

Between Vengeance and Forgiveness, by Martha Minow

reviewed by [Donald W. Shriver](#) in the [April 21, 1999](#) issue

Between Vengeance and Forgiveness

By Martha Minow. Beacon, 147 pp.

How do societies recover from atrocities--whether in Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Chile or even, as the recent murder of James Byrd attests, the U.S.--that destroy lives, relationships and institutions? By no one strategy, says Harvard law professor Martha Minow. A careful writer, Minow surveys the current strategies employed in various places, assesses their apparent successes and failures, and identifies the practical and ethical tensions that afflict them all.

Minow has read and digested a cross-section of the mounting literature in this field. After an introductory chapter that maps some of the minefields that lie "between vengeance and forgiveness," she discusses four major approaches to social recovery from traumatic pasts: legal trials, truth commissions, reparations and "facing history." Her summary judgments in these chapters are wisely balanced between pragmatic problems and social urgencies.

Legal trials "can air issues, create an aura of fairness, establish a public record, and produce some sense of accountability." But they are blunt instruments for bringing thousands of the guilty to "justice." In ways impossible in adversarial court trials, truth commissions offer healing balm to hurt minds. "Tears in public will not be the last tears, but knowing that one's tears are seen may grant a sense of acknowledgment that makes grief less lonely and terrifying."

As illustrated by the U.S. government's apology and reparations to Japanese-American survivors of their World War II internment, official words and monetary compensation also have some healing power--so long as no one pretends that all losses are restorable. "There are no tidy endings following mass atrocity." The final method Minow explores, facing history, requires a careful balance. "To seek a path between vengeance and forgiveness is also to seek a route between too much memory and too much forgetting." William Gladstone once declared, "The problem in Ireland is that the Irish will never forget and the British will never remember." Great danger lies either way. Memory can be a prison; forgetting, a deceptive assumption that "now that's over."

Though Minow pays little attention to the distinctive gifts of religious people and organizations in peacemaking, her sensitivity to the ethical dimensions of antagonism and healing makes her book a sober and distinguished contribution to this difficult subject.

In its mixture of realism, complexity and hope, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* offers a remarkable analysis of a troublesome legacy that the 20th century is about to bequeath to the 21st.