

Forgiveness in Reconciliation Between Japan and South Korea

Written by Naoko Kumagai

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NAOKO KUMAGAI, MAR 2 2016

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in the face of the challenge of reconciliation in the post-Apartheid period South Africa, insisted that there will be no future without forgiveness (Tutu, 1999). However, such a condition—reconciliation without forgiveness – is what exists between Japan and Korea. There is political reconciliation, with the rebuilding of a new political and economic relationship based on a fair amount of mutual confidence being as far as it goes, but it is not based on any solid foundation of forgiveness. Japan and Korea concluded the Basic Agreement and the Claims Settlement and Economic Cooperation Agreement in 1965. These Agreements sought to normalise their diplomatic relationship and resolve a number of difficult political issues between the two nations, which remained from the time of Japan's colonial rule of the Korean peninsula, "finally and completely." Still, particularly since the 1990s, South Korea has made repeated requests for apologies and compensation to be given to the comfort women. Comfort women were young women from many parts of Asia, especially the Choson Peninsula, who were taken to Japanese military compounds and, in many cases, forced to provide sexual services to officers and soldiers in the Japanese Army before and during the Second World War. Below, I will discuss the nature and challenge of reconciliation through forgiveness with the issue of comfort women.

Reconciliation restores relations through confidence-building among former adversaries. Kriesberg explains that reconciliation involves the perpetrators' acceptance of their having committed injurious acts, their acknowledgement of the victims' suffering, the victims' acknowledgement that their injuries are being redressed, and both sides' anticipation of mutual security and well-being (Kriesberg, 1998, p. 352). Shriver includes the place of forgiveness in reconciliation. With the offender's acknowledgement of their offenses and expression of repentance in the form of apologies, the victim's side accepts the apologies and forgives, which process assumes forbearance, a step back from a grudge or revenge, implying even some degree of empathy with the perpetrator (Shriver, 1998, p. 244). Thus, forgiveness goes beyond justice and contains a wider meaning, encompassing the attitudes of both the perpetrator and the victim in the reconciliation process. The presence of forgiveness in reconciliation, however, needs reservation. Some warn against forgiveness since it might rule out retribution (Calhoun, 1992). However, forgiveness does not exclude justice or retribution (Müller-Fahrenheit, 1997).

Contextualising the Japan-Korea relationship in the process of reconciliation through forgiveness demonstrates three difficulties: ambiguous acknowledgement of guilt, the victims' sense of involvement in the reconciliation process, and a sense of humiliation for both the victim and the perpetrator. On the subject of comfort women, the "forcible" nature of the comfort station system and the proper means of just compensation have been the two main issues over the two past decades. The Korean side emphasises the overall forcible nature of former comfort women's harsh and miserable experiences at comfort stations, while the Japanese government argues that there was no actual forced recruitment by the wartime Japanese authority, pointing to the absence of any official documentation detailing the recruitment process. This has opened another battle front over whether the Japanese government bears a lasting legal responsibility, thus owing state compensation to the victims.

The recent governmental agreement on 28 December 2015 to resolve the issue of comfort women "completely and irreversibly" contains the Japanese government's acknowledgement of responsibility and remorse and South Korea's acceptance of Japan's remorse and willingness to cooperate in Japan's efforts to heal the psychological

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wounds of the victims.[1]

However, the agreement fell short of achieving reconciliation through forgiveness. Former Korean comfort women expressed their lingering frustration and dissatisfaction with the agreement's ambiguity about the nature of Japan's responsibility, which was a product of diplomatic prudence, backed particularly by the United States' strongly expressed desire for the improvement of Japanese-South Korean relations to address the regional instability in Northeast Asia. Some victims opposed the accord because the Japanese government did not acknowledge the "legal" responsibility for comfort women and because the deal was reached without any voices from them.[2] On 30 December, two days after the agreement was made, former comfort women along with their supporters continued the usual Wednesday demonstration in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, demanding official compensation and sincere apologies. The gathering started on 8 January 1995 in the midst of the increasing testimonies of the victims and the occasion of the then Prime Minister Miyazawa's official visit to Korea. The demonstration on 30 December 2015 was the 1211th gathering. Victims' anger and frustration continue. The 2015 governmental agreement, albeit recognized as "historic" by Western media,[3] left the victims angered and frustrated, bringing about no forgiveness and thus incomplete reconciliation.

Genuine reconciliation through forgiveness is particularly difficult in situations where it involves a group of people. This is because genuine atonement and compassion can be felt only at the individual level. In response to the December 2015 agreement, an angry victim commented, "I want you to imagine the pain and anger that we experienced." [4] Karl Jaspers has explained that the state as political collectivity cannot assume criminal, moral, or metaphysical guilt. Criminal guilt can be attributed to the person who committed the crime, and most importantly the moral and metaphysical guilt can be felt and reflected only in the individual's mind. Jaspers also warns against the danger of easy attribution of moral guilt to a group. This could easily lead to fabricated apologies from a collective without any deep reflection in individuals' minds within that group (Jaspers 2000). The December 2015 agreement, as a diplomatic agreement, is just a gesture of reconciliation from Japan that falls far short of genuine enough acknowledgement of guilt and compassion for the victims to grant forgiveness.

The other challenge in the process of forgiveness is the issue of humiliation, for both the perpetrator and the victim. For the perpetrator, asking for forgiveness might stir a sense of humiliation. When one human being forgives the former perpetrator, s/he places herself/himself morally above the perpetrator (Auerbach, 2004, p. 153, p. 161), which might not matter in a religious relationship between man and God, but could matter significantly in human or state relationships, particularly when such moral superiority is threatened to be abused for political purposes. But a shrinking power gap does not necessarily induce remorse and apologies from the stronger former perpetrator. Instead, it sharpens the perpetrator's sense of humiliation. With the shrinking power gap between Japan and South Korea since the late 1980s accompanied by Korea's increasing requests for Japan's apologies, a growing warning against Japan's apologies for its wartime act has emerged among some Japanese. They perceived the inclusion of the issue of comfort women in Japanese high school history textbooks in the mid-1990s as sources of national humiliation. Such "masochistic" textbooks, they argued, would fail to foster in Japanese children a sense of honour as Japanese citizens.[5] Recently, the Japanese government protested the statue of 'comfort women' in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul as humiliation to the dignity of Japan. This poses the question of the fine line which might lead a victim to falsely offend the wrongdoer (Hampton, 1988).

The victim side might intuitively decline to grant forgiveness for fear of humiliation in that forgiveness could lead to condoning and forgetting the wrongful act and the harm done to the victim (Müller-Fahrenholz, 1997). A supporter for former comfort women once argued that to accept compensation without explicit state responsibility for former comfort women would humiliate them, reducing them to prostitutes (Yun, 2009). A victim's need for self-vindication is important for restoring self-respect and self-worth (Murphy, 2003), while forgiveness eventually replaces the victim's humiliation and anger with pride (Cloke, 2001).

Genuine reconciliation should be pursued to complement to what political reconciliation has missed. Political reconciliation could be changed by the dynamics of power politics. The victims' voices in the age of human rights can haunt and worsen even otherwise good diplomatic relations. Intergovernmental and transnational arenas for patient and frank dialogue matter; there is no one-time prescription that will bring about genuine reconciliation through

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forgiveness. Both the victim's pain, anger, and desire, and the perpetrator's atonement should be expressed without concern about humiliation. Particularly forgiveness needs to be accompanied by public and unequivocal acknowledgement of harm and the avoidance of communal denial (Minow 1998). Thus mutual compassion can be nurtured and shared, thus leading to genuine reconciliation.

Notes and References

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