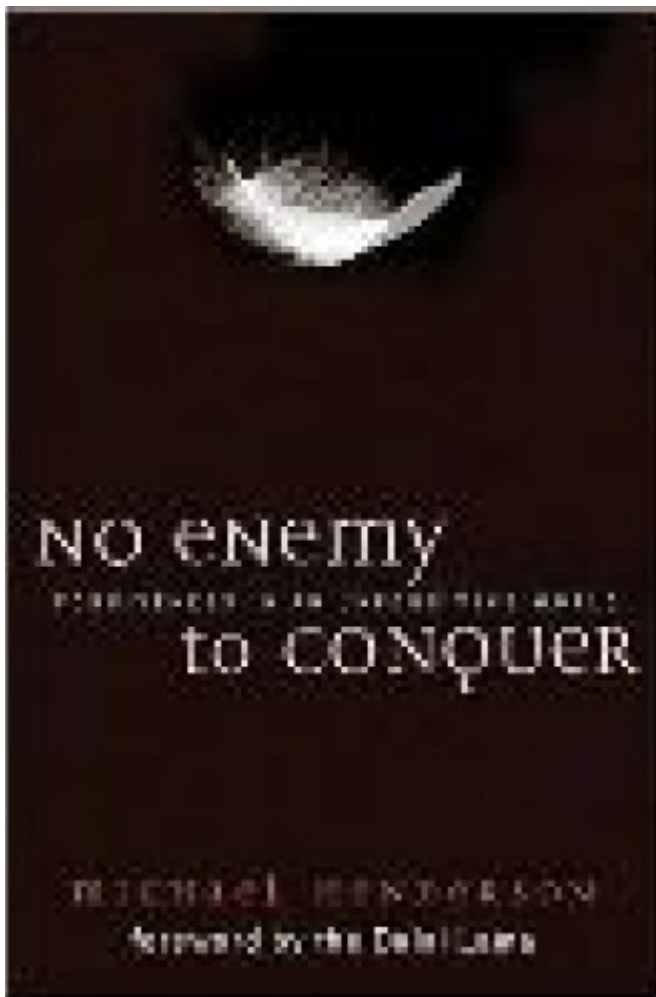


No Enemy to Conquer: Forgiveness in an Unforgiving World

reviewed by [Frank Ramirez](#) in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue

In Review



No Enemy to Conquer: Forgiveness in an Unforgiving World

Michael Henderson
Baylor University Press

It is often assumed that forgiveness is impossible in the face of extraordinary evil. In *No Enemy to Conquer*, Michael Henderson, a freelance journalist who lives in England and has written many books on peace, faith and forgiveness, blows away that assumption by cataloging example after example of people who have chosen to live richly despite suffering terrible wrongs.

Having experienced displacement as a result of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Henderson knows that there is nothing easy about forgiving, but he does not hesitate to point to the ways in which his own ancestors were oppressors. Celebrating the steps toward peace taken by both the victims and the perpetrators of terrorism in Northern Ireland, he challenges his largely Western readers to recognize that what some call the Muslim/Christian conflict has ancient roots and that in this case too there is plenty of blame to be spread around.

These stories shine a light on souls brave enough to step across sectarian boundaries into a new country of hope. We read about a woman who was a child victim of Nazi medical experiments, about survivors of Japanese prison camps and the firebombing of Dresden, about the wife of Daniel Pearl, about Amish grace, about courageous Muslims and Hindus in India, about Israelis and Palestinians who care enough to phone each other from opposite sides of the wall that separates them, and about individuals from both sides of the genocide in Rwanda who perform seemingly impossible tasks of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Some of the passages are unforgettable. When Norwegian Leif Hovelsen ran into the Gestapo agent who had tortured him during World War II, he threw a bucket of water into his face. He realized how wrong he was, sought out and forgave the agent, then refused to press charges against the man who had mistreated him as a captive. "When I answered the Nazis with the same treatment meted out to me," he said, "their spirit conquered me. When I forgave, I had conquered National Socialism." Years later he realized that he had never admitted his own wrongdoing, so he sought out the agent's descendants to ask their forgiveness for throwing the bucket of water.

Then there is Ginn Fourie, who insisted on treating the man who murdered her daughter in the midst of violence in South Africa as a human being. "It's not that I don't feel a great sadness of losing my daughter, but forgiving her killer has made it bearable and given me a creative way forward. Letlapa [the murderer] has told me

that in forgiving him I have restored his humanity.”

Chapter titles like “Moving Beyond Victimhood,” “Taking Responsibility,” “Creating Safe Space” and “Acknowledging the Past” provide signposts for the journey. Each chapter concludes with responses by individuals who are renowned for their work toward reconciliation and peace, including Desmond Tutu, Rajmohan Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto. The Dalai Lama contributed the foreword.

There is no single thread to this book, but the many stories woven together create a tapestry of hope and courage; they reveal a cloud of witnesses who have chosen life and forgiveness over death through the ways of the world.