personal commitment to accept their appropriate individual burden in redressing the wrongs of the collectivity.

## DCT

David, I am in awe of your thorough and wise examination of what can be seen as the necessary conditions for forgiveness. As such they are truly a phenomenology of the ills of our time. I concur that they constitute an enormous amount of the difficult work behind forgiving. I agree with most of what you say, but have a few additional observations.

First, I must apologize for appealing to the common features of Jewish and Christian faith on forgiveness and atonement. In trying to be irenic I too easily glossed over the injustices of history, especially those moments that were not shared. Yet I do not agree that Christianity is solely responsible for the hatred in the human heart. Nor can Jewish thinkers or politicians (like Lenin) escape personal and collective guilt for the injustices, maimings, and killings of Christians which their thinking and political theories provoked. Indeed, if we are properly cautious in this regard, the ancient enmities of peoples around the world can be acknowledged as more primary than that based on religious beliefs, as we noted in our Introduction to this dialogue. Enmity seems more likely to emanate from perceived threats to security and prosperity at different times and between peoples all around the world. Hatred and injustice, with the corresponding need for love and amends, seem to be inbuilt features of human nature.

Second I see the moral progress of individuals and peoples as an achievement of forgiveness, given the vast and violent history of the human race. Making social amends as well as personal ones is a work of collective resolve, as you so clearly delineated it. It must take the form of protecting the vulnerable from harm. The best form of this protection is an active commitment of persons to one another as valuable and sustainable entities, augmented and superseded only by, say for example in healthcare, the formation of international standards and rights as research subjects and patients.<sup>5</sup>

Third, in effect I have taken your point about the “never again” attitude and constructed an argument on behalf of forgiveness as a social necessity (for the

moral development of peoples and civilizations). Combining this with the argument for forgiveness as a personal necessity (for emotional health) may signify a kind of natural law about forgiving and forgetting: human beings are so constructed that in order to advance they must learn to forgive and never to repeat the violence of their generation. Perhaps the only atonement or amends to the victims is this commitment and assurance. This does not mean that one abandons the memory of the victims, but one transcends that treasure of love by letting go of the "rage and remembrance," to use the apt phrase of a contemporary classical music piece by John Corigliano about victims of AIDS.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, I remain optimistic that we are called to a higher morality, in Jesus' words, to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," who "makes his rain fall on the just and unjust alike." Hence I do not agree with your statement that we cannot expect people to forgive at that high level. Nonetheless, I do believe that, left unaided by a Higher Power, human beings face almost insurmountable odds of failure. As your extensive reflections and problematics demonstrate, forgiving and forgetting is rough sledding.

## DNW

Despite our respective affirmations about our commitment to forgiveness as a long-term value necessary to sustain and enhance human culture, in completing this stage of our dialogue we may still wish to reflect on the extent to which at root the differences between Jewish and Christian world views reveal alternate faces of a dialectic. Perhaps one could say meaningfully that whereas the orientation of Judaism has been more in the direction of history and covenant, the direction of Christianity has been more committed to idealization and belief. That is not to say that belief is not essential to Jewish worship and practice, nor that Christianity could be comprehensively described without attention to history. But there may be a case that their approach as religious and cultural systems, both for reasons of historical experience and theology, equipped their followers with somewhat divergent lenses from which to see when and how forgiveness should come into play in the context of culture, law, and morality.

The inherent optimism, despite notions of original sin, that comes forward with Christian ideas about man's capacity to emulate the perfection of the deity or universalist values, does not comport with Judaism's more modest observations about the human condition. Ultimately, the end goals of the two religious traditions are synchronistic, but the differences may yet remain clear and distinct on the matter of process. It is right to point out that Christianity should not be burdened for having unleashed a causal chain of evil in Western civilization, an insight surely to be matched by the view that the sins of the fathers cannot be righteously invoked as allegations against their offspring. Yet, we should be clear that although history does not repeat itself absolutely, and that the evils of institutional practices evolve and devolve into unrecognizable forms, we do ourselves an injustice not to see the extent to which the ghosts of history have a way of returning to haunt us. This is surely the truth of Elie Wiesel's comment on collective guilt.

What we must require of ourselves as professionals is to take stock of the extent to which our experiences can either dominate or repress our better instincts, or become the occasion for emotional healing and evolution. As the

influences on our thinking and attitudes lie deep within the psyches of our upbringing and cultural inheritances, we cannot afford to be facile about the need for delineating both the good and dark sides of our individuated human nature and historical experiences. Coming from one tradition to another, we should not convey an inherent moral superiority of any one tradition, once they are at the point of being committed to respect for persons and protection of the vulnerable. If there is a commonality in the traditions, it should be to search out the connectors that establish a consensus morality or universal set of standards around which we could seek to organize our moral and legal thinking for the next millennium. If anything, this century has been a living proof that such a universality is necessary for the future of civilization itself.

### **Conclusion: Forgiveness and the Limits of Professional Healing**

Medicine, law, and ethics share in the professional obligation to attempt to heal the wounds created by serious inflictions against the physical or emotional well-being of a wide array of victims. Throughout the system of practices in which these professions participate, there are ways and means by which these professions attempt to balance the healing of disorders connected to perpetrators as well as to victims. Because of the limitation of social resources and the fact that law is more occupied with punishment than with the process of healing, medicine—particularly psychiatry—has been identified as the professional medium through which we are likely to see the forgiveness process unfold.

However, despite the fact that we acknowledge the healing function in medical interventions, many observers in this century have been perplexed about the extent to which the moral codes of professional responsibility have been proven fragile or wanting in the face of pressures emanating from social or political prejudice, ideologies, state hierarchies, or acts of war. One of the most important challenges for our future professional development lies in searching out the best method for equipping professionals to resist evil practices and moreover to secure for themselves a proper moral basis for action. This search is not without an inherent burden already pointed out in our earlier discussion. That is, how do we morally satisfy the dual requirements of respecting the victim's experience while devoting ourselves to redeeming or forgiving the perpetrators of aggressive and indeed tragic acts?

Psychiatrists dealing with rapists or war criminals may find themselves in moral quandaries about how to cope with the professional obligation to heal while coping with an unavoidable human response not only to want to see justice done against the perpetrators, but also the wish to see that effective healing is provided for the victims, their families, or even large social groups. In some cases, psychiatrists may also hold the view that perpetrators are also victims of troubled familial backgrounds or highly determined socialization. In many contexts, professional treaters find themselves confused about what should be the appropriate moral course of action—what to forgive and how to instrumentalize a process of forgiveness and reconciliation between perpetrator and victim. This raises the question of how best to understand the relationship between the need for professional neutrality and professional/moral responsibility, which sometimes stand in opposing directions.

## *Forgiving and Forgetting*

By and large in our Western culture, victims have been marginalized and our discourse revolving around them has made them recipients of charitable benefits or treatment rather than leading us to participate in a dialogue with them about the pain and suffering of their experience, in which even professionals have often had an unfortunate involvement. Abused children, the elderly, involuntarily committed patients, orphans, and members of minority groups have endured countless episodes of suffering in this century within the walls of socially sanctioned institutions, including the military, and only in the latter part of this century, have they been treated with a reasonable modicum of respect from society and, more relevantly in many cases, from their treaters. In fact, ethical sensibilities have advanced quite considerably in both medical and legal circles since the 1960s and the prospects for more open dialogue between powerful professional elites and vulnerable populations is now well-situated for continued improvement.

Primo Levi wrote that “reason, art, and poetry are no help in deciphering a place from which they have been vanished.”<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, a great deal can be accomplished through the invitation to forgiveness and the encouragement of further dialogue. We reaffirm the hope that a morally equipped medicine may bring substance to our search for a meaningful, dialogic, caring-morality in healthcare.

### Notes

1. As quoted in Nichols B. U.S. says Milosevic rattled; raids intensify. *USA Today* April 7, 1999:1A.
2. Jones DH. *Moral Responsibility for the Holocaust*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 1999.
3. But refer to a movement among religious scholars to seek out of the causes of such anti-Semitism in religious language and interpretation, and root it out.
4. Luther M. *A Compendium of Luther's Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966. Marx, K. *Early Writings*. trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton. New York: Vintage Books, 1975.
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6. Performances on RCA.
7. Kramer J. The accidental Führer: how Adolf Hitler invented himself and Germany. *The New Yorker* Mar. 8, 1999; 75(2):87-91, a review of Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris* (NY: Norton, 1999).