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The Future of Apologies

Aaron Lazare

*Aaron Lazare spoke on the topic of apologies at the inauguration of Chancellor Michael Collins at the University of Massachusetts Boston. This text is taken from Lazare's 2004 book *On Apology* published by Oxford University Press and reprinted here with permission.*

Apologies have the capacity to positively transform relationships between individuals, groups, and nations. They provide processes by which parties in conflict can settle their differences in peaceful and constructive manners, while also preserving or restoring the dignity of both parties. The rapid growth of apologies since the early 1990s suggests that people are more aware of these benefits than ever before. But it also raises additional questions: First, what do we know about apologies (particularly public ones) from past centuries? Second, how did people heal and restore relationships before the apology process emerged as such an accessible and effective mode of reconciliation? And third, will this upsurge in apologies continue throughout the twenty-first century? If so, what can we hope for?

Some Notable Apologies Prior to the 1990s

The first signs of change in public attitudes about apology began to appear soon after World War II. Michael Henderson, in *The Forgiveness Factor: Stories of Hope in a World of Conflict*,¹ illustrates the temporal relationship between war's end and war-related apologies and attempts at reconciliation between former World War II enemies. Perhaps the most important of these stories involves the reconciliation between France and Germany, bitter enemies during and between their previous three wars. Elazar Barkan in *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices*² further chronicles and analyzes several instances of restitution following World War II, beginning with German reparations to its former enemies.

Three implicit or explicit apologies, occurring between the end of World War II and 1990, are particularly noteworthy because of their breadth and precedent-setting impact. All three apologies are in some way the result of

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World War II. The first of these apologies was Pope John XXIII's decision to eliminate all negative comments about Jews from the Roman Catholic liturgy.³ In a continuation of this apology, Pope John XXIII initiated the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, referred to as *Nostra Aetate*, a part of Vatican II. This document was completed and proclaimed in 1965 by his successor, Pope Paul VI.⁴ It states that "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. . . ." and that the church "decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against the Jews at any time and by any one."⁵ Michael Phayer, in *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930–1965*, comments: "Led by a new pope, John XXIII, and compelled by the memory of the Holocaust, the Catholic church reversed its 2,000-year tradition of anti-Semitism."⁶ With regard to the world of Islam, the document states: "The Church . . . regards with esteem also the Moslems. . . . Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to . . . work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."⁷ *Nostra Aetate* goes on to address the relationship of the Catholic church to all of civilization, "No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the right flowing from it are concerned. . . . The Church reproves any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion."⁸ It is widely believed that the Church in *Nostra Aetate* implicitly acknowledged, with this apology, its role as offender while explicitly offering reparations through its profound commitments to future relations to other religions.⁹

A second apology is illustrated by a speech, regarded by many as world famous, delivered by the president of the Federal Republic of Germany, Richard von Weizsacker to the Bundestag in 1985, addressing Germany's war-time offenses.¹⁰ This speech is remarkable for its comprehensive acknowledgment of the offenses of the German nation during World War II, together with an admonition to "look truth straight in the eye"¹¹ and to regard remembering as a moral obligation. Von Weizsacker's speech had further significance because it followed by three days the controversial Bitburg ceremonies in which President Ronald Reagan honored the memory of the SS who died in the war. Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times* called this address "one of the great speeches of our time."¹² Jeffrey Herf, author of *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, commented this was "the most important speech about the crimes of the Nazi era delivered in the national political arena"¹³ since 1952.

Finally the U.S. government in 1988, after years of debate and negotiations, apologized (and made financial reparations) to Japanese American

citizens who were interned during World War II.¹⁴ Barkan regarded this resolution as a “model for restitution cases and for redressing historical injustices”¹⁵ partly because the U.S. Congress “underscored the moral obligations of the country even when these come into conflict with political considerations.”¹⁶ It further showed that even the victors of the war have responsibilities to apologize for their offenses. This U.S. response to race-based civil liberties offenses has further served as a model for subsequent offenses of this type.

In my judgment, no twentieth-century apology prior to the end of World War II approaches the moral and social significance of these three post-war apologies. Only one U.S. president, Abraham Lincoln, is remembered for an apology, his second inaugural address.¹⁷ This 703-word apology for slavery, engraved on the north wall of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., will, I believe, grow in importance as one of the most profound and courageous statements in U.S. and world history. Ulysses S. Grant’s last message to Congress, said by some to be an apology, is actually an *apologia*, a justification and explanation.¹⁸

To my knowledge, no systematic studies of apologies exist in the literature or the history of any nation. (Academic disciplines of sociology, social psychology, and psycholinguistics became interested in research on apologies beginning in the 1970s,¹⁹ and the few books on contemporary apologies and “how to apologize” did not appear until the 1990s.)²⁰ Students of European history of the Middle Ages may be familiar with two famous apologies. In 1077, Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV traveled to Canossa, a castle in Italy, where he waited barefoot in the snow for three days to apologize to Pope Gregory VII with hopes of having his excommunication rescinded. The second famous apology of the Middle Ages was offered by Henry II for inciting the murder of Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1170. He performed penance four years later by wearing sackcloth and ashes and walking barefoot to a place where eighty monks beat him with twigs of a birch tree. Many historians regard both of these apologies as political maneuvers by the alleged offenders, both of whom were kings in conflict with the clergy. Also of historical interest in the management of humiliations and apologies was the practice of dueling, the beginnings of which can be traced to the Middle Ages. A duel was one method of resolving a conflict following an insult where one party was humiliated or lost honor. The duel would be terminated if the offending party apologized, thus restoring the honor of the offended party.

Quotations of famous apologies that I was able to compile, mostly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all speak negatively about apologies:

It is a good rule in life never to apologize. The right sort of people does not want apologies, and the wrong sort takes a mean advantage off them.

— P. G. Wodehouse, 1881–1975, *writer*

Apologies only account for that which they do not alter.

— *Benjamin Disraeli, 1804–1881, British Prime Minister*

No sensible person ever made an apology.

— *Ralph W. Emerson, 1803–1882, poet*

I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself. . . . I see that the elementary laws never apologize.

— *Walt Whitman, 1819–1892, poet*

Never regret, never explain, never apologize.

— *Benjamin Jowett, 1817–1893, Oxford University*

Never contradict. Never explain. Never apologize.

— *Lord Fisher, 1841–1920, British admiral*

Nine times out of ten the first thing a man's companion knows of his shortcomings is from his apology.

— *Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1841–1935, U.S. Supreme Court justice*

A noteworthy aspect of this list of British and American dignitaries are the missing voices: There are no women, no minorities, and no members of the so-called “underclass.” Perhaps their absences can be explained by the oft-quoted remark that “history is written by the winners” and thus reflects the historically devalued position these groups occupied in society. (Only anecdotes and documents that were considered “valuable” were preserved.) Perhaps those not represented had neither means nor opportunity to express an opinion about the value (or lack thereof) of apologies. Whatever the reason, it is clear that people who did have power and influence did not view the practice of apologizing kindly and — presumably — were quite loath to engage in it themselves.

The Relationship of Apology to Religion and the Law

If we assume that apologies currently play a greater role in personal and public discourse than at any time before World War II, the question arises how the needs of offended parties in those times were met. I believe that a plausible answer can be found in the function of two timeless institutions, religion and the law.

Limiting ourselves, for the sake of this discussion, to the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, we see the importance of repentance as a cornerstone of faith. Although all three religions speak of repentance in general terms as a turning away from sin and a returning to God, they also describe it as a means of healing relationships that have been damaged because one person committed an offense against another. Reli-

gious scholars analyze and describe the steps to repentance in virtually the same manner that social scientists describe the apology process.

An important statement about the importance of repentance as a manner of correcting or undoing offenses against God as well as against other people comes from the Talmud (a document dating from the early third century C.E. to the sixth century C.E.), which declares that God created repentance even before he created humankind.²¹ I take this statement to mean that the sages who authored this sentiment were acutely aware of the fallibility of humankind and the need for religion's prescriptions to heal offenses. Repentance (or its secular approximation of apology) therefore, would be so important for sustaining a just and livable society that an infinite and all powerful God would put it in place before creating humankind.

Another institution that served to manage conflict in its evolution over many centuries is the law. Taking the U.S. judicial system as a body of legal practice and precedent, it is easy to see some of the ways that law shares the structure and function of apology. For instance, in both cases, the offended party ("the people"—that is, the state or federal government in the case of a criminal trial) seeks to remedy an offense. The difference is that law coerces the offender, if guilty, into attending to the victim's needs while apologies are voluntary, unless they are ordered by the court. The significance of this difference is that only one party is apt to be satisfied by the legal process, whereas the apology process may potentially satisfy both parties.

In fact, I believe that many legal proceedings can be understood as formalized and ritualized substitutes for the apology process, complete with offense, explanation, remorse, reparation, and negotiation. For example, in criminal proceedings, acknowledging and negotiating the offense in the form of plea bargaining can precede or replace a trial. Similarly, in civil suits, pre-trial negotiations can resolve the entire suit. The nature of the crime (the offense) can be mitigated if the accused cooperates by providing new information ("acknowledging the offense") that may benefit victims as well as the authorities. For example, the families of murdered victims might want to know how their loved ones died and the location of the bodies. Explanations can affect the degree of culpability (responsibility) involved, as judge and jury determine whether the offense was premeditated or was a negligent but unfortunate outcome of a quarrel. "Victim impact statements" give the victim an opportunity to explain how the offense has affected his or her life, both at the time of the offense as well as in the indefinite future (explaining what the offense meant to the victim). Even the sentencing phase of a criminal justice process hinges on some of the same variables that determine the effectiveness of an apology: the expression of remorse, the presence of continued danger to the victims and society if the guilty party is

placed on parole, and the importance of retributive justice on behalf of the victims.

Personal Observations on the Current Interest in Apology

Moving from the past use of apologies to the present, the frequency of apology stories in newspapers has nearly doubled over the past decade. As my own interest in apologies has deepened during this time, I have been able to assess the importance of apology through the nature and responses of audiences I have addressed. I have been struck by the diversity of people interested in learning about apology and also by the extent and intensity of interest. These audiences included lawyers and law students, whose professional journals during the past decade have been publishing an increasing number of articles on apologies. Students of police academies were sent by superiors who wanted them to master the social skills of apologizing so they will become more effective law enforcement agents. Many religious audiences, mostly Roman Catholic, wanted to learn about apology as complementary to their interest in repentance and forgiveness. Groups of high school and Sunday school students attended my lectures with their teachers who hoped, perhaps, that understanding apologies might encourage their civility in relationships. Groups of retirees may have attended because of an interest, as they matured and aged, in resolving old grudges and making peace with friends and relatives. Physicians were struggling over whether and how to apologize to patients who were victims of their medical mistakes. Finally, I spoke before an international audience of 500 people from sixty nations who met at Caux, Switzerland, to search for means of resolving civil and international wars within and between nations.²² This group exhibited both a sense of near desperation and unswerving determination as they struggled to find ways to heal their war-torn countries. The net result of addressing these varied audiences was to strengthen my conviction that the growing interest in the apology process transcends arbitrary boundaries — of nationality, profession, age, gender, and religion.

Speculations on the Future of Apologies

In order to speculate on the future direction of apologies, I will review the social and technological factors that have led to their recent growth. As a result of the frightening loss of life from World War II and the use of weapons of mass destruction, a cloud of fear hangs over all of us, whether signaled by orange or yellow alerts, or not signaled at all. War is no longer the great adventure it was portrayed to be for many people prior to World War I. Another important social development is a new interdependence between nations, companies, and individuals. We need each other for our mutual economic well-being and to jointly protect the earth from a rapidly rising

population, global warming, and pollution. We observe yet another emerging interdependence required for success in national governance, business, the university, the church, and the physician's office. Such interdependence requires a departure from a rigid "top down" authoritative organizational structure in which no one apologizes to anyone for anything, rules are immutable, and the leader demands to be treated as infallible. In our new kind of interdependence, it matters more than ever what the voter wants, what the customer wants, what the worker wants, what the student wants, what the parishioner wants, and what the patient wants. It also matters to the economy and to our sense of moral justice what minorities want and what women want. The Internet, the cell phone, and the mass media keep populations on this planet interconnected, thus enabling offenses to be instantly visible on a global level. Finally, as women achieve more power and influence in society, their greater skill with and use of apologies (compared to men) can be expected to alter general discourse in most aspects of life.

All of these developments — the dangers of international war, our fragile planet, the global village in which we live, the growing number of the earth's citizens demanding equality, the interconnectedness of all of us — have led to more human interactions than at any time in history. This volatile climate demands that we renew and focus our energies on the resolution of conflicts, and that we do so in a way that does not simply submerge the resentments that inevitably accompany such conflicts but acknowledges and responds to them. I believe that the apology process can be a powerful tool in that effort. This is the good news.

But this cautiously optimistic view comes with a major caveat: Nations or groups in states of humiliation cannot participate in relationships of equality and interconnectedness. It is difficult for these parties to humbly acknowledge blame, empathically understand the plight of the other party, and behave in generous and forgiving ways. They are too consumed with fighting for and protecting their dignity, their psychological identity and sense of self, and their physical wellbeing. In their state of humiliated rage, they are vengeful and unable to see the world as they might see it if their adversaries halted attempts to dehumanize them and their dignity was restored. The world currently offers multitudes of examples of these humiliated groups: terrorists who offer their lives to restore the honor of their group or nation, the Iraqis, the Chechens, the Palestinians and Israelis, the Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland, and those living in emotional and physical deprivation in all countries. All of these groups or nations have long histories of subjugation and humiliation. The interconnectedness of our global village has only intensified their humiliation, because now mass media shows exactly what others have and what they are missing. Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton makes the point that the United States is currently a humiliated nation as a result of its exposed vulnerability following the 9/11

attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.²³ Such a state of mind can cause a person or a nation to interpret the external world through the lens of fear and rage and can compromise that person's or nation's judgment and ability to acknowledge and rectify mistakes.

I believe that humiliation is one of the most important emotions we must understand and manage, both in ourselves and in others, and on an individual and national level. This belief, particularly as it relates to international affairs, is supported by the writings of Robert Jay Lifton, Jessica Stern, Thomas Friedman, and even the fifth-century B.C. historian Thucydides.²⁴ The failure to deal constructively with humiliation has led to grudges and killings in families (for example, Cain and Abel) and in nations (such as France and Germany).²⁵ The significance of humiliation between nations or major national groups is magnified when either party is capable of inflicting mass destruction. The role of vibrant, prosperous democratic nations should be to humbly and without arrogance assist in restoring the dignity of other nations and groups in need. Only then can they partake in the dialogue of apology and reconciliation.

Concluding Thoughts

Apology is more than an acknowledgment of an offense together with an expression of remorse. It is an ongoing commitment by the offending party to change his or her behavior. It is a particular way of resolving conflicts other than by arguing over who is bigger and better. It is a powerful and constructive form of conflict resolution, embedded, in modified form, in religion and the judicial system. It is a method of social healing that has grown in importance as our way of living together on our planet undergoes radical change. It is a social act in which the person, group, or nation apologizing has historically been viewed as weak, but more than ever is now being regarded as strong. It is a behavior that requires of both parties attitudes of honesty, generosity, humility, commitment, and courage.

Notes

1. Michael Henderson, *The Forgiveness Factor: Stories of Hope in a World of Conflict* (Salem, Oregon: Grosvenor Books, 1996).
2. Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), xxiv–xxv.
3. Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930–1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
4. *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, October 28, 1965.
5. Ibid.
6. Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, 203.
7. *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, October 28, 1965.
8. Ibid.
9. Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, 214.
10. Richard von Weizsacker, May 8, 1985.
11. Ibid.
12. Anthony Lewis, *New York Times*, Editorial, May 1, 1986.
13. Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 355.
14. Eric K. Yamamoto, Margaret Chon, Carol L. Izumi, Jerry Kang, and Frank H. Wu, *Race, Rights and Reparation: Law and the Japanese American Internment* (New York: Aspen Law, 2001).
15. Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations*, 30.
16. Ibid., 31.
17. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Re-made America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 17–19.
18. President Ulysses S. Grant, Eighth Annual Message to Congress. December 5, 1876, <http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1876.htm>
19. See, e.g., Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York: Basic Books, 1971); Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Juhane House, and Gabriele Kasper, eds., *Cross Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*, vol. 31 (New Jersey: Ablex, 1989); and William L. Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

20. See also Nicholas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993); Beverly Engel, *The Power of Apology* (Hoboken, N. J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2002); Ken Blanchard and Margaret McBride, *The One Minute Apology* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); and Roy Brooks, "The Age of Apology" (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
21. Babylonian Talmud, Pes. 54a.
22. A summary of this talk was published in "What makes for a good apology," *For a Change* 16, 1 (February/March 2003); see also my unpublished essay on my experience at Caux, copy available from author.
23. Robert Jay Lifton, *Super Power Syndrome: America's Apocalyptic Confrontation with the World* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003).
24. Ibid.; Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Editorial, Thomas L. Friedman, "The Humiliation Factor," *New York Times*, November 9, 2003; and for Thucydides, see Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).
25. Thomas J. Scheft, *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism, and War* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1994).