

## Peace and the Culture and Politics of Apology

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Having looked the beast of the past in the eye, having asked and received forgiveness and having made amends, let us shut the door to the past—not in order to forget it but in order not to allow it to imprison us.

—Bishop Desmond Tutu, 1997

As governments attempt to reconcile people and restore community following violent civil strife and, too, as they seek to establish standing in the international community following acts committed in violation of human rights and international law within their borders, the role and function of apology is gaining considerable attention. The challenge, in the extreme, is how do people who were routinely killing one another form a working polity? How do they gain acceptance for their reconstituted nation in the company of nations? Does apology have a role? This essay examines the public expression of apology in recent decades, provides insight into the elements that can both limit and aid its efficacy and discerns the conditions and requirements, generally, that produce an effective apology, one that can assist reconciliation and restore relationships, and, in some circumstances, aid and sustain peace.

An apology can acknowledge that an injury or damage has occurred. It may include acceptance of responsibility for the mistake; recognize regret, humility or remorse in the language one chooses; explain the role one has played; ask for forgiveness; include a credible commitment to change or a promise that the act will not occur again; and, often, tender some form of restitution or compensation. It can serve as a personal expression of remorse, of course, but it may also be a condition for peace, an instrument of policy, a legal remedy, and an acknowledged requirement in a system, say, in which victims and offenders, in prison settings, or, as in South Africa, before a reconciliation commission, seek “restorative justice.” Differences in culture and politics, however, affect the meaning,

value, function, and efficacy of apology. The moral domain is highly complex. To the extent, for example, that some moral rules are instinctive, emotionally focused on harm and justice—protecting the individual and emphasizing reciprocity and fairness—they may more readily transcend culture; to the extent that they are learned, however, and focus on integrating the group or community by restricting self-interest, demanding loyalty and respecting authority, those moral rules—and thus the function of apology—may shift significantly in meaning and purpose.

As a catalyst for change, an apology can be instrumental. When the Irish Republican Army offered its “sincere apologies” in July 2002 for civilian deaths during its thirty-year campaign, it acknowledged responsibility for unintentional deaths and injuries, for the grief and pain of relatives, and offered condolences to family members. At the same time, it committed itself,

unequivocally to the search for freedom, justice and peace in Ireland . . . to the peace process and to dealing with the challenges and difficulties which this presents. This includes the acceptance of past mistakes and of the hurt and pain we have caused to others.

This unanticipated and unmitigated apology was received as an act to signal normalization, to herald a new attitude, and to set the stage for peace.

**M**ore recently, in August 2007, the mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, apologized for his city’s role in the slave trade, saying London was still tainted by it. For some, his statement was remarkable. Accounts in the press noted that he choked up as he read an account of the brutal tortures suffered by slaves in Britain’s Caribbean colonies. He denounced the role of his city’s corporations in financing the trade. As he pointed through a huge window at the skyscrapers of the financial district, he said the following: “You can look across there to see the institutions that still have the benefit of the wealth they created out of slavery. . . . As mayor, I offer an apology on behalf of London and its institutions for their role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.”

The apology launched a broad effort to acknowledge and confront the past. London provided programs to render slavery’s brutality in art and culture, from “Scratching the Surface” at the National Gallery of Art, films and renderings, diaries from writings of slaves and slave traders—and to educate those visiting the places the slave traders helped to finance in order to compel citizens and visitors alike to recognize where complicity in, and responsibility for, the slave trade rests.

The Roman Catholic pontiff, John Paul II, reversing years of the church policy to “never apologize, never explain,” introduced a theology of apology during his papacy. He launched an examination of church conscience that culminated in a sweeping apology on the first Sunday in Lent, March

2000: “. . . the Church . . . should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters. . . . Let us forgive and ask forgiveness.”

Prior to that time, and subsequently, he apologized for the past actions of church authorities, the “errors and excuses” of the Inquisition, the wars of religion that scarred Christendom, and, he apologized to indigenous people, to Muslims, to Africans, and to the Jewish community. By these actions, he took the Church a significant step toward dialogue with the modern world. By accepting candidly, repeatedly and voluntarily the Church’s responsibility for its failings, he seemed to be seeking a way to halt the cycle of violence that is repeating into modernity. To a gathering of historians, on October 31, 2003—the anniversary of the day in 1517 that Martin Luther is said to have started the Reformation—John Paul II said that the ongoing pursuit of peace will always require the purification of memory: “This sometimes requires much courage and self-denial. . . . However, it is the only way that social and national groups, freed from the remnants of old resentment, can come together with fraternal and reciprocal loyalty in order to build a better future for all.”

John Paul II’s successor, Pope Benedict XVI, is assuming a similar posture. In an overture to the Chinese government, in June 2007, he appealed for reconciliation among China’s Catholics. He chose, essentially, to sidestep the issue that divides Catholics who worship in the underground church from those who practice openly, having been officially registered with the Communist government and swearing loyalty to it. His words identify one of the crucial aspects of apology, that is, the desire to move on, to avoid finding fault even while acknowledging that harm has been done. The Pope urged charity toward those “who think differently from us in social, political and religious matters,” and went on to say the following:

The purification of memory, the pardoning of wrongdoers, the forgetting of injustices suffered and the loving restoration to serenity of troubled hearts, all to be accomplished in the name of Jesus . . . can require moving beyond personal positions or viewpoints, born of painful or difficult experiences.

Manifest in restorative justice programs and truth and reconciliation commissions, the concept of “purifying memory” seeks to open the mind and heart to a future, while being aware of, but not burdened or immobilized by, the past. It seems to require, effectively, that judgment and, for the most part, punishment and restitution, be left out of the picture (although with some of the twenty-plus truth commissions, selective prosecution is taking place and some limited restitution payments made). The concept has much to offer as nations seek ways to reckon with former regimes, to purge a

vilified past, to take steps to prevent recurrence of abuse and violence and, certainly, to reconcile and work to create a just and peaceful future.

What cultural perspectives come into play? In China, for example, apologies are complex matters, weighty acts that are rarely offered or accepted, that must be delivered with appropriate gravity and, given that “loss of face” is involved, an apology is not an act easily taken. Chinese officials have never openly apologized to the tens of millions of Chinese who were imprisoned, beaten, or killed during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, even though the Communist party has acknowledged that errors were made and that the period was a disaster. Chinese scholars suggest that the Western penchant for apologies grows out of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which a simple confession brings prompt absolution. In contrast, an apology in China involves a much more formal and traumatic event. Recently, given the problems that China has experienced with respect to its manufactured products for export, apologies for errors have been tendered; an appreciation of the “Western” use of apology appears to be gaining, at least in this limited, commercial domain.

Apologies are of paramount cultural importance in Japan; a number of apology words carry differing meanings depending on circumstance, formality of context, gender, relative power in the offended/offender relationship, and the amount of responsibility the person who apologizes assumes. Most include expressions of humility, submission, and meekness, in contrast to the English meaning that rests on sincerity, or the German, *entschuldige bitte*, which means to take away my guilt—the guilt experienced by the apologizer. The Japanese use apology—even when there is no fault—as a means to maintain harmony and social cohesion, to restore the relationship with the offended party, rather than as a means to seek forgiveness for a harm done.

Indeed, for the Japanese, an apology is an integrative device for maintaining the group; others, outside the group, may be considered “unworthy” to receive an apology. The reluctance of the Japanese, then, to apologize for “war crimes,” enslavement of women, and other heinous acts during World War II is rooted in its culture of apology; “Western” moral concepts simply do not apply.

In his book, *Eating Crow*, Jay Rayner recounts two stories that reflect differences among European, African, Asian, and American approaches to apology. When American president Bill Clinton went to Kigali, Rwanda, in 1998, to apologize for the world’s failure to intervene in the Rwandan genocide, observers noted that the engines of Air Force One were never turned off. Clinton was there for less than two hours and never left the airfield. One African observer turned to another and offered this telling explanation for why the apology “didn’t work.” “If you go round in the

car to say sorry to a neighbor, it's always good to turn off the engine. Just for a minute at least. Don't you think?"

One year later, Chinese officials were outraged at Clinton's initial apology after the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade because it was too casual—delivered while the president was outdoors and wearing a polo shirt. Initially, the Chinese media did not even broadcast the tape, with editors huffing that “it was not really an apology at all.”

Consider, in contrast, the following example. When Willy Brandt was Chancellor of West Germany he visited Warsaw in December 1970. A newspaper account shows a photograph with the following description appearing alongside it:

A man is outdoors, kneeling on the ground at the top of a short flight of broad steps, his body stiff and upright. His hands are clasped in front of him, very pale against the blackness of his raincoat. His head . . . is bowed so that his gaze appears to be fixed on a spot on the ground perhaps two feet in front of him. He appears oblivious to the large crowd that surrounds him at a respectful distance. Many in the crowd are holding cameras . . . recording the scene at the memorial to the half-million Jews of the city's ghetto murdered by the Nazis. . . . A seminal moment for West Germany. . . . There's not been a gesture like it since.

Adding further complexity, the other English meaning of apology—a justification or defense of an act or idea, from the Greek *apologia*—raises the critical issue of sincerity. An effective apology does not seek to excuse—to explain, perhaps, but not to dodge responsibility. Apologies that rationalize behavior are often those that are “forced” by a settlement. When an apology is coerced, moreover, it may invoke the opposite response of what is sought. The apology, for example, that was a part of the 1951 peace treaty between the Allied powers and Japan, is cast, now, as “victor's justice” and essentially disavowed. And, with respect to the women who were forced into becoming sex slaves for Japanese troops during the war, the Japanese government has avoided taking responsibility and refuses to pay any official compensation and instead formed the private Asian Women's Fund, offering several million yen to each of about 300 surviving women identified in South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan. Many women have refused the money, demanding direct compensation from the government instead. Some said they would not accept money if they did not receive an apology since, “the apology would mean Japan accepts it has committed wrongs.”

**T**he apology they seek, which the Japanese government refuses to give, raises a singular issue, one of the more difficult barriers to overcome in constructing an effective apology: acknowledging an offense. How does a government apologize for an act that it does not acknowledge?

To acknowledge the act is to admit to failed performance or behavior, to affirmatively indicate that a wrong was done; it requires that truth be told, neither minimizing the offense nor rationalizing the behavior. In this burden lies the full force of an apology.

Conviction matters in often subtle but exceptional ways to reveal what is intended, with sincerity, and what is necessary: acknowledgment without excuse or explanation, and acceptance of responsibility and a commitment to meaningful change. Years after Brandt's visit to Poland, in May 1985, Richard von Weizacker, President of the Federal Republic of Germany, delivered a speech to the Bundestag commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe, detailing the grievances inflicted on the victims of Germany by emphasizing the importance of honesty:

We need and we have the strength to look truth straight in the eye—without embellishment and without distortion. . . . Remembering means recalling an occurrence honestly . . . so that it becomes a part of our very being. . . . Today we mourn all the dead of the war and the tyranny. . . . In particular we commemorate the six million Jews who were murdered in German concentrations camps . . . all nations who suffered in the war, especially the countless citizens of the Soviet Union and Poland . . . the Sinti and Romany Gypsies, the homosexuals and the mentally ill . . . the people who had to die for their religious or political beliefs. . . . Alongside the endless army of the dead, mountains of human suffering arise, grief over the dead, suffering from injury or barbarous compulsory sterilization, suffering during the air raids, suffering because of rape and pillage, forced labor, injustice and torture, hunger and hardship, suffering because of fear of arrest and death. . . . Today we sorrowfully recall all this human suffering. . . . There can be no reconciliation without remembrance.

And here is South African President F.W. de Klerk, delivering an apology in 1993 for his National Party's imposition of Apartheid:

It was not our intention to deprive people of their rights and to cause misery, but eventually Apartheid led to just that. . . . We deeply regret it. . . . Deep regret goes much further than just saying you are sorry, deep regret says that if I could turn the clock back, and if I could do anything about it, I would have liked to have avoided it.

He goes on later, at the same press conference, to say that the new National Party logo is ". . . a statement that we have broken with that which was wrong in the past and are not afraid to say we are deeply sorry that our past policies were wrong."

A long-standing source of discord in the United States has been the treatment of Native Americans, and, specifically, the multitude of harms and indignities committed against them as official acts of government. At a ceremony held in September 2000 celebrating the one hundred seventy

fifth anniversary of the establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Kevin Gover, an assistant secretary of Indian Affairs for the U.S. Department of Interior, explicitly accepted responsibility on behalf of the BIA:

We must first reconcile ourselves to the fact that the works of this agency have at various times profoundly harmed the communities it was meant to serve. . . . By threat, deceit, and force, the great tribal nations were made to march 1,000 miles to the west, leaving thousands of their old, their young, and their infirm in hasty graves along the Trail of Tears. . . . As the nation looked to the West for more land, this agency participated in the ethnic cleansing that befell the western tribes. . . . The deliberate spread of disease, the decimation of the mighty bison herds, the use of the poison alcohol and the cowardly killing of women and children . . . a tragedy on a scale so ghastly that it cannot be dismissed as merely the inevitable consequence of the clash of competing ways of life. . . . This agency set out to destroy all things Indian . . . forbade the speaking of Indian languages, prohibited the conduct of traditional religious activities . . . made Indian people ashamed of whom they were. . . . So many of the maladies suffered today in Indian country result from the failures of this agency. . . . Poverty, ignorance and disease have been the product of this agency's work.

Govin goes on to make a commitment to the future, as follows:

We desperately wish we could change history, but of course we cannot. . . . Never again will this agency stand silent when hate and violence are committed against Indians. . . . Never again will we attack your religions, your languages, your rituals or any of your tribal ways. Never again will we teach your children to be ashamed of who they are. Never again.

The pledge to bring about a different future is the key to the effectiveness of these apologies. Signaling and implementing change are inextricably bound together. Peace in Northern Ireland, the end of Apartheid in South Africa, and the improved condition of Native Americans can be linked to the fact and circumstance of these apologies.

**I**n contrast, the quest by Armenians for an apology from the Turks for what they regard as genocide has been met by denial. In this sad saga lies persuasive evidence of the value and meaning of apology. Beginning in 1915, more than 1.5 million Armenians—Christians living under Turkish rule—were exterminated through direct killing, starvation, torture, and forced marches into the desert. Armenians from around the world have pressed relentlessly for an apology; Turks, in turn, deny that genocide occurred. Why does an apology matter? What will the Armenians gain from it? Why do the Turks refuse to acknowledge what occurred?

In *On Apology*, Lazare provides selections from a statement issued in 1998 by a group of 150 distinguished scholars and writers who signed it

while honoring the fiftieth anniversary of the UN genocide convention and condemning the Armenian genocide. In the statement they affirm the importance of acknowledging this tragic event:

Denial of genocide strives to reshape history in order to demonize the victims and rehabilitate the perpetrators. Denial murders the dignity of the survivors and seeks to destroy remembrance of the crime. In a century plagued by genocide, we affirm the moral necessity of remembering.

What Armenians seek in an apology is the restoration of their dignity, a reaffirmation that genocide is morally reprehensible, and to incorporate their memories into Armenian history and identity. Pained by their history and the lack of acknowledgement of their genocide, Armenians are unable to “move on.” The Turks’ refusal to abandon their “official” view of the past, however, poisons their effort to gain credibility and standing in the world community, and to establish solid diplomatic (and military) relations with nations whose acceptance it seeks.

The power of apology, again, is seen as vividly when it is denied—when conditions for what amounts to moral capitulation appear required for its acceptance—as when it is given. Shatha al Musawi, a moderate Shi’ite member of the Iraqi Parliament, in a conversation with Damien and Diana Cave that appeared in the *New York Times* in September 2007, reveals the profound difficulties faced by those who seek to end violent conflict and who believe that apology has a role to play. If Sunnis could “. . . come and apologize to victims, if they admitted their faults and asked for forgiveness, maybe we can forget about it. But now with this continuous killing and continuous crimes against us, how could we? How could we?”

To end violence, to find ways to reconcile past enemies, to purify memory, to seek means to restore community within and between nations, it is vital to understand how apology can function. It is important to understand, moreover, the ways that politics, language and culture can aid (and limit) its use. Apologies defy easy analysis given political, moral, and cultural complexities, but the growing interest in the public expression of apology and the increasing frequency, scope and range—and effectiveness—of its use argues persuasively that we get to know a good deal more about it.

**R**ecognizing the role apology may have is not to diminish other significant factors in play. Lazare makes a compelling case for our need to know and understand more about restoring the dignity of nations and groups in need, dealing with the consequences of humiliation, the power and politics of identity, the urgency of physical well-being, in order to see how apology can be a tool for renewing and focusing energies on the resolution of

conflict, and, in a way that does not merely submerge the resentments that inevitably accompany such conflicts, but acknowledges and responds to them.

Apologies can be, indeed have been, instrumental in moving individuals, groups, and nations beyond the history that can immobilize them. What seems to make public apologies matter, in the end, is where they lead, what they generate, what happens as a result of them. By finding the right expression and circumstance, and by acknowledging the wrongs done and the harm inflicted, an apology can serve as an instrument of reconciliation, and thus help to create the conditions for seeking a just and sustainable peace.

### RECOMMENDED READINGS

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