

IS FORGIVENESS ANTISOCIAL?

An OPEN LETTER to an (I think) overwrought New Yorker

Dear _____:

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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In our very brief conversation today, I tried to hear your **case against Christianity** without excessive expostulations from me. The locus of your life-world has always been New York City, which in recent years you've been experiencing as decreasingly livable & increasingly hard on your nerves; so I mainly tried to hear your pain, frustration, & fear, & was not as defensive of my religion as I'd otherwise have been.

But six hours have passed, & it just occurred to me that I owe you a substantive response to what I now feel was a substantive, concerted attack on the whole Christian tradition through the gate of what you think is **the Christian doctrine of forgiveness**.

My response, for your convenience in re-responding, takes the form of your assertions (though largely in my words, & largely from memory: I think I've nowhere misrepresented what you said, & would be eager to learn otherwise).

1 **Jesus was so alienated from the religious & civil authorities as to feel no responsibility for the social fabric.** With the substitution of "little" for "no," I agree. I'll not regale you with references, but he was more outsider than insider: the Lord's Prayer is for another "kingdom," & he seems to have said "My kingship is not of this world-order." He was an intentional agitator & did contribute to the restlessness that led to the ill-fated Jewish revolt of AD/CE 66-70 (an uprising which, however, had somewhat more prospect of success than the Warsaw ghetto uprising of $\frac{1}{2}$ c. ago yesterday). Never having held religious or political office, he could only imagine the burdens thereof; & he organized & managed nothing more difficult than the evangelistic efforts of his small band of followers (turning financial worries over to Judas Iscariot). While he recognized special gifts among his disciples, he left them no community blueprint for founding the church.

All this makes Christianity a far more radical religion than, say, Islam, whose founder went beyond his alienation to organize & lead an army, to attend to civil arrangements among his followers, & to write a guide for inner & outer living. (Muhammad wrote the Qur'an [or, he said, took it down as divine dictation]: Jesus, as far as we know, wrote only in sand, & only once.)

In some past conversations, you've been attracted to this very radicality of Jesus which at the moment you blame him for. Could it be that the former obtains when you are in a courageous mood & the latter when, as now, you feel fearful? He is for you a looming everpresence not just in history but in the business of your heart, & I (& I believe, he) would rather have you find him repulsive than cease paying attention to him.

2 Given Jesus' radical alienation from the status quo, it's not surprising to find him teaching **the antisocial doctrine of forgiveness**, a blanket forgiveness granted on the mere basis of remorse about the past & repentance toward better living. The church heightened the drama of this immoral doctrine by proclaiming that (1) one person, Jesus, died for all, & (2) God will forget anybody's past who is willing to drink Jesus' blood, participate in the Eucharist.

Again, I agree with much of this--not concessively, but triumphantly! Last week a Jew asked me what I mean by "grace" when I sign off letters with "Grace & peace." Well, it's precisely this "immoral" thing that some of Jesus' parables shock us into realizing. The prodigal son comes home, & the prodigally generous father runs to forgive him & then throws for him a better party than he'd ever thrown for his older son, who'd always behaved responsibly--& with money belonging to the older son, money from the latter's half of the estate! And a worker who works an hour is given the same pay as the one who worked all day! And a judge decides for a woman not on the basis of justice but because she's been pestering him! Jesus was into something other--I'd say, something more fundamental--than fairness & justice. And since fairness & justice are essential to the social fabric, Jesus was into something other than making NYC livable.

3 Unlike Christian forgiveness, **Karma & Torah are prosocial, teaching responsibility & enforcing accountability.**

When I countered that an aspect of Jesus' radicality was his call to responsible living & his warning of accountability to the divine Judge, you said "Only 8% of the Gospels' materials convey to us the authentic Jesus, & what you've just said is not Jesus." I replied, "How convenient! You choose the 8% confirming your picture of him! Besides, the historical-evidence reality is nowhere near that bleak."

Karma? Your knowledge of Hinduism is extensive, & it includes such facts as that (1) karma is an individual-soul, not a social, doctrine, & (2) the social influence of the karma doctrine is stagnating, superstabilizing: don't mess with people's tragedies, they're only working off their karma. (Neohinduism, under Christian competition, shows some compassion for the sick & the poor.) If you want to see compassion in action, check out Christian countries, not India.

Torah? You contrasted this "law of retribution" with Christianity's "law of forgiveness." A false contrast, I said. If Jesus did not teach retribution, forgiveness would have no function. Besides, we Christians speak rather of the "law of love," which includes obligation & compassion &, only in that context, forgiveness. You then proceeded to a second false contrast, viz between compassion (which you preach) & Christian forgiveness (which you misrepresent as unconditional, blanket).

But your complaint is not entirely groundless. In our present American society with its flaccid moral-ethical muscles, "forgiveness" tends to be captive to *sentimentalism*, in the spirit of the French twist that "to know all is to forgive all." Unconditional love (a phrase with at least a little redeeming value) tends to degenerate into something clearly immoral & antisocial, viz unconditional forgiveness.

You are wrong: Christian forgiveness is not as you caricature it.

You are right: It's a weakness in Christianity that it tends to err on the side of grace, generosity, compassion. And Enlightenment empirical individualism intensifies this tendency, especially in America. You rightly say that we tolerate criminality to the point of making our cities almost unlivable, in contrast to Muslim countries, which have "no crime problem" (meaning assault on persons & property: Islam lets some other forms of crime flourish). And while you are right that Christianity tends to oppose *capital punishment*, this is especially true since WWII: in most of Christian history there's been little opposition to it. My position is to ask the question, Which way will there be fewer innocent corpses? A few innocents are executed, but execution prevents murders unexecuted, released criminals would commit. The arithmetic here favors capital punishment.

4 **If Jesus died for all, how can you deny blanket forgiveness?**

Jesus' goodwill left nobody out. Its ultimate--&, in the history of religions, unique--statement is, "Love your enemies." But free will, which Jesus teaches (so he persuades instead of coercing, as eg Muhammad did), limits the functioning of good will: forgiveness is offered all, but not all meet the condition for receiving it, viz repentance. The existential way to put it, then, is to say that Jesus died for all *penitents* who open themselves to God's forgiveness through Jesus' preaching, presence, person. The NT teaches this in many ways. One is Jn.1.11-14 (NRSV): "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, ...full of grace and truth." To understand this with your heart, you'd have to be a Christian; but you needn't meet that condition in order to understand with your mind, clearly & fairly, what the Christian offer of salvation through Christ (and yes, through Christ's blood, his sacrifice "for us") means.

5 **The Christian idea of salvation is so individualistic that it frees Christians to be greedy, oppressive, & rapists of the earth.** Christianity is only one strand of Western individualism: you overcredit my religion so you can undervalue it. Further, Christian salvation includes the practice of Christian love, which is anti-individualistic: it is collective in church participation, community concern (including the condition of cities), & in care about God's good earth.