

Invitational Forgiveness as a Peace Initiative?
The Case of Suicide Bombing

Trudy Govier
Professor Emeriti
Philosophy Department, University of Lethbridge

The purpose of this paper is to consider conceptions of invitational and mutual forgiveness and their relevance, if any, to the current problem of suicide bombings. Along the way I distinguish between bilateral, unilateral, and invitational forgiveness.

Forgiveness involves fundamental attitudinal shifts, including:

1. letting go of hard feelings – that is to say, feelings of resentment, vindictiveness, anger, and hatred;
2. locating wrongs in the past, as distinct from allowing them to dominate the present and future;
3. reframing the perpetrator or perpetrators as persons capable of decent moral behavior and relationships of moral equality;
4. offering to the perpetrator or perpetrators the opportunity for a ‘fresh start’ on the basis of this reframing – that is to say, not reducing them to their roles as agents of wrongs of the past;
5. committing oneself to certain values. The acts done were wrong, the agents who committed them were morally responsible for doing so; these agents were, and are, human beings with a capacity for moral reflection and for positive engagement and moral change, and they are being engaged as agents of this sort.

Bilateral forgiveness presupposes moral acknowledgement by perpetrators; on the basis of that moral acknowledgement and the victim’s forgiveness a relationship may be reconstructed.¹ Unilateral forgiveness does not presuppose moral acknowledgement; it is a shift in attitudes by the victim for reasons independent of the perpetrator’s acknowledgement. Those who forgive unilaterally do so for their own reasons, which are not necessarily relationship focused and may range from ethical and religious commitments to therapeutic needs. Between bilateral and unilateral forgiveness, we may define a third type: invitational forgiveness.² Invitational forgiveness can be understood as a hybrid type. One indicates that one forgives as an initiative *inviting* or *hoping to elicit* moral acknowledgement, so as to make possible the construction of a relationship not defined by past wrongs. Like bilateral forgiveness, invitational forgiveness is addressed toward a perpetrator or perpetrators with a view to improving relationships. Like unilateral forgiveness, it does not presuppose moral acknowledgement on the part of wrongdoers.

An analogy with disarmament debates may help to clarify this conception of invitational forgiveness. Disarmament may be bilateral, involving two parties who negotiate to cut or eliminate their armaments. Or it may be unilateral, involving cuts or elimination by one side only. During the nuclear debates of the nineteen eighties, western disarmament advocates were often (unfairly) accused of favoring unilateral disarmament. A good response to this criticism was that we favored bilateral disarmament, and were recommending unilateral *initiatives* as a means of starting negotiations towards bilateral cuts. Analogously, invitational forgiveness can be understood as a unilateral initiative toward bilateral forgiveness.

The widely hailed forgiveness expressed by Nelson Mandela seems to be of just this type. Mandela's words and gestures of forgiveness when he was released from twenty-seven years in prison in 1990 were not offered in response to an expressed acknowledgement of moral error by the apartheid state or by white South Africans generally; thus his forgiveness is not plausibly characterized as bilateral. And yet it is implausible to think of Mandela forgiving with no concern for the response of those who had committed and supported the wrongs of apartheid. The post-apartheid context was one in which reconciliation and the establishment of decent relationships in the aftermath of political wrongs were major goals. In indicating his forgiveness of apartheid supporters, Mandela was surely hoping to inspire and elicit moral acknowledgement and moral reform among his former enemies. Thus his forgiveness is not plausibly characterized as unilateral. Rather, I would argue, Mandela is best interpreted as offering forgiveness without any prior condition of moral acknowledgement but as a kind of invitation or encouragement to those who had committed the wrongs of apartheid. It was an invitation to morally acknowledge and change their ways.

In contexts where wrongs have been committed by both parties, invitational forgiveness can be an initiative toward mutual forgiveness. When we think of mutual forgiveness, we are presuming a context in which there has been wrongdoing on both sides, so that the roles of victim and perpetrator are shared rather than distinct. Each party has suffered and has caused suffering. Where there are mutual acknowledgement and mutual forgiveness, both parties forgive and both are forgiven. There are forgiveness and moral acknowledgement on both sides.³

One can understand how the conception of invitational forgiveness is of interest in contexts of peace-making. If one is *seeking* peace, seeking a cessation of violent hostilities and a constructive relationship with an enemy party, then clearly peace has not been achieved. The identified enemy is most unlikely to have acknowledged any wrongdoing and, accordingly, bilateral forgiveness will not yet be appropriate. Nor is unilateral forgiveness likely to be promising: given that one is seeking to shift from violent hostility in the direction of peace, one is seeking an improved *relationship*, which puts the quest outside the unilateral framework. Invitational forgiveness could seem promising in such contexts: it involves an offer of forgiveness, an indication to the other party that one is ready to overcome animosities, accept the others as human beings, and work to the construction of a decent collaborative relationship not characterized by violence and hatred. In invitational forgiveness, we would indicate our commitment to regard the others as persons attached to their own values and goals and capable of cooperative behavior in an altered context. Moral acknowledgement of wrongdoing is not presupposed here; rather, it is sought or *invited*.

To consider forgiveness in a context of continuing hostilities, some re-thinking is needed. Forgiveness is usually considered in the *aftermath*: wrongs *were* committed, and the issue of forgiveness arises in the context of what to do given that they *have occurred*. Clearly it will be hard to let go of anger, resentment, and hatred when one fears attack and regards oneself as in a state of war. There are concerns about another feature of forgiveness too. How are we to make sense of locating wrongs in the past if they persist and seem likely to do just that? How could we reframe enemies who are still committing wrongs against us, and what sense would it make to give them a fresh start while they are continuing to do so?

When others are our enemies we may still, nevertheless, regard them as capable of decent behavior and relationships of moral equality, as capable of taking the opportunity for a fresh start. And, even during violent conflict it is possible, though rare, for people to maintain an underlying commitment to values of responsibility, human rights, and sustainable peace. Though also rare, it is humanly possible to engage in violent conflict with others while retaining our awareness that they are human beings with motives and goals. We may recognize that even though they are

using means that we find repellant, these people, our designated enemies, are people capable of reflection and change. Violent conflict by definition involves polarization. Often, it involves demonization and de-humanization. But it need not do so, and any peace arrangement reached by negotiation will have gone through a stage where the hated others have become parties to a negotiation and, eventually, partners who need some degree of cooperation to establish a sustainable peace. Salient points here are the following:

- a. Our enemies are not monsters but are, rather, human beings with their own interests, needs and motivations, which we can seek to understand. Thus the importance of *non-demonization*.
- b. Human beings are capable of change and, on occasion, of responding creatively and positively to initiatives and gestures from other human beings.
- c. Cycles of attack and counter-attack, violence and counter-violence, must someday end. How is this to come about? Who has the power and position to make the first move?
- d. Unilateral initiatives for peace are possible. Who can undertake such initiatives? And how would it be done?
- e. It is not we, and we only, who are and have been the victims of political violence and who have grievances. In a broader historical context, for most serious conflicts, both sides have suffered and caused wrongs. Thus the importance of *mutuality*.

I will focus here on two points especially, those of non-demonization and mutuality.

Non-Demonization

Certain terms, in certain contexts, are emotionally loaded to the point where they demonize by themselves. One such term may be the word “terrorist.” Often the application of this term to a group or an individual implies *inhumanity* to the point of *non-humanity*, moral monstrousness, engagement in evil and irredeemable deeds. To de-humanize people is to cut off any sense that they might have reasons for acting as they did, that they might be capable of constructive dialogue or of alternate roles in changed situations.

An aspect of de-humanization is to think of the demonized persons as *unforgivable* in the radical sense that it would always be morally wrong to forgive them, no matter what the context and circumstance. If we consider people as unforgivable, as always and forever beyond the moral pale, then we can only seek to cast them out or destroy them.⁴ To demonize them in this sense is to reject any notion that they could become decent people, much less partners in negotiation or the working out of peace. And, indeed, terrorists (or *jihadists*) are often regarded in just this way. In fact, for many their demonization will be a matter of definition. How often do we hear it said, in tones of self-righteous sanctimoniousness, that ‘we do not negotiate with *terrorists*.’ It is a valid syllogism: these people are terrorists, we do not negotiate with terrorists; therefore we do not negotiate with them. To this argument one may reply that people do and have negotiated with terrorists; it is an empirical falsehood that ‘we’ do not negotiate with terrorists. Menachem Begin, Nelson Mandela, and Gerry Adams were all terrorists, or branded as such, and they were persons with whom others did negotiate and negotiated successfully. But the statement that ‘we do not negotiate with terrorists’ is not offered as an empirical generalization. Rather, it is issued when it is convenient as an announcement of morally righteous policy: ‘these people are terrorists; they do awful things and are awful people, the worst of the worst. We *should not* and *will not* negotiate with *them*. We *do not*. We are us, and are decent and good. They are them, and are evil, beyond morality and reason.’

I would question this demonization and the polarized reasoning that it presupposes. And at the same time, I reject and have argued elsewhere against the notion of the absolutely unforgivable. I submit that we should discard the notion itself, rather than the people we would label by it. Grant the assumption that terrorist individuals and groups commit horrifying acts of violence. It remains true that these individuals and groups are not (logically, morally, or politically) reducible to those acts and those acts alone. An agent is not an act; a group is not every individual within it; individuals and groups have multiple dimensions and capacities, including the capacity for significant change. We should not assume an irreducibly and irretrievably enemy group with which peace can never be negotiated.

In an early defense of detainment at Guantanamo Bay, George W. Bush referred to its prisoners as “the worst of the worst”, the “dregs of humanity,” people seeking to destroy civilization and so on. It later transpired that some of these people were turned in by neighbours seeking bounty; some others were young and happened merely to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, a misfortune for which they paid very dearly.

Demonization presupposes dichotomization and polarization; after all, we do not regard ourselves as demonic. Those who self-righteously castigate the enemy as moral monsters will not be willing to apply that label to themselves. ‘We are not *them*; *they* are not us; *they* are not like us. *Their* violence indicates barbarity, whereas *ours* is justified. A key argument goes something like this: ‘*They* kill civilians and destroy infrastructure intentionally and intentionally inspire fear, terror and instability. That makes *them* evil, whereas *we* who are against *them* are quite different and are not evil, but good. *We* admittedly kill civilians and destroy infrastructure but we do so unintentionally, and any resulting fear and terror are only collateral effects of our collateral damage.’ But the distinctions here seem too contestable to support the weighty edifice of evil versus good. To many, the killing, suffering, and destruction caused by the ‘good side’ will seem too extensive to be justified or excused as collateral and unintended. If we grant that point, a *reductio* argument is ready at hand. If those who commit, condone and support monstrous deeds are to be rejected as unforgivable, then their enemies will be the same. In other words, if they are unforgivable, we may turn out to be so also. The obvious corollary is that in many violent conflicts, all sides are likely to have been involved in acts that could justify their demonization. This consideration leads to our next theme, that of mutuality.

Mutuality

What is mutuality? What is mutual forgiveness? And what is its significance in contexts of peacemaking? So far as I know, these themes have not been much explored by theorists. By mutuality in this context, I mean acknowledging that wrongdoing is not restricted to the other side, recognizing and admitting that one has, oneself, committed wrongs in the course of a serious conflict. If one were involved in mutual forgiveness after a conflict, one would admit one’s own wrongdoing while also accepting moral acknowledgement from the other side. To seek mutual forgiveness would be to acknowledge one’s own responsibility for harmful and wrong acts, and one’s mistakes and flaws, while at the same time indicating a willingness to forgive the others for their wrongs, seeking a reciprocal acknowledgement and reconstructed relationship on that basis. These attitudinal shifts could be expressed in various ways. In a context of political peacemaking, we may envisage an initiative involving admission and regret, and an expressed commitment to changed policy and action, with indications that one would be willing to overcome enmity and engage with the other side to establish a sustainable and viable peace, working together towards common goals. One would express one’s moral acknowledgement and commitments in a quest to seek similar shifts from the other side.

In contexts of serious conflict, mutuality will often be appropriate, since wrongs will have been committed on both sides.⁵ To offer forgiveness to another is to presuppose that that other has done something wrong – and this implication may be offensive, given that people typically prefer to see their actions as justified. To offer forgiveness presumes that the other has done wrong, suggesting that as a victim one has a morally superior position; it may thus connote a kind of moral arrogance. If there is mutuality, that impression of arrogance should disappear. If, in offering invitational forgiveness, we are at the same time admitting that we ourselves have been at fault, such offensiveness is moderated. Indications of mutuality should help to moderate offensive implications of moral superiority. To apologize is to accept a morally subordinate and humbling position ('We admit that *we were wrong* and *we need to do something about it*'). To forgive is to imply that one is in a morally superior position ('you were wrong and you need to do something about it but *we forgive you* and see you as capable of that'). If one apologizes while also forgiving, the resulting moral position is suggestive of *solidarity*.⁶ That is to say, 'we have both wronged each other; now we have to move forward into an improved relationship in which we no longer do so.'

In the contexts of political struggle in which peace is sought, it is likely that wrongs will have been committed on all sides.⁷ If a group were to undertake a peace initiative involving invitational forgiveness, it could improve its chances of success by incorporating recognition of its own wrongs in its initiative. The inclusion of moral acknowledgement would mean that what invited is mutual acknowledgement and forgiveness.

Current Problems

In a context of ongoing hostilities one can work against demonization of the enemy, reflect on relevant wrongs committed by one's own side, and seek to construct some awareness that this hostile group is, after all, composed of people with whom one may have to talk and work some day. I wish to consider here the hypothesis that notions of invitational forgiveness have some application to the current problem of suicide bombings by radical *jihadists*. This hypothesis may seem extraordinarily peculiar and implausible. Indeed, I am not considering this hypothesis here in order to defend it. I wish merely to consider it. One motive for engaging in this discussion is the inadequacy of current military approaches in the so-called wars against terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. Current strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan have to say the least been ineffective, arguably even counterproductive. There is a powerful line of criticism, epitomized in the bumper sticker slogan "we are creating enemies faster than we can kill them." Violent means of seeking out terrorists and their supporters (also called 'insurgents' or 'militants') have resulted in civilian deaths and injuries and damage to environment and infrastructure. The employment of torture and horrendous departures from the rule of law at Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and elsewhere have discredited American claims to defend human rights and the rule of law and have served also to discredit those allied with the United States, including Canada, in its role in Afghanistan. The rhetoric of *jihad* against the wicked infidel exploits the violence and abuse on Internet websites around the world.

Clearly the current conflict between Western and Western-affiliated forces and *jihadist* Islam is extraordinarily serious; it seems intractable.⁸ To consider notions of forgiveness in this context, especially with regard to suicide bombings, mass executions, and horrendous abuse may seem implausible to the point of lunacy. Many will think that notions of forgiveness are not at all applicable to these profound problems. Perhaps the others really are beyond all reach of dialogues and beyond the moral pale. Perhaps, to a man (and I use the word advisedly) these

people are cruel and brutal pre-modern fanatics. Perhaps their wish to support anti-Western terrorism, extraordinarily simplistic religious dogmatism, their cruelty toward women and girls serve to place them outside the bounds of reasonable humanity. But do these considerations justify their demonization? It is highly tempting to think that they do.

If we resist demonization and appreciate that the West may have wrongs to acknowledge in its relations with individuals and groups in the Middle East, a modified notion of invitational forgiveness could have some appeal in this context. I will explore it here by a dialectical method – namely, by considering some objections to it

A Dialectical Exploration: Objections Considered

Objection 1: In a suicide bombing, the perpetrator is dead. So we need not consider whether to forgive him or her. That is not an issue. *Response:* Those who organize, finance, and recruit for suicide bombings are not all dead, and they are the persons with whom any arrangements to end the war must be made.

Objection 2 : In a suicide bombing, many or all of the victims are dead. To discuss forgiving in this context is to presume that some party other than the victims is morally entitled to forgive. That presumption is false. *Response:* In addition to primary or direct victims, there are secondary and tertiary victims of these attacks. The whole community, or polity, is harmed and is in that sense a victim. Thus those authorized to act for the community are authorized to initiative forgiveness, as a peace initiative, on its behalf.

Objection 3: To invitationally forgive serious wrongs means making gestures to the effect that those serious wrongs *are forgiven*. But one will be making those gestures in a context in which there have been no moral acknowledgement, apology, restitution, or even change of behavior. These gestures will be confused with condonation and should not be undertaken for that reason. *Response:* To condone an offense is to fail to object to it, to accept it. Forgiving acts presupposes that those acts were wrong and as such is distinct from condonation. Communications can make this clear. Any offensiveness of the terminology of ‘wrong’ can be mitigated by mutuality.

Objection 4: There is no politically realistic way of communicating to one’s own people that one is invitationally forgiving an enemy party in a context of ongoing violence or war. Nor could there be any such communication strategy. The public would, quite rightly, find such an initiative morally and politically outrageous. *Response:* Communications must make it clear that wrongs are to be regarded as wrongs. Furthermore, communications may be secret and kept secret unless and until there is a favourable response. The public may be educated about mutuality in wrongdoing and about the need to bring hostilities to an end.

Taking it Back? Concluding Reflections

In warning against demonization and rejecting the notion of the absolutely unforgivable, I have argued that there are circumstances, circumstances including their acknowledgement, repentance, and moral transformation, that *could* render even extraordinarily serious wrongdoers eligible for forgiveness. This point is based on an insistence on a *possibility*, arguing against any notion of absolute unforgivability. I argued that under certain circumstances, even persons who have seemed to us to be extraordinarily evil might become eligible for forgiveness. I did not wish to say – nor do I wish to say now – that persons engaging in serious wrongdoing should be forgiven right here and now, in the absence of any moral acknowledgement or moral transformation on

their part. An application of a notion of invitational forgiveness in context of peace-making goes further than this rejection of the notion of the absolutely unforgivable. If anything is to be said about forgiveness here, it must be forgiveness of a conditional sort. That is not the account of invitational forgiveness I have defended in other writings. There, forgiveness really is granted in the hope of eliciting moral acknowledgement.⁹

Perhaps, then, it is not quite invitational forgiveness that could make sense in a context of peace-seeking. To make sense here, we need a notion modified so as to be weaker and more conditional, but nevertheless offered in a spirit of mutuality. One might suggest an attitude not of forgiveness, but of openness to it. Perhaps the notion is something like this: we see you as human beings. We regard you as people, people we could someday work with and engage with on a basis of cooperation, decency, and moral equality. We know that our struggle has been bitter, that it is still bitter, and that within this conflict serious wrongs have been committed by us as well as by you. We acknowledge that what we have done has hurt you and for that we are sorry.¹⁰

But is even this too much to offer? Perhaps. Those who deny education and medical care to women and girls, who kidnap and abuse aid workers, who seek to maximize civilian deaths even of their fellow countrymen, who celebrate and harbour international terrorism – one might submit that these are people with whom (as liberal democrats and defenders of human rights) we should *never negotiate*, people with whom we never could decently cooperate, people whose pre-modern fanaticism and brutality we never should accept. One might admit the pitfalls of polarization and fallacies of demonization in most other contexts while nevertheless insisting that there is something uniquely intractable in this case. Those who burn down schools for girls and behead their teachers really are demons, you might say. They really *are*, just as Nazis were, and there is no sane moral goal in the case but the destruction of these, our enemies, and there is no sane means toward this goal but the use of as much physical force as our societies can muster. One may indeed argue this. And the case is not without merit.

But I suggest that it is worth thinking further. There are good reasons to suppose that what we (the West) are doing is not working -- and it the conjunction of these struggles with my interest in forgiveness that have led me to these explorations. I pose to you again the question: could our reflections on forgiveness provide elements of a peace strategy, with regard even to agonizing struggles with contemporary *ihadists*?

¹ Discussion of making amends through restitution, redress, or commitment to practical reforms is, of necessity, omitted here.

² I have discussed this point in *Forgiveness and Revenge* (London: Routledge 2002), *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Acknowledgement, Reconciliation, and the Politics of Sustainable Peace* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books 2006).

³ Mutual forgiveness involves both parties acknowledging and both parties forgiving. Bilateral forgiveness involves one party acknowledging and the other party forgiving.

⁴ As noted in footnote 2. See also Trudy Govier, "Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1999.

⁵ That is not to say that there is a situation of moral equivalence; it is entirely possible that the wrongs committed on one side may be more severe and serious than those on the other.

⁶ We should not say equality here, for there is a risk of presuming a moral equivalence that may not be true to the case. It is entirely possible for A and B to have both committed wrongs without those wrongs

being morally equivalent in the sense of being equally morally serious. See my discussions in *Forgiveness and Revenge* and *Taking Wrongs Seriously*.

⁷ For a discussion of mutuality and further explanation of its importance in contexts of political reconciliation, see *Taking Wrongs Seriously*. While significant practical problems have emerged from failures of mutuality, the theme does not seem to have been prominent in theorizing about reconciliation.

⁸ It is an over-simplification, of course, to think of this as one conflict, since manifestations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Israel have distinctive features.

⁹ In “A Conception of Invitational Forgiveness”, Colin Hirano and I have developed an account that is not conditional. In this account, invitational forgiveness really is forgiveness, not ‘forgiveness if...’. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 2008.

¹⁰ Technically, complications seem to arise when we consider bilateral forgiveness, invitational forgiveness, and mutual forgiveness. Let us suppose that party A acknowledges his wrongdoing and invitationally forgives party B, hoping to elicit moral acknowledgement from B. If B forgives A in response to A’s moral acknowledgement, then B’s forgiveness of A is, by definition, *bilateral*. If B at the same time acknowledges his own wrongdoing, regarding A, A’s *invitational forgiveness* has succeeded in its goal, that of inspiring or evoking acknowledgement by B. If both A and B were to invitationally forgive at the same time (due to a communication deficit, perhaps), then the result would be forgiveness on both sides and the circumstances of that forgiveness, with mutual acknowledgement, would (of course) exhibit mutuality. The mutuality would have resulted from two distinct, but simultaneous, unilateral initiatives. It would be as though we had bilateral forgiveness, twice. A forgives B, who morally acknowledges having wronged A. And B forgives A, who morally acknowledges having wronged B.