

Apologising for historic injustices

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ABSTRACT: The spectacle of political and religious leaders apologising for historic injustices done by their (sometimes remote) predecessors has become very common in recent years, but both popular and philosophical opinion is divided on the propriety of such apologies. When Pope John Paul II said sorry for the Church's part in the medieval Crusades or Tony Blair for former British governments' complicity in the African slave trade, some critics questioned their authority to make such apologies, whilst some thought their statements smacked at best of contemporary 'contrition chic' and at worst of a cynical device to curry favour by denouncing their predecessors. Charles Griswold, however, has offered a qualified defence of the practice of institutional apology for historic failings, arguing that the non-responsibility of current leaders or representatives for the offences and shortcomings of their predecessors need not render their apologies null and void, in view of the 'intrinsically impersonal character' of such apology and its key concern with 'putting truth "on the record"' (*Forgiveness*, pp.150-51).

Contrary to Griswold, I contend that apology is an inappropriate moral idiom to employ when leaders wish to signify their, and their institution's, change of heart in regard to former acts and attitudes. I group my arguments under four heads:

Arguments based on the nature of apology. Apologies are normally associated with expressions of remorse and repentance premised on ownership of the deed(s) in question; but there is no ownership where the current institution, its leaders and representatives have no causal responsibility for what they apologise for. (As A. Lazare observes, apology is 'the acknowledgement of an offence followed by an expression of remorse' [*On Apology*, p.229].) Nor is there scope for a promise of reformation where the institution has already put the bad behaviour in question behind it, and is known to have done so.

Arguments based on the changing identity of institutions. The continuity of an institution such as a church, government or nation state is insufficient to establish its self-

identity through time, and a plausible case can be made for a 'Parfitian' conception of institutional identities as gradually changing with the passage of time (cf. P. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness*, p.165). But vicarious apology is inadmissible, since the requisite ownership of acts is lacking where the agent or principal is no longer the same. Yet even if the claims of certain institutions to retain their identity are allowed, changes in their structure, principles, objectives and modes of operation transform their character profoundly over time. So even if the modern Roman Catholic Church and the medieval are numerically the same church, it is not the modern institution which promotes the Crusades, whilst the medieval Church is ideologically too far removed for a present-day pope to make a meaningful apology on its behalf.

It is sometimes unclear whether an institutional apology is being offered on behalf of a particular time-slice of the institution (e.g. the 12th-century Church) or the institution timelessly conceived (e.g. the Eternal Church). Both alternatives are problematic. How could a 20th-century pope have greater authority to speak on behalf of the 12th-century Church than a 12th-century pope? And why should a modern pope be thought to have more right to speak on behalf of the Eternal Church than one of his pro-crusading medieval forerunners?

Arguments concerning the relations between the makers and recipients of apologies. In the standard interpersonal case, apologies are offered by offenders to the person or persons offended. Institutional apologies for past injustices depart from this norm where both the original agents and victims are dead, and so in no position to offer or receive apologies. But apologising to the dead is in any case absurd, since receipt of an apology requires consciousness. Sometimes, it is true, the effects of injustice last into the present day, and here institutional apology may be appropriate, but only in the form of apology to contemporary victims for *present* injustice.

Additional obstacles to apology arise when institutions divide or merge, or when internal opinion on the case for apology is divided (as in the case of the 2005 apology offered by the US Senate to black victims of lynching and their descendants [see *Forgiveness*, pp.161-63]), or when original distinctions between offenders and offended have become blurred (would, for instance, a future black US President who apologised for American slavery be in part apologising to himself?).

Arguments based on changing moral standards. Some apologies for historic injustices anachronistically project present-day moral standards on to agents whose beliefs, values and ideals were very different from our own, and who could not have been expected to act in the ways that we would now think right. Such apologies treat those agents unfairly by ignoring excusing conditions and mitigating circumstances, while their misrepresentation of historical realities may impede rather than assist the establishment of better relationships. But even more historically-aware apologies can be objectionable when they patronisingly portray the original agents as poor, benighted souls who fell far short of our own high standards of wisdom and goodness.

I conclude that institutional apologies for historic injustices are generally out of order and in some cases downright offensive. Although Griswold is right to emphasise the importance of putting truth on the record, institutional leaders do better to offer an *expression of regret* for the wrongs that were done by their predecessors, coupled with the assurance that those wrongs will never be repeated. Such declarations can be of inestimable value in laying ghosts and building bridges, and are much less likely than apologies to give an impression of spiritual or moral hubris, insincere posturing, or cheap and sentimental appeasement.

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January 2008.