

Official Apology: Cementing Peace, Disavowing Injustice

Robert J. Muscat

Introduction

Since World War II, governments, some church authorities and other bodies have apologised for specific injustices, including violence, which they deliberately committed against other countries, peoples, or their own citizens. The list, enumerated below, runs to well over sixty acknowledgments of guilt and contrition, in some cases accompanied with reparations. Before the war, there were few cases of official apology in all recorded history; thus, the wave of recent apologising is a remarkable development in human governance. It should be pursued as a new and major instrument for domestic and international social repair. The whole subject of apologising, making amends, and moving toward reconciliation, is complex.

This Policy Brief first explores the history of apology and presents a definition of official apology. It explains how apology can provide cement for a peace settlement. The post-World War II apologies referenced above are then categorised into seven types or purposes. This is followed by a discussion of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, and the difference between an effective apology and an inadequate apology. The question of apology and compensation is explored, along with the efficacy of enhancing apology with national commemoration and physical memorials and realising the potential of official apologies for promoting justice, post-conflict healing, and peace. Finally, the new and unprecedented situation of climate change, with multiple perpetrators and victims, is touched upon.

When President Clinton apologised in 1998 for US inaction during the Rwandan genocide, and for the historic trade in African slaves, he spoke as the legitimate representative of America, an elected head of state. However, he was not backed by any congressional expression, unlike the case when the United States apologised and appropriated financial compensation to Japanese-Americans for their WWII internment. Thus, Clinton's apologies to Africa were more than personal but less than fully authoritative nationally. Critics argued that he should have attributed responsibility also to the African traders who initially captured and sold other Africans to the European slavers, and that his attribution of complicity to the American polity—by referring to “we”—overlooked the fact that a large portion of the present US citizenry is descended from immigrants who reached the United States long after the country had abolished slavery and therefore should not be considered as bearing any inherited moral responsibility for that injustice.

Clearly, official apology is complex.

Apology Has a Deep History

Apology has deep roots in human history. Individual apology to God, the Day of Atonement, goes back well over 2,000 years in Judaism. In Christianity, regular confession was introduced in the year 1215. In human pre-history, apology to fellow humans probably developed very early as a means to restore peace and cohesion within families and clans after inter-personal clashes. Rituals of collective apology to a divinity have deep roots.

In some cultures, apologies for individual acts of violence against other persons can take a collective form. Instead of issuing a one-on-one “I’m sorry,” the offending person, or their family, provides material compensation to the offended family. The act is public, the compensation serves to make credible the admission of guilt and responsibility, and its acceptance settles the score. There is a parallel in criminal justice proceedings in the U.S.: whether or not the accused shows regret and penitence is considered a factor in the severity of sentence. In short, apology—acknowledgment of moral failure, an act of contrition—has had ancient and enduring importance.

Some perspective can be gained on *official* apology by comparing it to ordinary, or interpersonal, apology. In Nicholas Tavuchis' psychological and sociological analysis *Mea Culpa* (1991), an apology takes place between an Offender and the Offended. He delineates a sequential model in which an Offender commits a transgression (something said or done that violates accepted norms); the Offended calls for apology; an apology is made; forgiveness is granted, redemption is achieved, and the parties are reconciled. An apology implicitly, if not explicitly, conveys the offender's intent not to repeat the offense in the future. The credibility of the personal apology can be affected by its timing; a long delay may undermine its seriousness. The offender must express sorrow and remorse; without such expression, the offended may not accept the apology as genuine. Language counts: apologies should be unequivocal, not wrapped in exculpatory vagueness. As Tavuchis (1991) observes, apologies commemorate moral norms and have a civilising potential. Although other analysts also parse the many nuances of interpersonal apology, as a practical matter most ordinary apology is limited to brief expressions of “I’m sorry” and “I was wrong.”

While there are important commonalities between apologies offered and accepted by individuals, and those offered by states (or other large collectives) to other states (or

collectives), there are also major differences. Reparations (as distinct from gifts) do not figure in the interpersonal apology interaction. Restitution might, if there are specific damages involved, but money offered or demanded as a compensation for a moral infringement may diminish the ethical quality of the apology, reducing it to a financial transaction. For official apologies, especially where the damage has been large-scale, reparations (often coupled with restitution) are often critical; without commensurate reparations, apology may be rejected as mere tokenism. Although prompt timing is also important for official apologies designed to restore amicable relations, there is in effect no statute of limitations. Official apology for an historic wrong can be meaningful, especially if it is relevant for public discussion of lingering inequities.

Most obviously, an apology by a state or any large collective (such as a religious body) has potentially historic effects compared with individuals' apologies. The implied or (better) explicit pledge never to repeat the injustice for which the state is apologising, represents an obligation to adhere to civilising norms in its future relations with all states (or collectives), not just the injured party involved.

Official Apology Defined

The subject of this Policy Brief is official apologies, that is, apologies by legitimate authorities and internationally recognised leaders, for injurious actions by their predecessors, or by themselves and their administrations. Drawing on the historic record and the analytic literature, it excludes apologies (a) made to God, not humans, such as Lincoln's 1863 apology for the slaughters of the Civil War; (b) made to acknowledge injustices to single individuals, like the French government's apology in 1998 for the "judicial error" and imprisonment of Captain Dreyfus in 1898; or (c) made by private individuals to whole groups, such as Henry Ford's apology to American Jews in 1927 for years of antisemitic rants printed in his newspaper. Government-to-government apologies for individual violent acts that were accidents or acts unauthorised by the authorities are mentioned briefly. Apologies by individual private organisations (e.g., the American Psychological Association, which apologised in 2015 for its role in justifying CIA use of torture in interrogation) are also excluded.

While the focus in this Policy Brief is on apology on the societal or national level, it also considers apology processes at the community level inspired by the South African post-apartheid experience; these form an important basis for considering the dynamics of national level apology. These communal processes are a significant innovation in the recent proliferation of apology events.

State apology is not a simple or straightforward matter. In fact, an extensive scholarly literature has been developing in recent years examining the legal, moral, and political aspects of apology, reparations, and reconciliation. That the subject is relatively new, nevertheless, is evident from the paucity of books or journal articles before the 1980s. While most of the literature is secular, the Vatican issued in 1999 a lengthy study on apology from a Christian theological perspective (International Theological Commission 1999).

Apology: A Cement for Peace

Apology may serve to cement a peace settlement. Cementing is important because the most statistically robust predictor of warfare (since the end of WWII) is whether two antagonistic entities or groups have previously been at war; strengthening a settlement can help avoid recurrence. We often see an asymmetrical dynamic in the history of inter-group and inter-country relations. Overcoming hostility, restoring harmony, or even maintaining a stable tolerance, is usually difficult; destroying harmony is easy. Single incidents have often shattered years of trust in a flash.

After a settlement, relations between former antagonists may range over a spectrum, from merely refraining from further violence at one end, to full reconciliation at the other. The weakest post-conflict relationship—mere tolerance and abandonment of any policy of revenge, with no amelioration of hostile sentiments—would hardly merit characterisation as “reconciliation,” although it is a necessary first step. Moving beyond mere nonviolent co-existence (sometimes dubbed a “negative peace”), increasingly strong stages of reconciliation might include steps to restore or create trust; undertake credible judicial proceedings; cultivate cooperative relations at different levels of society (inter-personal, communal, economic, political); promote inter-group educational, sports, and cultural exchange; and accept inter-marriage. Some writers caution that achieving full reconciliation in the sense of mutual empathy, a transformed ability to face differences without firing up old hostilities, perhaps a fading of us/them as the essence of the relationship and a complete shedding of desire for historic vengeance, may be possible only over a long period, or may even be unachievable.¹

While the social and psychological nuances explored in the literature are essential for understanding reconciliation processes at the inter-personal and local community levels, they are less salient for cementing peace between states or other large collectives that are under ruling authorities which operate in the world of national interests and *realpolitik*, especially states ruled by autocrats intent on expanding their personal or territorial power.² These nuances remain relevant for *realpolitik* however, and must be dealt with when leadership levels are attempting to sustain peace or to promote reconciliation in the face of a legacy of mistrust or post-conflict hostility and grievance among their populations. But the essential requirement for a stable settlement is a mutually acceptable resolution of the conflicts of real interest that underlie the hostilities in the first place.

It is important to stress the need for dealing with the conflicts of real interest as fundamental for lasting conflict resolution as opposed to temporary cessation. This is because of an asymmetry at the core of the reconciliation problem. Reconciliation at the top, even if only a few steps beyond bare nonviolence, can create a favourable framework for reconciliation to spread throughout the society. But local or micro reconciliation programmes (e.g., inter-group workshops, summer camps for mixed groups of teenagers)

¹ For a full treatment of the challenges to reconciliation, based on close studies of experience in Rwanda, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Stover and Weinstein, 2004.

² Forgiving, which figures importantly as the closure step in interpersonal and theological analyses of apology, is inappropriate and seldom raised in the literature on political or official apology.

are not likely to lead to general reconciliation if leadership enmity remains entrenched and underlying conflicts of interest remain unresolved.

One can see this asymmetry in Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth, Bosnia). Following the Yugoslav breakup war, numbers of reconciliation projects were started by teachers, social workers and health professionals, mostly women, bridging the different religio-ethnicities. This inter-personal and civil-society reconciliation was spontaneous and heart-warming. In two major cities, Sarajevo and Tuzla, long-standing multi-cultural social harmony remained unbroken. In other cities, however, like Mostar in Bosnia and Vukovar in Croatia, ethnic separation and antagonism remained strong. Overall, there has been no “trickle-up” of reconciliation to the still-frozen levels at the top of the Bosnian multi-ethnic governance structure.

Between (and within) states, a spectrum of steps can be envisioned: cessation of violence; sustained peace-keeping; establishment of mutually acceptable new/renewed modes of dialogue, interaction, and conflict-resolution; disarmament and reintegration of insurgency forces; confidence-building measures; re-established economic rules of the game and institutions; renewed trade and travel; easing of border restrictions; creation of joint civil society organisations; legal cooperation; degrees of economic integration; development of common norms concerning justice; and visions and programmes for long-term integration and policy harmonisation. Parallel measures in educational, person-to-person, and cultural exchange, would reinforce such progress. The obvious model for near-total movement from one end of this spectrum to the other, from a period of warfare, even barbarity, to full-scale reconciliation, is the road Western Europe has travelled from World War II to the European Union (a work obviously still in progress).

There are also examples of post-conflict societies and countries that have not moved beyond the first two or three steps, such as Bosnia (as noted), and India-Pakistan. The reconciliation and reintegration of Aceh province in Indonesia has moved well along the spectrum. In Northern Ireland, peace has been sustained, and legal and formal governance has made progress, but trust and other dimensions of integration remain very weak. Between Serbia and Kosovo, normalisation has moved minimally, nudged by the stipulations Serbia must meet to gain entry to the European Union; popular reconciliation will not be easy. Diplomatic, security, political, economic, and psychological reconciliation between the US and Japan has been full. Each case is unique.

Apology, acknowledgment of responsibility and regret, at the start, can help move a post-conflict relationship along the spectrum from mere cessation of violence to durable peace and reconciliation. In fact, without apology, movement toward substantial reconciliation may be impossible.

A Typology of Official Apologies

Going back in history, one finds very few official apologies. In 1077, Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV famously apologised to Pope Gregory VII for the prevalent church-state conflict. In the fifteenth century, Queen Margaret I of Denmark is said to have apologised to the peasantry for manifold injustices imposed on them by her government officials. In 1711, the governor of Massachusetts apologised to the families of the Salem witchcraft trials victims and provided monetary compensation. There was subsequently a scattering of official

apologies (e.g., for gunboat incidents), and a major apology by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914 for the role played by the U.S. in the separation of Panama from Colombia.

This section provides descriptions of official apologies organised as seven types or purposes. They provide an appreciation of the burgeoning of official apologising in recent years—over 60 citations—compared with the paucity of official contrition in all previous history, as well as a sense of the scope of injustices apologised for and the large numbers of people involved. The table below delineates the headings of official apologies categorised under seven purposes, followed by descriptions of selected apologies under each heading.

Typology of Official Apologies by Purpose	
(1)	By a government (or other authority) for acts committed by some of its citizens (or members), but not at the behest of the authority
(2)	By a government (or other entity) for acts it has committed against some of its own citizens
(3)	For deliberate injustices to a non-state collective
(4)	For accidental or mistaken government violence
(5)	Official apologies to other states for deliberate government (or other legitimised entity); external aggression and/or human rights violations
(6)	For actions not taken, justice omitted
(7)	Mutual government apologies; both sides admit excesses and unjust acts

1. Apologies by a government (or other authority) for *acts committed by some of its citizens (or members) but not at the behest of the authority.*

Prime Minister Nehru apologised in 1955 for attacks on foreign missions by Indian demonstrators. In 1948, Israel apologised to the UN for the assassination in Jerusalem of the UN mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte. Some papal apologies have cited acts committed by Catholics for which the Church said the institution itself bore no responsibility. In such cases, the apologising authority expresses regret but denies official culpability.

2. Apologies by a government (or other entity) for *acts it has committed against some of its own citizens.*

In 1988, Congress apologised for the WWII internment of 100,000 Japanese Americans, and offered \$20,000 reparations to each surviving internee. The governments of Canada, Australia and New Zealand have apologised for their histories of assimilation programmes imposed on their indigenous peoples, and have provided compensation; the complex issues of reparations, and of current policies to deal with the cultural and economic legacies of the past, continue to figure in the politics of these countries. In 2008, in response to a widespread civil society movement, the Australian government established May 26 as a

national Day of Healing, or Sorry Day, marking the injustices suffered by the indigenous people.

In 2006, Canadian Prime Minister Harper apologised for government discriminatory taxes and other acts against Chinese immigrants going back to 1885; he recognised the “grave injustice” done, noted the “invaluable contributions” the Canadian Chinese community had made, and expressed determination that Canada would never repeat such injustice. In 1997, the U.S. (President and Congress) apologised for the infamous 40-year Tuskegee “medical experiment” in which a group of African-Americans with syphilis were merely observed instead of treated. There is a long history of apology and litigation in the US over land rights, compensation and reparations for injustices in the country’s treatment of Native Americans. In 2000, Congress apologised for the country’s slavery history, but stipulated that the apology could not be used as a legal basis for seeking reparations. In 2009, the government of Peru apologised to Afro-Peruvian citizens for its history of apartheid abuses.

In 2015, Kenyan President Kenyatta apologised for government violence against citizens protesting election manipulation in 2007-2008. In 2011, Prime Minister Erdogan apologised for the 1930s bombing of Turkish Kurds that killed 14,000. In 1996, former president de Klerk apologised for apartheid to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 1995, the US Southern Baptist Convention apologised to African-Americans for having “defended” slavery in the old South. Also in 1995, President Chirac apologised for France’s round-up of 13,000 French Jews in July 1942 for transport to the Nazi death camp, Auschwitz. Ten years earlier, President Mitterrand apologised for the slaughter of the Huguenots in 1572.

In 2004, Argentine President Kirchner apologised for the previous military regime’s killing (“disappearance”) of some 30,000 Argentines. In 2016, in a statement read out in every parish, Rwandan Catholic bishops acknowledged church complicity in the country’s 1994 genocide. Also in 2016, the Latvian president attended a ceremony marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of the murder of 25,000 Jews in a forest near Riga, admitting local Latvian complicity. In 2022, Austrian Chancellor Nehammer apologised for crimes against the Jews committed at the Mauthausen concentration camp.

In January 2021, the head of the Irish Catholic Church, Archbishop of Armagh, apologised for abuses suffered by unwed mothers and their children when forced to live in residences run as virtual prisons. In June 2018, Australian Prime Minister Turnbull said that he would issue an apology to thousands of survivors of childhood sexual abuse that went on for decades at schools and other institutions.

3. Apologies for *deliberate injustices to a non-state collective.*

The world’s largest case of apology and reparations has been the German atonement to Holocaust survivors and Israel, totalling an estimated \$90 billion. In 2021, Germany also apologised and offered significant reparations for the genocide committed by the German military against the Herero and Nama people of its colony Southwest Africa (Namibia) in 1904-1908. The genocidal killing of Roma people in Europe in WWII has been acknowledged by a number of countries, but the admission of complicity or outright apology has been largely absent. Switzerland has apologised for the blocking of bank accounts set up by Jews before and during WWII. Several countries have apologised for their role in the African slave trade. In 1998, the German parliament apologised to the Basque people of

Spain for the Nazi bombing of the town of Guernica in 1937 when Germany intervened directly on the Fascist rebel side in the Spanish Civil War.

In 1995, Pope John Paul II apologised for the Church's complicity in historic violence against indigenous South American peoples. On September 16, 2021, Pope Francis again apologised for the violence sixteenth-century Spanish Conquistadors committed in their evangelisation of the Americas, calling their actions "shameful atrocities." In 2016, Georgetown University's Jesuit leadership apologised for the university's slave history, especially its sale of 272 slaves in 1838, and began a programme of amends. Also in 2016, the United Protestant Church of Belgium apologised for Martin Luther's antisemitism (in the sixteenth century). In 2001, Pope John Paul II apologised for sins committed against the Eastern Orthodox. In 2015, Pope Francis said the Church should seek forgiveness from gay people for the way the Church had treated them. In 2017, a Polish bishop apologised for the slaughter of Jews, by Poles, in the town of Jedwabne in 1941. In 2019, Belgian Prime Minister Michel apologised for its policy of kidnapping and offering mixed race children, forcibly taken from their families in its former Burundi, Congo and Rwanda colonies, for adoption to white foster parents. In early 2022, the Lutheran Church of Finland apologised for its role in abuses suffered by the indigenous Sami people.

4. Apologies by a government for *accidental or mistaken government violence*.

In 1999 the US apologised to China (as China had demanded), and paid a substantial reparation, for the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the US campaign against Serbian "ethnic cleansing" of Kosovo. In 1937, China apologised for bombing the US ship SS *President Hoover*, and Japan apologised for sinking a US gunboat. In October 2015, President Obama apologised to the nongovernmental organisation Doctors Without Borders and to the families of victims of the US bombing of a hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan; the bombing was apparently mistakenly authorised through a failure of command. In 2016, Turkish President Erdogan similarly apologised to Russian President Putin for Turkey's shooting down a Russian plane over Syria the previous year.

5. Official apologies to other states for *deliberate government (or other legitimised entity, such as an apex church body) external aggression and/or human rights violations*.

In 1993, President Yeltsin apologised for USSR internment of Japanese prisoners of war after the end of WWII. Many European countries have apologised to their former colonies, all now independent states, for past injustices. In 2010, the president of Croatia apologised to Bosnia for "crimes" committed during the Yugoslav war. After WWII, Germany apologised to the countries it had invaded. In 2019, marking the eightieth anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Poland, German President Steinmeier asked for Poland's "forgiveness." While visiting Greece in 2001, Pope John Paul II reached back in history and apologised for the sacking of Constantinople in 1204 by Crusaders on route to Jerusalem.

A policy of *government abetting and supporting injustice committed by other authorities* can still warrant an apology. In 1999, President Clinton expressed regret for past US support to Guatemalan security forces that had committed "violent and widespread repression"³ and abuse of human rights during that country's civil war. A few days later, the head of the

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/mar/12/jeremylennard.martinkettle>

Guatemalan rebel army apologised for abuses the rebels had committed.⁴ In April 2015, German President Gauck acknowledged official German complicity with the Turkish government in the Armenian genocide of 1915. His acknowledgment was seconded by the German parliament and by an ecumenical gathering of heads of German and Middle East churches; their use of the word “genocide” was rejected by the government of Turkey.

6. Apologies for actions not taken, justice omitted.

In 1997, British Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed regret for the English failure to help the Irish during the Potato Famine of the 1840s. In 1995, on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII, Swiss President Villiger apologised for the country’s refusal to accept Jewish refugees during the war. Also in 1995, the International Red Cross apologised for its “moral failure” in not denouncing Nazi atrocities during the war. In 1997, the French Catholic Church apologised for its similar silence during the Vichy regime. In 2020, the Dutch Protestant Church issued a declaration of guilt for its silence on antisemitism during WWII. In 1998, President Clinton (as noted earlier) apologised for inaction during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, as did Belgium in 2000. In 2020, Dutch Prime Minister Rutte apologised for his country’s failure to help its Jews in WWII.

7. Mutual government apologies; both sides apologise for excesses and injustices.

In 1997, the governments of Germany and the Czech Republic issued a joint declaration of mutual apologies. Germany apologised for WWII Nazi violence; the Czech apology was for the post-war expulsion of over two million ethnic German residents of the Czech Sudetenland region. The apologies had the immediate effect of enabling the German government to support Czech admission into the European Union and NATO. In 1996, soon after former president de Klerk apologised for apartheid to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Nelson Mandela and other leaders of the African National Congress apologised to the Commission for killings the ANC had carried out in its resistance campaign. The apologies contributed to a political transition noted for its negotiations and ultimately peaceful character. In 2003, after the Serbian president apologised to Croatia for crimes committed during the 1991-1995 Yugoslav war, the president of Croatia apologised in turn. In the Guatemalan and Serbia/Croatia cases, the apologies appear to have been reciprocal in timing rather than deliberately mutual events. Even a *de facto* mutuality of apology is an unusual and constructive event.

Finally, it is worth noting that in a few cases governments have rejected calls for apology. In 2000, the US decided not to respond to Korean demonstrators demanding apology for a civilian bombing incident during the Korean War. Also in 2000, China refused to apologise to Cambodia for having supported the Khmer Rouge during its genocidal rule in 1975-1979.

Truth Telling and Transitional Justice

So-called “truth commissions,” both official and at an informal community level, have been established in many countries to promote justice, social healing, and human rights. By offering immunity from formal prosecution, some encourage individual perpetrators to come forth to admit and apologise. In some cases, the proceedings have been held before an

⁴ The Guatemalan government refused to make a parallel apology, arguing that abuses on the government side had been committed only by rogue units.

assembled village. Residents step forward and admit their participation in violent acts which they now avow were wrong and immoral. It may be understood there will be no subsequent vengeance-taking, especially if the truth-telling process is empowered to grant amnesty (to low-level perpetrators). The proceedings may be recorded for archiving (even posted on the internet) as a contribution to national reconciliation. The hope is that confronting and apologising will reinforce reconciliation.⁵ Some countries have formed a national “commission of inquiry” to bring the facts of injustices and criminal behaviour to light. The perception that justice has been done can contribute substantially to post-conflict healing.

These commissions fall under the rubric of “transitional justice,” that is, processes created to help countries transit from regimes of impunity, injustice, and violence, to societies governed by rule of law, democratic procedure, and transparent dispute resolution. More than forty countries have established such official commissions; some are still active. They have been much publicised and studied. Questions about their efficacy have been debated: whether society is better served by truth commissions with amnesty or by criminal trials and punishment; whether the commissions have led to increased social stability or to behavior change; whether the commissions have produced grudging tolerance, mutual acceptance, or full reconciliation; the merits of national versus international tribunals or commissions; when should the establishment of truth be followed by material compensation to the victims; which perpetrators merit amnesty and which do not; and when might silence (as in post-Franco Spain) rather than public airing be more likely to promote social healing. The commissions have operated under different concepts of purpose and different rules of procedure.

On the international level, legal norms and judicial institutions concerned with establishing criminal guilt also emerged after WWII, starting with the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, and these are still evolving. Besides the International Criminal Court established in The Hague (in 2002), ad hoc tribunals have been formed to try individuals accused of human rights violations committed during the periods of carnage in Rwanda, Cambodia, Sierra Leone, and the former Yugoslavia. Probably the most radical development in the field of international justice has been the formal adoption by the UN General Assembly (in 2009) of the Responsibility-to-Protect (R2P). Under this concept, drawn from the Genocide Conventions, certain grievous conditions of massive rights violations would justify, even require, international intervention that would override the heretofore sacred rights of sovereignty. It remains to be seen if and when the R2P norm will actually be invoked. The weak international responses to the humanitarian crises in Yemen, Myanmar, Ethiopia and elsewhere have not been encouraging in this regard. As for the role of apology *per se* in international law, legal scholarship thus far has focused on reparative justice and compensation, giving apology only minor importance.

⁵ The *gacaca* truth-telling process in Rwanda is a good example.

Efficacy of Apology: Pros and Cons

What makes apologies efficacious – or inadequate? The distinctions between acknowledgment, regret, apology, and offers of material restitution or compensation are important. Mere acknowledgment or even expressions of regret, which stop short of apology and therefore admission of responsibility, may not lead to satisfaction, let alone reconciliation. In the country offering such expressions, debate over whether the offer goes too far or not far enough may actually increase friction rather than assuage guilt. Expressions falling short of outright apology may incense opinion in the aggrieved country, keeping open historic wounds.

A clear apology by legitimate representatives may still not speak for all the citizenry; some groups in the apologising society may assert disagreement. Dissenters may insist the offending acts were justifiable and do not warrant apology; or, casting morality and history aside, they may reject an apology they view as weakening their country's international standing. When Serbia's parliament in 2010 apologised for the Srebrenica massacre, some members opposed, arguing that the apology would "stain" the name of Serbia; others opposed because the apology did not go far enough and was not explicit on the alleged genocidal character of the massacre. Rejectionists may serve to dilute the legitimacy of the apology in the eyes of the country or group to which the apology has been offered.

As noted above, some apology sceptics also object that an apology by the present generation for injustices by earlier generations is neither historically credible nor morally valid: sons cannot be held responsible for the sins of their fathers. Further, earlier generations were living in periods when different standards of morality or justice prevailed.

Thus, the effects of official apologies depend on wording, timing, and context, and on the perception of authenticity or of hypocrisy or opportunism. Given all the nuances and variations, it is not surprising that apologies have had varying effects on reconciliation, on the bilateral relations of the countries involved, on their domestic politics, and on the subsequent international behaviour of the apologising perpetrators. Despite all the caveats, given the frequency and range of this new phenomenon, apology constitutes a significant diplomatic and moral advance. The international stage can no longer be understood as a realm solely of *realpolitik*, of interactions on a multi-level chess board. Justice and the moral character of national policies must now also be taken into account.

In many instances, the perpetrator-apologiser was the stronger of the parties to the conflict or injustices. As geopolitical "realists" have always recognised, inter-state relations in particular have been governed largely by Thucydides' famous dictum from the Melian dialogue with imperial Athens: "The strong do what they will; the weak do what they must." In the rise of restorative justice, war crimes trials, and official apology, the strong face new risks, ameliorative pressures, and incentives for restraining the exercise of their power. This represents a distinct break with the past, new moral and institutionalised constraints on violent impunity.

Clearly, some official apologies are not likely to have any impact on conflict recurrence. One example is the 1998 German apology for the Nazi bombing of Guernica in 1937, noted above. This was a terrible event, probably the first bombing of civilians in a totally non-military

European location. There were over 2,000 casualties.⁶ Since the risk of war between Germany and Spain sixty-one years later was nil, the apology was not intended to have a deterrent effect on a recurrence. Neither was it needed (welcome as it was) as a reaffirmation of German determination not to return to a path of external aggression.

In recent years, the Catholic Church (popes, senior prelates, and a Vatican Council) has offered numerous apologies. Some reach far back in history. The Church's numerous apologies to the Jews for two millennia of injustices must stand as the most extensive historical repentance ever offered. In this case, the apologising institution is no longer a perpetrator, but the hostility toward Jews that was embedded among generations of adherents continues to reappear (although is seldom expressed theologically). Thus, the historical disavowal could continue to have healing relevance for some time to come. Some Catholic commentators questioned the wisdom or appropriateness of Pope John Paul's numerous apologies, arguing that the Pope went too far in claiming to speak for all Catholics and risked weakening the moral authority of the Church. Pope Francis' apology for the violence of the Conquistadors has been criticised by right-wing Spaniards as besmirching a proud episode in Spanish history. In another case of historic regret still relevant, in 1994 the German Evangelical Lutheran Church issued a declaration rejecting Martin Luther's "anti-Judaic diatribes" and deploring the appropriation of these words by modern antisemites. In another case that could have contemporary relevance, the South African bar association apologised in 1999 for having blocked Mohandas Gandhi from practicing law in 1894. The apology was extended to all aspirant lawyers who have encountered restriction on "racial grounds."

Enmity and conflict of interest may be too deep to be lessened by a single-event apology. In 1997, North Korea apologised for the killing of three South Korean civilians by soldiers who had landed in the South when their submarine ran aground. The soldiers were also killed. Although the incident can be seen as having had a certain mutuality after South Korea returned the soldiers' bodies, the apology did not create a basis for any improvement in relations.

Apology and Compensation

Apology opens the door to questions of making amends. Some of the most prominent apologies have been linked with financial payments as material restitution or compensation. In such cases, apology has stronger prospects for initiating reconciliation. One of the important distinctions between apology and restitution/compensation is the relevance of the time frame. While there is no limit on the lapse of time after which an apology may be credibly offered, and no limit to the numbers of peoples or groups to which an apology can coherently be offered, such latitude does not apply to questions of reparations. The Catholic Church has apologised, in effect, to hundreds of millions of people for actions centuries in the past. Material compensation would be utterly infeasible and has not been proposed. Reparations would be similarly infeasible following European apologies for the slave trade; the apologies came long after cessation of the trade which involved millions of persons from different parts of Africa. By contrast, apologies for recent injustices have commonly been

⁶ Despite the outrage in Europe at the time, the bombing had no effect on the appeasement policies of the democracies.

associated with claims and offers of compensation or restitution; these damages have been measurable and restitution or financial compensation has been both feasible and helpful to the surviving victims or their descendants.

The details matter. If the aggrieved judge compensation to be severely inadequate, the moral value of the apology may be diluted. Or the aggrieved may view even a large compensation offer as unacceptable “blood money”; accepting would dishonour the dead and give the perpetrators a fig leaf of moral cleansing. This was the initial view of some Israelis who opposed accepting German Holocaust reparations. For the majority of Jews, however, for Germany as a whole, and for the world, the combination of German Holocaust apologies, memorials, restitutions, and reparations stands as the foremost example of credible apology and atonement, with positive effects for the relations between Germany, Israel, and world Jewry, and for Germany’s stature on the world stage. The decision of over 6,000 German companies to pay \$4.5 billion in reparations to surviving European people they had used as forced labour during the Nazi years, along with the apologies of the German churches (both Catholic and Protestant) for their complicity or silence, has added to the perception that regret and genuine repentance have permeated German society (notwithstanding the revival of an antisemitic, xenophobic fringe).

The Canadian experience provides another example of thorough-going acknowledgement of the need for and appropriateness of substantial reparation if the society is ever to achieve reconciliation. According to the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Canada had long pursued a policy of “cultural genocide.” Canada had set out to destroy the political and social institutions of its Aboriginal people, had seized their land, banned their languages, and otherwise tried to destroy their identity. “Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one. Virtually all aspects of Canadian society may need to be reconsidered.”⁷

Affirmative action, rigorous enforcement of legal equality, investments in human capital to achieve a “level playing field,” and other social programmes, can serve as reparations equivalence. However, attempts to get restitution for specific land and other assets, not to speak of lives, lost over generations, are not likely to be feasible. The long-running debates over land restitution to indigenous American tribes and over general reparations for slavery in U.S. history, have shown the legal and political difficulties involved.

The case of Belgium’s 2019 apology for its forced separation of racially mixed children from their parents in its former African colonies, made the news again in 2021. A group of five women, victims of this policy and now in their seventies, sued the state, asking for reparations for “crimes against humanity.” They argued that both the state’s apologies and the symbolic steps, such as removal of statues of King Leopold II, were insufficient. Besides being taken from their parents when very young, they had been harshly treated. Lawyers involved argued over whether their treatment amounted to “crimes against humanity,” which would affect their claim for reparation, potentially opening the gates for a flood of claims. As at July 2022, the case is pending.

⁷ www.trc.ca. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: *Honoring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, pp.1-2

Enhancing the Power of Apology

How can the individual country, and the international community, ensure that the potential benefits of sustained peace and reconciliation from official apologies are realised? National memories are typically enshrined and reinforced through commemorative reminding events such as annual ‘days’ of celebration or remembrance, physical memorials, and museums. They may serve as political or propagandistic statements. At the time of their creation, they symbolise the then current narrative of national identity. As the age of nationalism emerged in the late eighteenth century, memorials began to serve as representations of national unity and (usually imagined) homogeneity. They were typically laudatory, intended to evoke feelings of pride on the part of citizens. They were usually silent on any injustices committed on the path to achieving the glory being celebrated.

As circumstances or national “identity” change, and as those injustices are confronted, yesterday’s monuments may become discredited and odious. They may be removed or destroyed (as were the ubiquitous statues of Stalin in the former Soviet Republics) as symbolising aspects, events, or persons no longer seen as praiseworthy or enhancing the national identity. The recent spate of removing statues of American Civil War figures—implicit apologies—is an example of repudiation of the meaning and appropriateness of statues erected in past years, statues that celebrated the defenders of slavery. The removal of memorials may also be a backward step, serving to disavow past events which a repressive government prefers to ban from the national narrative. In December 2021, the Chinese authorities removed a statue in Hong Kong that commemorated the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. For some time, the government has been erasing all mentions of the massacre throughout the country; removal of this statue was also another step in the repression of dissent, specifically in Hong Kong.

There is a considerable literature on the politics, aesthetics, and history of public monuments. As the Italian writer Luigi Barzini once observed, each country “clings to the memory of its glorious past, and mounts guard, jealously and suspiciously, over its unique heritage” (Gillis, p.50). However, now that we have entered an age of national apology, the subject of commemoration has taken a surprising turn. Instead of expressing pride, accomplishment or glory, numbers of countries are admitting collective shame and guilt. How should this contrition be memorialised?

The German example points the way. Addressing themselves, and the world, the Germans have made extraordinary efforts, besides the reparations noted above, to ensure their apologies for the Holocaust will remain fixed in their collective memory. They have placed name plaques on buildings all over the country where individual Jewish victims had been living. Similar individual remembrances have been inserted into sidewalks. Many cities and towns have erected memorials. In a central and symbolic location in Berlin, there is a vast memorial consisting of over 2,000 concrete slabs and stelae. The site also houses an underground Holocaust museum. Its abstract quality has been variously interpreted, even criticised. But it stands as a permanent testament to Germany’s acknowledgment and apology. Altogether, Germany has spent more than one billion dollars erecting monuments and other commemorations of World War II victims and resisters, but no commemorations of those who were responsible. Through visits of school children to the sites of concentration camps, moving speeches by political figures, works by novelists, film makers and poets, and the reflections of historians and philosophers, the moral reckoning has

deeply penetrated German society. Many other countries have also installed memorials to victims of the Holocaust.

In Rwanda, very apt physical memorials have been erected in Kigali and at killing sites around the country, including churches where victims seeking asylum were slaughtered. These serve as powerful reminders.

Beyond physical memorials, important historical events or occasions for celebrating collective identity are typically marked by annual observances or holidays. Bastille Day in France, Independence Day in several countries, the Emperor's Birthday in Japan, are examples of traditional memorialising. The recent designation of days noting collective iniquities is part of the historic wave of apology. The United Nations has designated January 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Over twenty countries, mostly European, have also designated Holocaust remembrance days. The French commemoration acknowledges the complicity of the wartime Vichy regime. The European Union has designated August 2 as a Roma Genocide memorial day, also adopted by several European countries. Rwanda has designated April 7 a day of national remembrance marking the start of the genocide in that country in 1994.

Each admission of complicity, each formal ratification of international conventions and laws condemning human rights violations and mass injustices, each country's apology for, and remembrance of, its own domestic or international injustices, represents a stark departure from the common traditional history of self-congratulatory public demonstrations and nationalistic swagger. One important long-run influence on national memory is the school history text. Memorials, appropriately designed and located, can be set up, with appropriate ceremony. Some gripping films about the Holocaust have shown the power of documentaries and dramatised accounts for widespread education about deplorable events. Religious figures have used their pulpits to communicate their own apologies and impress upon their adherents the moral imperative of "never again."

Finally, consideration should be given to formal adoption of days of atonement. Each country that has apologised could establish a national day that commemorates apology and solemnises the pledge of "never again." About twenty-five of the apologies noted in this essay are grave enough to merit a day of atonement. There are many more injustices, some amounting to genocide, for which no acknowledgement or apology has yet been made. There are 193 sovereign state members in the United Nations (plus eight entities with "observer" or other status). Few have nothing to apologise for.

Apology Globalised: The Responsibility for Climate Change

Thus far, this Policy Brief has discussed apologies that governments (and non-governmental entities) have made for injustices they inflicted in the past. The efficacy of these apologies has often been linked to the provision of reparations. In virtually all the cases cited there has been a single (governmental) perpetrator and only a few (or one) specified groups of victims.

We now face a new and unprecedented situation, caused by climate change, where every country in the world is implicated. The rich industrialised countries, over the past many decades, have produced the bulk of the accumulated greenhouse gases that are now

reaching critical levels. The poorer, developing countries are now also emitting such gases. All countries are beginning to suffer damage due to weather extremes, warming of the earth, and sea rise. Vast and costly mitigation and coping measures will be needed in all countries. Many of the poorer countries will be unable to finance the measures they must take to deal with the effects of climate change.

In the international conferences (most recently, in Glasgow) where the world has grappled with climate change, the rich countries have recognised their responsibility to disproportionately shoulder the costs of mitigation and coping. In assuming this responsibility, these countries are implicitly apologising for this planet-wide damage, even though it has been an inadvertent result of their economic and technological history. They are explicitly acknowledging responsibility for making amends – the largest, most universal case of making amends the world has ever seen.

The mechanism set up to monitor and encourage the materialisation of these pledges is currently dependent on the voluntary actions of each government. If the rich countries succeed in providing resources sufficient to the task, it could be the greatest apology realisation in history.

Summary and Conclusion

The last seven decades have seen an unprecedented outpouring of apologies from governments, church leaders, and other non-state collectives, for past actions of injustice, violence or outright warfare. Some apologies have contributed to reconciliation between perpetrators and victims, especially those accompanied by reparations. In some important cases, annual remembrance events, physical monuments and dedicated research and teaching institutions, have been established to continue cementing the settlement and restoration of peace. Some major cases of government apology for historic injustices have been reinforced by new legal and social reforms. Overall, the solid apologies are continuing to affect the dynamics between the states and groups involved. Some lessons can be drawn for antagonists seeking “closure” and peace, for conflict resolution professionals and scholars, and for the world community as a whole.

Apologies should be robust, citing the specific injustices. Mere “regret,” without full acknowledgment of guilt, is inadequate if not counter-productive. Credibility is best achieved if apologies are negotiated to satisfy both sides’ needs. The side apologising can benefit from the admission’s facilitation of moral rehabilitation, restoration of pride in a cleansed identity, and restored international moral credibility. Apology offers the perpetrator a new basis for bilateral relations and international voice. For the aggrieved side, an apology by the perpetrator establishes the historical truth, discredits deniers, strengthens confidence that the peace will hold, helps political leadership to move along the spectrum of reconciliation, and helps victims accept that they are getting historic justice. The credibility of the entire process has been enhanced where the apologising leadership has been known to feel a personal sense of remorse.

There is a striking dearth of civil war instances in the list of categories of apologies and in the academic literature on apology and repair. Virtually all the apologies, and the scholarly treatments, have concerned contrition of the strong over injustices inflicted on the weak. Apology as an instrument for settling conflicts and cementing peace agreements between

relatively equal and weak antagonists, whether inter- or intra-state, does not seem to have emerged yet. Lacking such cases for study, apology analysts have simply ignored this category despite the importance in recent decades of internal conflicts involving roughly evenly matched antagonists. Some of these conflicts were proxy wars for external powers. Settlements were reached through different paths of exhaustion, negotiation, outside withdrawal, and international mediation. With injustices committed by all sides, high-level apologies would have been appropriate and could have helped, and still might help, to cement peace. This group of conflicts includes, among others, Serbs versus Bosniaks within Bosnia, Serbia versus Kosovo, and civil wars in Angola, Mozambique, and Sri Lanka.

The accumulation of official apologies stands as evidence against the cynicism of “might-makes-right” *realpolitik*. As a new norm, official apology has been on the world stage for only a short time. We cannot assume its permanency. Therefore, while injustice remains an everyday occurrence, each opportunity for apology should be encouraged as a step toward more ethical international standards and nonviolent behaviour. It is not too soon to take up the idea of an annual day of international atonement, perhaps initiated by the Secretary-General of the UN, an occasion for every country to acknowledge its past injustices. It would be an institutionalised reminder of injustices inflicted by virtually all nations and other human collectives, and the need for renewed determination to avoid repeating history’s many human-made calamities.

In the months leading up to the unification of East and West Germany in 1990, historian Fritz Stern (2006) wrote of the importance of apologies in bringing about that historic rapprochement among all the parties involved. Czech President Vaclav Havel had said “We have a duty to apologize to the Germans who were expelled [from our country] after the Second World War.” Stern observed that apologies were a “necessary condition for a new Europe.” In his view, “To create a new and better order would require each country--and I include the United States--to face its past honestly, neither succumbing to exaggerated guilt nor indulging in amnesia.” Some years later, following the rising wave of apologies, he wrote that apologising had become “routine and meaningless gestures.” I think his later jaundiced view is mistaken. Each apology has to be judged in its unique context. The task is to make the most of the opportunities created by this historic new wave of facing past collective responsibility honestly.

Finally, at this moment of crisis in Europe, one could speculate on how a process of acknowledgement and apology might contribute to resolution and/or post-conflict repair between Russia, Ukraine, and all the other nations involved and impacted. Spelling out such scenarios would be beyond the scope of this essay.

Selected Bibliography

- Barkan, Elazar. 2000. *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historic Injustices*. New York: Norton.
- Blatz, Craig W., Karina Schumann, and Michael Ross. 2009. "Government Apologies for Historical Injustices." *Political Psychology* 30, no. 2: 219-241.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2014. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*, (June).
- Freedman, Sarah W., and Dino Abazovic. 2006. "Growing Up During the Balkan Wars of the 1990s." In *International Perspectives on Youth Conflict and Development*, edited by Colette Daiute, Zeynep Beykont, Craig Higson-Smith, and Larry Nuccie, 57-72. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gibney, Mark, Rhoda E. Houssmann, Jean-Marc Coicaud, and Niklaus Steiner, eds. 2008. *The Age of Apology: Facing up to the Past*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Gillis, John R., ed. 1994. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- International Theological Commission. 1999. "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past," https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_en.html
- Mihai, Mihaela, and Mathias Thaler. 2014. *On the Uses and Abuses of Political Apologies*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Neiman, Susan. 2019. *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Political Apologies: Chronological List. 2003. <https://www.upenn.edu/static/pnc/politicalapologies.html>
- Porter, Elisabeth. 2015. *Connecting Peace, Justice & Reconciliation*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Stern, Fritz. 2006. *Five Germanys I Have Known*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Stover, Eric, and Harvey M. Weinstein, eds. 2004. *My Neighbor, My Enemy; Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tavuchis, Nicholas. 1991. *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Torpey, John. 2006. *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: on Reparation Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

The Author

Robert J. Muscat is a development economist with extensive overseas experience. He served with the US Agency for International Development, the World Bank and several UN agencies, and as a resident economic adviser to the governments of Thailand and Malaysia. He has published on many subjects, including problems of conflict in developing countries. Muscat is a board member of the NGO Global Peace Services, devoted to nonviolent conflict resolution. He is now an independent researcher, living in Sarasota, Florida, USA.

Toda Peace Institute

The **Toda Peace Institute** is an independent, nonpartisan institute committed to advancing a more just and peaceful world through policy-oriented peace research and practice. The Institute commissions evidence-based research, convenes multi-track and multi-disciplinary problem-solving workshops and seminars, and promotes dialogue across ethnic, cultural, religious and political divides. It catalyses practical, policy-oriented conversations between theoretical experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders in order to discern innovative and creative solutions to the major problems confronting the world in the twenty-first century (see www.toda.org for more information).

Contact Us

Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan
Email: contact@toda.org