

Solomon Schimmel. *Wounds Not Healed by Time*.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2002

Reviewed by Ronald E. Bartholomew

Solomon Schimmel,¹ a professor of Jewish education and psychology at Hebrew College in Massachusetts, presents a serious, scholarly discussion of revenge, justice, forgiveness, and repentance. In 2002, this book was awarded the best professional and scholarly publication in psychology by the Association of American Publishers. In it, Schimmel presents his arguments in the framework of an analytical comparison of the different perspectives of Christian, Islamic, and Jewish beliefs, with the purported purpose of coming to a clearer understanding of how these phenomena must be dealt with as part of the universal human experience. He also closely examines the differences between the various philosophies of psychology in relation to this focus. However, his personal bias towards the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish traditions overshadow his treatment of the Christian and particularly the Islamic perspectives. In addition, his personal preferences to particular philosophies of psychology are also evident. In these biases are found the weaknesses of this book, and they color his otherwise extremely scholarly presentation of the research.

With that said, the strengths of this book are too numerous for all of them to be mentioned here. Schimmel's treatment of revenge and justice as both psychological phenomena and responses to religious beliefs is exceptional. He asserts that evil is ever present, is perpetrated on all of us, and must be dealt with. He dismisses what he considers a typical Christian view that God's love requires us to forgive all people, regardless of whether or not they repent, or whether or not the demands of justice are met. Schimmel asserts that "the best balm . . . is the proper balance of justice, repentance, and forgiveness" (7). He explores deeply the human need, or perceived need, for revenge and justice, with the important differentiation between "public" and "private" revenge and justice. To do this, he uses examples from history, more often employing examples of Jewish persecution and privation. His major contributions in this section of the

book include his analysis of the evolution of these doctrines in the Old Testament. He navigates the divergent views of biblical writers, from the doctrine that the “iniquity of the fathers” being answered “upon the heads of the children to the third and the fourth generation” (Ex. 34:7), exacting revenge and justice on the often innocent descendants of the perpetrators of the original crimes (for example, the command for Saul to annihilate the Amalekites years after their fathers spurned the Jews), to the later and more widely accepted doctrine taught by Ezekiel: that children were not to be held accountable for their father’s sins (1 Sam. 15; Ezek. 18:20). Another significant contribution is his discussion of the apparent reality that wounded parties can never be objective in terms of the amount of evil perpetrated on them, the actual natures of the perpetrators of evil, or their deserved punishments—and that objective third parties should always be called upon to examine and resolve such matters.

After a detailed analysis of what forgiveness is and, more importantly, what it is not, Schimmel discusses why and when to forgive. His comparative analysis of the conflicting doctrinal foundations of Judaism and Christianity in this regard, juxtaposed against agnostic and atheistic beliefs, is his most valuable contribution in this section. His basic thesis is this: Christian and Jewish doctrine differs on two main points—Christians believe in the Fall and the Atonement, Jews do not. Therefore, from Schimmel’s Jewish perspective, there is no need for redeeming grace because men are not innately evil (68–69). Furthermore, agnostics and atheists do not attach religious meaning to repentance or forgiveness. His main contention is that “radical forgiveness”—which is based on a primarily Christian belief that we should imitate Jesus’ forgiveness of those who perpetuated evil acts on him, despite the absence of remorse, repentance, or justice—is morally wrong and possibly emotionally harmful (65, 70). He contrasts the Christian view, that we should forgive all sin regardless of whether or not repentance occurs or justice is met, with the Jewish view, based on Hebrew scripture and rabbinic teaching that, while it is a sin to bear false witness, it is also a sin to withhold testimony against a sinner, even, and perhaps especially, in a capital case. To illustrate, he cites an actual example of a Catholic nun who, true to her Christian convictions, refused to testify against two men who brutally raped and tortured her, because it was her responsibility as a Christian to forgive, forget, and even turn the other cheek. He contends that if she were true to Jewish scripture and tradition, she would have committed a grievous sin by not testifying against these men, even if it led to their conviction of a capital crime, because that is the only way justice could be served. By refusing to testify, she not only became responsible for the demands of justice not being met

but also for the future evils these men may perpetrate on others when freed prematurely from prison due to reduced sentences. The kind of forgiveness the nun exhibited is radical forgiveness. Schimmel's perspectives might be of particular interest to LDS Church members in light of relatively recent teachings given by former members of the First Presidency who related stories of what Schimmel might consider acts of radical forgiveness and the need for LDS Church members to emulate these examples.²

Schimmel does not abdicate Christian principles entirely. On the contrary, while disagreeing with them from his doctrinal perspective, he claims some of them might actually be psychologically beneficial. For example, he continues to offer the Christian notion of forgiving others whether they have repented or not (which goes against his Jewish theology) as psychologically beneficial if done in the right way and for the right reasons. However, while heralding the positive, personal psychological effects of the Christian teachings of love and forgiveness, he asserts these principles will not only fail to heal a troubled world, but might actually retard the ethical and moral improvement of people because, instead of dealing directly with the evils we perpetuate on one another, we offer leniency and even excuses for them.

One of the greatest contributions of this book is Schimmel's careful analysis of several leading psychological theories on how to forgive. These analyses are carefully interwoven with both Christian and Jewish theologies in an attempt to elucidate, validate, and help the believer find doctrinal congruencies in them. I found this section of the book to be a helpful and objective attempt to lead the reader to valuable resources relating to the "how" of forgiveness.

Schimmel's analysis of self-forgiveness is deep, well balanced, and intelligent; moreover, his discussion of forgiving God is brilliant. His Jewish perspective lends itself well to his treatise, as does his familiarity with the literature. He explores the multifaceted phenomenon of believers becoming angry at God. Not only does he explore the reasons behind this anger, but also various responses to it and ways believers have successfully overcome it. This extraordinary analysis leaves one hopeful that a believer can retain faith despite evils suffered and despite the paradox of believing that God is both all-powerful and loving and yet either unable or unwilling to remove or prevent evil perpetrated against oneself.

Schimmel's assessment of the difference between Christian, Jewish, and Islamic doctrine in relation to repentance is this: Christians do not see repentance as a prerequisite to forgiveness; those embracing the Jewish and Islamic faiths do (141). Regardless of an individual's religious orientation, or absence of one, Schimmel asserts that repentance is

psychologically beneficial. He suggests that it is a positive way to rectify the harms you have done to yourself, your victim, and your relationships. By repenting, you can restore your moral status and worth as an individual, as well as relieve your pain and suffering and that of the victim. Repentance also has the potential of restoring valuable interpersonal and societal relationships between the sinner and the victim and between the sinner and God. In addition to offering a rather simplistic approach to repentance for specific “sins” of omission or commission, he also provides an analysis of the theology surrounding repentance as a successful method of self-transformation. Drawing on both Christian and Hebrew theologies, he suggests this can be either the process required for replacing undesirable characteristics with more desirable ones, or the much deeper process of conversion that occurs when an individual becomes a new person. He concludes this section with a valuable analysis, from his perspective as a psychologist, of the parallels between repentance and psychotherapy and how therapists might help individuals overcome the obstacles to change.

Schimmel follows up this careful analysis of repentance with a discussion of reformation. Can evil-doers reform? Can their claims of reformation be trusted? If so, how can true reformation be assessed? He employs two examples for analysis: the penal system and rabbinical law. He draws from these several conclusions: (1) moral self-improvement is possible; (2) psychologists should be able to develop instruments that could reliably measure true remorse and reformation; (3) innovative systems could plausibly be developed that would enable offenders to undo, amend, or substitute for the harm they have done; and (4) religious and civic laws should induce offenders to reform, not have built-in systems to perpetuate punishments and retard the desire or even the opportunity for reformation. He asserts that reforming the penal system from where it is now to a place where offenders are taught a civic form of repentance and reformation is desirable for many reasons, including the innate value of reformation itself as well as reintroducing the offender into society. However, he admits this proposition is clouded by many difficult issues: (1) the fact that not all offenders see themselves as needing reform or do not have a desire to reenter what they see as a flawed society; (2) the demands of justice from victims and a general lack of trust by the public that offenders really do or even can reform; and (3) the feeling held by many that offenders should be required to continue to pay a debt to justice even after their initial debt has been paid in prison.

The final section of the book takes a close look at group crime, punishment, and resolution, and the related idea of an individual or group “repenting” for acts committed by their ancestors or predecessors.

Schimmel makes a good case for the impossibility of both. He asserts that groups cannot repent, because sins are not committed by groups but by individuals in groups, and so it would therefore be impossible for groups to feel the same degree of remorse or make individual restitution and reformation required for true repentance. Likewise, an individual or member of a group may feel sincere remorse for what their predecessors had wrongfully done but would not be able to fully repent for the same reasons. However, groups or individuals can make efforts to reconcile with other groups or individuals by employing as many aspects of true repentance as possible, given the obvious limitations. Schimmel's genius in this argument is not only manifested in the principles he asserts, but also in the examples from history he employs, ranging from Apartheid in South Africa to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This widely acclaimed book offers much to a pluralistic society that will inevitably experience more, not less, of a need for the ideas and concepts Schimmel so carefully explores and amplifies.

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1. Schimmel is also author of *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Dr. Schimmel received his BA from the City College of New York and MA and PhD from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. He has been a National Science Foundation Research Fellow at Harvard University and a visiting professor or research fellow at Brandeis University, University of Texas, and Bar-Ilan University.

2. To illustrate the virtue of forgiveness, President Gordon B. Hinckley told the story of a woman whose face was crushed by a twenty-pound frozen turkey thrown through her windshield by a teenage boy. After enduring hours of reconstructive surgery and still facing years of therapy, this woman insisted on a plea deal in order to reduce the offender's sentence from twenty-five years to six months, all because she was more interested in salvaging his life than exacting revenge. See Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Healing Power of Christ" *Ensign* 37 (May 2007): 67–68. President James E. Faust shared a story in a similar vein about an Amish community that offered immediate forgiveness to the family of the murderer of five of their daughters as an expression of their faith in Christ. See James E. Faust, "Forgiveness," *Ensign* 35 (November 2005): 83–84.