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## Beyond “Forgive and Forget”: Rethinking Theological Narratives of Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding

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### Abstract

This paper examines the role of theological narratives of forgiveness in post-conflict peacebuilding, with particular attention to the limitations of the “forgive and forget” approach. The objective is to explore how forgiveness can contribute to reconciliation while preserving victim agency, memory, accountability, justice, and meaningful dialogue. The paper adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach, drawing on theological, peacebuilding, reconciliation, transitional justice, and peace communication scholarship, including studies of South Africa, Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other post-conflict contexts. The findings indicate that forgiveness can support the reduction of revenge, restoration of relationships, and peaceful coexistence, but it should not be equated with forgetting, reconciliation, or the abandonment of justice. Imposing forgiveness may silence grievances, weaken victim agency, and encourage premature closure, particularly when powerful actors define reconciliation on behalf of affected communities. The paper concludes that forgiveness is most meaningful when understood as a voluntary and negotiated possibility within broader processes of acknowledgement, memory, accountability, justice, and dialogue. It recommends that religious leaders, governments, peacebuilding organisations, media, and community actors communicate forgiveness as an invitation rather than an obligation, create spaces for testimony and constructive memory, support dialogue and accountability, and evaluate reconciliation through trust, agency, participation, and transformed relationships rather than declarations of harmony alone.

**Keywords:** Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Peacebuilding, Accountability, Memory

### Introduction

Post-conflict societies face the difficult task of rebuilding relationships, restoring trust, addressing grievances, and creating conditions in which peace can endure beyond the formal cessation of violence. Reconciliation is therefore not simply a matter of ending hostilities but of addressing the damaged relationships, memories, identities, and moral questions that conflict leaves behind. Scholarship



increasingly treats reconciliation as a multidimensional process involving relationships, trust, acknowledgement, justice, and, in some contexts, forgiveness (Kelly, 2021). Forgiveness has consequently become an important element of peacebuilding discourse, particularly within religious approaches to reconciliation. Religious traditions have long provided moral and theological resources for responding to violence through ideas of forgiveness, mercy, love, repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. These ideas have also entered public peacebuilding practice, where religious actors and institutions can contribute to reconciliation and peace processes (Philpott, 2015; Pope, 2014).

The appeal of forgiveness in post-conflict settings is understandable. Where communities have experienced prolonged violence, forgiveness can offer an alternative to revenge and create possibilities for restoring relationships. Christian theological approaches, for example, have connected forgiveness with reconciliation and restorative justice while emphasising that forgiveness can coexist with justice rather than require its abandonment (Pope, 2014). More broadly, forgiveness has been incorporated into public and political approaches to post-conflict reconciliation, including transitional justice and truth-seeking processes (Philpott, 2015). Yet the normative value attached to forgiveness can also create difficulties when a complex process is reduced to a simple moral instruction: forgive and forget. The phrase implies not only that victims should relinquish resentment but that the past should cease to demand attention. Such a formulation risks confusing forgiveness with forgetting, reconciliation with harmony, and peace with the closure of difficult questions about responsibility and justice.

The problem becomes particularly significant when forgiveness is communicated as an expected moral response. Appeals to forgiveness may come from religious leaders, political authorities, peacebuilding organisations, community leaders, or media narratives seeking to encourage reconciliation. While these appeals may be well intentioned, they can place pressure on those who have experienced harm to demonstrate forgiveness before they have had opportunities to express grievances, receive acknowledgement, or see meaningful accountability. Scholarship on public forgiveness has raised precisely this concern, questioning whether political or institutional appeals to forgiveness can become unfair when they pressure victims to forgive or encourage society to move forward without adequately confronting past wrongdoing (van Stokkom et al., 2020). Forgiveness is therefore not simply a message that can be communicated into existence; its meaning and possibility are shaped by relationships, histories, power, agency, and the conditions surrounding the harm.

This distinction points to an important difference between forgiveness as communicated instruction and forgiveness as a negotiated process. The former tells victims what they ought to do with their experiences; the latter creates space for affected people to determine what forgiveness might mean, whether it is possible, and what conditions might make reconciliation meaningful. Such a distinction is consistent with emerging research that treats peace communication as embedded in processes of narrative negotiation and community interaction rather than as the simple transmission of predetermined meanings (Atay & Berberoğlu, 2025; Levesque & Ongun, 2024). The question, therefore, is not whether forgiveness should have a place in post-conflict peacebuilding, but how forgiveness is communicated, by whom, to whom, and under what conditions.

This paper argues that forgiveness in post-conflict peace communication should not be communicated as an obligation to forget or move beyond harm, but rather approached as a potentially transformative process requiring acknowledgement, agency, accountability, dialogue, and justice. Forgiveness may contribute to reconciliation, but it should remain a possibility negotiated by those affected by violence rather than a predetermined endpoint imposed upon them.



## Method

This position was developed through a qualitative, literature-based analysis of theological, peacebuilding, reconciliation, transitional justice, and peace communication scholarship, including studies of South Africa, Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other post-conflict contexts.

## Forgiveness in Peace Communication and Peacebuilding

Forgiveness occupies an important and contested place within peacebuilding because it addresses one of the most difficult consequences of violent conflict: the persistence of resentment, mistrust, and damaged relationships after violence has ended. Rather than treating forgiveness simply as an individual psychological response, peacebuilding scholarship has increasingly considered its relational and social significance. Pope (2014), for example, conceptualises forgiveness as a movement from ill will toward goodwill that can contribute to the restoration of relationships while remaining compatible with justice. From this perspective, forgiveness does not necessarily require the denial of wrongdoing or the abandonment of accountability. Instead, it can form part of a broader process through which individuals and communities respond to harm and explore possibilities for renewed relationships.

The importance attributed to forgiveness is particularly evident in religious approaches to reconciliation. Religious traditions have long provided moral languages through which societies interpret wrongdoing, repentance, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Philpott (2015) argues that reconciliation constitutes an ethic of peacebuilding rooted in religious traditions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Within these traditions, forgiveness can provide a moral alternative to revenge and offer ways of imagining relationships beyond cycles of retaliation. Christian theological approaches, for instance, locate forgiveness and reconciliation within ideals of divine love and extend these principles into practices of restorative justice and peacemaking (Pope, 2014). Such traditions have consequently provided religious communities and leaders with important resources for responding to violence and rebuilding relationships after conflict.

Forgiveness, however, is not synonymous with reconciliation. It is better understood as one possible component of a broader relational process. Auerbach (2005) highlights the significance of forgiveness in conflicts involving deeply rooted identities and hostility, while also emphasizing that forgiveness is neither automatically sufficient for nor identical to reconciliation. Reconciliation concerns the transformation of relationships between former adversaries and may involve acknowledgement, interaction, changed perceptions, and the development of conditions for coexistence. Forgiveness can contribute to this process by reducing the desire for retaliation and creating possibilities for goodwill, but it does not by itself restore trust or resolve the political and social conditions that produced conflict. Its contribution is therefore relational rather than merely emotional.

This relational dimension is particularly important in post-conflict settings where relationships between individuals and groups have been severely damaged. Violent conflict can produce fear, resentment, suspicion, and enduring perceptions of the other as an enemy. Forgiveness can potentially interrupt these patterns by creating space for individuals to reconsider relationships structured around hostility. Pope (2014) places forgiveness within a relational account of peacemaking precisely because it can contribute to the restoration of “right relationship,” while also connecting it to restorative justice. Such an understanding makes forgiveness relevant not only to interpersonal encounters but also to broader efforts to rebuild social relationships after collective violence.

Religious leaders and institutions can play an important role in these processes because they often possess moral authority, established community networks, and culturally meaningful languages for interpreting



suffering and reconciliation. Research on religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, demonstrates their engagement with post-conflict challenges involving forgiveness, reconciliation, and collective memories of violence (Odak, 2020). Religious institutions can provide spaces for reflection, mourning, confession, repentance, dialogue, and reconciliation, while religious leaders can articulate moral narratives that challenge revenge and encourage peaceful relationships. Their significance therefore lies not simply in communicating religious doctrines but in their ability to connect theological ideas with the lived experiences of communities emerging from violence.

Forgiveness narratives can consequently provide valuable resources for reducing cycles of revenge and facilitating coexistence. Where communities remain organized around memories of victimization and expectations of retaliation, narratives emphasising mercy, compassion, and the possibility of restored relationships can create alternative moral orientations. Philpott (2015) identifies forgiveness as particularly distinctive within religious approaches to reconciliation because it offers a way of responding to wrongdoing that differs from purely punitive understandings of post-conflict justice. This does not mean that forgiveness eliminates the need for justice. Rather, forgiveness can coexist with processes seeking truth, responsibility, restoration, and institutional reform.

The value of forgiveness in peacebuilding therefore lies in its potential, rather than in any automatic capacity to produce reconciliation. It can provide individuals and communities with moral and relational resources for responding to harm, reducing revenge, and imagining relationships beyond violence. Religious traditions and institutions can strengthen these possibilities by providing culturally resonant spaces in which forgiveness and reconciliation can be discussed and practiced. At the same time, forgiveness remains embedded in particular histories, relationships, and social conditions. As Auerbach (2005) demonstrates, religious understandings of forgiveness themselves vary across traditions, meaning that forgiveness cannot be treated as a universally identical process.

The problem, therefore, emerges not from the idea of forgiveness itself but when this complex relational and moral process is reduced to a communicative imperative to “forgive and forget.” Such a reduction risks transforming forgiveness from a possibility that may contribute to reconciliation into an expectation that communities or victims are required to fulfil. The next section examines this tension more critically, asking what is lost when forgiveness is communicated as an obligation rather than understood as a process shaped by acknowledgement, agency, accountability, and the conditions of reconciliation.

### **From Forgiveness to “Forgive and Forget”**

The difficulty begins when forgiveness is reduced from a complex moral and relational process to the familiar injunction to “forgive and forget.” The phrase appears attractive because it promises closure: the injured person forgives, the past is put aside, and social relations can supposedly move forward. In post-conflict societies, however, such simplification can obscure the different processes involved in forgiveness, remembering, reconciliation, and accountability. Forgiveness may contribute to reconciliation, but it does not require forgetting, does not automatically restore relationships, and does not eliminate the need to confront wrongdoing. Indeed, scholarship increasingly emphasises that forgiveness, memory, reconciliation, and justice can be complementary rather than mutually exclusive processes (Amaya et al., 2023; Pope, 2014).

Forgiveness is not forgetting. Remembering can remain essential to post-conflict recovery because communities must confront what happened before they can determine how to live with its consequences. Research from Cambodia, for example, demonstrates the continuing significance of memory, truth-seeking, and unresolved feelings decades after mass violence. Pham et al. (2019) show that transitional justice processes can generate renewed demand for truth and influence how communities understand the legacy of violence. Memory therefore cannot simply be treated as an obstacle to forgiveness. It can provide the historical and moral context within which forgiveness becomes meaningful. Recent



scholarship on Colombia similarly argues that community-based practices combining forgiveness and memory-making can contribute to deeper forms of reconciliation rather than requiring communities to choose between remembering and forgiving (Amaya et al., 2023). The implication is important for peace communication: encouraging people to “forget” may prematurely close conversations about responsibility, loss, and historical experience that remain necessary for reconciliation.

Forgetting can also create an epistemic problem because it can determine whose experiences remain visible in the public memory of conflict. When peace narratives emphasize moving forward without preserving space for difficult memories, the experiences of victims and marginalized groups can become secondary to narratives of national unity or social harmony. Such an approach risks turning reconciliation into a process of replacing contested memories with a more convenient collective narrative. Remembering, by contrast, can help communities identify patterns of harm, recognize victims, and consider how violence might be prevented from recurring. This does not mean that remembering must perpetuate hostility. Memory can be reconstructed through dialogue and transformed into a resource for understanding rather than revenge. The critical distinction is therefore not between remembering and peace, but between destructive memories that reproduce hostility and constructive memory practices that support recognition and accountability (Amaya et al., 2023; Pham et al., 2019).

Nor is forgiveness synonymous with reconciliation. Forgiveness can be understood as a change in the injured person's orientation toward the wrongdoer, whereas reconciliation concerns the restoration or transformation of a relationship. Pope (2014) describes forgiveness as a movement from ill will toward goodwill and identifies it as potentially supportive of reconciliation and restorative justice, but this does not make the concepts identical. A person may forgive an offender without wishing to resume the relationship in its previous form. Similarly, communities may develop a willingness to coexist without having restored trust or resolved all historical grievances. Reconciliation is therefore a broader relational and social process involving acknowledgement, interaction, trust, and changed relationships. Forgiveness may contribute to that process, but it cannot be commanded as a shortcut to its completion.

This distinction is particularly important because trust cannot simply be communicated into existence. Post-conflict relationships are often shaped by memories of betrayal, violence, displacement, and fear. A declaration that communities should forgive one another does not automatically undo these experiences. Trust develops through repeated encounters, credible commitments, changed behaviour, and evidence that previous harms will not be repeated. The literature on public forgiveness consequently raises important questions about who can forgive, under what conditions forgiveness can be expressed publicly, and whether public appeals for forgiveness genuinely support reconciliation (van Stokkom et al., 2012). Communication can create opportunities for these processes, but it cannot substitute for the relational work through which trust is rebuilt.

The distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation becomes even more consequential when forgiveness is invoked to encourage premature coexistence. Living alongside former adversaries may be necessary after conflict, but physical proximity does not necessarily constitute reconciliation. Communities can coexist while continuing to experience mistrust, resentment, exclusion, or unresolved grievances. Treating coexistence as evidence that reconciliation has been achieved can therefore obscure the quality of relationships beneath the surface. Sustainable peace requires more than the restoration of social order; it requires attention to the conditions under which relationships can become less hostile and more equitable. Forgiveness may assist that process, but it should not be used to declare reconciliation complete before those conditions exist.

The third distinction concerns forgiveness and accountability. The question is not whether forgiveness and justice are opposites. They need not be. Pope (2014) explicitly understands forgiveness as compatible with justice and places it within a restorative approach that addresses harms experienced by victims,



communities, and perpetrators. The more difficult question is whether forgiveness can be meaningful when wrongdoing has not been acknowledged. Where perpetrators deny responsibility, victims may be asked to release resentment while the underlying account of what happened remains contested. In such circumstances, an appeal to forgiveness can shift attention away from the wrongdoer's responsibility and toward the victim's moral response.

Acknowledgement is therefore significant because it recognises that something happened, that harm was done, and that the experience of those affected deserves recognition. Accountability extends this recognition by asking who was responsible, what obligations follow from that responsibility, and how harms might be addressed. Transitional justice demonstrates why these questions matter: mechanisms concerned with accountability and redress also shape and are shaped by collective memory and understandings of past violence (Pham et al., 2019). Forgiveness should not therefore be treated as a substitute for truth, accountability, or justice. Rather, it can exist alongside processes through which responsibility is acknowledged and harms are addressed.

This is where the communicative dimension becomes particularly important. Forgiveness should not be used to close conversations that accountability requires society to continue having. If communication tells communities that peace requires forgiveness, but provides little space for testimony, acknowledgement, responsibility, or justice, it risks converting reconciliation into premature closure. Conversely, communication can create spaces in which victims articulate what happened, perpetrators acknowledge responsibility, communities negotiate the meaning of justice, and forgiveness if it becomes possible emerges from rather than replaces these processes. The challenge, therefore, is not to reject forgiveness but to resist its reduction to a formula of “forgive and forget.”

A more meaningful approach recognises that forgiveness, memory, reconciliation, and accountability can coexist. Forgiveness may involve releasing a desire for revenge without erasing the past. Memory can preserve experiences of harm without permanently reproducing hostility. Reconciliation can involve renewed forms of relationship without requiring the restoration of previous relationships. Accountability can address wrongdoing without making forgiveness impossible. What must be rejected is the assumption that peace requires these complexities to be compressed into a single moral instruction. In post-conflict peace communication, the task should instead be to create communicative spaces in which communities can determine what forgiveness means, what must be remembered, what accountability requires, and what conditions are necessary for reconciliation.

### **When Forgiveness is Not Negotiated**

The central question in communicating forgiveness after conflict is not simply whether forgiveness is desirable, but who has the authority to decide when forgiveness should occur. Forgiveness is frequently presented as a pathway toward reconciliation, healing, and peaceful coexistence. Yet once forgiveness enters the public sphere, it is no longer only a personal response to harm. Religious leaders, political authorities, peacebuilding organisations, community leaders, and media institutions can all participate in defining what forgiveness means and when it is expected. Public-forgiveness scholarship has long recognised this tension, noting the growing use of public apologies, national reconciliation initiatives, and appeals for forgiveness while questioning who can legitimately ask for, offer, or represent forgiveness in collective contexts (van Stokkom et al., 2012). The critical issue, therefore, is not whether forgiveness should have a place in peacebuilding, but whether it can remain meaningful when powerful actors determine its timing, meaning, and expected outcome.

### **The problem of imposed forgiveness**

Forgiveness becomes problematic when it is communicated as an obligation rather than an invitation or possibility. Appeals to forgive may be motivated by legitimate concerns about revenge, social



fragmentation, and continuing cycles of violence. Religious leaders may encourage forgiveness because their traditions regard it as a moral virtue; governments may promote it as part of national reconciliation; and peacebuilding organisations may see it as a pathway toward restoring relationships. Yet these different actors do not necessarily bear the consequences of forgiveness in the same way as those who experienced the original harm.

This asymmetry matters. When a victim is told that forgiveness is necessary for peace, the burden of repairing the social consequences of violence can subtly shift toward the person who suffered it. The victim is asked to release anger, resentment, or demands for recognition, while less attention may be directed toward what the perpetrator, institution, or wider society must do to repair the harm. Public forgiveness therefore raises questions about whether appeals to forgiveness can become coercive even when they are not formally compulsory. Van Stokkom et al. (2012) distinguish between different approaches to public forgiveness and examine the possibility of “invitational forgiveness,” precisely because public appeals raise questions about whether forgiving attitudes can legitimately be encouraged without becoming demands.

The distinction between invitation and obligation is crucial. An invitation leaves open the possibility that a person may accept, delay, reinterpret, or reject forgiveness. An obligation establishes forgiveness as the morally preferred response and can make refusal appear incompatible with peace. In post-conflict environments, where communities may be under considerable pressure to demonstrate that reconciliation has succeeded, such expectations can be particularly powerful. The language of “moving forward” can therefore become a subtle mechanism for discouraging continued discussion of harm.

This does not mean that every appeal to forgiveness is coercive. Rather, the problem lies in the communicative conditions surrounding the appeal. If forgiveness is promoted alongside truth-telling, acknowledgement, accountability, and opportunities for victims to speak, it can remain a voluntary possibility. If it is presented as the price of social harmony, it risks becoming a demand placed upon those who have already borne the greatest burden of violence.

### **Forgiveness and victim agency**

Victim agency is therefore fundamental. Who has the right to forgive? In interpersonal contexts, forgiveness ordinarily concerns the person who experienced the wrong. In collective conflicts, however, the boundaries of individual and collective forgiveness become less clear. Religious leaders may speak about communal forgiveness; political leaders may announce national reconciliation; and institutions may claim that a society has “forgiven” its past. Yet these collective declarations can obscure the fact that victims experience violence differently and may hold different views about forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides an important illustration. Gobodo-Madikizela's work on encounters between survivors and perpetrators shows that forgiveness can emerge through highly personal encounters involving remorse, empathy, testimony, and recognition rather than through a simple instruction to forgive (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002). Her later work describes the TRC as a dialogic space in which encounters between survivors and perpetrators could contribute to processes of psychological repair (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2015). These accounts are significant because they place the experiences and agency of survivors at the centre of the process. Forgiveness is not presented as something that institutions can simply produce through communication; it emerges, when it emerges, through particular relational encounters.

This perspective also means recognizing that victims may respond to harm differently. Some may choose to forgive. Others may require acknowledgement or accountability before forgiveness becomes conceivable. Some may forgive without wishing to restore a relationship, while others may decide that



forgiveness is not something they want to pursue. None of these positions should automatically be interpreted as opposition to peace. A person can reject revenge while declining to forgive. A survivor can participate in reconciliation while maintaining a demand for justice. A community can support coexistence without claiming that the wounds of conflict have disappeared.

Consequently, forgiveness must retain agency. Outsiders cannot legitimately determine when a victim has forgiven, and institutions should be cautious about speaking on behalf of victims when announcing collective reconciliation. The right to forgive should not become a new form of social pressure. If peace communication is genuinely concerned with human dignity, it must preserve the possibility that affected people may say “not yet,” “not in this way,” or even “not at all.”

### **Forgiveness and power**

The question of agency inevitably raises the question of power. Forgiveness does not occur within a social vacuum. Post-conflict societies are marked by unequal access to political authority, economic resources, institutional platforms, and public visibility. These inequalities influence who can define the meaning of reconciliation and whose interpretation of the past becomes dominant.

Consider a simple communicative sequence: the perpetrator says, “I have apologized.” The institution responds, “We need reconciliation.” A religious leader says, “You must forgive.” The victim responds, “But what about justice?” The exchange reveals that forgiveness is not merely a question of personal morality. It is also a question of power over the interpretation and closure of the past.

Minow's (1998) analysis of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission demonstrates the difficulty of navigating the space between vengeance and forgiveness after systematic violence. The significance of the TRC was not that it simply encouraged victims to forgive perpetrators. Rather, it created an institutional space in which testimony, public acknowledgement, responsibility, and competing responses to wrongdoing could be brought into the open. The process illustrates why forgiveness cannot be detached from the wider political and institutional conditions in which societies confront violence.

Power also shapes the incentives surrounding reconciliation. Political institutions may have an interest in narratives that emphasise national unity. Peacebuilding organisations may face pressure to demonstrate reconciliation within limited programme cycles. Religious institutions may prioritize moral narratives emphasizing forgiveness and restoration. These motivations do not make reconciliation illegitimate, but they can create circumstances in which the pressure for closure becomes greater than the willingness to confront unresolved grievances.

The danger is that responsibility for repairing a broken society becomes concentrated on those who were harmed. The victim becomes responsible for forgiving, the community becomes responsible for restoring harmony, while perpetrators and institutions may escape sustained scrutiny. Such a process can transform forgiveness from a potentially liberating choice into a mechanism through which the costs of reconciliation are redistributed toward victims.

This is why forgiveness should not substitute for accountability. Gobodo-Madikizela's work is instructive here because the possibility of forgiveness in her accounts is connected to remorse, acknowledgement, witnessing, and encounters between survivors and perpetrators (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002, 2015). Forgiveness becomes meaningful within a relational process in which the wrongdoing is not simply erased but confronted.

### **From forgiveness as instruction to forgiveness as dialogue**



The alternative is not to remove forgiveness from peacebuilding but to change the communicative question. Instead of asking, “*How can we persuade victims to forgive?*”, peacebuilding communication should ask, “What would meaningful repair require?”

The first question establishes forgiveness as the desired outcome and communication as the instrument for achieving it. The second opens a space for communities to determine what reconciliation should involve. Participants may identify acknowledgement, apology, truth-telling, accountability, restitution, justice, institutional reform, security, or changed behaviour as necessary conditions for meaningful repair. Forgiveness may emerge from these processes, but it cannot be predetermined as their required endpoint.

This approach transforms forgiveness from instruction into dialogue. Dialogue does not assume that everyone will reach the same conclusion. It allows victims, perpetrators, community leaders, religious actors, and institutions to negotiate meanings and responsibilities. Gobodo-Madikizela's (2015) account of survivor perpetrator encounters is particularly relevant because it emphasizes the importance of dialogic spaces in which testimony, remorse, empathy, and recognition can interact. Communication becomes significant not because it persuades one side to adopt the other's position, but because it creates conditions in which previously separated experiences can be encountered.

A dialogic approach also protects the legitimacy of disagreement. Some participants may consider forgiveness essential to their healing; others may prioritise justice; others may seek neither forgiveness nor renewed relationships. Peacebuilding communication should be capable of accommodating these differences without interpreting them automatically as failures of reconciliation.

This changes the meaning of acknowledgement. Acknowledgement should not be treated as a communication technique for producing forgiveness. Its value is that it recognizes the reality and significance of harm. Similarly, an apology should not be understood as an automatic entitlement to forgiveness. Gobodo-Madikizela's (2002) analysis of remorse suggests that genuine remorse can create possibilities for rehumanisation and forgiveness, but the possibility remains relational rather than guaranteed. The wrongdoer can apologize; the victim retains the agency to determine what that apology means.

The distinction is therefore fundamental: “You must forgive” closes the communicative question; “What would meaningful repair require?” opens it. The former establishes forgiveness as a predetermined social objective. The latter recognizes that reconciliation must be negotiated among people whose experiences, interests, and understandings of justice may differ.

Forgiveness can consequently remain an important resource for peacebuilding without becoming its compulsory endpoint. Communication should create spaces in which people can speak about harm, listen to competing experiences, demand accountability, acknowledge wrongdoing, and negotiate the conditions of coexistence. Whether forgiveness emerges from those processes should remain with those most directly affected.

The central issue, then, is not whether post-conflict societies should forgive. It is whether they are given the communicative freedom to determine what forgiveness means, when it is possible, and what must happen before it can become meaningful. Sustainable reconciliation cannot be built by placing the burden of social repair on victims. It requires communicative processes in which power, responsibility, memory, justice, and forgiveness can be openly negotiated.

### **The Politics of Harmony: When Peace Communication Silences Grievance**

Harmony is an attractive objective in societies emerging from violent conflict. After years of fear, displacement, loss, and social division, calls for unity, coexistence, reconciliation, and social cohesion can



provide an important alternative to renewed hostility. Peace communication frequently contributes to this aspiration by promoting narratives that emphasize common identity, mutual understanding, forgiveness, and peaceful coexistence. Yet the pursuit of harmony becomes problematic when it is treated as evidence that conflict has been resolved rather than as one possible outcome of a deeper process of addressing the conditions that produced and sustained conflict. Social cohesion, for example, is widely invoked as an objective of peacebuilding, but Brown and Zahar (2015) caution against treating cohesion simply as an end goal without examining the political and institutional conditions through which it is produced. Harmony can therefore describe the appearance of social unity without necessarily indicating that underlying inequalities, grievances, or relationships have been transformed.

This problem becomes particularly visible when post-conflict societies are encouraged to “move on.” The language of moving forward can be valuable when it signals a desire to prevent revenge and create possibilities for a shared future. However, it can also imply that continued discussion of violence represents an unwillingness to reconcile. Victims may consequently face pressure to demonstrate that they have overcome anger, grief, or resentment, particularly when political and religious narratives place a high moral value on forgiveness and unity. The result can be a subtle hierarchy of acceptable emotions: forgiveness becomes associated with peace, while anger and grievance are interpreted as obstacles to it. Yet grievance is not necessarily evidence of failed reconciliation. It can also communicate that an injury remains unresolved and that affected people continue to demand recognition, accountability, or repair.

This distinction matters because grievances can perform an important communicative function. They make visible experiences that dominant narratives may otherwise overlook. Research on group grievances demonstrates that grievances are closely connected to social cohesion and political stability, particularly where institutions fail to respond adequately to perceived injustices (Khan et al., 2023). From this perspective, silencing grievance does not necessarily eliminate the conditions that generated it. It may simply make those conditions less visible. Peace communication that focuses primarily on harmony can therefore risk treating the expression of grievance as a problem of communication rather than asking what the grievance is communicating about the social order itself.

The same concern applies to difficult memories. Post-conflict societies frequently need to construct narratives that enable people to imagine a shared future, but the desire for a common narrative can create pressure to simplify contested histories. Positive stories of forgiveness, reconciliation, and recovery may receive greater public attention than stories of continuing pain, unresolved loss, or injustice. Yet memory is not simply an obstacle to peace. As Pham et al. (2019) demonstrate in the Cambodian context, memories of violence remain connected to how communities understand forgiveness and reconciliation. Remembering can preserve recognition of victims, sustain demands for accountability, and provide lessons about how violence occurred. The objective should therefore not be to eliminate difficult memories but to create communicative conditions in which memories can be expressed, contested, and transformed without reproducing violence.

This leads to an important distinction: silence is not forgiveness. A community may stop publicly discussing its grievances because people have forgiven, but it may also do so because speaking is socially discouraged, politically costly, or perceived as threatening to communal unity. These possibilities cannot be treated as equivalent. The absence of public disagreement may indicate reconciliation, but it may also indicate exclusion, fatigue, fear, or the suppression of dissent. Communication research therefore needs to distinguish between a genuine reduction in hostility and the mere reduction of visible contestation.

Similarly, the absence of visible conflict is not necessarily reconciliation. A society can experience a reduction in open violence while significant mistrust, inequality, exclusion, and resentment remain. This



distinction corresponds with the broader peacebuilding literature on positive peace, which understands sustainable peace as involving more than the absence of direct violence. Positive peace requires attention to the relationships, institutions, and structural conditions that allow societies to manage disagreement and address injustice (Kang, 2021). Reconciliation therefore cannot be demonstrated simply by the disappearance of conflict from public communication. It requires evidence that relationships and the conditions underlying conflict have changed.

This is where the pursuit of harmony can become politically consequential. When peace communication presents social unity as the primary measure of success, those who continue to question the terms of peace can become framed as disruptive. Governments may prefer narratives that emphasize national unity after conflict; religious institutions may promote forgiveness as a moral pathway toward restored community; and peacebuilding organisations may favour messages that demonstrate social cohesion. These narratives can be valuable, but they also raise a critical question: who benefits when disagreement becomes interpreted as a threat to peace? If criticism of institutions, demands for justice, or expressions of historical grievance are dismissed because they disturb harmony, peace communication may unintentionally reproduce the inequalities it seeks to overcome.

This does not mean that peace communication should celebrate conflict or treat every grievance as legitimate. Grievances can also be manipulated, exaggerated, or mobilised to reproduce hostility. The critical point is that constructive disagreement should not be confused with violent conflict. Societies inevitably contain competing interests, identities, memories, and interpretations of justice. The capacity to express and negotiate these differences without violence can itself be an indicator of social resilience. The Institute for Economics and Peace similarly conceptualizes positive peace as a set of attitudes, institutions, and structures that enable societies to manage conflict and sustain peaceful conditions rather than merely suppressing visible violence.

Peace communication should therefore create room for disagreement while establishing boundaries against incitement, dehumanisation, and violence. The objective is not to maintain permanent social harmony but to develop communicative capacities for managing difference. Dialogue about grievances can reveal problems that require institutional responses; public disagreement can expose inequalities; and difficult memories can challenge narratives that prematurely declare reconciliation complete. In this sense, communication can contribute to peace precisely by allowing societies to confront what remains unresolved.

The politics of harmony therefore requires a careful distinction between peaceful coexistence and substantive justice. A society may appear harmonious because difficult questions have been silenced, but sustainable peace requires more than social calm. It requires the ability to recognise harm, address grievances, preserve meaningful memories, and negotiate competing interests without returning to violence. Peace communication should consequently resist the temptation to equate reconciliation with silence or harmony with closure. Its task is not simply to make post-conflict societies appear peaceful, but to create communicative environments in which the disagreements and grievances that remain can be expressed and addressed constructively. A peace that cannot tolerate grievance may produce silence, but silence alone cannot demonstrate that peace has been achieved.

### **Reimagining Forgiveness Communication**

If forgiveness is to contribute meaningfully to post-conflict peacebuilding, the task is not to abandon theological narratives of forgiveness but to reconsider how they are communicated. Religious traditions can provide important moral resources for confronting violence, reducing revenge, and imagining



relationships beyond conflict. Pope (2014), for example, understands forgiveness as compatible with justice and as potentially contributing to the restoration of relationships. Similarly, Boehle (2021) argues that forgiveness, restorative justice, and reconciliation can contribute to sustainable peace when justice processes are integrated rather than displaced. The challenge, therefore, is to communicate forgiveness in ways that preserve its moral and relational possibilities without transforming it into an obligation imposed upon those who have suffered harm.

The first shift should be from obligation to agency. Instead of communicating forgiveness as something victims ought to provide, peace communication should recognize forgiveness as a decision that belongs, in the first instance, to those affected by wrongdoing. This does not require rejecting religious teachings that encourage forgiveness. Rather, such teachings can be communicated as moral resources for reflection rather than commands that determine how victims must respond. Research on reconciliation similarly demonstrates that agency is central to the process: transgression can threaten victims' sense of agency, while acknowledgement, apology, and forgiveness can contribute to restoring it (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). Communication should therefore expand rather than restrict the capacity of affected people to decide whether, when, and how forgiveness becomes meaningful.

Second, communication should move from forgetting to constructive memory. The language of “forgive and forget” suggests that reconciliation requires the past to be left behind. A more constructive approach recognises that memory can remain part of reconciliation. Remembering does not necessarily mean maintaining hostility; it can preserve recognition of victims, clarify responsibility, and help communities understand how violence occurred. Research on memory and forgiveness demonstrates that these processes can coexist rather than requiring communities to choose between remembering and forgiving (Amaya et al., 2023; Pham et al., 2019). Peace communication should therefore create spaces where difficult histories can be remembered, narrated, contested, and interpreted without allowing memory to become a mechanism for reproducing violence.

Third, forgiveness communication should move from instruction to dialogue. The question should not be, “How can communities be persuaded to forgive?” but rather, “What would meaningful repair require?” This reframing changes communication from a mechanism for delivering a predetermined moral outcome into a space for negotiating the meaning and conditions of reconciliation. Dialogue allows victims, perpetrators, religious leaders, community actors, and institutions to articulate different understandings of harm, responsibility, justice, and restoration. Gobodo-Madikizela's work on encounters between survivors and perpetrators illustrates the importance of dialogic processes in which remorse, recognition, empathy, and the possibility of forgiveness can emerge through interaction rather than be prescribed in advance (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002, 2015). Dialogue does not guarantee forgiveness; its value lies in allowing affected actors to determine what reconciliation might require.

Fourth, communication should move from reconciliation rhetoric to acknowledgement. Public declarations that communities have reconciled can create an appearance of closure without necessarily addressing the experiences of those who suffered. Acknowledgement provides a different starting point. It recognises that harm occurred, that people were affected, and that their experiences matter. This does not make acknowledgement a technique for producing forgiveness. Rather, it creates a communicative foundation on which questions of responsibility, justice, repair, and possible reconciliation can be considered. Forgiveness can therefore remain voluntary while acknowledgement becomes part of the broader social process of confronting violence.

Fifth, peace communication should move from premature harmony to negotiated coexistence. Post-conflict communities may need to live alongside former adversaries even when trust has not yet been



restored and forgiveness remains incomplete. Communication should therefore avoid presenting harmony as an immediate or compulsory endpoint. Instead, it should support the negotiation of practical forms of coexistence while communities continue to address unresolved grievances. Such an approach recognises that reconciliation can be gradual and uneven. People may coexist before they trust one another; they may trust one another before they forgive; and they may forgive without returning to previous forms of relationship.

Communication should move from forgiveness alone to forgiveness alongside accountability and justice. Forgiveness becomes more meaningful when it does not require victims to abandon legitimate claims for truth, responsibility, restitution, or institutional change. Pope (2014) explicitly situates forgiveness within restorative justice, while Boehle (2021) emphasizes the need to integrate justice processes into peacebuilding approaches involving forgiveness and reconciliation. Communication should therefore resist the false choice between forgiving and seeking justice. A person may relinquish revenge while continuing to demand accountability. A community may pursue reconciliation while insisting that wrongdoing be acknowledged. Forgiveness and justice can consequently occupy the same communicative space.

This reorientation does not require theological narratives of forgiveness to be discarded. Instead, they can be reinterpreted communicatively. Religious teachings can provide moral languages of mercy, compassion, repentance, and reconciliation while leaving space for questions, disagreement, memory, justice, and victim agency. Religious leaders can facilitate conversations rather than prescribe outcomes; peacebuilding organisations can create spaces for reflection rather than measure success through declarations of forgiveness; and media can represent reconciliation as a complex process rather than a simple story of moving on.

The broader contribution of this approach is to reposition forgiveness from a message to be transmitted into a possibility to be negotiated. Communication should not tell communities what forgiveness must look like. It should create the conditions in which affected people can determine whether forgiveness is possible, what it requires, and how it relates to justice, memory, accountability, and reconciliation. In this sense, the goal is not to communicate forgiveness more persuasively, but to communicate in ways that make ethical, voluntary, and meaningful forgiveness possible.

### **Implications for Peacebuilding Practice**

Reimagining forgiveness communication has important implications for how reconciliation is practiced in post-conflict societies. If forgiveness is to remain voluntary and meaningful, peacebuilding practice must move away from communicating predetermined expectations and toward creating conditions in which affected communities can negotiate what repair, reconciliation, and coexistence should mean. This requires changes across religious institutions, governments, peacebuilding organisations, media, and community structures.

**Religious leaders** have a particularly important role because they often possess moral authority and remain embedded within communities long after formal peace processes have ended. Their contribution should not be reduced to encouraging victims to forgive. Instead, religious leaders can create spaces for lament, testimony, reflection, dialogue, and acknowledgement while distinguishing forgiveness from forgetting. Their communication can draw on theological traditions of mercy, compassion, repentance, and reconciliation without prescribing how victims should respond to harm. Religious actors can also contribute to peacebuilding by representing marginalized perspectives and challenging powerful actors



rather than simply reinforcing narratives of harmony (Parkin, 2026). Forgiveness should therefore be presented as a possibility rather than a requirement.

**Governments** should similarly avoid using reconciliation rhetoric to produce premature closure. Public appeals to unity and forgiveness may contribute to social stability, but they should not substitute for truth, accountability, or justice. Governments should support communicative processes through which grievances can be expressed and addressed, including dialogue connected to transitional justice and institutional reform. Dialogue can provide opportunities for communities to address long-standing grievances while connecting reconciliation with broader processes of justice and social repair (Sabharwal, 2017).

For **NGOs and peacebuilding organisations**, the argument requires a reconsideration of how reconciliation programmes are designed and evaluated. Expressions of forgiveness, participation in reconciliation ceremonies, or declarations of social harmony should not automatically be treated as evidence that reconciliation has been achieved. Organisations should instead create opportunities for communities to identify their own priorities, articulate unresolved grievances, and determine what meaningful repair requires. Evaluation should therefore consider acknowledgement, agency, dialogue, trust, relationships, and participation alongside conventional programme outputs. Dialogue should be treated as an ongoing process through which fractured relationships can be addressed rather than as a symbolic activity attached to a short-term intervention.

**Media organisations** also have an important responsibility. Rather than reproducing simplified narratives of “forgive and move on,” media can provide space for victims and survivors to explain what forgiveness and reconciliation mean from their perspectives. Reporting should distinguish forgiveness from forgetting, reconciliation from silence, and coexistence from the resolution of grievances. Media can facilitate constructive public discussion by representing the complexity of post-conflict experiences rather than privileging only positive narratives of closure. This is particularly important where continued demands for justice might otherwise be portrayed as resistance to peace.

**Community actors** should be supported as active participants in defining reconciliation. Community-based dialogue can create spaces where people preserve memories, express disagreement, negotiate grievances, and explore possibilities for coexistence without requiring immediate consensus. The objective is not to eliminate disagreement but to strengthen communities’ capacity to manage differences without violence.

Summarily, these implications suggest that peacebuilding practice should stop treating forgiveness as a communication outcome that institutions can produce. Communication should instead create conditions in which affected people can determine whether forgiveness is appropriate, what accountability requires, and what forms of coexistence are possible. The task is not to communicate forgiveness more forcefully, but to create communicative spaces in which forgiveness, if it emerges, is voluntary, acknowledged, and meaningful.

### **Implications for Post-Conflict Societies**

Reconceptualising forgiveness communication has broader implications for how post-conflict societies understand reconciliation and sustainable peace. First, reconciliation processes can become more **victim-sensitive** when forgiveness is treated as a possibility rather than an expected outcome. Victims and survivors can determine whether forgiveness is meaningful to them, while retaining the right to seek



acknowledgement, justice, or accountability. This reduces the risk that reconciliation becomes a social expectation imposed upon those who have experienced harm.

Second, this approach places memory within peacebuilding rather than treating it as an obstacle to reconciliation. Remembering violence can preserve recognition of victims, sustain historical accountability, and help communities understand the conditions that produced conflict. Constructive memory does not require societies to remain trapped in the past; rather, it can provide the basis for confronting the past without reproducing its violence. Peacebuilding can therefore pursue coexistence without demanding collective forgetting.

Third, understanding forgiveness as negotiated helps prevent reconciliation rhetoric from displacing accountability. Societies emerging from violence may need forgiveness and justice, rather than forgiveness instead of justice. Communication can create spaces in which communities debate what responsibility, repair, restitution, and reconciliation should involve. This is particularly important where political or institutional actors have incentives to promote narratives of closure.

Fourth, the approach creates a different role for religious institutions. Religious leaders can continue drawing upon theological traditions of mercy, repentance, compassion, and forgiveness while recognizing that these traditions should not be used to prescribe victims' responses. Their contribution can instead involve creating spaces for testimony, reflection, dialogue, and moral engagement. This allows religious institutions to contribute to reconciliation without becoming agents of premature closure.

Communities gain greater ownership over the meaning and direction of reconciliation. Rather than peace being declared through institutional statements or public ceremonies, communities can participate in determining what peaceful coexistence requires and what unresolved issues must be addressed. Peace consequently becomes understood as something negotiated rather than declared. Such an approach recognizes that post-conflict societies may disagree about forgiveness, justice, memory, and reconciliation while still developing ways of managing those disagreements without violence.

The broader implication is therefore not a choice between forgiveness and justice. Post-conflict societies do not need to choose between forgiveness and justice; communication can create spaces in which the relationship between them is negotiated. Forgiveness may contribute to healing, but its meaning, timing, and possibility should remain open to those most affected by violence. Sustainable peace depends not on compelling societies to forget or victims to forgive, but on creating communicative conditions in which memory, accountability, justice, coexistence, and forgiveness can be openly negotiated.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

“Forgive and forget” is an inadequate foundation for post-conflict reconciliation because it reduces a complex process of healing, accountability, and relationship repair to a simple expectation of closure. Forgiveness can provide an important moral and relational resource for societies emerging from violence, and theological traditions can contribute positively by offering narratives of mercy, compassion, repentance, and reconciliation. Yet the value of forgiveness does not justify imposing it upon those who have experienced harm. Forgiveness should remain voluntary, and forgetting should not be treated as a condition for peace. Communities may need to remember violence in order to acknowledge victims, confront injustice, and prevent its recurrence.

A more meaningful approach understands forgiveness as part of a broader communicative process involving acknowledgement, agency, dialogue, accountability, justice, and memory. Communication



should therefore create spaces in which victims, perpetrators, religious actors, institutions, and communities can negotiate what reconciliation requires rather than simply communicating harmony as a predetermined outcome. This approach does not reject forgiveness; it protects its meaning by allowing those affected by violence to determine whether, when, and under what conditions forgiveness is possible. Ultimately, sustainable peace does not require societies to forget violence or compel victims to forgive; it requires communicative spaces in which people can decide what forgiveness, justice, memory, and reconciliation should mean in their own circumstances.

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