

Correspondence

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FORGIVENESS IN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Sir,

In his article "Forgiveness in Religious Thought" Professor Donald H. Bishop makes some statements with regard to the Islamic conception of forgiveness which will surprise many Muslims; and since his standpoint, though naturally centred on Christianity, is so objective with regard to other religions, I feel that he will be among the first to welcome an Islamic comment on his theme. But to begin with, may I be allowed to say something about the Beatitudes, and in particular "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain Mercy." (The two 'm's as I have written them here, one small and the other capital, serve to bring out the point which Jesus was undoubtedly making, though in most Bibles they are both printed small). Professor Bishop remarks of this Beatitude: "It would be invalid to restate it: 'If you want to obtain mercy, be merciful.'" Yes, it would be aesthetically wrong; it would above all be devotionally wrong, for it falls far short of the original in giving glory to God; but it would not be logically wrong, nor would it be doctrinally wrong; for indeed the whole point of the Beatitudes lies in the answer to the question: "Why are they that mourn blessed? Why are the merciful blessed? Why are the pure in heart blessed?" The answer is: "**Because** they shall be comforted, **because** they shall receive Mercy, **because** they shall see God." There is no blessing in the act of mourning for its own sake. But to receive comfort from God, that is another matter! And how small a thing is fragmentary relative human mercy—all that man can ever be capable of—compared with the Absolute Mercy which he may hope to receive in return!

Professor Bishop says: "Jesus did not say to Peter: 'If you want to be forgiven seventy times seven, then you forgive likewise also'. Instead he simply said: 'Forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven.'" But the meaning again is ultimately the same if we consider the significance of being forgiven by God, which is inextricably connected with human perfection. The gist of this part of the article which we are discussing is that in Christianity forgiveness is "a duty," and if we ask why it is a duty the answer lies in the verse: "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." That is as far as the author goes. But if we go a step further and ask: "What is the point of being perfect?" the answer is, *not* that we should seek by our own relative human perfection to rival the Absolute Divine Perfection, but that we should seek to be acceptable and pleasing to God. Now that is ultimately also the point of desiring God's Forgiveness which is a necessary first stage in becoming acceptable to Him; and may we not say that having His forgiveness "multiplied by seventy times seven" is in fact no less than being utterly acceptable to Him? In other words, when man forgives, it should always be above all for the sake of being forgiven by God. Any other point of view comes dangerously near to Stoicism or humanism.

As regards what Professor Bishop says of Islam, the most surprising statement is that "his (Muhammad's) ethics, unlike Jesus's, never went beyond the level of equal retribution." But what man in the records of history has ever surpassed Muhammad in "multiple and unlimited forgiveness of enemies"? He remitted penalty whenever God would allow him to do so, and in

this connection it must be remembered that there can be a hidden cruelty in failing to punish, just as there is a hidden mercy in punishment, for to say the least it is better to expiate sin in this world than in the next. But in any case we may assume that the Prophet always forgave (do not all Prophets?), for he was magnanimity personified, a man entirely without rancour. Moreover it was his function to be a living example of Quranic spirituality, and the Qur'an abounds in injunctions to forgive injury. Let us take the following example from one of the many Quranic parallels to the Beatitudes: "Vie with one another for forgiveness from your Lord, and for a paradise as wide as are the heavens and the earth, which is prepared for those who are pious, who give offering in ease and in adversity, who suppress their anger and are forgiving towards men; God loveth those who do good." (III, 133-134). Or let us take a more particular example: a slander had been spread against 'Â'ishah, the wife of the Prophet and daughter of Abu Bakr, that she was guilty of adultery, and one of the slanderers was financially dependent upon Abu Bakr, who vowed that he would support him no more. Almost immediately there was revealed the following verse of the Qur'an which, though it is in general terms, Abu Bakr took to refer to himself, and acted accordingly: "Let not those who possess dignity and ease amongst you swear not to give to the near of kin and the needy...Let them forgive and show indulgence. Do ye not long that God should forgive you? God is Forgiving, Merciful." (XXIV 22).

One could go on quoting almost indefinitely. The Qur'an does not pass over in silence the "psychological" aspect of forgiveness: "The good deed and the evil deed are not alike. Repel injury with the better deed, and then he who was at enmity with thee will become as a warm friend." (XLI, 35). But characteristically the Qur'an immediately transposes this to the theological plane by adding words to the effect that such things are not possible unless one has already acquired a deep-rooted virtue of patience, and unless one has an immense gift of grace from God.

The Qur'an is in a sense both Christ and Caesar; it brings both spiritual teaching and law, and by making the law clear, (for example, by making it clear that the injured party is *under no legal obligation* to remit the penalty), the Qur'an establishes the principle of the entirely voluntary act of goodness, *nafileh*, which plays such an immense part in the spiritual life of Islam, the act of goodness which is performed simply and solely for the sake of "drawing near to God"; and one of the great *nawafil* is precisely forgiveness of enemies. Nor is this in any sense limited to the "minority voice" of the Sufis, for it is a universal principle of Islamic practical theology, though the Sufis, like their mystic counterparts in Christianity and other religions, are pre-eminently responsive to Divine injunction and Apostolic precedent.

Professor Bishop remarks that his article "does not deal with forgiveness on the divine level, in relation to Christian eschatology"; but it is in fact impossible to treat this question independently of eschatology, and he soon finds himself obliged to enter the eschatological domain, so let us follow him in. He says, again with reference to Islam: "Nor do we find in the New Testament a parallel to Chapter XLII (of the Qur'an) where Allah is pictured as a bargaining God who offers paradise if one believes and imposes torment if one does not." But what is the New Testament—and indeed what is *Religion*—if it is not a covenant offering Paradise if one believes on pain of torment if one does not? What about the passage in St. Matthew about the sheep and the goats—a passage that is one of the corner stones of the Christian religion? Is not that a piece of "bargaining" which offers Paradise on certain conditions and torments if one fails to fulfil them?

"Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into

everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels...And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal." (XXV, 41-46).

As to the remark: "We do not find a chapter in the New Testament the equivalent of Surah VIII...where Allah is pictured as a God supporting His followers in their bloody battles with the enemy (incidentally, there is a bad mistake in Max Muller's here quoted edition of the Qur'an translation, "God is keen to punish," which should be "God is severe in punishment"), this is hardly surprising, because Christ's warfare is reserved for his second coming. But when that takes place:

"And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army.

And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him ...These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth; and all the fowls of the air were filled with their flesh." (Revelation XIX, 19-21).

And from St. Matthew:

"The Son of Man shall send forth his angels and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth" (XIII, 41-42).

Might we then suggest, as regards Professor Bishop's remark: "Jesus conceived of God not in terms of justice, sovereignty, wrath, and punishment but as mercy, compassion, love, good will and forgiveness," that the words "not...but" could be with advantage replaced by "less...than." Jesus conceived of God *as He is*; and the same applies, needless to say, to the other founders of religions. In the Qur'an, for example, God says: "I smite with my punishment whom I will, but My Mercy embraceth all things." (VII, 156). Let us quote also the well-known *Hadith* in which God says, on the tongue of the Prophet: "My Mercy taketh precedence over My Anger."

In short, for Muhammad and the Muslim just as for Christ and the Christian, "the highest sanction for forgiveness is theological." It seems to me also, on Professor Bishop's own showing, that exactly the same is true *mutatis mutandis*, of Hinduism and Buddhism, but he would no doubt prefer to have directly the views of a Hindu and Buddhist on that score.

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