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Exploring Complexities of Forgiveness in Religious Traditions in a Post-Conflict Setting: Interviews with Muslim and Christian Leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract: This article explores religious understandings of interpersonal forgiveness in post-conflict contexts. It challenges views that portray religious perspectives as purely normative, prescriptive, and insensitive to life's complexities. This study draws from 75 in-depth interviews with religious leaders from Bosnia and Herzegovina's three largest faith communities (Islamic Community, Roman Catholic Church, and Serbian Orthodox Church). Using grounded theory methodology for data collection and analysis, this research reveals three interrelated conceptualizations of forgiveness: (1) forgiveness as a dispensation from justified punishment, (2) forgiveness as an emotional process, and (3) forgiveness as a spiritual transformation. This paper further examines forgiveness along the dimensions of procedurality, collectivity, conditionality, and memory. Forgiveness emerges as a fragmented, non-linear process shaped by both individual and collective factors. While some fundamental openness toward forgiveness is often seen as unconditional, its progression depends significantly on the wrongdoer's actions and broader context. Finally, the findings show that forgiveness does not imply forgetting, yet it substantially influences how past injuries are remembered and commemorated.

Keywords: forgiveness; conflicts; war; violence; reconciliation; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Islam; Christianity



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1. Introduction

In 2024, I taught at a summer school focused on resilience, designed for Croatian and Ukrainian students from Catholic universities. After one lecturer delivered a presentation on forgiveness, drawing upon experiences from the 1990s war in the former Yugoslavia, the session sparked significant unrest. Many participants appeared visibly uncomfortable, and one student rejected the notion of forgiveness in a particularly adamant way, also stating her intention never to forgive the Russians and to pass this view on to her children. Such emotional responses, while strong, are understandable in light of the participants' experiences of war and occupation. The workshop that followed the lecture provided the setting to explore further the tensions and challenges surrounding forgiveness. It raised numerous questions about its nature, scope, and limitations, such as what does forgiving someone imply in practice? Is it possible to forgive a nation? Are religious ideals of forgiveness unrealistic or exaggerated? What are the ramifications of choosing not to forgive? Can there be a neutral middle ground between forgiveness, on the one hand, and a desire for vengeance on the other?

Religious leaders, particularly Christian ones, have historically played a vital role in shaping cultural and political interpretations of forgiveness. Notable examples include the

1965 Polish bishops' letter to their German counterparts with the famous words "We forgive and ask forgiveness", which later entered the political discourse.¹ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, during South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, described forgiveness as a foundation for rebuilding society, elaborating on its transformative potential in a subsequent book whose title became an important political slogan: *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Tutu 1999). More recently, Pope Francis (2025) presented hope and forgiveness as two topics central to the 2025 Jubilee Year, aiming to project the principle of forgiveness also in the fields of international financial debt, ecology, and criminal justice. These religious initiatives have influenced secular approaches to conflict resolution and social reconstruction after violent conflicts, as evidenced by state leaders' formal demands for forgiveness for historical injustices and the integration of forgiveness into restorative justice programs (notable examples include Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Justin Trudeau, and Tony Blair).

However, this emphasis on forgiveness has faced increasing scrutiny. Critics like Brudholm (2008) challenge the religious undertones in political calls for forgiveness, arguing that they impose unrealistic expectations on victims of mass atrocities. Some theologians warn against the "fetish for forgiveness" (Lazard 2015) that may propel individuals to move over deep structural problems prematurely (Ruiz 2024). Political scholars, such as Cahan (2013, p. 174), insist that "importing an idea of forgiveness into political affairs is a mistake" and that such a concept, too reliant on Christian theology, is unnecessary for promoting peace and security.

The common problem surrounding the scholarly debate on forgiveness is that they often rely too heavily on a limited number of statements issued by religious leaders or, conversely, on religious texts, with very little insight into the complexities and nuances that forgiveness has in real lived experiences. This article addresses these gaps by focusing on how religious teachings on forgiveness are concretely applied in practice after the war. This will be achieved through an analysis of a large dataset of in-depth interviews with Christian and Muslim religious leaders from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as a paradigmatic case of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society with a history marked by conflict. Following the devastation of WWII and the period of non-democratic Communist government, the country experienced another war from 1992 to 1995 that claimed more than 100,000 deaths, while half of the population (around 2 million people) was forcefully displaced from their homes (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia n.d.; Zwierchowski and Tabeau 2010). Although the latter conflicts were not explicitly rooted in religious teachings, religion nonetheless played a significant role during the war—as an identity marker, as a justification for violence, but also as a source of inspiration for peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts (Mojzes 1998; Odak and Grozdanov 2023; Perica 2013).²

This study does not adopt a normative or prescriptive approach. Instead, it presents a theoretical framework for understanding forgiveness as a multidimensional phenomenon within both religious theory and practice, one that resists reduction to a single normative perspective.

This article proceeds as follows: *First*, it describes the methods used in the study, including the selection of participants and the analysis of data. *Second*, it presents the results organized around the three conceptualizations of forgiveness: (a) forgiveness as a dispensation from justified punishment, (b) forgiveness as an emotional process, and (c) forgiveness as a spiritual transformation. *Third*, it further analyzes forgiveness through the lenses of procedurality, collectivity, conditionality, and memory. *Fourth*, it situates the findings within the relevant scholarly literature, highlighting the contributions of this study. *Finally*, it concludes by discussing the research's implications for understanding the role

of religion in post-conflict debates on forgiveness, while it also identifies some areas for future study.

2. Methods

This study is based on 75 in-depth interviews with religious leaders from Bosnia and Herzegovina's three largest faith communities: 26 from the Islamic Community, 28 from the Roman Catholic Church, and 21 from the Serbian Orthodox Church. They were conducted between September 2015 and February 2017 in all regions and major cities of the country. The initial study was designed as a grounded theory research study (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967) focused on religious contribution to peacebuilding. Grounded theory, as a methodology, does not start with a preconceived theory and hypotheses but instead begins with observations and then, through iterative cycles of analysis and collection of new data, aims to produce an operative theoretical model.

Participants were drawn from the pool of all religious leaders who were active in the three largest religious communities in the country at the time of research. The selection of initial participants was guided by the “maximum variation principle” (Seidman 2006, pp. 52–54) to represent the scope of geographical regions, age, levels of education, hierarchical level in their community, personal experiences during the war, and geographical proximity to the places of tragedies as extensively as possible. The initial round of participants was reached directly or through contacts in the region. Afterward, the participants were also asked to suggest other potential participants. In the project's later phases, however, the interviewees were selected based on “theoretical sampling” concerns (Charmaz 2006, pp. 100–1). In other words, they were chosen with the specific purpose of providing necessary information to emerging theoretical categories until the point of “theoretical saturation”, at which “no new properties of the category emerge during data collection” (Charmaz 2006, p. 12).

The interviews were conducted in the participant's mother tongue, transcribed, and imported into NVivo, where they were subsequently inductively coded. After the initial round of analysis, the codes were grouped into larger categories and finally incorporated into a coherent theoretical model. The general model of preventative, reactive, and transformative roles of religious leaders before, during, and after intergroup conflicts has already been discussed in previous publications (Odak 2020, 2024).

In this article, I focus more narrowly on the conceptualization of intergroup forgiveness in the wake of the conflicts. Thus, this study provides a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 2008) of different perspectives and dimensions of forgiveness, grounded in interviews with active religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The analytical categories are illustrated by representative citations throughout the text. As the data were anonymized during the analysis, all the names mentioned here are pseudonyms.

3. Results

The analysis revealed three interrelated conceptualizations of forgiveness: (1) as a dispensation from justified punishment, (2) an emotional process, and (3) a spiritual experience and transformation (see Figure 1, below).

- The first perspective, *forgiveness as a dispensation from justified punishment*, emphasizes forgiveness's legal and moral dimensions. In this view, forgiveness involves the victim's decision to relinquish their right to seek retribution or demand punishment for the offender. In the research, this sense of forgiveness was only present among Muslim respondents who pointed to religious norms on large crimes. Under certain conditions, Shariatic rules give the possibility for victims or their families to grant pardon to the perpetrator, thereby mitigating or eliminating the prescribed punishment. However,

and this is an important element, even within such a legal framework, decisions to forgive are still motivated by theological views. Among Christian interviewees, this view was largely absent.

- The second perspective focuses on the *emotional aspects of forgiveness*, conceptualizing it as a process of managing and transforming negative emotions that stem from the injury—emotions such as anger, resentment, and hatred. Forgiveness, in this sense, involves a shift from being defined by the effects of past suffering towards an increased sense of personal agency and freedom for doing good.
- The third perspective situates *forgiveness within spiritually transformative experiences*. Here, in contact with God, individuals gain a deeper realization of the nature of reality that allows them to feel, at least temporarily, the effects of forgiveness. It also includes a comprehensive change in life and orientation towards good, of which forgiveness is only a part. In Christian tradition, this perspective also emphasizes the role of divine grace that elevates individual efforts, especially when they seem insufficient or failing.

These perspectives are not neatly separated or independent of one another but are employed here as ideal types for analytical clarity. Religious leaders often draw upon multiple notions simultaneously, highlighting the interconnected nature of these dimensions. In the second part of this section, these initial categories are further examined through the lenses of procedurality, collectivity, conditionality, and memory. The image below illustrates the organization of the discussion.

The discussion will focus on the interpretations and rationales provided by the interviewed participants, who understood forgiveness primarily within theological frameworks. This, however, does not mean that their perceptions are not influenced by external—cultural, societal, and political—factors. While their influence is certainly present, their analysis falls beyond the scope of this study.

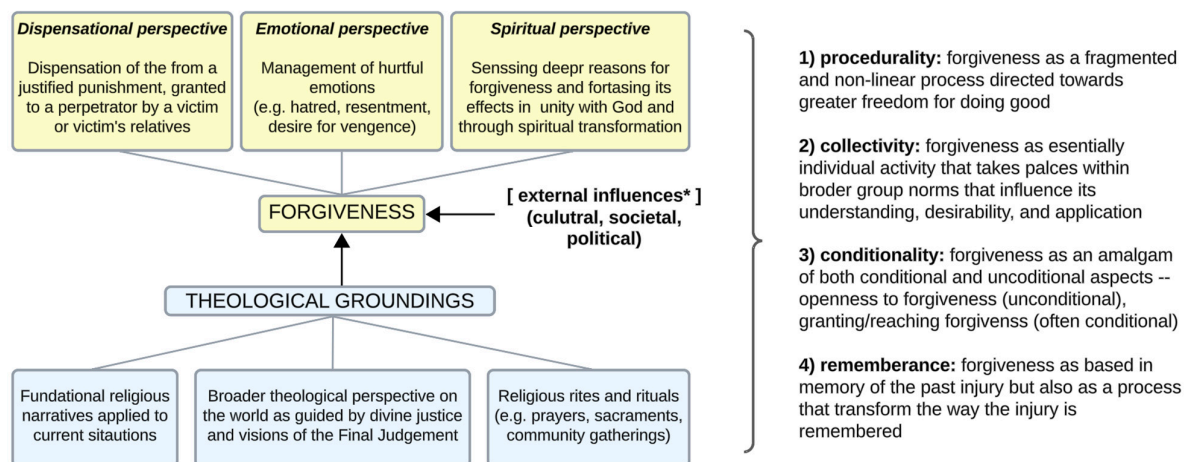


Figure 1. Perspectives and dimensions of forgiveness stemming from the interviews. * External factors are not discussed within the scope of this paper.

3.1. Forgiveness as a Dispensation from Justified Punishment

The initial concept of forgiveness entails suspending or renouncing punitive measures that would typically be mandated by legal systems or perceived as just. This notion, however, was specific to Islamic religious leaders who explained it with a reference to Shariah (Islamic religious law). While we can conceptualize similar forms of forgiveness in non-religious settings, for religious leaders, the grounding of such acts remains related to God. Using examples of manslaughter and murder, Ahmed (Islamic Community) elaborates:

If a person kills another person, the Shariatic rule is to enact capital punishment (...). That's the principle *ex officio*, so to speak, and such punishment is to be performed through an official ruling. Only one person can exempt him [the perpetrator] from the capital punishment—the victim's family members. God is thus just and desires the preservation of human life—because life is the greatest gift, even if one is a murderer—and God always desires the perpetrator's contrition and salvation. (...) The decision is transferred to the family. God is being just by [giving them an option]: "You can decide whether you want to forgive or not to forgive. If you forgive", God says, "it is better for you." What does God do? God encourages forgiveness (...) [b]ecause forgiveness represents a superhuman act; it is our continuous desire to reach toward God.

Forgiveness, while not an obligatory religious duty, is esteemed highly by Ahmed, who views it as a "superhuman act", reflecting God's desire to preserve all human lives, even those of wrongdoers. Nevertheless, refusing to forgive does not entitle the victim or the victim's family to seek vengeance; it only transfers the execution of prescribed punitive measures to the legal authorities. One can thus notice here that the opposite of forgiveness is not revenge but rather the imposition of legally prescribed punishment. According to Ahmed, this approach ensures the protection of both victims and society at large, as it would otherwise expand the effects of the crime. For example, in cases of rape, a strictly reciprocal form of revenge would result in an additional crime of rape committed, this time against an innocent individual from the perpetrator's family—actions antithetical to the principles of faith.

Ismail and Ferid, both members of the Islamic community, referenced an exemplary act of the Prophet Mohammed, who forgave his former enemies following the conquest of Mecca. As Ferid (Islamic Community) explains:

The most damaged party in all these prosecutions was the Prophet Mohammed, alayhi as-salām, and he nonetheless forgave everyone around him. (...) We often forget that nowadays. After he conquered Mecca with 10,000 fighters, he gathered his former enemies and asked what they thought he would do to them. They looked at him—he could have done whatever he wanted. He said, "You can go; all is forgiven." What an act! Only a believer can perform an act like that—only a person who, for the sake of God, had killed in themselves the ego, the desire for vengeance.

The example of the Prophet Mohammed granting amnesty to former enemies, for Ferid, offers a model for believers to emulate. However, we can notice that this example might be highly specific as it pertains to a leader who has consolidated political power and faces no imminent threats. This differs fundamentally from the experience of ordinary believers, who lack political authority and cannot influence their offenders' future conduct. How can then such an example be relevant for believers living in radically different conditions? What connects these contexts is the perceived permanence of a divine order, which guarantees final justice even when justice has been compromised in the domain of history and human affairs. Even if people have very limited scope for political action, they might still believe that God will value and support their actions.

Religious leaders are often seen as symbols and representatives of that divine order. Ferid (Islamic Community) illustrates this point by referencing a documentary on blood vendetta in Albania:

He [an imam] was standing there in the uniform of the Islamic community, and a father and another father (...) were hugging, crying, and forgiving one another in front of him. Somebody was killed. The religious servant played the crucial

role there. We [religious leaders] can do that because people look through us to God. Perhaps that's too strong an expression, but they view God through us (. . .) That is the power of faith and of a religious leader (. . .) They can play the key role because only faith can calm the passions (. . .) Only faith can enable a person to say: "Let God resolve that. From our side, we forgive."

In both passages cited above, God remains the central reference point. It is precisely God who gives believers the confidence to extend forgiveness even in precarious circumstances. A religious representative, in the case provided by Ferid, stands as a symbol of divine order where both the cruelty of the crime and the benevolence of the forgiveness that led to reconciliation are judged appropriately.

Among Christian leaders (both Orthodox and Catholic), forgiveness was, in fact, rarely discussed in relation to punishment. This difference may stem from the varying paradigms of religious laws in Christianity and Islam. Islamic law envisages a possibility of continuity between religious and civil authority and thus prescribes physical penalties for specific transgressions. In contrast, the legislative canons of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches focus on the spiritual regulation of believers and the organizational needs of communities, with sanctions limited to spiritual sanctions and criminal justice entirely relegated to civil authorities. Despite these differences, a commonality exists: in both traditions, forgiveness is not merely a formal act of waiving punishment because such a decision could be made on numerous pragmatic grounds. Theologically, the decision is inspired by a specific vision of the world and the afterlife where such acts would be rewarded and where final justice would be guaranteed. These forms of religious 'guarantees' offer a specific perspective on forgiveness, allowing people to manage inner emotional states more easily and place refraining from punishment in a broader spiritual context—the themes that will be further explored in the following sections.

3.2. *Forgiveness as an Emotional Process*

Forgiveness, in its second sense, pertains to the engaged management of painful emotions such as anger and resentment that arise from an injury. It requires deliberate effort on the victim's part, as opposed to the natural fading of these emotions over time or through external circumstances. Marijan (Catholic Church) articulates this idea by stating, "Acts of forgiveness do not happen just by themselves; they result from someone's efforts—those of an individual assuming [the burden] because they see it as something just, something that needs to be done." This statement underscores two dimensions of forgiveness: motivation and intentionality. Victims consciously and actively address the 'burden' of forgiveness motivated by a desire for the greater good.

Forgiveness, as a process of managing emotions, is closely associated with reclaiming agency, often compromised by the overwhelming reactions to the initial injury. The notion of "liberating oneself" or "freeing oneself" emerged frequently in the interviews. This leads us to a further question, namely, what are people freeing themselves from, and what kind of agency is being restored in this process? Haris (Islamic Community) elaborates:

Life must go on. We cannot remain trapped in the conflicts of the 1990s for the rest of our lives. If we want to live normally, with open hands as it were, and as people of freedom, we need to forgive; otherwise we will be captives of malice and hatred (. . .) If we want to liberate ourselves from the chains of evil and hatred, we have to keep forgiving people.

For Haris, thus, forgiveness serves as a means of liberating people from malice and hatred, emotions that would otherwise anchor them in a state of perpetual retrospection. Similarly, Slaven (Catholic Church) describes forgiveness as a release from one's inner demons that "do not leave a person in peace." Jakov (Catholic Church) shares a poignant

anecdote about a parishioner who lost two sons during the war, one of whom was tortured before succumbing to his injuries:

He said to me: “Uncle³, I won. I have forgiven them. God willing, may the punishment of the law reach all of them, but no harm will come from me. I cannot and do not wish to harm them. (...)” He was speaking in the sense of conquering oneself—I have broken it within me, I have expelled hatred from myself. That is what it means to forgive.

Forgiveness, therefore, represents a conscious response that counters the natural impulses arising from injury. As previously noted, Jakov views this inner renunciation of hatred as entirely distinct from, yet compatible with, the desire for transgressors to face appropriate legal punishment. However, individuals liberate themselves from carrying the constant burden of personally seeking to inflict harm on the wrongdoer.

For religious leaders, the problem with emotions such as hatred and malice does not lie merely in the fact that they are sinful (as being against religious rules or commandments), but that they are inherently harmful to the overall spiritual well-being of an individual. The concern is that a repeated mental fixation on the original injury consumes a person’s attention, restricting their ability to act freely. Instead of exercising their autonomy, people who hate are pushed into making forced choices, into constant reactivity towards past actions of someone else. This is where Haris’ metaphor of the “chains of evil and hatred” becomes particularly relevant. Even after the consequences of the original injury have dissipated, victims can remain mentally bound to the inflicted harm, attributing the original injury undue power and significance. This creates a persistent sense of being “chained” to the past, extending the perpetrator’s influence in the victim’s life. Blago (Catholic Church) thus compares forgiveness to a form of inner “purification”, arguing that without it, individuals “cannot progress” and are, in essence, “killing themselves”, which may also impact their physical health.

It is important to emphasize that forgiveness does not entail eradicating unpleasant or unsettling emotions to the extent of achieving apathy or indifference toward the injury. Forgiveness is, instead, the process of disengaging from emotional responses obstructing human potential for good. The contrast between anger and hatred is particularly illuminating in this regard. Slaven (Catholic Church) comments that victims do not have the right to hate, but they have the right “to be angry with the state that did not punish [the crimes] of the person who committed evil.” However, Slaven clarifies that victims also do not have the right to radicalize that form of justified anger, and they should “in the best case, pray to God to guide that other person [to the right path].”

Slaven distinguishes between two key aspects: rightful anger directed at a system that failed to prosecute a perpetrator and hatred directed at the individual offender. He warns against radicalization of emotions, even of justified anger, which can metaphorically consume a person’s energies. Ideally, for Slaven, there should also be an element of fundamental care for the offender, which may manifest as a concern for their moral transformation and return to the path of a virtuous life.

Pavle (Orthodox Church) makes this point even stronger and suggests the need for some form of ‘love’ towards the offender:

Forgiveness means liberation. (...) The one who forgives is liberated from anger. But that is not just a passive state. (...) Love is active, requiring activity, and only through love can we reach salvation. Anyway, I understood it and experienced it that way. And I tell people that not a single saint (...) would be a saint without love. This is especially the case with martyrs. Not a single martyr would be a saint without love. We have concrete examples. I like to mention those from

recent history, such as the story of the old man Vukašin in Jasenovac, who more than once responded to the executioner torturing him by addressing him as ‘son.’ Out of love, [Vukašin] desired to bring him back to the right path. [Vukašin] was not afraid of death and was not hurt by what [the executioner] did but by the fact that the one who was killing him was losing salvation. That is love.

Pavle presents a strikingly radical image: a martyr is not merely a victim who refrains from hating their wrongdoer but one who actively cares for the offender’s ultimate well-being. This notion of active love toward the offender appears unique to Christian leaders. Similarly, Andrej (Serbian Orthodox Church) states:

It is difficult to say to a mother who has lost a son, to call her to forgiveness. But people of strong faith still model themselves on Christ, on Jesus Christ the Lord, who forgives from the cross when they torture him, [and] kill him. (...) The same is the case with Saint Stephan and others who pray for their enemies. Not only do they forgive, but they also show them love and pray for them.

The love described here is not one of affection but rather a profound concern for another human being who jeopardizes their spiritual salvation by committing sin. Hamza (Islamic Community) observes this distinction between Christianity and Islam in this context:

[Islam] is not like Christianity, [which states,] “If he hits you on one cheek, turn [the other]”, although that is supreme. But I still think that Muslims, theologically speaking, do not have the right to do the same. Also, because God is the one who passes the final judgment and he [the perpetrator] is, after all, a perpetrator. One should influence [the perpetrator] through prayer, social [sanctions]. (...) If everything else fails, what remains is praying for him. A Christian would say immediately, “pray for him” or “love thy neighbor.” No! Let him come to himself. (...) He needs to experience some social [sanctions and feel] despised, at least. However, that should be kept under control because it could be carried to an extreme. (...) He [the perpetrator] should be punished, at least, through scorn, by saying, “I won’t drink coffee with you; come to your senses!”

In brief, forgiveness, when understood in an emotional sense, requires deliberate and ongoing efforts to manage the emotions triggered by injury, particularly anger and resentment. Victims are not deemed responsible for the spontaneous emergence of these emotions but are seen as accountable for their regulation. The key distinction here is in the direction of these emotions: while it is legitimate to feel anger towards the hurtful act itself or towards the failures of justice in processing criminals, one must avoid deep hatred toward the perpetrator as a person. Furthermore, allowing oneself to be overwhelmed by such emotions ultimately diminishes the capacity for doing good. Some Christian religious leaders specifically highlighted one additional element—the love for the perpetrator, which corresponds primarily to active care for their salvation and presents itself as a differentiating trait of Christian sanctification.

3.3. Forgiveness as a Spiritual Experience and Transformation

Unlike previous conceptions of forgiveness, which are understood as either a legal act or the active management of inner emotions, forgiveness in the spiritual sense entails a form of illumination or a sense of spiritual elevation. In this state, forgiveness flows from this renewed state of being. Hamza (Islamic Community), who formerly highlighted the difference between Christianity and Islam in their respective emphasis on concern for perpetrators, argued that “complete forgiveness” occurs “in those delicate, gentle moments of solitude, when we are closest to God, when we leave everything to God.” In this view,

those are “one hundred percent intimate moments when we become aware that He rules those lives, that He, after all, decided it that way, that He is the ruler of everything (...) and that I am also a part of that, as well as the one close to me who was killed.”

Although individuals can make efforts to adjust their attitudes toward perpetrators, “complete forgiveness” occurs during moments of intimate unity with God, accompanied by a profound realization of life’s meaning and one’s restored place in God’s design for creation. He notes, however, that these moments are transient and quickly give way to ordinary human preoccupations. Highlighting the significance of the divine element (*rūḥ*) present in every human being, Hamza explains that in those brief moments of unity with God:

it is that *rūḥ*, that soul, which forgives—it is ready, it can forgive. But in this human aspect, we calculate, we are not there (...) Every person has *rūḥ*, a soul. Not the ‘humanist’ soul, the Freudian one, but the one that truly comes from God (...) Therefore, it is *rūḥ*—that what is divine in a person—that can forgive; it levels all. . . But when we return, we return to what is ours, we return to *nafs*. *Nafs* is our human character (...).

In this framework, forgiveness is understood as a human act deeply rooted in the experience of unity with God. Similarly, Hrvoje (Catholic Church) describes forgiveness as a manifestation of divine grace while emphasizing the necessity of human effort in seeking it. In his view, forgiveness represents a blend of human desire to attain it—despite the inevitability of imperfection—and the grace of God that sustains and fulfills those efforts:

Forgiveness is not something natural to humans, in the sense that it comes on its own. It is something that requires great effort, something for which a person must strive and pray. It is a grace, a gift from God that a person must simply seek, and they must actively work toward it; otherwise, forgiveness will not happen spontaneously by itself—quite the opposite.

Miloš, an Orthodox priest, takes an even larger perspective, linking forgiveness with *metanoia*, a profound transformation of life oriented toward seeking God. Significantly, *metanoia* is not a state of human self-accomplishment but rather a transformation that arises in response to an individual’s genuine desire to seek God. In this sense,

It is not easy to forgive. (...) In the mystery of contrition, we call that “*metanoia*” and “*preumiti*.”⁴ Therefore, every person that has truly *preumiti* in order to be able to forgive. That moment of inner ecstasy, of inner accomplishment of *preumljenje* makes us able to forgive. Otherwise, (...) we cannot forgive. We can forgive verbally, but forgiveness that is merely verbal differs radically from the true one. (...) It is very hard to achieve that, and the Church is the best witness to that. We in the various Churches cannot forgive each other.

Miloš thus draws a distinction between verbal forgiveness and true forgiveness, which involves a fundamental transformation of one’s inner life, resonating with the themes of this section. Spiritual forgiveness, in essence, represents an elevated state of understanding characterized by an awareness of one’s participation in the divine plan that remains untainted by human failures. This state is often experienced as a fleeting moment of illumination or, alternatively, as a series of such moments, ultimately leading to a fundamental change in how one perceives and reacts to the world. Forgiveness, therefore, emerges as a result of a deeper process of seeking God’s presence. Both in Miloš’s and Hrvoje’s response there is, nonetheless, some ambiguity regarding the degree of human efforts in the process of forgiveness. Although forgiveness involves God’s grace in both reactions, there is nonetheless some importance attributed to human readiness to receive or seek that grace.

In short, the spiritual dimension of forgiveness pertains simultaneously to the theological groundings of forgiveness in spiritual visions of divine justice and reconciliation but also to the concrete experience of forgiveness during a fleeting but elevated state of spiritual practice. In Christian theology, specifically, forgiveness is also seen as an act of grace, i.e., a divine gift that makes the acts of forgiveness, otherwise difficult and nonspontaneous, possible. Although grace remains a gift and, in that sense, cannot be forced, it can still be sought through spiritual discipline such as prayer. In the Orthodox tradition, the spiritual perspective on forgiveness is sometimes related to a comprehensive change in a person's heart and mind, that is, of their perception of reality and consequently of their behavior. Metanoia thus suggests the alignment of an individual's living with God's will through spiritual praxis. This echoes the Islamic perspective on true forgiveness as an experience sensed by the human spirit (rūḥ) in a community with God.

One important clarification, one should not interpret the above-discussed distinctions between dispensational, emotional, and spiritual perspectives on forgiveness as three distinctive forms of experience. They are rather a conceptual framework or facets of the same complex phenomenon. Let us revisit their interconnections briefly. In the emotional sense, forgiveness necessitates an active engagement with negative *emotions*; however, it is precisely the spiritual practice that often serves as a critical catalyst in dealing with them. Conversely, the spiritual experience of unity with God sometimes produces emotional states of reassurance, tranquility, and peace that are conducive to forgiveness. Finally, a person's decision to forgo punishment or vengeance (the dispensational dimension) is both accompanied by intense emotions and inseparable from spiritual practices. The example of two Albanian fathers who reconciled after an act of forgiveness illustrates precisely how this punitive dimension had elements of emotional catharsis and a sense of God's presence, symbolized through a religious leader.

This interplay of elements highlights the pluri-dimensional nature of forgiveness, which can be additionally examined through the lenses of procedurality, collectivity, and conditionality, to which we turn in the next section.

3.4. Dimensions of Forgiveness

To further analyze the dynamics of forgiveness, I suggest four additional dimensions that cut across the three perspectives outlined above:

- **Procedurality:** This dimension explores forgiveness as a gradual process that unfolds over time, encompassing various stages and potential setbacks. It also highlights the non-linear and often fragmented nature of forgiveness. These elements challenge assumptions about forgiveness as one discrete act or, alternatively, as a cumulative and single-directional process.
- **Collectivity:** This dimension delves into the interplay between individual and collective aspects of forgiveness. While forgiveness ultimately remains a personal journey, it is also significantly shaped by social norms, expectations, and power dynamics within communities.
- **Conditionality:** This dimension investigates the extent to which forgiveness is understood as conditional or unconditional and the factors that shape these understandings.
- **Remembrance:** This dimension analyzes the interdependence between forgiveness and memory; it explores how the remembrance of past violence allows for the possibility of forgiveness and how forgiveness, in turn, can transform the remembrance of the original tragedies.

3.4.1. Procedurality: Forgiveness as a Nonlinear and Fragmented Process

What often causes confusion in discussions about forgiveness and its necessity is the distinction between forgiveness as a voluntary decision—often expressed through performative words like “I forgive”—and forgiveness as a final state, where a person feels liberated from undesirable emotions or undergoes a profound change in their life stance that includes forgiveness. In the first sense, this “I forgive” can be understood as an act that serves as a *pars pro toto* for a much longer and more complex process.

The process can be imagined in three stages: the preparatory phase of maturation leading to the decision to forgive; the moment of stating the decision externally or, alternatively, accepting it internally but without outward expressions; and the subsequent phase where the impact of the act unfolds. Of course, there are instances where forgiveness is professed under pressure or in a perfunctory manner, i.e., it is communicated through words, but those words that do not align with a person’s true desires or feelings. There are, however, cases where such expressions are not necessary or are impossible, such as in cases of self-forgiveness or forgiveness to dead individuals. However, such cases fall outside the scope of this paper.

What I aim to explore here is the complex and unpredictable nature of the processes of forgiveness. This process is often understood as linear and unequivocally beneficial: after preparation, a person expresses forgiveness and subsequently experiences its positive consequences. Such views are undeniably common among both religious believers and leaders. However, my analysis also highlights a significant sensitivity to the dynamism of this process. Bojan (Orthodox Church) articulates this unpredictability directly: “It [forgiving] is a process. Some people will not accept that until the end of their lives! A mother that lost her child—one piece of the world died for her, and she will carry that till the end of her life.”

Bojan introduces an important idea here, that individuals approach forgiveness on different temporal lines and the possibility that forgiveness may never reach its final stage. This “when” of forgiveness as well as “how fast” therefore differ from one individual to another.

However, even this notion can tempt us to view forgiveness as a linear and cumulative process—one that may never fully conclude but nonetheless progresses steadily over time. I propose a different image: forgiveness as a fragmented process. Across the interviews, forgiveness emerges as a process of addressing injuries, but here is the crucial element—the injury is not just a single concentrated element of pain that appears clear and unambiguous. Rather, injury resembles a great number of smaller fragments shattered around oneself. Some of these fragments only become visible after many years, even when a person believes to have finalized the process of forgiveness. Željko (Catholic Church) reflects on this idea, stating:

I believe that both [reconciliation and forgiveness] are processes, meaning that both continue throughout the whole life. (...) When one says, “I forgave someone”, one is astonished at how something unforgiven bursts from inside! That is why both are theological categories. God has the last word in all that, but not in the sense that we do not know what to do and so leave everything up to God. Rather, we have to do everything [in our power], even though we know that there will always be a “residue”... I don’t know how to call it... Something that only God can forgive. (...) How many times I went to the altar, with certain people [in mind]? I tell you honestly—I am celebrating mass, and thinking about them, and—I swear—you would be shocked how sometimes uncontrolled rage boils up... I cannot say it is hatred... [but it is] something uncontrolled. A woman who was raped [may seem to] read in the eyes of her husband, “He would not have

done that to you had you not wanted it”, even though he may not be actually thinking that. Imagine that! Who could [forgive that]? Only God can. You cannot simply cure that. How could you?

Using his own experience, Željko illustrated that even when one believes they have forgiven, sudden bursts of emotions can surface, stemming from an unexplainable “residue” within—a part of the self that only God can forgive. Forgiveness, therefore, is best perceived as a non-cumulative, non-linear, and essentially fragmented process. While centered on addressing injury, it is dispersed across many fragments, some of which may persist within a person even after they consider the process completed. The religious perspective on forgiveness reveals two specific insights. First, religious leaders often view God as the only being capable of fully understanding the depths of the human heart; second, even when individuals feel they have forgiven, hidden residues of pain or unforgiveness may remain—known only to God.

3.4.2. Collectivity: Forgiveness as an Individual and Communal Activity

A recurring leitmotif in discussions about forgiveness among the participants is its profoundly personal nature—forgiveness cannot be given or lived in place of someone else. However, this does not imply that it occurs in isolation from society. Although forgiveness remains fundamentally an individual act, it takes place within collective frameworks that shape not only its development but also its perception and meaning. Marjan’s (Catholic Church) response offers an illuminating perspective on this interplay:

In the same way that guilt is individual, I think that forgiveness also has to be on an individual level (...) A collective can create a proper environment for someone to take that step or walk that path [and so] undergo that experience. [However,] that is not a momentary experience but, rather, a path or a process of some kind. A collective, community, or society can encourage or discourage an individual (...) I believe that it rests upon an individual’s experience, decision, and effort. (...) [However,] the collective is not unimportant.

Marjan, as many other respondents, thus designates forgiveness as an essentially individual process that is nonetheless impacted by the community’s norms and values. Religious leaders occupy a specific position as they are simultaneously perceived as guardians of their group’s identity and as representatives of a moral and spiritual order that transcends their belonging to an ethnic or national group. Inevitably, there is always some dissonance between the norms promoted by political or ideological leaders of their community and the norms regarding forgiveness that stem from their religious tradition. They find themselves in a particularly precarious position when they criticize the mainstream tendencies of their congregants or members of a larger ethnic group (for an in-depth discussion, see [Odak 2024](#)).

Marjan recounted what he considered one of the most demoralizing experiences of his priesthood during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Preaching to a congregation of predominantly ethnically Croatian refugees, he centered his sermon on forgiveness. Acknowledging their hardships, Marjan nevertheless exhorted his congregation to move beyond entrenched divisions, drawing inspiration from the Gospel. He posited that all individuals are God’s children, and, from a cosmic and long historical perspective, interethnic conflicts are akin to childish squabbles. Towards the end of the mass, a local politician took the altar and dismissed Marjan’s sermon, stating: “Listen, those things that the priest said in his sermon, all that is nice and pretty. He said it in a sermon, but it is not like that (...) Let him speak whatever he wants; we know how it really is and how we are going to behave.” Marjan perceived this intervention as an act of spiritual sabotage, undermining his attempt to foster reconciliation. He noted that such incidents were common, as external

actors—particularly politicians—co-opt sacred spaces for ideological purposes and easily destroy all the reconciliatory progress.

The underlying motivation, Marjan suggested, lies in the deliberate effort of political actors to de-legitimize religious narratives that propose a conciliatory approach to intergroup animosities. If a community proposes forgiveness after suffering, it risks being perceived as weak. In addition, such acts might undermine the grievances and moral claims they hold against their oppressors. A group of victims who endured deep pain can become a symbol of the martyrdom of a broader collective, by the principle in which the suffering of some becomes the martyrdom of many. Forgiveness expressed by direct victims would, therefore, impede the transfer of this vicarious suffering to the community as a whole.

As a counterpart to the collective reluctance to extend forgiveness across ethnic lines, Željko (Catholic Church) identifies another problematic dynamic: the tendency to absolve war criminals from one's own community under the pretext of forgiveness. He describes this phenomenon as follows:

They [religious leaders] go on to humanize criminals. They humanize the perpetrators, and then they say, "He is human too!" Of course, he is. But when Jesus forgives people, when he forgives the thief on the cross, he does not deny his wrongdoing! He never told him, "Oh, you did everything right." Yet that is exactly what happens here. In a certain sense, they become saints—national heroes and religious saints—without repentance!

This selective leniency towards prominent figures within one's own ethnic group stands in sharp contrast to the strict moral expectations placed on members (especially criminals) from other communities.

It is important to recognize that religious leaders are not the only source of influence within what can be termed the collective frameworks of forgiveness. While forgiveness is often associated with religious communities, it has also been incorporated into secular peacebuilding efforts. Bojan (Orthodox Church) observed that some international NGOs engaged in peacebuilding exert undue pressure on victims to forgive, often within unrealistic timeframes:

Here in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we had many organizations from all around the world conducting projects. So many were fruitless, foolish projects that today have nothing to show for themselves. (...) Hold on, you are conducting some project over a six-month period in which people should forgive those who killed their child, mother, or father! That is insane!

Slaven (Catholic Church) expands the perspective on communal factors by linking the demographic situation of a group to their attitudes toward forgiveness. He notes that ethnic minorities, lacking the power to retaliate, may resort to forgiveness out of pragmatic concerns. This shifts forgiveness from a process that expands a person's moral agency into a largely imposed response to political and societal vulnerability:

[In forgiving,] one should not be naïve or feel devalued or weaker than the other. On the contrary, forgiveness should make individuals feel strong, to feel that, [yes, they] could retaliate but chooses not to and that they are aware that forgiving is being done out of love, for a higher goal. (...) This is easy when you are a minority—I will forgive you if you are stronger than me. But if you are stronger and you suffered an injustice from someone weaker and did not retaliate in the same measure—that is, in fact, the pinnacle of forgiveness. That is real forgiveness, the rest is just [a response to] social pressure.

Slaven thus highlights that asymmetries in power can significantly impact the attitudes toward forgiveness. Minority groups may feel an implicit pressure to forgive, fearing that

defiance or resistance could make their situation more difficult or provoke backlash. For Slaven, however, authentic forgiveness must be a genuine moral choice; it must stem from an inner sense of agency, rather than obligation or coercion. In this regard, religious leaders can play a key role—not by compelling forgiveness but by fostering a sense of empowerment that enables individuals to forgive on their own terms while resisting social expectations that systematically place this burden on the vulnerable.

In summary, while forgiveness is fundamentally an individual act, it unfolds within what can be termed collective frameworks of forgiveness—dominant and often implicit norms that shape the desirability and appropriateness of forgiveness, particularly in public gestures toward former adversaries. These frameworks influence who is expected to forgive, under what conditions, and with what social implications. Although religious leaders generally encourage forgiveness as a form of inner transformation that liberates victims from the burden of the past, they also recognize the potentially negative effect of ideological manipulations with the concept of forgiveness, especially in cases of blanket exculpations of criminals.

3.4.3. Conditionality: Conditional and Unconditional Aspects of Forgiveness

While responses varied among participants, there was a broad consensus that certain aspects of forgiveness, particularly openness to forgiveness, should be unconditional. However, deeper engagement in the process was seen as contingent on the behavior of the perpetrator, i.e., conditional.

Adis (Islamic Community) emphasized that forgiveness should begin with the perpetrator, who should first show genuine contrition and change before asking for forgiveness. Without these elements, he argued, forgiveness could easily become a hollow gesture, where wrongdoers continue adhering to their actions, and victims are coerced into granting forgiveness that was never sought. His perspective was particularly related to cases of publicly known crimes. Adis referenced the Mothers of Srebrenica, who lost loved ones in the genocide, stating that expecting them to forgive without contrition, transformation, and guarantees of non-repetition from perpetrators would be meaningless.

This concern aligns with the earlier discussions on the social pressures placed on victims to forgive, often serving broader goals of social reconstruction. Bojan (Serbian Orthodox Church) was particularly cautious about such initiatives, asserting that forgiveness “cannot be used for building a future identity, nor should it be used as a currency to obtain something”, even when the intended outcome is positive. Bojan’s critique underscores the risk of instrumentalizing forgiveness (even when the desired aim is a positive one). Instrumentalization of forgiveness, regardless of the aim, strips it of its personal character and transforms it from an intimate process of a victim’s reckoning with their injury into a response to external societal expectations.

Haris (Islamic Community), focusing on forgiveness in interpersonal relationships, framed it as an act of generosity rooted in faith and the expectation of divine mercy:

The one who extends his hand first is better than the one who accepts it. That was always the rule, not only in Islam but in all religions. (. . .) One does not need to forget. One should remember for the sake of future generations. But a believer needs to forgive another believer, regardless of their faith. A human person needs to forgive other people in order to be forgiven. When we make a mistake, we expect God to forgive us. But we cannot forgive one another. Here, in my view, the generosity of a believer is visible—they believe that God will forgive them if they forgive others.

Haris’ perspective presents forgiveness as an expression of faith and moral hospitality. A person who extends a hand of forgiveness is thus always justified in that act of initial

benevolence inspired by similar acts of God's benevolence towards humans. This, however, does not imply an inclination towards forgetting or ignorance of the past. Tarik (Islamic Community) used a similar metaphor of an extended hand but introduced an important qualification: while the hand should be extended, it should not be offered at any cost. Rather, it should signal openness to forgiveness only to "those who deserve it and merit forgiveness, to those who are also ready to forgive so as to make a better future—not by sweeping their problems under the carpet but by admitting their mistake." His concern regarding unconditional forgiveness was the risk of inadvertently enabling future crimes.

Adis and Tarik represent a stance in which remorse is seen as an eliminating criterion—forgiveness should not be granted if the perpetrator shows no contrition. Others, particularly those drawing from the Christian narrative of Jesus forgiving from the cross, saw remorse as a facilitating factor rather than a strict requirement. When asked whether apologies were a necessary prerequisite for forgiveness, Andrej (Serbian Orthodox Church) responded: "No, absolutely not. There is the model of Christ the Lord (...) There was obviously no regret from His torturers, but He still forgave them. And there are many, many later examples of the saints who should, in my opinion, be models to us."

At this juncture, we observe the interdependence between forgiveness and memory. Andrej draws on the religious memory of Jesus and the saints as a foundation for forgiveness. The suffering of torture and crucifixion is not forgotten but reinterpreted within a framework where forgiveness and renewed relationships take precedence. On the other hand, Haris stresses that forgiveness does not require forgetting, as one "should remember for the sake of future generations." These tensions between forgiveness, remembrance, and forgetting are further explored in the following section.

For now, it is sufficient to conclude that the conditionality and unconditionality of forgiveness are largely context-dependent. Whereas some initial openness to forgiveness is generally viewed as unconditional, the actual act of granting or reaching forgiveness is often contingent on the behavior of the perpetrator. Respondents expressed concerns that unconditional forgiveness—particularly when not sought—could unintentionally encourage moral laxity or dilute the significance of the act itself. These concerns, however, pertain primarily to interpersonal forgiveness. On a spiritual level, victims are not bound by the actions of perpetrators; they are not obligated to bear the weight of painful emotions simply because the wrongdoer has not demonstrated remorse. For some Christian respondents, especially those who emphasize Biblical narratives of Jesus forgiving his torturers despite their lack of contrition, forgiveness is inherently unconditional. However, this unconditionality primarily refers to inner spiritual and emotional appeasement and should not be conflated with public gestures, particularly in the political arena.

3.4.4. Remembrance: Forgiveness Between Memory and Forgetting

Previous testimonies suggest that memory and forgiveness stand in a mutually dependent relationship—forgiveness occurs because the injury is remembered. At the same time, the act of forgiving itself reshapes memory, turning it from a source of division into a testimony of benevolence and moral generosity. In this relationship, memory serves as its defining condition—memory is something that accompanies forgiving. But is this always the case? There is a risk, it seems, that an overemphasis on memory becomes 'parasitic' to the process of forgiveness, reducing it to a temporary suspension of punishment rather than a true reconciliation.

In numerous interviews, the refrain "forgive but not forget" was repeated. However, Hrvoje (Catholic Church) cautions that this imperative can sometimes have negative consequences both for the community itself and their relationship to the perceived offenders. Namely, "forgive but not forget" can function as a conditional dispensation, where for-

givenness is granted provisionally, but serves as a warning that any future wrongdoing will result in even harsher consequences. As he explains:

Often, we hear that one needs “to forgive but not forget”, which is, in essence, positive, at least in its original conception. However, that [saying] is sometimes misinterpreted. What does it mean to forgive if I continually return to the evil that was done to me, if I perceive all others through [the lens of] that evil? Perceiving other people, other generations, and perhaps even the progeny of those who did the evil through that lens—that does not constitute any positive not-forgetting. Forgiveness must include the memory itself, and we should not forget so that the evil does not get repeated. (...) [However,] some people interpret “Never more” in the sense of “that should never happen to us again. [In the sense of:] We have to be powerful—the evil must never happen to us again.”

In the regime of memory and forgiveness described by Hrvoje, nothing is truly set aside—only punishment is temporarily suspended, contingent upon the absence of future wrongdoing. This framework also introduces a shift from the individual to the collective level, where personal crimes become emblematic of an entire group. Damjan (Serbian Orthodox Church) identifies an asymmetry in how this logic operates along identity lines, questioning why the principle of “forgive but not forget” seems to apply only to conflicts between different national or ethnic groups. He elaborates:

There were cases where Serbs were killing Serbs, and Croats were killing Croats, all for ideological reasons. (...) Or [there were] conflicts within families. If we were to implement [‘forgive but not forget’] (...) down to the individual level, we most likely wouldn’t be able to go out to the street. We would be blaming everyone for something. (...) That would completely destroy the community at its most basic, and that is why I think it’s wrong.

According to Damjan, the principle of “forgiving but not forgetting” is in itself untenable. If literal and universal, it would create an uninhabitable world where the memory of past crimes would continuously accumulate, fostering perpetual distrust among individuals and communities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a specific term for this form of memory—*zlopamćenje*—which encapsulates the idea of remembering the past in a way that sustains resentment and fear. Literally translated, it means both “remembering evil” and “remembering in an evil way”, capturing the dual nature of this phenomenon.

In practice, *zlopamćenje* operates on two levels: it fixates on past injuries while simultaneously turning these injuries into defining characteristics of the other, ensuring that they are passed down intergenerationally as an implicit moral duty. This type of memory demands that relationships with the other be shaped primarily through the lens of historical grievances. Many respondents identified *zlopamćenje* as a key driver of cyclical violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Adis (Islamic Community) provided a particularly chilling example from his town, where grandfathers, fathers, and sons from one family killed members of another family over successive generations, often at the same bridge and, at times, using the same knife. Such long genealogies of vengeance, he argued, would be unthinkable without a specific kind of memory—one that does not merely preserve the past but transforms “the evil of the other” into the perception of the Other as inherently evil.

As an antidote to *zlopamćenje*, Damjan (Serbian Orthodox Church) does not advocate for forgetting but rather for a different approach of “remembering victims, forgetting evil.” This principle ensures that the suffering of victims is honored but their pain and suffering are not used as evidence of the inherent corruption of the perpetrators and of

their community. Instead of allowing memory to fuel resentment, this approach seeks to preserve dignity while preventing the perpetuation of cycles of enmity.

Velimir (Serbian Orthodox Church) proposes a similar idea through the concept of “prayerful commemoration.” He presented this concept as an alternative to ideological manipulation of tragedies. Such manipulations often occur during commemorative events when political leaders or opinion makers instrumentalize tragedies for their own projects. Prayerful commemoration, in contrast, contains no ideological agenda—it keeps the memory alive while fostering peace. This concept of prayerful commemoration does not merely mean that prayers should be included as part of commemorations. It can be interpreted more as a directive for how remembrance should be structured. In this sense, commemorating past tragedies should take the form of prayer, meaning that memory is ultimately entrusted to God, the final arbiter of both justice and forgiveness.

Konstantin (Serbian Orthodox Church) extends this perspective by introducing the concept of “sacred forgetting.” This does not imply erasing painful memories but rather elevating them from the purely biological and psychological considerations to the spiritual domain. While human cognition cannot erase the images of the past, these memories can be transformed—not into sources of grievance but into a spiritual concern for the well-being of the wrongdoer. As he explains:

Since sacred memory exists, [so too does] sacred forgetting; nicely said. Sacred forgetting would be to love the one we forgive. To be capable of loving that person even when, due to our biological makeup, we cannot perform some sort of auto-lobotomy; memory includes, images from the past. I think that sacred forgetting would be love.

In this vision, sacred forgetting is not about erasing the past but about transforming it. While a person can still retrieve the images of the past, they feel less need to do so and their attitude towards them fundamentally changes. Memory, which used to be an accusatory burden, is not placed within a framework of transformative care for the other.

In conclusion, religious leaders underline the importance of cultivating a proper form of remembrance of tragic events because it is precisely memory that deeply influences the process of forgiveness. The commonly invoked phrase “forgive but not forget” was often judged ambiguous, as it can inadvertently perpetuate cycles of resentment and fear. The concept of *zlopamćenje*, or “evil memory”, illustrates how the preservation of past grievances can become a destructive force, shaping perceptions of the Other and fueling intergenerational conflicts.

Religious leaders thus offer some alternative approaches that seek to direct the nature of remembrance in such a way that it supports forgiveness and reconciliation. Concepts such as “remembering victims, forgetting evil”, “prayerful commemoration”, and “sacred forgetting” provide frameworks in which the past is honored, but it is simultaneously transposed in a different framework of reference, the one in which fallible human memory finds assistance in divine memory that keeps to a unified vision of history and acts as the final arbiter of justice.

4. Discussion

Given the relative scarcity of studies examining the role of religious leaders in peace-building, restricting our discussion to directly comparable research would be unduly limiting. This section, therefore, broadens the scope by considering scholarship on the different conceptualization and dimensions of forgiveness discussed throughout this paper.

I will organize this discussion around four major lines of scholarship related to our study: (1) forgiveness as an emotional and cognitive process, (2) individual and collective aspects of forgiveness, (3) conditional and unconditional elements of forgiveness, and

(4) forgiveness and memory. In each section, I will specify the parallels with our findings as well as unique aspects of religious views on forgiveness stemming from the interviews with religious leaders. The discussion focuses on interpersonal forms of forgiveness and does not include self-forgiveness or forgiveness by God or forgiveness of dead people.

4.1. Forgiveness as an Emotional and Cognitive Process

Among the three perspectives on forgiveness discussed before, most parallels in the broader scholarship can be made with the second one, which focuses on emotional processes. Forgiveness has been widely studied in psychology and social psychology, where it is broadly defined as the “release of an emotional burden associated with honest appraisal of a perceived transgression” (Griffin et al. 2019, p. 336). While much of the research accentuates emotional transformation, scholars also acknowledge cognitive and behavioral aspects, such as making a choice not to retaliate and willingness to continue relationships (Garthe and Guz 2019, p. 87; Green et al. 2019, pp. 131–36). As observed in the interviews, forgiveness often centers on managing emotions stemming from the original injury.

A distinctive feature of religious perspectives on forgiveness lies primarily in the inclusion of a metaphysical dimension, that is, references to God and divine order. While individuals exercise personal agency in deciding whether to forgive or not, their actions are often guided by spiritual resources. These resources pertain not only to scriptural passages in the Bible, Qur’an, and other authoritative sources but also to broader religious rituals such as prayers or sacraments. As we could see from the responses, each religious tradition articulates its justifications, scope, and limitations for forgiveness. This aligns with the wider scholarship, which suggests that forgiveness is deeply context-dependent—though many religious traditions emphasize divine forgiveness, their interpretations and practical applications are shaped by specific narratives (see: Heim 2022, pp. 42–43; Rye and McCabe 2014). In addition, divine grace is also seen as an active principle that supplements the lack of motivation to forgive, particularly in tough situations of personal loss.

Forgiveness as Liberation from Negative Emotions

Another salient aspect of the interviews was the notion of forgiveness, which allows individuals to feel liberated from negative or spiritually corrupting emotions. The compatibility of forgiveness with emotions such as anger, hatred, contempt, and resentment has been a longstanding debate in moral philosophy. A significant contribution to this discussion comes from the Anglican bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752), who authored influential works in defense of certain forms of resentment as integral to moral justice.

Butler (1827) distinguishes between two types of resentment: (a) natural indignation arising from moral wrongdoing, which serves to prevent further harm, and (b) obstinate malice, including vengeance or prolonged hostility, even after an injustice has been addressed. The first form, a reaction to perceived transgressions, has a constructive societal role. Butler notes that even when reading fiction, we instinctively feel indignation when a villain prevails, and this response intensifies when injustice affects someone close to us. Such emotions play an important social function—they serve as a natural deterrent to wrongdoing. However, the moral value of resentment changes when it becomes exaggerated, persistent, and disproportionate. In such cases, Butler warns, it ceases to be a moral instrument of justice and instead becomes an obsessive, self-centered fixation that distorts one’s judgment.

The emotionalist perspective on forgiveness, influenced by Butler’s philosophy, conceptualizes forgiveness as relinquishing or renouncing excessive resentment—primarily vindictive passions and retributive impulses (Griswold 2007, p. 33; Murphy 2003, p. 13).

Scholars, however, diverge in their interpretations of the nature and extent of emotions that ought to be forsaken in the process of forgiveness. While some advocate a minimalist approach that requires renouncing the desire for the offender's suffering, others propound a much more comprehensive view, asserting that most or all negative emotions stemming from the injury, including sadness and disappointment, should be surmounted (for an overview, see: [Hughes and Warmke 2017](#)).

[Murphy \(2009, pp. 575–76\)](#) criticizes too expansive views of forgiveness, contending that an overly expansive inclination to extend fellowship towards wrongdoers may be construed as disrespectful to victims. While the abandonment of “total loathing and shunning” ([Murphy 2009, p. 575](#)) could be granted to all human beings based on moral humility, this does not necessitate an unconditional or unlimited extension of fellowship. The author cautions that socializing with a wrongdoer under the guise of forgiveness may demonstrate a lack of respect for victims' grievances. For [Griswold \(2010\)](#), similarly, premature expressions of forgiveness, even when proffered by the victims themselves, convey morally ambiguous messages. Critiquing instances where members of Christian communities publicly expressed forgiveness for the murder of their children mere days after the crime, the author suggests that such actions are not really manifestations of forgiveness as the brevity of time precludes adequate emotional processing; they are more a manifestation of a desire to lead a “life entirely free from moral anger, regardless of circumstances” ([Griswold 2010, p. 461](#)).

Certain parallels to emotional approaches to forgiveness can be found in the Islamic ‘adab’ literature—a corpus dedicated to good manners and cultivated behavior that flourished from the 9th to 12th century CE. Authors such as Ibn Muḥammad Miskawayh, Ibn Hazm, and al-Ghazali, influenced by Aristotelian virtue ethics, often situated forgiveness within the framework of temperance ([Powell 2011, p. 24](#)). Miskawayh's *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* (*The Noble Deeds of Character*), for instance, frames forgiveness as the restraint of anger of offense, even if such reactions would be justified in terms of fairness or reciprocity ([Powell 2011, p. 24](#)). Islamic scholars of this era, however, transcend the framework of mere emotional restraint. Inspired by Qur'ānic depictions of divine mercy and forgiveness and paradigmatic acts of clemency by the Prophet Muhammad, they advocate for magnanimous attitudes towards adversaries ([Wan Muhammad 2020, pp. 286–87](#)). [Ibn Hazm \(n.d.\)](#), in his work *Kitāb al-Akhlāq wa-l-Siyar* (*The Book of Ethics and Conduct*), thus states, “Do not deliver your enemy to an oppressor, and do not oppress him yourself. Treat him as you would treat your friend, except for trusting him”. He thus calls for non-vengeful and merciful behavior towards enemies, albeit with prudent reservation. This perspective shifts the emphasis from a primary concern with social justice towards a greater focus on the moral disposition of the wronged individual. While a virtuous act may not invariably elicit immediate positive emotions, it can be argued that consistent cultivation of virtues ultimately fosters inner peace and tranquility.

Religious leaders, as we could see, have expressed caution regarding resentment, recognizing its potential to harm victims' spiritual and physical well-being. While they have acknowledged the legitimacy of righteous anger—particularly toward institutions that fail to hold criminals to account—they have warned particularly against harboring hatred and malevolence towards the perpetrator. While underlining the importance of magnanimity and openness, they have also shared, to some extent, the critiques of rushed or indiscriminate forgiveness. These considerations highlight the interplay between individual and collective dimensions of forgiveness, a theme further explored in the following section.

4.2. Collective and Individual Aspects of Forgiveness

All interviewed participants unanimously agreed that forgiveness contains some uniquely individual aspects. This was evident in statements asserting that no one can forgive on another's behalf. Simultaneously, our discussion of the collective frameworks of forgiveness demonstrated how social contexts provide norms that can encourage, impose, or impede forgiveness processes. How does this idea of collective frameworks of forgiveness relate to broader research on this topic?

In their large meta-study on the socioeconomic and sociopolitical correlates of interpersonal forgiveness, [Hanke and Fischer \(2013, p. 516\)](#) also observed that “the context within which individuals interact and live can also contribute to an individual's propensity to forgive others.” This is because, as [Fehr et al. \(2010, p. 901\)](#) suggest, “victims may be motivated to forgive via internalized socio-moral expectations, regardless of the specific event that has transpired.” Such internalized expectations stem from the victim's religious systems but also from the perceived social desirability of forgiveness, more broadly. Religious and societal norms, however, are not always easy to disentangle, and religious norms and values often impact political discourse.

[Brudholm's \(2008\)](#) critique of forgiveness advocated by *The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* points in that direction. The author, in essence, reacts against collective pressure on individuals to forgive, highlighting two problematic aspects. First, religiously toned narratives that present an erroneous impression that the only alternative to forgiveness is vengeance. Second, there is an implicit division between victims who forgive and those who do not. This bifurcation lauds forgiving victims as exemplary citizens while portraying those who refuse to forgive as outliers failing to interiorize the importance of national reconciliation ([Brudholm 2008](#), pp. 28–34).

Brudholm's critique draws inspiration from Jean Améry, a French philosopher and Holocaust survivor, who condemned the “hollow, thoughtless, utterly false conciliatoriness” and “pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation” in post-WWII Germany (quoted in: [Brudholm 2008](#), p. 77). Améry argued that such hasty pressure for forgiveness was not merely insensitive but morally wrong, as rapid attempts to move forward after mass tragedies would make the past more likely to reoccur. Defending resentment as a virtue, Brudholm and Améry react against the societal moral amnesia that can follow insistence on ‘letting bygones be bygones’ (see: [Brudholm 2008](#), p. 29). At the same time, they aim to protect individual agency against social pressure. Victims thus have a moral right to remain resentful, even if such feelings do not neatly fit in larger societal projects of healing, reconciliation, or progress.

According to [Abu-Nimer and Nasser \(2013, pp. 482–83\)](#), the perspective in which forgiveness is considered a prerequisite to reconciliation is deeply rooted in Christian theology. In the Islamic tradition, the authors state, the emphasis is placed on compensation and commitment not to repeat the offense. These two elements combined provide sufficient conditions to “move forward” without necessarily implying that forgiveness has occurred. There are thus numerous cases “in which a ritual of reconciliation is performed and forgiveness does not take place (. . .). The emphasis in these narratives is on compensation and prevention of future acts of revenge. (. . .) [F]orgiveness is a subsequent step that a person can take once the first two conditions have been met” ([Abu-Nimer and Nasser 2013](#), p. 483).

Our findings do not entirely confirm this contrast between Islamic and Christian traditions. While it is true that the concept of reconciliation-through-forgiveness appeared more frequently among Christian correspondents in our study, they did not perceive forgiveness as something to be merely instrumentalized for social objectives. Similar to Brudholm and Améry, religious leaders were primarily critical of attempts to impose demands on victims to forgive, especially when it is done in an insensitive way and when

it serves ideological and political goals, exemplified by the statement that “[v]ictims cannot be used for building a future identity” (Bojan, Orthodox Church). At the same time, as we could see in the previous section, they have cautioned against the possibility that resentment or hatred becomes so overpowering that it limits individual agency to act positively. Muslim respondents, however, did put a stronger emphasis on non-violent punitive measures (such as social avoidance) towards offenders who did not express remorse. Nevertheless, this approach was still perceived as requiring careful moderation to prevent its escalation into irrational hatred that could ultimately harm the victim.

Restoring Collective and Individual Agency Through Forgiveness

Philosophical concerns about restoring human agency through forgiveness are perhaps best articulated in [Arendt’s \(1998\)](#) analysis of the human condition. Human deeds, stresses Arendt, are both an expression of freedom and the conditions of its entanglements. They manifest an individual’s capacity to act, but the authors of those deeds can never fully predict their future consequences. Since those same deeds are also irreversible, people could become permanently tied to the consequences of past actions to the degree that one appears “more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done” ([Arendt 1998](#), pp. 233–34). Forgiving thus appears to [Arendt \(1998, p. 237\)](#) as the only way to restore or expand a human’s capacity for action:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever; not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.

Arendt, interestingly, attributes the invention of forgiveness to Jesus of Nazareth. Her analysis, however, reverses the common interpretation of forgiveness as a human imitation of divine acts. Instead, [Arendt \(1998, p. 239\)](#) proposes that: “Man [sic] in the gospel is not supposed to forgive because God forgives and he must do ‘likewise,’ but ‘if ye from your hearts forgive, ‘God shall do ‘likewise.’” Forgiveness, therefore, is not a spiritually inspired act but, on the contrary, something that remains entirely a human affair. Acts of forgiveness as restorative acts of freedom simultaneously liberate the wrongdoers from the permanent dependence on the past deed and liberate the victim from natural instincts to re-enact the offense ([Arendt 1998, p. 241](#)).

Arendt’s view on forgiveness, drawing from the New Testament, aligns with Christian participants’ concern about human freedom but with a crucial difference. For Arendt, forgiveness is a rational human action necessary because of the irreversibility of time and limited insights into the consequences of our actions. Freedom is an essential ingredient of the human condition, and without forgiveness, there is no conceivable way of securing sufficient freedom of action in the present. Without forgiveness, in other words, the past would have an undue influence on the present. This perspective focuses on the cooperative and behavioral effects of forgiveness. In contrast, Christian religious leaders anchor forgiveness in a different moral framework. For them, forgiveness is not merely about restoring individual agency as such; it is an intermediary step towards orienting one’s life towards good. Freedom, in other words, needs to be restored so that both victims and perpetrators can rehabilitate their capacity to do good. Some respondents also linked forgiveness to metanoia, a comprehensive change in thinking, while others emphasized it should include love in the form of a concern for the offender. This aligns with the Islamic tradition, wherein forgiveness functions both as a vehicle for social restoration and as a pathway to spiritual development. By seeking forgiveness from God, individuals renew their capacity for good. At the same time, they model their own approach towards

forgiveness on the theological conviction that God is merciful and inclined toward the restoration of fractured relationships (Moucarray 2004, pp. 31–41, 68–69; Saleem and Sitwat 2025, pp. 21–27). These elements further highlight the difference between a philosophical, pragmatic approach to forgiveness and a religious one that sees it as part of a broader spiritual transformation.

4.3. Conditional and Unconditional Forgiveness

Regarding the conditionality of forgiveness, respondents generally view *openness to forgiveness* as unconditional. However, the acts of *granting* or *expressing* forgiveness are not necessarily unconditional. Importantly, forgiveness was not conceptualized as dependent either on the nature or on the magnitude of the offenses. Instead, it was seen as a process that can be initiated regardless of the offense but whose completion may be subject to certain conditions, such as contrition, readiness to provide some form of restitution or assistance, moral assurances of non-repetition, etc.

This perspective resonates with Volf's (1996) metaphor of forgiveness as an embrace, which unfolds in two stages: the *will to embrace* and the *embrace itself*. The will to embrace, according to Volf, should be unconditional, representing an act of making space for others within oneself. This step “is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity. The will to embrace precedes any ‘truth’ about others and any construction of their ‘justice’” (Volf's 1996, p. 29 italics in original). Conversely, the embrace itself, conceived as full reconciliation, is conditional. It “cannot take place until the truth has been said and justice done. (...) [E]ven if the will to embrace is indiscriminate, the embrace itself is conditional” (Volf's 1996, p. 29).

In Islam, forgiveness is deeply rooted in the notions of justice and reciprocity, which Powell (2011, p. 19) contrasts to a “unilateral command to forgive in Christian Gospels.” This might suggest that granting forgiveness to unrepentant offenders would contradict Islamic principles. The situation is, however, slightly more complicated. While forgiveness being predicated on justice and reciprocity might well represent the normative baseline, Islamic tradition simultaneously elevates supererogatory forgiveness as an aspirational ideal. In other words, believers are not just called to fulfill the ethical ‘minimum’ but to shape their behavior in the image of God's attributes and the Prophet's conduct (Moucarray 2004, p. 290). Following the example of the Prophet, the believers are thus urged to “forgive those who have not asked for forgiveness—even enemies” Powell (2011, p. 19). This position derives from Hadiths narrating Prophet Muhammad's conduct, such as his unqualified pardon of the inhabitants of Tā'if, even without their request or demonstration of contrition. Kamali (2012, p. 446) elaborates on this theme, noting not only that al-‘Afūw (the Most Forgiving) is one of the Excellent Names of God, but also that “pardoning is the most distinctive of the virtues of Prophets and Messengers.”

Philosophical debates on the conditionality of forgiveness are heavily shaped by Derrida's (2001) aporia, which states that true forgiveness encompasses forgiveness of the unforgivable. Ricoeur (2004, p. 468) following Derrida, asserts: “Forgiveness is directed to the unforgivable or it does not exist. It is unconditional, without exception and without restriction.” For both thinkers, defining forgiveness through the lens of the unforgivable is an attempt to reject its instrumentalization or reduction to strategic calculation.

Derrida (2001, p. 39) conceptualizes forgiveness as a radical gift—an “unconditional madness”—that transcends interests, juridical authority, and institutional frameworks. Ricoeur, by contrast, situates forgiveness within the realm of love drawing upon a verse from 1 Corinthians that states: “it [love] keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”⁵ From this, Ricoeur concludes: “[I]f love excuses everything, this

everything includes the unforgivable. If not, it would itself be annihilated" (Ricoeur 2004, p. 468). However, both authors introduce an unnecessary paradox to emphasize forgiveness as a radical form of gift. Their argument begins by dividing offenses into two categories: forgivable and unforgivable—a distinction Derrida mistakenly aligns with the theological division between venial and mortal sins. By asserting the existence of the "unforgivable", they position forgiveness outside all rational, moral, or political considerations. Yet, this division does not correspond to theological understandings of sin nor to Pauline eschatology, where history's struggles are ultimately reconciled. Rather than defining forgiveness through negation, a more coherent approach would root it in a vision of spiritual plenitude—one that indeed transcends pragmatic calculation but also transcends divisions of history into forgivable and unforgivable acts.

4.4. Memory and Forgiveness

As mentioned previously, memory and forgiveness are inherently linked. Amnesia of the hurtful events or forgetting through hypnosis, as Griswold (2007, p. xiv) suggests, would not count as forgiveness. Memory, therefore, is essential to forgiveness. However, as seen in the discussion on *zlopamćenje*, memory can take different forms—one that fixates on vengeance and another that allows space for non-repetition and a different future. In this sense, forgiveness also shapes memory, enabling individuals to remember differently.

This aligns with Levinas' (1961, p. 283) notion of forgiveness as a transformative act that reconfigures the past into a purified present. Unlike forgetting, which nullifies the past, forgiveness (*le pardon*) "acts upon the past, somehow repeats the event, purifying it. (...) [F]orgetting nullifies the relations with the past, whereas pardon conserves the past pardoned in the purified present."

Drawing upon Old Testament imagery, Margalit conceptualizes forgiveness as akin to crossing out a text rather than erasing it:

When we are dissatisfied with something we have written, there are two ways of getting rid of it: deleting it or crossing it out. In deletion the written material is totally erased, while crossing out leaves traces of the error under the crossing-out line. (...) I argue that forgiveness is based on disregarding the sin rather than forgetting it.

Religious leaders who emphasize the necessity of forgiving without forgetting echo this perspective. Yet, as seen in discussions of *zlopamćenje*, affirming the importance of memory after injury is insufficient; the crucial question is not whether one *should* or *should not* remember but *how* past suffering should be remembered. Concepts such as "prayerful commemoration", "remembering victims, forgetting evil", and "sacred forgetting" suggest that memory should acknowledge the injury's impact on victims without permitting identity to be wholly defined by it. Instead, memory, like prayer, opens itself to be transformed in contact with God.

This approach also echoes Ricoeur's (1998) distinction between "mémoire-répétition" (repetition-memory) with the "mémoire-souvenir" (recollection-memory). While repetitive memory traps individuals in a compulsive return to the past, recollection-memory allows for critical engagement, paving the way for the "healing of memory" (*la guérison de la mémoire*), which occurs when individuals allow themselves to be "re-told" by others, becoming "characters in the stories that others tell" (Ricoeur 1998).

For religious leaders, however, empathy towards the 'other' from a different ethnic or cultural group is important; God nonetheless remains the ultimate Other through which the memory of past suffering is reinterpreted. Similar ideas emerge in Christian theological reflections on memory, particularly in the works of Metz (1987) and Moltmann (1993). Here, the memory of Jesus' suffering serves as a model for transforming recollections of violence

into a communal memory—one that both unites and continuously challenges political oppression and injustice.

In Islamic theology, the role of memory in relation to suffering is less emphasized. However, Habibollah (Babaei 2010) highlights that in Shiite tradition, eschatological suffering serves as a foundation for solidarity and love. Remembrance of past suffering, therefore, becomes liberating as it is intrinsically linked to eschatological hope and deliverance, wherein ultimate salvation and pure goodness are expected to overcome suffering and evil. Habibollah (Babaei 2010) emphasizes particularly the interconnection between the past, present, and future, suggesting that remembering past suffering can actively shape the present. Religious promises (eschatological visions), on the other hand, allow for an enduring expectation of future deliverance from past suffering, even within the historical time.

5. Conclusions

Returning to the episode mentioned at the beginning of our interview, we can pose the question once more: from a religious perspective, should a Ukrainian student forgive Russians, or should they refuse to do so and encourage their children to follow the same path? Rather than offering a simplistic yes or no answer, our discussion has equipped us with a more profound sensitivity to the nuances of forgiveness that can guide our discernment.

The first challenge lies in the political dimensions of the question. Forgiving “them” inherently shifts forgiveness from a deeply personal process to a collective and abstract realm—especially when “them” encompasses an entire nation rather than individuals responsible for particular acts or decisions. This immediately raises a second issue: what is being forgiven? As we have explored, forgiveness involves navigating injury and the ways it binds individuals to past suffering. Yet, in the context of war or mass conflict, the scope of forgiveness becomes vast. It may apply to specific crimes (where it remains the domain of direct victims), but it can also extend to broader issues such as attitudes toward national identity, political allegiances, or even an inherited history of suffering that continues to shape collective memory.

Using the same term to describe radically different situations can be misleading. Religious perspectives that frame forgiveness primarily as an interpersonal process within a broader framework help focus the discussion on its emotional and spiritual dimensions—while the collective dimension is acknowledged, forgiveness remains nonetheless centered around the person dealing with the injury and its effects. Expanding the concept too broadly might lead to ambiguity and unnecessary confusion, particularly when forgiveness is conflated with high-level political processes such as conflict resolution, negotiation of a peace accord, or assuming responsibility for war-related losses. While the concept of forgiveness might occur during such a process, one should be cautious to use it in an appropriate victim-related context and not as another word for territorial concessions or political amnesties. The too vague or the too expansive use of the word forgiveness risks provoking strong adverse reactions. A more meaningful approach begins at the individual level, examining how people cope with the affects and emotions caused by war. This initial step already allows for a more nuanced distinction between resentment, the desire for vengeance, and justified anger. It also invites reflection on how such emotions may restrict personal agency and freedom and how spiritual perspectives shape one’s understanding of the world. Such gradual discernment can also clarify that forgiveness, particularly in its spiritual sense, does not need to be externally manifested or publicly declared. Rather, it can be an intimate and sometimes ineffable process of spiritual transformation—one that cannot be imposed on others, let alone generalized to an entire community.

Some innovative concepts emerging from the interviews, such as the residue of forgiveness and prayerful commemoration, also offer a more nuanced understanding of forgiveness—not as a straightforward, uplifting narrative with a happy ending, but as a complex journey that may never reach full resolution. These concepts also highlight the risks of certain forms of memory that, if left unexamined, may become self-referential and resistant to critique. Instead, they invite at least a minimal benevolence toward the other that can be seen as the first opening towards forgiveness but also as a key towards the ‘healing of memory’.

Interview findings also challenge the notion of forgiveness as a blanket amnesty—whether for perpetrators within one’s own identity group or those outside it. While some degree of openness to forgiveness can be defended on both religious and ethical grounds, progress in forgiveness often requires a mutual exchange of goodwill between parties on both sides of the injury. I leave this last phrase intentionally open-ended, as the distinction between victims and perpetrators is not always clear-cut, and many layers of entanglement are only revealed through the very process of forgiveness itself.

This study advances two key findings:

First, religious interpretations of forgiveness do not conform to the common perception of religious forgiveness as enforced benevolence toward perpetrators, often assumed to neglect the suffering of victims and broader concerns of social justice. Instead, our analysis reveals that religious leaders conceptualize forgiveness as a complex process of integrating legal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Moreover, this process is highly context-dependent and requires careful consideration along several key dimensions: *procedurality* (when should forgiveness occur? at what pace? how fragmented the whole process is?), *collectivity* (how does one’s social location influence the process of forgiveness?), *conditionality* (can there be some unconditional benevolence that facilitates further dialogue between divided parties? what are the conditions for further rapprochement and trust?), and *remembrance* (how has past harm been remembered so far, and how should suffering be remembered in future?).

Second, while this study focuses on Christian and Muslim religious leaders in a post-conflict setting, some of its concepts and insights have broader relevance for understanding conflict transformation and peacebuilding after war. However, it is essential to recognize the particularities of religious approaches to forgiveness, which remain rooted in theological visions of human life and its ultimate destiny. A deeper understanding of the scope and limitations of religiously inspired peacebuilding could foster more effective collaboration between religious and secular actors in projects of shared interest while also enriching approaches to conflict transformation in societies where religion plays a significant role. This is not to suggest that forgiveness constitutes a prerequisite to peacebuilding, nor does it guarantee its success. Both assertions would require a more extensive elaboration that goes beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, our findings illuminate how religious leaders, who frequently serve as moral authorities and community guides, conceptualize interpersonal forgiveness as a profoundly individual process that cannot be forced or mandated. They simultaneously perceive it as a phenomenon that can radiate positive effects outwards towards the community. Forgiveness from the theological perspective is not merely a transactional tool for conflict resolution, but a spiritual exercise that can significantly influence the relational ecosystem after conflicts. As such, it can be a valuable anchoring point for broader peacebuilding activities.

Several limitations of this study merit acknowledgment. This study is based on a selection of religious leaders from one country. This limits the generalizability of the findings in three important ways. *Firstly*, corresponding to the current hierarchical organization of these communities, all respondents are male. Further studies can, therefore,

provide broader insights into a more heterogeneous population of individuals who exercise leadership roles in these communities but do not necessarily occupy positions of hierarchical power. *Secondly*, the interviewed leaders belong to Abrahamic religions due to the specific demographic composition of the country. Therefore, future studies are necessary to compare these findings with those of other religious and spiritual traditions. *Thirdly*, both of these lines of research can be further enriched with more concrete insights into extra-religious (cultural, societal, political) factors that influence religious understandings of forgiveness.

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Notes

- ¹ In 2016, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko echoed the same phrasing in response to the Polish Parliament’s resolution addressing the massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, perpetrated by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Polish territories during World War II.
- ² Forgiveness in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina remains deeply intertwined with a broader culture of memory, which is also impregnated by religious symbols and narratives. Moll (2013) observes that the fragmentation of memory in Bosnia and Herzegovina is congruent with political fragmentation along ethnic lines. Each of the major ethno-religious communities—Croats, Serbs, and Bosniaks—tends to advance its own victimhood narrative, with very little cross-group commemoration. Moreover, the remembrance of each group’s own suffering often entails the marginalization, if not outright omission, of the crimes perpetrated by that same group. In response to these exclusionary and self-referential modes of memory, Šarčević (2023, pp. 210–11) advocates for the cultivation of a mnemonic culture rooted in what he calls an “ecumenism of compassion.” Such a culture does not seek to reduce all suffering to the lowest common denominator nor promote a moral equivalence among all ideologies and atrocities. Instead, it affirms the singularity of each tragedy while striving to open a space for shared compassion. In this sense, it strongly resembles ecclesial ecumenism, which respects the distinctiveness of each tradition while seeking what is common and what can be jointly built.
- ³ In this region of Bosnia, “uncle” is a common title for a Franciscan priest in popular parlance.
- ⁴ In a literal translation, preumiti would mean “to change mind”.
- ⁵ 1 Cor. 13: 5–7.

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