CHAPTER 17

Narratives of Reconciliation in Early Modern England: Between Oblivion, Clemency and Forgiveness

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1 Changing Conceptions of Reconciliation: From Early Modern to Modern

An examination of the cultural construction of anger in early modernity brings with it a complementary question that is the focus of this article: how did early moderns understand the nature of reconciliation? An important starting point for my analysis is the idea that concepts of and forms of reconciliation are culturally constructed and therefore historically contingent: different eras and cultures conceive of interpersonal reconciliation in different ways. A single culture, moreover, can entertain various and potentially conflicting notions of conflict resolution, while its dominant reconciliation paradigms can change over time. My focus in this article is on the ways in which reconciliation between people was envisioned in early modern culture, with early modern England as my main case study.

One early modern model of conflict resolution can arguably be found in Neo-Stoicism. Yet rather than offering advice on how to resolve an existing conflict, Neo-Stoicism recommends an emotional economy that renders conflict resolution irrelevant. The true Stoic sage is not affected by the actions of other men, knows no anger or resentment, and therefore never arrives at a point where he is in need of reconciling with others. Such an attitude is recommended, for example, in Seneca’s *De ira*, which not only advocates a wholesale elimination of angry feelings but also urges that any retaliation for wrongs be carried out purely as matter of duty, never from a sense of injury. In Christianity, by contrast, there is a long theological and pastoral tradition which stresses the importance of anger suppression (rather than its elimination). This tradition finds one important origin in the New Testament letters attributed to the apostle Paul, with Ephesians 4:26 as a much-cited example: ‘Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath’.1

My main focus in this article is on the interplay between, on the one hand, this early modern interest in anger control as a basis for reconciliation and, on the other hand, an alternative notion of interpersonal reconciliation that I will refer to as remorse-based forgiveness, and that differs in fundamental ways from both the Stoic model of anger elimination and the Christian model of restraining anger. As several scholars and commentators have noted, remorse-based forgiveness has become especially dominant in modern culture, both in relation to political conflict and in personal relations.2 Within this model of interpersonal reconciliation, a victim foregoes resentment on the grounds that the wrongdoer feels genuine remorse and has successfully communicated this feeling to the victim. Both victim and wrongdoer, in other words, undergo, or bring about, a self-transformation. The wrongdoer regrets his wrongful actions and is therefore a different person from who he was when he committed his crime. It is to a large extent for this reason that the victim lets go of his anger and resentment towards him, or commits himself to doing so. The victim’s self-transformation revolves around this letting go of resentment and his willingness to see the wrongdoer in a new light. An important additional precondition for modern-day forgiveness in a political context is that the perpetrator reveals the whole truth about his crimes. A particularly well-known example of forgiveness in the political realm is the South-African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up in 1995. The Commission saw forgiveness as a prerequisite for a successful transition from the Apartheid regime to democracy: the horrors and injustices of Apartheid could be overcome only if perpetrators publicly disclosed the truth about their crimes, in this way making forgiveness by their victims a possibility. Desmond Tutu, one of the Commission’s main founders, famously claimed that there is ‘no future [for South-Africa] without forgiveness’, and confession and remorse on the part of perpetrators were recurrent themes in the Commission hearings.

My aim in this article is to reflect on the cultural-historical origins of this modern preoccupation with remorse-based forgiveness as a road to reconciliation. Is this preoccupation peculiar to the twentieth and early twenty-first