

Less than Embrace, More than Restraint: Bundles of Loves, Periodic Catastrophes, and the
Realist Case for Political Forgiveness
Christopher J. Dowdy, Southern Methodist University

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ABSTRACT

Christianity considers forgiveness crucial to a minimally decent human life while also prizing a just political order. The typical modern assumption, however, is that these instantiations of love and justice are not compatible; to react to atrocity with forgiveness seems, for example, plainly opposed to the law's forcible restraint of such cruelties. Donald Shriver, Desmond Tutu, and others have offered compatibilist rejoinders with approaches largely forged in the contexts of transitional justice. Yet, on the whole, these rejoinders are too optimistic about the limitations of forgiveness and the regular turbulence within even settled, democratic legal orders.

I propose a more satisfying, realist account integrating forgiveness and politics. To secure the realist *bona fides* of this proposal I turn to Reinhold Niebuhr, a figure allegedly hostile to such compatibilism. I modify his realism by developing more explicitly his Augustinian account of political goods and human limitation. Within this Augustinian liberalism, human beings are "bundles of loves," as Eric Gregory says. That is, we are constrained to form communities around discrete temporal goods that are the objects of our love—political goods like justice and peace, for example. But these goods are fragile and our cultivation of them is fraught. When loves conflict the result is rough bargaining, outright conflict, even violent deprivation: inevitable episodes which Niebuhr calls "periodic catastrophes."

How do we deal with these periodic catastrophes? On this view, not only does love's capacity for attachment help us comprehend and improve political organization, its disciplines of reconciliation lay out a map for social repair. I draw on Niebuhr's account of collective contrition to defend a conditional model of forgiveness, focusing on repairing specifically political goods. By the logic of reciprocity in this model of forgiveness, political authority is obligated to respond to the forbearance exercised by "the disinherited" just by their continuing minimal political communion. This obligation is all the more urgent where political authority, even the law itself, has been acutely responsible for wrongdoing. Is changing oppressive law enough? What else can actually be done?

Typical compatibilist accounts of forgiveness focus on the sublime mercy of specific victims; this realist account instead focuses on what can plausibly be demanded from societies to make amends to those it has wounded. The resulting normative vision has serious implications for punishment, reparation, and memory work practices.

Biographical Information

Christopher J. Dowdy a Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate Program in Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University. In August 2013 he defended, with honors, a dissertation on historical injustice and political forgiveness. His continuing research focuses on the possibilities and the limits of institutional redress and the ethics of reconciliation.