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### **The Christian Concept of Forgiveness and Religious Education Facing the Problem of Individualism**

**Abstract:** The analysis undertaken in this article pertains to the challenge faced by education, which consists of overcoming the negative aspects of contemporary individualism, such as the building of instrumental relationships by people maturing in a culture permeated with it. Consequently, there is limited responsibility taken for the other people co-creating these relationships. The author puts forward the thesis that the Christian concept of forgiveness is an appropriate point of reference for reflection on the nature of interpersonal relationships and the issue of responsibility for other people, even when they are weak and their behaviour is the cause of disappointment and regret. The main part of the analysis was devoted to understanding forgiveness, which is the essence of the Christian attitude and, at the same time, the subject of many controversies. However, from the analysis of excerpts from the Bible, it was concluded that the often-raised doubts about the moral value of forgiveness are a consequence of identifying God's forgiveness with decisions made by people and an erroneous understanding of the relationship between forgiveness and repentance. The dispelling of these doubts was a premise for the statement that it can become the basis of contemporary social and moral education.

**Keywords:** individualism, responsibility, forgiveness, Christianity, religious education.

## **Introduction**

Individualism has a long history in philosophical thought and is one of the key features of contemporary culture. In the present world, it has received special significance as a consequence of the criticism of collectivist models of social life, which involved violation of dignity and well-being of people due to their emphasis on needs and goals of a group as a whole. Individualism demands respect for the dignity and rights of individuals (Spicker 2013); however, this concept is susceptible to other vices. For example, it induces individuals to adopt an attitude focused solely on themselves, which can be expressed in various forms. Rather than being concerned for people, combined with respect for their dignity and rights, individualism leads to egoism, allowing the use of other people in pursuit of particular interests (McCann 2014; Shaver 2021). Regardless of how an individualistic attitude is expressed, it results in the marginalisation of responsibility for other people (Mounier 1986). Although the topic of responsibility is discussed in the context of individualism, it is understood as bearing the consequences of the decisions made rather than taking responsibility for people experiencing the repercussions of the decisions (Spicker 2013). Consequently, individualism causes the weakening of community relationships, which might even lead to the breaking of such connections.

Individualism is one of the challenges for education (Peters and Marshall 1996; Rajský 2023), particularly for religious education, which refers to the problems experienced by people in their earthly existence: to the relationships established by them, to the way they participate in social groups, to the interpretation of the culture that dominates in a given social context or to the relation to the natural environment by helping maturing people to understand the transcendent dimension of human existence and the specificity of other religions (Bagrowicz 2000; Stern 2009; Lundie 2010; Milerski 2011; Barnes 2015; Marek 2022). The horizontal and vertical dimensions of human life are closely related (Archer 2000, 2006). The challenge faced by education, including religious education, is related to the preparation of maturing people to find solutions to their dilemmas, thereby enabling them to care for their dignity and well-being while also taking responsibility for other people and social relationships.

The following analysis demonstrates the way in which the issue of negative aspects of individualism can be addressed in religious education with reference to Christianity. Limiting the reflection to Christianity is justified, on the one hand, by the author's knowledge of Christian doctrine; on the other hand, the choice has resulted from the fact that each religion sets out different paths for the development of its members. The attention is focused on the topic of forgiveness, and this choice is justified for two reasons. Firstly, the idea of forgiveness

is central to Christianity (Arendt 1958; Ely 2004; Bash 2007). It is a way to begin loving the enemies, to which Christians are exhorted (Matt 5:38–48, 18:21–35; Neu 2011). Secondly, forgiveness is controversial (Horsfeld 2003; Murphy 2005; Griswold 2014; Kleiven 2022) and is rather difficult to achieve (Heimbürger et al. 2019). Jean Hampton claims that Christians are not ‘any less resentful, indignant or hateful’ (Murphy and Hampton 2002, 11). As a consequence of narrowing the focus of the analysis undertaken in this article, I put forward the thesis that the topic of forgiveness, from the Christian perspective, can serve as a reference point to help people maturing today to recognise and overcome the negative consequences of individualism permeating contemporary culture. If this thesis is correct, then religious education – regardless of its confessional or supra-confessional specificity – turns out to be one of the spaces in which the challenge of preparing the currently maturing generations to identify and overcome the negative dimensions of individualism can be undertaken.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part presents the topic of individualism with respect to challenges for education. In the second part, a reflection on the understanding of forgiveness in Christianity is undertaken. Lastly, conclusions relating to the question posed in the article are formulated.

### **Individualism and Its Moral Aspects as a Challenge for Education**

Individualism is considered on many interrelated levels, such as psychological, social, political, religious, methodological, ethical and legal. For the purpose of the topic undertaken in this article, it is necessary to limit the reflection on individualism to the issue of social relationships and their moral dimension.

In the social sciences, individualism falls under the topic of social ontology (Epstein 2021). Its foundation is the assumption that human individuals are the only ontological realities, the exclusive subjects of socio-economic life. They are entitled to freedom, including legal personality, inviolability in the field of property rights and freedom of economic activity. Society is understood as the sum of human individuals (atoms) and the social order resulting from a voluntary social contract (Piwowarski & Skwierczyński 1997). The creation of society is understood to be conditioned by individuals’ striving for personal, material and spiritual development (Wierzbicki 1997; Machan 1998; O’Flynn 2009). Individualism is also referred to as atomism, mainly by its critics, who emphasise that from this stance, individual people are perceived as isolated from one another, and their mutual interdependence is blurred (Epstein 2021).

The popularity gained by this stance in the culture of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is primarily a consequence of attempts to establish collectivist models of social life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wherein individual interests were subordinated to the interests of groups, leading to the questioning of the freedom and subjectivity of individuals. The rejection of collectivism implied the pursuit of individual empowerment in social relationships (Renaut 2014). In today's era of postmodern culture, individualism finds expression in the postulate of unrestrained external freedom for every human being (Bronk 1998).

For this analysis, the point of reference is not individualism as a doctrine, but as a feature of attitudes adopted by individuals maturing in the culture of the first half of the 21st century. It is worth paying attention to one of the impacts of adopting these attitudes: the nature of relationships with other persons created by people with an individualistic attitude and the moral dimension of decisions made by them in these relationships (Putnam 2000; Bauman 2009).

Relationships with others can be built in two ways – either because of one's interests, which can be realised thanks to a given relationship, or because of concern for other people, who co-create a given relationship. Indeed, in every relationship, the well-being of both parties should be secured; therefore, it is impossible to radically categorise relationships as either selfish, which are built by people with an individualistic attitude, or altruistic, which are created by non-individualists. In addition, while establishing a relationship, the primary motivators include other parties' properties that may be valuable to the people making the commitment decision. Thus, the difference between selfish and altruistic relationships is quite subtle. Individualists limit involvement to the pursuit of selfish interests since they maintain relationships based on the benefits they bring. The lack of these benefits, or the possibility of obtaining more valuable goods when establishing other relationships, becomes a premise for breaking existing relationships. It is worth noting that people with an individualistic attitude can offer other people something in exchange for the opportunity to use their properties. In this way they justify the instrumental treatment of others (Shaver 2021). However, non-individualists take responsibility for other people while building relationships with them. As a result, caring for these people becomes a significant dimension of the interpersonal relationships they build. Such caring is not ceased when the other parties lose their properties that previously enriched their common life. They are also ready to give up striving for specific goods/pleasures if they may cause violation of dignity and well-being of the other party. Relationships established by people can be built in both models, and regardless of the model, they can be long-lasting. For example, marriage may be an expression of the spouses' concern

for each other, but it can also be limited to meeting each other's needs (Björnberg and Kollind 2005).

In the moral dimension, individualism, on the one hand, implies the positive thesis of people's intrinsic value as well as their highest value in social life (Machan 1998; Spicker 2013; Donohue 2021). On the other hand, the focus on individuals creates the foundations for subjectivism, liberalism, and utilitarianism, which may lead to selfish attitudes (McCann 2014). This means that people maturing in a culture permeated by individualism can understand the relationships they build as a way to achieve selfish benefits, i.e. they may *de facto* treat the other parties of these relationships in an instrumental way as a means to achieve goals important to them, and not as persons under their responsibility. It is worth noting that people with individualistic attitudes may not be aware of how individualism permeates their personal culture. Due to their sociability and ability to build long-lasting relationships, they may identify their attitudes as non-individualistic. While adopting an individualistic stance, they can simultaneously criticise individualism in an open manner.

This specificity of individualism also implies how decisions are made in the context of experiencing harm. Since individualism suggests that the good of the acting person should be the point of reference for individual decisions, the harm done by the other parties in given relationships becomes a premise for breaking them off. Of course, in many cases, such decisions should be made so that the dignity and well-being of the victims are protected, especially when the perpetrators have an advantage over the victims and commit serious abuses, such as acts of violence, rape or threats to life. However, focusing on one's own good can also lead to breaking off relationships in situations where the perpetrators do not have an advantage over the victims, and resentment arises from the disappointment experienced by the harmed people as a result of the decisions made by those remaining in relationships with them. However, such harm is difficult to avoid, considering that interpersonal relationships are not built by perfect beings, i.e. those creating them are not always able to correctly recognise the well-being of other people and are not always capable of making morally good decisions. Furthermore, a hasty termination of a relationship can cause more pain than the harm previously experienced, especially when a broken relationship is practically impossible to replace because it involves parents or children.

Individualism, as mentioned in the introduction, is a challenge for contemporary education for several reasons. Taking into account the specificity of the culture at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is difficult not to ask how to prepare maturing individuals to build mature relationships, wherein they consider the well-being of others and take responsibility for them. Considering these considerations can certainly lead to more thoughtful reflection before a

decision is made concerning them and protect them, at least partially, from experiencing harm. With this in mind, it is difficult not to pose another question: how can maturing people be prepared to build relationships with imperfect, weak people whose decisions are a source of disappointment and suffering and arouse regret? How can they be protected from the sometimes extremely hasty termination of relationships in order to look for more perfect people, who are seemingly stronger and not disappointing? And, consequently, how can they be protected from further disappointment when the new person also turns out to be imperfect? At the same time, bearing in mind the danger of hasty forgiveness leading to victimisation, it is difficult not to pose the question of how maturing people can be protected from adopting an attitude of consent to further harm.

In this article, I put forward the thesis that the Christian perspective of forgiveness can support the development of currently maturing people in the area described above. In the next section, the Christian perspective of forgiveness will be presented. However, to summarise the reflections so far, it is worth pointing out two conditions that must be met in order for a given issue to be used in education to address the challenge discussed in this paper. First, attention should be focused on caring for and taking responsibility for the people in the relationship, even if they are imperfect. Second, such methods of solving practical dilemmas should be used as examples that are morally unquestionable, i.e. ensuring the protection of the dignity, self-respect and well-being of the acting subjects.

### **Christian Teachings on Forgiveness**

The idea of forgiveness is inscribed in the essence of Christianity to such an extent that the religion is commonly known as the religion of forgiveness (Bash 2007). Indeed, this idea was known and developed before Christ—for example, in Judaism, where it found expression in the rituals of Yom Kippur (Pilarczyk 2016), as well as in classical Greek and Roman texts. However, in Christianity, forgiveness ‘represents a very different pattern from the one that informs the classical [...] texts’ (Konstan 2010, 91; cf. Couenhoven 2010). In this religion, forgiveness is recognised as an unconditional act (Giannini 2017) and as a norm, the observance of which is considered a critical condition for being a Christian. Prior to addressing these issues, the specificity of biblical texts on forgiveness is worth noting because although Christianity places the idea of forgiveness at the centre of its doctrine, biblical texts on the decision to forgive do not help understand what it should mean for victims to forgive their harmers (Musekura 2010). Moreover, this ambiguity results in philosophical and theological

discussions, which raise further questions regarding the practice of forgiveness (Couenhoven 2010).

The idea of forgiveness is explained in Christianity from the perspective of the relationship between human beings and God, which is informed by divine law and marked by its transgression by people. This results in the breakdown of that relationship and finally redemption and reconciliation (Jankowski 2016). Therefore, to understand the idea of forgiveness, it is necessary to ‘consider the nature of guilt, confession, repentance, and absolution’ (Konstan 2010, 91; cf. Ely 2004)<sup>i</sup>. Recognition of forgiveness in this context does not imply that this idea can easily be transferred into the context of interpersonal relationships. For example, it is worth noting that God as a spiritual being does not experience all those elements of decision-making that are related to human corporeality, such as emotionality and uncertainty regarding the effects of decisions (Warmke 2017a). Hanna Arendt (1958) stated, ‘[T]he discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. [...] The fact that he made his discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense’ (238). However, it is difficult to agree with the author’s statement, considering the nature of entities creating given relationships.

Interestingly, it is not the comparison of human forgiveness to divine decisions but rather trying to match divine forgiveness to the understanding of forgiveness that results from human experience that is a problem, which is caused by the difficulties to indicate the differences between forgiveness granted by God and decisions made in interpersonal relationships. First, the biblical authors expressed their experiences of divine forgiveness in terms that were used to describe human relationships available in antiquity. Next, the reading of the biblical texts on forgiveness is undertaken in light of theories that were developed several centuries later. This type of analysis has been compiled by Brandon Warmke, who discusses four theories of the nature of divine forgiveness: the theory of changing the emotional attitude towards the wrongdoer, the theory of resigning from punishment (Warmke 2017a), the theory of reconciliation and the theory of debt cancellation (Warmke 2017b). None of these theories appears to adequately reflect the phenomenon known as divine forgiveness.

Consequently, arguments about the conditionality/unconditionality of divine forgiveness lead to confusion. This problem is significant in the analysis of interpersonal forgiveness, especially in relation to the protection of the dignity and well-being of victims (Horowski 2021). However, in relation to God’s attitude towards people, it is a secondary problem. On the one hand, if the conditionality of forgiveness becomes the primary problem,

i.e. it is stated that forgiveness should be a consequence of repentance (Swinburne 1989) and conditional forgiveness is perceived as a pattern of God's decision (Ramelli 2011), then God's relationship with people becomes foreign to Christianity. On the other hand, if forgiveness is made unconditional, the distinction between forgiveness and pardon is blurred, which raises objections in the context of the harm experienced by the victims.

However, by referring to biblical texts, it is possible to work out the Christian concepts of divine forgiveness and human forgiveness. It would be difficult to dissect such a broad topic within the framework of this analysis, yet it is necessary to present its essential threads. Divine forgiveness should be described from the perspective of the truth about God's love for people, which is the perfect one, i.e. it does not disappear when people turn away from God. The story of Hosea and his marriage illustrates this truth aptly. When Hosea was called as a prophet, God decided to make the prophet's marriage a sign for the Israelites. He said to Hosea: 'Go, marry a whore, and get children with a whore; for the country itself has become nothing but a whore by abandoning Yahweh' (Hos 1:2). Of course, prostitution cannot be accepted; therefore, goods and privileges were taken away from the harlot. However, this was not a sign of revenge. The story of the prophet is a symbol of love that knows no bounds. Everything that was experienced by an unfaithful wife was aimed at building a marital relationship. By referring to this sign, God told the Israelites about his love for them: 'But look, I am going to seduce her and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart' (Hos 2:16). God believed that 'When that day comes – declares Yahweh – you will call me, "My husband", no more will you call me, "My Baal". [...] I shall betroth you to myself for ever, I shall betroth you in uprightness and justice, and faithful love and tenderness. Yes, I shall betroth you to myself in loyalty and in the knowledge of Yahweh' (Hos 2:18, 21–22). The conclusion of this prophecy is quite suggestive: 'Yahweh said to me, "Go again, love a woman who loves another man, an adulteress, and love her as Yahweh loves the Israelites although they turn to other gods"' (Hos 3:1)<sup>ii</sup>. Referring to this story, it can be said that just as the prophet Hosea was called to love and care for his wife despite her betrayals and the hurt he suffered, God's love for people is unconditional. God is portrayed here as faithful in loving and caring for people, even though they are not interested in maintaining a relationship with Him. It can be said that forgiveness is somehow inscribed in the essence of God (Giblet and Lacan 1990; Couenhoven 2010).

However, although God's love and forgiveness are not conditioned by human repentance, repentance is not irrelevant to forgiveness. From the story of Hosea and his wife, it can be concluded that repentance is not the condition for forgiveness but the purpose of it. Repentance is necessary for people to experience God's love and forgiveness. The prodigal son



experiences his father's forgiving attitude when he returns home (Luke 15:11–24). If he had not recognised his wrongdoing and repented, the experience of forgiveness would not have been possible for him. Just as it was the prophet Hosea's task to take action to influence his wife's rediscovery of his husbandly love and her termination of her relationships with her lovers, God's love for people is also expressed through their actions aimed at restoring their relationships with God. The condition for this restoration is human repentance. God's love is not tantamount to leniency for moral evil. This distinction also helps to understand the story of the two criminals crucified next to Jesus. Although one of them heard, 'Today you will be with me in paradise,' and the other did not (Luke 23:39–43), the presumption of Jesus's indifference to the salvation of the other man would lead to a conclusion contrary to the essence of the gospel: Jesus desired the salvation of both criminals, but only one of them was ready to accept this offer.

As a consequence of the above analysis, the meaning of the call to forgiveness addressed in the Bible to people can be discovered. Christians should act like God in their attitude towards wrongdoers (Chrost 2016), which is expressed, among others, in the call to forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times (Matt 18:21–22). However, it is not condonation that is an expression of love for wrongdoers, but an action that may help perpetrators to understand how they harm other people, how their actions affect their relationship with God and, consequently, how they can rebuild their relationship with God and people (Couenhoven 2010). Condonation can be an expression of indulgence for wrongdoers and indifference to how they and their relationships develop. Sometimes, condonation can even become an expression of disguised revenge if victims are aware of the consequences of the acts experienced by perpetrators themselves. To sum up, **forgiveness is an expression of concern for the wrongdoers, and, therefore, it should be expressed in actions adequate to the current level of their development and the goal of rebuilding their relationship with other people and with God.** Interestingly, condonation can be simple, while forgiveness can take time and effort to bring about change in harmers. Sometimes, forgiveness is also combined with punishment, which should not be understood as revenge, but as a kind of educational method. It is worth noting that this **forgiveness is not conditioned by repentance but directed towards repentance.** Moreover, such forgiveness need not be communicated to offenders who are not mature enough to receive it (Horowski & Jeziorński 2023).

There is another difference between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness, which can be compared to the difference between parental love and sibling love. The latter is usually weaker and involves numerous conflicts that are not easy to overcome. The Bible contains

stories wherein this difference is taken into account and on the basis of which the specificity of human forgiveness can be understood. These are passages dedicated to Joseph and his brothers (Gen 45:1–15, 50:15–19) and the older brother of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25–32). Both cases concern brotherly relationships, and the decision to forgive is made (or is suggested to be taken) not because of the direct relationship between the injured party and the wrongdoer, but because of the father, for whom not only the victim but also the wrongdoer is a son (Horowski 2019). In the story from the Book of Genesis, the brothers ask Joseph for forgiveness, referring to the father's memory (Gen 50:16), while in the parable of the prodigal son, the father asks the elder son to forgive his brother because of how important it was to him as a father to regain his relationship with his child (Luke 15: 31–32).

In conclusion, Christianity puts forgiveness in a new perspective. It is an unconditional decision while simultaneously implying non-condonation. Its purpose is the development of perpetrators; hence, it should be expressed in actions supporting this development.

### **The Christian Approach to Forgiveness against the Challenges of Individualism**

At the end of the first part of this article, two conditions that must be met for the given topic to be used in education to address the challenge of individualism were indicated. The first pertains to the understanding of people's responsibility for others, and the second pertains to the moral value of the analysed activity. This moral value should include concern for the well-being of others, the dignity of the acting persons, as well as third parties affected by the consequences of those actions. From the analysis of the Christian perspective on forgiveness conducted above, it can be concluded that forgiveness from the Christian perspective can be used to highlight the weaknesses of individualism and serve as a reference point for overcoming them. This is because forgiveness meets these conditions..

The theme of forgiveness in the Christian approach provokes reflection on the nature of interpersonal relationships and the issue of responsibility for other people. The passages in the Bible dealing with forgiveness describe relationships built with weak people. These relationships may be considered disappointing. The father of the prodigal son may be disappointed with his child, and the prophet Hosea may be disappointed with his wife, but neither of them people breaks off the relationship. Instead, they make an effort to strive for the well-being and development of those for whom they are responsible. They do not make the decision to build new, more satisfying relationships with others; they remain faithful in love. Through these examples, God is also shown to be faithful in love despite the weakness of human beings. In this way, interpersonal relationships and their development are shown in the Bible

from a completely different perspective than the one preferred in a culture permeated with individualism. Interpersonal relationships are shown not as a means to pursue selfish desires, but as a space where care for other people is undertaken, such as those who are weak, often disappointing and cause suffering. Moreover, through the call to forgive not just seven times, but seventy-seven times, people are urged to persevere in caring for those they encounter along the journey of their lives.

It is also worth noting that the Christian discourse on forgiveness evokes the theme of the motivating factor for perseverance in caring for those who live next door; are family members, neighbours and co-workers; and are accidentally found on the path of the acting people. Christians are called to care for these people because they are loved by God. Christians are called to look at other people with the eyes of God, including those who adopt a hostile attitude towards them. Although the theme of caring for other people for God's sake may be incomprehensible to non-Christians, and especially to non-believers, the very examples used in the Bible show that caring for other people can also be motivated by the good of a third party: caring for the ex-spouse may be motivated by the offspring's good, and caring for siblings can be motivated by the parents' good. The biblical examples thus suggest that the broader social context should be considered when making decisions concerning those who have failed in relationships. Recognising these links between the perpetrators of harm and the victims may also provokes the question of what the point of reference for the attitude towards persons committing serious offences should be. Attitudes towards these people can be modified for the good of their loved ones, who are not responsible for the evil committed, but who will bear the consequences of their actions. The biblical texts therefore point to the devotion of time, strength and resources to social rehabilitation, i.e. caring for the moral and social development of the perpetrators and not rejecting them as people.

The second condition that must be met in order to implement forgiveness in addressing problems arising from individualism relates to the moral value of forgiveness. When offering maturing people with reflections that encourage them to take responsibility for other people, examples that are morally dubious cannot be used, i.e. they suggest making decisions that threaten to violate the dignity of the victims, victimisation or permission to hurt other people. Common concepts of forgiveness often raise doubts about its positive value. If, on the one hand, forgiveness is understood as a process that runs on an emotional level and consists of changing the attitude towards perpetrators from negative to positive, it may become an expression of indulgence and permission for perpetrators to decide that they may harm others in the future. Due to such decisions, neither the dignity of victims is protected, nor is the moral development

of perpetrators promoted. On the other hand, the concepts of conditional forgiveness assume that victims should remain indifferent to the well-being of perpetrators until they repent. This protects victims' dignity; however, any concern for perpetrators is excluded if they do not understand the evil caused by them.

In the concept presented above forgiveness is understood as a decision that should be reflected in actions aimed at changing offenders' attitude towards God and other people. It is unconditional; however, it is not naive. This understanding of forgiveness is possible because repentance is no longer treated as its condition. It is understood as the goal of forgiveness, which excludes indulgence. It can be expressed in the pursuit of punishment if perpetrators are unable to understand the evil they have inflicted upon other people, but it can also consist of the 'cancellation the debt' if perpetrators change their attitudes. According to this concept, forgiveness consists in renouncing resentment, i.e. a negative attitude towards the perpetrators, and adopting a positive attitude of concern for their well-being, taking responsibility for them and for their development. Nonetheless, this attitude can be expressed in various ways depending on whether perpetrators notice the evil they have done and change their behaviour, or whether they consider their behaviour harmful to other people to be acceptable. In forgiveness understood in this way, victims' dignity is protected. They are not called upon to allow their victimisation. Therefore, teaching about forgiveness from a biblical perspective meets the ethical condition of educating young people to maturely resolve moral dilemmas.

To conclude the analysis of the potential of reflection on forgiveness in education that addresses the challenge of overcoming the negative aspects of individualism, it is worth noting that this potential is only used if forgiveness is interpreted as an expression of love. However, in religious education, fragments of the Bible are interpreted in different ways (Stern 2018) and sometimes taken out of the context of the overall message of Christian revelation. Consequently, in some interpretations, the reflection on forgiveness is conducted in the perspective of the truth about God's love for all people regardless of the evil committed. Of course, such an attitude towards people does not exclude God's consent to suffering experienced by people because of evil committed by them and to punishment understood as an educational means. However, in other interpretations, God is shown as a strict judge, holding believers accountable for disobeying his commands, including the command to forgive (humanly impossible). It is worth noting that only reflection on forgiveness from the perspective of the truth about love can be used in education that aims to address and overcome the negative consequences of individualism. Forgiveness motivated by love is altruistic, while forgiveness motivated by the desire to follow the Christian norm is selfish. Conforming to such standards

is done to avoid the negative consequences of disobedience. Recognising this difference allows for the conclusion that not all religious education referring to Bible content and relating to forgiveness has the potential to identify the negative consequences of individualism and indicate ways to overcome them. On the contrary, seeing forgiveness as the object of a norm that should be respected may reinforce an individualistic attitude.

## **Conclusions**

Individualism, which highly influences the attitudes of modern people, is an expression of concern for the dignity and well-being of individuals while also implying a lack of responsibility for others. This is significant for selfish interpersonal relationships that are weak and can break as a result of the experience of harm. Contemporary education faces significant challenges related to this cultural feature. The purpose of such education is to prepare maturing people to build relationships where both parties are responsible for each other. This challenge is also considered by religious education. The analysis depicted how the Christian concept of forgiveness can become a benchmark in education aimed at overcoming threats associated with the penetration of individualism into the attitudes of individuals. This concept of forgiveness emphasises people's responsibility for one another due to God's love for everyone. In addition, this concept is not morally questionable because it combines forgiveness, i.e. taking responsibility for perpetrators, with concern for one's own dignity and well-being.

The analysis further leads to other conclusions. First, the biblical message can be interpreted in various ways, and in extreme cases, these interpretations can lead maturing individuals to self-centeredness and reinforce individualistic attitudes. Second, the comparison of God's forgiveness and human forgiveness causes uncertainty in finding the specificity of people's decisions. Third, reducing forgiveness to a criterion of being a Christian makes forgiveness impossible for them. Forgiveness – especially of the most painful wrongs – is possible only through reference to God's love.

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<sup>i</sup> The heroes of the Greek novels are not perceived as offending the gods, so they don't need to show repentance, conversion and beseech forgiveness (Konstan 2010).

<sup>ii</sup> In Christianity, the incarnation, passion and death of Christ on the cross are understood as the greatest expressions of God's love for people (Martini 2019), but this topic is deliberately omitted because it would require a broader theological interpretation.