What does it mean to forgive? The answer is widely assumed to be self-evident but critical analysis quickly reveals the complexities of the subject. Forgiveness has traditionally been the preserve of Christian theology, though in the last half century – and at an accelerating pace – psychologists, lawyers, politicians and moral philosophers have all been making an important contribution to questions about and our understanding of the subject. Anthony Bash offers a vigorous restate-ment of the Christian view of forgiveness in critical dialogue with those both within and without the Christian tradition. Forgiveness is a much more complicated subject than many theologians recognise. Bash explores the relevance of the theoretical discussion of the topic to recent events such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, post-Holocaust trials, the aftermath of 9/11 and 7 July and various high-profile criminal cases.

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Christian ethics has increasingly assumed a central place within academic theology. At the same time the growing power and ambiguity of modern science and the rising dissatisfaction within the social sciences about claims to value-neutrality have prompted renewed interest in ethics within the secular academic world. There is, therefore, a need for studies in Christian ethics which, as well as being concerned with the relevance of Christian ethics to the present-day secular debate, are well informed about parallel discussions in recent philosophy, science or social science. *New Studies in Christian Ethics* aims to provide books that do this at the highest intellectual level and demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

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FORGIVENESS AND
CHRISTIAN ETHICS

ANTHONY BASH

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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This book makes a timely contribution to the series New Studies in Christian Ethics. It provides a nuanced and well-written account of forgiveness that takes fully into consideration a wide range of scholarly material in philosophy, psychology, law (Anthony Bash originally trained in law and practised as a solicitor before ordination), New Testament studies and theology. It makes important links with other books in the series, especially David Hollenbach’s *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* and Jean Porter’s *Moral Action and Christian Ethics*. And it fulfils well the two key aims of the series as a whole – namely, to promote monographs in Christian ethics that engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and, second, to encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate.

The issue of forgiveness is certainly timely, as Anthony Bash demonstrates through the many examples that he takes, such as the process of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa, post-Holocaust trials, the aftermath of 9/11 and 7 July, and various high-profile crime stories. He also shows that the virtue of forgiveness is much more complicated than is often realised either in society at large or specifically in churches. Pointing to philosophical, psychological and legal discussions of forgiveness he argues that in comparison many theological accounts of forgiveness are inadequate. Indeed, very few other recent theologians have shown a proper awareness of these detailed secular discussions of forgiveness.

Anthony Bash argues that forgiveness properly understood is a process, as psychological studies have suggested. He also sides with those philosophers who maintain that there are occasions when unconditional forgiveness is actually inappropriate, for example when the victim is dead or where forgiveness conflicts with justice. He concludes that, theologically, forgiveness is properly seen as a gift rather than as a moral duty. We do have such a
duty, but it in turn is best seen as a duty to *strive* to forgive – believing, on theological grounds, that it is finally God who forgives unconditionally.

Readers of this thoughtful book are likely to come away more (deeply) confused about forgiveness than before. Theologically inclined readers may, I hope, be persuaded that secular accounts of forgiveness do need to be taken seriously. Others may be challenged by the book’s theological foundations – forgiveness is an eminently theological virtue. This is indeed a challenging book.

**Robin Gill**

**A NOTE ON THE COVER IMAGE: THE ESSA CROSS**

Towards the end of the last century Gert Swart was commissioned to make a cross for the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa (ESSA), a multicultural seminary drawing students from many countries in Africa. ESSA’s campus, a small but significant example of urban renewal, is situated in the South African city of Pietermaritzburg, the capital of KwaZulu-Natal.

The complex symbolism of the cross was carefully selected to convey several messages including the suffering of many South Africans in the turbulent, violent years before the birth of our democracy, the suffering of countless others in what must be one of the bloodiest centuries in the history of the world, and, crucially, one of redemption, reconciliation and hope.

Gert used images of his hands, each with a finger on the trigger of a gun directed at the Lamb, to contextualise the cross – in a province known as the ‘killing fields of Natal’ in the 1980s – and as a comment on the complicity of each one of us in the brutal execution of Christ on the cross.

As people gathered to dedicate the cross on 11 September 2001 news was filtering through of the audacious and devastating attacks on the Word Trade Towers and the Pentagon. So it was that, while the USA reeled, a small assembly intimately acquainted with terror and tragedy exuberantly celebrated the arrival of the ESSA Cross, a beacon of hope on a dark day in a dark world.

**Gert and Istine Swart**
Preface

This book is about forgiveness.

The subject is no longer the preserve of only those within the Christian tradition. People within the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, law and politics, for example, are also talking and writing about forgiveness.

Most weeks there is something in the popular press that is germane to the topic of this book. It is rare that an academic book can engage with popular culture in this way without becoming journalistic.

The Christian tradition has a significant, coherent and sometimes critical contribution to make to academic and popular discourse on forgiveness. As this book will show, modern discussion about and reflection on forgiveness are impoverished without the contribution of Christian thinking. The fact that society may be ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-Christian’ does not mean that the Christian tradition has nothing to say about forgiveness. There remains a distinctive and important place for the Christian voice on the subject.

Modern discourse also has a contribution to make to Christian thinking. It forces theologians to rethink the content and forms of their categories of thought and to restate them for a modern audience that asks modern questions. It is urgent that theologians do that, if they are to engage coherently with the sorts of wrongdoing that have taken place in the last hundred years – wrongdoing that is probably unparalleled as to both its extent and its depravity. Modern thinking also has the incidental effect of highlighting what is distinctive in the Christian tradition and enables Christians to contribute better to the current debates.

Less obviously, forgiveness is also a relatively neglected topic in scholarly Christian writing. There have not been many books directly on the subject in recent years, yet forgiveness is rightly regarded as one of the central themes of the Christian gospel. This book seeks to help restore the omission and to further debate and discussion on forgiveness.

Books often have their genesis in the personal interests of their writers. My interest in this subject does not arise because I have been wronged in a
particularly evil way. I have faced the normal ‘ups and downs’ of life and, like most people, have learned something about forgiveness pragmatically. I became interested in the topic as the subject of academic study in the summer of 2003 when, jointly with my wife, Dr Melanie Bash, I wrote a chapter of *Forgiveness in Context* (Watts and Gulliford 2004: 29–49). I became aware then of how much work remains to be done on this subject, and I also became aware of how deeply the topic was touching me personally. I may not have been carrying a particularly heavy burden of unforgiveness, but I began to realise then that I had been – and continued to be – unforgiving about some things. I have, since then, made some progress in this area; more progress has yet to be made.

I have been surprised, as I have talked to people about the contents of this book, how much they have wanted to disclose their own stories to do with unforgiveness, hurt and suffering. I suspect this book is timely to help people think in a measured way about forgiveness, to explore some of the complexities and issues that forgiveness raises and to learn to forgive responsibly.

I would like to thank a delightful conversation partner, Dr Geoffrey Scarre of the Department of Philosophy at Durham University, for the contribution he has made to help me formulate and hone my thinking about forgiveness. His gentle and measured approach and his sharp insights have been an unfailing source of stimulus.

To my friends and family who have read portions of this book as it was being written I would like to give thanks. Dr Joe Bouch has been, for over twenty years, a critical and loyal friend. I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude. Thanks are due also to Alan Brown, Professor Gyles Glover, Professor Peter Rhodes, Rowena Abadi, Dr George Boyes-Stones and the Reverend Dale Hanson who have read, offered advice or talked to me about portions of this book. I thank my father who, in his ninetieth year, has critically and carefully read the entire manuscript of this book. I am also grateful to Dr Stephen Cherry for reading a draft of this book and for his generous and insightful comments.

My thanks go to Professor Robin Gill, the editor of the series in which this book appears, and to an unnamed reader of an earlier draft of the book. I am grateful to them both for their comments and suggestions.

I wrote most of this book while I was Solway Fellow and Chaplain at University College, Durham. I am grateful to the College for the opportunity to engage in research and to explore some of the ideas contained in this book through conversations with students and academic staff and in the College chapel.
My three children, Hannah, Simeon and Matthias, have been surprised that I should have spent so long reflecting on forgiveness, a topic that seems to them self-evident in its scope, meaning and value. For them, the subject has been adequately explored in books such as *The Grumpy Day: Teddy Horsley Learns about Forgiveness*, one of a delightful series by L. J. Francis and N. M. Slee (Birmingham: Christian Education Publications, 1994). Another book on forgiveness (and one without pictures) is, in their view, unnecessary. They have also been quick to remind me to forgive, especially where they have been concerned. I hope that with the completion of this book they will find me less often at my desk in front of a computer screen.

The children have given my wife, Melanie, and me great joy, and brought many opportunities, within the context of happy family life, to forgive and to be forgiven. I dedicate this book to Melanie – my best friend and most loyal critic – and to our children, Hannah, Simeon and Matthias. It comes with much love and with many thanks to each of them.
This book is about one kind of response to evil and wrongdoing – the response called ‘forgiveness’. The aim of this book is to explore why, how and when a victim may forgive a wrongdoer for wrongdoing – in other words, what it means to forgive.

I stand within the Christian tradition. In writing this book, I have sought to engage with modern secular insights about forgiveness and to be in critical dialogue with those insights. I have also sought to look critically at the Christian traditions about forgiveness and restate some of them in the light of modern discourse.

In the following pages, I refer to someone who has been wronged as ‘the victim’ or less often (and only for stylistic reasons) as ‘the wronged person’ or words to that effect. The person who does the wrong I usually refer to as ‘the wrongdoer’. The wrong that the wrongdoer does to the victim I call ‘wrongdoing’. When I refer to ‘wrongdoing’ or use a similar word, I mean ‘a morally wrong act or omission’ in contrast to an act or omission that is wrong but not also morally wrong. Where there could be ambiguity, I make the meaning plain.²

I appreciate that words such as ‘victim’ and ‘wrongdoer’ may be read as words with emotive connotations. I do not intend them to be understood that way. I have been unable to find words that convey a more neutral sense. I have, in addition, sought to use gender-neutral language whenever possible to avoid, for example, suggesting that typically victims are women, wrongdoers men or that God is male.

¹ The root of this definition is Aristotelian; see Rh. i, 10, 1368b5–10 (in Barnes 1984). There, wrongdoing is defined as injury voluntarily inflicted contrary to the written laws that regulate particular communities or to unwritten and universally acknowledged general principles.
² Not all wrong acts are morally wrong. For example, the law may treat it as wrong to break a speed limit, but it is not morally wrong to do so when taking a seriously ill child to hospital, particularly if the child’s life is in danger.
Ask anyone in the street if to forgive is good and worthwhile and the answer, almost certainly, would be ‘yes’.

On a day-to-day basis, with the minor difficulties of life, it is not very difficult to forgive. If Jack lends Jill a book and Jill is careless and loses it, Jill may irritate Jack by her carelessness but, as they are siblings and as Jack wishes to retain a good relationship with Jill, Jack may well accept Jill’s apology and then forget about the matter. Similarly, one friend may unwittingly say some hurtful things to another, but for the sake of friendship the offended friend will forgive and not allow the hurt to stand in the way of the friendship.

Most people would also affirm – at least in principle, if not by their own practice – that not to forgive is both foolish and misguided. Popular understanding is that bitterness often comes from being unforgiving. It is also that being unforgiving can be emotionally corrosive and harmful to health. It does not take an astute observer of human behaviour to see that the effect of not forgiving or of being unforgiven can be dehumanising and personally diminishing. Both wrongdoer and victim may also become trapped in a pattern of behaviour that is personally and communally destructive. This can be expressed in terms of the thought of Lévinas: to forgive is to recognise that we are part of a matrix of social relationships, that we have responsibilities towards others because we are part of that matrix and that our wholeness and freedom are best expressed in the context of relationships with others.

Of course, when it comes to forgiveness, most people fail to live up to their own standards, and (if they were to think about it) they know that they do not live up to God’s standards. Whatever the nature of an act of wrongdoing, there will be some who find they are unable to forgive, who will feel guilty about this, and who will also feel guilty about having disagreeable – or even brutish – feelings towards those who have mistreated them. For Christians in particular, this can present additional problems, because Christianity emphasises the ethical ideal to forgive. If truth be told, forgiving the way people believe that Jesus forgave (unconditionally, unilaterally and lavishly) is immensely difficult and few seem able to do

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3 Here forgetting does have a moral basis: it is in response to the apology (which is often a covert appeal for forgiveness). One is unlikely to have forgiven if one simply forgets or buries the recollection of the wrong (Neu 2002: 31–3).

4 The thought of Lévinas does not contribute to normative ethics and the determination of the moral worth of conduct. Rather, Lévinas offers an ‘ethic of ethics’ that identifies the responsibility of the self to others but not the ethical content of that responsibility.
 Forgiveness and wrongdoing

For some, revenge is an attractive alternative to forgiveness and they would rather retaliate than forgive.

Even if people fail to forgive, they still tend to hope that God will forgive them, either because God is merciful or because, if they try hard and intend to do well, God will show a sense of ‘fair play’ and forgive them. Alexander Pope expressed the relation between the human and divine conditions in this way: ‘To err is human, to forgive divine.’ To put it unkindly, people think that God will forgive (because that is God’s role) but they often will not (because that, sadly, is the human condition).

In this book, we will examine views such as these, so that we can think both ethically and Christianly about what it means to forgive. We begin with some initial thoughts about what forgiveness is, although it will not be until chapter 9 that we draw together the discussion in this book and reach a firm conclusion – as best we can – about what forgiveness is.

Revisiting forgiveness in the twenty-first century

A straightforward, popular dictionary definition of forgiveness is that it is an action or process that results in a person ceasing to be angry or resentful towards someone for an offence, flaw or mistake.

That forgiveness is an action or process is self-evident. In almost every other respect, I take issue with the definition or wish to qualify it. For example, one implication of the definition is that one may ‘forgive’ another person if one forgets about, denies or even blames oneself for the offence, flaw or mistake. I shall argue that doing these is not to forgive. Similarly, if by mistake I bought you red roses thinking that you liked them, when I should have remembered that it was yellow roses that you preferred, you may, as a result, be angry – perhaps even resentful – that I had forgotten what you liked, but that does not mean that I have done something for which you should forgive me or for which I should seek your forgiveness.

I take as the starting point for discussion that forgiveness (whatever else it may also be) is a moral response to wrongdoing. There are two elements to this starting point that need to be held in place: the first is that forgiveness

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5 Jones (1995) ascribes the capacity to do this as coming from the Holy Spirit who presses and shapes people to embody and so practise divine forgiveness.


7 This definition is based on the definition in the Oxford Dictionary of English, 2nd edition (Pearsall and Hanks 2003).

8 See Lévinas 1960: 282f.: ‘Pardon in its immediate sense is connected with the moral phenomenon of fault.’ For Lévinas, ethics is not a matter of abstract principles or reason but the result of an encounter with something or someone other than oneself. The moral response becomes clear at the moment of the encounter.
is a moral response, and the second is that the response is to a morally wrong act.\(^9\)

As for the first element (that forgiveness is a moral response), two observations may be made. First, not all moral responses to wrongdoing amount to forgiveness. For example, a victim who renew relations with a repentant wrongdoer in response to a moral principle (for example, that it is right to have relations with those who repudiate immoral behaviour) will not necessarily also have forgiven the wrongdoer (Hampton in Murphy and Hampton 1988: 41). Second, it does not necessarily follow that to forgive is always the right moral response to wrongdoing.\(^10\) This is what Murphy in Murphy and Hampton (1988) argues: he suggests, for example, that one should not forgive if to forgive would not necessarily serve the public good or would result in an undesirable outcome.

That forgiveness is a moral response also has an important corollary. It is this: if the response to wrongdoing is not moral, the response cannot be forgiveness. Thus, if a victim implicitly or explicitly denies that the act in question is wrong, the response of the victim will not – and cannot – be forgiveness. It may be ‘condonation’ (Kolnai 1973–4: 96), excusing, pardoning, exonerating and so on\(^11\) – but it will not be (according to Kolnai 1973–4 and most other commentators – see Worthington 2005: 557) forgiveness.

We turn now to the second element of our starting point that forgiveness is a moral response to wrongdoing, namely, that forgiveness is a response to a morally wrong act.

**Morally Wrong Acts**

Morally wrong acts range from what one might regard as relatively trivial (such as telling a lie to avoid embarrassment or breaking a promise) to acts – often referred to as ‘evil’ rather than ‘moral wrongs’ – of execrable

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\(^9\) Some suggest that forgiveness can sometimes be a one-way process or act on the part of the victim, not dependent on anything the wrongdoer does or does not do, and may occur even if the wrongdoer does not acknowledge the forgiveness (Holmgren 1993: 341; Garrard and McNaughton 2002: 31, 53–9; Kolnai 1973–4: 9). This view will be explored later in this book.

\(^10\) Lévinas (1969: 43) makes this point. What is right to do will depend on the situation and (in his view) will be the result of encounter (or a relationship) with something or someone other than oneself. He therefore rejects the idea of rigid or univocal moral principles and argues that the appropriate moral response in a situation is always the result of encounter. The result is more stringent and demanding than in any formal ethical code (Davis 1996: 54). The encounter produces the ethics, and not vice versa. Strictly speaking, therefore, Lévinas’s philosophy is not about the contents of ethics, the norms or standards of moral behaviour (he calls these ‘justice’), but about what is ethical.

\(^11\) To pardon is to remit punishment rightly imposed on or due to a wrongdoer or to declare a person innocent of something of which the person has been pronounced guilty. See Horsbrugh 1974: 270 and Govier 2002: 54–61 further on the distinctions.
Forgiveness and wrongdoing

horror, cruelty and depravity, sometimes called ‘dehumanising evil’ (e.g., Wolfendale 2005). If an act is not morally wrong it is not forgivable (that is, ‘able-to-be-forgiven’) and forgiveness is not an appropriate response to such an act. Three scenarios may arise. First, an act of which I may not approve but which is not morally wrong is not forgivable. (For example, if I do not like to see men wear ear studs, I cannot forgive my friend if he chooses to wear an ear stud. To wear an ear stud is not morally wrong, and no right-thinking moral philosopher would hold that it was. In such a case, it is I – and my social tolerance – that need to change.) Also not forgivable are morally innocent acts that have unintended but harmful consequences for a ‘victim’, as in the case of a mistake or misfortune. Lastly, if the victim is not aware of the wrong, the ‘victim’ will have nothing to forgive. If Jack steals from Jill’s purse but Jill does not know, there will be nothing for her to forgive, even though Jack has done wrong. (Jack may consider that there is something to forgive, even though Jill does not know it, because, both in Jack’s mind and objectively, he has done wrong.) If Jack later admits what he has done, there will then be something for Jill to forgive.

To establish whether an act is right or wrong from a moral viewpoint, the act has to be critically evaluated in the context of an overarching moral

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12 Wrongdoing is certainly more than ‘a breach of trust between two (or more) people’ (Wilson 1988: 534).

13 An act may also be unforgivable in two other circumstances: first, if there is no one to forgive it and second if there is no one to be forgiven. An example of the former is the case of murder: the victim will be dead and so cannot forgive. As to the latter, if a wrongdoer has died, there will be no one to receive the victim’s forgiveness. However, if the wrongdoer died contrite, there seems to be no reason why the person wronged, when able, should not posthumously forgive the wrongdoer. Although there will be no possibility of a restored relationship, there is the possibility of letting go of the hurt, of inner healing for the victim and of psychological restoration. The person wronged can retrospectively embrace the repentance of the wrongdoer and experience the renewal that that will bring.

14 Aristotle, NE iii, 1110b30–1111a1 (in Rowe and Broadie 2002), calls this ‘ignorance at the level of particular things’ and so makes the action involuntary. See also NE v, 6, 1135a20–30 (in Rowe and Broadie 2002).

15 In Rh. i, 13, 1374b5–10 (in Barnes 1984), Aristotle defines a mistake as ‘an act . . . not due to turpitude, that has results that might have been expected’, and a misfortune as ‘an act, not due to wickedness, that has unexpected results’. In discussing what being wronged amounts to, Aristotle denies that such actions are unjust (and so actions for which people are morally responsible): see Rh. i, 13, 1373b1, 35 (in Barnes 1984). What is also important is how one interprets an action: a person may take something but the taking not amount to theft if, for example, the person believed they had a right to take the thing. In Aristotle’s words, ‘it happens that a man will admit an act, but will not admit the prosecutor’s label for the act nor the facts which the label implies’ (Rh. i, 13, 1373b35–40, in Barnes 1984).

16 If a ‘victim’ does not suffer harm from an act that was intended to harm the victim, the victim may forgive the wrongdoer’s wrongful intentions but not the act itself.
Forgiveness and Christian Ethics

The framework may be derived from principles (whether from a supra-human moral being or power or from universally recognised social norms and laws) that underlie particular expressions of moral imperatives. Even when we make appeal to an overarching moral framework, legitimate disagreement may remain about whether a particular action is morally wrong: the discussion in 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 and 10:23–11:1 about eating meat that has been used in idol worship is a case in point. Well-known also are views that the cultural climate of a former time affirms and even sustains but which a later generation recognises to be wrong. It is hard to attribute blame when people act strictly according to their consciences. Scarre (2003: 108, 110) gives the example of Aztec human sacrifice: it may today be ‘morally repugnant, but it [is] hard to see it as wrong from [Aztec] viewpoint’. He also describes the persecution and murder of supposed witches in Europe in the middle ages. We may believe those who persecuted the witches to be wrong but they acted according to their understanding and with integrity of conscience for the supposed good of all. Those who adhered to and carried out Nazi political philosophy are, in my view, less excusable (pace Scarre 2003). As Milbank (2003: 2f.) says, many believed they were ‘fulfilling the goods of order, obedience, political stability and peace’ and ‘articulated their defective desires . . . in terms of the promotion of racial health and excellence of humanity’. Even the aim to liquidate the Jews was expressed in terms that could be described as ‘rational’ (though perverse and flawed) and not out of ‘the pursuit of evil for its own sake’. Even so, the moral and intellectual criteria of the time could have led people to condemn Nazi philosophy as odious and repugnant (as it did some) and there was a degree of culpable and wilful blindness by many who upheld Nazi philosophy.

Given that there are degrees of evil in wrongdoing and (as we shall see below) even degrees of responsibility for wrongdoing, one might have expected that there would be degrees of difficulty to forgiving, and that it would be easier to forgive a peccadillo than an egregious wrong or evil. In many instances that is true, but not always. When it comes to forgiveness, it seems to be that it is not necessarily the nature of the act that determines

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17 The question I am exploring is not ‘What is right?’ and ‘What is wrong?’ (and so I do not explore which expression of higher ethic we are following and whether we might agree that the act is moral or immoral) but ‘If we conclude that an act is morally wrong, how might we forgive it?’

18 According to Aristotle in Rh. i, 13, 137b10–10 (in Barnes 1984) there are two kinds of law: particular law (community-enacted rules, whether written or unwritten) and universal law (norms that are universally recognised). The aetiology of ‘crimes against humanity’ is that wrongdoing is an offence against the moral order from whichever ethical standpoint that moral order is looked at.

19 See further on responsibility for actions, pp. 8–11 below.