

The political apology as a millennial phenomenon

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Abstract: Political apologies are not new, but the huge upsurge in their presentation that occurred during the 1990s was unexpected and suggested that a remarkable change in national conscience had taken place. This upsurge opened the door to reconciliation between nations and between marginalized ethnic minorities, and their mainstream political leaders. The presentation of political apologies continues today with the most recent apology by the Prime Minister of Australia to the “stolen generation.” Political apologies are important especially to indigenous minorities who depend very strongly on the mind-set of their majority colonizers. In this essay the upsurge of political apologies around the world is identified as a millennial phenomenon associated with the end of the last century; basically, a numerological phenomenon directed towards the advent of the third Christian millennium. The main driver of this phenomenon appears to be the Roman Catholic Church through the desire of the then Pope John Paul II to renew and reinvigorate the Christian faith prior to the advent of the third millennium.

Keywords: indigenous cultures; millennial phenomenon; political apologies; Pope John Paul II; stolen generation

Introduction

Recently, the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, before parliament, formally apologised to the Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. He said (Editorial, 2008a):

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.

And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

We the parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.

This political apology was well-crafted, delivered with humility and remorse by Rudd, and for his effort he received a standing ovation from both sides of the House. Many Australians supported the apology; it was long overdue, but when it finally arrived it was brilliant. The complete text of Rudd’s speech to parliament may be found on the web (Editorial, 2008a).

When a national government apologises to a group of its own citizens or to another country for past actions or repressive policies that severely hurt that group or country it is headline news. Exactly why political apologies have become so popular today until now has not been clear although Malik (2007) discusses several contributing factors including the end of the cold war, the disintegration of the working class, and the blurring of distinctions between left and right. Fifty years ago such apologies were rare; their frequency is on the rise but few are as inspiring as that delivered by Prime Minister Rudd.

The issues concerning the “stolen generations” of Aborigine and Torres Strait Islander children has divided Australians for decades, but the recent apology will not guarantee an end to the controversy. John Howard who was Rudd's predecessor and Prime Minister from 1996 until November, 2007 refused to apologize because he believed that contemporary Australians were not responsible for past injustices (McGuirk, 2008). Dr Brendan Nelson, John Howard's replacement and current leader of the opposition held the party line by saying that he personally had a "bit of concern about the idea that one generation should be held responsible for things that happened in the past" (Editorial, 2008b). Nevertheless, in the end the apology by Mr. Rudd was supported by Dr. Nelson and his opposition party (Editorial, 2008c).

Political apologies are founded in conflict and controversy, and as such speak to issues that may have festered in the national consciousness sometimes for generations. Political apologies are clearly important because they usually presage changes in government policies that can affect the lives of millions through educational, economic, social and business initiatives designed to give substance to those policies. Such apologies are not embarked upon lightly because most politicians consider sack-cloth and ashes inherently at odds with piety and self-righteousness.

Not surprisingly, many apologies by governments around the world target their indigenous people. Indigenous people have borne the brunt of decades and sometime centuries of racist policies and practices that aimed to exploit, marginalize, and minimize their physical and social presence. The desire to reconcile colonizers with the colonized is a recent phenomenon that needs explanation because of its social significance. Exactly why after two hundred years of racist government policies should Australians choose reconciliation with its indigenous people is not clear, but the overnight transition from racism to tolerance seems miraculous and bears careful watching. Those who fought against the apology are likely unchanged, and no doubt working to undermine its political ramifications (Crab, 2008).

Australia is not unique in its soul searching and the airing of old linen. South Africa, New Zealand, Canada, The United States, Finland, Taiwan and Japan are all trying to come to terms with their histories of repression and the denigration of their own indigenous peoples. Originally, indigenous people stood between colonists and the land they lusted after, and their response was to eradicate, denigrate, and confiscate. Could it now be that today the indigenous people still stand between the colonists and another piece of real estate they lust after only this time it is a mental construct called the moral high ground. Whatever the reasons, political apologies are fashionable, and so it behoves us to understand, if not control, this most important of current trends.

In this and the two essays that follow, I have tried to extract a measure of order from the concept of political apology (Hook, 2008a); I have looked at its history, its definitions, its uses and misuses, and where it fits in the overall scheme of national strategies. Finally, I have tried to provide a realistic perspective of its value especially in the world of indigenous struggle (Hook, 2008b) by considering whether or not the New Zealand government owes an apology to its indigenous people for 150 years of repression and denigration. While political apologies have existed throughout recorded history the rapid upsurge seen at the end of the last century is a unique phenomenon that bears investigation. Does this apparent change in the

hearts of men presage a new attitude or an embracing of our fellows, or a contrition for past wrongs that only now surface to claim our attention? What are the reasons for this miraculous turn around in the conscience of the West and what are the implications for the marginalized ethnic minorities of the world?

The concept of the political apology

There are many kinds of political apology ranging from polite nods to fully-blown sack-cloth and ash parades. Politicians are forever putting their feet in their mouths and the apology is probably the least damaging form of retreat. This discussion has been confined mainly to those apologies that are issued on behalf of national governments, and major organizations that lie within the power structure of nations, such as the church or other bodies of national significance. Apologies made by politicians for offences against colleagues and others are considered personal and, in the main, have been excluded from this discussion. For example, the apologies made by President Clinton for personal transgressions involving staff have been excluded, excepting where humour tempts us aside.

The definition of a political apology in this context is the public announcement of a remorseful acceptance of responsibility for wrongful or harmful actions by a government that led to the disadvantage or victimization of a group of its own citizens, or attacks on the citizens of another country. There exists a whole spectrum of “disadvantages” associated with the word “attacks” ranging from slight embarrassment to death. Time is also a factor, since wrongful acts by governments tend to become less relevant with time especially when considering those acts that occurred over 500 years ago; however, particularly heinous acts that occurred within that window of 500 years or less appear to be relevant and “apologizable.”

Many other historical acts of foolishness are also offered for modern day review that seem hardly worth our attention excepting for the amusement they afford. For example, consider the persecution of Galileo Galilei by the Roman Catholic Church from 1616 to 1642 for his belief in heliocentrism. In October 31, 1992 Pope John Paul II issued an apology and lifted the edict of the Inquisition against Galileo Galilei (Poupard, 1992). This was a little late in the overall scheme of things and to a degree irrelevant, excepting to the conscience of the Roman Catholic Church and the satisfaction that some might feel in forcing the Church to deal with a reality that was not doctrinally Christian, that Man might not be the centre of the Universe, and that the infallibility of the Church might itself be fallible.

There are always two sides to a political apology, and there will always be those in favour and those against. Some have criticized the Rudd apology by suggesting that it targeted the “stolen generation” while omitting any mention of, what might have been, even more heinous crimes such as the genocidal killing of Aborigines that supposedly occurred in the early days of colonial settlement (Mellor, Bretherton, Firth, 2007); others believe that such things did not happen and that they are simply products of myth and legend (Windschuttle, 2002). Some knowledgeable people even believe that the forcible removal of children from their families was a merciful act that in many cases resulted in the saving of lives (Johns, 2008), all of which is quite possible. However, the uncertainties of history are more to do with the inner thoughts of men than actual events, and the documentation surrounding the “stolen generation” is undeniable. Interpretation of history from a modern perspective is always risky especially when one can only speculate about motivation.

The non-apology

The non-apology apology is where an apology is given in the form of an apology but it turns out to be nothing of the sort. For example, saying that, "I'm sorry if my troops offended your people by shooting them," is not an admission of offense but basically lays the blame at the feet of your people for being so thin-skinned as to be offended and not fast enough to dodge bullets. Some examples by the humourist Bruce McCall are listed in an article that appeared in the New York Times in 2001 (McCall, 2001). One of the classics was that issued recently by Pope Benedict XVI. In September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI having quoted from an ancient text critical of Islam, was forced to issue an apology which he did expressing regret for the reaction to his comments. The statement from the Vatican said that the Pope "sincerely regrets that certain passages of his address could have sounded offensive to the sensitivities of the Muslim faithful and should have been interpreted in a manner that in no way corresponds to his intentions" (Anonymous, 2006). In other words, mine not his, "stop being so sensitive."

The spectrum of political apologies

The spectrum of political apology is wide and in order to understand the motivation behind their creation and the value expected from their release it will help to examine some examples. In addition, to understand what constitutes an effective political apology one must look at their history. In the following I have selected a few examples and very briefly examined their value, elegance and outcomes. Some are outstanding, some amusing, some irrelevant by today's standards, and some downright foolish.

Rudd's apology to the indigenous people of Australia was cathartic and spiritually uplifting, and must be considered one of the finest examples of its genre to grace the lips of modern day politicians. It had all of the ingredients necessary for a great political apology, or was it as Aird suggested (Aird, 2008), merely a carefully stage-managed branding exercise of the new Labour government. More likely it was a well-crafted apology that served the purposes of the party as well as attending to a national need. Certainly the three main ingredients, great content, great delivery and a receptive audience were present and the apology was timely. One of the most important ingredients of a political apology is relevance and Rudd's apology was topical and highly relevant. Consultations with Aborigine were performed prior to delivery (Editorial, 2008b), thus ensuring that the apology remained highly relevant. Sad to say, relevance is not always found in political apologies although a lot depends on one's point of view.

Among the most irrelevant must be the belated almost apology by the Danish culture minister, Brian Mikkelsen, (Dublin, August 15, 2007) to the Irish for Viking raids which took place of over 1200 years ago (Erikson, 2007). It was probably a joke, because Mikkelsen denies that any apology was made; however, it is hard to determine from actual text. Are the excesses of the Crusaders relevant? Pope John Paul II thought so when he apologized to the Patriarch of Constantinople on May 4, 2001 (Stanley, 2001) for the sins of the Crusader attack on Constantinople in 1204 (Crusades – Encyclopedia). In John Paul's speech he expressed "deep regret" and "lamented" the "disastrous sack of the imperial city of Constantinople," Thus the perspectives of the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox churches was sufficient to bring John Paul II to Athens in spite of the fact that the rest of the world seemed less interested. Relevance is in the mind of the apologizer and should not be dismissed out of hand.

Political apologies should include a repudiation of policies, practices, and character traits that led to the wrongdoing in the first place. A resolution to eliminate the renounced character traits is also helpful although the offer of reparations is not an essential part of an apology. Recipients of political apologies often assume that reparations will follow, and the sincerity of

the apology may be measured by the size of the settlement. Statements of regret are not considered apologies.

There are some apologies where a form of restitution should follow either immediately or soon after delivery in order to be taken seriously. On December 11, 2001 the government of Canada offered an apology for the execution of 23 Canadian soldiers by allied firing squads for desertion or cowardice in World War I, saying the punishment was too harsh (the Canadians were among 306 Commonwealth soldiers shot for desertion between 1914 and 1918). The apology did not erase their convictions or bring them back to life, and because restitution in the form of forgiveness was absent the sincerity of the apology will remain in doubt (Canadians Shot At Dawn).

Political apologies are not new. In 1077 Henry IV of the Holy Roman Empire apologised to Pope Gregory VII for past actions against the Pope, and thereby avoided excommunication. An interesting point in this early recorded instance of political apology is that it required and was accompanied by penance. For three days, from January 25 to January 27, 1077, Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, stood in the snow while begging the Pope to rescind his excommunication, which Pope Gregory duly did (Anonymous, Henry IV). The coupling of apology with penance is an important and ancient principle that needs to be looked at carefully, because penance has a way of deepening sincerity and hastening the reconciliation process. Would Pope Gregory VII have changed his mind about Henry with just an apology and was Henry's penance the deciding factor? It is unlikely that the Prime Minister of New Zealand would be willing to stand for three days in the snow in order to convince Māori of her sincerity, or for that matter the Australian Prime Minister to stand for three days in the desert sun to convince Aborigines of his.

Acts of penitence are mild expressions of sorrow for past actions. In April 9, 2005 Prince Charles apologised in front of the Archbishop of Canterbury and 800 guests, during his wedding to his second wife Camilla for his adulterous behaviour towards his first wife, the Princess Diana. As Jay Rayner of The Observer wrote:

Will yesterday's act of penitence by Prince Charles do much to humanise him? Unlikely. First, there's the fire and brimstone language - 'We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness' - which is so over the top one might be forgiven for thinking he was having a laugh at the archbishop's expense, were it not for the fact that we know that this man long ago had a sense-of-humour bypass. And then there's the fact that it wasn't only Camilla who had to do the bewailing with him, but the 800 guests behind too. This hardly seems fair. (Rayner, 2005)

There are various kinds of political apology ranging from the "expressions of regret" which is not quite an apology to the fully blown "sorry" with grovelling. When a soviet submarine ran aground in Swedish territorial waters on October 27, 1981, the Soviet Ambassador to Sweden, Mikhail D, Yakolev, went to the Swedish Ministry to express Moscow's regrets (Priol, 1981). On September 7, 1984 the Prime Minister of Japan Yasuhiro Nakasone said to the Koreans,

There was a period in this century when Japan brought to bear great sufferings upon your country and its people. I would like to state here that the government and people of Japan feel a deep regret for this error. (List of war apology statements issued by Japan).

Today, expressions of regret or remorse, do not make convincing apologies and nor do acts of penitence in the form of "bewailing of our manifold sins and wickedness."

On December 4, 1991 the Japanese Foreign Minister Michio Watanabe expressed "deep remorse" for the wartime suffering that followed Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor (Reinhold, 1991). This was not an official apology involving the highest level of government, and remorseful feelings might well be a natural consequence of defeat in war, but are hardly acceptable as an apology. Expressions of regret and expressions of remorse lack sincerity and can actually raise resentments that work to impede progress towards reconciliation. However, it is possible to combine expressions of regret and/or remorse with statements of deep apology and enhance the sincerity level. The most important phrase seems to surround the word "apology" especially the word "sorry" for without which an apology just isn't an apology. For example, On January 17, 1992. Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa of Japan on the occasion of a visit to the Republic of Korea said,

I would like to once again express a heartfelt remorse and apology for the unbearable suffering and sorrow that you experienced during this period because of our nation's act. Recently the issue of the so-called 'wartime comfort women' is being brought up. I think that incidents like this are seriously heartbreaking, and I am truly sorry. (Editorial, 2008d).

The history of a person or organization that is apologizing is important because it speaks to credibility. For example, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has a long history of lying, deceiving, and breaking promises to its clientele, the indigenous people of the United States. On September 8, 2000, during a celebration of the 175th year anniversary of the Bureau, Interior Department Assistant Secretary Kevin Gover, a member of the Pawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, apologized on behalf of the Bureau to American Indians for its past actions, including the forced relocation of Indians and broken treaties and promises. The apology was made not on behalf of the government but on behalf of the Bureau only. The remarkable thing is that the Bureau evolved from what was a War Department Office that dealt with what white Americans regarded as the "Indian problem" to an Interior Department entrusted with promoting tribal autonomy and improving the lives of Indians. (Stout, 2000). The fact that an Indian now headed the Bureau did much for restoring its credibility. Today most of that department's 10,000 employees are Indian. Although the history of the Bureau would tend to undermine its credibility its evolution into a department promoting Indian well-being is remarkable and one cannot help thinking that perhaps the revenge of its past victims is almost complete.

Credibility speaks to sincerity which in turn influences just how seriously we consider the message. There is a certain irony in politicians, that group of leaders least trusted by the public, (Whitaker, 2005), to be the ones promoting political apologies. Sincerity is a very important ingredient of an apology. On October 18, 1990 an apology was issued by Japan's Justice Minister, Seiroku Kajiyama, who sent his "deepest apologies to the American people" for comparing foreign prostitutes in Tokyo to American Blacks who move into white neighbourhoods and "ruin the atmosphere". He said that while his comments were "inappropriate and wrong" they were "not at all related to racial discrimination" (Sanger, 1990). His apology was difficult to take seriously.

Some apologies are given for statements so outrageous that no amount of apologizing will enable the listener to consider the apology seriously. On September 18, 2001, After being criticized by the White House and Pat Robertson, the Rev. Jerry Falwell apologized for saying on Robertson's television show "The 700 Club" that God had allowed terrorists to attack America on September 11 because of civil liberties groups, abortion rights supporters, and feminists. Falwell said:

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I

point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.' (Editorial, 2001)

Pat Robertson, host of the 700 Club program, supported Falwell's earlier statements in a prayer during the programme:

We have sinned against Almighty God, at the highest level of our government, we've stuck our finger in your eye ...The Supreme Court has insulted you over and over again, Lord. They've taken your Bible away from the schools. They've forbidden little children to pray. They've taken the knowledge of God as best they can, and organizations have come into court to take the knowledge of God out of the public square of America, (Editorial, 2001).

Falwell apologized for his rantings which at least was behaviour consistent with his record. Since then Rev. Falwell went on to call the Prophet Muhammad a "terrorist," for which he issued another apology (Editorial, 2002). It should be pointed out that in 1985 Falwell called Bishop Desmond Tutu (a Nobel Peace Prize winner) "a phony" for which Falwell apologized (Editorial, 1985). Name calling and other insults are not the subject of this essay, but these utterances were so outrageous that I included them for reasons of light relief. Other apologies of the same or similar ilk have been written about by Leibovich (Leibovich (2006) who thinks that they are mainly of little value and do not fool the public.

In South Africa, for several days in November 1997 the chief executives of the nation's biggest corporations and banks lined up to apologize for their actions over the last century. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings was investigating the ways business supported apartheid or violated human rights during the era of white rule (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report,1998). Mining executives admitted that they exploited racial and tribal divisions thereby helping to cut labor costs and close association with government officials helped Afrikaaners win government contracts. While corporate greed is universal that of corporate South Africa during the apartheid era was particularly disturbing because it emphasized the unprincipled nature of big business and the readiness of right wing governments to collude against marginalized citizenry.

Offers of reparations can offset credibility issues. For example, March 22, 2000, the Netherlands apologized to Jews, Gypsies and Indonesians for a "chilly" official response in the past to their claims to property seized during and after World War II. Prime Minister Willem Kok (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wim_Kok) offered \$180 million, in addition to past restitutions, to the Central Jewish Congress, while Gypsies receive an extra \$13 million, and Indonesians who sided with the Dutch during Indonesia's fight for independence in 1949 were offered \$110 million. However, in the Australian case Mr Rudd again ruled out paying compensation, despite calls for \$1 billion to be paid to Aboriginal people who were removed from their families as children, but just how serious this is has yet to be seen. For an apology to be effective the immediate offer of restitution may not be needed; however, there has to be a realistic possibility that somewhere down the path some form of reparations will follow or at least the doorway to its renegotiation should be left open.

The phenomenology of political apologies

The data listed in Figure 1 was obtained mainly from the archives of the New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com/>), The London Times (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/>), the Manchester Guardian (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/>), the Sydney Morning Herald (<http://www.smh.com.au/>), and the New Zealand Herald (<http://www.nzherald.co.nz/>), although other web-based sources were also examined such as the web site of Graham G. Dodds (http://www.upenn.edu/pnc/political_apologies.html), CNN (<http://www.cnn.com/>), ABC News (<http://abcnews.go.com/>), Political Apologies and Reparations web site

(<http://political-apologies.wlu.ca/>), Time Magazine (<http://www.time.com/time/>), and Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page). The implied assumption is that if the apology was of national or international significance it would be listed by at least one of the major newspapers or news services around the world. In the main, the survey confined itself to apologies involving the major democracies since apologies issued by nondemocratic governments were quite rare. This association between Western democracies and political apologies might be a key to understanding the phenomenon itself.

The data represented in Figure 1 show that before 1980, political apologies were not unknown, but they were rare and their rate of delivery fairly constant; during the mid 1990s they were on the rise peaking around the year 2002 and then rapidly falling off. This upsurge of political apologies of the 1990s clearly identifies itself as a millennial phenomenon, an event or series of events that owes its/their existence to the advent of the third millenium. The third millenium, being a somewhat arbitrary exercise in numerology, has significance only for certain sub-cultures found in the Western world, but in particular the Christian church and it is to there that one must look for the drivers. However, before examining the engagement of the church in this phenomenon there are several other possibilities that must be considered.

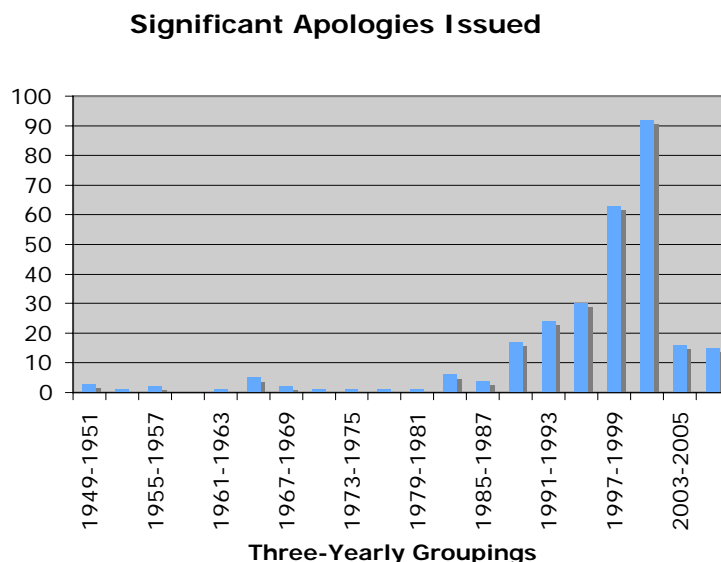


Figure 1. Political apologies issued over the period 1949-2008

In an attempt to identify reasons for the upsurge in the delivery of political apologies Malik (Malik, 2007) discusses several contributing factors including the end of the cold war, the disintegration of the working class, and the blurring of distinctions between left and right. These ideas of Malik regarding the end of the cold war, and ambiguities in the philosophies of left and right, could be significant, although looking back into the history of the 20th century when other lengthy stressful displays of armed conflict ended, there was no corresponding upsurge in political apologies; for example, at the end of the First World War. Ambiguities between left and right are not readily apparent as an underlying cause for the 90s upsurge in political apologies and the disintegration of the working class is not universally recognized, and even if it were its relationship to political apologies might remain unclear.

In the USA President Clinton was never slow to apologize once a wrong had been clearly identified; Bill Clinton’s empathetic readiness to adopt the perspective of the underdog is

considered to be one of his outstanding strengths as a world leader. The coincidence of apologetic surge and the Clinton Administration of the 1990s may be fortuitous or it may have been driven by the “Great Apologizer” himself, who made both political and personal apologies somewhat less onerous, more commonplace, and certainly more entertaining (Klein, 2002). While the entertainment value of catharsis and self-flagellation is unquestioned it seems unlikely to be a root cause of the world wide upsurge of political apologies at the end of the last century.

In the long term one might expect an eventual diminishing of the phenomenon as much of what seems morally reprehensible by past governments may eventually be apologised for; however, governments being human institutions will undoubtedly invent new ways of abusing and persecuting their minorities.

Millennial phenomena

Millennial phenomena are historically recognized and well documented (Landes, R. (2000a,b). The end of the first millennium was a time of special significance for Christians because of the expectation of the apocalypse. Even today the numerological significance of the third millennium has not been lost even to the extent that the current generation, that is those born between 1983 and 2003, being referred to in the USA as “millennials”. Without going into any discussion concerning the arbitrariness of the year 2000 (Cohen, 1999), it nevertheless remains significant to many if only in the Western world.

The millenarianism of Pope John Paul II drove the Catholic Church to prepare itself for the advent of the third millennium. During the 1990s Pope John Paul II issued many apologies for past errors of the Roman Catholic Church in acts of confession and repentance. He was determined to lay aside some of its historical baggage in order to reinvigorate Christianity. Pope John Paul II believed that repentance could transform the church and was determined to set the stage for a Christian revival with the Year 2000 being celebrated as the “Great Jubilee” (Pope John Paul II, 1994).

The upsurge of political apologies at the end of the 1990s could have been a millennial phenomenon unintentionally driven by the Catholic Church, and by none other than Pope John Paul II himself. It is possible that the example of Pope John Paul II triggered the outpouring of contrition even in places where Christianity is of little concern. It is also true that most of the apologies have come from Nations where Christianity holds considerable sway although not exclusively (see the political apologies issued by Japan, for example).

In view of its recent nature it may be premature to link the religious fervour of Pope John Paul II for cleansing institutional conscience through confession and repentance to the upsurge of political apologies in the 1990s, because insufficient time may have elapsed for other more subtle social phenomena to manifest themselves. However, supposing that the supposition were true, that political apologies have been driven by the Vatican, then in the years immediately following the millennial turn one might expect to see a rapid downturn in the number of apologies offered, as is indeed the case (Figure 1). In other words, for lack of a more compelling reason the upsurge in political apologies in the 1990s could have been driven by the Roman Catholic Church, and in particular by Pope John Paul II himself and his desire to reinvigorate the Christian Church. Pope John Paul II declared that the period leading up to the Third Millennium be regarded as "a new Advent, a time for examination of conscience" (Pope John Paul II, 1994).

The value of political apologies

Apologies diffuse anger and divert aggression. Much of the violence currently faced by governments around the world arises from disenfranchisement of marginalized citizenry. To resist tyranny is as natural as breathing as Thoreau noted in his essay on civil disobedience:

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable (Thoreau, 1849).

The point is that conflict over government mismanagement of its ethnic minorities is not uncommon just as the drive to resist is also natural. Conflict is better resolved around the bargaining table than in the passion of revolution; the costs are just too high both in terms of human lives and in terms of economics. The political apology is the most important doorway in the process towards settling differences, because at least while people are talking they might not be killing each another.

Have we as people become more sensitive to moral issues because of the terrible events that transpired in the 20th century? The bringing of these events to the public consciousness through the revolution in communications of the last century has happened in an unexpected manner. The exhibition of brutality and immorality through television evokes mass empathy in a manner never before seen. To a point, wars are crafted in secrecy, but public opinion is written on television screens the world over by video, voice, and repetition. In my opinion, the upsurge in the offering of political apologies is also, to a degree, an offshoot of the information age attributable to the watchdog eye of moral journalism. The tragedies, injustices, and brutality of repressive regimes is brought to us daily in a way never before possible. Perhaps these visions instead of desensitizing us to injustice have given rise to the exact opposite – we have come to sympathize with the victims in a way previously impossible. This is especially true when the tools of modern day communications are coupled with the moral fortitude of a man like John Paul II whose saint-like example could be communicated around the world instantly.

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