Chapter 13
Forgiveness in the Face of Hate

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ABSTRACT
The June 2015 killing of nine African-Americans by a white male shooter in Charleston, South Carolina re-ignited intense discussions around the relationship of race, justice, and faith in the U.S. Within two days of the massacre, members of the victims’ families were shown openly offering forgiveness to the accused killer and praying God’s mercy on his soul. This seemingly quick offer of clemency raises penetrating questions concerning the value and purpose of the act of forgiveness, arguably an act of pure grace. This chapter shows that forgiveness, as a complex Christian practice, casts an extraordinary light on structures of identity and the politics of privilege in the U.S. In doing so, forgiveness exposes the myth of a “post-racial America” and reveals the deeply-rooted and longstanding systems of racial oppression and discrimination in American society. Structured around key guiding questions, the chapter provides a way to think through the meaning of forgiveness towards developing an approach to dismantling structures of exclusion that are the hallmark of a racial world view.

INTRODUCTION
On June 17, 2015 twelve African-Americans assembled inside Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina for weekly Bible study. AME stands for African Methodist Episcopal, the Protestant denomination founded by African-Americans during slavery. Following the Wesleyan tradition of Methodists in doctrine and worship, the AME Church has maintained a membership predominantly comprising people of African descent and heritage with a global presence in thirty-nine countries across five continents (Official website of the AME: “Our History”).

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The Emanuel AME Church was founded in 1816 and is the oldest AME church in the Southern United States. Although Emanuel (Hebrew) translates “God is with us” in English, the historic Emanuel AME edifice is affectionately called “Mother Emanuel”; perhaps because mothers in the African-American community embody safety, security, support, and strength. Mothers bring forth life and are expected to stand the test of time. To many, ‘mother’ means love, unconditional love, protection, the one who can do no wrong. For many in Charleston, “Mother Emanuel” is a sacred space, a holy place - set apart for sanctuary, refuge, reimagining and re-membering. Throughout her history, she has been a harbor for recovery, renewal, strategizing, and resistance-planning in the name of freedom and justice. Mother Emanuel is at once home, anchor and compass.

Among those gathered within the warmth of Mother Emanuel’s space on June 17, 2015 were: Clementa C. Pinckney, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Daniel Simmons, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Ethel Lee Lance, Myra Thompson, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Susie Jackson, and Tywanza Sanders. By all accounts these were proud Americans: educated, hardworking, ambitious, respected, and beloved by their families and community. Collectively, they could speak of surviving the Jim Crow, Civil Rights and early post 9/11 eras while being hopeful of their individual futures and the future of their country.

On the said fateful June night, a lone white man joined their Bible study. They welcomed him. He conversed with them. Then, as they were about to say the final prayer, the lone white man stood up, pulled out a gun from his fanny pack, and fired multiple shots at the assembled few. Bedlam! Another slaughter of African-American bodies at the hands of a hate-filled, deranged white man! Nine new victims of ‘racial violence’ lay lifeless in Charleston, South Carolina – a scene reminiscent of slavery day harassments and invasions endured by “Mother Emanuel”.

Two days later, the accused killer appeared in a Charleston county courthouse for a bond hearing. Members of the victims’ families who were present openly offered forgiveness to the accused. This seemingly quick offer of forgiveness raised questions about the value and purpose of the victims’ lives and the significance of forgiveness. Had “I forgive you” become a well-rehearsed line that had lost its substance? The bodies of the nine who perished had barely become cold! How is one able to offer forgiveness so quickly after such an atrocity had been meted out?

The act of forgiveness on the part of the devout (or the secular who might have other informing reasons to not seek vengeance or retaliation) evidently raises a host of questions that require thought. The succeeding sections of this chapter are organized around these questions with the aim of exploring the conflation of race, faith and justice in the United States.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is an explicit, meaning-laden religious behavior. It is, for many, anchored in a particular theological tradition, part of the expectations associated with being a member of an interpretive community. It is a complex phenomenon; yet for Christians, forgiveness looms large in both the New and Old Testaments of the Bible. In the Old Testament, the word is literally translated from Hebrew to mean “to cover”. In general usage, the idea is mostly employed to convey “atonement”, an act of mercy that pardons or purges away wrongs. In the New Testament, the word “forgive” appears in the Lord’s Prayer, one of the first teachings that a Christian receives about how to pray— “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” In this application, the word “forgive” is commonly associated with the Greek aphiemi meaning “to send forth, send away” closely related to aphesis denoting “dismissal” or “release”
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