Performing Political Apologies

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Atoning for past wrongs has become a major political phenomenon, so much so that some scholars refer to the post-Cold War era as “the age of apology and forgiveness” (Brooks 1999; Gibney 2007; Lind 2010). They highlight the central role that apologies play in the wake of traumatic events. Societies that experienced a major conflict often struggle to recreate a stable order. The memory of trauma can linger for decades and give rise to new animosities and conflicts. Approaches to reconciliation that incorporate gestures of apology and forgiveness are said to significantly reduce the risk of resurgent conflict. The example of post-apartheid South Africa is often cited here (Tutu 1999) but scholars point towards the significance of apologies in broader processes of reconciling individuals, communities and even states (Lind 2010).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore these political linkages between trauma, memory and apologies. We do so by highlighting the crucial religious dimensions of apologies. Numerous scholars have, of course, already noted how notions of apology and forgiveness have their origin in Western religious traditions (Arendt 1998: 238; Celermajer 2009; McGonegal 2009: 19; Tutu 1999). Some even believe that the secular tradition lacks a viable precedent for public expressions of apologies and forgiveness. Danielle Celermajer (2009: 8), for instance, insists that only religious practices offer the kind of language and historical antecedents necessary for a genuine public apology.

We explore the reasons why public apologies play a particularly influential role in breaking the vicious cycle that can arise after a major conflict and trauma. We evaluate arguments that stress how apologies mark a turning point in the relationship between the parties to a conflict. Apologies are said to reconstitute the moral framework that governs the communities and direct them towards an alternative future built on equality, mutual dignity and respect (Celermajer 2009; McGonegal 2009).

We argue that the performative dimensions of apologies are the key to understanding why they play such an influential role in coming to terms with traumatic events. It is not by accident that religious apologies were usually performed as part of services and rituals of atonement. These performative dimensions rendered the act of offering forgiveness far more powerful. It remained enshrined in the memory of those attending the service. And so it can be in politics: an apology is remembered as much by how it is given than by what it contains. It is through its performative dimension that an apology is most likely to become an important collective memory, influencing both collective representations of the conflict and how future generations deal with its political residues.

We illustrate the performative dimensions of apologies through a prominent example that took place in 1970. The West German chancellor Willy Brandt silently knelt before the monument marking the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943. This famous visual apology created international headlines and was much discussed in both Poland and Germany. To this day the photographs of this gesture remain
influentia, more so perhaps than any verbal repentance of the Holocaust. It is the performative nature of Brandt's apology that made it both famous and part of the collective European memory of what it means to come to terms with the Nazi past. Drawing on insights from both religion and aesthetics, we make some preliminary conclusions regarding the performative power of apologies, emphasizing that political leaders should not simply focus on the words that are said but also the actions and rituals that are carried out as part of public collective apologies.

The Politics of Apologies

Apologies have become an accepted and frequent component of contemporary politics. Coming to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century, public apologies were initially a means of dealing with mass atrocities committed during World War Two, specifically in relation to the Holocaust (Lind 2010: 1-2; Nobles 2008: 1-2). But in response to increasing humanitarian disasters and human rights violations, apologies have become an integral component of processes of reconciliation and peace-building. They are now largely recognized as an essential political tool for reconciling antagonistic groups within emerging democracies. At the same time apologies have also become foreign policy instruments used by states to interact in the international community (Lind 2010; Seiple 2004).

Several theories have been advanced to explain why apologies have become so prominent. Melissa Nobles (2008: 2) draws attention to what distinguishes apologies from other symbolic gestures, such as diplomatic agreements or monuments designed to remember traumatic events. She believes that apologies not only offer public rectifications of the past but "also morally judge, reassign responsibility, and introduce expectations about what acknowledgement of that history requires." Used in this way apologies can enable a reconfiguration of the identity of a political community. In particular, they may allow for excluded members of the community to become politically reintegrated. By acknowledging that an act of violence or any other trauma was wrong, an apology resets the moral framework in which the community operates and acknowledges that certain individuals or groups have experienced injustice (Celermajer 2009; Tutu 1999). Because apologies alter the norms of what was and is right and acceptable, they may bring dignity to those who have been wronged in the past.

The surge in political apologies has come in a variety of forms. The literature on apologies tends to classify them by two main sets of criteria – the actors who are offering the apology and what is being apologized for. We now discuss each of these categories in turn, aiming not for a comprehensive analysis but simply for a rudimentary appreciation of why apologies have become so politically salient.

There are at least five types of actors that have played important roles in offering political apologies. In discussing them we draw heavily on Michael Cunningham's (1999) influential analysis.

The first group are individuals. A recent example can be seen in Australian citizens who sign "sorry books" to Indigenous Australians as a gesture to acknowledge the fate of the "stolen generation" - that is, Aboriginal children who were forcefully removed from their parents. Although each of these gestures is private they become political when taken together. Another prominent example of individual public apologies can be found in South African citizens apologizing to each other as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
Second are professional and commercial organizations. Cunningham (1999: 285) here cites the New South Wales police commissioner apologizing for the role of the police force in the stolen generation. Other more recent examples include the 2009 apology from the CEO of Goldman Sachs for mistakes made that contributed to the global financial crisis. Also consider how British Petroleum apologized to people living in the US Gulf Coast for the 2010 oil spill. Or there is News Corporation apologizing for how one of its flagship publications, News of the World, was involved in a major phone hacking scandal in the UK in 2011.

The third type of actor is religious organizations. Here Cunningham (1999: 286) draws attention to particular orders of nuns and monks that were responsible for past abuses in their orphanages (Cunningham 1999: 286). Other examples are spiritual leaders offering public apologies, such as the Pope apologizing for atrocities committed during the Crusades and for the Catholic Church’s role in the Holocaust (Cunningham 1999: 286; Celermajer 2009: 25).

Fifth and perhaps most politically salient are public apologies offered by states. Examples that stand out here are apologies by the Japanese government for the treatment of prisoners of war during World War Two; or by the Canadian government for its treatment of native people.

A more recent example of a state apology that is worth describing in more depth is the Dutch government apology in December 2011 for the Rawagedeh massacre in Indonesia in 1947. The Rawagedeh massacre occurred as part of the anti-colonial struggle for Indonesia’s independence from July 1947 until January 1949. The Dutch military entered Rawagedeh in search of Lukas Kustario, a commander in the Indonesian Siliwangi division. Houben (1997: 60) quotes the following account of the massacre from Kustario himself:

On December 9, in the evening hours, Dutch soldiers forced their way into the village. The men were assembled on a field thirty meters wide in front of the community house. The soldiers asked where Lukas was hanging out and threatened to kill the villagers if they would not hand me over to them. When everyone remained silent, they opened fire. In cold blood. At that moment most victims fell.

Estimates of the dead vary from 150 (official Dutch estimates) to 433 (the figure given by the Muslim cleric of Rawagedeh) (Houben 1997: 65-66). An official UN investigation into the atrocity in 1948 declared the act had been intentional and without mercy (Houben 1997: 66). While in 1949, the Dutch government expressed “regret” for the incident, it was not until 9 December 2011 that the government offered an official apology (Dutch News 2012; News Desk 2011). Even then, the apology was only offered following the ruling of a Dutch court that the government was liable for damages suffered by the next of kin of the victims and ordered they pay compensation (Dutch News 2012; News Desk 2011). Tjeerd de Zwaan, the Dutch ambassador to the Netherlands, attended a ceremony in the village, where he formally apologized for the actions of the Dutch military (Zwaan 2011).

There are disagreements concerning which form of state apologies is most effective. For some, an apology offered by a head of state is more effective than if the same apology were merely expressed as a government policy. If pronounced by a major political leader the apology is seen as gaining additional symbolic value. Michael Cunningham gives the example of Queen Elizabeth II apologizing for
wrongs done to New Zealand Maoris during the colonial period. This form of apology is, in some ways, the prevailing practice in the West, where apologies have traditionally been thought of as an essentially private act between individuals: as a gesture that occurs within personal relationships (Celermajer 2009: 1-2). Such a private gesture, even if expressed by a head of state, is rather different from a public act that is ratified and pronounced by the political body as a whole. This is why some scholars, such as Melissa Nobles, believe that an apology given by a head of state ultimately does not carry the same significance as one given officially by a political entity, such as a government or a parliament. This is the case, Nobles argues, because official state apologies are "the results of deliberative processes and have frequently been accompanied by monetary compensation" (Nobles 2008: 5).

A second main way of categorizing apologies - after considering the actors that express them - is to examine what they actually apologize for. Here we distinguish between historical apologies and contemporary apologies. In doing so we rely on Danielle Celermajer's analysis, though we use a different vocabulary from hers (Celermajer 2009: 15).

Historical apologies address injustices that occurred in the remote past. Such apologies often deal with situations where either the perpetrators or the victims or both are no longer alive. As a result it is no longer possible to either admit personal responsibility for crimes or, alternatively, receive a personal apology for them. Most public apologies fall in this historical category. This, in turn, creates a particular challenge since, as Celermajer acknowledges, determining responsibility and attributing agency is unusually difficult in historical apologies (Celermajer 2009: 15). Descendants of people or groups who committed past crimes may not feel personally responsible for them and thus might have a certain reluctance to admit guilt and responsibility. This was the view of former Australian Prime Minister John Howard and one of the key reasons he refused to offer a formal apology to members of the Stolen Generation (Barta 2008). Still, there are numerous prominent examples of historical apologies, including, of course, the various private and public apologies for crimes committed during the Holocaust. So influential have they been that state-sanctioned apologies for these crimes were, arguably, the catalyst for many subsequent forms of political apologies. Among them are apologies that seek to rectify colonialism, imperialism and race-related discrimination. A prominent example here is President Bill Clinton apologizing for US support of dictators throughout Africa during the Cold War (Celermajer 2009: 27).

Contemporary apologies, by contrast, take place in contexts where the trauma is recent. Victims and perpetrators are facing the challenge of living and working alongside one another in rebuilding their community. Contemporary apologies tend to take place in the immediate aftermath of conflict and societal breakdown. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is perhaps the most well-known example of a situation where contemporary apologies were used as tools for peace-building and reconciliation. It must be acknowledged, though, that the South African Commission promoted apologies and forgiveness at the level of civil society, which is a different approach than those involving official government apologies. Celermajer (2009: 40-42) also refers to apologies offered by Indonesian President Wahid and his successor President Megawati Sukarnoputri for human rights violations in East Timor, Aceh and Irian Jaya. Then there are the public apologies by US President Clinton, as well as by the Prime Minister of Belgium, Guy Verhofstadt, for failing to adequately respond to the Rwandan genocide.
The difference between historical and contemporary memory has direct implications for the politics of memory. In fact, the very distinction between apologies for long past traumas and those for more recent wrongs echoes a distinction that Duncan Bell (2003: 63-81) urges us to make about the concept of memory. He believes that the concept of memory should not be used loosely to refer to collective representations of history. There are far too many different aspects involved here. Recalling a trauma that took place three generations ago is very different from trying to come to terms with recent events. This is why Bell urges us to limit the concept of memory to the experiences of people who directly witnessed and shared events in question. Memory, he argues, is always anchored in common experience, as is the case, for instance, with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Apologies here take place between and among people who have been directly affected by the trauma. Such encounters are - if we follow Bell's logic - very different from dealing with the memory of long past events. For him, recalling such events is not an issue of memory but one of myth: a process of establishing a common set of assumptions about what took place in the past and how the respective events are to be remembered. This process is shaped by numerous factors, from media representation to school curricula and linguistic conventions. Offering apologies in such a context is thus a very different political process. It is not a face-to-face encounter but an attempt to influence how past events have come to be represented in public discourses and how these representations shape the identities and lives of the descendants to the parties involved in the original trauma.

The Religious Origins of Apology and Forgiveness

While public apologies have become an established part of contemporary political discourse there remain a range of open questions and contradictions. One of them is the central - but still largely underestimated - religious dimensions of the issues at stake.

The actual religious origin of apologies and forgiveness are not disputed (Arendt 1998: 238; McGonegal 2009: 19; Tutu 1999). But these religious origins also put the politics of apologies in direct confrontation with contemporary political practices, which largely revolve around the secular principle of separating church and state as well as religion and politics. It is thus not surprising that there have been only few attempts to explore how the religious origins of apology and forgiveness influence processes of reconciliation. One of the notable exceptions is Celermajer’s (2009) study, which suggests that exploring the religious origins of apology is crucial for developing a more nuanced understanding of the public dimensions of public apologies.

The very idea of apologizing, of admitting wrong-doing and exposing one's vulnerabilities, goes against the logic that prevails within the rational secular political realm. It also goes against the grain of prevailing masculine understandings of political leadership. Add to this that there are numerous pragmatic reasons against asking for forgiveness: apologizing for past actions of a state can easily expose a government to demands for reparations from injured parties (Lind 2010). Viewed from these perspectives the recent surge in public apologies seems rather intriguing. Further investigations into these contradictory sides are thus in order. At minimum one needs to look beyond the immediate history of collective apologies and
understand the extent to which their religious roots continues to shape the politics of forgiveness.

Danielle Celemajer (2009) offers a particularly revealing example. She traces the history of apologies back in time, examining practices that range from Jewish atonement services to private Christian rituals up to their secular reincarnations today. She argues that understanding contemporary public apologies requires a deeper appreciation of the ancient Jewish rituals, particularly those related to *teshuvah* and Yom Kippur. She justifies her argument by highlighting that “the Jewish tradition privileges the constructive role of collective symbolic action and speech and encodes it as part of a suite of reparative acts that work in concert to effect not only individual but, more importantly, collective transformation” (Celemajer 2009: 65).

Taking the Jewish practice of repentance - or *teshuvah* - as an example, one can identify three key elements that are still relevant to today's secular and often liberal politics of apologies. First, *teshuvah* provides both a conceptual framework and a physical set of practices that “transcend the apparent contradiction between individual and collective responsibility” (Celemajer 2009: 67). Second, *teshuvah* provides insight into how apologies contribute to the reshaping of collective identities. Third, *teshuvah* offers a kind of map that sketches "the relationship among speech, action, and being that does not reduce speech to mere representation (Celemajer 2009: 67). This is to say that while language is important, the politics of apologies also has other, more symbolic dimensions, including those associated with gestures and rituals.

Let us follow Celemajer's example of Jewish atonement rituals a step further and look at the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, as outlined in Leviticus 16. The respective atonement rituals include animal sacrifices, burning incense and the ritual cleansing of the altar and of the High Priest (Celemajer 2009: 72). The first point to notice here is that the wronged party, in this case God, is the one who sets the terms for the atonement. It is God who says how atonement should be made. If one were to translate these Jewish terms of atonement into a contemporary context one would have to stress that it is the responsibility of governments and political leaders to consult with representatives from the community of victims about the elements that an official apology should contain. This very responsibility is underlined by the role that High Priests assume in the ritual of atonement. As the representative actor of the community, they perform all the required rituals in the service of atonement. Again, translating this ancient practice into a contemporary context, one can understand why it is so important that political leaders and heads of state have a key responsibility to offer public apologies. Several scholars have, in fact, noted the similarities between political leaders and spiritual leaders and the extent to which their public declarations are imbued with power and political consequences (Wilson 2012: 149-150).

The Jewish practice of atonement places particular emphasis on “presentation”. There are very specific rules about how the High Priest must present himself and how he has to symbolically present sacrificial offerings from the community of Israel. For instance, the High Priest cannot undertake the rituals without specific clothing and must follow particular procedures that regulate the visual and performative dimension of the ritual. Indeed, while part of the ritual occurs in the Holy of Holies with only the High Priest present (Leviticus 16: 17), the rest of the service occurs on the altar in the central court (Leviticus 16: 18), in full view of the entire community. Add to this that the whole community is involved in preparations for the Day of Atonement. On the day itself, the community fasts and
does not work. These forms of self-denial are important so that everyone is focused entirely on the process of atonement and reconciliation to God (Leviticus 16: 29-31; Celermajer 2009: 72).

Here too, one can see strong parallels between these ancient religious practices and contemporary political apologies: the latter too have to be made in public places of significance for the community, such as parliaments, governmental offices or memorials. The statements must have a high profile and attract media attention, so that as many members of the community as possible may witness and participate in the act of apology. Indeed, almost all public apologies take place as part of some kind of official ceremony or proceedings.

Consider how Australia’s apology to the Stolen Generation occurred as the first official act during the first session of the new parliament in February 2008. The apology was the culmination of two decades of campaigning, public education and agitation for recognition of the indignity and suffering caused by the government policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families and placing them with white families or government or church-run institutions (Barta 2008). Indeed, the apology to the Stolen Generations was a decisive issue in the 2007 Australian Federal election. The incumbent Prime Minister, John Howard, had repeatedly refused to offer an official apology, preferring instead to talk of “practical reconciliation” (Barta 2008: 203). While expressing his personal regret over the events that had occurred, Howard did not believe an official government apology was warranted (Mellor, Bretherton and Firth 2007: 16). In 2007, not only the Howard-led Liberal party but also Howard himself were defeated by the Rudd-led Australian Labor Party. One of their main campaign promises had been an official apology to the Stolen Generation and, rarely for politics, it was a campaign promise that was kept.

On the first sitting day of the new parliament, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd moved that the House officially apologize to the members of the Stolen Generation. This special session was broadcast nationally on all the major television stations. It was also transmitted to large screens in and around Parliament House in Canberra, enabling the Australian community as a whole to be part of the historic event. Members of the Stolen Generation sat in the parliamentary gallery and both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition addressed their apology speeches directly to the Stolen Generation through eye contact and gestures. The Prime Minister in his speech specifically and repeatedly said, “Sorry”, something that victim groups had insisted on (Barta 2007: 204):

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.

1 This is not the place to discuss the issues surrounding this case in detail. But we note that we consciously write of “apology speeches” rather than “apologies.” We do so because the remarks by the Opposition Leader were highly controversial and considered by many as not constituting an actual apology. The Prime Minister, on the other, was explicitly apologetic, specifically using the phrase “We say sorry” multiple times.
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.

(Excerpt from Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s speech to the House of Representatives, 13 February 2008)

By comparison, the speech from the Opposition Leader, Brendon Nelson, continued to uphold the view of the former Prime Minister and Liberal party leader, John Howard, and took the opportunity to emphasize that the people who carried the policy of removing children did so “with the best of intentions”:

Our generation does not own these actions, nor should it feel guilt for what was done in many, but not all cases, with the best of intentions. But in saying we are sorry - and deeply so - we remind ourselves that each generation lives in ignorance of the long term consequences of its decisions and actions. Even when motivated by inherent humanity and decency to reach out to the dispossessed in extreme adversity, our actions can have unintended outcomes. As such, many decent Australians are hurt by accusations of theft in relation to their good intentions.

(Excerpt from Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson’s speech to the House of Representatives, 13 February 2008)

In response to Nelson’s comments, audience members both within and outside the parliament stood and turned their back to him as a sign of protest, anger and disrespect (Barta 2007: 205). The audience’s response to Nelson’s speech provides a vivid example of the performative dimensions of public rituals and particularly how significant the visual dimensions of apology and forgiveness, or in this case, unforgiveness can be.

While the Australian government’s apology formed part of the official proceedings of parliament, apologies can take place in other officially sanctioned locations and fora, such as the gacaca courts in Rwanda and the Truth and Reconciliation commission in South Africa. Gacaca traditionally concerned the re-integration of low-level offenders into a community, and subsequently focused more on reconciliation than justice (Graybill 2004: 204). However, following the seeming ineffectiveness, or at least tardiness, of efforts by the International Criminal Tribunal in Rwanda (ICTR), gacaca has been adapted to deal with the perpetrators of Rwanda’s genocide (though not with the main organisers and planners of the genocide) (Graybill 2004: 204). Gacaca involves “hearings” before a council of elders with the ultimate goal of resolving disputes within a community (Graybill 2004: 204). In the Rwandan case, the common hope was that the courts would help to unify Rwanda in the wake of the genocide, that it would bring to light new information about the killings enabling survivors to deal with the trauma and that perpetrators could be successfully reintegrated into Rwandan society (Graybill 2004:
The courts have had mixed success, however. While there was initially widespread support in the Rwandan community for gacaca, this enthusiasm rapidly declined in the wake of murders of some of the witnesses (Graybill 2004: 204).

In each of these examples, the encounter between victim and perpetrator forms a critical component of the public apology ritual. As with the other dimensions of public apologies noted above, the notion of encounter is equally central to ancient Jewish rituals of atonement. An apology cannot be offered authentically and sincerely without seeing and being in contact with the wronged party, the “other,” so to speak. Neither can an apology be accepted and forgiveness be given without actually seeing the other. As such, apologies, while requiring significant verbal formations and speech acts, as Celermajer (2009) has demonstrated, necessarily require a physical encounter to be authentic.

For Celermajer (2009: 74) the contemporary legacy of these religious practices leads to situations where political apologies mostly take on a form of purification. She argues that this process is far more important than other dimensions of apologies, such as practices to offer compensation or the pursuit of retributive justice. For her, the essence of communicating an apology is not to pay someone something back, but to change the nature of the relationship in question. The process of exposing and atoning for wrongdoings also alters the power dynamics between the parties and their identities (Celermajer, 2009: 75). A public admission of guilt and a request for forgiveness inevitably requires a certain amount of humility – a willingness to humble oneself, to make oneself low, for the benefit of another person (Dickson 2011). The original Leviticus text on the Yom Kippur rituals do, indeed, emphasize the importance of humility, stating that the community must “afflict [them]selves by fasting with penitence and humiliation” (Leviticus 16: 29 & 31, Amplified version).

We have highlighted the links between apologies and religion primarily with reference to Jewish rituals. But one could find similar patterns in a range of other religions, western and non-western ones. It is not our task to outline them here, but we would like to note that the Christian tradition also provides numerous precedents that highlight the power of apology and forgiveness. Hannah Arendt (1998: 238) argued that Jesus Christ was “the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in human affairs.” Although this claim could be disputed, it still draws attention to a feature that Julia Kristeva (quoted in McGonegal 2009: 45) noted: that forgiveness is similar to the notion of being born again. The act of apology or repentance is thus seen as a form of renewal that leads to a new identity, a new life and, ultimately, a new future for parties that shared a traumatic past and had hitherto been in conflict (see McGonegal 2009).

Related though distinctly different conceptions may also be found in the Northern Ugandan traditional practices of mato oput (drinking the bitter root) and tomo gong (bending the spear) (Allen 2008: 48). Mato oput occurs at the conclusion of negotiations for compensation between the family members of a murdered victim and the perpetrator of the crime. Rather than a ritual of atonement, however, it is a ritual to signify that the disagreement between the two parties is now resolved and ended, taking place after the compensation has been negotiated and agreed upon. Both the perpetrator and the relatives of the victim drink a mixture of the blood of a sacrificed sheep and bitter root (Allen 2008: 48). Tomo gong is a more public ritual, usually occurring after the conclusion of a local war, symbolizing through the bending of the spear that the hostilities between the groups are at an end (Allen 2008: 48) (it is interesting to note the similarities here with ideas in the Judeo-Christian tradition of
“turning swords into ploughshares”). In both cases, performance is central – all parties must engage in the rituals, otherwise they are meaningless. It is important to emphasize that these two rituals are not strict equivalents of apology and forgiveness. Indeed, whether the true meaning of these rituals is possible to translate into the predominantly Western notions of apology and forgiveness that presently govern contemporary IR is questionable. Nonetheless, they do both signify a new beginning in a sense – the past hostilities are resolved and forgotten once these rituals occur.

**Memory and the Performance of Political Apologies**

While the religious origins of political apologies continue to reverberate today one aspect is particularly important: their performative nature. Apologies are not just about the content of what is being apologized for. They are as much about the manner in which the apology is offered.

Apologies are offered by a specific person or group, in a specific manner and location and for the maximum benefit of a specific target group. This was as much the case in ancient religious practices as it is today. High priests have been replaced with heads of states; temples with parliaments; religious procedures with equally well-rehearsed rituals dictated by media-entertainment networks.

A focus on performance opens up opportunities to ask different questions about political apologies. An innovative study by Shirin Rai (2012) on political performance and claim-making in democracies reveals why this is the case. She demonstrates convincingly that political claims are to a considerable extent influenced not just by what they claim, but also by how, where and why the claims are made.

The mode of performing an apology is one aspect that renders the process social and political. Again, this was as much the case with religious apologies as it is with secular ones today. Robert Gibbs (2001: 74) stresses that “teshuvah is not a private act of contrition but is a social performance.”

The public performance of an apology enters the process through which the memory - or myth - of trauma is being shaped and reshaped. Remembering past events is always a political process and it always involves as much forgetting as it does remembering. There is no way we can remember everything about a trauma: all of its various manifestations, causes and consequences. We cannot possibly remember everything. We cannot possibly give every aspect of the event the same weight. Our memory of the past is the result of a process through which certain events and interpretations are remembered and prioritised, while others are relegated to secondary importance or forgotten altogether. This process is political in its very nature, particularly with regard to a trauma where the different parties to the conflict tend to strongly disagree not just about who is responsible but even about what happened in the first place.

Nietzsche has already stressed that coming to terms with past event always involves a mixture of forgetting and remembering. To move from trauma to reconciliation some aspects of the war have to be ‘forgotten.’ Nietzsche (1981: 118) stresses that the past suffocates the present unless we forget it, and he calls upon people to have the courage to ‘break with the past in order to live’. Forgetting, in this sense, does not mean ignoring what happened. Forgetting, after all, is a natural process, an inevitable aspect of remembering; we all do it, whether we want it or not.

The public performance of a political apology enters and alters this process of remembering and forgetting. It influences how societies select and present the few
facts, perspectives and interpretations that ought to be remembered. If a group admits to wrongdoing it changes not just the moral lenses through which we view the past but also opens up possibilities for reshaping the past, more importantly, using this process in the service of creating a better future (see Nietzsche 1981: 100).

Nowhere is the power of performance more evident and influential than in its visual dimension. Consider what is perhaps the most famous visual apology: Willy Brandt’s kneeling - or so-called *kniefall* - at the memorial for the Jewish uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War Two.

When the German chancellor offered this apology in 1970 he did so in a highly symbolic manner. While the religious dimensions of the act are obvious there are numerous more secular dimensions to it as well. For some commentators, the process of kneeling equated to giving up Germany's "position of domination and its claim of authority over history." (Celemajer, 2009: 74). In kneeling, Brandt lowered himself and made himself and his country lower than the Jewish people they had so wronged, purposefully placing himself in a position of vulnerability and inferiority and elevating the Jewish people to the position of power. The Jewish community was thus symbolically given the power to choose whether to forgive Germany (or not) and thereby restore Germany to a position of equality within the international community through forgiveness. For other commentators a key aspect of Brandt's apology was the fact that it was not scripted. Nobles (2008: 6) believes that the spontaneity of the gesture makes the apology more sincere and authentic.

But what exactly has rendered Brandt's apology so powerful? Key here is that it was not only a symbolic act but also one that was acutely visual. With the advent of global mass media images have come to play a particularly important role in politics. Some commentators refer to a "pictorial turn," stressing that people often perceive and remember key events more through images than through verbal accounts (Mitchell 1986, 1994). Our collective memory of the Vietnam War, for instance, is decisively shaped by a few iconic images, such as Nic Ut's photograph of the nine
year old girl Kim Phuc, running away naked after a napalm attack. Or consider how the essence - and the memory - of the Tiananmen incident is nowhere more powerfully captured than in Jeff Widener's photograph of a lone man trying to stop a convoy of assault tanks. In short: we live in a visual age. Images play an essential role in representation and to some extent constituting political events, phenomena and issues. Still and moving images influence how we view and approach phenomena as diverse as war, humanitarian crises, protest movements and election campaigns.

It is not surprising, then, that images of Willy Brandt's kniefall have had a major political impact. Because of its visual power the apology received immediate media attention across Europe and, indeed, the world. A mere verbal statement would never have been able to get that kind of global coverage. A striking image, by contrast, was perfectly suited for newspaper covers and television headlines. It conveyed, in an immediate and visceral manner, the significance of the event in question. Once the image acquired an iconic status it came to stand for an entire political attitude towards what the Germans call Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung: the difficult process of coming to terms with the problematic past. It is in this sense that photographs of Brandt's gesture conveyed an apology far more powerfully than any verbal repentance ever could. Today's generation of Poles and Germans - Jewish or not - are unlikely to recall specific verbal apologies. But many of them would have seen images of Brandt's gesture - a gesture that is enshrined in our collective memory. Because of its iconic status the image will be passed down to other generations - so much so that the performance of the apology becomes its very content.

Conclusion

We have tried to offer a series of reflections that link trauma, memory and political apologies. We have done so to explain why apologies have become such a prominent political feature over the past decades. We have stressed that appreciating the religious origins of apologies is essential if we are to understand how they function and what impact they have on processes of reconciliation. Apologies interfere with and alter the moral and political framework through which past traumas are seen. In doing so they have the chance to recast the relationship between victim and perpetrators and open up possibilities for a politics of reconciliation.

An appreciation of the religious residues in apologies allows us to recognize a particularly influential aspect: the performative nature of apologies. We have argued that the process through which apologies are given can be just as important as their content. Religious apologies have always been embedded in a range of rituals that are performed in a meticulous manner. The rituals and their location may have changed, but political apologies are just as performative: they need to be made by people in power, in a symbolic location and with maximum media effect. Some scholars have already drawn attention to this performative power of apologies, but they tend to focus primarily on their verbal dimension. Celermajer (2009), for instance, is predominantly concerned with apologies as speech acts. She does not deny that such speech acts are often accompanied by rituals, gestures and actions, but the power of these gestures largely remains to be investigated in detail.

We have argued that the visual dimension of apologies occupied a particularly influential but so far largely underestimated place. Both scholars and practitioners alike have paid relatively little attention to the significance of visual apologies. Images of apologies not only capture their essence in a succinct and particularly
powerful manner but are also ideally suited to influence political attempts to come to terms with traumatic events and open up possibilities for reconciliation. Once an image becomes iconic it conveys certain political attitudes - such as acts of asking for forgiveness - far more powerfully than verbal statements can. Such iconic images often survive for decades. They enter and linger in the public memory, thereby influencing both how past traumatic events are viewed and how political attitudes towards them are formed and reformed.

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