

http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2007/11/the_final_form_of_love.html

"The Final Form of Love"

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is **forgiveness**.

No, I didn't write that. I wanted you to read it as though it were something just written, so I left off the quotation marks. It's from page 63 of "THE IRONY OF AMERICAN HISTORY," a 1952 classic by America's premier public intellectual of the time, Reinhold Niebuhr.

"*Christian realism*" is the phrase Niebuhr's name often brings to mind. He had a wry way of saying things, and I remember the irony I could see in the slightly upturned corner of his mouth when he said things like forgiveness sometimes doesn't work and unforgiveness never works.

He keenly *felt* that realism in the prayer of Jesus which we Christians call the Lord's Prayer. Let's see....

"Our Father...

YOUR kingdom (rule, governing) come

[every human government is defective and deformed];

YOUR will be done on earth as it is in heaven

[the Bible says "God is love," and less than love is not allowed in heaven and will not work, cannot survive, on earth];

Give us this day our daily bread [worthy religion addresses the needs of the body *individual*];

And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us [worthy religion addresses the needs of the body *social*, whose health and even existence-against-anarchy depends on forgiveness]...."

As persons-in-community, we human beings must have our needs met:

our physical needs—for short, "bread"

our interpersonal needs—for short, "forgiveness"

our spiritual need—cohesive centering in worship.

Now please notice that in the first paragraph (above), Niebuhr has used, as its spine, the trinity of "Christian virtues"—FAITH, HOPE, and LOVE. The great love-poem, the New Testament's First Corinthians 13, ends thus: "And now abide these three—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love." Why the greatest? Because without it, faith and hope become ashes. And why is forgiveness (as Niebuhr said) "the final form of love"? Because it fulfills Jesus' command to "Love your enemies."

Love in the form of forgiveness is so powerful that it overrides morality: forgiveness is *immoral*. My willingness to forgive is to be so overwhelming that I stand in the way of my enemies' getting their "just deserts," "what they got coming to them." If you think this is not so, you must think that Desmond Tutu's "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" was and is immoral and insane even though it is world-spectacular confirmation of Jesus' teaching. (That cigar-chomping Christian statesman, Winston Churchill, put the truth in a way Washington now needs to hear: "You don't make peace with your friends.")

The Christian Story shows God modeling forgiveness for us.

"God proves his love for us in that while we were still [impenitent]

sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Of this most basic Christian idea, the *immorality* is obvious: somebody suffering as a stand-in ("vicar") for somebody else is unfair to the stand-in and unjust to the escapee from "consequences."

"**Grace**" (the Christian word for this) cancels "law." Love has many forms, but "the final form of love [God's love and human love] is forgiveness."



Comments

Please report offensive comments below.

Jihadist

I feel reasonably sure that President Bush knows very little about the Crusades, probably nothing at all, and that his choice of the word "crusade" was just an unfortunate accident, misinterpreted by Middle Eastern people, as a reference to THE Crusades. I know that you may find this fact difficult to swallow, but I am sure I am right. He just said it off the top of his head, with no inkling of its possible meaning to other people. That is a problem, of course.

POSTED BY: DANIEL | NOVEMBER 21, 2007 10:24 AM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Daniel :)

Hello. My coffee is percolating.

Thank you for your post. Always a pleasure to read them in On Faith threads.

What you have described about Christians, seems to be true of the adherents of other faiths, including Islam.

Muslims too may attend mosques regularly, but that does not mean they understand or comply fully with the tenets and principles of their faith.

Living in Asia, the most diversified region in terms of race and religion, I noticed that adherents of faiths, regardless of the faith, that are the most devout, understood and embraced their faith, are also the ones that are the most humane, considerate and thoughtful of others.

As for Christians, certainly it does seem complex when discussed by theologians, but the lay Christians I know have a very elegant faith - Jesus is love, love your fellow men, don't do unto others as you would want them to do unto you etc.

The Christians in Asia, including in Malaysia, are active on social issues. The Christian groups and organisations work together with Muslim, other faith-based groups and secular NGOs on human rights issues, especially on women and children, STDs and humanitarian assistance.

I recognise that western Christians (Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand) are different from Christians in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Asian Christians are the most conservative on social issues compared to those in other parts of the world, and due in part, to the culture they're of and in.

And yes, like Christians, Muslims are also a diversified lot with varying level of education and knowledge, not only on their faith, but on their own history and that of others and current affairs.

It is of course, due to the education syllabus of our respective countries, and how our ministers, priests, monks, imams, relate and educate us on our faith. And how interested we personally are particularly on issues of the day and affecting our future.

As for the Crusades that still seems to ring loud in the Muslim world, it was President Bush who reminded Muslims so - in his "crusade" against evil and terrorists. Did not went down well in the Middle East (due to the

historical Crusades) and it was changed. The control of Jerusalem by Israel, the "democratisation" of Arab governance by forced "regime change" also exacerbate the feeling that the Crusade is still on in the Middle East.

America and Americans have nothing to do with the creation of the state of Israel, nor cause World War I and World War II. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have nothing to do with Christianity, but just geopolitical, security and economic interests. Likewise, terrorist groups like Al Qaeda are seemingly couched in religion, but are really about their violent dissent against those they despised who are in power in the Middle East and wanted them removed and have in place, another set of government and form of governance. It's really a civil or very uncivil war that the US walked into and Al Qaeda dragged in when they attacked US embassies and caused 9/11.

As on politicized and superficial knowledge of Christianity, you do get that right as on how many Muslims in the Middle East feel on the Israel/Palestine conflict. Stir in Zionism with what Pat Robertson and other Armageddon promoters are saying, and you have a very potent and dangerous brew. Some harping about the Judeo-Christian civilisation as "our" civilisation vs them certainly form a perception that added more spice or poison to the brew.

Muslims, as adherents of a faith with basically little "church" hierarchy or a central authority for all Muslims (as church headquarters), certainly don't regard Pat Robertson to speak for all Christians, or all Christians are like him and his ilk. Or that thinker-writers like Daniel Pipes and Bernard Lewis speaks for all American academics and experts on Islam and the Middle East. But they certainly are some of the loudest voices heard in the Muslim world, just as Osama is in the western world. It is up to us whether we want to listen to them and/or counter them.

Thank you and warmest regards

"J"

POSTED BY: JIHADIST | NOVEMBER 20, 2007 5:09 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

This is for Jihadist who seems sincerely curious:

There are hundreds of millions of people in the world who call themselves Christians, because that is the inheritance of their birth. Even though many of them might attend church, and observe many religious practices associated with Christianity, that does not mean that they have a very sincere or true interest in Christianity, itself. They just go along with what they have always known, and know nothing else. You cannot blame them because they do not practice a very complex religion which they do not understand well.

Christians are like all other groups of people, some very clever and educated, others knowing very little about the world beyond the little space which they occupy. Many Christians do not know the history of the world, the history of European Christendom with its violent religious wars, nor anything about the Crusades, which still seems to ring loud in the Muslim world. Many American Christians do not know much of the world beyond America, and do not know, nor even ponder the misadventures of American foreign policy.

Christianity is most understandable, most accessible, and most beneficial as a personal religion, which individuals take into their hearts and dwell upon quietly. As Christianity moves away from the individual seeking to live a Christian life, it becomes more and more contradictory, and in fact unworkable. When it morphs into political parties, and state-run or state-influenced religion, it becomes just another contending faction in the contests of the world, and has nothing, absolutely nothing, that distinguishes it, at all from any other faction.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have nothing to do with Christianity. If you ever hear a political leader speak of these wars in Christian terms, it is just hollow political rhetoric, with little relevance to Christians, seeking to live a Christian life.

I think what you mostly know of Christianity is politicized and superficial. Because I know all these things about Christianity, I am able to imagine that the same may also be true of Islam.

POSTED BY: DANIEL | NOVEMBER 20, 2007 11:37 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr. Willis E Eliot,

Thank you for taking time to respond to and clarify on points raised by your readers, including mine on your essay - "forgiveness" in Christian belief and practice.

I agree with you that misunderstandings on race and creed can be reduced if we do listen on what others say instead of just making and relying on assumptions based on our limited and/or wrong information and knowledge.

I read On Faith because I want to listen directly what various faiths' leaders have to say on their respective religions, faiths and/or beliefs and how their faith addresses personal and public issues.

It goes without saying that religious leaders are very important reminders and shapers of personal and group responsibilities as per the interpretations and implementation of faith-based ethics and values at the personal level and in the public square.

Religious leaders are usually forces for good but sometimes and more dangerously, (to freely borrow from and rephrase what Thomas Jefferson said about the British colonialists, but here in the context of religious leaders) - can be and are, "disturbers of harmony".

I'm a woman, but thank you for calling me a "brother" anyway.:)

Thank you and best regards

"J"

POSTED BY: JIHADIST | NOVEMBER 18, 2007 6:59 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Joey

my reply to Dr E also is a follow up to our discussion, for which i thank and salute you.

hj

POSTED BY: HENRY JAMES | NOVEMBER 17, 2007 11:15 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr E

thank you for your response. you are continually good to do so with the readers here.

yes, what you say makes perfect sense. i, who usually incorporate the metaphorical large view in my thinking, also make sure not to neglect the quotidian.

so, while i affirm and understand the big point of Niebuhr's quote, and applaud your elucidation of it above, i did feel the need to nudge it a bit, perhaps because it IS such an important point.

"I can't do everything, but I can do something" should be remembered at the same time that ""Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;" is understood.

finally, i am *trying* to avoid being TOO literal, but YES, the Marshall plan was a "great thing" that WAS "worth doing", and was achieved in General Marshall's lifetime.

I do agree that Paradise and MLK's Promised Land will never be achieved in our lifetime, but once again, Paradise and the Promised Land are metaphorical provinces.

BTW, your description of Christianity in this reply is the most felicitous and clear that I have read from you. thank you.

POSTED BY: HENRY JAMES | NOVEMBER 17, 2007 11:03 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

JOET 11.16 / 1:35p

Ya got it! After some commenters attacked Niebuhr's classic statement on "the Christian triadic virtues, faith hope and love," you asked everybody to interpret it not as a philosophical statement or an ethical claim but within its own genre, viz. RHETORIC: "all good rhetoric should be read for the point it makes, not the enormous limitations of same."

Some wildly wrong readings (previous to your post) made Niebuhr, a hard-headed Christian realist, sound like a soft-headed romanticist.

JIHADIST

I thank you, a Muslim, for saying that you always read my "essays." No hope for approximating peace on earth if we do not read/hear one another across the chasms of creed & race & nation &....

A CLARIFICATION: You thought of "Christian virtue" as "faith, hope and charity" rather than as "faith, hope and love." Earlier translations of 1Cor.13 into English made much use of the Latin (Vulgate) translation of the Greek "agape," the Latin transliterating as "charity." What "charity" has come to mean in English is only one aspect of the original (Greek) word "agape," which means viewing a relationship from the other to oneself (the other's needs being seen as superior to one's own). On the Cross, Jesus died "for us" (which we Christians call "the atonement") while forgiving his torturers & executioners (thus, forgiveness as "the final form of love"). / As a Christian leader, Desmond Tutu's central motivation was & is "agape," the full Christian understanding of "love" (as heterocentric concern—as God in Christ so loved us as to do what was necessary for our salvation, not counting the cost to himself—as put in the Gospel of John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life....").

Of course your religion gives Jesus no such high role in the providence of God, so all the relevant terms—"repentance," "forgiveness," et al.—are otherwise conceived.

One misconception of yours I must correct. Christianity has never used the doctrine of vicarious suffering (centrally, Jesus "taking our sins upon himself") politically, i.e. as causing OTHERS to suffer: it has always & only meant taking others' sufferings upon ONESELF (e.g., the Catholic priest who removed the yellow Star of David from the arm of a Jew & entered the gas chamber in that Jew's place). Causing someone to die for someone's sins is completely foreign to Christian thinking, & always has been.

Of course, as you say, we human beings are individually "accountable" for our behavior. But in Christianity, God's aim is to restore communion with him & create community among human beings—so by the grace of Jesus' self-sacrifice God cancels the sinner's punishment ("forgives" the sinner) so as to achieve the communion of "reconciliation"—the process being repentance/forgiveness/reconciliation. (As in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them....") So, Tutu's "Truth and RECONCILIATION Commission." Christian "forgiveness" is "forgivingness," the will & life of leaning in love toward the offender (as in Jesus' "Love your enemies"). It has nothing to do with whether or not the offender accepts the forgiveness; if the offender does accept, the Christian word for the event is not forgiveness but "reconciliation." An unforgiving heart blocks God's will to forgive. So Jesus says [Gospel of Matthew 6:19] "if you do not forgive others, neither will your [heavenly] Father forgive your trespasses."

You concluded "Thank you," & so do I: Thank you, my brother.

AJDELOSREYES

You say beautifully & powerfully what I sought to say (just above) to Jihadist.

As for forgiveness as breaking the “concatenation” of retaliation, making it possible for offender & offended to walk together through a gate of new life, I like the Latin meaning of the English words transliterated “concatenation”: a linked chain. God’s grace through forgiveness breaks the chain of resentment-revenge-retaliation.

HENRY JAMES

You are so right that Niebuhr’s “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime” is “either rhetorical or non-sensical.” Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a non-Christian, remarked that he was awed at the overwhelming good sense Niebuhr made every time he heard him—so, the statement is rhetorical.

Curing all Calcutta’s sick was “worth doing,” but Mother Teresa could only nibble at the need: she couldn’t possibly “achieve” the fulfilling of the need in her lifetime. Human rights on earth is “worth doing,” but in our lifetime we must be satisfied with nibbling at this need. By things “worth doing,” Niebuhr was pointing to needs so huge that they outrun our capacities & our lifetimes—but not necessarily our faith/hope/love in action toward “shalom,” the total (mind/body/earth) prosperity God intends for humanity (& for which we Christians pray daily, in the Lord’s Prayer, as God’s “kingdom come”). In his sermon the night before his murder, King called it “the promised land” (a reference to Genesis 12-15). Christian poets use various metaphors & analogies for it—as Browning’s “A man’s reach must exceed his grasp / or what’s a heaven for?”

In a later comment, you seem to be asking for an example of some great thing achieved within one generation. How about the Marshall Plan, which gave democracy to our defeated enemies, Germany & Japan?

But we Christians believe that even the highest possible human achievements can never reach goals which themselves are higher than our imaginings: “the kingdom [rule & realm] of God” must be, and will be, God’s GIFT of GRACE. The Christian Story begins & ends with acts of God—creation & consummation.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | NOVEMBER 16, 2007 11:20 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

yes indeed it's rhetorical. and all good rhetoric should be read for the point it makes, not the enormous limitations of same.

back at ya

POSTED BY: JOET | NOVEMBER 16, 2007 1:35 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Mad Love

thanks as well to you. seems like you and Joey have a similar interpretation. and as i noted to Joey, it surely makes sense.

the next question that comes to me is:

Has anything that was "worth doing" been achieved in *more than one generation*, and if so, what is an example?

If one limits the things that are "worth doing" to achieving universal justice or eliminating poverty, we ain't never going to get there.

If it is "worth doing" to write War and Peace or come up with the Theory of Relativity or help a kid get an education who otherwise wouldn't, then the quote seems rhetorical (merely rhetorical?).

and even someone as cynical as I think the items in the second category were well Worth Doing.

love you madly

Henry J

(writing Portrait of a Lady was surely worth doing, don't you think? Don't you?).

POSTED BY: HENRY | NOVEMBER 16, 2007 12:42 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Joey
thanks for the elucidation.

yes, is we focus on "achieve"
we are cast into bottomless chasms of ambiguity.

King "achieved" *some* justice, probably, but it IS all so evanescent.

Reminds me of Henry Kissinger asking Chou En Lai in 1973 if Chou thought the French Revolution was a good thing,

and Chou answered

"It's too early to tell."

POSTED BY: HENRY JAMES | NOVEMBER 16, 2007 12:32 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Mr. James, the way I take it is this: there is only so much one person can do. Mother Theresa didn't cure starvation and sickness. Dr. King didn't end racism. We know that Mother Theresa had some serious doubts about the merits of her actions. All Dr. King got for his trouble was a bullet. But they had to hope that it was worth it. You can make they case that Dr. King could have had a *better* life by simply keeping his mouth shut. Mother Theresa, likewise had *better* options. They both took on wars that they had no chance of winning at great personal cost. I think that's where the hope faith and love comes in.

POSTED BY: MAD LOVE | NOVEMBER 16, 2007 12:27 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Henry: another way of reading it is to say the things that are really worth doing won't in fact succeed until more than one generation of great people have done them notwithstanding that they wouldn't see the fruits of their labors in their lifetimes. read it that way and you have the opposite take on it. ahh the rich ambiguity of the english language.

POSTED BY: JOET | NOVEMBER 16, 2007 12:14 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr Elliot

Since I am quick to criticise you when I disagree,
let me praise you for a mostly very sensible article.

I have great respect for Mr Niebuhr, but I do think his first clause does merit more elucidation.

to asy ""Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;"

must either be rhetorical or it is non-sensical. And my meagre mind is missing its rhetorical use. Can anyone enlighten me?

Mother Theresa helping the sick in Calcutta was not "worth doing"?
Martin Luther King speaking out against injustice was not worth doing?

What am i missing?

love

Henry

POSTED BY: HENRY JAMES | NOVEMBER 16, 2007 10:51 AM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

And, Jihadist, have to point out that this problem is not unique to Christians:

"I still has some difficulties with "someone dying for my sins". Is that why some Christians have no compunction in killing innocents in Afghanistan and Iraq that has nothing to do with the sins committted by Osama and Al Qaeda? That, at least, someone is dying for the sins of Osama?"

Apparently, before Afghanistan or Iraq even *got* there, Osama convinced some Muslims that a lot of innocents ought to die for what *he* thought was their collective sins, ...apparently in the name of some idea that a 'loving' eternal judge and punisher would make *that* OK.

For fairness, I quote this, I just note that these ideas aren't *quite* unique to Christianity, if somehow they just keep coming up among 'People Of The Book.:'

"You just made those innocent Muslims "martyrs" in being killed for what Osama had wrought while he got away with it. Unfortunatately, Muslims don't believe in being punished for the sins of others, or dying for the sins of others. Everyone is individually accountable for their own actions and sins."

Notice how by displacing, yet worshiping, 'judgment,' things still tend to come out the same kind of sideways?

The Reverend here, in claiming mere human love and hope and faith and forgiveness can never be adequate, absolves his own religion of responsibility for its own excesses of power and, really... acts of despair.

If you guys believe your God created me with a capacity for faith and hope, kindly get out of the way if you think he meant 'For later. But, Copyright, with footnotes, please. '

I fail to see the value in holding to some idea you have of your various exclusive accesses to 'Ultimate Divine forgiveness' if you think that never touches *Earth.*

"To those who say there is no hope, I say:

Liars."

One of the most challenging Pagan myths for people to understand is the story of Pandora. ...given a gift from all the Gods, as her name says..

When all trouble and confusion are loosed on the world, *Hope* remains with us. But what do we do with it?

The bad stuff's already in the wind... Suppose *we* are Pandora... by the Gods all-gifted.... What do we do with *Hope?*

"I get the feeling you're waiting for something."

Is that a good idea?

Many cultures have a myth of a *box* they are afraid to open. Call it the Lost Ark, the Triumph Casque, the Ark of the Covenant, the Q'abah, Pandora's Box, whathave you.

Same box, really.

All fun and games, till those boxes make *humanity conditional.* Till they make something 'we unworthies' must save for later, propitiate, worship, try to control, ...and in the meantime kick the crap out of each other over.

Maybe Hope is in the box. Maybe, as in some versions of the tale, Hope got out, too.

The box *is not* Hope.

That goes for your box, too, Reverend.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | NOVEMBER 15, 2007 8:35 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope."

Nonsense. If we can't *express* hope in our lifetimes, then nothing is 'worth' your idea of 'worth.'

Sometimes it's just not grandiose enough to satisfy some absolutists.

Sometimes, this is just a dodge.

" Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith."

Nonsense.

What is true and beautiful and good makes sense in *any* context. Or no context.

Just is.

Saved from *what?*

Life? History? Beauty?

Funny. My *faith* says this world isn't just a speed bump to be transcended and discarded.

"Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love."

No, Reverend, ...we're *never* this thing called 'alone.'

Doesn't mean we aren't *here.*

Love takes *many* forms. But it's not something outside ourselves. It's not an abstraction, it's a *faculty.* One your *therefores* don't define.

"No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."

That one doesn't even make sense to me.

If you're saying that if people don't agree with your definition of what external things constitute 'virtue,' then they are 'sinners' who need your 'forgiveness?'

But I thought no one could accomplish anything without your definitions?

And they wonder why this goes on and on and on.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | NOVEMBER 15, 2007 7:49 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Kudos, Dr. Elliot, or as we say it in Pilipino: Mabuhay! (trans.: Live!)

"The final form of love is forgiveness". Indeed, that is why our God is the God of forgiveness. That's why the Son came to offer himself that creation may be forgiven. For some time I thought that God's power was exemplarily shown in miracles: turning of water to wine, parting of the sea, making the blind see, etc. I was wrong. The ultimate evidence came when in utter weakness, nailed on the cross, Jesus asked for forgiveness for others. The final form of love indeed!

Now I know that we are nearest God not when we pray, not when we labor to feed others, although these too bring us near God, but when we forgive despite our needs, irrespective of abuse to our cherished ways, over our hurts and pains, without counting costs or consequences. An ultimate situation we may never confront, yes, but there in our moral horizon a landmark in our journey around its periphery.

For all its metaphoric beauty, it is really not mysterious, and it is really pragmatic, utile, and beneficial in many ways. It makes us accept our frailties, affirm our unity with all of mankind, level the heights of our vainglories, fill up the gaping depths of vengeful hearts, and assuage the pains we inflict on one another in our journey through life "in this vale of tears." Tell me, which of these can be done if we do not forgive each other.

Being the final or ultimate form, it is the end of a concatenation, a series of logically sequenced actions. Immediately before it comes justice, before that is concern, at the start is acknowledgement or recognition. First then is identifying the other as a sensate creature just as we are and for whom we can sympathize, and then deepening this, accepting him as a fellow man (a "thou") thus deserving our empathy. If we cognized our commonality, we take him to our embrace as our brother for whom we are keepers and who demands from us fairness and some bit more of what we can give or share. Then, even when he breaks our taboos or transgresses our laws, him being contrite, we help rectify his misdeeds and assist him in repairing somehow the damage he has done. In forgiving, we condemn the sin/s but save the sinner, our brother. He must, of course, tread the same path. Only there and thus, can we be of help.

It helps if, before hand, we believe in the ineffable mercy of God. But even not so, God's mercy flows on, and on which we can float through the contours of our lives our forgiving ways. If we acquiesce. At the very least, each forgiving is a small piece of heaven brought down on earth. For the nonce, brief as it may last, isn't it worth what it demands from us?

POSTED BY: AJDELOSREYES | NOVEMBER 15, 2007 12:54 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr. Willis E Elliot,

I always read and never commented on your essays in On Faith before. Christian theology is the most complicated of all faiths in the world. And your essays seem to have been written either for fellow academics or theologians, or to elevate Christian believers to a higher thinking.

As always, I will write very simply here, not as if I'm making a presentation paper for a conference or seminar, or a sermon for church or mosque. I won't quote Suras from the Qur'an as who I am, what I think, what my ethics and values are, is already also informed by my faith. Besides, I'm not a preacher, missionary or evangelical, only a lay believer.

Interesting that you should mention "Christian realism". My father likes to say that my generation is a most cynical and sceptical Muslim generation - not on our faith, but on temporal affairs.

So, Christian virtue is not - "hope, faith and charity", but faith, hope and love?

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is based on "charity" - the victims of the apartheid regime being generous in forgiving against human rights violations, atrocities and perversity of justice committed then in the hope that they all can put it all behind them. Their faith in the process, the human capacity to forgive, and the future of a post-apartheid South Africa makes it work.

As far as I know, in my travels to South Africa, "love" is still short between the different groups. "Love" must be preceded by "trust" and "personal comfort" with others. "All You Need Is Love" is too simplistic a basis to move on. There has to be a sense of fairness and justice done too.

By the way, "forgiveness" is not the final form of love. True and sincere repentance is for the love of the human race and God (with the caveat of the "sinner" never ever doing whatever it was that he committed in asking for forgiveness).

I still has some difficulties with "someone dying for my sins". Is that why some Christians have no compunction in killing innocents in Afghanistan and Iraq that has nothing to do with the sins committed by Osama and Al Qaeda? That, at least, someone is dying for the sins of Osama?

You just made those innocent Muslims "martyrs" in being killed for what Osama had wrought while he got away with it. Unfortunately, Muslims don't believe in being punished for the sins of others, or dying for the sins of others. Everyone is individually accountable for their own actions and sins.

So, it is seen as a "sin" by Muslims to see those not guilty of crime being unjustly punished. I'm afraid that the Muslim modeling of God, sin and forgiveness is slightly different from the one you stated in your essay here. E.g. only when the "sinful one" ask forgiveness from and is forgiven by the "sinned one" will God forgive the "sinful one", but then, only God knows if that asking for forgiveness is sincere.

Thank you.

"J"

POSTED BY: JIHADIST | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 10:24 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Thank you, Mr. Elliot. Of the commentators on this question, you seem to be the only one who has taken some time to take it seriously.

The Kingdom Prayer of Jesus, it should be noted, is in response (at least in Luke) to the disciple's desire to learn to pray "as John's disciples do." That is, every rabbi had a prayer they taught their disciples that incorporated the heart of their teaching. In Matthew's Gospel, the prayer comes in the middle of his first teaching discourse.

The prayer draws from the future reign of God, speaking, as Jeremias notes, of the pray-ers desire to have the coming gifts of the kingdom (reign) of God, even as we await the full coming of that time.

To pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done," is to pray that the coming kingdom will already have its beginning in the here and now. It is a statement of realized eschatology - not a pie-in-the-sky desire for the hereafter. Central to this is the issue of forgiveness. It is, in fact, the only one of the petitions that has limits placed on it - actually an imperative, couched in legal language, something to the effect of: "Forgive us for we heretofore forgive all who have any debts against us."

The other petitions also have to do with the coming kingdom. Eg. The "daily bread," is the bread of the kingdom, or as one translator puts it, "give us tomorrow's bread today." We ask not just for our daily provision here, that our bellies may be full, have clothes to wear and a place to sleep, but that we be provided the "bread of the

kingdom," those things we daily need: forgiveness, salvation, justice, righteousness, new life, hope, peace, etc. that the kingdom's reign may become apparent in and among us.

My only disappointment is that you did not go more deeply into the matter at hand - it is so important. Thank you for your fine article.

POSTED BY: GARY | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 5:03 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Willis Elliott's utterances remind me of great gobs of cotton candy. And they are about as useful in addressing the moral/theological questions of the day.

POSTED BY: CHUCKMCF | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 4:16 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Lilla:

To the extent that "putting it aside" can be done, I agree with you. But I don't believe in forgetting.

I was married to an abusive man. I finally left one night when I thought he was going to kill me. He never admitted that he had done anything wrong - never apologized - never sought my forgiveness. In fact, he claimed it was all my fault for embarrassing him in front of his friends. (I had refused to let him drive us home because he was so drunk he walked into a coat closet and couldn't find his way out). Divorcing him meant that I never had to have any contact with him ever again.

I do not wish the man any ill - I sincerely hope that somewhere along the way, he gained control over his alcoholism and his violent temper, and managed to become a decent human being.

But I have not forgotten what he did to me, nor will I ever. To forget would be to put myself at risk of making the same mistake again.

Nor do I ever wish to lay eyes on him again, even if he receives a Nobel Peace Prize.

POSTED BY: LEPIDOPTERYX | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 3:57 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

To me it is important to forget. It may not be possible to forgive everyone for everything they do wrong. But to dwell on hurts is to be made miserable. Why not just move on. If the wrong is a great wrong, such as the murder of many innocent people--we should hold it in memory in an effort to keep it from happening again. In smaller everyday cases of being wronged, I think the best victory over it is to put it aside.

POSTED BY: LILLA HOEFER | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 3:36 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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POSTED BY: LILLA HOEFER | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 3:36 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Let's look further down the page and then we'll get back to the "Lord's Prayer."

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As persons-in-community, we human beings must have our needs met:  
our physical needs—for short, "bread"  
our interpersonal needs—for short, "forgiveness"

our spiritual need—cohesive centering in worship.

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Can't help but notice how this leads to a world where the speaker wins. Wins what? But of course, creature comforts for self.

Every philosopher except Jesus had that goal in mind. It's a matter of how the human emotion is put together. Was Jesus really all that different?

Let us prEy:

Our father - the sun
Who art in heaven - the sky
Hallowed be thy name - yeah, through screen wire
Thy kingdom come - later, in the mean time there's the ministry
Thy will be done - or else, the ministry, hell

Jesus was different. She spent the treasure of ancient Egypt building a "tower up to God." Not really. She built a palace for her heavenly father the sun and prayed to Him, "come on down daddy and claim His kingdom. The Israelites have built you a grand palace." Churches are grand palaces where ministers call out to Jesus, "come on down and claim Your kingdom"?

How do we know Jesus was a Pharaoh, (would be Pharaoh at least)?

The next line:

"Give us this day our daily bread."

Those who read the Bible know that Pharaoh, under the enlightened guidance of Joseph the Jew collected up all the food in Egypt, (7 fat years and 7 lean years).

What's the Jewish connection? Joseph the Jew of course, the one Pharaoh put in charge of the food. And Joseph dished the "short" Egyptian food out to Jews.

Not so! When Pharaoh had all the food folks got in line and "prayed to Pharaoh" for their daily bread.

Read your Bible. And pay attention to what you read.

You don't suppose Josephus was a dreamer do you? Isn't Joseph the English word for Josephus? What sort of person would want to be in charge of the national treasury or a foreign country, the most powerful nation on earth? Food is all the Egyptian people had, taxes were food, money not yet invented.

<http://www.hoax-buster.org> for the whole story, the "Lord's Prayer" that is. And the origin of the Bible, before Josephus the Jew and another dreamer named Constantine. Both were great. Don't you think?

Was Jesus really a peace maker or just a totally confused individual searching for His/Her father? Doesn't peace come when we respect our neighbors rights and not through some silly "love thy neighbor" nonsense.

People only love themselves. Can people be taught to respect the rights of others short of threats of violence? The threat of hell doesn't seem to be conducive to love does it? Is forced love really love?

POSTED BY: BGONE | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 1:50 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

I have that quote from Niebuhr on a piece of paper in my office.

I like your statement that forgiveness is a form of love. I wish in today's conversation about "forgiveness" that is taking place across these several articles, more people would think of it that way.

POSTED BY: I AGREE COMPLETELY | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 1:39 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Even I can see the Jesus in this one Dr. Elliott. Thank you.

POSTED BY: MAD LOVE | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 1:14 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

This article is a great article outlining the basic truths and foundation of Christianity. Very well written.

POSTED BY: JAMES | NOVEMBER 14, 2007 9:24 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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