

Article

Forgiving Others: Pastoral Care of Forgiveness in Post-Secular Societies

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Abstract: This article argues that pastoral insights into the dynamics of forgiveness are also relevant for pastoral care in post-secular society. While *receiving* forgiveness has been the *raison d'être* of the sacrament of penance (a historical precursor to modern pastoral care), contemporary post-secular societies accentuate the problem of forgiving *others*. This article explores several paths for forgiving others that care seekers can walk, guided by pastors who provide maps and signposts. Methodologically, this article analyzes two pastoral care conversations about forgiving others, published in a Danish podcast series on the official homepage of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark. These two conversations present a highway of unconditional forgiveness, in contrast to the dead end of not being able to forgive. This article explores how pastors can care for care seekers along these diametric roads, and along several byways, through surveys of relevant (theological) philosophy, systematic theology, and theology of pastoral care. The two care seekers are neither religious nor simply secular; they are post-secular, moving in and out of secular and religious discourses as appears relevant. The article concludes with reflections on pastoral care in different intercultural settings, specifically in post-secular societies.

Keywords: pastoral care; interpersonal forgiveness; divine forgiveness; reconciliation; anger; contrition; obstacles to forgiveness; plurality of perspectives; ethics; post-secularity



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It is normal to require certain conditions to be met before forgiveness is granted. Unconditional forgiveness as a sudden and undeserved gift is a miracle and, in many ways, escapes ethical analysis. It is by no means always possible for the individual victim to forgive his or her specific offender so that the relationship between the two can be restored. (Leer-Salvesen 2000, p. 161)

1. Introduction

Historically, pastoral care has arisen out of the sacrament of penance, through which Christian sinners have sought forgiveness for their sins. The sacrament of penance established a pattern of forgiveness. This pattern involves three aspects on the side of the confidant: a heartfelt *contrition* expresses itself in a *confession* of one's sins that becomes credible through acts of *satisfaction* that repair the harm as much as possible and indicate a process of personal reform: I won't do it again (Klessmann 2015, p. 241; Due 2006, p. 158). Then, on the side of the pastor, is the communication of the *absolution*: Your sins are forgiven.

Comparing this historical context of the sacrament of penance with contemporary Nordic pastoral care, we see that the latter occurs in a world that is different in three key ways: (1) It is a Protestant world, wherein only baptism and eucharist are established as sacraments, which is why the liturgy of confession is only rarely used (Klessmann 2015, pp. 91–93). (2) It is a “post-secular” world, in which people are neither simply religious or secular, but move from secular to religious discourses and back, depending on existential needs (Nissen and Andersen 2022; Ziebertz and Riegel 2010). (3) It is a post-WWII world, where it is not just sinners seeking pastoral care to achieve divine forgiveness, but those who have been sinned against are also seeking pastoral care to achieve divine comfort and

rehabilitation (Cooper-White 2006). These three differences mean new questions around forgiveness come to the fore in pastoral care.

This article explores how theologies of forgiveness can manifest in concrete conversations of pastoral care. Rather than focusing on pastoral care for those who *receive forgiveness* or those who seek to *forgive themselves*, this article centers on pastoral care for those who struggle with *forgiving others*. My hypothesis is that pastors with knowledge about phenomenologies of forgiveness and ethics of forgiving can serve as guides to processes involved in forgiving others, also for care seekers who are post-secular.

Certainly, care seekers approach pastors with diverging thoughts on forgiveness. In conversations with pastors, one might find care seekers expressing a desire to forgive another unconditionally, and others who find themselves completely unable to forgive. These desires might be ambivalently present in the same person and the same conversation. In Section 2, I will present two distinct pastoral care conversations where these two diametrically opposed positions are expressed. In Section 3, I analyze these conversations with respect to contemporary scholarship on forgiving others in order to explore alternative conversational routes. Finally, Section 4 discusses what the analysis tells us about the contours of pastoral care on forgiving others in a post-secular society.

2. Materials and Methods

Tormod Kleiven has called for a “diaconal approach” to the study of ecclesial processes of forgiveness. To avoid misuses of forgiveness, a diaconal approach means “listening carefully to the perspective of the violated with regard to the event or issue in an asymmetrical power relationship, to explore the relevance of forgiveness in that context” (Kleiven 2023). This article follows the impetus of Kleiven by carefully analyzing how two care seekers, Jakob and Mette, both mid-40s, talk to one pastor about their struggles with forgiving their respective parents. I should note that the first names of the care seekers and the full names of the pastors are public. Despite the public nature of the pastors’ names, I anonymize them here to protect the two pastors: Since there are only two conversations drawn on for analysis in this paper, they should not be used to characterize who the pastors are as care givers in general.

The two conversations appear in a podcast called *Sjælesorg* (Pastoral Care), which has been produced by the mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark (ELCA), with eight other episodes available.¹ The purpose of this production has been to give what I would call a “church-curious segment” of the Danish population a sense of what pastoral care can be and could be for them. To ensure identification with the target group, the podcast participants are members of the same segment of the population. In other words, the participants are neither regular church goers, nor people hostile to the church; rather, they are interested in finding out what contribution pastors in the ELCA can make in their life, given their more neutral orientation.

It is also worth noting: (1) that it was a journalist, who is now a pastor, that found the participants and matched them with the pastors; (2) that the same journalist was present during the conversations to ensure technical functionality and to ensure the product was publication-worthy, which implied occasionally inviting the pastor to focus on a specific line of questioning; and (3) that the same journalist edited the product after the conversations, cutting away detours. In interviews, the two pastors have told me that, despite (and partly also due to) these interferences, the published episodes correspond well to both the actual conversation as they remember it, and to their usual pastoral care. As such, this podcast presents conversations of people encountering pastoral care for the first time.

After listening to all episodes twice, transcribing them, and teaching them to three classes of Practical Theology, two conversations attracted my attention because they shared the topic of forgiving, a topic I have previously explored theoretically. These conversations are 40–45 min long, and they took place in the pastor’s office and in the pastor’s church. To analyze those conversations in depth, I wrote thorough summaries of how the conversations

worked through the topic of forgiveness. To ensure completeness, I checked the summaries with the transcripts and the original sound.

Then, I searched through the literature on forgiving, especially within the fields of systematic theology and theology of pastoral care, to find perspectives through which to interpret, nuance, and discuss the summaries. Within the literature that I use, I have prioritized writings from Nordic scholars for two reasons: (1) Using Nordic literature on forgiving brings the interpretations closer to the contextual phenomenology of these two Danish conversations. (2) Using Nordic sources serves to introduce these authors in an international context. I have translated all quotations from sources in German and Scandinavian languages into English.

The method of this article is hermeneutical rather than empirical. A qualitative empirical study would require more data material than the two conversations available in the podcast to reach the point of saturation where no further insights would be gained from the use of further material (Tanggaard and Brinkmann 2015, p. 32). Instead, the method forms a hermeneutical spiral consisting of four elements: (1) my preconceptions of forgiveness, shaped by broad theoretical studies of the relevant interdisciplinary literature; (2) the two podcast episodes of pastoral care conversations on forgiving others; (3) focused theoretical studies of forgiveness to inform, discuss, and nuance the topics considered in the two episodes; and (4) theoretical studies of pastoral care in post-secular societies. The central question around which this spiral revolves is how pastors can contribute to conversations about forgiving others, and I harvest insights from all four elements.

The hermeneutical nature of the article has ramifications for the structure of the article. An empirical article often separates an analysis of the empirical material from a theoretical and interpretive discussion of it. However, Section 3 of this article brings together empirical and theoretical perspectives on the possibilities for conversing about forgiving others. Section 4 then discusses how pastors can relate to the multitude of possibilities described in Section 3, and explores their relevance for pastoral care within post-secular societies.

3. Results

In this section, I analyze options for pastoral care on forgiving others. The two conversations that form the basis of my analysis share three traits, beyond the fact that Jakob and Mette are seeking pastoral care for the first time. (1) The “other” in the two conversations is their respective parent (Jakob’s father and Mette’s mother), who have been emotionally abusive after meeting new partners: Jakob’s father has been distant, and Mette’s mother has been derisive. Jakob has alternated between cutting off his father and seeking contact.² Mette’s relationship to her mother has been constant, but she has safeguarded herself emotionally. (2) Jakob and Mette see their respective parents as completely unwilling to talk about the past. This unwillingness is a fact both care seekers struggle with because they long for proximity with their parents. (3) Jakob’s and Mette’s parents are growing older; death is drawing near. This urgency has prompted Jakob and Mette to seek a pastoral conversation about the possibilities for reconciliation and about how they relate to those possibilities.

Before beginning the detailed analysis, I will convey my overall analysis of the conversations through an evaluation of the episode captions. The producer has given the conversation between Jakob and his pastor the appropriate title “How do you heal a broken relationship with your father?” Further to that, I analyze this conversation under the headline: “Paths to Forgiving”. For Jakob, the path to forgiving is a highway. The conversation between Mette and her pastor is titled: “How do you forgive someone who does not feel guilty?” In my reading, however, this title describes the conversation from the perspective of the pastor. For Mette, a different—and more explicitly theological—question is more urgent: How does God feel about me when I cannot forgive? Since Mette is cast as a church-curious person, this theological question comes as a surprise to the pastor. For Mette, the path to forgiving has been a dead end. Therefore, Mette seeks pastoral care to

find out how to relate theologically to what she perceives as a failure. Therefore, I entitle my investigation of her conversation: “Obstacles to Forgiving”.

3.1. *Paths to Forgiving: Jakob*

Jakob seeks pastoral care for the first time to discuss how to approach his alienated father one last time. Jakob’s parents were divorced when he was aged 13–14; his father left and married another woman. Their inability to create a home for Jakob was the background for a turbulent youth for Jakob. He took drugs and became a criminal, with time in both youth and adult prison. Meeting reasonable young people at a Danish folk high school, a particular boarding school inspired by the thoughts of N.F.S. Grundtvig ([Grundtvig 2011](#)), gave him a new focus in life. He discovered the ability to talk about his feelings, became educated, and got a job. Yet, his family relationships, especially with his father, are still strained. While he has previously attempted to get his father into a conversation about their mutual past, his attempts have proven futile. In fact, every attempt has alienated him even more, to the point where there has been no contact for 10 years. Jakob longs for a relationship with his family, especially with his father, and is therefore ready to let bygones be bygones and try to get in touch with his father in order to see if they can get back into each other’s lives. This story, which Jakob tells the pastor during the first 15 min of the conversation, gives rise to mutual reflections on forgiving. The purpose of these reflections is to figure out how to contact the father. Writing a letter becomes the chosen format; but what should the latter say?

3.1.1. Forgiveness Can Be Unconditional

After Jakob himself has introduced the term “reconciliation” into the conversation (minute 17:09), the pastor asks Jakob whether he finds it more important to resume contact with the father or reach a mutual understanding of what has happened. Jakob answers “to resume contact”, a statement that would have surprised his 10-year-younger self, who would have insisted on mutual understanding (24:33). Deep down, Jakob longs also for his father to confess his part in the wrong, but he has stopped believing that this might ever happen. Therefore, Jakob is ready to move on and proceed into a new phase of the relationship (25:00). The pastor interprets this readiness as a “great strength” of Jakob. He calls it a “readiness to forgive without demanding anything in return” (25:36). This interpretation resonates immediately with Jakob both emotionally and hermeneutically.

Oh, this gives me the shivers. I really believe . . . I feel deeply moved by what you are saying now, and I believe this is . . . Unconditional forgiveness, and let us move on, or let us move ahead. I really think this is . . . yes. I can feel that what you said meant something . . . This is where I am. This very accurately captures where I find myself concerning what happened in the past, right? (26:03)

Emotionally, Jakob is uplifted by the pastor’s words. Hermeneutically, Jakob sums up the pastor’s interpretation in the words “unconditional forgiveness.” From Jakob’s excitement about these words, one might conclude that they—though so common in a theological context—are novel to Jakob, or at least have finally surfaced as long-lost treasures buried in the sea of his unconscious life. Unconditional forgiveness is a concept to which Jakob returns repeatedly during the rest of the conversation.

The idea of unconditional forgiveness is controversial. Some theorists argue that the readiness to forgive unconditionally is a strength or, as the pastor has it, a virtue, especially in the context of Christianity ([Fiddes 2016](#), p. 62). Norwegian theologian Paul Leer-Salvesen offers a nuanced picture of this:

Only few are able to forgive an offender who hasn’t admitted and repented for what he has done. But they do exist. Some of them are saints who show a grace that I have previously argued for calling a miracle. But it is also a question whether some of these forgiving people do not forgive first and foremost for their

own sake, or because they are so close to the perpetrator that forgiving the other becomes almost the same as forgiving oneself (Leer-Salvesen 2000, p. 170).

On the one hand, Leer-Salvesen calls unconditional forgiveness a miracle, performed by saints, because it breathes life into relationships that have gone awry. On the other hand, he also observes that some people forgive unconditionally not as a matter of grace, but for reasons that resonate with Jakob. First, Jakob wishes to forgive his father with the purpose of getting his father back into his life. Jakob's forgiveness is thereby also "for his own sake". Second, Jakob also seems to forgive himself by forgiving his father. Not, it seems, because the father is an extension of himself, as Leer-Salvesen has it.³ Rather, it is because Jakob understands his own part in the conflict: Jakob wanted to change his father into something he was not, into a person who talks about his feelings. By forgiving his father, Jakob also seems to want to forgive himself for his own contribution to the alienation between them.

Other theorists go even further in pointing to the dangers of unconditional forgiveness in the interpersonal realm.

From an ethical point of view, Croatian-American theologian Miroslav Volf emphasizes how victims have a right to get their abusers to talk to him about the problematic past. Remembering the unjust events and being able to communicate them to the perpetrator, or to the public, is itself part of obtaining justice. Thinking more of structural oppressions than personal abuse, Volf puts it this way: "By wanting to know what happened they [victims of oppression] are wanting to insure that the insult of occultation is not added to the injury of oppression" (Volf 1996, p. 234). Other scholars of forgiveness emphasize similar things: remembering the wrong that has been done is a necessary step towards forgiveness and reconciliation (Fiddes 2016, p. 60; Suchocki 1996, p. 96; Cooper-White 2012, pp. 253–54).

Further, forgiving too readily might deprecate one's sense of self-respect. Australian theologian Keree Louise Casey presents such an argument: "Forgiveness, in order to be consistent with self-respect and moral equality, is appropriate only when the offender ceases to hold a degraded view of his victim and repents of his wrongful actions" (Casey 1998, p. 237; see also Okkenhaug 2008). If one forgives without requiring contrition from the other, then the forgiver has lost his or her self-respect, the argument goes.

Jakob has used such arguments for decades. But tying his self-respect to a demand for confession and contrition has not brought about the self-relationship that he has wanted. In fact, he finds that a right self-relationship depends on a right relationship to his family and his father, which is why the idea of unconditional forgiveness resonates so deeply with him. Jakob is ready to give up his requirements of forgiveness. Another line of argument supports such an approach. As Canadian philosopher Trudy Govier has rightly argued: "To say that if the perpetrator does not feel remorse, forgiveness is not appropriate is to leave too much power to the perpetrator" (Govier 1999, p. 62). As we shall see later, forgiving the wrongdoer can be a way of freeing oneself from the power of the wrongdoer, and so therefore it is crucial to emphasize the legitimacy of unconditional forgiveness.

A final resource for interpretation comes from Swedish theologian Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm, who has pointed out that forgiveness has been criticized for its use as "a weapon for forcing other people into subjection" (Bråkenhielm 1993, p. 4). Transgressors, including church people, have not just asked, but demanded forgiveness from their victims—thus being able to continue with their wrongdoing. This criticism only applies partly to Jakob's situation. Jakob's father has never demanded forgiveness. But, by being absent, the father exerts an extreme influence over his son. The father's lack of initiative makes Jakob desperately ready to do anything to get his father back into his life, even if this includes forgiving without reservations. The father has all the power in this situation. Therefore, Jakob choosing to forgive might involve subjecting himself to his father in a problematic manner.

More conversations with Jakob could have further explored these issues, including conversations about whether Jakob can find a sense of self-respect in his willingness to forgive,⁴ rather than in his demand for confession, contrition, and satisfaction. Instead, in

this conversation, the pastor walks and guides the way of unconditional forgiveness, which Jakob seemed to have paved, if not explicitly named, beforehand.

3.1.2. Forgiveness Implies Accusation

Jakob mentions wanting to communicate his unconditional forgiveness to his father, at which point the pastor issues a warning:

I wanted to pick up on what you said about unconditional forgiveness, for it is a great strength that you are capable of it, but it also contains a risk if you communicate it to your father. Because . . . it depends on . . . well, receiving a forgiveness requires the ability to acknowledge that there is something to forgive. That is, for many people it will sound like an accusation to say that “I forgive you”. Because if they don’t really think they have done anything wrong . . . so I would be careful using that word (29:54)

This warning entails three insights that are worth exploring further; (1) a phenomenological insight that describes how forgiving implies an accusation; (2) a psychological insight concerning how people might react if they are accused without being repentant; (3) an insight into pastoral care, namely that, even though warnings are often unhelpful in personal conversations, sometimes warnings are exactly what is called for. I will take each of these points in turn.

(1) That forgiving implies an accusation resonates with most theorists of forgiveness. American philosophical theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff uses this very insight to argue that forgiveness is not the enemy of justice, forgiveness implies justice, at least of a certain kind. Forgiveness implies not a *punitive justice* that insists on punishing wrongdoers for their deeds because forgiving is an alternative to (further) punishment. Rather, forgiving implies a *judicial justice* that explores the events and evaluates them normatively: You did wrong (Wolterstorff 2005, p. 220; see also Volf 2006a, p. 166).

(2) Since forgiving implies an accusation, the forgiven may become aggressively “resentful at having the offence recalled; he fears blame and so wants to justify himself by blaming the other”, as British theologian Paul Fiddes puts it (Fiddes 2016, p. 60). Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai seconds this psychological observation: offering forgiveness to another person “may easily irritate him, harden his resentment and hatred, and encourage him to persist in his line of wrongdoing with which he appears to have got away so cheaply” (Kolnai 1973, p. 103; see also Bråkenhielm 1993, p. 40; Murphy 1988, p. 31). Miroslav Volf talks about the offer of forgiveness as an invitation to an embrace, in which the forgiver opens the arms, thereby rendering oneself vulnerable for the aggressive reactions from the wrongdoer. He calls it the “risk of embrace” (Volf 1996, p. 147).

(3) Based on these insights, the pastor warns against using the word “forgiveness”, a warning that Jakob accepts without reservation. “I could explain, use other words, but it [forgiveness] is . . . it is what I do” (30:38), and a little later: “And then he [my father] wouldn’t need to know that it is unconditional forgiveness, even though forgiveness is what I would be signaling” (30:48). Jakob wants his letter to his father to emanate with forgiveness without using the word to avoid negative reactions.

3.1.3. Forgiveness Is One-Sided

Fearing that Jakob will not receive a response from his father, Jakob and the pastor reflect on the one-sidedness of forgiving. Forgiving without requiring anything back is an asymmetric maneuver that is possible because forgiving is different from reconciling. While forgiveness is one-sided, reconciliation requires mutuality, the pastor suggests:

[. . .] forgiving others means that a burden is being released from oneself [. . .] Even if the other person does not receive the forgiveness, you avoid having to carry the anger around . . . Reconciliation, in contrast, involves both parties, it requires some sort of mutual understanding, not necessarily that the entire past

needs to be cracked open and talked through, but both parties at least need to be ready to re-establish the relation that was broken [...] (32:07).

This quotation from the pastor is rich with phenomenological insight, to which I return in the following sections.

That forgiveness is one-sided and therefore distinct from reconciliation is commonplace in the literature. Leer-Salvesen suggests that, though forgiveness is a one-sided act, reconciliation implies a mutuality, a way of conversing with each other (Leer-Salvesen 2011, p. 115; see also Heberlein 2005, p. 31). As a one-sided act, forgiving is an act solely on the side of the victim, with no legitimate requirements from the perpetrator.

Emphasizing the one-sidedness of forgiveness is crucial for the empowerment of victims. Predicating forgiving upon some sort of response from the perpetrator binds victims to wrongdoers in a problematic way. Emphasizing that victims are free to forgive empowers victims to relate to the harm without being dependent on the wrongdoer. The victim might be able to free themselves from their bondage to an atrocity by forgiving the doer, even if the doer does not repent. Similarly, the victim may forgive an unrepentant perpetrator who is long dead. This leads us to the pastor's next point: forgiving has ramifications in two directions.

3.1.4. Forgiveness Is a Gift to the Other

The first direction is towards the other. Forgiving is forgiving another person. Jakob himself calls it "giving" the other something (33:31). As Leer-Salvesen writes: "Forgiveness is, as the word says, a gift. And gifts are only gifts if the giver gives them in freedom. At the very moment when the gift becomes coerced [*tvang*], it stops being a gift" (Leer-Salvesen 2002, p. 88; see also Volf 2007, p. 280).⁵ Forgiveness is a gift, and therefore cannot be earned, Leer-Salvesen emphasizes.

But what is it, then, that the forgiver gives? The pastor suggests that the forgiver gives an opening to the restoration of the relationship: "you open yourself up to the other person, so you, you could say, open yourself up to restore the broken relationship" (33:50). This statement may be true in the case of Jakob, who forgives to reconcile. But generally, the literature describes the gift of forgiveness in terms more clearly distinct from being willing to reconcile.

Bråkenhielm points out that the gift of forgiveness is both negative and positive (Bråkenhielm 1993, p. 20). Forgiving is negative in the sense of removing something. Wolterstorff puts it as follows: "Forgiveness is the enacted resolution of the victim no longer to hold against the wrongdoer what he did to one—or to use Biblical language, no longer to count the sin against him" (Wolterstorff 2011, p. 169). As such, the aim of forgiving is "to eliminate the offence from the texture of [the] relationship", as put by (Kolnai 1973, p. 101). Forgiveness, in such an account, is about the acknowledgment of the offense, alongside a refusal to allow it to define the future of the relationship (Gunton 1994, p. 190). Forgiveness entails a promise that the victim will no longer refer to this event in future interpersonal blame games. In this sense, forgiveness is a negative event: it removes something from the relationship, liberating the offender from the guilt of the offense, and therefore also from (further) punishment (Bråkenhielm 1993, pp. 22–24).⁶

Forgiveness also has positive aspects: forgiving both removes and restores, Bråkenhielm argues. What it restores is the moral community between the two parties, a community that is based on a mutual respect for other people's dignity and integrity, one that is breached when guilt comes between two parties (Bråkenhielm 1993, pp. 28–29; see also Brudholm 2006, p. 16; Hampton 1988, p. 37). The moral community is different from the personal community in which individuals "care for each other and are united by personal bonds" (Bråkenhielm 1993, p. 29). Bråkenhielm emphasizes the legitimacy of wanting to restore the first but keep the second at bay. More precisely, as a one-sided performativity, forgiving restores the basis for the renewal of the moral community; the actual renewal of the moral community requires the repentance of the wrongdoer. And the renewal of the personal community requires something more, namely a willingness to become a part of

each other's lives once again. Jakob opts for a forgiveness that "seeks a reestablishment of personal relationships" with his father (Bråkenhielm 1993, p. 30).

3.1.5. Forgiveness Is a Gift to Oneself

While the pastor presents forgiveness as a gift to the forgiven, he also notes that forgiving has ramifications for the forgiver. By forgiving, a burden is lifted from one's own shoulders, he suggests. It gives "peace of mind", as Jakob himself formulates it (33.31). As we shall see, this therapeutic insight into the act of forgiving is one that the pastor in conversation with Mette also emphasizes. Forgiving also releases the forgiver.

How is the forgiver released? Which burden exactly is being lifted from the forgiver's shoulders? Jakob's pastor suggests in passing that this burden is anger (32:07).⁷ Understanding forgiving as letting go of anger is in line with the views of a majority of commentators, whether they argue for forgiveness as a promise or a process (Adams 1991, p. 297; Flanigan 1998, p. 98; Griswold 2007, p. 39; Hunsinger 2001, p. 96; Leer-Salvesen 2011, p. 258; Novitz 1998, p. 299; Tutu 2000, p. 31).⁸

However, the literature also shows more complex positions, as some argue that (1) forgiving does not necessarily entail letting go of anger, and that (2) anger is not necessarily a burden.

(1) Forgiveness does not entail letting go of anger. Rather, forgiveness transforms anger. Even though the victim has forgiven his perpetrator, the victim may still resent the act. As Wolterstorff phrases it: "Forgiveness, so I suggest, requires letting go of one's negative feelings towards the wrongdoer; it does not require letting go of one's negative feelings towards the deed done" (Wolterstorff 2011, p. 169). If forgiveness means separating the doer from the deed, the victim's resentment may take the same route, focusing on the deed and leaving the doer at peace.⁹

(2) Anger is not necessarily, or not just, a burden. Victims' anger can be beneficial both for the wrongdoer and for the victim. Although American philosopher Martha Nussbaum is generally critical of anger, she has conceded that anger can empower a victim's efforts to change the patterns underlying the wrongful act. "Anger can also be a source of motivation" (Nussbaum 2015, p. 55). Anger insists that such wrongs should never recur. A victim's anger can help maintain the importance of offenders doing their part in changing patterns. The possibility of incurring righteous anger can function as a deterrent against wrongdoing. As Joseph Butler, the British 18th century bishop, puts it: "Men are plainly restrained from injuring their fellow creatures by fear of their resentment; and it is very happy that they are so, when they would not be restrained by a principle of virtue" (Butler [1726] 1987, p. 100). Although acting well out of concern for the other person's wellbeing is more praiseworthy, human beings also require deterring powers in order to act well. Fear of resentment might function in this regard as a helpful, inhibitive force that prevents actions meriting resentment from occurring in the first place.

While Nussbaum and Butler note the relevance of victims' anger for wrongdoers, Leer-Salvesen ponders the benefit of victims' anger for victims. Resenting the wrongful act can become a constructive force in the lives of the victims. Leer-Salvesen has interviewed sons of violent fathers. In their adult lives, they have struggled with the behavioral patterns that they learned at home. Physically resembling their violent fathers, these sons have been reminded of those patterns every time they have looked into the mirror (Leer-Salvesen 2009, p. 165). Nothing would be easier for them than repeating these familiar patterns. What is more difficult is breaking those patterns. To these grown-up sons, anger at the violence of their fathers works as a reminder not to commit violence themselves; it works as an inhibition against passing on the same violent patterns to their own children (Leer-Salvesen 2009, p. 176).¹⁰

Establishing the value of anger enables a phenomenological distinction within anger—or resentment—between *ressentiment* and malice. While *ressentiment* entails feeling sorry for oneself, not only at the injustice of an act but regarding the entire world, resentment remains focused on the universe as a moral place within which a concrete person has

committed a concrete act of wrong (pace [Williams 2011](#), p. 155). And while malice seeks punitive justice or even vengeance, resentment focuses on judicial justice ([Jackson 2018](#), p. 753; pace [Nussbaum 2016](#), 5 contra anger; and pace [Murphy 2005](#), 16 pro anger). It is resentment that is compatible with forgiving.¹¹ As philosophers Paul Hughes and Brandon Warmke have pointed out, even a “minimal emotionalism” implies that forgiveness is a gift to oneself because it releases one from emotions like *ressentiment* and malice ([Hughes and Warmke 2017](#)).

In the last two sections, I have followed Jakob’s pastor in exploring the two directions of the gift of forgiveness: Forgiveness is a gift to the other and to oneself. However, two commentators strongly disagree with this dual direction of forgiveness. Volf sees forgiveness primarily as a gift to the wrongdoer: “Emotional healing is not the main purpose of forgiveness”, because forgiveness is a gift given to the other person ([Volf 2006a](#), p. 169). In contrast, American pastoral theologian Pamela Cooper-White argues that forgiveness is primarily directed towards oneself: “forgiveness is not a gesture of sentimentality toward the offender, but a step toward wholeness for the survivor herself. It is a releasing of all the heavy burden of rage and hatred and moving forward in life with a new lightness of breath and of step” ([Cooper-White 2012](#), p. 258). Forgiveness means divorcing oneself from the power of the other over oneself and is therefore directed at oneself. It is crucial that these two positions also be considered by pastors when forming their theologies and ethics of forgiveness.

3.1.6. Reconciliation Is Two-Sided

Now, having pondered the one-sidedness of forgiveness, I will describe the proposal that reconciliation is mutual, as the pastor puts it. What the mutuality of reconciliation entails is a key question. Jakob has declared himself willing to forgive unconditionally. Jakob no longer has a need for the father to confess and repent his wrongs. Therefore, the mutuality of reconciliation, in Jakob’s eyes, can imply as little as the need to forgive and forget and a mutual willingness to be together. This understanding, which the pastor supports, empowers Jakob’s hope that reconciliation with his father might be possible. The father, Jakob senses, will never explore the past. If Jakob wants a relationship, he can only require of the father that he also engages in the relationship, forgetting the past altogether.

However, this conversational understanding of forgiveness contrasts with Volf, who argues for a comprehensive notion of conciliatory mutuality. Reconciliation must imply a (1) mutual understanding of past deeds; (2) an agreement on the moral evaluations of those deeds; (3) forgiveness and repentance; and (4) making space within oneself for the other to inhabit ([Volf 1996](#)). The purpose of this comprehensive notion of mutuality is to ensure that people are not pressed towards reconciliation without having had the justice of truth (confession), repentance (contrition), and personal or structural improvement (satisfaction). To Volf, then, what Jakob and the pastor understand as reconciliation, namely (4) making space for the other in oneself, is not enough.

Cooper-White also argues that reconciliation is mutual, but in a yet more comprehensive manner. Reconciliation, for her, is never simply between two individuals; it pertains to the entire community of intersecting oppressions ([Cooper-White 2012](#), p. 260). Only if all relationships are set right can we speak of reconciliation, which assumes an eschatological character. However, calling reconciliation eschatology does not entail postponing efforts: “eternity in this moment, now! salvation, liberation, the realm of God is here! We are all, as a community, called to repent, that is, to turn around, because in Jesus’ words, the kingdom of God is already here” ([Cooper-White 2012](#), p. 260). Reconciliation is not merely two-sided, then, it is much more complex. The goal of reconciling not just two people but all intersecting oppressions does not make sense in the context of the conversations with Jakob and Mette. However, in other conversations, this perspective can be crucial.

3.1.7. Conclusion to the Conversation with Jakob

For Jakob, the path to forgiving proceeded through sending a letter to his father. The letter would be the result of Jakob's personal process of unconditional forgiveness without communicating that forgiveness to his father directly. While the pastoral care conversation has informed and supported Jakob on his highway to forgiving, we do not know whether he also achieved the desired reconciliation.

I have used the literature of forgiveness to point to alternative paths to forgiveness through pastoral care that would be enriched by exploring:

1. More troubled motivations behind the wish to forgive unconditionally (Section 3.1.1);
2. The contents of the gift of forgiveness, e.g., removing the guilt from the other, restoring the moral community with the other (Section 3.1.4), releasing one's own *ressentiment* and malice, and transferring one's anger from wrongdoer to wrongdoing (Section 3.1.5);
3. The embeddedness of conflict within larger structures that require reconciliation (Section 3.1.7).

Along the way, I have shown how pastors can serve as guides by listening to the ideas and solutions of care seekers, and by exploring these ideas together, contributing with phenomenological distinctions (Section 3.1.3), encouragements (Section 3.1.1) and warnings (Section 3.1.2).

Even though Jakob's and Mette's stories are similar, the next section shows that paths to forgiveness can be dead ends.

3.2. Obstacles to Forgiving: Mette

Mette comes to pastoral care confessing an inability to forgive her mother. From Mette's point of view, there is plenty to forgive. Mette's mother never really loved Mette's father, and so when Mette's father died, her mother quickly found a new husband with whom she began new family. The mother seems to have seen Mette as an annoying reminder of a previous loveless relationship. Here is an excerpt from the conversation:

[...] There were episodes where... especially when we lived at home, where I almost felt that she not only liked to put a spoke in my wheel, right, put obstacles in our ways, unnecessary obstacles, but, really, she also didn't help us get on our feet when we tumbled off these our bicycles of life. And then—what was worst—she was also standing there, pointing and laughing when we were laying down and couldn't come up (7:09).

In Mette's experience, her mother continues to fail to love her, which is visible in this very graphic and metaphorical summary of a life: her mother has not only failed to help her, but has actively obstructed her and caused her problems, and then taken enjoyment in all the suffering that these problems created. Now Mette comes to pastoral care with an existential tension: she thinks that she ought to forgive her mother, but she also found herself incapable of doing so.

3.2.1. Isn't Forgiveness a Christian Obligation?

Mette believes she ought to forgive her mother. Throughout the conversation, she offers three types of reasons for this normative standpoint, including moral and personal, but also theological reasons.

(1) For Mette, forgiveness is a moral imperative. The moral imperative appears in a hypothetical form. Since Mette longs to experience a "good time" (18:18) with her mother before she dies, forgiving could be an appropriate instrument. Right now, it is not just Mette's anger that forms the hindrance,¹² but also her hesitance: Mette feels constantly on guard because her mother might hurt her again (17:47), but she feels forgiveness might change that. Mette also gives moral arguments that are based on realizing her mother's own vulnerable humanity.¹³ Mette suggests that she ought to forgive her mother because she has realized that her mother could not help herself; she was simply unable to show empathy

(8:19), possibly due to her own childhood, where she was supposed to be strong and never received any empathy herself (13:50). Mette believes she ought to forgive her mother because she ought to be grateful not only for what her mother has after all given to her, namely, the gift of life itself, food, and clothes (2:08), but also—more existentially—because Mette ought to be grateful for the loving relationships she enjoys in all other aspects of life (19:12).

(2) A more personal reason is that Mette believes her inability to forgive her mother is a sign that she has inherited, unconsciously, her mother's coldness (25:04). She ought to forgive her mother because she does not want to be her mother's imprint. It is almost as if she does not want to have her mother's abuse continue through her into the world.¹⁴

(3) Mette suggests, theologically, that God requires her to forgive her mother. Since this line of argument is more theological, this is where I will venture a conversation with the literature. I begin with a quotation.

11:17 Mette: [...] Shouldn't I be able to forgive, I know better?

11:41 Pastor: But forgiveness, what is your understanding of "forgiveness"?

11:34 Mette: Well . . . well, forgive her for what she has done, because she really didn't know any better. Wasn't that something, isn't that something . . . Well, now that we sit here (small laughter) in a church, and wasn't this something that God would say, right, but . . . probably?¹⁵

Even though Mette never finishes the sentence, I interpret her statement to mean that God would have wanted her to forgive. In fact, Mette almost quotes Jesus' words on the cross according to Luke: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). Mette may not be aware of this biblical background. Yet, she is undoubtedly right that there is support in Christianity for the view that God commands people to forgive each other. Consider the Lord's Prayer, in which *receiving* forgiveness from God is intertwined with *giving* forgiveness to those who have wronged us: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Leer-Salvesen explains: "The most obvious reading of the text is that our readiness to forgive others is a condition for God to forgive us [...] God forgives the one who forgives" (Leer-Salvesen 2000, p. 189; see also Worthington et al. 2006).¹⁶ The Lord's Prayer and other sources seem to establish forgiveness as a Christian obligation. Implicitly quoting Jesus' words on the cross, Mette understands Christianity as implying a demand to forgive.¹⁷

Scholars of Christian forgiveness discuss whether forgiveness is a Christian obligation, also using a broader framework than biblical exegesis. In the literature I have consulted, the matter is complex, as can be seen in Leer-Salvesen. On the one hand, Leer-Salvesen argues that forgiveness is a moral virtue (Leer-Salvesen 2002, pp. 88–89). On the other hand, he emphasizes that forgiveness is a gift that people can only give each other freely, that is, "no one can demand forgiveness of the other" (Leer-Salvesen 2002, p. 88). American philosopher and pastor Marilyn McCord Adams describes this conundrum with more conceptual clarity. She argues that forgiveness is a "Christian obligation", albeit a peculiar one, "for (i) it is one to which the offender has no correlative right, and (ii) one that the victim lacks sufficient resources to fulfill" (Adams 1991, p. 300). Usually, rights and obligations follow each other, such that a person has rights over a person or an institution, who then has an obligation in turn. But this is different with forgiveness. While a Christian has an obligation to forgive, the offender has no right, neither natural, nor earned, to be forgiven, for forgiveness is always a gift. Furthermore, the resources to forgive do not come from the human person by themselves, but instead come from God.

How do these "resources" of forgiveness then avail themselves to the victim? Volf tackles the problem of how to forgive in dialogue with a Finnish school interpretation of Luther's Christology. Christ is "not just outside us, modeling forgiveness and urging us to forgive", Christ also lives within. "From Christ, we receive the power and the willingness to forgive" (Volf 2006a, p. 200). Human beings receive the power to forgive because Christ dwells within as a nurturing force that sings "songs of gentle care and firm protection"

to each person (Volf 2006a, p. 206). Therefore, a victim “may need to rage against the perpetrators and even against God for a while. But now she will rage against perpetrators in the presence of God who cares; and she will struggle with the God who seemed absent when she needed God most, all the while being cradled by God” (Volf 2006a, p. 207). This divine care is the soil from which forgiving will blossom, Volf argues.

American pastoral theologian Deborah Hunsinger seemingly disagrees that forgiveness is an obligation, but her position is also complex. She bases her discussion on a distinction between law and gospel in Protestant Christianity. “In the light of our knowledge of God’s forgiveness of all, the need to forgive each other is not the necessity of a moral demand, but rather, the freedom of the gospel” (Hunsinger 2001, p. 96). Forgiveness is not a moral demand that serves as a condition for acquiring divine love. Yet, having already been forgiven by God, human beings are now free to pursue forgiveness, which is still a “calling” from God (Hunsinger 2001, p. 96). What Hunsinger means by the “freedom of the gospel” is clear from the following line: It is up to God to give us “the power to do that which is humanly impossible” (Hunsinger 2001, p. 96). The ability to forgive is a gift from God, and not something human beings can find in themselves by themselves. What human beings can do—and ought to do—is pray for those powers, Hunsinger argues.

A final voice worth considering is that which most clearly denies that forgiveness is a Christian obligation altogether. Cooper-White is acutely aware of the dangers that surround the idea of forgiveness as a duty. Churches may embody an ethos of interpersonal forgiveness, whether displayed in sermons, songs, or in concrete pastoral care, that pressure survivors of abuse into forgiving prematurely or into forgiving abuses that are unforgivable. It is not just the ethics of forgiving that is problematic, as Cooper-White suggests, but also the idea of pushing people to forgive “for their own good” (Cooper-White 2012, p. 252). In this way, “forgiveness becomes a mask of niceness that keeps unacceptable feelings of hatred, loathing, and fantasies of revenge locked out of consciousness” (Cooper-White 2012, p. 253). It is crucial that survivors of abuse are allowed to be as angry as they are without being confronted with an ideal of forgiveness that they are unable to meet, thereby stirring a sense of shame not only for their victimhood but also for their inability to forgive. Cooper-White ends her argument with an alternative interpretation of the comparative conjunction “as” in the Lord’s Prayer: “we pray for God to release us from our wrongdoings *in the manner in which* we humans release our debtors” (Cooper-White 2012, p. 257, italics in original). Rather than a condition, “as” describes the method: God forgives human beings in much the same way as human beings forgive each other—at least, in the cases when we actually do forgive (for a consideration of other relevant New Testament verses with the same implication, see Hauge 1991).

Whether the pastor in conversation with Mette believes that forgiveness is a Christian obligation is unclear. Mette proposes that “traditional Christians would think it was a terrible thing to not be able to forgive” (35:32), to which the pastor responds in two ways. At first, the pastor distances herself from Christians who take an ethical stance on forgiveness. Yet, another position appears when the pastor makes a parallel between parental love and divine love: “even when you scold them [your children], you probably love them” (38:33). Here, the pastor implies that God is scolding people for being unable to forgive, and thereby, the pastor very indirectly, and possibly unconsciously, confirms forgiveness as a Christian obligation.

3.2.2. For Me, Forgiveness Is Impossible!

Though wanting to forgive her mother for the reasons mentioned in the previous section, Mette finds herself incapable of forgiving her mother for two reasons. Mette requires her mother’s repentance. She needs to have a conversation in which her mother gives even the slightest admission that she has wronged her daughter (13:50). In one sense, Mette is very realistic—her mother will never repent. But still, seeing her in the hospital, “looking small”, she was surprised to sense a small hope that such a conversation could happen (10:44). Forgiving her mother *without* that admission entails letting go of

the possibility of that admission (13:50). Mette visualizes a great conversation where the mother finally admits to her faults, repents, and where she would be able to forgive. The grief that she feels with her mother growing older is not so much over her mother. In fact, she blames herself for feeling nothing at the idea of her mother's death. Rather, the object of her grief is that the possibility of reconciliation changes when her mother dies (10:44).¹⁸

Another reason why Mette hesitates to forgive relates to the lack of satisfaction on the part of the mother (i.e., the possibility of future improvement or change on the mother's part in response to the acknowledgement of wrongdoing). Forgiving is not just about the past. Rather, 'making amends' is a sign of transformation which enables the forgiver to believe that the other person will not commit the same fault again. Mette does not believe that her mother will change. If Mette forgives her, she fears she would open herself to her mother again. This would be too dangerous, as she expects that her mother would abuse her again (25:54). Forgiving others makes the forgiver vulnerable. While Volf speaks of this vulnerability as a risk that Christians run as part of their obligation to forgive (Volf 1996, p. 147), Kleiven emphasizes that forgiving "requires a position where you have the power to forgive without this resulting in new violations" (Kleiven 2011, p. 47). Mette does not find herself in a position where she can feel safe in her mother's company. Consequently, Mette is not ready to run that risk.

In sum, for the lack of both contrition and satisfaction, Mette cannot forgive her mother. The options for the pastoral care giver at this point are manifold. Mette's pastor responds by seeking to pave three new ways of forgiving for Mette.

First, when Mette states that it is "impossible to forgive someone who does not want to be forgiven" (12:54), the pastor offers the therapeutic insight that forgiving is not for the mother's sake, but for her own sake (12:58), a possibility that I have covered above.

Second, now taking seriously that Mette is incapable of forgiving, the pastor points towards the possibility of asking God to forgive her mother for her (28:45). If forgiving is too difficult for Mette, then perhaps Mette can allow God to forgive on her behalf? This move resonates with the literature. Paul Leer-Salvesen has mentioned the possibility: "It can be difficult for victims to forgive their abusers. There are situations where the furthest a victim can manage to go is to say the following prayer: 'God, forgive them, because I can't do it myself'" (Leer-Salvesen 2002, p. 85).¹⁹ Such a prayer of petition might in itself be a path to forgiving.

Third, the pastor tries to reinterpret Mette holding her mother's hand as a "wedge into forgiveness" (40:37). Recently, the very old mother touched Mette for the first time since Mette was a teenager, grasping Mette's hand for support in her apartment. The pastor offers the interpretation that, when Mette held her mother's hand instead of slapping it away, Mette gives a bodily sign of forgiving. "Couldn't that be a small drop of forgiveness?", the pastor asks (41:34). A bodily gesture can also be a sign of forgiveness.

Therapeutic advice, spiritual guidance, and the reinterpretation of bodily gestures are three strategies that the pastor explores. Seemingly, Mette's pastor does not seek to pave these ways of forgiving for ethical reasons; rather, the pastor believes that finding a way to forgive her mother would help Mette live with herself. The goal of forgiveness, for this pastor, seems more therapeutical than ethical. However, Mette does not seem to take either of those ways, declaring herself not ready to forgive for her own sake (13:34), and she denies the possibility of letting God forgive on her behalf (32:20). She does not refuse the possibility that her bodily gestures suggest some degree of forgiving has already taken place, but she expresses no enthusiasm about exploring that possibility either (41:38).

A fourth option for the pastor faced with an inability to forgive would be to explore those alternative pieces of spiritual guidance that I mentioned in the previous section. Hunsinger and Volf agree that the power to forgive comes from God. Hunsinger suggests praying to receive the power to forgive. Volf's book is a piece of spiritual guidance that invites the reader into a meditation on the divine care that people can receive in and through Christ dwelling within them. It seems unlikely that these two propositions would help

Mette, given that she has firmly expressed her incapacity to forgive without her mother's confession, contrition, and satisfaction.

A fifth option mentioned in the literature is for the pastor to simply remain with the care seeker who "can be ashamed of not being able to forgive", as Danish pastoral theologian Hanne Pahuus pointed out (Pahuus 2017, p. 86). Pahuus gives the following piece of advice to care givers: "You can take a burden from another person by conveying that forgiveness is not always possible" (Pahuus 2017, p. 40). Instead of seeking to pave new ways of forgiving, the pastor can remain in solidarity with the care seeker at the dead end of being unable to forgive. Perhaps this perspective can be combined with Falk's argument that people who are unable to forgive should affirm this inability existentially, thereby also affirming its implied guilt (Falk 2018, p. 106). If the pastor is capable of being present with the care seeker in this existential affirmation, the pastor can signal that the shame is welcome, thus avoiding that the affirmation of guilt turns into shamefulness (Christoffersen and Hjortkjær 2021).

A sixth option becomes available upon challenging the premise of the problem. Is forgiveness really something you *do*? Or is it rather something you discover? American pastoral theologian John Patton has argued against the idea of forgiving as an act, and instead argued that forgiveness is a discovery. What is the content of this discovery? According to Patton, forgiveness is tantamount to discovering that one is a human sinner like the wrongdoer (Patton 1985, p. 16; see also Falk 2018, p. 107). This is a highly controversial statement when considering abuse victims who would possibly not welcome such a leveling of responsibility. As Norwegian pastoral theologian Berit Okkenhaug phrases it: "Between people, there is a difference regarding sin. A single thoughtless and wrong action is easier to forgive than an ongoing abusive and oppressive attitude" (Okkenhaug 2008, p. 221; see also Hauge 1991). Kleiven and Cooper-White—perhaps constructively—misconstrue what Patton means regarding forgiveness as a discovery. For them, forgiving is a discovery of already having been liberated from a sense of shame (Kleiven 2023, p. 159) or liberated from pain and bitterness (Cooper-White 2012, p. 259).²⁰ Forgiveness is not something each victim can be capable or incapable of, as Pahuus seems to imply; rather, forgiving is impossible in a more general sense because forgiving is not something one does at all—forgiveness is something that one discovers.

However, Mette prompts the pastor into a seventh and even more theological option for responding to her inability to forgive when she asks the key question: what does God feel about her inability to forgive?

3.2.3. How Does God Feel about Me?

The conclusion to the two previous sections is that Mette is torn between her sense of having an obligation to forgive and her inability to do so. At this point, Mette poses a significant theological question to the pastor: "But how does God feel about people who can't find it in their hearts to forgive?" (28:17). It is not entirely obvious what Mette means with this question, and the conversation does not explore it further. Is Mette only asking whether God deems unforgiving people (i.e., herself) to be wrong? Or was she also asking whether (assuming God does find her culpable for not forgiving), God can forgive Mette and love her despite it? If we proceed with the second interpretation, Mette changes the nature of the conversation from ethics to confession. Mette is concerned not only with the ethics of interhuman forgiving. She is also concerned with how God relates to her in matters of interhuman forgiving. She longs to be loved, and longs for this from God, despite her inability to forgive. In a theological interpretation, Mette reveals herself as being stuck in a spiritual struggle (see Exline and Rose 2013) that can be likened to that of the reformer Martin Luther: How do I find graceful God when experiencing my incapability to fulfill the law (in Mette's case, of having to forgive)? As Leer-Salvesen notes, "I have met many people who continue to ask the old Luther questions, who are tormented by doubts about whether God's forgiveness applies to them" (Leer-Salvesen 2000, p. 183). Mette appears to be one of them.

Mette's question is an interesting case of seeking forgiveness from God. Mette is perfectly capable of confessing in the sense of telling the story as it is. Mette also appears to be contrite. She has argued throughout that her inability to forgive is wrong, and she asks the question about God's feelings for her not as a matter of theological curiosity—the answer matters to her personally as well. Finally, however, Mette does not seem to be intent on making amends for her inability to forgive. Bråkenhielm suggests: "In my view it is difficult to imagine an admittive plea for forgiveness [admitting that the act was wrong] that does not also logically contain the intention not to repeat the wrongful act. If I admit that an act was morally wrong I must also will that it not be repeated" (Bråkenhielm 1993, p. 19). Bråkenhielm's argument here is an indictment against sinners who ask forgiveness again and again for the same sin: seeking forgiveness also implies satisfaction. If not, seeking forgiveness is untrustworthy. It seems, however, that this logic falls apart in Mette's case. Mette does not ask for divine forgiveness with the intention of improving, for her improvement depends on her mother's improvement, i.e., her mother's contrition, confession, and satisfaction.

In contrast to Bråkenhielm, Okkenhaug suggests that God invites people to share with God their experience of the wrongness of unforgiveness: "We can come to God with our true feelings, even with our unforgiveness. Maybe that is the sin we need to confess" (Okkenhaug 2008, p. 222). Leer-Salvesen makes a similar argument. Even though Leer-Salvesen emphasizes the Christian ethos of forgiveness and roots it in the Lord's Prayer, he also argues for an opposite prayer: "It must be possible to pray the following prayer in the space of the church: 'Forgive us our debts, even if we are unable to forgive our debtors'" (Leer-Salvesen 2000, p. 191). In this context, Okkenhaug does not mention anything about making amends, or trying to improve after having received absolution. This exclusion of acts of satisfaction corresponds to the Lutheran rejection of the sacrament of penance. In his *Small Catechism*, Luther argued that confessing one's sins and receiving absolution sufficed for a proper confession (Luther 2012).

Until now, this section has focused on Mette's question about how God feels about her inability to forgive, but now I wish to turn my attention to the pastor's response. At first, the pastor replies evasively: "Well, I don't really know, do I, because I . . ." (28:45). I have wondered what to think of this evasiveness. At first it seems that the pastor is implying a truism—who am I to know what God thinks? But then again, telling people what they think God thinks is what the pastoral office allows pastors to do—albeit within the confines of the creedal signature of their church community. Perhaps the pastor is initially embarrassed about her first thought, which might have been that God does not like Mette's lack of forgiveness at all. However, 10 minutes later, the pastor offers a response that can be interpreted as a sermon of divine forgiveness:

[...] If you ask me . . . what I believe God thinks of you [...] then I believe that God would look at you the way you look at your children . . . Like someone . . . like somebody to take care of, and somebody to care for. [Coincidentally, the church bells start ringing in the background at exactly this point]. Your children are not always nice and well-behaved, and that doesn't stop you from loving them . . . Even when you scold them, you probably love them. That is how I believe he looks at you (38:16).

The pastor uses an analogy to Mette's own way of loving her children as a way of communicating the grace of God. Eduard Thurneysen, the key figure in what has been called "kerygmatic" pastoral care, suggests that even though forgiveness of sins is always the content and context of pastoral care, the communication of forgiveness may find other linguistic means, e.g., "With your sin and anxiety, you are in the hand of the Good Shepherd!" (Thurneysen 2010, p. 310). Mette's pastor uses an analogy to Mette's parental love. However, this might be risky, because after all, as Henri Nouwen has emphasized, worldly love is always conditional, whereas God's love is unconditional (Nouwen 1994, p. 42). Hunsinger has a similar point when she argues that human parenting offers but resemblances to God as the true Father (Hunsinger 2001, p. 74). For Mette to

hear the pastor's preaching as intended, she must understand her parental love as being unconditional. Yet, the pastor bases her sermon on Mette having already explained how she loves her children—in contrast to the way in which her mother has loved her. Therefore, it probably suffices for Mette to see the analogy to God's love.

A pause in the conversation ensues, possibly due to a cut from the editor, but also possibly due to a transformative pause for Mette. Mette usually retorts when she disagrees, but here, the words of the pastor are allowed to stand without rejoinder. The pastor continues (or the journalist has the pastor continue) with a conclusion, apparently satisfied with the effect that the preaching has made.

3.2.4. Conclusion to the Conversation with Mette

The analysis of the conversation with Mette has shown how the path to forgiving can also be a dead end. How can pastors guide care seekers with that experience? The analysis of the conversation and the literature saw two distinct types of strategies:

1. Paving new ways for forgiving. Here, the conversation offered three alternatives, including (a) the therapeutic move of forgiving for one's own sake, (b) the spiritual move of asking God to forgive vicariously, and (c) the hermeneutical move of reinterpreting bodily gestures as indicating that the care seeker has already forgiven the wrong. In addition, the literature suggested (d) praying to God for the power to forgive (Hunsinger), and (e) meditating upon the divine care for the care seeker (Volf).
2. Staying grounded at the dead end of finding oneself unable to forgive. Here, the conversation pointed to the strategy of (a) preaching divine forgiveness, whereas the literature advised (b) being together in the hopelessness of being unable to forgive (Pahuus), (c) challenging whether forgiveness is for the care seeker to give, and not rather a discovery of something given (Patton), and (d) challenging whether the inability to forgive is such a misery after all (Cooper-White), thereby turning a dead end into a home.

The options are plentiful. What can be said more generally about ways pastors might contribute to processes of forgiving others? This is the topic of the next section.

4. Discussion

In this analysis of two pastoral care conversations on forgiving, I have, as Kleiven (2023) proposed, listened “carefully to the perspective of the violated”. Listening to Jakob and Mette revealed two experiences at opposing ends of a spectrum: Jakob sought theological assistance because—as it turned out—he was ready to forgive unconditionally. In contrast, Mette was unable to forgive and sought theological perspectives on coming to terms with this inability. For Kleiven, a diaconal approach to forgiveness suggests that people misuse forgiveness when “cloaking the responsibility of the perpetrator” (Kleiven 2023, p. 158). Therefore, he argues for conditional forgiveness. The cases of Jakob and Mette show that pastors confront more complex realities. For Mette, it was crucial that her mother realized her responsibility before Mette could forgive. But for Jakob, this was different. Jakob was now ready to cloak the father's responsibility to achieve a purpose that was higher to Jakob: reconciliation.

Now, I will discuss three aspects of pastoral care for the processes of forgiving. In Section 4.1, I argue, following Tor Johan Grevbo, that the multitude of paths to forgiving, which this article has uncovered, should contribute to a “critical plurality of perspectives” in pastoral care. Rather than insisting on one perspective of forgiveness as the one true, the pastor should offer a flexible theology of forgiving. In Section 4.2, I nuance this point by following Falk's position on ethics in pastoral care. If pastors find themselves having clear positions on ethical issues, such as the idea that forgiveness is a Christian duty, it is better for pastor to bring those ethical positions into the conversation than to avoid them or pretend they are not there—just so long as the pastor does not force or pressure the care seeker to adopt the pastor's positions. Finally, I argue in Section 4.3. that these pastoral

insights into processes of forgiveness are crucial for pastoral care even (or especially) in pluralistic, post-secular societies.

4.1. Critical Plurality of Perspectives in Pastoral Care

American pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring offers the distinction between the “lived theology” of one’s actual beliefs, practices, and values, and the “intentional theology” of beliefs, practices, and values that one would like to nourish. On the journey to discover one’s own lived and intentional theologies, the pastor is present as a sparring partner, wherein the pastor’s knowledge about life-giving intentional theologies also contributes (Doehring 2015, pp. 11–12). Applying this theory to our two conversations on forgiving allows me to draw out two insights.

First, Jakob and Mette experience two radically different relationships between lived and intentional theology, which is why the role of the pastor is radically different in each case. Jakob’s lived theology is in tune with his intentional theology. He wants to forgive and experiences a conversation with a pastor who can offer relevant intentional distinctions and suggestions that strengthen his lived theology. Mette, in contrast, experiences being caught between a lived theology of being unable to forgive, and an intentional theology of forgiving as an obligation. The role of the pastor here is working within that discrepancy, (1) by encouraging ways to change the lived theology, (2) by challenging the intentional theology on the grounds of it involving a mistaken ethical position on forgiving, or (3) by expanding the intentional theology to also include a liberating message of divine care for those who are unable to meet the divine command to forgive. All three distinct options are available to the pastor.

Second, determining *a priori* which theology is life-giving is difficult. A theology of unconditional interpersonal forgiveness seems to give Jakob renewed sense of hope and purpose. In contrast, Mette longs for a theology of conditional forgiveness in which her premises—confession, contrition, and satisfaction from the mother—are met. Alternatively, or in addition to that, Mette longs for a theology of unconditional, divine forgiveness of her inability to forgive.

It is because of this complexity that Norwegian pastoral theologian Tor Johan Grevbo’s call for a “critical plurality of perspectives” (Grevbo 2006, pp. 400–1) is so important. Although the stories of Jakob and Mette share objective traits, they struggle with forgiving in very different ways. Rather than having a fixed understanding of forgiveness, pastors may instead serve as guides on the journeys of care seekers, acting as guides who contribute with a map of the plurality of perspectives and roads that the care seeker can explore. This perspectivity is also critical because it insists not only on listening to care seekers but also on weighing arguments within different theories of forgiveness.

4.2. Ethics in Pastoral Care

Arguments can be used to decide between various theoretical positions, both descriptive and normative, concerning forgiveness, e.g., whether to think of forgiveness as a Christian obligation or not. The theoretical field is split regarding evaluations of forgiveness, and I have avoided taking a definitive stance. Positioning oneself in this debate raises the question of ethical discussions in pastoral care. How do pastors relate to ethical discussions of forgiveness in pastoral care?

I will approach this question by characterizing the ethical positions of the pastors of Jakob and Mette (as were made apparent during these two conversations). For this, I use two typologies, drawing primarily from Klessmann (2015) but also from Grevbo (2006).

I would characterize the conversation with Jakob as “philosophical and ethical counseling”. In the tradition of biblical wisdom, this type of conversation provides an orientation to the art of living well. The normative content of living well comes primarily from the care seeker. As such, the conversation will be about “how someone can and wants to realize himself and at the same time adequately take into account his interconnectedness with the system of the family, society, religion” (Klessmann 2015, p. 115). The pastor aids

in exploring the ethical consequences of the care seeker's wishes. Jakob seeks pastoral care with a wish to orient himself anew in relation to his father, because he finds his self-realization immensely difficult without proper parental relations. The pastor comes to his aid with attentive listening, providing conceptual clarifications and helping to explore various potential courses of action. The pastor confronts Jakob with no categorical ethical stances, only hypothetical: If you wish to achieve reconciliation, then you should be warned against using the word forgiveness, for it implies accusations.

The same ethical elements are at stake in the conversation with Mette. The pastor understands Mette as wishing to forgive her mother but being unable to, which is why the pastor suggests several pathways to forgiving. The pastor's suggestion that Mette forgive for her own sake takes the conversation in a more "therapeutic" direction (staying with Michael Klessmann's typology), which orients the care seeker towards personal healing. When the pastor suggests that Mette ask God to forgive her mother vicariously, one finds a strategy closer to Tor Johan Grevbo's, namely a "spiritual direction" that guides the care seeker within the universe of Christian practices (Grevbo 2006, p. 332). Finally, however, when Mette's pastor realizes that her inability to forgive depends only on her mother's confession, contrition, and satisfaction, an element of kerygmatic pastoral care emerges: the pastor preaches a sermon of divine love to Mette.

While the pastors in conversation with Mette and Jakob expressed no obvious convictions of forgiveness as a Christian obligation,²¹ pastors with firmer ethical stances on this question will have to consider how to present themselves in the conversation. I would advise the following: The point of ethical pastoral care must be to help the care seeker to clarify their own ethical positions and values. On that basis, the job is to help care seekers see the practical consequences of those values and help them live with those consequences. Crucially, throughout the process, the pastor stays present with them, thereby showing that the consequences of their values do not involve being utterly abandoned (Falk 2009, p. 27; Okkenhaug 2008, p. 105).

However, in that process, even a therapeutic pastoral care can allow for the pastor to declare their own ethical positions. As Falk observes: "A clear articulation of where you stand is not an assault on the other person. It is just a clear statement that gives the other person a fair chance to figure out where he or she stands" (Falk 2009, p. 25). Clarifying one's own position is a *statement*, which is neither "pretending I do not believe in anything on the one hand, and on the other hand agitating for my beliefs and not letting you go until you believe in the same things I do" (Falk 2009, p. 25). If pastors are mindful of timing, turn of phrase, and tone of voice, statements of their ethical positions enable rather than inhibit contact with the other. This point has a critical edge pointed against evangelizing pastoral care that seeks to convince other people of the values of the pastor. But it also warns against a false neutrality in therapeutic pastoral care, as seen in Klessmann, that promotes non-directiveness in all ethical concerns, with only few exceptions (Klessmann 2015, p. 307).²²

Finally, the main force of pastoral care comes in its dialogical nature. When pastors preach, there is no conversation but only one voice, wherein they proclaim their interpretations of the world. The major problem with preaching is that the pastor never knows how their preaching is taken in by the congregation. This is different in pastoral care. In a dialogue, the pastor can explore how the care seeker responds to the contribution of the pastor. Falk advises: "... say what you think is relevant in the context and check how it operates over there" (Falk 2009, p. 38).

4.3. Post-Secularity in Pastoral Care

Sociologically, Denmark, in which these conversations took place, is an increasingly pluralistic society. From being a largely Christian monoculture, Danish society has become increasingly pluralistic. This is not only due to immigration but also because of processes of secularization that have resulted in changes to religious practices and beliefs, as well as in less persons taking these practices up. The situation, however, can best be described as

post-secular rather than merely secular. The term “post-secular” signifies that Danes today can be expected to move from secular discourses, in which they live most of their lives, to religious discourses and back depending on the context and state of mind.

Danish post-secularity finds itself being expressed in this podcast in two interesting ways. First, the podcast series itself is expressive of post-secularity. The podcast series was produced to advertise pastoral care as an opportunity for those who struggle with their lives, particularly those Danes who are unfamiliar with the term “pastoral care”. To ensure identification with this target group, the participants had little or no experience with pastoral care. In an interview, Jakob expresses neither Christian beliefs, nor membership of the ELCA (Melendéz 2021). During the conversation, Mette states that she is not a “traditional Christian” but that she believes “in some sort of God” (35:23). Nonetheless, both of them volunteer to participate in a podcast where they are able to talk to a Christian pastor, and thereby open themselves to a Christian discourse around forgiving.

Secondly, the conversation with Mette in particular exemplifies the general point that pastors still enjoy some authority to interpret the will of God. Though Mette is not a traditional Christian, she asks the pastor to explain what God thinks about her inability to forgive her mother. At first, the pastor finds it difficult to embrace this position of power, but the pastor later offers Mette an interpretation of God’s love for her in response to her inability to forgive. If post-secular people have spiritual struggles, they may still call upon pastors to offer explicitly theological guidance.

When pastors are navigating the call to give such guidance, I have discussed two lifebuoys concerning the relationship between non-directiveness and personal conviction. The first buoy is putting care seekers at the focus of attention, exploring what they need and require, and contributing with nuances that help care seekers to orient themselves on their self-defined paths. For this position, I used Tor Johan Grevbo’s concept of a “critical plurality of perspectives” (Section 4.1). The second buoy concerns areas in which pastors do hold what they perceive as normative theological positions on beliefs and ethics. Here, I have argued that communicating their theological positions can enable rather than inhibit contact with care seekers. Certainly, pastors will need to attend to their position of power such that they express their positions in ways that empower care seekers to reflect and respond. Then, pastoral care may serve as a constructive forum for dialogue about interpersonal and divine forgiveness in a pluralistic and post-secular society.

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Notes

- ¹ In fact, the podcast has been produced by the editorial group behind the official website of the ELCA and the steering committee behind the ELCA pastoral care chat service Sjaelesorg.nu.
- ² For a psychological and theological assessment of this form of abuse, see (Hunsinger 2001, p. 86).
- ³ Leer-Salvesen reflects on this possibility when parents are to forgive their children, as is the situation in the parable of the lost son (Luk 15). Does the same apply to children who forgive their parents?
- ⁴ Adams discusses how Christians may find self-respect in a “deepened sense of God’s love for him/her” (Adams 1991, p. 298) but this option seems less relevant for Jakob who declares himself a non-believer (Melendéz 2021).

- 5 For discussions about the reciprocity in gift-giving and forgiveness, see (Derrida 2001; Grøn 2009; Ricoeur 1998, pp. 481–86; Twambley 1976, p. 90).
- 6 Volf points out that “An individual’s forgiveness and the state’s punishment are compatible” (Volf 2006a, p. 171).
- 7 For two recent interdisciplinary theological surveys of the phenomenon of anger, see Haußmann (2021) and Teuchert (2022).
- 8 Some theorists even suggest forgiveness implies letting go of *all* negative emotions towards the wrongdoer (Richards 1988, p. 79; North 1998, p. 20).
- 9 I would argue that on this understanding, the contrition of the wrongdoer parallels two movements of the victim: By *admitting* to the deed (I did this!), the contrition of the wrongdoer parallels the victim’s *anger* (you did this!). By *distinguishing* oneself from the deed (and I know that this was wrong!), contrition parallels the victim’s *forgiveness* (and you are more than your deed!).
- 10 Therefore, I disagree with Miroslav Volf on this point who argues that forgiveness entails eventually letting the offense “slip into oblivion” (Volf 2006a, p. 173; see also Volf 2006b; Fiddes 2015).
- 11 Already Joseph Butler (1692–1752) argued that forgiveness relates not to the “general indignation against injury” (Butler [1726] 1987, p. 102) but rather removes the excesses and abuses of resentment: “the precepts of this text [on loving one’s neighbor Mt 5:43–44 . . .] must be understood to forbid *only* the excess and abuse of this natural feeling [of resentment]” (Butler [1726] 1987, p. 103). Resentment becomes excessive when it “destroys our natural benevolence” towards the wrongdoer, because then it turns into “malice or revenge” (Butler [1726] 1987, p. 107). Forgiveness has emotional ramifications but targets only malice, not resentment. (For interpretations of Butler, see Westlund 2009; O’Shaughnessy 1967).
- 12 Later, Mette denies that she is angry (30:17). She even ponders whether her lack of wanting revenge is tantamount to forgiveness (30:24), a position that is close to that of Joseph Butler mentioned earlier.
- 13 For Smedes, rediscovering “the humanity of the person who hurt us” (Smedes 1996, p. 6) is the first step in forgiving. Nonetheless, Mette finds herself unable to forgive.
- 14 The pastor responds to this by emphasizing that Mette does not seem at all like her mother. In fact, to this pastor, Mette “strives to be as kind, loving and caring as possible at all times” (37:00). Emphasizing the difference between Mette and her mother, interestingly, is exactly the opposite strategy of John Patton. Patton argues that the pastor should strengthen moments when victims realize that they are human and sinners just like their wrongdoers. This realization is what he calls forgiveness (Patton 1985).
- 15 Later on, she repeats the question phrased differently: “But in such a traditional Christian view of things, I would say that traditional Christians would think it was a terrible thing not to be able to forgive. . . (35:23).
- 16 While Leer-Salvesen interprets human forgiving as a *condition* for divine forgiveness, Danish pastoral theologian Bent Falk argues instead that human forgiving is a demand that always *springs from* divine forgiveness (Falk 2018, pp. 104–5).
- 17 I have found a softer interpretation in Grevbo: “The prayer Jesus teaches us is thus based on a normal and double characteristic of life in the good father’s house (we are forgiven and we forgive), but does not refer to a condition we must fulfill even before entering the ‘house of forgiveness’” (Grevbo 2018, p. 194). The interpretation is softer because forgiving others is not a condition for God’s forgiveness. But forgiveness is still a part of the Christian vision of a life in love.
- 18 For Mette, the possibility of reconciliation changes rather than closes. Mette also looks forward to her mother’s death, because she believes that she will be able to talk to her mother more purely after her death (35:23). This idea resonates with the interpretation the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment in Miroslav Volf (2000). The pastor does not take the opportunity to talk about such theories.
- 19 Dorothee Sölle also mentions this possibility in her response to Simon Wiesenthal’s famous question: Would you have forgiven the Nazi officer who called upon you as a Jew to confess his atrocities? (Sölle 1998, p. 245).
- 20 Okkenhaug highlights Patton’s idea of discovering forgiveness, although without discussing what the forgiver discovers (Okkenhaug 2008, p. 223).
- 21 Jakob’s pastor called it a great strength that Jakob was able to forgive, but I interpret this in the hypothetical mode: Forgiveness helps Jakob achieve his goal of reconciliation. And Mette’s pastor did hesitate when asked what God felt about Mette not being able to forgive, but I interpret this as as a hermeneutic reorientation of the conversation away from the empowerment to forgive, and towards a conversation on powerlessness, confronting the inability to forgive.
- 22 Klessmann notes the case of care seekers who utter their dislike for foreigners and disabled people (Klessmann 2015, p. 307).

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