CHARLESTON AND CHRISTCHURCH AND THE POLITICS OF POSTRACIAL FORGIVENESS

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Abstract: This article explores the political work of forgiveness in a secular liberal West by examining the aftermath of two white supremacist violent events: the Charleston church attack in 2015 and the Christchurch mosque attacks in 2019. The article examines how the exaltation of forgiveness over anger after such events is symptomatic of what David Theo Goldberg (2015) calls the “postracial” turn which denies the structural harm of racism and privileges social unity at a time when racism bears its most violent face. What can be ascertained in centring forgiveness, and therefore the unifying figure of the victim of white supremacist violence, is how the postracial conceals the persistence of race as the secular investment and regulation in the articulation of religion in public life.

Key words: postracial, forgiveness, white supremacy, Islamophobia, anti-Black racism, secularism

After witnessing 51 members of his community in Christchurch murdered, including his wife Husna, Farid Ahmed, a survivor of the 15 March 2019 attacks by white supremacist Brenton Tarrant, sits with United States President Donald Trump, whose presidency has been embroiled in charges of white supremacy. Surrounded by a group of 27 survivors of persecuted religious minorities, Ahmed volunteers to speak: “Thank you for your leadership, standing up for humanity, standing up for religious groups and their rights and thank you for supporting us after the 15 March tragedy in Christchurch. God bless you, and God bless United States” (Stuff NZ 2019).

Only days earlier, Trump launched a series of anti-immigration tweets against four US Congresswomen of colour, one of whom was Ilhan Omar, a Somali Muslim. The tweets excited crowds at his rallies to chant, “Send her back, send her back!” (McCarthy 2019). The chants echo a presidency defined by a “Muslim ban” and building walls that would keep out immigrants (Woodhouse 2018). In contrast to this divisive campaigning, it is curious that Trump now welcomes and sits with a Muslim, who thanks him for attending the event as a show of solidarity against the persecution of minorities.
Government and religion convene in this scene of unity against the forces of political violence. Ahmed, however, later explained that he was not there for politics but religious freedom. As he was the only survivor who had offered forgiveness in the aftermath of one of the most violent anti-Muslim incidents in decades, the invitation by the US administration requires further examination.

The theme of the forgiving victim of racial violence is an intriguing reoccurrence. Only a few years earlier, the ideology of white supremacy had targeted another minority community and their religious site. On 17 June 2015, Dylann Roof shot nine members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. In the days that followed, and to the astonishment of many, some family members of the victims offered their forgiveness. Acknowledging the immensity of her loss, Nadine Collier, the daughter of one of the victims, 71-year-old Ethel Lance, said to Roof, “you hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. But if God forgives you, I forgive you” (BBC News 2015). In both Charleston and Christchurch, forgiveness transpired in the absence of an apology and remorse.

This article critically examines these scenes of unity and compassion in the aftermath of racist attacks on minorities. It contends that a West, professing commitment to values and principles of individual freedom, secularism, and democratic ethics, exalts forgiveness. This exaltation, a technique of power that constitutes a particular type of ideal subject that is distinct for nation-building (Thobani 2007: 5), expects victims of racist violence to favour unity over politics – an expectation discerned in Ahmed’s emphasis on religious freedom over politics – even at a time when anti-Muslim and anti-Black racism is on the rise (Daalder 2019; Levin 2019). Amidst increasing white supremacist violence, the key tension explored in this article is how this expectation, which I argue is invested in a liberal secular ontology, assigns a political role to forgiveness that aims to unify rather than to seek recognition for racism as a “structural injustice” (Young 2011). The expectation to forgive strips forgiveness of a more substantive religious intent and therefore its social and political power, sanitising it within liberal secular understandings of the virtuous.

There is something hasty in the way forgiveness and its public celebration occur while there is a lack of tending to the injury. Forgiveness can obscure and impede the harm we are dealing with, and cover cracks and the possibility for justice and accountability. The purpose of questioning forgiveness is not to undermine the moral valence of forgiveness or take something away from individuals and families who do forgive the wrongdoer, but to examine how the haste to forgive and its exaltation is prompted by genealogies of racial judgement and an effort to distance oneself from white liberal reproach. Further, political risk of an unconditional forgiveness rests on the troubling assumptions that unity is the
solution or that forgiveness can take place on behalf of the dead in Charleston and Christchurch. The right to withdraw forgiveness shadows the queries of Thomas Brudholm (2006) who forces us to think more critically about rendering anger and resentment in unforgiving victims as merely destructive, thereby eliminating other ways of recognising harm and seeking justice.

In studies of forgiveness, there has been less attention given to victims of recent white supremacist violence. Much of the literature considers forgiveness in a post-conflict or ongoing historical national reconciliation process. Examination of forgiveness and reconciliation in the context of an active white supremacist resurgence needs urgent attention.

White supremacy is globally on the rise, with growing interconnections (Cai and Landon 2019). It has been behind a majority of deaths, superseding “Muslim extremism” which has been the main target of counter-terrorism and de-radicalisation initiatives over the past two decades (Kundani 2014). Since 2011, 175 people have been killed in 16 incidents of high-profile, far-right, and white nationalist violence (Beckett 2019). One way of explaining the reluctance of security paradigms to include “far-right extremism”, as it is now labelled, reveals more than simply a selective definition of security and terrorism. I propose we think about this blind spot as a symptom of what David Goldberg calls the “postracial”, which identifies a belief that society has moved on from the confines of organising social life around race. Goldberg explains the postracial as “far from being an end to race” but a “neo-raciality” that extends racism (Goldberg 2015: 24). In the postracial world, which has claimed to have departed from colonial domination, the prospect for justice is governed through a spectre of postracial forgiveness which pacifies resentment and anger, ritualising an end to conflict in Western society which has already declared an end to history.

The contemporary turn toward inclusivity, diversity, and multiculturalism surrounds itself in the denunciation of a legacy of race, paving the way for the postracial. Incidents of white supremacists’ violence are then taken as extremism and isolated racial expressions, such as a “lone wolf scenario” rather than a structural phenomenon. The racial preoccupation with Muslims as a problem articulated in counter-terrorism, liberal critiques of Islam’s cultural practices in relation to women, and anti-Muslim attacks by members of the public, are similarly disavowed as opposition to Islam as a political ideology. The postracial departs from race but stays committed to racism, leaving it unmarked. As Goldberg contends, racist violence is intensified precisely because racism is made unrecognisable and the belief that it no longer exists dominates (Goldberg 2015: 127).

The article contends forgiveness is a postracial practice that depoliticises oppositional responses to anti-Black racism, and Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism (Sayyid 2010; Allen 2010). The choice of case studies enables a tracing of the
postracial by identifying the ways in which race and religion have been intimately bound historically as markers of difference – that is, to produce racial seeing, knowledge, and practice. As recent studies have determined, racial configurations were built on religious differences between Christians and Muslims in Europe and rationalised dehumanising strategies to establish boundaries of belonging (Grosfoguel and Mielants 2006; Medovoi 2012; Mignolo 2011). Acknowledging this history, which feeds and gives political life to the new racial expression of the postracial, Goldberg (2015) contends race is now the “secularisation of the religious.” Like pre-modern European religious practices of romanticised belonging, exclusion, and expulsion, race took on religion’s commitment in shaping belonging and preclusion (Goldberg 2015: 8–9). Goldberg’s assessment is situated in a wider pattern of theories considering how theological boundaries of inclusion and exclusion have shaped racial and colonial investments in securing differences to establish zones of being and non-being (Fanon 2008) and the category of what it means to be human (Wynter 2003). That is to say, the modern state has deployed categories of “religion” and “race” and specific forms of violence to organise inclusion and exclusion. The secularisation of the religious qua race can now be detected on a scale of “radicalisation” and “deradicalisation” that arbitrates Black and Muslim commitment to the nation state or a faith that is otherwise.

Framing the case studies through a postracial lens also invites deeper analysis of the political effects of emphasising forgiveness in the absence of any apology or remorse. Along with the Jewish community, Black and Muslim communities have been frequent targets of a growing, global, white supremacist movement over the past decade. However, unlike the Jewish community, forgiveness has had prominence in the aftermath of these attacks against the Black and Muslim community. The case studies of Charleston and Christchurch enable me to draw the links between anti-Black racism and anti-Muslim racism and its disciplining effects on Black and Muslim expression. They are also religious communities – Muslim and Christian – who have demonstrated a religious-based forgiveness. Charleston and Christchurch allow an exploration of how religion as a universal category (Asad 1993) via forgiveness is shaped and repurposed for the civilising effects of secular expectations. Histories rooted in slavery, which saw Blackness, much like Muslim theology, as violent and vengeful, have also fashioned, albeit differently, a performative distancing from such aggressive representations of both communities. These scenes of forgiveness are also rooted in genealogies that problematise being Black and Muslim.

Turning to Talal Asad is helpful to examining this reworking of religion in modernity. Asad deploys “the secular” as a marker of modernism’s sensibilities on how politics should be conducted and how it assigns religion not a private role but a carefully curated role in public life. Secularism governs the sacred.
Therefore, it is a productive force in the making of religion in modern life. This secular expectation strips the religious of a political will, that is, the possibility of a countergovernmentality (see Medovoi 2012), to moderate and contain what it perceives as the irrational excesses of religious passions. It manifests also in a history of Western anxiety about the ungovernability of Black and Muslim political anger as it is rooted in the politicisation of religion (Asad 2003; Cavanaugh 2004, 2011). What can be ascertained in the exaltation of the forgiving and, therefore, the unifying figure of the victim of white supremacist violence is how the postracial conceals the persistence of race in the secularisation of the religious and the secular investment in the articulation of religion in public life.

Studies have examined how the debate on multiculturalism across Europe, North America and Australia has not only been securitised but witness to a hollowing out of difference (Hage 1999; Seth 2001; Lentin and Tilty 2011) in the name of social cohesion founded on not cultural sameness but political sameness. In governing difference, multiculturalism relies on racialised difference to produce whiteness (Hage 1999; Mackey 2002) and commodifies diversity for global capitalism (Žižek 1997; Badiou 2001). In this climate, forgiveness upholds the postracial subject who expunges responsibility in addressing the legacy of racism for the sake of a postracial social unity. In public discourse, Black and Muslim visibility are then domesticated through liberal interlocutors and a depoliticising narrative of condemnation, resilience, and moving forward as a nation (Mohamud and Ghumkhor 2017; Marshall 2020). An examination of forgiveness is also more urgent at a time when this postracial unity has been powerfully challenged in the United States, which is facing its largest civil rights unrest since the 1960s. Led by the Black Lives Matter movement against racial injustice, the global resonance of this message has shattered the postracial claim that we have moved on from legacies of racial practice. The anger that permeates these protests reveals the breakdown of civil dialogue and the limitations of forgiveness as a postracial assessment or a resolution.

The exaltation of forgiveness

On 17 June 2015, 21-year-old Dylann Roof walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, sat through a Bible study class and prayed with the congregation. As the class came to end, he began shooting, killing nine people and injuring one. The motivation for the shooting spree was documented on his website The Last Rhodesian, which included images of him wearing symbols of white supremacy and Nazism and a manifesto which reveals he was ‘radicalised’ after the shooting of African American teenager Trayvon Martin and the Black Lives Matter protests that it spurred, which he saw as Black people trying to take over the
US. Soon after his arrest, he told police that he was motivated to start a race war, corroborating victims’ reports that Roof was shouting “You rape our women, and you’re taking over our country. And you have to go” (Jorgensen 2017: 340).

Two days later, through a video link at his bond hearing, Roof listened with a blank face to family members of the victims who had the opportunity to speak. To the surprise of many, while reflecting on their loss, some of the family members had words of forgiveness. In addition to Nadine Collier, Chris Singleton who lost his mother also chose to forgive: “It takes a lot more courage to forgive than it does to say, ‘I’m going to be upset about whatever forever’” (Ali 2019). Forgiveness, in these accounts, demonstrated a commitment to Christian faith, courage, resilience, and humanity in the face of such unconscionable violent horror, and was received with praise and awe by the public. Thereby, forgiveness is seen as a refusal to mirror the barbarism of the violence and distinguish oneself from it. It even inspired the documentary film *Emanuel* produced by actress Viola Davis and NBA player Stephen Curry on the power of forgiveness.

In contrast, Roof did not display any remorse, only apologising to his parents. Writing in his journal from jail, he explains,

[I] do not regret what I did . . . I am not sorry . . . I do feel sorry for the innocent white children forced to live in this sick country and I do feel sorry for the innocent white people who are killed daily by the hands of a lower race. (Blinder and Sack 2017)

There is an unwavering defiance in Roof’s words, a cold and calculating rhetoric comparable only to another young white supremacist who devoted himself to his own violent resolution. Four years later, on 15 March 2019, 28-year-old Australian Brenton Tarrant walked into Al Noor and Linwood mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, during Friday prayers and began shooting at over 400 people gathered. The violent rampage and his escape were broadcast live for 17 minutes from his body camera. He only stopped when he was disarmed by a worshipper as he was trying to reload, causing him to flee and later be apprehended by police. Tarrant killed 51 people and injured 49. Like Roof, and their predecessor white supremacist Anders Breivik who killed 77 people in Oslo a decade earlier, Tarrant left a manifesto outlining his motive for the shootings. It reveals his global network of white supremacist groups, notes on histories of wars with Muslims such as the Crusades, and the continuation of its legacy by resisting Muslim ‘invaders’ whose continued presence in the West was a threat to the racial and cultural existence of the white race.

While much of the coverage detailed the harrowing events that unfolded in Christchurch, one of the most circulated stories was the story of Farid Ahmed (RNZ 2019). His was a story of more than survival. It was one of forgiving Islamophobia. In contrast, Tarrant did not offer an apology, nor seek forgiveness, and it was
reported that he was laughing in court. When Tarrant entered the Al Noor mosque, Farid Ahmed’s wife Husna rushed the children to safety and went back to get her wheelchair-bound husband. She was shot dead protecting him. To the surprise of journalists and the public, within days, Ahmed declared:

I love that person because he is a human, a brother of mine. I do not support what he did. But maybe he was hurt. . . . I have forgiven him and I am sure if my wife was alive she would have done the same thing. I hold no grudge. (Leask 2019)

Ahmed’s gesture of forgiveness has a performative effect in speaking to a deeper wisdom of a universal human condition beyond his particular circumstances. The appeal to a universal humanity by victims is a language, to borrow from Spivak (1999: 9), one cannot not want; to speak as victims and therefore, be intelligible as victims. The problem however is what Spivak warns of the conditions of speaking: who is the subject that comes to be known and on what terms? The language through which Muslims articulate themselves has been shaped by at least two decades of Islamophobia which has recognised Muslims as confessional subjects whose speech must repudiate terrorism to be identified as a “good Muslim” (see Mamdani 2005). Treated with suspicion, the social pressure to condemn and attest loyalty appeals to public fears of the potential threat posed by Muslims. The point here is not that Muslims are directly asked to forgive Islamophobia or that Ahmed is insincere in his offering, but the hastiness of this gesture cannot entirely be divorced from the performative distancing that has been expected as a condition to humanise Muslims. For Muslims to be human is to subscribe to the desires and choices of a liberal order which makes the conditions of speaking impossible without tending to white anxiety (Morsi 2017). This moderating effect has relied on the conflation of increasing religious practice with “radicalisation” which fuels the political economy of the war on terror (Kundani 2014).

Each gesture of forgiveness isolates the harmful act, enclosing it within a liberal narrative of a destructive irrational hate by the perpetrator and the personal loss and tragedy of the singular victim. These violent men, however, were not just individuals with guns. They had conscripted history dressed in the ruthless symbolism of white supremacy to deliver a message beyond themselves. Tarrant had carefully selected his target. Christchurch was chosen to buttress the white supremacist avowal of the threat immigration, particularly Muslim, poses to the cultural and demographic makeup of the Euro-American world. He chose Friday because he knew that it was a holy day of the week when Muslims would congregate in higher numbers and viewed it as an opportunity to maximise the death toll. Engraved on his guns were far-right and Nazi symbols, the names of historical heroes and victims of his Muslim enemy. He also played Serbian nationalist music played during the massacres of Bosnian Muslims in the 1992–5 war that broke up Yugoslavia (Associated Press 2019).
In the case of Roof, the targeting of the particular church was also significant. The church was first established predominantly by black slaves in 1816 and became the location to plan a slave rebellion. During the Civil Rights period, it was a site of peaceful protests and police violence. After the Civil War, it was rebuilt but continued to be treated with suspicion and surveillance (Jorgensen 2017: 339–40). Therefore, the violence that came to Charleston and Christchurch had a wider historical and racial continuity.

With the history of anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism serving as a context, forgiveness here derails urgent conversations about the past, preferring history’s closure in the act of “coming together” (McGonegal 2009: 17). It is not surprising then that forgiveness becomes the foremost theme in the public reception of these events. In their analysis of the media coverage of Charleston, Johnson and Fisher (2019) argue that a curious shift towards themes of forgiveness takes place in the aftermath of these violent incidents. Though there were members of the family who did not forgive (ibid., 8), coverage was heavily skewed towards the power of forgiveness through press interviews, articles, and documentaries. The public expects a “rhetoric of forgiveness” and the offer of a “non-threatening” forgiveness (ibid., 5). We see here how an acceptable expression of modern Christian religiosity in the public domain is carefully curated in the form of unconditional non-threatening forgiveness.

Forgiveness can be to a degree an empowering and healing act that re-establishes the power of the victim to draw definitive moral boundaries (Gobodo-Madikizela 2002; Diamond and Ronel 2019). Marking the first anniversary of Christchurch, Farid Ahmed’s reflections seem to corroborate this positive victimology wherein forgiveness heals the victim, allowing them to move on from the injury. A year on, while speaking about a book he wrote about his wife, Ahmed offers more compassionate words on behalf of his daughter and himself: “Our acceptance has given us peace in mind, comfort in heart. We do not suffer from anger, rage, revengeful mood and have forgiven the killer” (Leask 2020).

While examples like that of South Africa, which situates forgiveness not as the prime focus but a possibility in the process of truth-telling and listening – however flawed – the circulation of Ahmed’s singular story of unconditional forgiveness is a telling sign of a public and institutional preference for a forgiving victim. His story was one of the few victims’ testimonies, beyond their heroism, that was covered extensively by local and international media, including the BBC News (2019) and CNN (Hu and Thornton 2019). He has also been invited to speak around the world, including England, the US, and Australia, and praised for diminishing community anger. New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, also specifically commented on Ahmed’s gesture and extolled his admirable commitment to forgive despite having the least reason to do so (O’Callaghan 2020). She followed
these comments at a United Nations conference in her reflections on Gandhi, praising more broadly the Muslim community for breaking “a potential cycle of violence” by opening up to the nation and sowing “seeds of diversity, humanity, forgiveness and aroha [love]” (TVNZ News 1 2019). It seemed that the options for Muslim responses were either reconciliatory to maintain peace or reactionary with potential violence. This was an admission on the part of the head of state that the Muslims’ victimhood remained precarious and could slip into violent retaliation.

In her critical reflections on forgiveness, Martha Minow asks, “what responses do or could lie between vengeance and forgiveness, if legal and cultural institutions offered other avenues for individuals and nations?” (Minow 1998: 21). Ardern it seems relies on this binary of vengeance and forgiveness to affirm that the only path for peace and empowerment is turning away from hate and therefore, any feelings of anger and resentment. The alternative would be continuing the cycle of violence which curiously creates equivalences between those who are on the receiving end of racism and those who are empowered by racism.

A threatening alternative has led to an obsession with forgiveness (Mujawayo and Belhaddad 2006) as an essential, if not the only, condition for reconciliation by non-governmental organisations, healthcare workers, conflict mediators, religious leaders, and in scholarship (Brudholm and Rosoux 2009: 115). This fixation hinges on the belief that forgiveness is a human value which enhances the capacity for reconciliation and unity. Unlike anger and resentment, which fester and hold on to the injury caused, forgiveness enables the potential to step beyond oneself. It invites the possibility of the wrongdoer being received with compassion, generosity, and moral love to which the wrongdoer has no right (Enright and Fitzgibbons cited in Morris 2019: 2–3). What drives this investment in forgiveness is the belief in its possibilities: to reimagine and reconstruct the past, present, and future. The ideal becomes one of “victims overcoming anger and desires for revenge or retribution” in an emotional transformation (Brudholm 2006: 9). In this exaltation of forgiveness, the gesture becomes moral, virtuous, just, and therapeutic, and to refuse is its reverse or even to risk the future of the nation as it was framed in South Africa (Tutu 2000). In the process of exaltation forgiveness is “a form of existential and ontological capital” that can be claimed by ideal national subjects of the colonial project in relation to others (Thobani 2007: 5) – in this case, the others as resentful and angry victims.

In his critique of the Truth and Reconciliation model in South Africa, Derrida argues for a forgiveness without conditions and direction. Forgiveness for him is not a reconciliation but a gift; it has no conditions, no exchange, nor aiming for normality but an extraordinary act in the face of the impossible – “forgiveness only forgives the unforgiveable”, he insists (Derrida 2001: 32). A forgiveness which comes with conditions (salvation, reconciliation), which he argues is the forgiveness of Abrahamic traditions, is not forgiveness. What is required of an
unforgiveable system like apartheid, the most manifest contemporary system of white supremacy, is an extraordinary act of unforgivable forgiveness. This gesture, however, runs a collective risk to generations of Black South Africans of what this would mean for a newly forming path towards justice, as an unconditional forgiveness of ongoing white supremacist violence would today. Derrida assumes forgiveness of systemic violence is an exceptional, individual act alone, thus reinforcing a liberal ontology of diagnosing and resolving racism through grand individual expression. It risks exceptionalising the gesture and echoes the postracial effort to exceptionalise the violence. Extraordinary evil met with an extraordinary gift elides responsibility that exceeds the individual.

An individual act can be therapeutic, especially for those consumed by feelings of anger and revenge (Minow 1998: 20), but individual acts that invoke the collective such as Black religiosity or Muslim religiosity move beyond the individual act, positing forgiveness as unconditional by way of religious practice. Thereby, it runs the risk of forgetting. To exalt forgiveness as a means of arriving at peace and empowerment transposes it into a demand for others to forgive and, therefore, is an act of silencing. It does not recognise the injury incurred as that of someone like Ahmed alone but belongs to his dead wife, to other Christchurch victims, and the wider Muslim community who were the target of a historical continuity that shared no script with the victim and foreclosed on a possibility of justice and reconciliation (see Minow 1998: 18). In this vein, neither Derrida’s unconditional forgiveness nor conditional forgiveness can replace collective recognition for what is just and the option for revenge and punishment.

Ahmed’s forgiveness and Ardern’s exaltation of the broader community response as one of forgiving are depoliticising as they occur in the absence of other avenues, including state investigation into the history of Islamophobia and far-right activities. The main purpose of the current Royal Commission into Christchurch attacks, which was initially criticised for excluding the Muslim community in its consultations, mainly traced Tarrant’s radicalisation as an individual and neither investigated growing Islamophobia nor the wider activities of the far-right in New Zealand (Royal Commission 2020). With the absence of a demand for justice and the expectation of repentance, Ahmed’s unconditional forgiveness is one that is non-threatening. We can trace liberal notions of harm, ideal speech, and ideal victimhood in the investigation’s individual-focused approach mirroring Ahmed’s individual exercise of mercy.

The cost of forgiveness

Are Charleston and Christchurch the exceptional examples Derrida has in mind where forgiveness defies expectations? What if, in the racial context, the expectations are, to follow Johnson and Fisher’s (2019) findings, that victims do the
unthinkable: forgive the unforgiveable? What are the costs of expecting – perhaps even idealising – unconditional forgiveness from victims of political violence (see McGonegal 2009)? Derrida (2001) warns that forgiveness should not further victimise the victims. However, the institutional capacity for victims of white supremacist violence in Charleston and Christchurch to air grievances was not only absent but discouraged by moral and social expectations, as racism is not viewed as a social problem; these acts are viewed as extremism. The unifying post-racial phrase from Jacinda Ardern “they are us”, which gained momentum after the attacks, quickly swept up any uncertainty on the continued afflictions of racism and where Muslims stand in the nation. The phrase, however, also reveals that inclusion hinges on a conditional assimilationist process where they (Muslims) are to be invited into the us (the nation) if they perform the forgiving (“good”) Muslim. This inclusion is first marked by an exclusion whose ominous trace remains.

The exaltation of forgiveness suppresses and rehabilitates post-racial tensions in countries which claim to have moved on from their history of racial injustice. In its efforts to conceal what Ann Laura Stoler describes as the more insidious and elusive traces of imperial history’s ongoing processes of ruination in the form of contemporary inequities (Stoler 2013), forgiveness sanitises events and isolates the pain and suffering of victims of legacies of racist practices today. The post-racial turn quarantines racial violence, splitting it from a legacy of racism, colonialism, slavery, and Jim Crow laws. However, these aggrieved historical terrains continue to inform law enforcement and the criminal justice system’s relationship with African Americans in terms of policing and mass incarceration which has galvanised the Black Lives Matter movement (Alexander 2012; Browne 2015; Taylor 2016). In the case of Muslims, a history exists of the war on terror’s criminalisation of Muslims through surveillance, counter-terrorism measures (Mamdani 2005; Razack 2008; Kundnani 2014; Tufail and Poynting 2016), and a systemic neglect in recognising Islamophobia as a racial harm requiring legal protection (Tolley 2020).

In addition to race denialism, the liberal investment in forgiveness is also rooted in genealogies of violent and unforgiving Blackness and Muslim theology, which shape a Western liberal imaginary that overdetermines the dangers of Black and Muslim political agency as exceedingly masculinised in a contextless rage (Lewis 1990) which can only attribute anger and resentment to cultural pathologies, signalling securitised relations with the state. In addition to “Islamic extremism”, the FBI have warned that the Black Lives Matter activism poses threats to social cohesion and law enforcement through “black identity extremism” (Speri 2019). These racial imaginings have instituted legal and political measures in response to white historical fears of being overwhelmed, replaced, and even punished. Law enforcement and counter-terrorism then become a therapy for what Brudholm identifies
as the “pathologisation of anger [that] facilitates a ‘blindness’ to the moral demands and critiques that maybe inherent to victims’ anger after mass atrocity” (Brudholm 2006: 9). Building on Brudholm, Glen Sean Coulthard reminds us about Frantz Fanon’s contention that anger and resentment can be a form of witnessing, resisting the settler colonial nation’s assimilationist efforts. In the refusal to reconcile there is potential for a self-affirmative and decolonising praxis to emerge (2014: 109).

Drawing on the historical legacy of racism, in her response to Charleston, Roxane Gay argues that forgiveness does not absolve America of its racist past. Forgiveness perpetuates the problem as “white silence in the face of racism continues to thrive” (Gay 2015). Forgiveness reinforces and preserves “white fragility” (Johnson and Fisher 2019: 12), and “white innocence” (Wekker 2016) to safeguard national unity. Nowhere was this image of redemption most powerfully expressed than in Jacinda Ardern wearing the hijab in a gesture of humility, identification, and unity with the Muslim community. The image, widely circulated around the world, became one of the most iconic and celebrated images of leadership in times of crisis, a powerful testament to national solidarity and mourning. This was echoed by a national day of mourning where many women in New Zealand wore a hijab in support of the community. The donning of the hijab in the aftermath of racism’s most violent articulation as a gesture of solidarity also signals the political work of the postracial, strengthening its resolve even as it is challenged by recruiting the “nonracial” middle ground where racial mixing, hybridity, and multiculturalism assume everyone is getting along (see Goldberg 2015). Obscured from the frame is the historical racial context – the lobbying from Muslims, or pleas as one community member put it – responding to the growing threat of Islamophobia and the securitisation of government and Muslim relations (Rahman 2019). In the process of muting the racial through its negation or distinctive denial, raciality mutates into multiculturalism (Goldberg 2015: 22). The repetition of Ardern’s exalted image, along with the hypnotic celebration of her leadership, became a symbol of not only national unity but non-racial multiculturalism which submerged any critical debate on the racial significance of the event.

“The secularisation of the religious”: postracial forgiveness

The erasing effects of Ardern’s solidarity image also has the ambition to project a future orientation which the “post” in the postracial signals. The progressive thrust as the prophylactic for any contemporary racial expression colludes with a secular trajectory that claims to disenchant society from religious thinking in the name of modernity. In this progressive vision, the postracial is a secular practice that intersects with and oversees the religious motives that embody forgiveness.
The capacity to forgive mass atrocity where language often fails, stuns as it marvels, like something transcendental, tempting silence in the face of it (Tutu 2000). Indeed, many of the cases of forgiveness in the face of unconscionable crimes are enthused with religious faith. Charleston and Christchurch are no exceptions. Muslim tradition centres on Prophet Mohammed’s way of life (Sunnah) embodied in virtues of mercy, compassion, and understanding. Islamic tradition encourages forgiveness, but it also offers alternatives for justice, such as execution or monetary compensation which, to different degrees, establish conditions for reconciliation but do not guarantee it (Abu-Nimer and Nasser 2013; Brown 2016). Similarly, Black Christian forgiveness privileges forgiveness but with the purpose of moral strength, survival, and overcoming (Wedderburn and Carey 2017; Morris 2019; Johnson and Fisher 2019). Considering the genealogies of violence rooted in slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, shaping white liberal fear of a vengeful violent Blackness and Muslim theology, these traditions of religious forgiveness are shaped by a performative distancing from historical judgements. Religious traditions of mercy and forgiveness are therefore narrowed in their social purpose and usurped to bound victims to only a depoliticised narrative of a singular humanity, healing, and unity. Or in the case of Derrida, whose secularisation of Abrahamic practices of mercy removes conditions, to bound the already forgiving victim of communities on the margins, to an abyss of possibilities over which they have no control.

Tracing forgiveness in the violence of policing such as the 2019 Dallas case of police officer Amber Guyger who shot her black neighbour Botham Jeans in his own home and was forgiven by the victim’s brother, Daniel A. Morris (2019) observes how examples of unprompted forgiveness as black defiance long established in its Christian tradition are often lost on white audiences. Widening the lens on public reception to other examples forgiveness one must question whether it is a tradition that is misunderstood by white audiences or apprehended in a form that reveals how religious practice is repurposed for extolling the virtues of modern secular sensibilities, which defines ethics around emotional constraint, a triumph of rationality over one’s passion.

It is difficult to disentangle “religion” from “race”, and therefore the politics of its expression and reception in the history of America’s relationship with the Black community. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., two of the leading Black figures of the twentieth century, were spiritual leaders of Black Muslim and Christian communities, embodying two modes of Black religiosity. Today, they are positioned as peace maker versus “radical” in white America’s imaginary to interpret a more authentic Black tradition in King’s legacy. What is omitted in this tale of two Black leaders is how their commitment to racial justice as part of a Black insurgency made them the target of white supremacy (Kahn and Vinent 2016). Malcolm X, as
a Muslim politicised against America’s racial violence, has been rendered an unassimilable figure. The politicisation of people around the world as Muslims under the rubric of Islamism or political Islam has similarly been projected onto disparate groups – “bad Muslims” (see Mamdani 2005) evidencing Islam’s incompatibility with modern society. Labelling politicised Muslims as radicalised, fundamentalist, dangerous, and extremist is not only ahistorical, it performs a cautionary sign to the Western public of where Muslim political anger can lead. Two decades of counter violent extremism and deradicalisation such as RAND’s Moderate Muslim Network program, PREVENT in the UK, and recently France’s anti-separatist law, have seen the state committed to regulating Muslim political emotions.

The “radicalised” symptoms of an uncompromising religiosity have long been a source of secular liberal concern. On the one hand, forgiveness as an “active response” that refuses retribution can be a way in which “religion” enters the realm of politics to challenge Western secular liberalism’s separation of the private and public thereby transforming the public through a gesture of reconciliation (McGonegal 2009: 51). On the other hand, a forgiveness that refuses retribution in times of contemporary and continued racial oppression by white supremacist violence can have less transformative effects on the public, as it is mitigated by secular, moral, and social expectations and sensibilities on how this religious intervention will and should take place. To understand the political work that forgiveness does in being bestowed a sacred status in the aftermath of white supremacist violence, further analysis of the postracial needs to consider how “whiteness” as unmarked (Goldberg 2015; Wekker 2016), a fill-in for the universal, is also recruited to maintain a secular governmentality.

In his genealogy of the secular, Talal Asad (2003: 25) has persuasively argued that it is an epistemological category that organises behaviours, knowledges, and sensibilities on how to be human, in which the doctrine of secularism later establishes legal boundaries to define modern life. Through Asad’s lens the secular is not a mask for religion nor is it separate from religion, but religion overlaps with it, and is interpreted, regulated, and disciplined through it. Asad’s theoretical insights are pertinent to a history that sees the intersections between race and religion in modernism’s fixations on combating our “state of nature”. Built into this progression towards civilisation was the notion of the primitive which was projected onto non-Europeans whose irrational and cultural attachments evidenced underdevelopment. To be civil was to show signs of self-discipline; to emotionally and bodily contain oneself and appear polished (McCintock 1995). To be modern is to be the enlightened liberal subject, an individual who is autonomous and rational and does not succumb to their passions.

While Christianity is moulded into the regulating technologies of the new modern state, Islam has come to be racialised as a still-not-civilised Other that embodies the
excess of past passions. Politics and governance become subject to the calculations of secular liberal tolerance and its new disciplinary concerns (Medovoi 2012). Here we understand how religion’s entry into public life, such as the Black Christian tradition of forgiveness as moral defiance and resilience and the Islamic tradition of emphasising human reconciliation that reflects Allah’s (God’s) mercy as part of restorative justice (Brown 2016), is filtered through ideals of postracial liberal tolerance, confined to its specific individual sensibilities and disciplinary practices that exemplify secular progress in unity. Therefore, the regulation of political emotions is one of secularism’s most effective tools for the domestication of racial and religious difference. Forgiveness as a filtering process corroborates Asad’s observations that secularism is a revising of a post-Reformation Christianity within modernity that governs religious expression in public life, particularly Islam for its absence of separating religious and public life (1993). In other words, we not only see the continuation of a particular Christian experience universalised under secularism via forgiveness, we also see how it assimilates Islamic religiosity.

What about religious subjects such as family members and survivors who do not forgive? Some members in Charleston, such as Reverend Clementa Pinckney’s wife Jennifer Pinckney, did not issue statements (Morris 2019: 18). This did not slide easily into a forgiveness narrative. Moreover, the fuller statements of those who were interpreted as forgiving Roof did not explicitly do so, such as Felicia Sanders and Wanda Simmons who emphasised judgement and justice rather than any mention of forgiveness (Morris 2019: 17). Even Nadine Collier’s forgiveness is conditioned on God’s forgiveness.

In the case of Christchurch, it was only a year later during the sentencing of Tarrant that we heard the wide range of emotions from survivors rather than the sanitised media stories of heroism. These were voices of traumatised if not forgiving victims in the months that followed the attack. Some condemned, threatened, and cursed Tarrant, such as Ahad Nabi who lost his father Haji Mohamed Daoud Nabi and called him a “sheep in wolf’s clothing” who deserves “to be buried in a landfill”, ending with raising both his middle fingers in a final act of defiance (Graham-McLay 2020). There were others who similarly showed less interest in empathy and instead angrily called for justice, but these stories did not receive attention or were not given the opportunity to be expressed until the hearings. Declarations of “takbir- Allahu akbar” (God is the greatest) followed many of these statements, indicating that Islam also authorised the righteous anger expressed that day. Such angry statements and faith declarations, while moving, still occurred within the assimilationist confines of a legal process where liberal justice was to broadcast above all its final judgement on Tarrant the individual.

Two years earlier, the ritual of postracial forgiveness had also appeared as the solution to social ills and serves as a further context for the exaltation of forgiveness at a
time when a resurgence of white nationalism and far-right populism was occurring in the country where Brenton Tarrant was born and raised. As international debate heated up on Donald Trump’s “Muslim ban” which would prevent citizens of some Muslim majority nations from travelling to the US, Australian TV presenter for Channel 9 Sonia Kruger expressed she felt unsafe and supported a similar ban on Muslim immigration. Her comments provoked controversy and in some community quarters, Kruger was condemned for fuelling Islamophobia. Waleed Aly, an Australian Muslim academic and TV presenter for Channel 10’s The Project responded that we should forgive Kruger’s racism and #SendForgivenessViral. Aly stressed the moment as an opportunity for understanding and sympathy rather than fuelling the cycle of outrage (Pâquet 2017: 157).

Aly not only neutralises this political terrain to one of genuine fear and concern, he neglects the postracial predicament where language, positionality, and social power within society still determine who gets to speak and who gets to be heard without reference to race. In dismissing emotions as beyond rational debate (see Nussbaum 2016; Ahmed 2014), he also denies Muslims the right to be angry at racism on religious grounds and places the responsibility on them to prove their secular capacity by casting off their religious affliction through listening and understanding. Antagonism is diagnosed as inhibiting civil rational discourse – that is, secular liberal engagement – by refusing to constrain one’s emotions in the face of a moral injury that embodies incommensurable religious energy. The exclusion of this emotional “excess” in both instances is buoyed in a history of biopolitical governing of “fanaticism” – the collective emotions that fall out of secular liberal perimeters in white fear narratives of Black anger or Muslim rage – which neutralises any internal challenges to a secular trajectory of gradualism and superficial reform (see Toscano 2010: 12–13).

As the only mainstream Muslim TV presenter, Waleed Aly embodies a postracial raciality whose visibility is only relevant, like that of Obama’s blackness, insofar as it can soothe any tensions when racial outbursts occur. Forgiveness here is not only what Morris (2019: 2) calls a “ritual” that preserves the innocence of whiteness, it is also a postracial ritual that preserves the secular appeal for certain kinds of emotions, religious passions in this instance, if restrained, to signal moral superiority. This is a moral autonomy and self-discipline that produces a more rational secular liberal authentic “heroic” self (Asad 2003: 56) who does not shut down political dialogue but reaches out to the other in a civil embrace.

Conclusion

The exaltation of forgiveness produces social pressure on victims or survivors to fit the ideal victimhood (Brudholm and Rosoux 2009). This is a victimhood that
is passive and restrains political and social futures for communities who are left to continue to face the uninhibited forces of a remorseless wrongdoer both in the mode of the individual and the state. Institutional reverence for forgiveness as human virtue or admirable for its restraint seemingly places those feelings from victims which resist unity and reconciliation with nowhere to go. If forgiveness is presented in the liberal West as a moral strength of being human, victims are confronted with one recourse for justice and troubled by a judgement that the refusal to forgive makes them less human.

This article has examined how the exaltation of forgiveness in the aftermath of white supremacist violence is symptomatic of the postracial turn that privileges social unity in a time when racism bears its most violent face. Imposing a narrative of healing and solidarity removes the capacity of community to delay “the coming together” until justice is served. A few days after the attacks in Christchurch, a vigil was held in Auckland, the most diverse city in New Zealand with the highest population of Muslims. It was attended by 4000 people. Some Muslim speakers and anti-racist activists spoke passionately and angrily about Islamophobia and the history of racism in New Zealand. This led to many members of the public walking out in protest. A leading paper New Zealand Herald covered the event with the question: Christchurch Vigil or Political Rally? These critics argued that the vigil was “too political” where people were there to mourn and remember; it was not a time for politics (Neilson 2019).

Considering the political nature of the violence, one must wonder what other time is there for anger to be expressed if not the murder of 51 Muslims? How does one regulate their anger and suspend concern about racism when it has made itself known in its most forceful form? It is as if anger was not already part of remembering and mourning. The curious conflation of anger with the political is not only an admission of the postracial hollowing out of politics, but of secularism’s regulation and exclusion of any difference that exceeds its socio-ethnic arrangement of unity in public life. It prevents Muslims as religious subjects from questioning this vision of unity in an effort to give weight to their moral injury. In this reading, politics is translated as vengeance rather than an avenue for the articulation of grievance. If the political is destructive to the bringing together of people, the choice left for survivors has already been made, and they have been spoken for in disqualifying any resentment and anger attached to their moral demands. Such conclusions warn of justice slipping into injustice, in an exclusionary rehearsal of superficial reform.

Curiously, the moral value placed on forgiveness as reconciliation sits uncomfortably in the absence of a commitment to forgiveness in the preceding, and continuing, decades of mass incarceration and counter-terrorism projects with the sole purpose to criminalise and punish. Even when those who have not participated directly in
terrorism, such as Western citizens who went over to Syria and married members of the Islamic State – pejoratively dubbed “jihadi brides” – are left abandoned along with their children in refugee camps. Forgiveness as a compassionate identification with a universal humanity and a means of restoring unity is not always the preferred and only alternative.

Is the critical engagement with forgiveness meant to dissuade from the ethical potential in forgiveness? We cannot police the responses of individual victims of racial injustice on how they make sense of their experience. Nevertheless, this article considers whether we should identify it as only a personal forgiveness distinguished from the collective, if not only to avoid the risk of depoliticising the conditions on which that violence takes place and continues. It is also to leave room for the possibility of those victims who refuse to forgive, and those victims that the violent encounter with white supremacy has ensured will never speak again. It is also to leave bare the uncomfortable yet necessary prospect that reconciliation might not be possible.

Notes

1 See forgiveness in the context of national efforts for reconciliation and ongoing violence, such as South Africa (Tutu 2000; Gobodo-Madikizela 2002), Northern Ireland (Spencer 2011; Little 2011), Rwanda (Clarke 2010; Kabwete 2018), Australia (Ahmed 2004; Mellor, Bretherton, and Firth 2007; Barta 2008; Muldoon and Schaap 2011), or post-holocaust (Felman 2001; Brudholm 2006; Diamond and Ronel 2019; Banki 2018).

2 This is not the first time Aly has intervened to mediate Muslim emotions and play the role of cultural interlocutor. In 2012 a Sydney protest against a controversial film criticising Islam led to confrontations with the police provoked Aly to describe the protestors as like the “incredible hulk” whose anger is unfounded and “fanatical” in its refusal to compromise (Aly 2012). There was little sign of his sympathetic ear at the time. Muslim anger in these interventions is translated as irrational, destructive, and uncompromising because it is attributed to religious origins and therefore a sign of the failure of Muslims to articulate their concerns in the political rationality of liberal tolerance and secular values.

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