

d. Brian Frost. **The Politics of Peace**. London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991. Pp.225. £10.95. Foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

The American novelist, Flannery O'Connor, a Catholic, remarked to a college audience twenty-five years ago:

"In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character: author and character seldom go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected".

Substitute 'theology' for 'fiction' and you have a clue to the difficulty we have in speaking of human forgiveness in human politics. Yet, if the great concepts of our religious tradition, truth, justice, mercy, repentance, forgiveness, have no place in the ordinary commerce of human life, including our politics, then have we not surrendered faith and theology to a sheltered, private world of individual commitment? Logically, there must be a connection between the God of the Bible, who called individuals and societies to be transformed, and God's presence in our own times, in the public world, including the world of states, with their laws, power-struggles, wars and violence. So students of theology may need to repent; to be ready to see old facts in new ways and to interpret again some neglected facts.

Central to the biblical revelation of God is the theme that human beings may destroy life in community by their own sinfulness and wickedness, but God can and will repair that community. We name this process the forgiveness of sins. But at this point, there is a puzzle, suggested by Donald W. Shriver in his splendid, theological reflection, which concludes Brian Frost's very valuable book.

Embedded in the religious grounding of the Hebrew Bible, but absent from its social ethics, is the concept of forgiveness. In the Old Testament God is the one who is offended by sin and who alone has the power to forgive (Cf. Psalm 51). God alone can repair the damage caused by sin to the divine-human relationship, to the human person and to the community.

In the New Testament, the teaching of Jesus is generally

continuous with the Hebrew Bible and with the rabbis of his own day. But there is a striking exception, which demands the attention of theologians, and careful inquiry by the Christian community. There is an innovation in early Christianity, stemming directly from the teaching of Jesus: forgiveness becomes the centre of the Christian social ethic.

Still in place for Jesus is the conviction that God judges and forgives human sin; but now the disciples of Jesus are to understand forgiveness as a transaction mandated between human beings, not reserved to the divine-human encounter. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors", he teaches his disciples to pray. There is no equivalent to this petition in the Hebrew Bible, and none, to my knowledge, in the contemporary teaching of the rabbis. (p. 188, Shriver's reflection).

Clearly, Jesus required his followers to see the connection between the forgiveness of God and the human willingness to forgive each other. Indeed, the prayer of Jesus from the cross to the Father to forgive his murderers, found only in Luke (23:34), suggests that the early Church had grasped the inner coherence between such forgiveness and the core of Jesus's message. The death of Jesus belongs to a narrative of colonial and military violence, so the prayer from the cross provokes the thought that the death and resurrection of Jesus empowers persons and groups to forgive the unforgivable, and so break through to something better.

In the popular mind, forgiveness is often dismissed as religious sentimentality and weakness. Leading thinkers such as Aquinas and Luther have opposed the idea that Christians could connect forgiveness and justice in politics. Forgiveness belongs to a higher, rare level of ethics, certainly not possible in the State.

Brian Frost's book offers much convincing evidence for the possible necessity of human forgiveness in human politics. Frost wrestles with the question: is it possible to practise a politics of forgiveness and how do you make it happen? The twelve chapters of the book present case histories from different parts of the world, from very different cultures and traditions. There

are moving stories of individuals, victims of appalling evil, who have not allowed vengeance to possess them but have found the power to forgive. There are stories of representative figures who have asked forgiveness for the crimes committed by their countries against groups or whole nations. Chancellor Kohl of Germany spoke to Jewish concentration camp survivors in a ceremony at Bergen-Belsen where some 100,000 were murdered. He said of the German people that "there is no limit on the shame they must bear for the crimes committed in their name by the Nazis". (P. 30).

There are too, histories of leaders of newly-independent countries in Africa and Latin-America who have called on their peoples to forgive former colonial powers, even after extreme forms of colonial violence. That forgiveness can be a revolutionary, political virtue is suggested by Tomas Borge, former Interior Minister of the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua, who was in prison and tortured; his wife was raped and murdered. After the revolution, he went to the prison and confronted two of his former torturers: "I am Borge whom you tortured and whose wife your colleagues killed....Now you are going to discover the full weight of this Revolution... I forgive you... Go on. Out through the door. You are free".

Throughout the book, Frost raises the crucial questions: the complex problem of collective guilt and responsibility for evil inflicted by one nation on another nation or group in the past; the need to find creative ways of dealing with historical evils which continue to blight political processes in the present; the relation between forgiveness and social justice. The author might have given more time to the question of historical interpretation; in particular, the need for an adequate emotional and moral register to take account of the sufferings endured by countless, nameless victims of militarism and colonial expansion. One is thinking here of styles of historical revisionism which diminish the scale of moral evil in past actions and policies, to serve contemporary political interests.

Some of the key witnesses in the book such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King make clear that one does not choose between either peace and forgiveness or revolution and justice. Both Gandhi and King demonstrate the need for forgiveness in the complex process of genuine liberation.

Brian Frost has made an important contribution to a neglected part of theology and social ethics. *The Politics of Peace* will stimulate Christian theologians and believers to investigate seriously the claim that forgiveness is eminently political, and productive of social and political change.

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e. P. Vallely. **Bad Samaritans.** *First World Ethics and Third World Debt.* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990. ix + 374 pages.

The encounter between peoples, cultures, and different systems of thought leads a group of people within a given area to develop for better or for worse. Of all continents and peoples of the world, the black race, mainly located in sub-saharan Africa, may have had the most traumatic experience of inter-cultural or inter-racial encounter. From their contact with Arab-Moslem slave-kingdoms installed in Africa, through the encounter with European merchants/pirates/slave-raiders/colonialists, to the present insertion of the continent into a world history made "universal" by others the experience of Africans has been negative.

Paul Vallely in **Bad Samaritans** narrates as a journalist not only his experiences of Ethiopians and other peoples of hunger but takes the reader through "the shocking details" of the encounter between the West and the Third World; an encounter which is responsible for the misery of Africa and other Third World countries. In the camps where thousands die, the author was tempted to ask whether this was not "an act of God": "The sheer size and intractability of the problem was mind-numbing" (p. 23). After an informed analysis of the problem and its structural causes, he was not afraid of proposing solutions in order "to transform indignation into action" (p. 329).

Vallely's book is very informative in many ways. The gory details of poverty and hunger in Africa, the statistics of children who die of hunger annually in the Third World, the various