

Article

Presbyterians, Forgiveness, and Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland: Towards Gracious Remembering

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Abstract: The transformative potential of forgiveness has been lauded in theory but its outworking on the ground has proved more challenging. Drawing on a study with 122 Presbyterians in post-violence Northern Ireland, this article returns to debates on forgiveness. We propose a modest role for religious discourses on forgiveness, situated within a wider process of political forgiveness. We advance 'gracious remembering' as a contextual, faith-based, transitional concept for helping create conditions in which political forgiveness may become more likely. Drawing on our empirical study, as well as the work of Northern Irish public theologian Johnston McMaster, gracious remembering is orientated around a vernacular understanding of grace and utilizes a four-fold framework to guide grassroots and civil society dialogues about the past: (1) the rehumanizing of the other by acknowledging the human cost of violence, (2) giving victims a public voice, (3) engaging in self-critical reflection, and (4) listening to alternative interpretations of events. Overall, we seek to demonstrate that religious discourses and social scientific framings of political forgiveness need not be opposed; and forgiveness and remembering need not be opposed. Ultimately, we argue for the value of faith-based contributions in post-violence settings, but with ample recognition of their limitations.

Keywords: forgiveness; remembering; reconciliation; Northern Ireland; conflict; peacebuilding; Presbyterian



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1. Introduction

Forgiveness is a key concept in the study of religion, conflict, and peacebuilding (Brewer et al. 2018; Leiner and Schliesser 2018; Schliesser et al. 2020). Scholarship on forgiveness has ranged from theological reflections to empirical, social scientific studies that emphasize that the meanings given to these concepts vary across time and place (Jones 1995; Lederach 1998; Robinson 2015; Tombs 2017). These analyses usually discuss the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation because these concepts are so often linked in religions' theological traditions, especially Christianity. Others have considered the relationship between forgiveness and remembering, recalling the age-old admonition to 'forgive and forget'. Remembering past atrocities is understood as fuelling present-day resentments and violence (Reiff 2011, 2016); forgiveness, it would seem, is not possible without at least some forgetting.

In some contexts, it is religious actors who bring discourses and rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation to the public sphere, claiming that these should be included as part of wider processes of peacebuilding (Amstutz 2005; Philpott 2006). However, some have taken the view that religion has brought the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation to the study of peacebuilding in ways that are unnecessarily exclusionary, arguing for more social scientific (Trimikliniotis 2013) or 'secular' (Griswold 2007) framings of these concepts. Among the main critiques of forgiveness are that there is little conceptual clarity about forgiveness, reconciliation, remembering, and the relationships between them, and that forgiveness is too individualized and too religious.

Although scholars have developed sophisticated conceptions of forgiveness, they should be continually testing the utility of these concepts in real contexts. The transformative potential of forgiveness has been lauded in theory but its outworking on the ground has proved more challenging. Drawing on a study with Presbyterians in post-violence Northern Ireland, this article returns to debates on forgiveness. Our return to forgiveness is driven by a key finding from the study: people wanted to talk about it. Our interviewees were asked about reconciliation but not about forgiveness. Yet many spontaneously spoke about forgiveness even before they were asked about reconciliation, alerting us that it deserves further consideration as a key concept in post-violence transitions, especially among people of faith. Our interviewees' discourses on forgiveness were just as messy and contradictory as decades of scholarship in cross-national contexts would have led us to expect. At one level, these findings could be interpreted to mean that forgiveness is not a useful concept for post-violence societies: people do not agree on what it means and some refuse to forgive.

Critiques of the role of religious discourses in post-violence transitions are rightly cautious about claiming too much for their transformative power. We propose a more modest role for religious discourses, situated within a wider process of political forgiveness. Accordingly, we advance 'gracious remembering' as a contextual, faith-based, transitional concept for helping create conditions in which political forgiveness may become more likely. Drawing on our empirical study, as well as the work of Northern Irish public theologian Johnston McMaster and others, gracious remembering is orientated around a vernacular understanding of grace from our research: a man whose brother had been killed expressed his hope that others would 'consider grace'. For him, considering grace meant extending understanding and mercy to those who had hurt them. Grace was framed as a gift from God—freely given and freely received. In the Northern Irish Presbyterian context, the emphasis on God's grace as a gift serves as a counter to traditional theological approaches that make forgiveness conditional on repentance. This underlines the value of religious actors' ability to speak to (and potentially reform) their own traditions as part of dealing with their own pasts. To assist in the creation of spaces where grace might be manifested, gracious remembering utilizes a four-fold, practice-based framework to guide grassroots and civil society dialogues about the past: (1) the rehumanizing of the other by acknowledging the human cost of violence, (2) giving victims a public voice, (3) engaging in self-critical reflection, and (4) listening to alternative interpretations of events (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, pp. 242–43). Gracious remembering does not require every victim to forgive every perpetrator—an unrealistic goal. Rather, it presents forgiveness and remembering as complementary, inter-related, and ultimately future orientated. Gracious remembering also helps us to think about the role of religious actors and faith-based discourses, recognizing their potentially constructive contributions as well as their limitations.

The article proceeds with an account of the role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, including Northern Ireland's struggle to deal with its past. Next, we describe our methods. Then, we briefly discuss scholarship on forgiveness, situating the potential contributions of religious actors as part of a wider process of political forgiveness. Here, we draw on a range of interdisciplinary scholarship, especially from the fields of peace and conflict studies and transitional justice studies. We share these fields' concerns with prudent, practical political actions that are undergirded by political philosophies that recognize the contributions of both 'religious' and 'secular' thought. This provides a platform for presenting our data about how Presbyterians spoke about forgiveness. We conclude with reflections on gracious remembering, which we see as above all a practical framework. Overall, we seek to demonstrate that religious discourses and social scientific framings of political forgiveness need not be opposed; and forgiveness and remembering need not be opposed. Ultimately, we argue for the value of faith-based contributions in post-violence settings, but with ample recognition of their limitations.

2. Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland

The ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland (circa 1968–1998) claimed more than 3600 lives and left thousands more injured and traumatized. Although it has been more than two decades since the Good Friday Agreement that marked the end of most violence, Northern Ireland has not had a joined-up process for dealing with the past. In July 2021, the British Government announced controversial plans to introduce a Troubles-related amnesty, widely viewed as a means for protecting British soldiers and undermining previous proposals for dealing with the past. This is remarkable in a global context where a range of transitional justice mechanisms have been implemented to address legacy issues, such as truth commissions (Bakiner 2014).

There is now a considerable body of scholarship evaluating the role of churches in Northern Ireland in contributing to conflict, as well as peacebuilding (Power 2006; Ganiel 2008; Wells 2010; Brewer et al. 2011). While few would claim that the violence was about religious doctrines and practices, religious traditions helped shape institutions and identities and overlapped with ethno-political differences, reinforcing patterns of division and differentials in power (Ruane and Todd 1996; Mitchell 2006). Religion’s importance was underlined by high levels of belief and practice throughout the Troubles and high public profiles for clergy and church leaders, who were regarded as spokespersons for their communities (Fawcett 2000). Although the role of the churches in peacebuilding has been significant, individual clergy and small organizations were more effective than ‘institutions’ like denominations or ecumenical bodies (Brewer et al. 2011; Scull 2019).

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) is the largest Protestant tradition in Northern Ireland and its theology and practices have influenced other Protestant denominations. Its historical significance is such that Liz Fawcett (2000) described it as having the character of a folk church for wider Protestantism. Over time, Presbyterianism has exerted significant influence on wider Protestant identity. It has informed a ‘Protestant ideology’ rooted in a popular Calvinist theology, including concepts like the covenant, the chosen people, and the promised land (Wright 1973; Mitchel 2003; Southern 2007). Some have compared PCI to South Africa’s Dutch Reformed Church, which used a similar Calvinist theology to justify settlement and apartheid (Akenson 1992; Fawcett 2000). This Protestant ideology has informed Northern Ireland’s evangelical sub-culture, justifying privilege and power (Mitchell and Ganiel 2011). Evangelicalism is important because up to a third of Protestants could be considered evangelicals (Mitchell and Tilley 2004).

Within Northern Ireland’s wider Protestant tradition, there also is a longstanding idea that there can be ‘no forgiveness without repentance’ (Brewer and Higgins 1998; Spencer 2011). This makes forgiveness very difficult and has real consequences for Protestant approaches to dealing with the past. For example, Protestant/unionist/loyalist opposition to the Good Friday Agreement was based partly on the release of paramilitary prisoners, which was deemed ‘immoral’ because they had not repented of their crimes (Ganiel 2008). The Democratic Unionist Party’s Rev Ian Paisley also drew on this tradition when he declared that the Irish Republican Army must ‘repent in sackcloth and ashes’ before Northern Ireland’s devolved parliament could be restored (BBC 2004). Alwyn Thomson (2000, p. 8) claimed that this discourse has been *the* dominant one within Protestantism:

This is the idea of forgiveness most common among Protestants over the years of violence: no forgiveness without repentance. In part, it derives from the emphasis on justice in their tradition. Forgiveness is possible only because of the death of Jesus; but Jesus’ death is seen primarily in judicial terms: he died in order to satisfy God’s just demand.

During the 1990s, Thomson worked for Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI), a religio-political organization that critiqued what it considered the divisive aspects of Protestant theology and identity (Mitchel 2003; Ganiel 2008). ECONI also developed theological alternatives, not least of which was an ambitious ‘Embodying Forgiveness Project’ which sought to introduce different perspectives on forgiveness into public debates (Wells 2010). This was a series of 15 papers, written by Christians from a

variety of traditions, including Catholics. Some authors asserted there *could* be forgiveness without repentance; for others, it was ‘you *yourself* who must repent—not the “other”’ (Ganiel 2014, p. 67). PCI’s response to the Good Friday Agreement also moved away from the ‘no forgiveness without repentance’ discourse by recommending that consideration be given to prisoner releases ‘as part of a search for a greater good’.¹ But the extent that such softening was discernible among grassroots Presbyterianism (and Protestantism) remains unclear.

At the same time, there has been a sense that the institutional churches have not done enough to repent or even acknowledge their roles in contributing to division and violence, for example through well-publicized and explicit public apologies or statements of acknowledgement; nor have they developed compelling theologies of reconciliation that have reached the grassroots (Tombs 2015). It was left to faith-based organizations like ECONI, Corrymeela, and the Irish School of Ecumenics to ‘confess’ the churches’ failures. These groups reach only a limited audience and lack legitimacy among some conservative evangelicals (Ganiel 2008, 2014). In 2021, the Church Leaders’ Group, comprised of the Catholic and Church of Ireland (Anglican) Archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian Moderator, the Methodist President, and the President of the Irish Council of Churches, issued a St Patrick’s Day statement that included the most comprehensive confession to-date for the churches’ failures in this regard. The church leaders’ confession received less attention than might have been expected in both secular and religious media, underlining the churches’ diminishing role in a secularizing society (Ganiel 2021b). However, six months later, the Church Leaders’ Group gained significant public attention when Irish President Michael D. Higgins declined their invitation to attend a service of reflection and hope on the centenary of partition and the creation of Northern Ireland. He was concerned that the event celebrated partition, which he regarded as a tragedy. The Church Leaders insisted that the event was not a celebration and proceeded with the service, which went even farther than the St Patrick’s Day statement in its apology and acknowledgement of the churches’ failures. The controversy meant that the event received far more media attention than would have been expected (O’Brien 2021), including live coverage by RTÉ and BBC Northern Ireland television.

3. Methods

Our research was conducted as part of PCI’s ‘Reconciliation through Dealing with the Past’ project, which was conceived by its Council for Public Affairs ‘dealing with the past’ task group. In 2016, the task group brought a proposal for the project before the General Assembly, the church’s highest decision-making body, describing it as consisting of interviews with 100 Presbyterians. The project had two aims: (1) promoting healing and forgiveness within its own congregations; and (2) contributing to the wider discussion in society on dealing with the past. The proposal passed alongside a revised version of the General Assembly’s 1994 Peace Vocation, a new ‘Vision for Society’ statement. The Vision for Society statement is significant in that it includes a confession of failure (which can be considered a type of repentance) and a commitment to peacebuilding.²

The project was conceived to fit within what were then the latest proposals for dealing with the legacy of the Troubles, as outlined in the Stormont House Agreement (SHA), agreed in 2014 by Northern Ireland’s main political parties and the British and Irish Governments. The SHA recommended a historical investigations unit, a commission for information retrieval, an oral history archive (OHA), and an implementation and reconciliation group. Despite a 2018 government-led consultation with civil society, which drew more than 17,000 responses, the proposals languished (McEvoy et al. 2020). This was partly due to the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly between 2017–2020. The OHA had been mooted as a resource that would collate existing archives and collect new material. The task group realized that existing oral history archives contain more stories from Catholic-nationalist-republican than Protestant-unionist-loyalist (PUL) perspectives and saw the project as addressing this imbalance. The lack of PUL engagement in dealing

with the past is a broad phenomenon, marked by unionist political parties' opposition to formal truth processes. Cheryl Lawther (2011) argues that PUL opposition is rooted in 'the myth of blamelessness', in which their community bears no responsibility for the causes of the Troubles; a truth recovery process would challenge this myth. There also are fears that mechanisms for dealing with the past would 'provide an opportunity for the advancement of the republican political agenda', and that British security forces would face stiffer scrutiny than republican paramilitaries who did not keep records, amongst other factors (Lawther 2011, pp. 369–70). The relative paucity of PUL oral history gathering also may be linked to a lack of social capital in loyalist communities; as well as to a reluctance to listen to perspectives that challenge 'the myth of blamelessness'. Lawther (2011, p. 366) concluded:

... although many unionists have championed the cause of storytelling initiatives, their boundaries of right and wrong will not welcome the stories of the 'other' being told in anything other than local-level initiatives, nor will they be willing to listen to them.

At first glance, PCI's project seems to conform to Lawther's observation about a lack of will to listen to others' stories. However, the project was also framed as an opportunity for PCI to be self-critical about its own past, in line with recommendations in the SHA that governments and civic bodies should consider statements of acknowledgement of their own shortcomings. The project's inclusion of interviews with ten 'critical friends' from outside Presbyterianism signalled a willingness to listen to others, as did PCI's support for an OHA which would include multiple perspectives.

I (Ganiel) read about the project in news reports about the General Assembly. A few weeks later, I asked a member of the task group how they planned to carry out the project. He said they did not have research assistance or funding. I helped the task group secure funding from the Irish Government's Reconciliation Fund. This allowed us to employ Yohanis to work with me at Queen's University Belfast, conducting and transcribing interviews. Together with the task group, which included serving and retired clergy and laity, we identified categories of interviewees: clergy, victims, security force personnel, emergency responders, health care workers, grassroots peacemakers, politicians, those affected by loyalist paramilitarism, those who left Presbyterianism, and 'critical friends' from outside the denomination. This locates the project in the 'action research' tradition, in which academics collaborate with practitioners in the design and implementation of research, with the aim of producing research that contributes to practical action as well as academic debates. Interviewees were found by writing to every serving minister in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland, asking them to nominate people. We interviewed 122 people (50 women), with 77 from border counties. Due to the nature of their roles during the conflict, men were over-represented among the clergy, security forces, and politicians; while women were over-represented among victims. Although our largest category of interviewees was victims, we strove to avoid framing Presbyterians and their church primarily as victims—especially in light of scholarship that has emphasized religion's (and Presbyterianism's) roles in contributing to division and violence. For the purposes of our category, victims were simply people who had been injured and/or bereaved during the conflict.

PCI's project is unique amongst faith-based peacebuilding initiatives in Northern Ireland, given its explicit connection to the proposed OHA, its research-based invitation to Presbyterians to criticize their own church, and its sole focus on dealing with the past. There have been other dedicated church-based peacebuilding programmes, including the inter-denominational Irish Churches Peace Project (2013–2015), the Methodist Church's Edgemoor Reconciliation Programme (2004–2014), the Church of Ireland's Hard Gospel project (2005–2008), PCI's Peacemaking Programme (2006–2009), and Clonard Monastery's Reconciliation Ministry (ongoing).³ Apart from Clonard, these programmes were externally funded and did not outlive their funding cycles; they also were not primarily research-based and exclusively focused on dealing with the past (Ganiel and Brady 2021).

Interviews were semi-structured and wide-ranging. We asked people how they became Presbyterians, and to tell us about their experiences of the Troubles. We asked them to evaluate how their local congregation and the wider PCI responded to the Troubles. We asked them about reconciliation, a widely used but contested concept in Northern Ireland (Brewer et al. 2011). PCI's Peacemaking Programme deliberately did not use the word reconciliation because it was deemed too open to misunderstandings. In the intervening years, there have been some efforts to rehabilitate the term by faith-based groups (Ganiel 2014). Accordingly, our interviews did not offer a preconceived definition of reconciliation but rather asked people what they thought about it. Forgiveness has been an even more emotive concept. We chose not to ask about forgiveness, lest interviewees feel they were being pressured to forgive. So, we took notice of when forgiveness emerged as such a prominent theme in the interviews.

We used qualitative analysis software to identify themes from the interviews, identifying 47 codes. Our analysis in this article relies solely on narratives from the 'forgiveness' code. While this means that the quotations about forgiveness are decontextualized from interviewees' experiences of the Troubles, they still provide valuable perspectives on the range of views on forgiveness. The nature of the qualitative analysis is such that it is not valid to try and identify causation between particular experiences of the Troubles, such as the severity of an injury, and particular perspectives on forgiveness, such as 'no forgiveness without repentance'. It is likely that different perspectives on forgiveness are multi-causal and include awareness of various approaches to forgiveness present in Northern Ireland Presbyterianism/Protestantism, such as the 'no forgiveness without repentance' discourse.

The main outputs of the project have been a book written for a general audience, and study resources for congregations, small groups, and trainee ministers (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019). These outputs consider forgiveness amongst a range of themes but analysing all of them is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, we now discuss some of the literature on forgiveness, contextualizing our data.

4. Forgiveness

The literature on forgiveness is vast and inter-disciplinary (Murphy and Hampton 1988; Shriver 1995; Minnow 1998; Digeser 2001; Griswold 2007; Blustein 2014; Nussbaum 2016). Theologians and religious actors often have linked forgiveness and reconciliation, presenting them as interdependent. However, there is no consensus on whether or to what extent reconciliation depends on forgiveness; some argue that there can be no reconciliation without forgiveness, while others contend that reconciliation is possible without forgiveness, noting different points of emphasis among the world religions (Jones 1995; Auerbach 2005; Abu-Nimer and Nasser 2013). Similarly, some take the view that forgiveness requires repentance, while others advocate 'unilateral' forgiveness that does not require repentance (Watkins 2015). There also is disagreement about what forgiveness and reconciliation look like, and how they could be measured. Some space has been created in this debate through the insight that forgiveness and reconciliation can be viewed both as goals to be achieved and as ongoing processes. Conceiving of them as processes may be more productive, due to the impossibility of ever fully achieving forgiveness or reconciliation (Lederach 1998). Further space can be created by acknowledging that forgiveness and reconciliation take place at multiple levels, including individual, societal, and political. Lederach's influential conception of reconciliation was inspired by observing grassroots peacebuilders in Nicaragua read Psalm 85 before their meetings. Drawing on the psalm's invocation of truth, mercy, justice, and peace, he describes reconciliation as a locus or 'meeting place' where these four aspects come alive (Lederach 1999, p. 51).

While recognizing the links between forgiveness and reconciliation, we focus on forgiveness in order to situate the empirical data from our interviews. Our data must be understood in a wider context in which religious actors have been critiqued for how they have brought forgiveness into post-violence debates, including the criticisms that faith-based concepts of forgiveness have been too individualized and too religious (and

therefore exclusionary), and that they are immoral for putting too much pressure on victims to forgive. Women, it has been argued, may face even extra pressure to offer Christian forgiveness (McIntosh 2020). Such critiques have often been directed towards high-level religious actors, public figures like Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, whose book *No Future Without Forgiveness* could be interpreted as pressuring victims to forgive—although Tutu’s perspective is more nuanced than that (Tutu 2000). Social scientific framings of forgiveness, including conceptualizations of political forgiveness, could be presented as superior because they help overcome the problems of being too individualized and too religious. However, we argue that religious discourses and social scientific framings of political forgiveness need not be contradictory; rather, in some contexts, they can fruitfully complement each other.

This sense of complementarity is hinted at in Danielle Celermajer’s (2009) study of public, political apologies. She points out that the twentieth century’s rise in this phenomenon coincided with a theological shift in how Christian models of repentance were conceptualized. She recognizes that for many Christians, the dominant assumption is still to frame repentance and forgiveness as matters of individuals’ relationships with God. However, at an institutional level, there has been a move from practices of private penance to public confession, especially in the Catholic Church. While she hesitates to draw a direct causal connection between communal forms of repentance in churches and the emergence of political apologies, she notes that ‘their temporal simultaneity is certainly remarkable’ (Celermajer 2009, p. 140). For her, political apologies, which raise issues of forgiveness, exist uneasily in public spheres where distinctions between secular and sacred are taken for granted: ‘re-appropriation of repentance as a tool in the political repertoire was highly problematic . . . apology stood out as an anomaly’ (Celermajer 2009, p. 14).

In contrast, Charles Griswold (2007) claims that the very concept of political forgiveness is incoherent: forgiveness simply cannot be scaled up to the political level. Rather, Griswold (2007, pp. 134–46) argues for a political apology as a potentially useful post-violence mechanism. He notes that while political apologies bear some family resemblances to interpersonal forgiveness, they cannot be considered a form of forgiveness because they do not usually involve the injured parties and perpetrators themselves and because they bypass emotions or sentiments in ways that interpersonal forgiveness does not. In that light, Griswold (2007, pp. 157–59) critiques Tutu for presenting the apologies made by churches that had supported apartheid as political forgiveness. Moreover, the main aim of Griswold’s (2007, p. xv) project is to conceive forgiveness as ‘a secular virtue’; he remains concerned about the potentially coercive power of religion to impose particular versions of ‘forgiveness’ in the public sphere.

Peter Digeser (2001) agrees with Griswold about the need to construct ‘secular’ conceptions of forgiveness. He sees common-sense understandings of forgiveness as ‘burdened’ with ‘religious assumptions’ and argues that (Digeser 2001, p. 3):

... a secular, performative notion of forgiveness, one that takes as its cue the practices of forgiving debts and pardoning criminals, can be compatible with a politics that places a high value on justice (receiving what is due) and action (as opposed to motive).

In contrast to Griswold, Digeser (2001, p. 4) makes a strong case for political forgiveness as a coherent concept, which involves the re-creation of civic relationships, regardless of whether individuals have overcome emotions like resentment: ‘... what counts in political forgiveness are not motives or sentiments but whether the actor is pursuing a desired end by publicly subscribing to a set of moral practices and rules’. Barbara Misztal (2016, p. 4) even argues that there is increasing evidence of the ‘transformative potential’ of political forgiveness, which has been framed ‘as a forward-looking virtue which is opposed to revenge’, and has been ushered in by an ‘age of accountability with its underlying value system of human rights’. At the same time, she notes the tension between political forgiveness and justice, citing evidence that ‘a combination of trials and amnesties, rather

than trials alone, is more likely to bring improvements in democracy and human rights' (Misztal 2016, p. 13).

So, to some extent, the 'problematic' nature of apologies and forgiveness in public spheres is due to their association with religion, and the perceptions of religion's over-individualized, emotional/sentimental, and exclusive approaches to forgiveness (although Griswold's concerns about religion are less to do with over-individualization). In this light, religion can get in the way of achieving political forgiveness. At the same time, religious leaders have been prominent in efforts to scale up forgiveness to a societal level, most obviously through truth commissions (Philpott 2006; Tombs 2017), illustrating the link between the religious and political that Celermajer wishes to make. In fact, some religious actors do not make hard and fast distinctions between the religious and the 'secular' political, conceiving of all spheres of life as sacred. Amstutz (2005, p. 11) agrees with Philpott (2006) that the proliferation of truth commissions has 'encouraged consideration of the potential role of forgiveness in public life', in part due to the disproportionate involvement of Christian leaders. It also may be because most truth commissions forego prosecutions, offering, what are in effect, amnesties. Here, forgiveness may be framed as an alternative to punishment or as justifying amnesty. However, while Amstutz and Philpott see religion's contributions as largely constructive, Boesenecker and Vinjamuri (2011, p. 364) claim that 'faith-based actors who stress reconciliation and forgiveness may offer the most extensive challenge to the international accountability norm'. In other words, forgiveness—especially that advocated by religious leaders—functions as a license for perpetrators to act with impunity, without consequences for their deeds.

Since truth commissions often aim to contribute to societal healing (in addition to discovering what happened), religious leaders' involvement demonstrates that religious approaches to forgiveness are not inevitably over-individualized. Amstutz (2005, p. 73) argues that while historically, forgiveness has been considered a personal (and religious) virtue, actions associated with the process of individual forgiveness can be scaled up to political forgiveness. He identifies five necessary elements of political forgiveness: consensus on truth or past wrongdoing, remorse and repentance, renunciation of vengeance, empathy, and mitigation or cancellation of a deserved penalty (Amstutz 2005, pp. 77–79). In his monograph on forgiveness, which compares Argentina, Chile, Northern Ireland, and South Africa, Amstutz (2005, p. 226) admits that the necessary elements of political forgiveness are demanding and 'depend largely on leaders' capacity to fulfil the ethic's preconditions', and the 'wisdom and courage' of citizens. He concluded (Amstutz 2005, p. 228):

In none of the four cases has political forgiveness played a prominent role in fostering political reconciliation—in great part because major political actors have been unable or unwilling to fulfil the prerequisites for forgiveness.

Amstutz judged Northern Ireland as the least successful, due to its failure to deal with the past. In the more than 15 years since Amstutz came to that conclusion, there has been almost no progress towards political forgiveness in Northern Ireland.

Relatedly, Joram Tarusarira's (2019) 'transformative forgiveness' addresses two shortcomings of forgiveness associated with religion: over-individualization and pressure on victims. It includes three components: (1) apology, (2) reparation and/or changes in unjust socio-political systems, and (3) 'shifts in the epistemic conditions' (changes in mindsets, i.e., what opposing groups think about each other). Tarusarira argues forgiveness requires some degree of acknowledgement or recognition, although he allows that forgiveness can take place without apology. Tarusarira's emphasis on apology resonates with Amstutz, who claims that perpetrators must show remorse and repent. Tarusarira (2019, p. 210) argues that effective public apologies, i.e., those that include remorse and repentance, can have a 'therapeutic effect' for victims. However, the quality of public apologies varies; some have even perpetuated abuses by ignoring continuing divisions and violence. So even when apologies play a constructive role in political forgiveness, their impact is limited. Apologies therefore should be accompanied by 'practical amends', such as reparations and

affirmative action policies (Tarusarira 2019, p. 214). He also does not rule out prosecutions. In these ways, his argument resonates with Rebecca Saunders (2011), who eschews calls for forgiveness in favour of a range of other transitional justice mechanisms. However, Tarusarira (2019, p. 216) does not advocate utilizing those mechanisms instead of promoting forgiveness; rather, like Amstutz, he sees those mechanisms operating concurrently. When it comes to shifting mindsets, Tarusarira does not advocate Robert Enright et al.'s (1998) concept of 'reframing', which urges victims to understand perpetrators' perspectives and empathize with them. Nor is his concept quite like Amstutz's (2005, p. 78) definition of 'empathy', whose evocation of St Augustine seems to place more responsibility on victims than perpetrators:

... victims must follow St Augustine's admonition to hate the sin and love the sinner. This means that people must treat enemies and offenders with dignity and respect despite the offenses that they have committed. If forgiveness is to occur, transgressors and victims must cultivate empathy and compassion toward the 'other', viewing each other as human beings worthy of respect.

In Amstutz, it is not entirely clear if (or how far) compassion goes beyond sympathy for individuals to include changing mindsets about the 'other' group. For Tarusarira, what happens is that both victims and perpetrators listen to each other's perspectives, identifying with the humanity in each other, leading to changes in perceptions of individuals and wider groups. The undoubtedly difficult tasks of promoting understanding of the 'other' and changing mindsets are aspects that have been overshadowed (or pushed aside as too difficult) in some accounts of political forgiveness.

In sum, social scientific framings of political forgiveness have shifted the burden of forgiveness from individual victims and conceptualized it through concrete actions that can be carried out by political elites, such as public apologies and reparations. While components of political forgiveness remain varied and contested, introducing criteria for what constitutes forgiveness that does not depend on religious faith or individual emotion is a useful contribution. Frameworks for political forgiveness also recognize that forgetting is not possible at individual, societal, and political levels. At its best, political forgiveness helps to create conditions in which remembering ceases to be divisive and destructive. This is the hard work of 'shifts in mindsets', which includes dialogue on how to remember the past. Shifts in mindsets may be more likely to occur at the societal level of grassroots and civil society dialogues rather than at the political level of official apologies and structural changes. This illustrates the important points that forgiveness at the social and political levels is intertwined and interdependent; and that political forgiveness and remembering can be complementary, not contradictory. However, it is not always clear whether or to what extent religious discourses on forgiveness fit within wider processes of political forgiveness. In Amstutz, religious discourses are presented as important aspects, especially the discourses of high-level faith leaders. In contrast, Tarusarira's discussion of transformative (political) forgiveness barely mentions religion at all—despite Tarusarira's record as a scholar of religion (Tarusarira 2016; Tarusarira and Chitando 2020). We agree with Amstutz, Philpott, and others that religious discourses on forgiveness and religious actors' contributions to mechanisms like truth commissions have been constructive in a range of contexts. This signals that religious discourses and social scientific framings of political forgiveness need not be contradictory; rather, in some contexts, they can fruitfully complement each other. However, such claims have usually been based on the discourses of high-level religious leaders, with little attention paid to what people at the grassroots think of these discourses, or whether they hear them at all. In contrast, we now turn our focus to discourses on forgiveness among grassroots Presbyterians in Northern Ireland.

5. Presbyterians and Forgiveness: Interview Analysis

It has been argued that victims may act as 'moral beacons', forgiving perpetrators and leading the rest of society forward by example (Brewer and Hayes 2011). In her study of victims of apartheid in South Africa, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2008) observed how

even those who suffered greatly could develop empathy for perpetrators, leading to a kind of forgiveness through empathy or ‘empathetic repair’. However, victimhood does not guarantee forgiving dispositions: cross-national research has shown that far from serving as moral beacons, some direct victims are more likely to harbour unforgiving attitudes (Brewer and Hayes 2011; Kijewski and Rapp 2019).⁴ Nor does religiosity necessarily promote forgiveness: a study of Christian and Muslim students in Bosnia and Herzegovina found that higher levels of religiosity correlated negatively with propensities for forgiveness and reconciliation (Odak and Cehajic-Clancy 2021). John Brewer et al.’s (2018) study of victims in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Sri Lanka found, on balance, evidence that the experience of victimhood encouraged emotional empathy and the ability to act as moral beacons. However, they cautioned that victims’ magnanimity is uneven and contingent, and risks being undermined by macro-level factors such as inequalities, poverty, and perceived unfairness in dealing with the past. Similarly, Saunders (2011, p. 120) warned that there are ‘ambiguities in the meaning of forgiveness . . . and transitional justice bodies must also be attuned to public understandings of these terms’.

Brewer et al. (2018) interviewed 60 victims in Northern Ireland from a variety of backgrounds, including those involved with victims’ groups that prioritize cross-community work. Their assessment was remarkably positive (Brewer et al. 2018, p. 96):

Most interviewees saw forgiveness towards their former protagonists as an essential step when moving forward and were ready to do so. When thinking about the past, most participants wanted to move on with the peace process but to remember the past within a historical context.

These victims linked forgiving and remembering, which may signal an appetite for a societal-wide process for dealing with the past. At the same time, Brewer et al. (2018, p. 96) noted that ‘a small number of Protestant victims’ believed the peace process was unfair and that they had been misled by their political leaders; they felt ‘helpless and betrayed’ and unready to couple forgiveness with remembering.

Our data on forgiveness adds to wider discussions in several ways. First, it illustrates Saunders’ (2011) point that there are a variety of public understandings of forgiveness, even among a limited group: churchgoing Presbyterians. Second, the complex and contradictory nature of these perspectives confirms the difficulty of public dialogues about forgiveness, as emphasized in the wider literature. Third, the data demonstrate that while people of faith may draw on their religious tradition to advocate forgiveness, this is not guaranteed. Indeed, some people of faith say that they cannot forgive (see also McIntosh 2020; Hampton 1988, pp. 10–13). Fourth, this highlights contrasts between discourses of high-level religious leaders, who have been accused of pressuring victims to forgive, and grassroots people of faith. Fifth, most interviewees spoke of forgiveness in individualized, interpersonal terms, illustrating a lack of awareness of political forgiveness. Sixth, only a handful of our interviewees had been involved in cross-community work with victims’ groups. This distinguishes them from many of the victims in Brewer et al.’s study, who linked forgiveness and remembering in a positive, future-orientated way. Brewer’s study demonstrates the work’s constructive impact. Finally, the fact that Presbyterians—primarily though not exclusively the injured or bereaved—brought up forgiveness without us asking about it illustrates this concept’s power. Our data do not allow for direct comparisons with non-Presbyterians who were injured or bereaved, so we cannot claim that it was necessarily interviewees’ religion that prompted their emphasis on forgiveness. However, the prominence of forgiveness in the interviews demonstrates how it continues to resonate as part of a wider process for dealing with the past, despite challenges in defining it or envisioning what it means in practice.

Interviewees expressed three main perspectives on forgiveness: no forgiveness, no forgiveness without repentance, and unconditional forgiveness.⁵ At first glance, these findings appear to limit the potential for forgiveness in Northern Ireland. Returning to Tarusarira’s three-fold formulation of transformative (political) forgiveness (apology, structural change, shifts in mindsets) reveals the shortcomings. When it comes to an

apology, some Presbyterians are waiting for others to repent and apologize—without critically reflecting on their own church and community’s contributions to violence. In terms of changing unjust socio-political systems, people expressed little awareness that this should be done, or how to do it. Those who did usually had not experienced direct violence and had sought out other historical perspectives on the Troubles.⁶ As Lawther (2011) has suggested, many within the PUL community resist the idea that Northern Ireland before the Troubles was unjustly structured to favour their interests. So, it may seem that these perspectives on forgiveness do little to change what opposing groups think about each other, perhaps except for those who advocate unconditional forgiveness. However, the more intractable perspectives should be understood in the context of those individuals’ experiences of the Troubles. In that way, people’s willingness to share stories not about forgiveness, but about the struggle to forgive, may contribute to re-humanization, prompting changes in how people think about the ‘other’. This differs from ‘reframing’, in which victims alone are expected to be ‘moral beacons’, charged with the task of understanding perpetrators’ perspectives. In this way, it is possible that Presbyterians’ varied perspectives on forgiveness (and other matters) may contribute to changes in mindsets among people from previously opposed groups, helping people identify with the pain of the ‘other’. Of course, this assertion is optimistic and as yet untested.

Finally, before proceeding to the data, it is worth reiterating our four-fold framework of gracious remembering, noting that most of the examples from the interviews fit most comfortably in aspects 1 and 2: (1) the rehumanizing of the other by acknowledging the human cost of violence, (2) giving victims a public voice, (3) engaging in self-critical reflection, and (4) listening to alternative interpretations of events.

5.1. No Forgiveness

Some Presbyterians said that there could be no forgiveness or claimed that ministers should not force people to forgive. Resistance to ministers’ advocacy of forgiveness was reflected in the comments of a policewoman (87) who had been injured, speaking about how her colleagues felt:

Any time they go to church they’ll be cursing and swearing at the ministers because all they ever get is that they have to forgive the perpetrators of these horrendous crimes. How can you say to a man who lost two legs and an arm: ‘You have to forgive the people that did that to you?’ That’s obscene. There’s no way Christ, if he walked this earth, would say that. . . . Men and woman have shed tears over ministers saying: ‘You have to forgive and there’s no place for you in God’s kingdom if you don’t forgive.’

She described reading books on forgiveness, which led her to conclude that ‘repentance comes before forgiveness’. Another victim (14) described a visit from her minister, who advised her that she should forgive the perpetrators. She told him, ‘I can’t forgive’, then added:

I don’t think [the minister] was very pleased about that. But to this day I never forgave them. It doesn’t bother me now, but when I’m saying the Lord’s Prayer, I will never say: ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us.’ Funny, I discussed that with the Church of Ireland [Anglican] minister there about three months ago and he said he had several in his congregation that says exactly the same thing.

A Presbyterian minister (3) was a boy when his father was killed. He was inspired by his mother’s forgiveness. He spoke about how the Lord’s Prayer and the parable of the ‘unforgiving servant’ inspired him to forgive. Yet he often found that the forgiveness he preached was not warmly received:

When you’re preaching, there’s application from the word of God that speaks very powerfully into our context in terms of Jesus saying: ‘Love your enemies.

Pray for those who persecute you.’ ... I would have got criticised for things I said from the pulpit where I was encouraging people to put that into practice.

It may seem there is little constructive that can come from the perspective that there should be no forgiveness. However, these comments should be read in light of the interviewees’ wider stories (detailed in [Ganiel and Yohanis 2019](#)), which often involved suffering great physical and emotional pain. Listening to these perspectives is consistent with the idea that victims should have a voice in wider processes of dealing with the past—without forcing them to conform to the forgiving, ‘moral beacon’ model (aspects 1 and 2 of gracious remembering). At the same time, giving unforgiving victims a voice may contribute to a divisive politicization of victims, as [Lawther \(2014\)](#) has demonstrated.

5.2. No Forgiveness without Repentance

Others echoed the traditional Northern Ireland Protestant perspective that links forgiveness with repentance. One (8) said:

... If people repent, and know that they’ve done the wrong, you’ve got to forgive. Because if you don’t forgive, how are you to be forgiven?

A woman whose loved one had been murdered (33) spoke of praying for his killer:

I remember one day [my minister] was praying and I remember thinking of [the killer] as I sat in the pew. I remember praying: ‘Forgive him. Please, he’s got a chance to get to know You. Your judgement’s coming soon and I’m not responsible for it.’ I really prayed that he would seek forgiveness.

Another man (52) whose father had been murdered ruminated on the relationship between repentance and forgiveness, demonstrating its complexity:

Do you have to ask for forgiveness before you’re forgiven? I don’t know. But I think if they came to my door and asked me, I would say ‘yes’. But I don’t think I could use the word now. I can definitely say I’m not bitter and I don’t hold a grudge, but I think that’s very different.

These narratives illustrate that even the simplistic ‘no forgiveness without repentance’ discourse can be more complicated than it appears, as people grapple with whether or to what extent they can forgive without repentance. It also is striking that interviewees who expressed this view spoke in individual victim-perpetrator terms, rather than referencing public apologies on behalf of a group as a type of repentance. It is understandable that individuals who were injured or bereaved would speak in personal terms. However, it also demonstrates that at an institutional level PCI and other churches could do more to promote discourses about political, group-level forgiveness. Again, these narratives illustrate aspects 1 and 2 of gracious remembering and, it could be argued, aspect 3, especially as interviewee 52 grapples self-critically with whether or not he could forgive the perpetrator.

5.3. Unconditional Forgiveness

Among our interviewees, unconditional forgiveness was advocated both by victims and those who had not been injured or bereaved. Non-victims pointed out that they were not victims of direct violence, acknowledging that unconditional forgiveness could be more challenging for those who were. A woman in our ‘quiet peacemakers’ category (92), who had worked with victims, reflected on the futility of waiting for others to repent, urging unconditional forgiveness:

If you go back to the Lord’s Prayer, I think that ultimately forgiveness isn’t an option. If you count yourself to be a follower of Christ, I believe that we are called to forgive no matter how hard that is. Even though you believe you’ve been the victim of injustice, and you believe that those who have done you this injustice, are not repenting of that. Or they don’t perceive that they have even done you an injustice. But ... ultimately, that’s what we’re called to do as Christians.

Growing up through the Troubles, finding Christ [you know] that you've been forgiven for a worse atrocity than anything that has ever happened on the face of the earth ... If you're a believer in Christ, you extend the hand, however hard it might be. Because if you don't, you're going to end up with the same mindset as those that afflicted these atrocities.

Likewise, another (73) referenced Christ's crucifixion as the 'ultimate injustice'. While this put his own loss into perspective, he clarified that forgiveness was a daily challenge, rather than an unconditional, once-and-for-all event:

The thing we would still struggle with is that ... it's not fair. We feel that in a way, so forgiveness becomes a daily challenge, something that we have to do every day. It's not like a decision you make once. It's something you have to be proactive in deciding you're going to do, daily.

These examples counter the previous perspectives of 'no forgiveness' and 'no forgiveness without repentance'. It could be argued that the examples include all four aspects of gracious remembering, as they feature a degree of self-criticism and understanding of other perspectives; for example, when interviewee 92 recognizes that some people 'don't perceive that they have even done you an injustice'. Some people spoke about forgiveness as a covering of the sins of others which one was duty-bound to extend even if it contravened their inner sense of justice and propriety. There was no mention of the empowering support of the Holy Spirit: forgiveness was based merely on a dutiful response to Christ's ethical standards, rather than a gift of grace or an embodied practice (see [Jones 1995](#) on embodied practice). While this is not problematic in a secular context, from the perspective of Christian theology and experience the absence of the Holy Spirit could be considered impoverished. However, others spoke about the responsibility of individuals to forgive based on their relationship with God (interviewee 91), which could point to the action of the Holy Spirit, even if this was not expressed in theological language. At the same time, it is striking that almost no one adopted the language of the 'greater good' used in PCI's 'official' response to the Good Friday Agreement. Forgiveness was spoken about in individualized terms—there was limited awareness of political forms of forgiveness.

6. Towards Gracious Remembering

In societies transitioning from violence, there seems to be 'a human need for remembrance' ([Reiff 2016](#), p. 41). In his provocative *In Praise of Forgetting*, David [Reiff \(2016](#), p. 39) argued that collective historical memories more often lead to 'war rather than peace, to rancour and resentment ... rather than reconciliation, and to the determination to exact revenge rather than commit to the hard work of forgiveness.' Reiff described Ireland as gripped by unhelpful memories of events spanning centuries ([Reiff 2016](#), pp. 102–4). On the surface, Reiff's arguments resonate with a phrase oft repeated in Northern Ireland: there should be 'a line drawn under the past', so that people can forget and move on.

Even Reiff allowed that in cases of recent violence when greater truth could be discovered through truth commissions or other forms of investigation, such avenues should be pursued for the sake of victims and for the historical record ([Reiff 2016](#), pp. 65, 84). In such societies it is impossible to forget because people live with the memories of lost loved ones and/or physical injuries; this is a different type of remembering than valorising the deeds of the long dead. [Reiff \(2016](#), p. 145) also had some sympathy with 'those who insist on the centrality of forgiveness', admitting that they are 'right up to a point'. However, he bleakly concluded: 'forgiving is not enough because it can never escape its own contingency' ([Reiff 2016](#), p. 145). This may be another way of saying that in the face of great wrongs, forgiveness is simply too hard; or that forgiveness and remembering must remain diametrically opposed. As such, reconciliation remains unachievable.

Our research confirmed that forgetting the traumas of the recent past is impossible; it would be unrealistic and immoral to insist that individuals do so. However, if we cannot forgive and forget, the best course of action must be to forgive and remember. This has led to reflection on how to remember better or to remember well ([Ricoeur 2004](#); [Margalit 2004](#)).

However, Reiff (2011, 2016) has argued that such arguments can be over-optimistic. Indeed, remembering well becomes almost impossible in what Brewer (2020, pp. 33–36) has called ‘pathological memory cultures’. Brewer (2020, pp. 34–35) argued that post-violence societies are more likely to develop pathological memory cultures when ‘conservative forms of the Abrahamic faiths dominate’ and when post-violence transitions have been ‘problematic or challenged, with groups mistrusting the carefully negotiated second-preference peace agreement and remaining loyal to mutually-exclusive first preferences.’ By these criteria, Northern Ireland is a paradigmatic example of pathological memory culture. Brewer (2016, p. 9) hinted that this is especially so within Protestantism, where covenantal Calvinist theologies and the ‘no forgiveness without repentance’ discourse have been prominent.

Brewer (2020, p. 35) also lamented that pathological memory cultures ‘lose perspective about the future’. He suggested that this could be addressed by ‘remembering forwards’, an approach featuring commitments to truth, tolerance, togetherness, and trajectory (‘remembering to cease to remember the divisiveness and contentiousness of disputed memories’) (Brewer 2020, p. 43). ‘Remembering forwards’ resonates with Johnston McMaster’s body of work as a public theologian in Northern Ireland, in which he has emphasized the importance of ‘ethical and shared remembering’ (McMaster et al. 2011a, 2011b; McMaster and Hetherington 2011), ‘reimagining the future’ (McMaster 2018), and ‘remembering the future’ (a phrase also associated with Lederach, see Brewer 2016, p. 12).⁷ McMaster, a Methodist minister, has had a long career focused on theologies of reconciliation and community education while employed by the Irish School of Ecumenics and latterly the Junction, a community relations centre in Londonderry/Derry. In 2019, his contributions were recognized with his appointment to the Council of State of the President of Ireland.

McMaster’s (2012) *Overcoming Violence*, a work of popular theology and history, critiqued how Ireland’s churches contributed to cultures of ‘redemptive’ violence. It called on the churches to remember their role in violence and to construct an alternative, non-violent theology, based on how the Bible critiques itself in the counter-witness of the prophets, and Jesus. McMaster further developed ‘ethical and shared remembering’ through his work on a project of that name with the Junction. The project aimed to inform commemorations of the centenaries of contentious events in Ireland between 1912–1922, assuming the events of the more distant past can provide a platform for constructive dialogue in the present, including dialogue about the future.

McMaster understands that commemoration is about the politics of the present rather than about what happened in the past. However, it is not entirely clear whether or to what extent McMaster sees ethical and shared remembering as a realistic approach for remembering the more recent events of the Troubles. Thus, while McMaster recognizes the potential of the churches to contribute constructively to ethical and shared remembering, the overall thrust of his work is that their potential has been relatively untapped. Accordingly, we have developed gracious remembering as a concept in dialogue with our data and some of the key insights of McMaster’s public theology. The use of the term ‘gracious’ highlights the potential of the Presbyterian tradition to critique itself, as it is based on a vernacular understanding of grace expressed by a man whose brother was killed. His words recalled the idea of grace as a gift, freely given and received without conditions, serving as a counterpoint to the ‘no forgiveness without repentance’ discourse, which sees Jesus’ death ‘primarily in judicial terms . . . to satisfy God’s just demand’ (Thomson 2000, p. 8). The emphasis on graciousness situates our concept in realms of faith-based discourses, perhaps even public theology. Moreover, the four aspects of the framework are concerned primarily with practices. This resonates with the insights of theologian Gregory Jones (1995), who in his writings about forgiveness emphasized its embodied aspects, likening it to craft. In contrast to Jones, who urges forgiveness, using the term graciousness allows us to alleviate some pressure to forgive.

Gracious remembering’s four practices were all previously recognized by McMaster (and others) and confirmed over the course of our research, as noted in examples we provided from the interviews. These practices are designed to help create spaces for grassroots,

civil society dialogue, allowing grace to be manifested through (1) the rehumanizing of the other by acknowledging the human cost of violence, (2) giving victims a public voice, (3) engaging in self-critical reflection, and (4) listening to alternative interpretations of events (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, pp. 242–43). As such, gracious remembering is not the same as forgiveness, at individual, social, or political levels: it is even possible that an individual victim could remember graciously without forgiving an individual perpetrator. Rather, gracious remembering should be understood as practices that help to create the conditions in which political forgiveness may be more likely. This makes it a limited concept—less ambitious than other approaches to post-violence remembering, as critiqued by Reiff (2016). Here, it is useful to recall Tarusarira’s (2019) three-fold summary of transformative (political) forgiveness—apology, reparation, and shifts in mindsets. As a framework designed to be implemented at the societal level, guiding grassroots and civil society dialogue, gracious remembering is most likely to address ‘shifts in mindsets’, thereby contributing to just one aspect of political forgiveness.

In this light, it could be argued that Christian leaders could fruitfully reconsider how they speak about forgiveness, given that calls to forgive can be relatively ineffective, even among the faithful. Discourses focused on gracious remembering or grace (and their relationships to political rather than simply interpersonal forgiveness) could be more effective than those focused solely on forgiveness. Such discourses would remain rooted in Christian traditions but avoid emotional pressure while encouraging people to participate in grassroots or civil society dialogue.

Ultimately, we agree with those who have been cautious about claiming too much for the transformative power of religious discourses in post-violence transitions. Yet that does not mean that religious discourses should be stifled or ignored; rather gracious remembering allows us to conceptualize a more modest role for religious discourses and practices of dialogue, especially at the grassroots. Moreover, gracious remembering recognizes that remembering and political forgiveness can be complementary, inter-related, and future orientated.

7. Conclusions

The evidence for religious actors’ contributions to post-violence forgiveness is mixed: sometimes, they put forgiveness on the public agenda in constructive ways; other times, people of faith prove less likely to forgive, contributing to ongoing divisions. Our research does not resolve this ambivalence. Taken together, the varied perspectives on forgiveness found in our research raise questions about the efficacy of the concept of forgiveness when people are faced with traumatic loss.⁸ In contrast, emerging work in the relatively new field of feminist trauma theologies may provide some scope for expressions of grief and anger (O’Donnell and Cross 2020); observations that dovetail with other work by McMaster (2006), in which he argues for the creation of spaces in which people can lament their losses. However, the fact that the Presbyterians in our study had reflected on and wanted to speak about forgiveness points towards the fundamental importance of forgiveness as post-violence societies struggle to deal with the past. This is notable for Northern Ireland, where despite the ongoing controversy about how to deal with the past, public discussions about forgiveness are rare.⁹ The perspectives of victims who advocate forgiveness, such as those in Brewer et al.’s (2018) study, are often overshadowed by the perspectives of victims who do not (Lawther 2014). Public reticence about forgiveness may be linked to a perception that it is just too hard; to the idea that it is better ‘to draw a line under the past’—forgetting what happened to avoid reliving traumas.

We cannot say that the practice of gracious remembering has been rigorously and empirically tested in Northern Ireland, either by PCI or other groups. The COVID-19 pandemic took hold just as PCI’s project was gaining momentum, and its roll-out stalled as ministers and congregations adapted to online services and meeting immediate needs (Ganiel 2021a). Nevertheless, it could be argued that the text of the book based on the research, *Considering Grace*, and its accompanying study resources provide material for the

first three aspects of gracious remembering. Examples have been provided in this article and are further detailed in *Considering Grace*, while examples of self-critical reflection are expanded on in *Considering Grace*. PCI's 2016 'Vision for Society' statement also contained a confession that includes a degree of self-criticality¹⁰:

We confess our failure, to live as Biblically faithful Christian peacebuilders and to promote the counter culture of Jesus in a society where cultures clash. Accordingly, we affirm Christian peacebuilding to be part of Christian discipleship and reassert the Church's calling to pursue a peaceful and just society in our day.

However, this confession lacks specific examples of how PCI failed (specific examples are constitutive of an effective apology) and has not been particularly well-publicized within Presbyterianism or the public sphere, limiting its impact. PCI Moderator David Bruce included a more fulsome analysis of his church's failings in an address at an event marking the centenary of the part played by Union Theological College in hosting the parliament of Northern Ireland, saying¹¹:

Northern Ireland's perception of itself has suffered from a deep and bogus theological conceit from its earliest days, particularly from within my tradition, or parts of it—that it was a bulwark against Rome's inexorable advance, that it, and the Protestant people within it were especially anointed by God.

Bruce's acknowledgement received almost no coverage in the media and failed to penetrate the public consciousness. It was overshadowed by Irish President Michael D. Higgins' decision, a few days earlier, to decline an invitation to attend a service of reflection and hope on the centenary of partition and the creation of Northern Ireland. Ironically, the publicity generated by Higgins meant that when the service took place on 21 October 2021, it received far more publicity than would have been expected. The Church Leaders' Group expanded on their St Patrick's Day confession, and the main speaker, Rev Sahr Yambasu, President of the Methodist Church, chose grace as the main theme of his sermon, saying: 'Grace alone can set free the people of this island from enslavement by the past. The result of the outworking of grace is forgiveness' ([Church Leaders' Group \(Ireland\) 2021](#)). It remains to be seen whether the service will generate wider dialogue and action around these themes.

In addition, PCI's decision at its 2018 General Assembly to deny people in same sex relationships full membership and to prohibit the baptism of children of same sex couples has arguably damaged its reputation as a contributor to civic debates on all issues ([Meredith 2018](#)). Finally, PCI's ability to listen to and absorb alternative interpretations of events has not been fully tested. This is important in light of [Lawther's \(2011\)](#) observations that the inability to move beyond 'the myth of blamelessness' is characteristic of the wider PUL community; and [Brewer et al.'s \(2018\)](#) findings of Protestant victims' sense of helplessness and betrayal.

In sum, gracious remembering is a limited concept, based on a single empirical case. Its vernacular invocation of grace is contextual, recognizing the difficulties of pressuring others to forgive and critiquing Northern Ireland's 'no forgiveness without repentance' discourse. Despite this, we argue for gracious remembering's constructive potential, even while recognizing that it cannot produce political forgiveness on its own. So, gracious remembering is not a form or variant of political forgiveness; rather, it should be understood as helping create conditions in which wider processes of political forgiveness become more likely. Here, we have in mind multi-faceted conceptions of political forgiveness, like those put forward by Digeser, Amstutz, Tarusarira, and others. Multi-faceted conceptions of political forgiveness require more robust interventions by the state and other political actors, especially in the areas of apology and structural change. We are mindful of Catherine Lu's (2017) admonition that structural change is the most important aspect for achieving a lasting reconciliation. In that light, the British government's 2021 amnesty proposals are particularly unhelpful. These not only appear to favour the interests of the British Army over others, they also have scuppered other measures previously proposed for dealing

with the past. Grassroots efforts, no matter how effective, cannot substitute for the types of structural change that can accompany effectively implemented state initiatives. At the same time, gracious remembering's mechanisms for grassroots dialogue could be tested in other contexts that are struggling with post-violence transitions, with its emphasis on practices helping to minimize emotional pressure to forgive. Ultimately, gracious remembering's limitations may also be a strength, presenting a more realistic image of how religious actors can contribute to political forgiveness, in even a small way.

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Notes

- ¹ PCI, 'Response of the Church and Government Committee Following the Publication of the Belfast Agreement', supplied to authors by Rev John Dunlop, co-chair (with George McCullagh) of Committee (24 April 1998). The document supports prisoner releases only for those who did not kill.
- ² Full statement at <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/Utility/About-Us/Statements/Vision-for-Society-Statement.aspx>, accessed on 24 June 2020.
- ³ Clonard is a Redemptorist Monastery.
- ⁴ Dyrstad and Binningsbo (2019, p. 155) find that 'overall, victims are not more prone to support punitive reactions against perpetrators'. Strength of group identity strongly predicts support for punishment.
- ⁵ Interviewees are given a random number to protect anonymity. In the book based on the research, *Considering Grace*, most interviewees were given pseudonyms and the opportunity to read their story prior to publication.
- ⁶ See examples in (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, pp. 138–40, 143–45).
- ⁷ McMaster's body of work includes numerous popular books and pamphlets, many co-authored with his long-time collaborator Cathy Higgins. Many can be found on the Junction's website, <https://thejunction-ni.org/publications/>, accessed on 27 September 2021.
- ⁸ I am grateful to David Tombs for this point.
- ⁹ For an exception, see the 2019 4 Corners Festival in Belfast, with the theme 'scandalous forgiveness', <https://web.archive.org/web/20190119051803/https://4cornersfestival.com/>, accessed on 13 December 2021.
- ¹⁰ Full statement: <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/Utility/About-Us/Statements/Vision-for-Society-Statement.aspx>, accessed on 24 June 2020.
- ¹¹ Gladys Ganiel. 26 September 2021. <https://sluggerotoole.com/2021/09/26/the-service-of-reflection-hope-an-opportunity-for-the-church-leaders/>, accessed on 5 October 2021.

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