

The Political APOLOGY

Can a community forgive? Can collective crime be forgiven?
What are the socio-cultural layers of an apology?

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Each side's narrative is both an account of the injury, and an allocation of blame; ideal and reality, exoneration and fault, are all woven together, and forgiveness can be seen as in part an attempt to harmonize the narratives, so that the story comes to an end in a new beginning. Reconciling narratives is must

Sonia Gandhi must apologize for Operation Bluestar. Indian Parliament should apologize for the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. New Delhi should apologize for the blunder of IPKF in Sri Lanka. Some nation must apologize for the use of "comfort women" during World War II. Someone still owes an apology for making Socrates drink from the poisoned chalice. What is an apology? What good does it do? Will Sikhs really be helped if they do make the Congress president some day to utter words seeking forgiveness? How many and which words will amount to an apology?

The late Sardar Gurcharan Singh Tohra spent many years in the Akali wilderness asking that Sardar Badal must apologize at the Akal Takht for denigrating the institution. Finally, both found enough common ground to claim unity. Was forgiveness a sub text? Can an apology be offered on behalf of another? Is it only for the victim to forgive? Since Socrates is not there, can someone else accept the apology?

A large number of 20th century crimes are receding from human memory very rapidly because the collective guilt and shame of those crimes will be so much that any composition of demography will find it shameful. So guilt ensures forgetfulness. That is why the concept of an apology for these crimes is not on the syllabus of anglophone moral philosophy. Christ taught that those who ask forgiveness must also grant it, and enshrined this maxim in the prayer that his disciples repeat each day. The love-one's-neighbour idea, which Jews and Christians believe to be the core of morality, is unintelligible without the context of mutual forgiveness.

But what is the larger view on the subject, and is there something for the Sikh community to ponder on the subject? It was a Hungarian exile, Aurel Kolnai, who, in 1973, first talked of the subject when anglophone moral philosophers were analysing the "logic of moral discourse", and wondering whether it was different from the logic of "booh!" and "hurrah!". The idea that moral philosophy was really about the moral emotions and their place in human fulfilment, was an idea that Kolnai – steeped in the phenomenology of Max Scheler

– had never doubted.

Of course it was soon to be agreed on that forgiveness does play a role in repairing psychic damage. The idea is personified in the form of a Forgiveness Institute at the University of Wisconsin. It also merited a great discussion in "Exploring Forgiveness", the book edited by Robert D. Enright and Joanna North (1998) and introduced by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who has perhaps done more than any other public figure to emphasize the necessity for forgiveness in the healing of communities.

Archbishop Tutu's idea of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, often cited by the Sikhs for possible replication in India to deal with the years of the terrorism, greatly influenced the anglophone moral philosophy. Adam Morton's *On Evil* (2004) is a result of exactly such influences.

But let's go back slightly in history and to Adam Smith's account of the moral emotions and of their root in sympathy. Also, Butler, Aristotle and Hegel too considered the idea of offering an apology or showering forgiveness as a strong one. One can, and must, mention E. R. Dodds's *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) and Bernard Williams's *Shame and Necessity* (1993) as having a significant impact on the formation of the idea of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is both a process, whereby two people cope with an injury inflicted by one upon the other, and a virtue. But of course it is necessary that one understands virtue in the Aristotelian way, as a disposition, turned towards the good, and promoting the fulfilment of the person who possesses it.

But there is a feeling that in the real world, some things will always remain unforgiven, and that forgiveness must be distinguished from forgetting, condoning or turning away in defeat.

Forgiveness is not achieved unilaterally: it is the result of a dialogue, which may be tacit, but which involves reciprocal communication of an extended and delicate kind. It can happen either way. The one who has assaulted can go back and seek forgiveness, admitting the mistake, realizing that a wrong had been undone, one that is often impossible to undo, and then, even then, seek to be accepted into a community of respectable. Or one who forgives goes out to the one who has injured him, and his gesture involves a changed state of mind, a reorientation towards the other, and a setting aside of resentment. Such an existential transformation is not always or easily attained, and can only be achieved through an effort of cooperation and sympathy in which each person strives to set his own interests aside and look on the other from the posture of the impartial spectator.

But any such step depends on how one has narrated the sequence to oneself about which the apology is to be sought. There has been significant work on "narratology" of this kind. Each side's narrative is both an account of the injury, and



Many a voices are heard intermittently, demanding an apology for the Indian Army's attack on Akal Takht Sahib, or for 1984 anti-Sikh pogroms

