

Reconciling Past and Present

A Review Essay on Collective Apologies

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This review essay examines two recent edited books on collective apologies. The 2008 apology of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to former students of Indian Residential Schools provides the lens through which the reviewer shows how the books provide critical interdisciplinary perspectives on apologies and their reconciling possibilities, as well the kind of further work required.

This review essay looks at two scholarly treatments of collective apologies for past wrongs and applies the issues of collective apology to Canada's recent experience of addressing the history of First Nation children forced into Indian residential schools. The first title considered is *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation*, edited by Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn (Stanford University Press, 2006). The second is *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past*, edited by Mark Gibney, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, Jean-Marc Coicaud, and Niklaus Steiner (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

The collective or political apology has emerged as a rhetorical tool in international relations, national politics, truth commissions, and the self-reflective practice of a range of institutions, including churches. The stated purpose is usually reconciliation, though damage control or cynical self-justification may also be suspected. The idea that a true apology depends on "really meaning it" is drawn from the phenomenology of the personal apology, though whether this criterion is writ large for collective apologies is just one of the many interpretive issues posed by this practice. It is a fact that nations, corporations, churches, and other institutional actors are issuing apologies. The present challenge is to find adequate conceptual tools with which to make sense of what is happening so as to develop a thick

account of the possibilities and limits of such apologies.

The two books under review each comprise a series of essays from various disciplinary perspectives. The thirty-four included essays provide a fairly representative overview of issues, practical approaches, conceptual frameworks and case studies on political apologies.^[1] There is no substantial difference in focus or scope of the two collections. Contributors analyze apologies from the disciplines of history, political science, cultural theory, philosophy, law, public policy, psychiatry, and peace and conflict studies. Some write about their own involvement in a public apology. United States' diplomat J. D. Bindenagel writes in *Taking Wrongs Seriously (TWS)* about his involvement in the Holocaust era insurance claims process. Others argue that a particular apology ought to be given, as does Jonathan Marks in *The Age of Apology (AA)* when he discusses the apologies offered by the American news media regarding their role in making the case for the invasion of Iraq. Law scholar Richard B. Bilder (*AA*) examines the general question of whether apologies in international affairs have the effect of shaping international legal norms. He cautions that apologies are making little if any mark on such customary law, though they may be helpful in resolving certain conflicts or resentments.

Most essays analyze a particular apology or series of apologies, often asking whether and how reconciliation or justice may be achieved through them, has been achieved in particular cases, or failed to be realized for reasons that ought to be named. Apologies have accompanied several instances of transitional justice, such as a nation moving out of conflict, occupation, or dictatorial situation. Apologies made in the context of a truth and reconciliation commission, such as those in South Africa and Tulsa, Oklahoma, are analyzed. The apologies by Western states for the legacies of colonialism, either with respect to their aboriginal people or to overseas colonies, are the subject matter for several case studies. In addition, non-state actors such as corporations, churches, and universities have apologized. A leading expert on the issue of U.S. reparations for slavery, Alfred L. Brophy (*AA*), details the battle over memory involved in the process by which his own institution, the University of Alabama, came to apologize for having owned slaves and for having used slave labor to construct its buildings.

The Canadian Collective Apology

In this essay, I will demonstrate the value of these diverse studies by showing how they can help to illuminate new and emerging situations of apology. My focus will be one recent high-profile instance of collective apology that was too recent to be examined in these books: the 2008 apology of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to former students of Indian Residential Schools. This lens will show how collective apologies may achieve their aims, but also which issues remain contested or unclear. In a disparate series of cases related to Canadian treatment of indigenous people and the government's subsequent apology, a distinct discourse of collective apology emerges, one that has broad applicability in international relations and organizational structures.

The danger of this approach is that it undermines my conviction that generalizations about apologies ought to be made very cautiously. Part of the point of facing up to tragic and oppressive pasts is to wrestle with that history in its irreducible particularity. The idea that "one size fits all" may indeed be part of the mindset for which many institutions are apologizing. For victims of any historical injustice, what matters is their own experience and the loss of loved ones, not how their experience may be an instance of general trend. Nevertheless, reflection on experience may provide the basis for more effective action in the future. Thus, for example, the process by which the people of Australia advocated for a national apology for their government's treatment of aboriginal people may be instructive for how similar actions may serve the goal of reconciliation in Canada.

For over a century, tens of thousands of aboriginal children were removed from their families and placed in 132 federally-supported Indian Residential Schools. This policy of cultural assimilation was established by the Canadian government and in many cases implemented by churches (Anglican, Presbyterian, United Church of Canada, and Roman Catholic religious orders) that ran numerous schools. As noted in the apology, a key purpose was to "to kill the Indian in the child," by extinguishing traditional language, culture, and spiritual practices. In addition, many students experienced emotional, physical, and sexual abuse in the schools.

The destructive legacy of the schools is manifest in dysfunctional families, intergenerational patterns of abuse, addictions, and poverty. At the same time, some students have regarded their experience in the schools as largely positive.^[2] A series of individual and class action lawsuits against the governments and the churches have been in process for years. The immediate context for the Canadian apology was the Indian Residential Schools Settlement

Agreement. The out-of-court agreement involved the federal government, aboriginal organizations, church representatives, and the courts. All survivors of residential schools would receive a “common experience” payment based on the number of years they spent at a school. In addition, those who were physically or sexually abused could apply for additional compensation. The agreement mandated a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and set aside additional money for education, research, healing, and commemoration. Though the Conservative government of Stephen Harper had previously resisted the idea of an apology, and none was mandated by the negotiated settlement, some key advocates in the government and opposition made the case that an apology had to be made, and given the fact that former students were dying every week, had to be made as soon as possible.

On June 11, 2008, the House of Commons convened for the purpose of an official apology. After the prime minister’s statement on behalf of Canada, the leader of the opposition, whose Liberal Party had been in power for the majority of the twentieth century, added his own apology. Prime Minister Harper’s apology took eleven minutes. He acknowledged that the policy of cultural assimilation was wrong. He acknowledged the detrimental consequences of the schools. He recognized the courage of those who spoke out against the abuse they suffered. He stated, “The government recognizes that the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation. Therefore, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to aboriginal peoples for Canada’s role in the Indian residential schools system.” He continued to apologize for several aspects of Canada’s actions, and then concluded on a note of hope. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he stated, “will be a positive step in forging a new relationship between aboriginal peoples and other Canadians.”^[31]

What Makes an Apology Genuine?

The question of what makes an apology genuine or effective is complex. It involves considerations of whether the right person, speaking for the right entity, has identified a historical wrong accurately, recognized responsibility where it is due, expressed sincere regret, and followed this statement with actions that demonstrate a commitment to both undo past effects and to avoid repeating them. But there is a prior methodological question about whether one assesses cases in light of an ideal account of apology (e.g. Matt James

[AA] and Meredith Gibbs [AA]^[4]), or whether the nature of political apologies, including their truth and effect, emerges from actual practice. Alison Dundes Renteln (AA) and Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn (*TWS*) emphasize that cultural context and the particular history of past wrongs largely determine whether and how an apology is appropriate. The negotiated element of each apology may itself be important insofar as a victimized group regains some agency in the process itself. Nevertheless, as instances accumulate, the importance of a number of consistent issues emerge.

Who can make a political apology? On one level, anyone duly designated to speak on behalf of the collective entity, such as a nation. Yet, as James explains, an attempt in 1998 by the Canadian government to apologize for residential schools failed in part because it was delivered by the Minister of Indian Affairs, not the Prime Minister, in a government meeting room rather than a more appropriate location. While the minister was presenting an official statement on behalf of Canada, she was not the highest official who could have delivered the statement nor did she do so at a symbolic center of the body politic. By contrast, the Harper apology was a truly national event, delivered with solemnity and ceremony in the House of Commons and as such entered into the official parliamentary record.

Rebecca Tsosie (*TWS*) analyzes the interesting case of Kevin Gover, the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs who apologized for U.S. policy towards Native Americans as carried out by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Yet, critics faulted the process, saying it was inappropriate that Gover, a member of the Pawnee First Nation, should apologize even though he claimed to be speaking for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, rather than as a member of the wronged group.

Even though he unequivocally speaks for the United States (as opposed to lower level officials), could an apology for slavery by a black president such as Barak Obama be received as adequate and appropriate? The question of who can apologize is obviously related to the nature of collective responsibility and how it is passed on through time. A strictly biological notion of inter-generational responsibility, in which only a president directly descended from slaveholders would be legitimate, is dubious in part because the apology of a national leader is not about their personal responsibility, direct or inherited, but that of the body they represent. (One noteworthy exception is in Paul Kerstens' [AA] discussion of how, in the 1960s, the biological descendants of Belgium's leaders disputed the right of the present Belgian government to speak on behalf of a predecessor

government.) Clearly a political apology is a public ritual in which symbols matter, including the identity of the official spokesperson.

The editors of *Taking Wrongs Seriously* propose that the political apology “navigates between the extremes of orthodox individualism and romantic collectivism” (26). While some Canadians objected that responsibility for residential schools resides solely with those persons who made the policies of the day or who ran the schools, this narrow interpretation of responsibility was implicitly denied by Harper. The effects of past wrongs continue to this day, he said. “The burden [of this experience] is properly ours as a government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian residential schools system to ever again prevail.”

The present and future dimension of collective responsibility intimated by this statement has been theorized by political scientist Danielle Celermejer (*TWS*). In her analysis of Australia’s apology process towards its aboriginal people, she argues that collective responsibility is essentially about a commitment to reconciliation rooted in the present communal identity of Australians. While many citizens may agree that they do not hold direct responsibility for since-repealed laws, nor for the excessive actions of some government agents (the basis on which Prime Minister Howard maintained a government apology was appropriate), Australians hold a sense of national identity in which such policies and acts would not happen. Thus, grassroots “Sorry Day” events expressed a willingness to take responsibility for the past as a way of making a clear, collective commitment for the future.

A related approach is developed by philosopher Janna Thompson (*AA*) who argues that a collective apology is qualitatively different than a personal one precisely in the way responsibility is assumed. The assumption of collective responsibility for a past history makes possible the continuity of corporate moral agency through time. If a nation wishes its current commitments to bind future generations, for example to never again attempt to annihilate the culture of aboriginal people, then it ought to act as if it is indeed bound to and thus responsible for what was done in the past. Likewise, the sincerity of a political apology ought not to be understood analogously with personal sincerity. A collective sincerity is not located in the inner dispositions of leaders, nor even whether a cumulative number of individual citizens share specific remorse. Rather, it exists where there is a true collective and practical commitment to chart a new future. Thus, Eleanor Bright Fleming (*AA*)

assesses sincerity in terms of whether a political apology creates a political or social space for true dialogue and understanding on the continuing dimensions of an issue such as race.

Of course, cynical political calculations are always possible and are frequently suspected. Politicians want credit for appearing to do the moral thing, or they may just want a problem to go away. In analyses of U.S. government apologies in relation to the Iraq invasion and the “war on terror” the rhetoric of apology can be used to evade responsibility, especially when issued routinely, indirectly, or for something other than the commonly perceived wrong, such as when President Bush expressed remorse for the fact that America’s reputation was tarnished by Abu Ghraib rather than for the abuses of Abu Ghraib itself (Elazar Barkan [TWS]).

In contrast to the residential schools statement, another apology made by Prime Minister Harper a few months later was widely regarded as self-serving, insincere, and poorly executed. Speaking at a Sikh festival, Harper apologized for the 1914 incident in which the Canadian government refused to allow the Komagata Maru ship to land. The ship returned to Calcutta where several people were killed by police as they disembarked. Indo-Canadian leaders complained that the apology should have been made in parliament, preceded by detailed consultations. The fact that the event was overseen by the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism, who was also the cabinet minister charged with helping the Conservative Party make electoral inroads into ethnic communities, contributed to the perception that both the past and the apology were used for partisan ends. Many Indo-Canadians felt manipulated.^[5]

Rectifying the Past, Setting a New Future

Nearly all contributors to these volumes point out that a clear function of the political apology is to place a particular interpretation of the past on record. The prime minister’s apology for residential schools, followed by concurring statements by the leaders of the four other parties in the House of Commons, clearly did this. The government did once have a policy of cultural assimilation, and that was wrong. It should not have operated these schools under such a mandate. While the effect of these schools on the lives of individuals would be determined by testimony at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the basic narrative and moral position were already established.

And yet judging the past is always risky. Who are we to know better? What about the sincerity of the many residential school teachers, many of whom served in this “mission field” at great sacrifice for themselves and with compassion for the students in their care? What about those Aboriginal people for whom the schools were largely positive?

Jean-Marc Couicoud and Jibecke Jönsson (AA) recognize that the universal and ahistorical claims of human rights render it thinkable to apply current standards to past practice. At the same time, rights discourse is generally uninterested in rectifying the past for its own sake. Thus, there is a sense in which speaking about the past is a medium for negotiations about the future. But this does not resolve the tension between the nuanced work of the historian and the necessarily summary accounts of the past that may be officially acknowledged and memorialized.

On the day after the Canadian apology, *The Globe and Mail*, Canada’s newspaper of record, printed a reaction from a school survivor on the front page that said the apology was “just a bunch of words.” He denounced it as “too little, too late.” Yet, much was made of the fact that in addition to the value of the words themselves, and the solemn ceremony that surrounded them, the apology was significant because it was made in the context of broader efforts to repair the relationship between Canada and aboriginal peoples. A commentator noted that respect is established by deeds, not words. Would the Settlement Agreement be perceived as deeds that helped to make the words true? Would financial reparations truly repair?

The literature on reparations is vast,^[6] and often grounded in the precedents set by German reparations after World War II. With respect to their relationship to apologies, several distinct positions emerge. For reasons of analytic clarity, Pablo de Grief (AA) defines an apology very narrowly as a speech-act which takes responsibility and expresses remorse, and recommends that related actions such as reparations be considered separately. Yet, many theorists argue that some form of reparation is intrinsic to the meaning of apology; reparations concretize apologies and render them genuine. Thus, in their article “Words Require Action: African Elite Opinion about Apologies from the ‘West,’” Rhoda E. Howard-Hassman and Anthony P. Lombardo (AA) advocate reparations for colonized western Africa. They base their arguments on the opinions of African leaders who reasoned analogously from personal apologies. Clearly the cultural context to which an apology is

addressed partly determines whether an apology is effective.

An argument against reparation, at least in the particular situation of U.S. slavery, is advanced by Fleming. In “When Sorry Is Enough: The Possibility of a National Apology for Slavery,” she argues that reparations commodify the past, especially those victims who have died. The dignity and respect an apology may promote are undermined by financial payouts. This atomizes the descendants as slaves and reinforces their status as victims, albeit compensated ones. The problem is the fact that a social whole never existed (and thus cannot be repaired), so true apology is construed as atonement: “making the past right by eliminating the systems of inequality that permitted slavery and segregation” (97). Tangible actions are still required, but their effectiveness is measured in terms of creation of a just social and political space for the future rather than repayment for actions in the past. Fleming thus broaches a helpful distinction between a narrow concept of reparations (usually monetary) and broad actions that reconcile.

Reparations broadly construed may entail the institutionalization of a truth and reconciliation commission, as in the Canadian case. The “tangible” offering here is the possibility for victims to have their stories heard and acknowledged. In this way, a new collective memory is forged that names a past injustice but also prescribes its limit, not in terms of forgetting but in its declining capacity to define identity. The reformation of laws and institutions may constitute reparations. The programs of education and commemoration like those envisioned by the Residential Schools Settlement may help non-aboriginal people recognize the injustice for which their government has apologized, and mobilize solidarity among communities.

An apology itself can be understood as a reparation given that its public profile and place on the public record. Anniversaries of such a prominent event will likely become occasions for assessing progress. Canadian Aboriginal leaders were involved in consultations about the content of the apology and the form in which it would be given. In deviation from standard protocol, leaders of several aboriginal groups were permitted to give official responses to the apology in the House of Commons and thus appear in the parliamentary record. For the aboriginal communities, this was a key sign of respect. Thompson argues that in many cases of historical wrong, the injustice is essentially against the human dignity of the victim. Justice may thus require an apology as a means of restoring respect to victims. Financial reparations apart from the restoration of respect fail in significant ways.

Like the apologies of perpetrators, the issue of forgiveness by victims is treated with some ambivalence. The same problem of how a representative may apologize on behalf of a group applies to how the representative of a group of victims may grant forgiveness on behalf of others. In addition, some contributors to these volumes judge the absence of a request for forgiveness an essential part of a true apology. A request for forgiveness too quickly moves the onus onto the victims, prematurely expecting that the apology itself resolves the issue. Yet, the fact that the Canadian government's apology did include a line asking forgiveness did not appear to negatively affect the statement. In Ryan Crocker's (*TWS*) examination of the complex relationship between the collective and personal possibilities for forgiveness in the context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he concludes that Archbishop Desmond Tutu's largely interpersonal framework for forgiveness, coupled with the structural promise of amnesty to those who confessed to crimes, may have inhibited both the victims' sense of justice as well as genuine social reconciliation.

Other authors, such as Kerstens (*AA*) and Roy Brooks (*TWS*) simply assume that an apology is a de facto request for forgiveness. Renteln notes that while diverse cultural and religious contexts render a universal notion of forgiveness impossible, what may be most significant in a political apology is the possibility that an offended group may choose to grant forgiveness or to withhold it. To the extent that an apology is about some exchange of power, this possibility dramatizes a renewed agency on the part of a grieved group.

The contested link between apologies and forgiveness indicates a larger ambiguity about the religious dimension of these acts. The Christian roots of forgiveness in western politics were identified by Hannah Arendt decades ago.^[7] For Arendt, the forgiveness Jesus practiced makes possible "reversibility" in political affairs. Though one cannot go back in time, forgiveness can free parties from a spiral of vengeance. Since Jesus declared forgiveness a prerogative not reserved to God alone, human forgiveness can contribute to a true social and political future. That apology discourse includes language such as forgiveness, confession, atonement, reconciliation, healing, wholeness, and so on, points to the need for further work on their religious and theological dimensions.

The fact that dozens of churches have made public statements of apology, confession, or repentance (terms not entirely equivalent) is the primary subject of only one essay, and

briefly discussed in two others. Historian Michael R. Marrus (AA) analyzes the dozens of “apologies” made by Pope John Paul II, though the pope has pointedly avoided using that word. Marrus’ use of the term “apology” to describe those statements of repentance, confession or requests of forgiveness inadvertently illustrates that these terms may become interchangeable in the perceptions of the public yet represent very different intentions and meanings on the part of the speaker. Marrus is quite positive about the progress represented by the pope’s actions, and apologies more generally.

Celermejer and Julie Fette (*TWS*) situate particular church apologies, or what I call ecclesial repentance, within larger processes of national reflection. Fette argues that the French government’s apology for its complicity in the Vichy regime helped make possible the statement of repentance by the French Catholic Church. Yet, the church acknowledged the shape and depth of its failure much more profoundly than the national apology. In the Australian context examined by Celermejer, churches and other institutions were at the forefront of the apologies to aboriginal people, which put pressure on the government to do likewise. Yet, conceptual similarities and differences between apologies by churches and states are not explored, nor is the possibility that the emergence of church apologies in the aftermath of World War II is a causal factor in the recent rise of political apologies.

Notable by its absence in the Harper apology and the responses reported in the mainstream media was any reference to the fact that Canadian churches had long since apologized for residential schools. If these apologies were important, why was this not identified? If they missed the mark, then surely there were lessons that ought to be learned from them.

The Age of Apology

Why are we in an “age of apology” in which nations and other institutions are “taking wrongs seriously”? Despite being implied in the titles of both books, the “why now” question is addressed only occasionally. Is it greater historical consciousness? Or, is it the culture of confession fostered by culture icons such as Oprah? Contributors point to the emerging human rights regime and a role for morality in international affairs. Transitional justice often involves the establishment of some official account of a dictatorial past. In recent decades, grieved groups have made claims for the recognition of past or present victimization. They have sought apologies as the means by which their history is officially acknowledged. Thus, apologies have been a medium through which identity may be

negotiated.

One key factor is the distance between event and apology. The “apology moment” in France was made possible, argues Fette, because leaders like President Jacques Chirac were not personally implicated in Vichy policies. While some critics of collective apologies charge that it is all too easy for one leader to apologize for the tough choices that others made, the separation of the personal from the political made it evident that Chirac was speaking for France. The timing of the Canadian apology for residential schools was in part determined by the fact that former students were aging and dying.

To the extent that representatives of institutions view apologies as a sign of strength rather than weakness, because an apology presupposes a moral universal larger than the narrow interests of any one group, then collective apologies are likely to proliferate. Yet, political apologies may also reflect a particular historical moment that will pass more quickly if the discourse is routinized or trivialized. Finite “apology capital” ought to be used wisely, as the “failed” Komagata Maru apology presages.

The interdisciplinary probes represented in these volumes raises the question of what political apologies are about, at root. Are they about justice, or reconciliation? Are they about collective memories, or psychological healing? Are they reducible to the rational if complicated calculations of self-interest? Are they about latent religious dimensions in public life? Are they about meeting a need for a victimized group? Or, are they primarily about the self-reflective process through which a collective may come to a decision to apologize? How have particular apologies affected a situation? What does effectiveness look like? Given the novelty of collective apologies, do they provide previously unrecognized windows into the nature and function of the institution apologizing? Clearly, further work needs to be done. The perspectives of psychology, sociology, management studies, rhetoric, religious studies, and theology, in addition to those represented in these volumes, will enhance the conversation.

1. 1. This review essay examines two recent edited books on collective apologies. The 2008 apology of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to former students of Indian Residential Schools provides the lens through which the reviewer shows how the books provide critical interdisciplinary perspectives on apologies and their

reconciling possibilities, as well the kind of further work required.

2. 2. Wendy Stueck and Sarah Boesveld, “Schools Not Entirely Bad, Native Writer Contends,” *The Global and Mail*, 12 June 2008, p. A8.
3. 3. The text of the prime minister’s speech is available at: www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=2149. Video clips of the apology and responses may be found at: www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/rqpi/apo/index-eng.asp. The official parliamentary record (Hansard) is available at: www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2&DocId=3568890.
4. 4. Both take significant cues from Nicholas Tavuchis’ analysis of personal and collective apologies, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
5. 5. Robert Matas, “‘We Were Duped,’ Indo-Canadians Say of PM’s Speech,” *The Globe and Mail*, 6 August 2008, A4.
6. 6. See the 1000-page *Handbook of Reparations*, edited by Pablo de Grieff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
7. 7. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Among the burgeoning literature on political forgiveness, recent key works include Mark R. Amstutz, *The Healing of the Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); P. E. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Donald W. Shriver, Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).