

For they don't know what they're doing?

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive....

In 1993, a Serbian journalist, @eljko VukoviĀ, penned a heart-felt cry against the horrors being perpetrated in the siege of Sarajevo. Children on all sides, he said, were being reared to hate; a future generation was being primed for revenge; the seeds of the next war were being sown even as the present one was still being fought. Among many personal stories he recorded the following terrible account of a Bosnian woman:

“I am a Muslim, and I am thirty five years old. To my second son who was just born, I gave the name ‘Jihad’. So he would not forget the testament of his mother — revenge. The first time I put my baby at my breast I told him, ‘May this milk choke you if you forget’. So be it. The Serbs taught me to hate. For the last two months there was nothing in me. No pain, no bitterness. Only hatred. I taught these children to love. I did. I am a teacher of literature. I was born in Ilijaĉ and I almost died there. My student, Zoran, the only son of my neighbor, urinated into my mouth. As the bearded hooligans standing around laughed, he told me: ‘You’re good for nothing else, you stinking Muslim woman....’ I do not know whether I first heard the cry or felt the blow. My former colleague, a teacher of physics, was yelling like mad, ‘Usta{a, usta{a....’ And kept hitting me. Wherever he could. I have become insensitive to pain. But my soul? It hurts. I taught them to love and all the while they were making preparations to destroy everything that is not of the Orthodox faith. Jihad — war. This is the only way....”¹

Shocked? You should be! What price forgiveness? What now of Jesus’ command to forgive our enemies? After reading the above lines, who can feel that Jesus is advocating merely sweet reasonableness: ‘You forgive him and God will forgive you’? Who, having been in the place of this Muslim woman, would not feel as

¹ @.VukoviĀ, *Ubijanje Sarajeva* (Belgrade: Kron, 1993), p.134, cited in M.Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1996), p.111.

she feels? And as for trading in her religion and accepting the Christian God and the alleged 'faith' of her tormentors and abusers...! When confronted by such horror, and yet still hearing the insistent demand of Jesus, "If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins", we are tempted to recoil: "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"²

Surely, all our experience seems to tell us, we are cut off from most other people around us because their actions, or our actions — or just the circumstances of life — create an unbridgeable gulf between us? We are condemned to form 'relationships' and friendships of various kinds, until conflict arises — generally (thank God) less appalling than the atrocity in Sarajevo and perhaps, indeed, something fairly trivial. Either way, we move on, to start the game afresh. It's a prison of superficiality and artifice, but we see no way out. Forgiveness requires too much effort and release in the forgiver, and far, far too much confession and penitence in the offender. We find it easier to insist on the other person's guilt and then to move on, unreconciled. From the perspective of a twenty-first century westerner, even — and perhaps especially — a life-long marriage seems like an unreachable ideal. Durable relationships are what we long for but, the more passionate we are about them, the less we can attain them. Each of us is trapped in the prison of the self.

Oppressing the innocent?

The world is a terrible place. Its crimes scream out for vengeance. The grievances, on the other hand, of those comfortable Westerners who rush to court against one another every time they slip on somebody else's pavement, or are

² Matt.6:15; Jn.6:60.

dismissed from a job under dubious circumstances, or have their feelings hurt because an airline could not squeeze their overfed bulk onto a single seat: these pale against the horrors from which we avert our eyes — but which God sees.

It's part of fallen human nature, of course, that we 'feel' the wrongs, real or imagined (or a little of each), against ourselves far more acutely than we sense the wrongs suffered by others — and far, far more than we are willing to recognize our own sins. We want to bring our grievances to God, for Him to tell us just how right we are, and how wrong our enemies are. We want to pray with King David, "May all my enemies be ashamed and dismayed."³ That's the stuff! But as for our own sins ... well, we acknowledge their existence in theory, of course ('nobody's perfect', and all that) — but we're sure God will understand the provocation we were under. The *real* issue, we want to insist, is what the others have done against us. That's what *really* needs sorting out!

There is a small, little-regarded incident in Luke's gospel which should warn us against enlisting God or Christianity as moral 'combat gear' in our own cause. A man comes to Jesus (didn't they all?) and says to him: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."⁴ The law laid down that brothers were to divide their father's inheritance between them. (You remember that sometimes-forgotten aspect of the parable of the Prodigal son?) This fellow was a victim: his brother had hogged the lot somehow, and so the man wanted Jesus to use his moral 'clout' as a leader and teacher to sort the brother out and make him behave properly. The funny thing is, I really think that if the errant brother had come along, that's exactly what Jesus would have done. I can see it now: 'Man, you have cheated your brother of his father's

3 Ps.6:10.

4 Lk.12:13.

inheritance: go and divide it with him as the law commands.’

But the wrongful brother didn’t come; the victim-brother did. And Jesus was not about to tell this one how right he was, and how wrong his brother had been. Instead, he says: “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Jesus then immediately went on to warn against covetousness and thinking that one’s life consists in an abundance of possessions.⁵

The snubbed enquirer, however, was probably still in shock. He didn’t merely *think* that he was in the right; he *knew* that he was! If Jesus’ strictures about materialism were to be applied to him (who, after all, was merely trying to get possession of what was legally his anyway), then how much more should they apply to the cheating brother, who had taken so much more than was rightfully his! Why didn’t Jesus have a go at *him*? Failing that (for, after all, the brother wasn’t there to be ‘got at’), why didn’t Jesus at least affirm the wronged party?

The reason is not far to seek. Jesus never affirms wronged parties — or, at least, he never affirms them in their own right-ness as opposed to their oppressors’ wrongness. There are, for example, many instances in Scripture where God confronts rich exploiters of the poor: one thinks of the denunciations by the prophet Amos, in the Old Testament, or the terrifying warnings in the Epistle of James, in the New Testament. “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. ... Look! The wages you failed to pay your workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. ... You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.”⁶

⁵ Lk.12:14-21.

⁶ Jas.5:1-5.

But the poor, though they are assured of God's love and care, are never told to rebel or that 'you have been wronged'. There are no incitements to revolution or righteous wrath. Instead, the scriptural injunctions directed towards them read like this: "Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud"; or "Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting with strife"; or "An evil man is bent only on rebellion; a merciless official will be sent against him."⁷ Is this not extremely odd — or even downright offensive?

Why this strange state of affairs? Why will God rebuke wrongdoers, yet not simultaneously assure victims that He recognizes that they are wronged parties?

It is because God will not justify us. At least, He will — but not in anything like the way that we want. He will justify us only through repentance and the cross.

We, however, want to be 'justified' in the sense of being told that God is on our side in our quarrels with one another. We want to co-opt Him as the ultimate moral 'combat gear'. And that is one thing that He simply will not allow — even when one side manifestly is the oppressor and the other the victim.

Maybe we are in just such a position. Maybe we really are more 'in the right' than those with whom we have come into conflict. But we are seldom in any danger at all of underestimating how *far* — or to what degree — we are in the right!

Are we?

⁷ Prov.16:19; 17:1, 11.

God on our side?

Throughout history, governments have declared that ‘God is on our side’ in their wars with one another. It all makes a mockery of religion, of course — and mockery is exactly what Bob Dylan supplied in his ‘angry young man’ days as a protest singer, and his song ‘With God on our Side’. All sides claimed God for themselves. Maybe, Dylan was implying, God wasn’t on anybody’s side in such wars: if God’s really on our side, he concluded, “He’ll stop the next war”.

U.S. money even declares on every coin that “In God We Trust”. English monarchs long ago adopted the motto *Dieu et Mon Droit*: “God and My Right”. So that settles the issue: their enemies were — or are — God’s enemies. Tell that to al Qa’eda!

Isn’t it strange, then, that in one of the very few wars — perhaps the only one — that ever really was commanded by God, we find that He refuses to take sides! The bizarre episode is recorded in the Book of Joshua:

“Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, ‘Are you for us or for our enemies?’ ‘Neither’, he replied, ‘but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.’”⁸

The ‘man’, it at once became apparent to Joshua, was an angel.

God wouldn’t be ‘for’ Joshua — even in a war that God had himself commanded! How very strange! How seriously, then, should we take claims by governments now that ‘God is on our side’? We are all anxious to co-opt God — and so right-ness — onto our side, not just in wars but also in our more mundane, perhaps even petty, struggles with

⁸ Josh.5:13-15.

one another. And God refuses, steadfastly and everywhere, to underwrite this tendency of ours.

Jesus is *not* 'on the side' of the young man against his brother who has defrauded him of the inheritance. He is, in the deepest possible sense, 'on his side' (and 'on our side') — but not in the way that we want Him to be. He is not, for example, against our enemies. He does not endorse our actions, or our point of view. He does not tell us that we are right and that our opponents are wrong. And this is not because He does not uphold rightness against wrongness, or truth against falsehood, but because our judgments of these things are hardly dispassionate, proportionate or without self-seeking and self-justification — and because He absolutely will not become a weapon in our battles against one another.

The wronged brother was coming to Jesus in order to have Jesus sort his brother out. And Jesus won't. You remember how, at the end of John's gospel, Simon Peter is talking with the risen Jesus. He has just been told something about the manner of his own death ("When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go"), and then he turns, points to John, who had been dawdling behind them, and asks "Lord, what about him?" The implication is that even martyrdom might be acceptable — as long as John had to face it too! But Jesus shot straight back with "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."⁹ The Narnia stories illustrate the same human bafflement when confronted with God's failure — or rather, refusal — to back us up against other people. Aslan tells one of the too-curious children, "Child, I am telling you *your* story, not hers. No one is told any stories but their own."¹⁰

9 Jn.21:18-22.

10 C.S.Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, ch.14.

Our constant temptation to co-opt God onto 'our' side stems from our failure, or refusal, to recognize the partiality of our own standpoint. Of course we are right! Those who see the world differently to 'us' (whatever 'we' may be) are fools, uninformed or even inherently wicked. ('Arabs are just like that.' 'All South Americans are crazy.' 'All Gypsies are wicked.' 'Women are inherently unstable.' 'Men are just violent brutes.')

And perhaps they really are — but, if so, certainly we are no impartial judges of the matter!

On this subject, my fellow-Westerners are particularly (albeit unconsciously) amusing — especially those who see themselves as 'liberals' or 'multi-culturalists'. They are sure of their own broad-mindedness. They are very cosmopolitan, they think, mostly because they have been on holiday to a sunnier copy of Boston somewhere in the Caribbean, or of Brighton somewhere in the Mediterranean, or have even traveled all over the world — by which they mostly mean English-speaking countries. Why, they can get along with anybody — Africans, Japanese, Serbs, Russians, Chinese — just as long as they are cosmopolitan, westernized (and preferably English-speaking) like themselves!

But if they are not, then it's a different story! When we are confronted with a *really* different worldview, such as radical Islam, or with a phenomenon that shocks us — like ethnic cleansing in the Balkans — then we cannot understand or empathize at all, and immediately adopt an attitude that says 'All of these people are crazy!' In post-Marxist forms of the typical Western outlook, this paternalism is supposedly justified by adding that such 'backwardness' is caused by economic conditions — or else it is seen as further evidence of the harmfulness of taking 'religion' too seriously.

I am throwing stones, of course. But, leaving my stone-throwing to one side, how, it might be objected, can a person possibly see the world through the eyes of another — especially another with whom one is in conflict? The answer is that we probably cannot. Either the conflict has come into existence because we never were able to see the world — or at least the issue in dispute — with the eyes of the other ... or else the conflict has generated our inability to see.

None of this means, of course, that we are necessarily in the wrong and the other person in the right. It is merely to say that we cannot have the 'objective' viewpoint that we naturally wish to claim for ourselves. And God will not, therefore, underwrite our position and condemn the others — even if we truly are victims and the others our oppressors. He will tell me only my story — not theirs. If they are wrong, He will indeed condemn them. But that is *their* affair, not mine.

A question of blame

The reason for this should by now be clear. We all tend to minimize our own guilt in disputes and maximize the guilt of the other parties. That is as true when we are innocent bystanders whose lives have suddenly been wrecked by a monster intruding from outside as it is in a 50:50-ish situation where each of us is, at least to some extent, blameworthy.

In the latter circumstance (assuredly more numerous than the former), the apportioning of guilt for the outbreak of hostilities becomes, at a very early stage in the proceedings, a major secondary cause of dispute. 'You started it!' 'No, I didn't! You were the one who....' And so on.

The sad thing is, we will rarely, if ever, agree about the apportioning of blame. For even a trivial dispute between bickering spouses, or between work colleagues, to be resolved amicably, there nearly always has to be agreement-to-disagree about the relative blameworthiness — a willingness to cast the dispute into oblivion in the interests of getting on in the future. I have to forgive the other, not simply for their ‘objective’ guilt (for the degree of *that* has ‘instantly’, at the start of the conflict, become one of the things that cannot be agreed upon), but also for their refusal to agree with my perception of what the appropriate apportioning of blame is and should be.

I may be able to do this, of course, in the case of at least relatively trivial conflicts — and perhaps even in more serious cases. But how can I possibly do that in the face of massive wrongs? And when the victims have been those dearest to me, is not my forgiveness a betrayal of them? If I forgive the person who has raped the woman I love, have I not somehow become complicit, or compromised my love for her? If I forgive the monster who has massacred my family, or incinerated the people of my village, have I not somehow profaned their memory and trivialized their loss?

Faced with ultimate horrors, does not forgiveness seem, not merely morally resistible, but actually immoral? Furthermore, doesn’t the ‘point-of-view’ line we have just been describing become an oppressor’s charter (‘no one can be condemned by any absolute standards, because we all have different points of view’)?

I wish to argue that, forceful though these questions are, the answer must nevertheless be, in each case, ‘No’. We are not disarmed from striving for justice by acknowledging the partiality of our own judgments — merely from doing so on our own behalf. As a powerful outsider I may well — nay, should — wish to intervene to prevent

the genocide of Tutsis by Hutus. Even then, however, I should remember that “there is no ‘pure’ space from which corrupt human beings can make pure judgments about purity and corruption.”¹¹ I myself am tainted. So my intervention will be only a ‘relative’ good — relative, that is, to the alternative of genocide. But, if I am a Tutsi, I will be an even less dispassionate judge of the degree of guilt or innocence of anyone involved, and deeply pre-committed in my analysis of the grievances (whether or not distorted by mad ideologies) that led to the cataclysm of violence.

I may, if I am well informed enough and empathetic, be a passably good judge about the rights and wrongs of a dispute that is nothing to do with me. I can never replicate this ability, however, in disputes in which I (or ‘my people’, or others with whom my self-hood is closely bound up) am involved — even though I can claim the moral high ground of being ‘far better informed’ than the ‘interfering’ outsider. Despite being able to trump the outsider every time in my depth of information about ‘what has really been going on here’, I will nevertheless overestimate, every time, the magnitude and significance of the wrongs done to me (or to ‘us’), even where the wrongs themselves are not imaginary, but very real. Every time, I will be good — very, very, very good — at mitigating (or ‘contextualizing’, or explaining) my own bad actions, or those of my group.

Even concessions on my part will be precisely that — concessions made for a show of objectivity, or as ‘proof’ of my good faith. And they will never be too damning to my central contentions. They will, in a word, be a tactic — a strategic withdrawal to ensure ultimate victory, or vindication. Miroslav Volf puts the matter thus:

“If we look at conflicts and evil in the world, we discover something strange. If we listen to what people tell us about their enemies, we are overwhelmed by the ugliness and magnitude of wickedness. But if we let these same enemies talk about themselves, the ugliness changes into beauty, and the wickedness into

11 M.Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p.83.

innocence. ... Yet all know and all agree that somebody must be guilty. Somebody's eyes must be deceiving them badly."¹²

But whose eyes are deceiving them? Whose eyes are wrongly reassuring their owners of an illusory innocence? Yours? Mine? Both?

Our principal problem is this: at the very heart of human sinfulness lies a refusal to accept or to tolerate a full, frank confession of the existence of that sinfulness in the self. In general terms, we will, of course, admit it. But concerning specifics, we always evade, minimize, reinterpret the evidence.

We do this both as individuals and on behalf of the corporate entities to which we belong. Anyone who has listened to Israeli and Palestinian spokesmen being interviewed about some latest violent twist in 'the conflict' has witnessed this process in action. So too has anyone who has mentally 'revisited' their own utterances in respect of some argument or dispute with family, friends or neighbors. If anyone is brave enough to confront us on some particular misdemeanor, great or small, we employ what Volf calls "a double strategy": we deny the wrongdoing and/or reinterpret the moral significance of our actions. If I am a perpetrator of wrongs then, apart from minimizing their *extent*, I attempt to drag my victims down "into the swamp of common undifferentiated sinfulness" (i.e. the undeniable fact that all of us are sinful) as a way of minimizing the *significance* of those things that I am unable to deny having done.¹³ By emphasizing that my victims are not guiltless either (because, perhaps, we have been involved in an ongoing dispute), I render my own guilt relatively less horrible than it objectively is.

¹² Ibid., p.79.

¹³ Ibid., pp.80, 119.

Something like this strategy is employed even by those whose victims are, to most intents and purposes, completely innocent. I remember vividly the only conversation I have ever (knowingly) had with child-sex offenders, in a prison that I was visiting. When I asked them how they coped with the hostility from the other inmates (from whom they were separated for their own safety), they assured me that ‘We’re all prisoners, and none of us would be here if we hadn’t done wrong; they’re no better than us’. The extreme hostility shown by the ‘mere’ thieves and robbers in the other wing, of course, was their own way of minimizing the guilt for the crimes that *they* had committed: ‘Look at that lot! Now *there* are people who’ve done *really* terrible things!’

Those who have done monstrous evils point to “common undifferentiated sinfulness”; those who have done lesser evils point to those who have done more. The purpose, in each case, is the same: to deflect attention from our own guilt and onto the guilt of others; to divert discussion from the specifics of our own sins to the abstractions of moral philosophy; to evade a confession of the absolute evil of our deeds by shifting towards relativism, *vis-à-vis* the crimes of others.

Even when they can be wrung from us, “most confessions,” Volf observes, “come as a mixture of repentance, self-defense, and even some lust for revenge. We admit wrongdoing, justify ourselves, and attack, all in one breath.”¹⁴

There is, so far as I can see, no limit to our determination to evade, deny and creatively reinterpret our own guilt, and to maximize that of parties with whom we are in conflict. This tendency is, in itself, unaltered by whether or not we ‘objectively’ are mostly the victim, or mostly the perpetrator. It extends even to the throne of God

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.119.

Himself. When Adam and Eve were questioned as to what they had done, Adam responded by accusing both God and his own wife: “The woman *you put here* with me — *she* gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” God was guilty; Eve was the instrument of sin; Adam was culpable only incidentally. And when Eve was asked the same, she mitigated her own blameworthiness by claiming that it was as a result of being misled by another, who was more guilty than she: “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” But about her own ‘deception’ of Adam, she was silent.¹⁵ The strategy of counter-accusation, or of deflective subsidiary accusation, is part of the essence of sin and guilt.

Pleading guilty

The very fact and process of sin and guilt means that we are hopelessly lost in an endless web of attempted (but failed) self-justification. For this reason, repentance may be viewed as a gift of God, rather than as something we can achieve for ourselves. It comes only when we cease to wriggle, struggle, evade, reinterpret, counter-accuse. It comes when we fall down and plead a simple ‘guilty’. When we cease to justify ourselves, only then can God justify us.

Jesus has died for the sins of the world. “If we walk in the light,” says John, then “the blood of Jesus ... purifies us from every sin. [But] if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”¹⁶

Note that plural: “sins”. Jesus’ sacrifice for sins is efficacious — not if we admit them

¹⁵ Gen.3:12-13.

¹⁶ 1 Jn.1:7-10.

only in theory, or in general (though we certainly need to do that), but in practice and in specifics.

This realization is particularly needed today. The late Middle Ages saw a legalistic mind-set, in which only external actions were counted as sinful by many ordinary people, and so the root of individual sins in the thing itself — sin, or the sinful nature — was often overlooked. The result was that they tried to be ‘good enough’ for God — though they could never succeed. It was this which the Protestant Reformers were trying, quite rightly, to correct. Today we have almost the opposite problem. Sin (albeit in a vague, generalized sense) is usually accepted; none of us, we will happily agree, is perfect. But accusations of specific actions, omissions, evil thoughts or words, are almost always rejected with indignation.

Scripture, however, emphasizes both. Human beings both commit individual sins *and* are slaves of a sinful nature. They have committed the former until “God gave them over” to the latter — and then that sinful nature could not do otherwise than produce more and more individual sins!¹⁷ And so on. To infinity. Martin Luther seems to have had a clearer grasp (at least existentially) upon the magnitude of his own sin than almost anyone. It was the key insight that led to his conversion and, indirectly, to the Reformation. He realized that to encounter one’s own sinfulness is to peer down an abyss without any bottom; it keeps going down, forever.

That is why we evade, counter-accuse and reinterpret, every time that we are put on the spot about our own behavior or our motives. To allow the accusation against us to stand, just as it is, without any defense, is to allow our inner self to be exposed, naked, for what *it* is. And so we attempt, pathetically, to excuse the inexcusable, to

¹⁷ Rom. 1:24, 26, 28.

'explain' what is already all-too-clear, to justify the unjustifiable.

This is why God will not justify us in our battles with one another. He will justify us only through the cross of Jesus — but we can receive that justification only by pleading an unambiguous 'guilty!' and throwing ourselves upon divine mercy. Christ justifies only the guilty — not the self-styled innocent, nor the not-as-guilty-as-I-seem, nor the more-innocent-than-my-enemy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor executed by the Nazis in the last days of the Second World War, described those who truly repent:

“They confess their guilt without any sidelong glance at their fellow offenders. Their confession of guilt is strictly exclusive in that it takes all guilt upon itself. Wherever there is still a weighing up and calculation of guilt, there the sterile morality of self-justification usurps the place of the confession of guilt.... Christ subdues us in no other way more utterly than by His having taken our guilt upon Himself unconditionally and entirely, declaring Himself guilty of our guilt and freeing us from its burden. The sight of this grace of Christ blots out entirely the sight of the guilt of other men and compels a man to fall on his knees before Christ and to confess *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* [my fault, all my fault].”¹⁸

If we are still “weighing up” our own guilt relative to that of others, then, says Bonhoeffer, we have not yet caught “sight of this grace of Christ”; we are still trapped in “the sterile morality of self-justification” which will, quite literally, never set us free, or even resolve our conflicts with one another — far less our estrangement from God. For forgiveness to be possible, only an unambiguous, unqualified, undefensive plea of 'guilty' will do.

This is difficult. Quite apart from the tendencies of our innate sinful nature, our whole upbringing in contemporary western culture has conditioned us to have almost no

18 D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (SCM, 1993), pp.90-91.

sense of sin. The problem does not disappear simply because we have become Christians; we accept the fact of our sinfulness because our Christian faith requires us to do so, but our conviction of its reality is paper-thin. Our upbringing, our education and the constant clamor of the media around us tell us of our supposed rights, not our duties. In the end, we believe it. Consequently we find it hard really and consistently to believe that we are sinners who have failed to fulfill their obligations; more likely we will see ourselves as victims who have somehow been cheated of the full value of our 'rights'. We need a revelation of what Martin Luther saw quite clearly: the full enormity of our own sinfulness. For it is this awareness that will drive us to repent and to seek forgiveness — not just at conversion, but on an ongoing basis. It is this that will make us humble, rather than the self-assertive monsters which our therapy culture values and strives to create.

Victimhood as a weapon

There remains a major 'loose end' from earlier in this chapter, and to which we must now return. What of the 'guilt' of those who are oppressed through no fault of their own? Do we seriously wish to insist upon it? What of the abused children? Of the women raped by strangers? Of those whose violent fate bursts in on them suddenly, uninvited and unprovoked? What of the Muslim woman of Sarajevo, with whose terrible ordeal we opened this discussion?

These are weighty considerations. They also appear to have compassion — and so morality — on their side. Perhaps, for some who voice objections of this sort to the case we have been making here, that is their sole motive in objecting. Doubtless such transparently honest people will be devoting all their efforts towards minimizing the

plight and alleviating the suffering of victims of this kind.

But many more of us who make no such efforts are nevertheless tempted to argue in this way with questionable motives. By pleading the terrible suffering of the unjustly oppressed, I tacitly justify myself in my own non-repentance. It gives me a 'handle' on God, so that I may accuse Him — and so postpone the need to confront my own guilt. If so, my apparent concern for the oppressed turns out, on closer examination, to be nothing but one more deflective strategy, one more counter-accusation (this time directed against God), one more guilt-avoidance technique. I express my incredulity at the guilt of the suffering so loudly, not out of compassion for them, but because I wish to call into question the reality of the doctrine of universal sinfulness — and with it the reality of my own guilt.

But let us take this objection on its own terms and see where it leads us. What of those who are oppressed, quite literally through no fault of their own? In all probability, many such *are* indeed completely innocent — or at least, they were until they were violated. Will they remain innocent after that? Or will today's victims become tomorrow's perpetrators, whose crimes are 'justified' because they are 'really' victims? The Sarajevan woman's lament gives us cause to fear as much. On her own account, she "taught these children to love". But now, they have "taught me to hate". She has given her son the name Jihad, so that his very being will incorporate revenge, the perpetuation of conflict and horror. Somewhere out there is a Bosnian Serb baby girl whom this son will grow up to rape, humiliate and destroy.

All around us, the claim to be oppressed is used as moral combat gear — not just at the level of high politics ('the Palestinian problem'), but in ordinary social relations ('you male chauvinist!'). In recent years, in western societies in particular, a

bewildering variety of people have begun to shoe-horn themselves into the category of an 'oppressed' class. We need not question the reality of the claimed oppressions; even if some are fraudulent then, all too obviously, many more are real enough. But the frequency with which they are resorted to is the thing to watch. If I can claim to be part of a group (social, ethnic, sexual, religious, biological) that has been oppressed by the group to which you belong, then I have moral 'purchase' upon you in respect of any interactions between us. You are, morally, 'on the back foot' before we even begin to speak. At its most extreme, I am justifying, *in advance*, the bad thing I am about to do to you next. For, appearances notwithstanding, I am 'really' a victim. And you are 'really' the oppressor.

Jesus came to a society, first-century Israel, most of whom were victims. They were oppressed as an occupied society under alien, Roman rule. The majority were oppressed by upper-class Jewish collaborators and the Herodian aristocracy. The corrupt forms of tax collection, whereby the collectors took more than was legal and kept large amounts for themselves, was a burden upon everyone, and suppressed the economy. Finally, they were culturally oppressed, as the Greek-speaking world was making serious inroads into Jewish cultural space and was threatening to destroy it.

Yet Jesus refused to cry 'Revolution!' — though this was the kind of Messiah they desperately wanted. They, too, wanted a god who would justify them against their enemies, who would overthrow the cruel Romans, cleanse them from pollution by Gentile cultures, and eject the Herodians, collaborators and corrupt tax collectors. But Jesus did not 'take their side' in the way that they wanted. And, ultimately, this is why they killed him. Instead, he called upon these 'victims' to repent.

How offensive is that! Of course, Jesus does not call upon victims to repent for

their victimhood. (That would truly be grotesque!) But he does call upon them to repent of what they have allowed their victimhood to do to them and to implant in them: bitterness, hatred, jealousy, feelings of automatic moral superiority. “Though some sins have been imputed to them,” (say, by the false religiosity of the Pharisees) “other sins of theirs were real; though they suffered at the sinful hands of others, they also committed sins of their own.”¹⁹

The constant use of victimhood as moral combat gear in our disputes with one another is clear evidence that, whether or not a person is innocent before their oppression, they do not remain so afterwards — if they ever were. It has been quite rightly observed that the worst persecutors are recruited from among the ranks of the not-quite-martyred in the previous bout of struggle. But the effects of victimhood, even when they are nothing like as extreme as this, are nevertheless clearly discernible.

There are no ‘pure’ victims — only weak perpetrators. That is to say, our victimhood is a matter of circumstance, not of absolute moral purity. We may be *relatively* purer than our oppressors, of course. In the case of small children terribly maltreated or killed by adults, for example, that is quite certain. But relative purity tends to degrade over time with awareness of itself. And, in any case, it can hardly help us in achieving or obtaining forgiveness.

There are no ‘pure’ victims — except one. Jesus was maltreated, scorned, beaten and crucified. Yet he did not fight back, nor allow any place for bitterness within himself. “As a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.”²⁰

19 M.Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p.114.

20 Acts 8:32-33, citing Is.53:7-8.

Although this was done to him, he offers his persecutors forgiveness. Indeed, he did this precisely in order to obtain forgiveness for them — and for us. It remains so. Reconciliation, with God and with one another, is obtainable only by pleading 'guilty' at the foot of the cross, through the sacrifice of the only pure victim.