

Potentials and Problems of Public Apologies to Canadian Aboriginal Peoples

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Introduction – the “Age of Apologies”

From the interpersonal to the international level, the automatic response to any incident of injustice appears to begin with a demand for apology. “National apology is all the rage,” claims Mitchell (2000) in an introduction to list of national apologies rendered from 1988 to 1998 – the “decade of atonement”.

Cunningham (1999:285-7) presents another exhaustive listing of recent public apologies, subdividing these into those made by individuals, professional and commercial organizations, religious organizations, spiritual leaders, governments and heads of state. Why has this apparently simple act of saying “I am sorry” taken on such importance in so many situations? Does the popularity of this one expression signal “the canonization of sentimentality” or “heartfelt contrition signifying the national capacity to suppress the impulse to harm others” (Brooks 1999a:3-4)?

Any cursory overview of recent Canadian political and social history could provide many more examples of public apologies not included in the lists noted above. One significant aspect of the Canadian situation, however, is the number of apologies and near-apologies attempting to respond to Canadian Aboriginal societies, whether addressing specific communities (or even individuals) or addressing Canadian Aboriginal society in general.

The purpose of this paper is to begin an analysis of one particular grouping of Canadian public apologies – those coming from Canadian Christian church denominations or communities (hereafter referred to as Church). This grouping includes a wide range of apologies, ranging from those expressing a general recognition of a complex and problematic relationship with Aboriginal communities to those responding to very specific allegations of residential school abuse. Since it is impossible to discuss adequately this entire range in the context of one brief introductory paper, this preliminary analysis will focus on one relatively well-known and well-documented example – the apology offered by the United

Church of Canada during General Council sessions in August 1986.

This paper offers some general principles and guidelines for understanding the meaning of apologies in general and then applies these to the specific situation to be discussed. This one case study is then used to introduce and reflect on several issues common to other apology processes. These include the implication of type of apology offered, cross-cultural dynamics, issues of sincerity, and implications for legal liability. The intent of this analysis is to address the meaningfulness and usefulness of an apology process in the context of Church / Aboriginal relations. How does the United Church experience compare to experiences of other Canadian Churches? Can this process provide a means for moving both sides toward reconciliation and a renewed relationship? If so, what needs to happen to make an apology meaningful? The tentative conclusion of this paper is that an appropriate apology can create some space for conflict transformation and reconciliation to occur but the process is easily abused if too much weight is put onto it on its own.

Basic Definition of Apology

What exactly is an apology? In its simplest and most basic form as apology is a speech act, a form of oral communication from one party to another designed to carry out several specific simultaneous communicative and moral functions (Tavuchis 1991, Govier 1998, Govier and Verwoerd 2002). The power of this particular speech act lies in the extent to which it fulfills its intended role.

First, the apology names a specific situation as a violation of the listener. A particular event is reframed and given meaning to validate the listener and acknowledge the pain of the listener as legitimate. This naming creates a space for further healing and reconciliation by allowing the victimizer to express respect for the victim's memories of pain and hurt. The recognition and acknowledgement of the painful event according to the terms perceived by the victim can transform the trauma of victimization into a process of mourning which includes both apologizer and listener, thereby beginning the rebuilding of relationships (Barkan 2000:323). According to Govier and Verwoerd (2002:69-71), this aspect of acknowledgement is the most crucial aspect of the process, providing a basis for moving through the rest of the process and toward potential future reconciliation.

Second, the event is named in terms which clearly specify that the apologizer takes responsibility for the damage done to the listener. For the speaker, the naming of this responsibility can occur within the context of "confession" as described by Schmidt (2002). Schmidt notes that an acknowledgement of wrongdoing has a positive impact on both speaker and listener; it not only provides the support and affirmation needed for the healing of the listener but also allows the speaker to address the guilt and social marginalization that may have been felt as a consequence of the original event. In what is otherwise a similar list of apology elements, Alter (1999) adds two significant aspects of this acceptance of responsibility – the expression of profound remorse and the assurance or promise that the wrong will not recur.

Third, in addition to naming some form of wrongdoing and taking responsibility for it, an apology also implicitly

acknowledges and reinforces the impossibility of undoing the harm that has been done (Minow 1998:33). The moral asymmetry between the speaker and listener created by the acknowledgement of the speaker's responsibility for the wrongdoing is further heightened by the recognition that no future action can remove this asymmetry. Herein lies the ambiguity and the power of the apology process. In Tavuchis' words, "We are faced, then, with an apparently enigmatic situation in which the offender asks forgiveness as the necessary and symbolic corrective for a harmful action on the flimsiest of grounds: a speech act that is predicated on the impossibility of restitution" (1991:34).

The ambiguity of the apology adds an element of tension to the speech encounter. The speech act demands a response but the parameters of the response are deliberately vague. By offering the apology without justification or defense, the speaker deliberately takes on the vulnerability of moving the speech encounter toward an unknown endpoint (Schneider 2000:267). Yet this aspect of the apology can also be a very powerful one because the creation of this ambiguity can provide the space for the birth of new understandings and creative new responses to the event.

Fourth, through these aspects the apology process institutionalizes a symbolic exchange whereby the speaker provides a social legitimation of the pain of the listener and the social and moral norms held by the listener in the hope that the listener will respond in some reciprocal fashion. Some analysts define apology as "the exchange of shame and power" (Schneider 2000:267, Lazare 1995). Roles are reversed as the apologizer deliberately places her/himself at the mercy of the listener who may or may not accept the apology.

However, in hearing the apology, the listener is also placed in an ambiguous position. By the speaker's act of unilaterally placing her/himself in a position of vulnerability, the listener is empowered to respond in any way desired but also simultaneously left with a deep moral obligation to respond positively. Again, in the words of Tavuchis (1991:35), "Once the symbolic overture has been made, the victim alone holds the keys of redemption and reconciliation. But this power also entails a profound moral obligation since the helpless offender, in consideration for nothing more than a speech, asks for nothing less than the conversion of righteous indignation and betrayal into unconditional forgiveness and reunion".

Fifth, the entire speech act and the response of the listener become a necessary ritual of 'letting go' and "making things right" even as both parties agree that no action can ever make everything right again. Through the communication occurring between the parties on verbal and on symbolic and ritual levels, the apology establishes the foundation for moving toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Mayer (2000:104) refers to "emotional resolution" as an important component of conflict resolution. This emotional resolution may only be possible if the work of an apology has been effectively done.

Herein lies the significance of the speech act as a potentially powerful symbol. The danger, however, lies in any attempt to remove the ritual from the context and to use it as a formula for resolving a dispute. Every parent is tempted to demand of his/her child, "Apologize to . . . !!" as a quick way of moving through and beyond a painful situation. Such a quick and easy apology can never do the work required to make the apology meaningful. The apology is extremely important as a symbol

of the desire to reconcile but the symbol loses all value if it is forced or easily expressed.

Alter (1999) also identifies reparation as a specific task or element of the apology process. Govier and Verwoerd (2002:72-3) reframe this aspect in their discussion of moral and practical amends – a concept which links reparation to other ways of making amends, such as the assurances and expressions noted above. Since this link between the apology and the reparation or practical amends stemming from the apology can be a problematic one, this aspect is included as one of the complicating issues discussed later in the paper.

The United Church 1986 Apology

The North American struggle to respond to various historical injustices provides several potential case studies, rich in informational detail and brimming with unanswered questions. Canadian responses to First Nations provide a range of good examples which can highlight some of the issues and questions discussed in this paper. In the 1970s and 1980s, Canadian faith communities led the way in insisting that reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples could only begin with a heartfelt acknowledgement of the injustices committed against the First Nations through the colonial development of the country. A few national church organizations (such as the Conference of Mennonites in Canada) offered apologies in the 1970s but more of the national and regional Church expressions of acknowledgement and remorse for the imposition of alien religions and values were offered in the mid to late 1980s.

By the early 1990s, as survivors of residential schools began to speak out about the abuse and trauma they endured, Church

apologies took on a different tone as they attempted to respond to specific situations in specific times and places rather than the former blanket condemnations of the colonialist missionary endeavour. Examples of national Church apologies which make direct reference to residential school abuse include those made by the Oblates (1991), Primate of the Anglican Church (1993), Presbyterian Church (1994) and the United Church (1997 and 1998)

The most widely-known and debated of the earlier general apologies is the apology offered by the United Church of Canada (UCC) in 1986. McKay and Silman (1997:173-175) describe the events leading up to the apology and the Aboriginal response to it. The idea was first raised at the UCC General Council Executive in 1984 when an Aboriginal representative to the Council stated flatly and directly, “You need to apologize to us for this historic injustice.” In the next eighteen months, a pamphlet was sent out to all UC congregations, informing them of the request for an apology and encouraging them to reflect on this.

McKay and Silman (1997:174) describe the fears of Aboriginal UC members that the Church might refuse the request.

Some of us had a deep fear about what it would mean if the church refused . . . The elders said, “We will have the drum group come.” There was discussion around that. Then someone said, “What if the church doesn’t apologize?” The elders’ response was “Well, it doesn’t matter. We have to dance whether they apologize or not.” That positive framework of being a people, whatever the church did, was . . . the moment of a statement of liberation.

The apology was officially requested on the floor of the UC General Council meeting at Sudbury, Ontario, and then Aboriginal council members withdrew to a nearby teepee and a sacred fire where they waited and prayed for about two hours until UC leaders arrived with the apology statement agreed to by the General Council:

Long before my people journeyed to this land, your people were here, and you received from your elders an understanding of creation, and of the mystery that surrounds us all that was deep and rich and to be treasured. We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality. We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and length and breadth and height of the gospel of Christ. We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel. We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result, you, and we, are poorer, and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred and we are not what we are meant by God to be. We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed (cited in McKay and Silman 1997:175).

Then Aboriginal elders spoke about the damage done through the imposition of rigid criminal justice and social welfare system on societies that had no comparable structures and of the broken families cast aside as a result (Sinclair 1986). The elders did not immediately accept the apology, promising only

to take it back to their people for further deliberation and response. In the following months, the statement was discussed within Aboriginal circles and eventually accepted. In the meantime, regional and national representatives embarked on the major task of communicating the implications of the apology to congregations across the country and promoting the idea that each congregation set aside one Sunday in the next year as a Native Apology Sunday so as to reflect on these implication further.

What insight can this experience provide on the series of apology tasks and roles defined above? While much more work remains to be done, some tentative conclusions can be offered here. The acknowledgment of injury is very general but there is a clear indication of responsibility taken and, at the very least, an attempt to reframe this general situation in terms of moral and spiritual perspectives more appropriate to the audience being addressed. The encounter between apologizers and audience is laden with symbolic and ritual elements and thus serves to communicate in more than a strictly verbal and relatively legalistic EuroCanadian context.

In attempting to understand this encounter in terms of a symbolic exchange of shame and power, perhaps the most significant aspect of the UCC experience is the initial request for an apology. While some writers tend to disparage the value of an apology which is not freely offered, for Aboriginal UCC members the initial demand was in itself an empowering act, aside from the potential acceptance or rejection of the demand. Some of the work to be done through the apology was accomplished merely by openly and directly asking for one. This empowerment was further emphasized by the decision of the elders to withhold their affirmation of the apology for an

extended period of time, a response which was met with some chagrin by UCC representatives who had anticipated a quick acceptance and further gestures of reconciliation (personal conversations). It was important to the Aboriginal representatives who heard the apology and to the members of the All-Native Circle Conference which gained official status within the UCC as a result of this dialogue, that their response to the apology not be coerced or taken for granted. The listener must decide how to respond rather than feel compelled to accept an apology simply because it has been offered.

It is significant that this one event, deeply moving as it was, could not create social harmony on its own. UCC was not immune to further charges of wrongdoing and further expressions of regret and remorse in subsequent decades. The 1986 encounter and others like it have the potential to build momentum toward deeper social reconciliation but only if certain obstacles and issues are seriously considered. Several of these issues are considered below, namely the tensions between different types of apology to be offered, the problem of assessing sincerity and meaningfulness issues of reparation and legal liability, and difficulties inherent in cross-cultural communication of apologies.

Determining Appropriate Type of Apology

In the midst of growing public demands for apologies in response to a variety of contemporary and historical injustices, insufficient attention has been given to the implications of the type of apology demanded and / or offered. Any assessment of the usefulness and the meaningfulness of an apology process must confront the question of whether the type of apology under consideration can bear the weight of the tasks expected

of it. Tavuchis (1991) provides a useful typology which categorizes apologies as coming from one to one, from one to many, from many to one and from many to many. Each of these categories of apologies raises its own unique issues and concerns. The different implications of these types of apology can best be understood in terms of the implications of movements along three continua –private vs. public, personal vs. institutional, and specific vs. general

Most of the paper to this point assumes a social interaction whereby an individual apologizer communicates directly to an individual listener in some direct written or oral face-to-face form. According to Tavuchis (1991:70), notes that the greatest difference between this form and other types of apology is the movement of this encounter from a partially private to a completely public sphere of discourse. Issues of vulnerability and liability loom much larger in the public sphere than in the one-to-one apology. The apologizer stands vulnerable and defenseless before a multitude of listeners instead of just one. The audience responds in judgment, evaluating the degree of perceived sincerity of the apology and the degree of extended punishment or reparation to be attached to it.

An institutional apology is one directed by some institution toward an individual or limited group of individuals or a larger societal grouping perceived to have been harmed by the institution. The apology process may occur within the private or public realm, depending on the extent to which a public apology is volunteered or demanded within the specific circumstances. An appropriate institutional apology can provide a public and visible acknowledgement of wrongdoing which simply can not be matched by any individual apology (Govier and Verwoerd 2002:74). Also, an institutional apology

also has significant implications regarding the acknowledgement of institutional responsibility for what happened and the responsibility to ensure that the regrettable situation is not repeated – an aspect particularly significant if the apologizer is a State institution (Cunningham 1999, Gibney and Roxstrom 2001).

On a more basic level, can an institution apologize? Couper (1998:126), a former police officer turned parish priest, indicates that the pursuit of an institutional apology is one way to reinforce the principles the organization needs to uphold the cultivation of trust, respect and dignity among those who operate within it and through it. Any large institution can and will make mistakes, thereby necessitating some means of officially acknowledging the mistake and rebuilding public trust.

However, Couper (1998:127-128) also distinguishes between institutional apologies and personal apologies for an action committed on behalf of the institution, citing the case of a police officer reprimanded for publicly making racist remarks. In this case, the institution required the officer to offer a public apology and used the apology as part of the officer's disciplinary procedure. This example also highlights the dilemma between relational and transactional apologies because the apology served as both relational for the institution in its effort to regain its social standing and transactional for the specific individual who was expected to go through the steps of the apology as part of her discipline procedures and thereby averted calls for her resignation. Couper's case for the validity of an institutional apology is thereby undermined in this particular example by the significance of the individual apology which was central to the institutional response.

So, how should we distinguish between the institutional commitment to an apology process and the potential lack of commitment on the part of individuals represented by or mandated to act on behalf of the institution? Govier and Verwoerd (2002:75-6) emphasize the importance of an appropriate mandate for the spokesperson offering the apology and extensive internal institutional preparation for the event, so that the spokesperson is clearly perceived as speaking on behalf of most of the individuals represented by the institution.

The distance between individuals or groups directly implicated in a specific harmful act and the persons or groups responsible for offering an apology is even more significant if the recipients of the apology are members of a distinct social grouping rather than the specific individuals who suffered the harm being addressed. This type of apology is usually presented as a response to some historical injustice several generations after the injustice occurred. The UCC apology discussed above and other similar processes tend to fit this pattern.

How significant is the apology if the specific wrongdoers are not directly involved in the process? Can a person or an institution sincerely apologize on behalf of geographically or temporally individuals? One response to this question places this issue in the context of societal forgiveness (Schrivver 1998, 2001). Schrivver notes that healing for the victims is only possible through a process of remembering the past, telling the truth about it in a way that brings both sides together.

Thus an apology process has the potential of creating a space for the remembrance of that which others tried so hard to forget

and a space to re-assert a moral claim about the wrongdoing as a basis for the restoration of a healthier relationship between those who represent the victims and those who represent the perpetrators. Given the enormity (in most if not all such cases) of the event to be overcome, forgiveness and restoration takes much time (Schriver 1998:134), possibly decades or even a century or more. Thus an apology provided by future generations may be able begin a process of reconciliation which would have been impossible to consider much earlier.

Such a public apology can represent one important step toward reconciliation, but it is still only one step. According to Schriver (2001:7), the integrity of the apology is validated by gestures of reparation. However, Schriver distinguishes between imposed demands for reparation versus voluntary offers of reparation, noting the difference between the demands imposed on Germany in 1918 and the reparations offered by Germany to the victims of Nazism after 1949. According to the same logic, a public demand for an apology may paradoxically negate the value of public apology once it is given. The interaction of the apology, whether demanded or volunteered, with the demand for or offering of monetary reparations further complicates the situation – a factor to be discussed further as an aspect of the legal liability dilemma.

Some of the issues noted above are further heightened by any attempt to define the wrongdoing in precise and specific terms. As noted by Bavelas (2001) in her linguistic analysis of several Church statements, many of the later apologies respond to specific cases of physical and sexual abuse for which the institution could be sued rather than the general spiritual and cultural colonization addressed by the UCC statement. Hence, the later statements try to minimize legal liability by exhibiting

more cautious and evasive language and are thereby more easily labeled as non-apologies. These statements highlight the tension between response to general concerns and a response to specific situations for which the apologizer could be held to be legally liable.

The offering of a meaningful institutional public apology should not preclude the possibility of offering other types of apology for the same situation, such as specific private individual apologies in response to specific individuals who have suffered more directly than others. For Alter (1999), a significant factor here is allowing the potential recipient to choose the type of apology desired (or several types if desired) with the understanding that each type of apology can carry out its own distinct communicative tasks.

In summary, any further assessment of the range of public apologies considered here must take into account these factors related to the type of apology being offered, including the implications of public discourse, of institutional preparation for and commitment to follow up the apology, as well as related aspects of the context of the apology event.

Apology Sincerity and Meaningfulness

Whether made privately or publicly, in general or specific terms, the reception of an apology statement is largely dependent on the perceived sincerity of the speaker – something which can be quite subjective and difficult to measure. Since an apology can too easily become a familiar and comfortable ritual, devoid of meaning, it is not surprising that the listener's first reaction may be one of disbelief and cynicism. How do we know that the apology is really sincere?

Is the apologizer signaling the willingness to take responsibility for the action and make reparation or are there other motives for this plea for forgiveness? For the listener as well as for any third-party facilitator, it is crucial to determine how much meaning to attach to the words they have heard. As indicated in recent interactional justice studies (eg. Scarlicki, et.al. 2004), an apologetic statement perceived as insincere or manipulative will stimulate a more negative response than the absence of any apology at all.

Contemporary conflict resolution scholars have emphasized the significance of relationship dynamics in conflict transformation and from this perspective the apology can be viewed as a statement signaling a desired change in relationship. Through his analysis of genuine and false requests for forgiveness, Augsburger (1996) hints at a potentially useful guideline for ascertaining the sincerity of an apology by placing an authentic apology on a relationship continuum between the desire to unite (cohesion) and the desire to separate (dispersion).

From this perspective, a sincere apology can be distinguished from an appeasement on one hand and a justification on the other. If the apology is overwhelmed by the apologizer's strong need for deeper attachment to the listener, it may be offered as an appeasement, as something designed to merely to placate the victim and ingratiate the apologizer back into the victim's good graces. Gaining the listener's acceptance has become more important than directly responding to the listener's pain and suffering. On the other side of the continuum, the apologizer may be motivated primarily by the desire to leave the listener and the whole situation behind. Instead of an apology, the listener may hear an account designed to justify the apologizer's action. The apologizer's

goal now is to exonerate her or himself, to provide a defense. At both ends of the continuum, the apologizer's relationship goals take precedence over any attempt to deal honestly with the consequences of the harmful situation.

Unfortunately the threat of potential legal liability (as will be discussed below) frequently results in statements couched in terms better described as justificatory rather than apologetic. One famous example is the expression of regret made by former United States President Richard Nixon in his resignation speech in 1974. "I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of events that have led to this decision. I would say only that if some of my judgments were wrong, and some were wrong, they were made in what I believed at the time to be in the best interests of the nation."

From this perspective, a sincere apology is one which does not attempt to minimize the wrongdoing through some gesture of appeasement or somehow justify it as less than horrendously wrong under the circumstances. More work needs to be done to develop criteria for distinguishing sincere from insincere apologies and to apply these criteria to public apologies such as those considered here.

Reparation and Legal Liability

The act of offering an apology can be seen as a moral act which re-establishes some common understanding of right and wrong between the apologizer and the listener, facilitates the exchange of the power of the victimizer for the shame of the victim, and creates a space for forgiveness and healing to take place. However, within most public apology situations, the attempt to demonstrate goodwill and to make recompense for

the harm done is constrained by the potential of reinterpreting and reframing this acknowledgement of wrongdoing within the rigid requirements of the formal North American adversarial system.

Schneider notes that the nature of the North American adversarial system works against the establishment of the kind of setting that could allow a sincere apology to be offered and heard (2000:273). Whereas a sincere apology implies vulnerability on the part of the apologizer and a willingness to accept the demands and the judgment of the one who has been wronged, adversarial legal processes require both sides of any dispute to defend their interests and state their position in the strongest way possible. Any sign of vulnerability in this context is a sign of weakness to be exploited by the opposing side.

While opening the door for retribution on the one hand, the apology process also acknowledges that redressing the wrong is ultimately impossible. This acknowledgement directly contradicts one of the basic ideals of the North American legal systems – the ideal of applying degrees of punishment proportional to the degrees of wrongdoing. So the apology, rather than standing on its own as an admission of an irreparable debt, becomes one more tool in the debate about the appropriate amount of punishment and reparation.

Taft (2000) decries the “commodification” of apologies, which he defines as the subversion of a moral expression into something to be traded for personal material benefit within a legal context. He cites an example of a Missouri criminal defense lawyer suspended from practice for six months due to contempt of court, but under the condition that a public

apology could result in a less severe sentence. The lawyer promptly apologized and the court decision was changed to a public reprimand. When an apology can be used as a market item, it has become something to be bought and sold for a price rather than a significant moral action.

Should apologies be viewed as something distinct from or integrally connected to offers of reparations and material compensation for wrongdoing? Taft’s concern about treating an apology as a moral act or as a marketable commodity highlights the ambiguity of the relationship between apologies and reparations in other public settings outside the local courtroom. Other researchers disagree about the necessity of linking the apology process to reparations. Alter (1999) includes some concrete form of reparations as one of the essential elements of an apology process. On the other hand, Cunningham (1999) defines the sincerity of an apology in terms of the rebuilding of relationships, concluding that reparation may follow from this but can occur independently.

In his examination of reparation of historical injustices, Barkan (2000:323) asks whether the growing public legitimacy of the apology process merely whitewashes specific injustices and cheapens reparation. Barkan views the apology process as part of a growing cultural trend of performative guilt. The public apology acts paradoxically as a ritual of public confession which may mitigate the demand for material compensation yet by its expression provides the core of restitution by validating victim memories and identities. Minow (1998:112-113) goes so far as to describe an apology as the symbolic dimension of reparation which simultaneously prepares the way for an offer of material reparation and acknowledges that no adequate reparation is possible. For these writers, the prevalence and

popularity of appeals for apology both complement and transcend the economic aspects of rectifying injustices.

Questions of legal liability and adequate reparation loom larger in the more recent Church apologies than in the UCC process outlined above. As the events of wrongdoing are identified more specifically and the apology is directed to specific individuals who suffered the harm, statements are made which seek to mitigate the level of vulnerability demanded by a sincere apology. Further research and analysis is required to answer the unanswered questions. Can public institutions such as the Canadian Churches rebuild relationships without making themselves completely vulnerable to demands for compensation? Should reparation or compensation be automatically considered to be part of a meaningful apology. More work need to be done with both sides in this dialogue to determine the parameters of a truly meaningful apology.

Apologizing Across Cultures

Another factor that must be considered is the cross-cultural context of the public apology encounter. How meaningful is this type of communicative act within a non-EuroCanadian cultural context? Can we assume that an apology offered in a situation similar to that of the 1986 UCC encounter means substantially the same things to both sides of the encounter? In this case, both sides indicated that the encounter could be deeply meaningful across cultural contexts – Aboriginal recipients through their initial demand for an apology and through their deeply serious consideration of it, UCC officials through their willingness to contextualize their statement with Aboriginal imagery and symbolism. However, more work would need to be done to assess whether this contextualization

served to communicate what either side intended to communicate.

An example of different nuances in the meaning of an apology is provided by Wagatsuma's and Rosett's (1986), analysis of the use of apologies in Japanese jurisprudence. The offer of an apology in the Japanese context gains significance as an expression of the apologizer's wish to restore or maintain a positive relationship with the person or group wronged. Rather than questioning the sincerity of the apology, the external act of apologizing is more readily accepted at face value as an acknowledgement of self-denigration and submission to authority of the moral standards of the wider community and the hierarchical structure upon which the community's social harmony is based.

Because of the Japanese understanding of apology as an external social lubricant, significantly less emphasis is placed on the internal mindset and motivation of the apologizer – a factor which is crucial to North American distinctions between sincere and false apologies. Wagatsuma and Rosett (1986:492) refer to the North American understanding of an apology as a wholehearted expression of the self, springing from the most laudable and pure internal motivations. Japanese society, however, appears more ready to accept a level of personal ambiguity and ambivalence. Thus any apology which communicates ambivalent feelings is likely to be criticized as insincere in North America but may well be accepted as sufficient in a non-Western context such as Japan.

The different social understandings of the sincerity or sufficiency of an apology are also reflected in different responses to the apology once it has been offered. The

acceptance of and response to an apology can be viewed as the beginning of forgiveness. In the North American context, acceptance of an apology signals, at the very least, the end of hostility toward the wrongdoer and the beginning of a peaceful co-existence. The Japanese apology, according to Wagatsuma and Rosett (1986:477), is much more socially significant because it emphasizes the restoration of harmony and the re-insertion of the wrongdoer into a restored order of hierarchical roles and reciprocal obligations.

These distinctions also have implications for one major issue mentioned above – the connection between the offer of an apology and the offer of reparations. Wagatsuma and Rosett (1986:464) claim that the relative absence of the apology in North American legal systems is partially due to “the legal system’s historic pre-occupation with reducing all losses to economic terms that can be awarded in a money judgment and its related tendency either not to compensate at all or to award extravagant damages for injuries that are not easily reducible to quantifiable economic losses.” In other words, the focus on economic compensation overwhelms the apology and diminishes its value as a move toward forgiveness. The apology becomes what Wagatsuma and Rosett (1986:478) refer to as a transactional apology – an explanation and justification of behaviour with as limited an expression of liability for as limited a specific situation as is possible under the circumstances. A Japanese legal apology, on the other hand, is described as more relational, with much less emphasis on the specifics of the wrongdoing for which the apology is offered and a much greater emphasis on a commitment to a future harmonious relationship in which the web of mutual social obligations is fully restored.

More work needs to be done to assess the comparable transactional, relational and other distinctions between apologies offered in EuroCanadian Church settings and those meaningful in Canadian Aboriginal settings. Only by understanding what each sides intends the apology to mean can we begin to evaluate the potential usefulness of the apology process as one step toward reconciliation.

Concluding Questions and Research Directions

A wide range of substantive issues surround the articulation and usefulness of a public apology intended to move toward reconciliation of a complex relationship such as that existing between Canadian Aboriginal communities and Christian Church denominations. This brief survey of several of these issues indicates some of the research and analysis which may be useful to both sides in this historical and contemporary encounter as well as providing deeper insight into the significance of a public apology process in general.

The 1986 apology offered by the United Church of Canada provides one example of an institutional public apology process recent enough to be documented and remembered and yet distant enough to allow for sober reflection and analysis. This event can provide insights to highlight and probe the issues identified above. How did the UCC prepare for the event so that the institutional statement represented the interests and positions of its members? How was the institutional apology received on a personal level by both sides? What criteria were used to assess the sincerity of the statement? How was the statement explicitly or implicitly influenced by the potential of demands for compensation? What forms of compensation and reparation were envisioned

by the framers of the apology and how was this linked to the text of the apology? Was the intent of the demand for and the offering of an apology statement communicated across cultural context. What did this communicative act mean to both sides of the encounter?

An extensive analysis of this event can also provide some potential points of comparison with similar apologies expressed by other Canadian church bodies and with more specific apologies made subsequently by the UCC and its structures to specific situations such as residential school abuse. In all these cases, the context of apology preparation, articulation and follow-up is extremely significant as we seek to better understand the role of apologies as one aspect of reconciliation.

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