Article Title: Matthew 18.15-35 and the (im)possibility of forgiveness among South African Methodists? A study in empirical intercultural Biblical ethics.

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Abstract

This paper presents a Biblical ethical engagement with the politics of forgiveness in South Africa. The research stems from a three-year empirical research project that involved Black and White *South African Methodists* who engaged in a series of *inter-cultural Bible readings* on the topic of '*forgiveness*'. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa remains the nation's largest Christian denomination, a nation in which 84% of persons profess Christian faith. Many Methodists serve in senior positions in government, business, and civil society and so shape the nation's values on transformation and forgiveness. The participants in this study read *Matthew 18.15-35* in 'in-group' and 'out-group' social identity settings in order to extrapolate hermeneutic perspectives on forgiveness. Matthew 18.15-35 is a fascinating text to read since it offers a complex and nuanced variety of interpretations and understandings of forgiveness. A careful exegetical reading of the text shows that Matthew conceptualised forgiveness in personal, spiritual, social, and political terms within the Matthean community. This holds promise for South African society, since as this paper will show, Black and White South African Methodist articulate understandings of forgiveness in very different terms. Aspects of social and contextual identity, such as race, economic status, gender, and age all influence their hermeneutic perspectives of forgiveness among the readers of Matthew 18.15-35. The study finds that Black Methodists in South Africa tend to understand forgiveness in social and political (economic) terms – they accentuate restitution for the wrongs of colonialism and apartheid, and emphasise the need for social, economic and political transformation. While, on the other hand, White South African Methodists, understood forgiveness as personal and spiritual – once the sin and wrongdoing had been confessed to God, the matter was settled. Forgiveness, from their perspective, does not necessarily require any engagement with the offended party. It only requires God's 'unmerited grace'. In this context, what might "thy grace restore, thy work revive" mean? The recent Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), Reconciliation Barometer (2015) shows that South Africa remains divided by race, class and economic inequality. Some have begun to ask whether forgiveness for the sins of colonialism and apartheid are possible? This article engages with the (im)possibility of forgiveness as it is presented in Matthew 18:15-35. In particular, it engages the text from an integral All Quadrants All Levels (AQAL) hermeneutic perspective. AQAL theory extrapolates a textured understanding of forgiveness that 'possibilises' the (im)possiblity of forgiveness between racially and socially divided groups of readers. The paper seeks to offer some insight into what transformation and 'reformation' for the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, and indeed South Africa, may entail in the light of intercultural readings of Matthew 18.15-35

Introduction

Matthew 18:15-35 offers a number of significant theological insights into the complexity of understandings of forgiveness both in the Matthean text and among contemporary readers of this text. This article explores the complexity of forgiveness as it is presented in the social and historical context of Matthew 18:15-35 and the contemporary context of a largely unreconciled South African society 24 years after the dawn of participatory democracy. Is biblical forgiveness possible among Black and White South Africans given the nature of the crimes perpetrated during the colonial and apartheid eras in South Africa?[1] The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) recently reported that (Hofmeyr & Govender 2015),

> While most South Africans agree that the creation of a united, reconciled nation remains a worthy objective to pursue, the country remains afflicted by its historical divisions. The majority feels that race relations have either stayed the same or deteriorated since the country's political transition in 1994 and the bulk of respondents have noted income inequality as a major source of social division. Most believe that it is impossible to achieve a reconciled society for as long as those who were disadvantaged under apartheid remain poor within the 'new South Africa'. (p. 1)

In contemporary South Africa the rhetoric of forgiveness and reconciliation have become extremely contested. For what reasons do White South Africans want forgiveness from the past? Is it merely to be free from the guilt of the past, or to deny White privilege in the present, or to move into the future without having to compensate for the structural sins that have constituted their White privilege and entrenched Black pain? Conceptually, forgiveness is also a difficult political concept to engage since it assumes an end point, i.e., an ideal located in a yet unreached future, while the present remains unchanged. The research suggests that what is needed is a more nuanced understanding of forgiveness as it is seen in Matthew 18:15-35.[2] In my other work I have come to speak of this as a politics of forgiveness (cf., Forster, 2017a: 1–10; Forster, 2017b) Such an approach not only places an emphasis on the desired goal, but emphasizes the journey towards that goal (the series of social shifts, encounters and relationships that are necessary in the unchanged present to work towards a changed future).

Nussbaum (2010) rightly points out that social (political) transformation begins with social identity engagement. She says:

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[1] See the key findings of the IJR report, *SA Reconciliation Barometer 2015: National Reconciliation, Race Relations, and Social Inclusion* (Hofmeyr & Govender 2015:1–2).

[2] See Marius J. Nel's discussion in *Interpersoonlike vergifnis in Matteus 18:15–35* (2015a) on the complexity of forgiveness in this particular text with reference to *Before forgiveness: The origins of a moral idea* (Konstan 2010). This article and the book it engages, argue that the contemporary notion of interpersonal forgiveness cannot be equated in their entirety to understandings of the social and communal processes of forgiveness described within the ancient Near East (and Matthew's Gospel).

> [*T*]he ability to imagine the experience of another – a capacity almost all human beings possess in some form – needs to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains. (p. 10)

The multilingual nature of this study frames it within a public theological approach to Biblical scholarship (Forster, 2017a: 2; Smit, 2017: 67–94).[3] In other words, it translates texts into contexts and brings contexts into conversation with texts (Forster, 2018). In order to complete the aforementioned task, it will be necessary to consider aspects of the Matthean narrative of forgiveness through a careful and critical exegesis of the text. Then it will be necessary to carefully consider how contemporary readers may engage complex notions of forgiveness in the text. The article will also present the hermeneutic lens that shaped this study, namely integral theory (i.e. Ken Wilber's AQAL integral philosophy).[4] A case will be made for the applicability and value that comes from approaching forgiveness as it is presented in Matthew 18:15-35 from an integral perspective. This will serve to texture our understanding of both the text and how contemporary readers understand forgiveness in reading this text.[5]

With regards to the Bible in relation to the concerns of the South African context, Koopman (1998) notes:

> Although the Scriptures do not give blueprints for our societal problems, our ideologies are corrected by the light the biblical principles provide. In South Africa, where the race factor has also determined how people understand the Bible, it is of utmost importance that people listen jointly to the Word to discover God's will for us today. This joint listening to the Word wills us to develop a common story which belongs to all of us. This common heritage corrects our racial ideologies, but also

[3] I will not go into the finer points of the argument for a Public Theological engagement with Biblical scholarship. I addressed aspects of that argument in this article (Forster, 2017a: 1–10). At this stage I will simply note that the discipline of public theology is gaining prominence in scholarly theological discourse. There are a variety of understandings of the discipline of public theology and the approach of the public theologian. However, they seem to converge in the idea that theology has a valid and necessary role to play in public discourse. That matters of public concern should be engaged theologically (both for the sake of making a public theological contribution, but also to reflect upon and shape our theological perspectives on the world, our own lives and God). Please refer to Smit's article *The Paradigm of Public Theology - Origins and Development* (2013) and his recent chapter *Does it matter? On whether there is method in the madness* (Smit, 2017: 67–94) for a helpful historical overview and philosophical analysis of the development of the term *public theology* and development of the discipline of public theology in theological discourse. It is also worth noting that the discipline and terminology are contested in South African theological discourse. Please see the Maluleke (2011) and Koopman (2011) as two prominent examples of the diverse perspectives on the role and place of public theology in South Africa. Tshaka (2014:4-5) has a very insightful analysis of the debate in his article *A perspective on notions of spirituality, democracy, social cohesion and public theology* in which he offers a balanced and nuanced view of the role of public theology in the South African context.

[4] Wilber's work is not without its critics. In particular the work of Kirk Schneider (cf. 1987:196–216; 1989:470–481; 2012:120–123) has pointed out some deficiencies and weakness in Wilber's integral theory over the last two decades. Some of these aspects will be addressed in the sections that follow. However, notwithstanding such critique, there is sufficiently credible acceptance of Wilber's work for it to be used in the manner in which it is employed in this article.

[5] For examples of such interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies see the *Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series*, (De Wit 2012; Van der Walt 2014; Jonker 2015).

> liberates, encourages and energizes us to work for a new society which reflects something of the biblical ideals. (p. 165)

Such reasoning suggests that the biblical text has a communicative ethical impact on South African society (cf. Van der Watt 2014:7).[6] Hence the need for such a multi-disciplinary, even trans-disciplinary, engagement with the Bible in relation to the politics of forgiveness in South Africa.

Why Matthew 18:15-35?

Why was Matthew 18:15-35 chosen as a helpful text for South Africans to read on the politics of forgiveness?[7] The Christian scriptures contain numerous and varied perspectives on forgiveness. It is undeniably an important concept in the New Testament as recent studies in the field have shown (Nel, 2002; Konstan, 2010; c.f., Hägerland, 2011; Mbabazi, 2013; Forster, 2017b). Moreover, there are many texts that deal with the notion of forgiveness from a variety of perspectives (theological, social, restitution, grace, developmental). The most recent and extensive project on forgiveness in the New Testament is *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins* of Hägerland (2011). Within the Matthew studies, the most complete studies on forgiveness are by Nel (2002; 2013; 2014; 2015b), Konstan (2010), Mbabazi (2013), Eubank (2013), and Forster (2017b).[8]

Matthew 18:15-35 was, chosen for this project, since it presents a set of three narratives that approach the complex topic of forgiveness from differing perspectives. Of interest in this article was the importance of forgiveness as a social and political construct (i.e. the restoration of relationships within a broken community) (Duling 1999:6; Senior 1987:403), and views of forgiveness as a spiritual and theological concept (i.e. forgiveness as a process that restores relationships with God) (Mbabazi 2013:153–158). The interplay between the intent of the original author and the originally intended reader's context, and the current readers, allows for a fascinating study.[9]

This section (Mt 18:15-35) deals with the concepts of alienation and forgiveness with a strong focus on power relationships within the community (for a detailed discussion of

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[6] See for example Austin (1975:3–5) on the performative intention of communication as well as Searle (1969:155) who emphasised the illocutionary intent of written communication. Also see Viljoen (2014: 9–11) as an example of performative speech in Matthew's Gospel and his explanation of the intent of Matthean communication with its social and ethical implications for the hearer or reader.

[7] Because of the limits of a publication of this sort I shall not be able to do a thorough exegesis of Matthew 18:15-35. I shall, however, just make reference to the necessary exegetical aspects of the text to show why it is an important text to use in presenting an integral public theological engagement with forgiveness in biblical scholarship and the publics of the church and broader society.

[8] The topic of forgiveness in the biblical text is extremely broad and extensive. For a very helpful scholarly overview of this area please see, Gowan's *The Bible on Forgiveness* (2010) and Nel's *Vergifnis en versoening in die evangelie volgens Matteus* (2002). Also see *Wages of cross-bearing and debt of sin: The economy of heaven in the Gospel of Matthew* (Eubank, n.d.; Eubank, 2012)

[9] For a creative example of research that lays a credible groundwork for such engagement see *Listening past difference* of Wasserman (2016).

community ethics in Matthew please see Van der Watt & Malan 2006:23–45). As Van der Walt (2014:2) reflects, employing a text in this manner allows the text to function 'simultaneously as a conversation starter for intercultural conversation and as a reflective surface' that allows the participants to 'reflect on their own contemporary and contextual experiences'. While the Matthean context and the contemporary South African situation are vastly different, it is plausible to identify some coherence in social aspect between these communities with their respective 'in group' and 'out group' tensions (Kok, 2014: 1–9; Forster, 2017b: 79–80, 178–198) (cf., Kok 2014:1-9).

A further reason that makes Matthew 18 suitable for the intended purpose is that it finds its place within the *community discourse* of Matthew's Gospel (Senior 1987:403–407; Weren 2006:171–200). The larger project aimed at facilitating a process of engagement between two racially, socially and politically divided Christian communities (a Black Methodist community and a White Methodist community in the same town) . Matthew 18 presents a narrative with a focus on community ethics and social harmony.[10] As such, it is of benefit to the process of explicating hermeneutic understandings of forgiveness as well as the cost and social implications of forgiveness.

The conceptual thrust of harmony in the Christian community, as expressed in Matthew 18, is triggered by the question that is asked in verse 1, namely 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'.[11] Peter's question in verse 21[12] reiterates this theme, 'Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member (brother) of the Church (family) sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"' It could be argued that Matthew 18 presents Jesus' formulated reply to these questions in various parables and accumulated sayings.

When Jesus places the child in the middle of the group and tells the disciples that they will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless they are like a child (Mt 18.3), he destabilises the accepted social order and so introduces a new approach to the structuring of the community based on Matthew's presentation of Jesus' values rather than traditionally accepted norms such as social standing or cultural rights (Senior 1987:403; Duling 1999:6).

The notions of community and forgiveness in Matthew 18 (especially vv. 15-20, 21-22 and 23-35) formed an important aspect of the research project on the politics of forgiveness among South African Bible readers. Naturally, the previously mentioned sections cannot be read in isolation from the rest of the chapter or, indeed, the entire Gospel. However, the foci on forgiveness and harmony in the community are key themes, forming a necessary delineator.

Thus, Matthew 18 has been widely identified as a discourse for the church or a discourse for the community of disciples (Senior 1987:403–407; Weren 2006:171–200). The sections on

[10] There are numerous excellent studies of the structure of Matthew's Gospel (literary, narrative, geography, topical, conceptual, et cetera. Please see the following overview of Bauer (1989). There is general acceptance of the fact that Matthew 18 stands as a discourse on community (with some variation on the structuring of the contents of the chapter). Please also see the excellent discussion of ethics and ethos in Matthew's Gospel in 'Identity, Ethics and Ethos in the New Testament, Volume 141' (Van der Watt & Malan 2006:27–27, 40–45).

[11] Unless otherwise stated all references to the Bible will come from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (1989).

[12] All verse references refer to Matthew 18.

forgiveness dealing with sin and the parable of the unforgiving servant, tie together a number of important themes that run through the chapter (Mbabazi 2013:136–216; Nel 2015a:3; Reimer 1996:268–271). These include the characteristic values that members of the community should extol (such as humility – vv.1-7; restraint and discipline – vv. 8-9; mercy and grace – vv. 21-35). In addition, there are a number of theological insights that build throughout Matthew 18 towards the final parable (the eschatological expectation of salvation or judgement – vv. 3, 8, 9, 35; the relationship between actions in this life and God's eternal Kingdom – vv. 1, 10, 14, 18-20, 23, 35) (Davies & Allison 1991:789).

An overt theme of verses 21-35 appears to focus on forgiveness that contributes towards the wellbeing of the community, (cancellation of a debt, setting a person free: ἀφήσω – v. 21; ἀφῆκεν – v. 27; ἀφῆτε – v. 35). This theme is part of the larger aim of the whole chapter, namely the facilitation of healthy relationships among the community of disciples (Nel 2015a:5).

Taking the preceding discussion into account, Matthew 18:15-35 was deemed helpful for the following reasons:

The topic of the text

It has a strong thematic emphasis on forgiveness in various forms running through its narrative. In particular, this passage focuses on issues of social harmony, relationships,[13] discipline in the church and community forgiveness (Carter 2005:361–376; Hagner 1995:515–516, 528–529, 534–537; Mounce 1995:173–174; Overman 1996:262–276; Viviano 2007:211–219; Zimmermann & Dormeyer 2007:448–453). The thematic and theological content of this text is both necessary as a theological informant for the development of an understanding of Christian forgiveness as well as functioning as a helpful framework within which to structure the intergroup engagements around forgiveness for the contemporary readers of the text.

The layered understanding of forgiveness in the text

The text offers a layered understanding of forgiveness that touches on the four general areas of human experience and reality. Moreover, this text presents a nuanced understanding of the complexity of forgiveness that is in keeping with the theoretical and theological perspective of the research. As will be discussed in the next section, Wilber's AQAL theory shows the importance of diverse and layered understandings of reality that cover all four aspects of human identity and being (Paulson 2008). This text presents aspects of the nuance and complexity of concepts of forgiveness in the personal and the social settings. This holds promise in relation to contemporary research on forgiveness which suggests that it is a complex process of shifting from one set of realities and experiences to another through various phases of social interaction and inner change (Duffy 2009; Gobodo-Madikizela 2009; Hannoum 2005; Kaplan 2008; Ricoeur 2009; Vosloo 2015). Lastly, this text has sufficiently detailed social information for the application of social theories to understand the complexity of inter-group

[13] Some would argue that the focus is interpersonal relationships in particular (cf. Mbabazi 2013:153–158).

social identity (Tucker & Baker 2014:147–173) and inter-group contact (Brewer & Kramer 1985; Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp 2011).

Mimesis and performative ethical implications

The mimetic and performative ethical aspects of the narrative further informed the decision for its use. Van der Watt (2014) makes the point that in the biblical worldview, and in the broader culture at the time of the writing of the Gospels, mimetic texts based their transformational capital on more than just theological content. Such texts also focus on social expectation (Van der Watt 2014:7). They present with the clear expectation that ''*n persoon volgens sy identiteit sal optree. Hierdie aspek van antropologie staan al vanaf Sokrates in die sentrum van diskussie*' [… a person will act [*behave*] according to his identity. This aspect of anthropology has been at the center of [*ethical*] discussion since Socrates', *author's own translation*] (Van der Watt 2014:7). The expectation is that the readers will not only understand the grammar, syntax and narrative components of the text, but that they will respond to the narrative mimetically. They are expected to respond in a manner that is appropriate to their time and context (Van der Watt 2014:8).

This is illustrative of an aspect of Matthew's style displayed in the discourse of the Sermon on the Mount where Matthew's Jesus points out that faithfulness to God, and true Christian discipleship, is not just a matter of obeying the law. Rather, it consists in mimicking the character of the loving God that is fulfilled in the person and life of Jesus (Davies & Allison 1988:507, 541; Garland 1999:62–77; Morris 1992:106–112; Overman 1996:77–84; Talbert 2010:72–73).[14] One could argue that Matthew employs the strategy of mimesis throughout the gospel and, particularly, in Matthew 18. The intention is to convey meaning to the reader through the content of the text, the structure of the narrative, the genre of the text and its embeddedness in a socio-historical network of shared meaning. With regards to the ethical implications of this, Van der Watt (2014) writes,

> Dit beteken dat die etos wat die algemeen aanvaarde gedrag binne die Christengemeenskap verteenwoordig, onder andere veronderstel dat die Vader en Jesus mimeties aan gelowiges, as kinders van God, gebind was … Mimesis word dus verwag, omdat die aangesprokenes hulleself binne die familie bevind. Die veronderstelling is dat binne die betrokke sosiale raamwerk mimeties opgetree moet word. Dit is moontlik omdat mimesis nie 'n sosiale model is nie, maar eerder 'n spesifieke gestruktureerde houding weerspieël. [This means that the ethics that

[14] There is a rich corpus of study on this topic. Two points of illustration will suffice: first is the structural narrative of Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of righteousness (Mt 3:1-4:17), followed by Jesus' discourse on true righteousness (Mt 4:18-8:1). These set the scene for the development of a new form of faithfulness and righteousness that progressively unfolds in Matthew's Gospel in accordance with 5:17. This theme is echoed clearly in our passage in Matthew 18:21-22. A second example is the use of 'but/and' (δὲ) from Matthew 5:22 onwards where Jesus establishes himself as the fulfillment of the law (Davies & Allison 1988:541). The point is that Jesus is not abolishing the law, but fulfils it. Thus, if the disciple follows both the teaching and the example of a faithful and loving life as seen in Jesus (*mimesis*), she or he cannot go wrong (Davies & Allison 1988:507).

> represent the generally accepted behaviour within the Christian community assumes, among other things, that the Father and Jesus are bound mimetically to the believers, as children of God … Mimesis is thus expected since those who are being addressed find themselves within the family. The assumption is that persons will behave in a certain manner within this mimetic framework. This is possible since mimesis is not a social model as such, but rather a representation of a specific structural attitude [*ethos*]. (p. 8, [*author's own translation*])

Why Ken Wilber's Integrative AQAL approach?

Ken Wilber is well regarded as a philosopher of contemporary social identity complexity theory. His work is widely cited in this field (Esbjörn-Hargens 2009:33). Naturally he has his critics (cf. Schneider 1987:196–216; 1989:470–481; 2012:120–123). Notwithstanding such critique, there is a sufficient scholarly acceptance of his contribution to utilize it in the manner proposed here.

Wilber (in Visser 2003) offers the following summary of integral AQAL theory:

> The word integral means comprehensive, inclusive, non-marginalizing, embracing. Integral approaches to any field attempt to be exactly that: to include as many perspectives, styles, and methodologies as possible within a coherent view of the topic. In a certain sense, integral approaches are 'meta-paradigms,' or ways to draw together an already existing number of separate paradigms into an interrelated network of approaches that are mutually enriching. (pp. xii-xiii)

According to integral theory, there are four important perspectives that must be taken into account when attempting to understand an aspect of reality. They are, the subjective (I), the intersubjective (we), the objective (it) and the interobjective (its) (see Fig. 1). In its most basic form the principle of integral theory suggests that everything can be considered from two basic distinctions: first: from an inner and an outer perspective; and second, from an individual and a collective perspective.

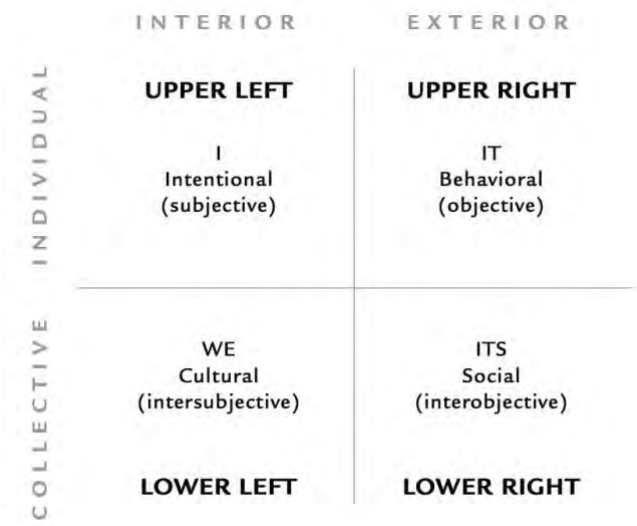

Figure 1. The four quadrants of identity and meaning in AQAL theory. Source: (Esbjörn-Hargens 2009:36)

This approach provides both language and a thought construct around which to develop a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted complexity of social identity.

Previous research (cf., Forster, 2006; Forster, 2017b: 21–57, 126–134) has collated data that suggests that these four aspects (quadrants) correlate with, or at the very least, cohere to the dimensions that constitute our human experience of reality. For example, all living things have some measure of subjectivity (an interior identity – Upper Left (UL)) as well as unique observable behaviors that express this interior life (an exterior identity – Upper Right (UR)). In addition, the interior identity of individuals is shaped by being in relationship to other people and other things (being male, being English, living in Africa, etc.). These collective interior elements are generally classified as intersubjective realities, experienced as a common culture, value or belief system (Lower Left (LL)). The exteriors are known as ecological and social systems, such as buildings, towns, technologies (such as hospitals, or weapons) (Lower Right (LR)). To understand the locus of identity relationships in each of the four quadrants, please refer to Figure 2 below.

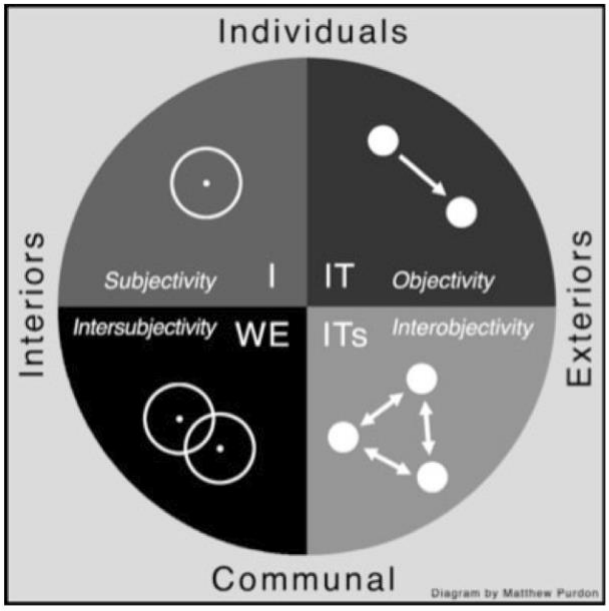

Figure 2. Subject and object relations in AQAL theory. *Source*: (From De Quincey 2006:206)

Snyman (2002) notes that

> The vast networks and contexts of one's cultural community serves as the intrinsic background in which … thought arises, and shapes thought itself in the life and upbringing of the thinker. (p. 93).

It should be borne in mind that culture itself has material components just as thoughts have material components (e.g. the individual thought (UL) is related to the individual brain (UR)). For example, before what has become known as the 'apartheid wall' on the Israeli border was built, it first had to find form and expression in the minds of individuals and groups of persons. For the original thought itself to be possible, certain social, external, realities need to present (e.g. not only the culture of the thinker (social inward – LL), but also social structures that make such thoughts possible, e.g. geography, etc. These are all LR expressions of the holon, because they are social, external, necessities). Wilber refers to these LR elements as the 'social action system' and 'concrete material components', which are necessary for the actual worldview within which the thought arises to exist.

The importance of this interrelated understanding of the four dimensions of reality suggests that responsible scholarship cannot 'collapse' all of the elements of an understanding of forgiveness into one quadrant. Hence, when engaging Matthew 18:15-35 in order to gain a fuller understanding of complex notions of Christian forgiveness, the value of a hermeneutic framework (such as the AQAL integral approach) is most helpful. Such a framework provides both language and concepts with which the complexity of understanding, belief, and

expectation can be engaged. The AQAL hermeneutic approach will be brought into conversation with the text to illustrate the textured variety of interpretive opportunities.

An AQAL integral approach to Matthew 18:15-35

An AQAL reading of Matthew 18:15-35 highlights the deficiency of a collapsed, or mono-perspectival, approach to reading of forgiveness. [15]

The introductory question posed by Peter (v. 21) places forgiveness within the context of the Christian community: 'Lord if my brother … (ὁ ἀδελφός μου)'. What we see in this question is an individual (UL) attempting to find meaning in the midst of inner conflict ('how many times should I forgive?'). This was likely to have been brought on by disharmony in the community (LR) considering the place in which this question is found in the narrative of Matthew 18, that is, just after verses 15-20 which presents a process for dealing with sin or wrongdoing in the community. Please refer to figure 3 for a diagrammatic representation of the domain location of the theological understanding of forgiveness in this regard.

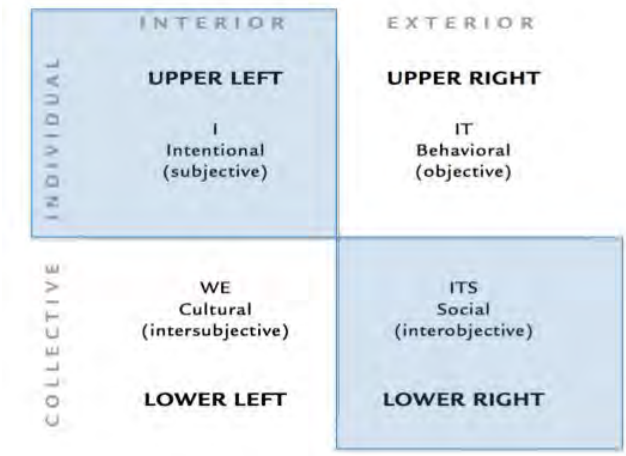

Figure 3. Upper Left, Lower Right.

[15] In integral theory, a collapsed, or mono-perspectival approach to complex experiences and phenomena is called a flatland approach. This expression was coined by Ken Wilber to explain the process of collapsing one's understanding of reality into either the interior realm (psychological, spiritual) or the exterior realm (science, politics, sociology) exclusive to the others. Wilber (1998:124ff.) suggests that one of the greatest achievements of the Enlightenment was the differentiation of the three realms of being as I (UL), We (LL) and It (where 'It' includes both right hand columns of the four quadrants). As a result of this, Wilber sees the task of late modernity (or post-modernity) in relation to modernity – not simply as replacing atomism with holism, but to integrate the 'flatland holism with the depth of I and the community of we' (Wilber 1998:145). This task is urgent, because there is a great deal of subtle reductionism in the dualistic worldviews of both modern atomism and postmodern holism (cf. Forster 2006:214-217, and Forster 2017b:24-54, for a more detailed discussion of these concepts).

An AQAL hermeneutic highlights Matthew's approach to the intricacy of forgiveness. Jesus's answer to Peter's question adds a dimension of complexity, namely the reliance of the Matthean community on the Jewish law (LL), (vv. 21b-22, 'how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times'). Religious law is based upon a shared understanding of morality that arises from a set of theological convictions about what is just and right, and what is unjust and wrong (LL). Figure 4 shows the further domain complexity of forgiveness in that it operates in three quadrants of theological meaning and identity.

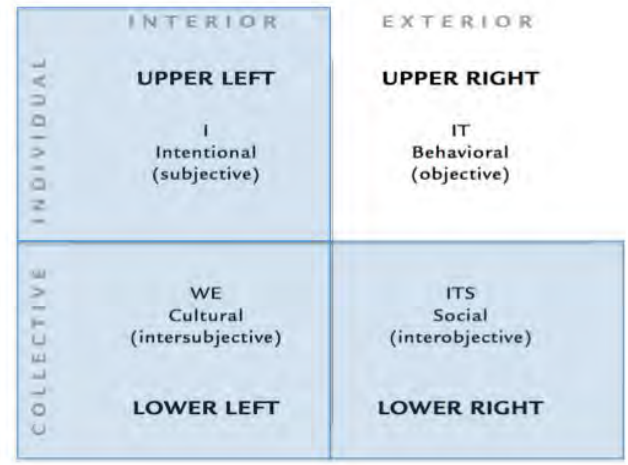

Figure 4. Upper Left, Lower Left, Lower Right.

One of the suggested intentions of Matthew's Gospel was the re-establishment of a new social and religious order (LL) based on the understanding that Jesus was the fulfilment of the Jewish law (Davies & Allison 1988:507, 541; Garland 1999:62–77; Morris 1992:106–112; Overman 1996:77–84; Talbert 2010:72–73). Jesus is presented as the fulfilment of righteousness that is required by the law in Mt 3:1-4:17 (UL and UR). This is followed by Jesus' discourse on true righteousness in Mt 4:18-8:1. These set the scene for the development of a new form of faithfulness (righteousness) that progressively unfolds in Matthew's Gospel in accordance with 5:17 (LL and LR). This theme is echoed in Matthew 18:21-22.

A second example is the use of 'but/and' (δὲ) from Matthew 5:22 onwards where Jesus establishes himself as the fulfilment of the law (Davies & Allison 1988:541). Jesus does not abolish the law, but rather fulfils it. Thus, if the disciple follows both the teaching and the example seen in Jesus (*mimesis*), linked to values (UL) and action, (UR), she or he is faithful as a believer (UL), and a member in good standing of the new community (LL). Through their beliefs (UL) and actions (UR), the values and virtues of the new community (LR) are established and upheld (Davies & Allison 1988:507).

The result is that Matthew presents the shift in identity from individual belief to an integrated understanding of the complex interplay of individual identity (UL), social identity (possibly theological identity) (LL), individual action (UR) and social harmony (LR). The

graphic representation in figure 5 displays the possibility of an integral understanding of forgiveness that operates in all for quadrants of theological identity and meaning – it is a 'politics of forgiveness' that engages the individual, the collective, the spiritual and the political.

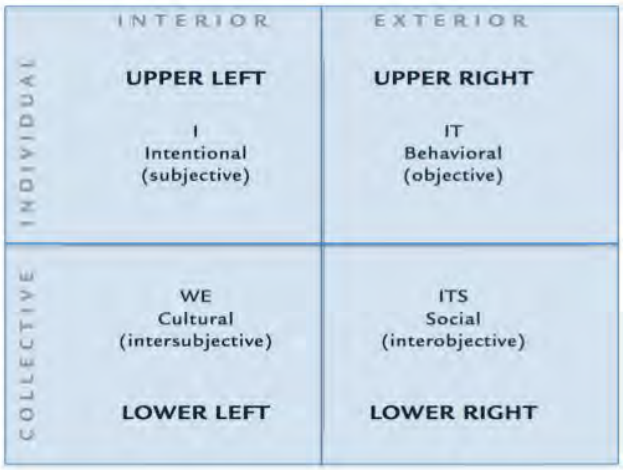

Figure 5. All Quadrants.

This approach highlights that the intended social cohesion and faith life integration that is advocated in this passage. It deals with all four of the AQAL life dimensions.

According to Matthew, social harmony and Christian faithfulness require forgiveness (illustrated in vv. 21-22 & v. 35). In fact, where there is agreement (unity - LL) the Lord promises to be among the members of the community (vv. 19-20). Thus, forgiveness cannot be a purely personal matter (UL), although it requires a personal engagement with the particular if there is some sin that is disturbing personal relationships and community harmony. The use of the adjective μόνου in verse 15 emphasizes the need for courtesy in personal engagement, so as not to publicly humiliate or manipulate the individual. At the same time it shows that personal engagement is important, 'go' (ὕπαγε imperative, present, active, 2nd person, singular) is an UR action of the individual, that is, 'you must go [*alone to him*]', whereas 'between you and him' (μεταξὺ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ) shows both interpersonal presence (LR) and the intention of dealing with the conflict in a shared interpersonal value space (LL). In addition, μεταξὺ is a preposition that can refer either to a physical location as in Ac 12.6, 'he was sleeping between two guards', or as an associative interpersonal space as in Ac 15.9, 'he did not discriminate between us and them'.

The flow of the narrative in verses 15-17 shows a progression of identity location between the individuals (the sinner and the sinned against, indicated by the phrase ἀδελφός σου, indicating relational identity location, namely, the self and the other who is related to the self, who is also the cause of the personal offence). If the sinner hears the truth (ἀκούσῃ, which can mean 'to accept', 'to believe' and 'respond') of the sinned against person in the personal engagement (ὕπαγε ἔλεγξον αὐτὸν μεταξὺ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνου), then that person's relational

proximity is altered from that of an outsider (v. 17, ultimately a 'gentile or a tax collector'), to an insider, that is, one who is 'regained'. The verb ἐκέρδησας indicates a proximal shift in ownership, that is, to have earned or gained that person for one's self. If the person does not hear, the relational interaction moves from subject-object engagement (one individual UL with another individual UR) to an intersubjective (LL) and interobjective engagement (LR). In verse 16, the verb παράλαβε indicates that one brings along another with one's self (as in Lk 9.28). The taking of another witness (μαρτύρων) indicates that the one (or ones) taken along share a common view of the situation (LL). There is a shared thought world concerning the matter that is to be addressed with the sinning party. Their presence is intended to act as a social contract (LL), a confirmation of the sinned against the person's location on the side of righteousness and truth (σταθῇ).

The final progression in the narrative takes the matter to the broader community. The ἐκκλησίᾳ is viewed as a larger social space (LL) in which deeper and greater truth about rightness or wrongness can be established and judged. As in Romans 16.16, the use of this term carries a collective identity and shared thought space, so that Paul could say that the 'churches of Christ greet you'. Furthermore, the term ἐκκλησίᾳ not only establishes communal thought boundaries (LL), that is, the called-out ones, which establishes a boundary between the in-group and the out-group, it also has a socio-historical meaning in common usage that derives from before the Christian era in which it refers to a socio-political entity like an assembly (Ac 19.39) based in a city or a state (LR). The conclusion of this narrative in verses 17b-19 touches on all four quadrants of individual and social identity (UL, LL, UR, LR).

In verse 17b, Matthew states, 'if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector'. As discussed earlier, the connotation of such a judgement has consequences for the individual (UR) being cast out, for their faith community (i.e. regarding them as an 'other', a Gentile, UL). This has clear consequences for their belonging in the faith community (LL), and for their future social and economic interaction with the community (LR, 'regard them as a tax collector').

Some have suggested that the phrase 'ἔστω σοι ὥσπερ ὁ ἐθνικὸς καὶ ὁ τελώνης' (v. 17b) is an act of formal excommunication from the community, while others have said that it may simply have had religious and interpersonal connotations[16] (Mbabazi 2013:153–158). My own reading of this is that the narrative is framed thematically by some important markers that help us to understand what was meant by this phrase. First, the use of the word ἀδελφός throughout the passage places an emphasis on the depth of the relationship and the importance of engaging the sinner to restore interpersonal harmony (LL). Second, the entire discussion is moved along by its location within the Jewish law and Jesus' reinterpretation thereof for the Matthean community (vv. 21-22) and the expectation of mimicking the mercy of the father (or king) (v.35). Finally, the social, economic and political setting into which the whole of the Gospel of Matthew enters (LR), presents an in-group and an out-group identity (Carter 2005:368; Hagner 1995:532; Mounce 1995:468–469).

[16] Please see Mbabazi's detailed discussion (2013:153–158) of the 4 general approaches to this topic here. Luz (2005:450–451) has also done an extensive survey of the various approaches to the meaning of this verse in.

The Matthean community is forming its true identity over against those who do not share their social and religious worldview (LL and LR). Naturally there is some scholarly discussion on whether the Matthean community and Matthew were hostile to the out-group or not. It can be suggested that in light of the evangelist's intentions in the Gospel, there is a possibility that the intention and tone of the Gospel speaks of 'winning over' the out-group, rather than an outright rejection of them. Carter (2005:368) points out that Jesus frequented with tax collectors and 'heathens' (Mt 9:9, 10-13; 11:19), and that he saw such persons as the object of mission, 'people to be won over to the community of disciples' (cf. Mounce 1995:468–469). Regardless, it is clear that being an outsider was an undesirable social and religious state to be in, it creates both social (psychological, cultural and religious, i.e, LL) separation, as well as spatial separation (i.e., economic, and political separation, LR). Significantly, verses 19-20 and 35 bring in the larger dimension of eternal acceptance or eternal rejection (UL and LL) by God as a result of inclusion or exclusion from the community (UR and LR).

This leads to the next phase in the narrative. This section of the discourse takes on the form of a parable. An approach to understanding parables is to relate certain elements of the parable allegorically to spiritual realities, or, spiritual and theological constructs (Blomberg 2009:46). A parable deals with forgiveness as a concept differently from a complex social-juristic process of dealing with discipline in the community (UR, LR), as found in verses 15-20, or the religious teaching and reframing of a traditional teaching on forgiveness by Jesus (UL, LL) (vv. 21-22). Meaning in a parable relies on the author and the reader sharing a common metaphoric thought structure (LL) that creates meaning for the reader (UL) and can find expression in their individual actions (UL) and affirmation and support within the community (LR) (Carter & Heil 1998:1–8; Mbabazi 2013:160–163)[17]. The application of the parable, which sums up its intention, is to be found in verse 35. This verse is helpful in understanding the meaning and intention of the preceding narrative.

In Matthew 18:15-35 we see a link between a social problem (UR, LR), the restoration of an individual and communal relationship (UL, LL) (vv. 15-20), the cancelling of a debt (LR) (vv. 23-25), and the fostering of a new shared spiritual reality between the individual (UL) and the faith community (LL). Jesus answers Peter's question on forgiveness within the community by sharing a parable that can be likened to 'the Kingdom of heaven (ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν)' (v. 23). The relationship between the human and the divine, the present and the eschaton, finds expression in the parable of the unforgiving servant in verses 23-35. Here, heaven, and in particular the king of heaven, brackets the discussion: the 'βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν' [Kingdom of heaven] (v. 23) and 'ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος' [Jesus' Father in heaven] (v.35).

[17] A great deal of scholarly work has been done on the genre of parables, their intention and usage in the gospels in general and Matthew's Gospel in particular. Please see, among others Carter & Heil (1998: 1–8); De Boer (1988:214–232); Hultgren (2002:383–416); Jeremias (2003:82–84); Liebenberg (2001:167–275); Linnemann 1977:167–174); Oppong-Kumi (2013:27–69); Zimmermann (2015); Zimmermann & Dormeyer (2007:385–512).

What this means is, for example, that the βασιλεύς and κύριος in the parable is an *analogy* for God, not a *picture* of God; the δούλοι, σύνδουλοι and ἀδελφοί are all analogies for the church (Mbabazi 2013:161).

Matthew's intention in employing this literary style was thus to evoke shared meaning (LL) in the reader by telling a story that could be concretely related to actual experiences (such as insurmountable debt, μυρίων ταλάντων – v. 24, and the witnessing of social injustice, ἰδόντες a οὖν οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτοῦ τὰ γενόμενα ἐλυπήθησαν σφόδρα – v.31). The indented outcome was to draw upon this shared set of community beliefs, to activate a moral and theological change in the individual's beliefs (UL) (οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου – v. 33a and ἐὰν μὴ ἀφῆτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν – v.35b). This, in turn, would change the behavior of the reader, encouraging her or him not to act like the unforgiving servant, but indeed to act like the merciful king (UL).

When verses 21-22 (which introduces the parable) are coupled with the parable narrative, it is clear to see that the intention is not only to alter individual attitudes (UL) and individual behavior (UR), but to establish a new moral and religious order (LL) that will bring harmony among the in-group of the Matthean community (i.e., a community with shared values and beliefs, LR). Moreover, when one considers all three parts of the text together (vv. 15-35) the picture becomes still clearer. Without an integrated shift in belief (καρδιῶν – v. 35: the inner self) and action (ἐὰν μὴ ἀφῆτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ – v. 35) in the individual (UL), the harmony of the community (LL) will be eroded (v. 17), the unity of the faith will be weakened (vv. 18-19), and the presence of the Lord in the community will be lost (v. 20). Most importantly, God, the heavenly King and Father, will be displeased (v. 35).

The parable elicits in the reader a connection with all four aspects of social and individual identity, individual belief (UL), social values and religious values (LL), individual action (UR), and communal action and social cohesion (LR).

Intercultural Bible reading on forgiveness

This understanding framed the value of using Matthew 18:15-35 in the intercultural group readings among the Black Methodist readers and the White Methodist readers of the text. The intention of the intercultural reading was to ascertain how each group would understand forgiveness sin the text in a homogenous 'in-group' (mono-cultural, mono-ethnic) setting. Then, to allow them to read the text together within a carefully facilitated intercultural setting. In this intercultural setting it was hoped that acts of 'translation' would take place. Then the groups would once again be separated into the 'in-group' conditions and allowed to read the text and reflect on it again. If one compared the first 'in-group' reading with the last 'in-group' reading (after the facilitated intercultural Bible readings), where there any discernable differences? If so, could they be accounted for in any credible manner?

In short, what was aimed at was an act of both literary and ontological translation through intercultural Bible reading on forgiveness. Paul Ricoeur's work is helpful in this context – as Vosloo states, it has both hermeneutic and mediating possibilities (Vosloo, 2015a: 1). Ricoeur's approach helps because he suggests that what is needed is an act of translation

that can bridge the differences in language and the very nature of the difference between the self and the other (Ricoeur & Brennan, 1995: 7). He writes,

> [t]ranslation can be understood here in both a specific and a general sense. In the specific sense – the one in common contemporary usage – it signals the work of translating the meanings of one particular language into another. In the more generic sense, it indicates the everyday act of speaking as a way not only of translating oneself (inner to outer, private to public, unconscious to conscious, etc.) but also more explicitly of translating oneself to others. (Ricoeur, 2007: xiv–xv).

What the research on forgiveness among Black and White South Africans found was that social identity, of which political identity is a part, played a very important role in the construction of beliefs concerning the expectations, processes and content of forgiveness.

We cannot go into great detail on the findings of the research at this stage. However, the general findings where that:

- Among the predominantly Black participants, forgiveness was largely understood in a collective and social manner (LL and LR) (cf., 6.2.1-6.2.5 of (Forster, 2017b)). In other words, forgiveness was not only an individual concern (UL, UR), it had social consequences and social expectations within the community (LL and LR). Moreover, this group understood that forgiveness was not only a matter of spiritual restoration between the individual (or community) and God (UL, LL). Rather, it should be evidenced in the restoration of relationships and structures in the community (UR, LL and LR). For this group, forgiveness can only be authentic if the conditions for forgiveness are evidenced in the community (LR) – in other words, forgiveness in South Africa would be contingent upon economic transformation, transfer of land ownership, a transformation of social power dynamics, and visible and tangible expressions of remorse on the part of the beneficiaries and initiators of apartheid in South Africa – the participants wanted justice to be evidenced (as in Mt 18.31-34). A social understanding of community harmony is largely in keeping with notions of intersubjective identity that are more common in Black South African communities (Adhikari, 2005; cf., Shutte, 2009; Forster, 2010a; Forster, 2010b; Cakal et al., 2011).
- In contrast, the White participants largely understood forgiveness in an individual and spiritual manner (UL) (cf. 6.2.6-6.2.9 of (Forster, 2017b)). For the majority of participants in this group, the data showed that they viewed forgiveness as being primarily a matter of restoring their spiritual relationship with God – they favoured individual and spiritual interpretations of Mt 18.19-22. They did not initially consider that forgiveness may need to engage the party against whom the sin (or grievance) was committed (UR). Forgiveness would have been enacted when God had set them free from the guilt and spiritual culpability of their actions (UL, LL). Such a view of forgiveness would not necessarily entail the restoration of relational harmony among members of the community or the restitution of social, political or economic structures in the community (LL and LR). Common expressions of this view would be statements

> such as, "apartheid was wrong, but it is over. I confessed my part [sin] in it and I believe God has forgiven me. Now we need to move on and stop living in the past. We must stop talking about apartheid".

Within this context, I find the statement of Kearney in the introduction to *On Translation,* deeply challenging. He says that it,

> … is only when we translate our own wounds in the language of strangers and retranslate the wounds of strangers into our own language that healing and reconciliation can take place. (Ricoeur, 2007a: xx).

When initiating this research project, I was aware that it was unlikely that any one individual would have a completely integrated understanding of forgiveness in their reading of the text (locating meaning in each of the four quadrants and understanding the importance of the interaction between these categories of meaning). However, it was hoped that when a variety of readers engaged the text in a safe space, without judgement or competition (Gobodo-Madikizela 2008:169–188), it would become possible that the various perspectives of the readers could enrich and deepen each other's understanding of both the text and the communicative intention of the text (*mimesis*).

Paul Ricoeur (cf. 2009) reminds Christian theologians, including biblical scholars, to be careful of creating a simplistic soteriological short-circuit between remembering and forgiving by calling to mind the eschatological horizon of memory (Junker-Kenny & Kenny 2004:x). Ricoeur (2003) emphasises the importance of understanding forgiveness as a process of engagement when he writes:

> Forgiveness, if it has a meaning and if it exists, constitutes the joint horizon of memory, history and forgetting. The horizon … puts the stamp of incompleteness on the whole enterprise… what is at stake is to project a sort of eschatology of memory, and as its consequence, of history and forgetting. (pp. 593, 595)

The important point to recognize is that forgiveness goes beyond a mere mental construct (UL), an understanding of the concepts communicated in the text. Rather, as pointed out in the famous debate on the universality of hermeneutics between Gadamer and Habermas (Negru 2007:113–119), there will always be a difference between what the individual reader or scholar constructs in his or her mind (UL) and what the social world constructs as a historical reality (LL and LR).

The possibility of a robust, authentic, even contested, politics of forgiveness is highlighted by an integral, AQAL, hermeneutic approach to the social and spiritual complexity of a politics of forgiveness as expressed in Matthew 18:15-35.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to make a case for an integrative AQAL approach to engaging what was called a 'politics of forgiveness' in Matthew 18.15-35. The central argument is that a public theological (multilingual) approach to biblical scholarship enables one to develop new knowledge on both the text (within the public of the theological academy), and also to find ways of bridging this knowledge for contemporary readers (in the public of the church and the public of society at large). The purpose of this engagement is to add new insight to the theological discourse on forgiveness in complex social settings such as those found in South Africa.

Ken Wilber's integral theory (AQAL) highlights the need for a multifaceted understanding of the lived reality of readers, and textual content, in this regard. It suggests that all understanding must take account of the internal life, the external life, the individual as well as the collective. An AQAL hermeneutic approach was applied to the text itself to illustrate the layered complexity of forgiveness as an integrative process in Matthew's narrative in Mt 18.15-35. The conclusion is that such a textured and nuanced approach to this passage could open up new possibilities for understanding forgiveness among readers of the text from diverse social, cultural and theological perspectives.

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