

**Müller-Fahrenheit, G 1996 — The art of forgiveness: Theological reflections on healing and reconciliation**

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**Reviewer: Rev J Ayres**

As a German theologian Geiko Müller-Fahrenheit is painfully aware of Nazi history and Auschwitz and holds the viewpoint that it is necessary to think of forgiveness not *in spite of* Auschwitz but *because of* Auschwitz. Against this background the book calls upon readers to become mirrors of mercy, as all human beings are created in the image of God, the Most Merciful.

The book is divided into two major parts. In Part One attention is given to the (mis)use of the words *reconciliation* and *forgiveness*. Forgiveness has become a matter of politeness ('I am sorry'/'excuse me') to the extent that pardon is taken for granted. After discussing this trivial usage of 'reconciliation' and 'forgiveness' the author discusses the biblical meaning of these words. He argues that *reconciliation* is a strictly theological concept to describe God's redeeming work and that the Bible understands forgiveness as a process which includes both the perpetrator and the victim, as forgiveness can only occur when the perpetrator asks for it and the victim grants it. When this happens healing takes place which paves the way for cooperation between formerly conflicting partners.

The author proceeds by illustrating the perversion of the biblical notion of forgiveness in Church history. The Reformation is criticized for its emphasis on the vertical dimension of forgiveness, with the resulting loss of the horizontal dimension between human beings, society and nature. Traditional Christian teaching and spirituality are also criticized for the tendency to address only the sinner and losing sight of those 'sinned against'.

The author goes on to say that perpetrators and victims should set one another free. An act of transgression constitutes a bond between them. Perpetrators tend to forget the wrongs they have done and victims learn to live with their trauma, but extended forms of repression and denial can lead to various illnesses. Therefore an act of forgiveness must be understood as a complex process of unlocking this painful bond which sets both perpetrators and victims free.

In Part Two of the book Müller-Fahrenholz discusses the stupidity of 'ethnic purity' which is the reason why also the apartheid programme of the National Party of South Africa and separate development could not be sustained, despite tremendous brutality. The author makes some thought-provoking statements about 'restitution' and 'compensation'. Is it at all possible? Material and financial compensation often deepens the bitterness of the survivors. Yet there is a need to take compensation seriously, even if compensation only makes sense when directed not only at repairing the past but preparing for the future.

The book closes with a discussion on the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Here men and women recall their painful memories, but they leave the witness stand with their heads held high, because they have been recognised in their pain, and that is the beginning of a renewed dignity which leaves them with a deep satisfaction. The author confronts white South Africans with a discussion of the question 'Where are the whites?' Why are they largely absent from the hearings of the TRC? Maybe a deep sense of shame causes them to avoid direct confrontation with the horrible facts? Müller-Fahrenholz is of the opinion that, because of the patterns of racism, white people in South Africa seem unable to admit even the possibility that they might be held and comforted by black people.

The past must be healed but, most black South Africans cannot share the attitude taken by whites: 'Let bygones be bygones'. Black South Africans live with the awareness that the spirits of the dead are still with them and that it is vitally important to reconcile the unredeemed spirits of the past. For black South Africans there can be no peaceful present as long as the spirits of the dead are not laid to rest.

The author warns that if the beneficiaries of apartheid seek to carry over their advantages into the new South Africa without being ready to let go of some of their wealth — for instance, in the form of land — the patience (of Black South Africans) will eventually be exhausted and violence will increase even further.

The reader must decide for himself whether Müller-Fahrenholz has given enough attention to the complex history and population of South Africa to reach the conclusions and solutions which he advocates. Nevertheless the book is undoubtedly guaranteed to force the reader to reconsider his own viewpoint with regard to the current political developments in South Africa, in particular the hearings of the TRC.

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