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Forgiveness as the Summation of the Gospel Ethics of God

Abstract: Ethics is a philosophical discipline that explores what is good for a person and enables the survival of individuals and humanity. Christians in the biblical text recognize the word of God, revealing to them what is good for man and for his survival, and what is bad. There is a big difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament expressions of God's revelation. In the article, we find that God's revelation does not »fall from heaven«, but man recognizes God's word in the human word. His recognition is conditioned by culture. In recognizing the will of God from the Old Testament to the New Testament, we see a development that culminates in the evangelical doctrine of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift that enables survival. Thus, the concept of forgiving is understandable in the context of the so-called »relational theology«, based on the axiom, that living means to be in a relationship with the other.

Key words: ethics, Old Testament, New Testament, forgiveness, relational theology

Povzetek: **Odpuščanje kot višek etike evangeljskega Boga**

Etika je filozofska disciplina, ki raziskuje to, kar je za človeka dobro oziroma posamezniku in človeštvu omogoča preživetje. Kristjani v bibličnem besedilu prepoznavajo božjo besedo, ki jim razkriva, kaj je za človeka in za njegovo preživetje dobro in kaj je slabo. Med starozaveznim in novozaveznim božjim razodetjem je velika razlika. V prispevku ugotavljamo, da božje razodetje ne »pade z neba«, temveč človek prepozna božjo besedo v človeški besedi. Njegovo prepoznavanje je pogojeno s kulturo. V prepoznavanju božje volje od Stare zaveze do Nove zaveze opazimo razvoj, ki doseže vrhunec v evangeljskem nauku o odpuščanju. Odpuščanje je nezaslужen dar, ki omogoča preživetje. Takšno pojmovanje odpuščanja je razumljivo v kontekstu t. i. »relacijske teologije«, ki temelji na aksiomu, da živeti pomeni biti v odnosu z drugim.

Ključne besede: etika, Stara zaveza, Nova zveza, odpuščanje, relacijska teologija

1. Introduction

The word »ethics« is derived from an Ancient Greek word, êthikos, which means »relating to one's character«. The adjective êthikos is itself derived from another Greek word, the noun êthos meaning »character, disposition«. The semantics of »ethics« and the word »morality« are, in fact, synonyms, possessing the same meaning at their origins. Both expressions denote a view of life that contains two elements: 1) awareness of what is good for a person, and 2) awareness of the duties that must be fulfilled. The benefits of certain acts and their consequences are the two most solid characteristics of ethics or moral consciousness from their beginnings. It is beneficial for a human to do what makes a person's survival possible. Or even more precisely, it is most appropriate for the survival of the whole of mankind. So when we talk about the ethical implications in the Bible, we mean the advice and guidance that God gives to man as how to live so that he can survive. Or even more precisely, as we have already said, so that the whole of mankind can survive. Christians recognize the expression of God's will in the text of the Bible. We will look at God's commands to man for living, albeit surviving, in the Old Testament and the advice and guidance expressed in the New Testament.

In our paper, we want to emphasize that the highpoint of Gospel ethics is Christ's doctrine of forgiveness. We note that God's directives to man for ordered living expressed in the Old Testament dictate to us something completely different from the New Testament directives of God. How is it possible? First, we will clarify the various paths that God has used to speak to man. Then we will consider how to understand the differences between God's addressing man in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

2. *Dei Verbum* or the recognition of God's will

For many people, it is an unsolvable question as to how it is possible to communicate with God, or how God should tell man what is right and what is wrong. This is an actual question for those who want to reconcile their lives with God's will. We will answer this question with the help of the Second Vatican Council's document *Dei Verbum* which tells us that the biblical text, such as we can read it today, is written with the help of two authors. The first author is God who inspires man; the second author is the man who recognizes the divine inspiration and »incarnates« it into human words:

»Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (John 20:31; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20; 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to

the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.« (1965a, no. 11).

Recognition of God's will, however, is conditioned by the culture and by the time in which the person, chosen by God, lives. He will communicate to the people God's will, as he recognized it by his abilities and only such God's Revelation as he could have recognized it with his conditioned and limited abilities.

It is quite clear that, above all, it depends upon man, the second and true author, as to how he will write down divine revelation, which was not expressed to him by God in words. There is no telephone line between heaven and earth, and God does not call a believer on the cell phone to tell him clearly and loudly what he wants. God's doctrine is not a truth »fallen from the heaven«. (Lafon 1964, 24) Much like our image of God, also God's Word can be recognized by man in everyday life, and only in everyday life can he recognize it. Revelation is happening within human culture. God, infinitely powerful, who overcomes all, enters space and time and speaks through witnesses. When the prophet writes, »Thus says the Almighty Lord ...«, we must not think that God sent to him a message from heaven through a cellphone or a mail through the internet. The prophet ascribes the Word of God to human language. (1982, 117) Why he recognized these words as originating in God is another question. At this moment, it is important to emphasize that revelation is the word whose origin the believer has recognized as God's. When we speak of God's revelation in a theological context, we basically say that the theologian acknowledges that those human words found in the Bible are attributed directly to God. (1987, 34) In much the same way we speak about the »calling of God«. A boy who feels called to the priesthood or the girl heeding God's call to the monastery does not receive this call over the phone, but recognizes the »vocation« in human words or through a life event. The key to understanding God's revelation can therefore be attributed to the term »recognize«.

We can say that theology basically is not a science of God, but the systematic study of the recognitions of God's image and of God's deeds in human life. In the place of the word »recognize« we also often place the verb »to seek«. Thus, we can write that faith is the constant search for God; seeking God's image, seeking God's will! Christian theology, moreover, explores how the believer seeks God and His image and His Will as they have been recognized through the history of Christianity. It is obvious that through time there has been development of this recognition. The individual believer's search for God knows evolution, as can also be seen at the level of religion. In the next two chapters, we will show the evolution of recognizing God's will from the Old Testament to the New Testament in the Bible.

3. Ethical implications of The Bible's Old Testament

Believers attempt to make their behavior consistent with God's Word. A problem occurs when Catholics open the Holy Scriptures to Old Testament pages, where God requires, for example, human sacrifice of a son or a daughter. We ask: »How could God commission Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac to Him?« (Gen 22:9-10) In biblical history, we can find after Abraham another narrative of human sacrifice. The Book of Judges, for example, tells us how Jephthah sacrificed his beloved daughter to God in gratitude for a victory (Jgs 11:29-40). Mosaic Law prohibited human sacrifice in Leviticus: »Don't sacrifice your children on the altar fires to the god Molech.« (Lv 18:21) However, Mosaic Law allowed making a payment to the priests in lieu of the human sacrifice promised: »If you have promised to give someone to me and can't afford to pay the full amount for that person's release, you will be taken to a priest, and he will decide how much you can afford.« (Lv 27:1-8) But violence by God's will continued. God instructed Moses to kill 3,000 men from the people of Israel. In Exodus it is written: »The Lord God of Israel commands you to strap on your swords and go through the camp, killing your relatives, your friends, and your neighbors.« (Ex 32:27) The men of the Levi tribe followed his orders, and that day they killed about three thousand men (32:28). We ask ourselves how God could instruct Israel to exterminate all the people in the land of Canaan. »He has commanded you to completely wipe out the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. If you allow them to live, they will persuade you to worship their disgusting gods, and you will be unfaithful to the Lord.« (Dt 20:17-18) In fact, how is it possible that God, whom we call the Righteous and the Good, can »order« murder or even genocide? Christians who want to shape their lives according to God's will have great difficulties reading the Old Testament covenant. They wonder if God requires similar sacrifices from them today, as he demanded from Abraham; they wonder if God requires revenge from them today, as he asked of Moses.

When we talk about the Word of God present in the Bible, we speak about His Revelation, that is, the advice and counsel that God gives to us regarding how to live so that we can survive. In the Old Testament, we saw, the Jews recognized God's will in the directive rule »an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth« (Ex 21:24). In fact, His elected people were convinced that they had to fight against the enemies so that they could survive. It is no wonder that they were ready to kill everyone in Palestine so that they could easily occupy the Promised Land for themselves. The New Testament, with respect to the Word of God through His Revelation, is diametrically opposite to those directives of the Old Testament.

4. Ethical Implications of the New Testament

The Old Testament doctrine »an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth« matured in the New Testament into the unconditional commandment of love of neighbor.

The essence of the Gospel is in the transition from »being for oneself« (egoism) to »being for others« (altruism).

The invitation to live for others is expressed by the evangelical words that invite to walk for Christ in carrying the cross. This invitation of the Christian urges him to renounce himself, to his own comfort and constancy of himself, leaving himself to follow the Crucified with a crucifixion of his »own self« and to be available to others. As *Gaudium et spes* states: »The man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.« (1965b, no. 24) In the Gospel of John we read: »I tell you for certain that a grain of wheat that falls on the ground will never be more than one grain unless it dies. But if it dies, it will produce lots of wheat.« (Jn 12:24) The same is said by Matthew: »And unless you are willing to take up your cross and come with me, you are not fit to be my disciples. If you try to save your life, you will lose it. But if you give it up for me, you will surely find it.« (Mt 16:24)

If we compare the prescriptions of God in the Old and New Testaments, we quickly realize that in both cases, our gift to God must be impeccable. The believer must sacrifice the best of what he has. He must deny to himself the best he has. The word »sacrifice« in the Gospel text expresses this directly. Evangelical doctrine emphasizes the crux of sacrifice as renunciation. A believer in the Old Testament had to give up that which to him was the most precious, renunciation will be taken a step further in the New Testament. Here Jesus does not require of a believer's abandoning his property or loved ones, but renunciation of himself.

In the context of the renunciation of oneself it becomes clear to us what it means »to save one's life or lose it« and »find the life«! The apostle Peter would want to save Christ from suffering. The Master, however, instructs him that God's will is to accept suffering. And furthermore, He explains that »avoiding suffering« is but a superficial way meant to save life; when, in fact, »life would be lost«! Christ tells his disciples to give up their lives, to give up their desire to avoid suffering and to accept suffering. Christ did this himself and set an example when torture and death approached him: »He began to be grieved and trembling. Then he said to them: My soul is sad until death. Stay here and be with me! And he went a little further, fell on his face and prayed: My Father, if possible, let those chains pass by me, but not as I want, but as you.« (Mt 26:39-40) Christ's instruction, on how to act when fear reminds a person of the danger of »failure«, has further illuminated Matthew's text where Jesus spoke of violence:

»You know that you have been taught, ›An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth‹. But I tell you not to try to get even with a person who has done something to you. When someone slaps your right cheek, turn and let that person slap your other cheek. If someone sues you for your shirt, give up your coat as well. If a soldier forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two miles. When people ask you for something, give it to them. When they want to borrow money, lend it to them.« (Mt 5:38-42)

We see that the ethical implications of the Old Testament are completely different from those of the New Testament. How then do we understand this change of God's will?

5. Faith is an ongoing search for God

Man, when a child, may perform acts which in his mind are appropriate. Later, as an adolescent, he looks back and recognizes that these acts were foolish and he should have acted differently. Then an adult, he recognizes the acts of his youth as very inappropriate. Because of his having lived and grown wiser, he owns up to his past mistakes and avoids such behavior. In such a manner, we can understand the evolution of the recognition of God's will by the Israelites or people of the New Testament. Abraham recognized the will of God in the offering of Isaac in sacrifice. Moses, as well, readily acknowledged his duty to kill those who had rejected God. Today, we would say that such acts are terrible and incomprehensible. We believe that God does not oblige us to sacrifice in His name those who are dear to us. However, He requested it of the Patriarchs, because they recognized such sacrifice as the will of God. Similarly, as we regret and remember what nonsense we did as children, we today abhor what transpired according to the will of God in the time of Abraham. We are adults in our Christian faith and see life in a much different light from our »youth« embedded in the Jewish traditions. Jesus, in the Gospel, proposes a new commandment of absolute respect and love for everyone. We thank God that our faith is a relationship that is changing, albeit, evolving, and that the believers in faith are constantly searching for a new face of God. In recognizing that new image of God in the person of Jesus Christ, we discover the new manifestations of God's will. The believer can recognize a new image of God and discover a new manifestation of God's will, because Faith is perceived as a relationship. That means, it is the ongoing search for God. People are physical and spiritual beings. The spiritual world is understood as the place for growing relationships. Spirituality is composed of relationships: I to God and to others with whom we find ourselves at some point. Let us explain what the relationship exactly is.

Relational theology¹ posits the axiom that subjects, I, you, we, they, are born in relationship. The subject does not enter into relationship, it finds himself in it. Like one does not enter into life by his own decision, neither into faith. Life happens and faith happens too. A man enters into the material world by the union of two cells but he starts to live as a person when someone, the mother, addresses him as »you«, in a verbal way or non-verbal ways. Called by »you«, a human being is born as »I«, as a person. In such a manner, we can understand the faith. A man starts to be believer when he addresses the word »you« to God. Or, even better, he becomes a believer when he recognizes that God pronounced to him

¹ By the expression »relational theology« we espouse the thinking of the French theologian Guy Lafon and his disciples.

the word »you« and he replies as I to Him. In that moment man finds himself to be connected to God and starts a new life in relationship with Him. This means that man does not merit life, faith neither. Man receives both as gifts. The personal identity, his existence, can only be maintained when »I«, the person, continues to look for »you«, that is, »I« interact with the »you«. To call another by »you« is an ongoing searching for »you«. »You« becomes my responsibility, and »I« begin in turn to give up myself. To live means to be in relationship with another. In fact, subjects are repositioning themselves constantly in the relationship, because this situation is never static, but is always changing due to the two dimensions in the relationship: the presence and the absence. (Osredkar 2008)

Relationship consists of two dimensions: presence and absence. These two dimensions work at the same time in a relationship between two individuals. Their relationship is changing all the time. With the help of geometry, let us imagine a meter-long line. We can split this line in two parts infinitely. We find an infinite number of possible rapport between the two segments of the line: 50:50, 40:60, 80:20 or 99:1, etc. The simultaneous operation of presence and absence between two subjects forms a relationship and the subjects find themselves within it. Anyone who wants to stay in the relationship must accept this variance. If the presence eliminates the absence, two subjects would be but one and the same to each other; but if the absence overcomes the presence, the subjects would not know each other and would not be able to communicate. The essence of the relationship is the diversity of the subjects, who find themselves linked through a dynamic rapport. At one point presence dominates, later absence may prevail over presence. Constant change is the overarching constitutional element of relationship. Because of the constant changing of the rapport between presence and absence, the relationship is always new. We can say that the relationship produces at each moment new subjects within itself. In faith, in an active relationship to God, believers always recognize in God a new person. To remain in this relationship, they must accept God's absence in the sense that they acknowledge the new differences of the Other as necessary and renounce their own desires of His presence, that is, of their desires that God would not change. The Gospel narrative of the return of the Prodigal Son underscores the meaning of acceptance of the absence through the homecoming extended by the father.

The relationship is by nature changing. This is the reason why »partners« in the relationship always experience each other in a new light, always different; also faith or God's relationship with us is always evolving. We come to recognize God's revelation in continual evolution. We seek new and clearer expressions of the will of God. The believer is not a person who has already found God, but the one who always seeks God. Whoever stops in this searching and wants a permanent image of God, is no more a believer but an idolater. The believer recognizes *Dei Verbum* more and more fully. The purpose of faith is to maintain, while renewing the relationship with God. In fact, the human relationship with God, faith, is experienced in man's relationship with another man. The interpersonal relationship is the first human experience of transcendence (Lafon 1982, 43), so it is possible

that the person in this relationship with another man at the same time seeks God. We might say that in relation to other humans, we can and do experience a yearning for a relationship that goes beyond us. This is called faith. In relation to others like us, we can recognize the relationship of God and therefore human words can be recognized as the words of God. (Petkovšek 2016, 18)

6. Sharing our faith establishes a common relation with God

Faith, an individual's search for God, can evolve into a religion after a long period of time. Throughout history all attempts for the establishment of a religion overnight have, in fact, failed. Recognizing God's will must take much time to mature and become fully developed in society. (Lafon 1982, 97) Faith is the search for a new image of God with respect to the individual seeking relation to the divine. Never satisfied, the believer is always looking for a new and deeper relationship with God. Religion, on the contrary, tends to maintain the old image of God. The believer is open to new relationships, while the task of religion is to preserve the old unchanged. Thus religion stands in fear of »new relations«. In this way, we can understand why the Jewish religion intended to preserve the Old Testament doctrine »an eye for an eye«. Just an individual's search for His Father's will was able to develop further the then existing Law into the unconditional commandment of love of neighbor. Christ reveals God's will, which leads us to survive by forgiving the wicked and doing him well. (Mt 5:39)

Believers of the New Testament read the Old Testament text as it was written. We cannot »abolish« our past nor nullify stupidity and mistakes that we have done in our youth. Reading the Old Testament is like paging through photographs of our childhood recalling our behavior and reasoning of the past. These are our roots. Each plant needs roots to push up a stem from the earth and produce the flower, which we admire. Nobody admires the roots encased in »mud«, but all admire the flower. This growth would not occur without roots. Thus, the evangelical commandment of love would not exist without Moses and Joshua's murders. We read and we remember the Old Testament, but that is not where we are at in the evolution of our faith. Now when we recall our childhood's hooligan behavior, we say that this is not what we want to achieve in our present life. Throwing aside our childish discontent we as believers newly seek God's will. Thus the Church, theologians as well as simple believers, in the teachings of the Magisterium² accepts an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, transmitted in the Bible. (International Theological Commission 2012) All members of the Church then identify in her teaching God's revelation.

² Guidelines that the Assembly of Bishops with the Pope at the helm expresses.

7. Forgiveness as the summation of the Gospel ethics of God

The change in relationship results in an ever-fluctuating »change of distance« between subjects, who encounter each other always in a new light. So, we can speak about the always-new relationship and the always-new subjects. Specifically we shall focus now on how forgiveness alters the relationship and how it impacts the positioning of subjects in relationship. Forgiveness can promote the continuation of the relationship and of life because, as we know, to forgive is to denounce self-sufficiency. The relationship underscores the searching for the partner; and the man, who forgives another, recognizes at the same time his partner in a new light. The seeking out of the other enables him to change, experiencing a new birth. Anyone who does not forgive does not lead his brother to a new birth, so the other is left unchanged when »this anyone« leaves him alone. In that light can be understood well the words of Apostle Paul when he says: »Anyone who belongs to Christ«, you could say, anyone who forgives and asking forgiveness, as teaches Christ »is a new person« (creation). (2 Cor 5:17-21) To be a new man means that he recognizes that he cannot be alone – it means a search for the father, or for the brother or for the sister. In this sense can be understood also Jesus' answer to Nicodemus, that he must be born in a new way (Jn 3:3-8). The first is the birth of the individual; the second is the birth of communion with others.

As a life and a relationship, forgiveness is a gift too. As no one has earned his existence, so also no one has merited forgiveness or the new birth. The prodigal son in the Gospel text did not earn the forgiveness of his father. It was a gift. God forgives man at all times. In fact He allows him to be every time a new person, a new creation. Every time He forgives him, He creates him as a new being.

We can find a parallel also between God's forgiveness and God's creation. God creates a being that can answer him. This means that this being is created free. Freedom is an essential condition of the person that can say »you« to the »other«. God's creation gets real meaning if it is understood in the context of the relationship, i.e. a commitment between God and human beings. Christians believe in »God the father, the creator of heaven and Earth« and under these terms we understand first the diversity between us and God, but also the dependencies. (Ocvirk 1990, 10) God does all out of love. If, therefore, God created beings equal to himself, this would be just love of himself. However, love between individual beings exists only in diversity. Therefore, creation is not a duplication or an effusion of the Creator.

»Love enables others to be. If God does not renounce being all things, He would not be love. The creation must be different from the creator and it must be free, not just his reflection, his extension or his satellite. Love wants the other ›to be‹ and ›to come‹ from him, but not ›to be his slave.‹« (10)

Let us consider a theological interpretation of God's forgiveness to support our argument. God gave man a life, a world, and everything on it for his use. He concluded with a commitment that He will protect and defend him. He but asks of

man that he would return the love, that he respect and listen to Him. In essence, this is not required, but again a gift. With this commandment, God told him how he can survive. And what does man? He breaks the commitment with God. He breaks the link to the origin of life. And yet he does not die. He receives a new gift: a new commitment and a new life.

The French language affords us a wonderful translation or explanation of the English »forgiveness«. The word *pardonner* consists of »par« meaning »over«, while »donner« means »to give«. *Pardonner* means to give again, to give more, to give over. This then is the essence of forgiveness: when you make a mistake; nothing is over or completed. In fact, everything is incompleting. One, who asks for pardon, should not be perfect to be able to receive a new gift, that is, continuation. And in God's forgiveness, He offers man an even greater gift: God approaches man and accepts him again (Lk 15:11-32).

8. Conclusion

Forgiveness changes attitudes and thus allows the re-birth of related individuals, one to the other, albeit brothers, in relationship. We have indicated that a man starts to live as a person when someone addresses him as »you«, in a verbal way or non-verbal ways. Called by »you«, a human being is born as »I«, as a person. To forgive someone, in fact means to call him by »you« again. To be willing to address again that person by »you«, the person who had offended you, is not so easy. It is quite hard to re-call a brother by name, saying to him: »Brother, I accept you, let's stay together!« To be able to move in the direction of the other, it is necessary to give up the totality of who we are as a person. It means to sacrifice my own individuality. Forgiveness will permit the continuation of the relationship (life) because of the renunciation of one's self-sufficiency. Because relationship implies the reaching out to one's brother, a man who forgives knows the other in a new light. In fact, it is possible only through forgiveness of the other to see the other in a new light. Forgiveness allows the brother to change, that is, to be reborn. The Gospel teaches us through the parable of the prodigal son that a good father is waiting, is seeking the son, and welcomes him home with a warm embrace. The father's forgiveness allows his progeny to be »born again«! In this Gospel passage, Jesus demonstrates for us that forgiveness is the means by which we can return to each other, reborn in our relationship.

In this context, we can even speak of cases where there is no insult, no offense. To accept anyone in relationship who is different from us is a kind of forgiveness; in fact, this acknowledgment of the other is a new creation. Forgiveness and acceptance of diversity (absence) are very necessary in a modern world. When we accept a refugee or a foreigner as new brother, we give him a new life. Through time changes impact relationship, we age, experience both good and bad moments, perhaps a crisis. If we do not support our brother for the long term, we begin to disavow his new birth and eventually leave him for »dead«. But in such

cases, we essentially disavow what constitutes living our life. For our very existence, we depend on brothers. Forgiveness and acceptance of others allow the continuation of life for all, especially for those who forgive others and then fully welcome them back.

Moreover, Jesus' instructions reveal the essence and specialty of the Gospel doctrine of forgiveness. This is also the most important thing in (Christian) life. Not to resist the enemy, the evil person, means not to take revenge on him at that moment and to avoid retaliating, taking his tooth for the loss of yours. For the opposite of forgiving is revenge. Christ calls us to do good to those who are doing bad things to us. This is not about overcoming fear or suffering; this is not about masochism or naivety; this is an ethical rule that allows the survival of humanity. In the context of this ethical implication, we also need to understand Christ's instruction on the »acceptance of the cross«. It is a life-giving relationship. Not only for the relationship with man, but also for the relationship with God, which the believer maintains when he openly accepts what is bad in his life (illness, suffering, and death). The faithful recognizes all this as the revelation God's will to us.

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