

# The Theology of Forgiveness

There was a sacramental air about it, a sense of ritual drama. Gerald Ford had just returned to the White House from Sunday morning services, fresh from partaking of the cup of Holy Communion at the historic St. John's Episcopal Church. He spoke with the same earnest, forthright piety that had moved many listeners in his Inaugural Address a month before. This time the phrases somehow seemed more sonorous: "To do what is right as God gives me to see the right . . . to uphold our laws with the help of God." He had searched his conscience, the President said, and "my conscience tells me clearly and certainly that I cannot prolong the bad dreams." Contemplating his own appearance before the bar of divine justice, he declared: "I . . . will receive justice without mercy if I fail to show mercy."

President Ford, invoking the name of God five times, might have thought that he was on solid theological ground in pronouncing a "full, free and absolute pardon" for former President Nixon. Ford had shown compassion and mercy, and few virtues win higher praise in sacred or contemporary theological writings. "What does the Lord require of thee," says the Book of Micah, "but to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, exhorts Christians to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you." And St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in the 12th century, wrote engagingly that "if mercy were a sin, I believe I could not keep from committing it." Moreover, as a French Jesuit theologian observed last week, by building a religious scaffold for the pardon, Ford may well have hoped to disarm potential critics. "If Ford draws the cloak of New Testament moral theology around his pardon," said Father Michel de Certeau, "it makes it infinitely harder to argue with it. It puts opponents in the position of not having a Christian conscience."

But Ford misjudged both Americans in general and American churchmen in particular. Evangelist Billy Graham applauded the Sabbath pardon, but he was a decided exception. Conservative or liberal, Christian or Jew, most other religious thinkers deplored Ford's action on grounds of theology as well as simple justice.

Some deeply resent that the decision was couched in the language of religion at all. "Whether or not it was explicitly stated between the two men," says the Rev. L. Harold DeWolf, retired dean of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., "this was a political payoff. Raking in so much of this religious stuff—God and all that—makes it even worse than it was." Others concede the sincerity of the President's spiritual motives but challenge the wisdom of the act. "Clearly compassion is something we need more of in public life and the administration of criminal justice," declares an editorial in *Commonweal* this week. "Nonetheless . . . to talk of mercy while ignoring justice is to make a mockery of morality."

Beyond the disastrous political and social consequences—the reopened Watergate wound, the revived climate of distrust and division—the pardon, for all its compassion, is bad theology. On its own terms, within Ford's Bible-oriented, evangelical Christian framework, it does not meet traditional tests for an act of judicial mercy. One of the most serious defects is Nixon's continuing reluctance to admit any real fault in the Watergate affair.

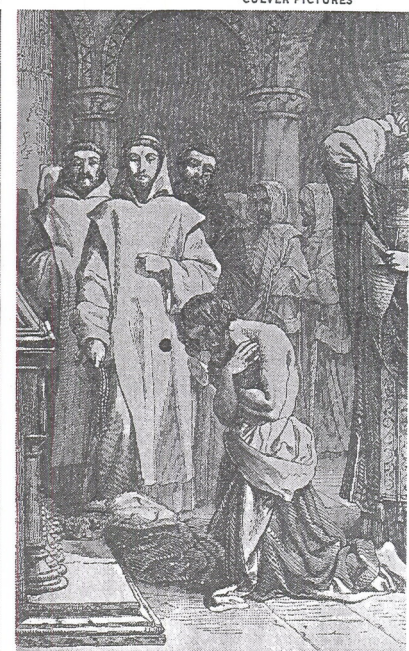
The great theologies of Western man—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—have historically demanded that a wrongdoer, no matter how highly placed, repent before he is forgiven. King David of Israel, warned by the prophet Nathan of impending punishment for his crime in stealing Bathsheba, threw himself into

days of fasting and prayer to avert divine wrath. King Henry II of England, whose burst of temper led to the murder of Thomas à Becket, submitted to a barebacked scourging by the monks of Canterbury as part of his penance for his complicity in the crime. Such dramatic mortifications may have sometimes masked a lack of genuine contrition in the sinner, but they were at least impressive symbols of repentance.

Richard Nixon, on the other hand, has so far scorned even the language of contrition. He referred only to deep "regret and pain" over the Watergate "mistakes" and "misjudgments." His behavior even comes perilously close to that in Jesus' famous parable of the unmerciful servant: a man had been forgiven a large debt by his master, then brutally tried to collect what was owed him by a subordinate. After his own pardon, Nixon fervently opposes amnesty for Viet Nam War resisters. Indeed, according to his son-in-law David Eisenhower, Nixon now says that he would



NATHAN REPROACHING KING DAVID



KING HENRY II DOING PENANCE

not have accepted pardon at all if it had been tied to amnesty.

"Nixon has not forgiven himself," observes Maryknoll Priest-Psychologist Eugene Kennedy. "He has not admitted that he is capable of evil, that he has hurt countless persons. Forgiveness is a tough existential transition." Divine forgiveness is the model for human pardon, notes Church Historian Martin Marty, a Lutheran, and involves "an annihilation of what the sinner was. God completely wipes the slate clean. But that only happens if there is repentance, an about-face, a 180° turn. There is no evidence that the former President is doing anything of the kind." Nixon's attitude, complains Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, president of the American Jewish Congress, merely seems to be: "Get this behind me so that I can get on with writing my memoirs and tell that I was right in the first place." Even on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement that falls next week, sins against one's fellow man are not pardoned unless the sinner begs forgiveness from those he has wronged.

There is, of course, dramatic precedent for forgiving the unrepentant: the words of Jesus on the Cross, praying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Stretching compassion, one might argue that Nixon was so caught up in the

pressures of the presidency, and is so exhausted now, that he "knows not what he did." But Evangelical Theologian Clark Pinnock of Regent College in Vancouver, B.C., argues that such generous forgiveness is for the truly ignorant, "the little people who were swept up in what was going on."

It was just such forlorn human beings whom Abraham Lincoln, the greatest of presidential pardoners, could not resist. Lincoln believed in a stern divine justice, yet time and again during the Civil War he exasperated his generals by pardoning boys who faced execution for such capital crimes as sleeping on sentry duty or even desertion. But Lincoln's pardons were often just commutations of death sentences, not passports to complete freedom; offenders could still find themselves at hard labor on the dread Dry Tortugas. Ford's pardon of Nixon may stem from similar motives of compassion, but it is hardly the same sort of pardon. The Watergate parallel, if there is one, might be clemency for such men as Eugenio Martinez and Bernard Barker, the "little men" who were tried and convicted while Nixon goes free.

No major body of Christian teaching favors forgiveness without some concern for justice. For churchmen, as for other Americans, one of the most galling aspects of Ford's decision is that it

Nixon hedges on his guilt, pardoning him is more an act of amnesty than of genuine pardon. If Ford so desired, it could be a prelude to full amnesty for the Viet Nam War resisters.

Perhaps one of the deepest difficulties of Ford's pardon is a confusion of two roles: his obligations as a Christian and his responsibilities as a just President. On the personal level, the quest for Christian perfection obliges one human being to forgive another not only without regard to contrition but in spite of continuing hatred. Jesus' injunction in the Sermon on the Mount to "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you" carries no conditions. But an official charged with the administration of justice cannot casually apply personal obligations to a public office. "If Jerry Ford, as a Christian, wants to forgive Nixon, God bless him," says Philosophy Professor Richard Mouw of Calvin College in Ford's home town of Grand Rapids. "But to pardon him has legal and political ramifications. If Ford has circumvented the legal system in a way that would do harm, he could be judged for that too."

Many religious thinkers believe that the pardon has done serious harm. They argue that, because it has halted the due process of law in regard to Nixon's actions in Watergate, the pardon constitutes a grave miscarriage of justice. Americans now will never know the full truth about Watergate, or be assured, as they had a right to be, that there were not other, more fearful skeletons in the White House closets. Richard Nixon may well be suffering, but the American people have also suffered—and at Nixon's hands. Deceived, anguished, still too much in the dark about the conspiracy, they deserve some compassion too. Laments Father Eugene Kennedy: "Ford has closed a national wound without cleaning it first."

CULVER PICTURES



THE ANGRY MASTER REBUKING THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

suggests unequal justice. Ethicist Roger L. Shinn, acting president of Manhattan's Union Theological Seminary, feels that the pardon reinforces American cynicism about equality before the law. "What bothers so many is that the demand for justice and punishment applies to the poor and the weak, and mercy applies to the powerful." Jesus, however, stressed that the more powerful a person is, the more accountable he is for wrongdoing. "To whom much is given, of him will much be required," he warned the Apostles according to the Gospel of Luke, "and of him to whom men commit much, they will demand the more." A surprisingly tough editorial in the *Catholic Standard and Times*, weekly newspaper of the conservative Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia, voices the prevailing discontent: "It is discouraging for law-abiding citizens to see that presidential duplicity goes unpunished and that the considerable perquisites of power continue undiminished, while perpetrators of acts with less far-reaching effects feel the full weight of the law."

Ford's pardon of Nixon has now kindled the *Standard and Times*, as it has other religious commentators, to call unconditional amnesty for selective conscientious objectors "a necessity." There is, of course, a subtle difference between pardon and amnesty. A pardon usually presumes some guilt; amnesty, derived from the same Greek word as amnesia, "forgets" the alleged offense without necessarily imputing guilt. Yet because

Mercy cannot survive without justice; life would be so unpredictable, so full of anxiety, that the gentler virtues would probably disappear. "One cannot constantly turn the other cheek," warns Religious Historian Sydney Ahlstrom of Yale. "A country that doesn't want to live in chaos has to establish a tradition of law." While the Bible extols mercy, it also demands justice and honors those who seek it—those who, in the words of the Sermon on the Mount, "hunger and thirst for righteousness." If every wrongdoer deserved unlimited mercy, police could not arrest murderers, district attorneys could not prosecute slumlords, and ombudsmen like Ralph Nader could not attack the shoddy practices of industry.

Most churchmen agree that a pardon would have been far more acceptable after a full airing of Watergate in any trials that Nixon would have faced.

But that option has been lost. What now? A number of theologians doubt that a categorical pardon for all other Watergate offenders would solve anything. An additional blanket pardon, contends Evangelical Theologian Carl F.H. Henry, would only compound a wrong by moving from "a preferred individual to a preferred class of individuals."

One healing gesture could come from Richard Nixon himself, suggests Theologian Claude Welch, president of Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union. "An honest admission of real guilt would do a great deal toward making sense out of the pardon." Somewhat optimistically, Welch observes that "a forgiving spirit"—like Ford's pardon of Nixon—"can precede awareness of guilt. Forgiveness is part of the process by which relations that have been destroyed, between two people or between one man and a nation, can be fully restored."

That is a generous assessment of what the pardon might accomplish. Yet the very existence of a lost man—and Richard Nixon, whatever his remaining perquisites or power, is a lost man—impels a compassionate society to hope that the rift between it and him can somehow be healed. Such a hope stems not from mere pity, but from self-recognition. Each of us is to a degree lost, tied to the rest of humanity—and to God—by fragile strands of grace, strands that fray and break. Pardon is a favor that we may sometimes be in a position to grant, but more important, it is one that we will always need.

■ Mayo Mohs