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I'm Sorry, So Sorry — “False Apology Syndrome”

Wednesday, October 8, 2008

A physician by profession, Theodore Dalrymple has diagnosed one of the most public ills of our age — “False Apology Syndrome.” He defines this new illness as “public apologies by politicians for the crimes and misdemeanors of their ancestors, or at least of their predecessors.” There is a lot of this going around.

Britain seems to be involved in an outbreak of this syndrome at the moment, and this includes both church leaders and politicians. As Dalrymple points out, Australia and the Vatican have also been involved. The Australian Prime Minister apologized to the Aborigines for the colonization of the continent. Pope Benedict XVI apologized to the Muslims for the Crusades.

Dalrymple explains his objection:

Let us examine briefly the apology for the Crusades as an example of the whole genre. It is not exactly a new discovery that the Crusaders often, perhaps usually or even always, behaved very badly. It is not in the nature of invading armies to behave well, even when discipline is strong, morale is high, and control of the foot soldiers is firm; it is no secret that these conditions did not exist during the Crusades, to put it rather mildly.

They were, however, rather a long time ago. The Crusades were an attempt to recover for Christendom what had been lost by force, with all the accompanying massacre, pillage, and oppression that the use of force in those days implied. No one, I think, expects an apology from present-day Arabs for the imperialism of their ancestors, either as a matter of moral duty or political likelihood. We are all born into the world as we find it, after all; we are not responsible for what went before us.

Dalrymple argues further that the practice of apologizing for what ancestors or predecessors have done is morally corrosive. The giver of the apology is prone to pride. “Insofar as the person offering the apology is doing what no one has done before him, he is likely to consider himself the moral superior of his predecessors,” Dalrymple explains. “He alone has had the moral insight and courage to apologize.”

But, “he knows full well that he has absolutely no personal moral responsibility for whatever it is that he is apologizing for. In other words, his apology brings him all kudos and no pain.”

As for the recipients of the apology: “Just as those who give them become convinced of their own virtue, so do those who receive them. It is enough that they should be considered victims for them to conclude that they can do no wrong, or at any rate no wrong worth talking about. For what is a personal peccadillo to set beside a great historical wrong?”

In the most significant paragraph of his essay, Dalrymple explains why these apologies have become more common:

The False Apology Syndrome flourishes wherever there has been a shift in the traditional locus of moral concern. At one time, a man probably felt most morally responsible for his own actions. He was adjudged (and judged himself) good or bad by how he conducted himself toward those in his immediate circle. From its center rippled circles of ever-



decreasing moral concern, of which he was also increasingly ignorant. Now, however, it is the other way round. Under the influence of the media of mass communication and the spread of sociological ways of thinking, a man is most likely to judge himself and others by the opinions he and they hold on political, social, and economic questions that are far distant from his immediate circle. A man may be an irresponsible father, but that is more than compensated for by his deep concern about global warming, or foreign policy, or the food situation in Africa.

I think Theodore Dalrymple is basically correct in his analysis. The “False Apology Syndrome” is all too common in this country as well. It is now so common that these apologies have lost much of their public impact.

But I also think that Dalrymple misses an essential point. He gets close to it when he writes of historic wrongs. We now know that some historical realities — such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade — were moral horrors. The Crusades, on the other hand, are morally and historically complex. Does the Pope wish that the Muslims had taken Vienna or won at Lepanto?

But the slave trade is an example of a historical wrong that is virtually undiluted in its immorality. The slave trade led to the violent subjugation of a people by race. Furthermore, it has left a legacy that still stains today.

In 1995 the Southern Baptist Convention struggled to find a way to deal with the fact that our denominational history is rooted in a defense of chattel slavery. We could not celebrate the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the SBC without recognizing that dark fact of history.

In order to deal with this in a healthy and biblical way, a group of white and African-American Southern Baptists met at the invitation of the SBC president to talk about a proper way of dealing with this. In the end, the SBC adopted an apology for the fact that our history and founding were so associated with slavery. In conversation with our African-American brothers, we decided together that apologizing for the sins of the long dead was an evasion of sorts, but an acknowledgement of the moral wrong was right and necessary.

We worked for hours on the wording, and left the meeting with a final form we all felt was just about right. The convention adopted the statement and we celebrated 150 years of working together in the cause of the Gospel. Looking back, it's hard to see how we could have celebrated the anniversary of the SBC without that acknowledgement.

But, for me at least, the most meaningful part of that process was the day spent in conversation with African-American brothers about the legacy of slavery and the complex realities of what this means in the present. That was a priceless learning experience, and a graced day of honest talking and listening.

Perhaps honesty is the real issue here. Many of the apologies offered for past events seem false on the face. Others seem, at least to me, to be nothing less than necessary. We cannot repent for our ancestors, but we can confess the reality of historic wrongs.

We are now a people constantly reminded of history. Historical consciousness is a great blessing, but it is also a moral challenge. Anyone needing empirical verification of original sin need look no further than the human past. Of course, our greater moral challenge is the present, and that may well be even more difficult to deal with than the past.

Theodore Dalrymple (Anthony Daniels) writes for *In Character*, where this essay is found [[see here](#)].

