

# Forgive and Apology

by Michael Curtis



If I caused you pain, I know that I'm to blame. I must have been insane. From the bottom of my heart I apologize. Please let me make amends.

In the course of the religious services on Yom Kippur (this year on September 16, 2021), the confessions of sins, Al Chet, are uttered ten times. They have wide scope and differing emphases: among them are sins made under duress or willingly, by hardheartedness, inadvertently or with thought and deceit, improper thoughts, evil inclination, false denial and lying, ceaseless hatred, passing judgement, evil talk. The plea of the confessors is pardon us, forgive us, atone for us.

In the U.S. and other countries, issues of repentance and forgiveness have become controversial and troubling problems in this era of BLM and frequent allegations of racism. The many relevant issues have to be seen in the context of a number of factors: the existing prejudice and persecution against certain people or groups in society, the desire to seek a realistic assessment of forgiveness by objective authorities, or in the U.S. specifically by blacks or the black community for what is considered racist utterances or behavior. Consider some of the factors. Differences exist over the possibility of absolving white people of responsibility for the existence of discrimination and prejudice; the degree of change in feeling or sensibility over the years; the willingness to repair contentious relations; the subsequent behavior of the accused person or group since the alleged offence; the anticipation of future behavior; the attempts at reconciliation; the degree of relief afforded to the alleged wrongdoer. At the core may be the desire for vengeance as the

primary factor towards people or society which are said to be the cause of harm. In any case, who has the right to decide on principles of justice and who can justifiably have power to forgive others in a meaningful way in an era when ethical and moral expectations may have changed? Moreover, is there a time limit on punishment for offensive actions committed in the past?

To help find proper policies to deal with forgiveness in the U.S. it may be useful to examine a number of attempts abroad to deal with comparable problems.

South Africa on 1995 established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a body to help the country come to terms with its apartheid past on a morally accepted basis, and to advance the cause of reconciliation between the different peoples. By this body, individuals identified as victims of gross human rights violations are invited to give statements about their experiences, as part of the transition of the country to full democracy. The TRC sometimes grants amnesty to perpetrators of crimes relating to human rights violations, and offers reparation and rehabilitation to victims. The TRC, was replaced by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in 2000. It works through three committees, human rights, reparations, and amnesty. Amnesty has been granted to those who committed abuses during the apartheid period, so long as the crimes were politically motivated, proportionate, and there was full disclosure by the person seeking amnesty. This emphasis on reconciliation marks a difference from the approach of the Nuremberg trials.

The register of reconciliation gives the public, including those who failed to prevent human rights violations but who may not have committed gross violations of human rights, the opportunity to indicate their regret for not having been able or even tried to prevent violence.

Northern Ireland has long been the setting for civil and

political unrest, and violent political conflict, especially during The Troubles, the ethno-nationalist conflict that lasted for 30 years until 1998, the result of political nationalism and ethnic sectarianism. Religion has had an important place in the problem but the conflict is not religious, though the Unionists are mostly Ulster Protestants, and the Republicans are mostly Irish Catholics. This correspondence between religion and politics is largely the result of a historical accident, the movement of Scottish and English settlers to the north east of Ireland to become owners of the land in that area.

To end most of the violence in the conflict in Northern Ireland, on April 10, 1998 the Good Friday Agreement, Belfast Agreement, was signed by the UK and Irish governments, and most of the parties in Northern Ireland, except for the Democratic Unionist party, DUP. Two documents were signed: a multiparty agreement, and another was between the British and Irish governments, and hopefully a foundation on which a lasting peace between the two politico-religious groups can be built.

In an unrelated event, Tony Blair Prime Minister in 1997, in a message, probably mostly written by his private secretary and aides, apologized for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish potato famine, and stated states that the Irish famine was a defining event in the history of Ireland and Britain. Those who governed in London at the time failed by standing by while a crop failure turned into massive human tragedy. He also remarked that the British were partly responsible for the 20<sup>th</sup> century conditions that led to the Troubles. These were in effect statements of fact, that the British government had not done enough to prevent the famine or its consequences, rather than a full apology.

For some years political leaders in Australia were split on the issue of a formal national government apology for

treatment of its Aboriginal population. Finally, on February 13, 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on behalf of parliament made a formal apology to Australia's indigenous peoples, particularly the Stolen Generations, for what was a blemished chapter in the nation's history. This was government policies of forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands children from their homes, their communities, and their country by federal and state agencies. Tens of thousands of indigenous children were removed until 1970. In addition, Aborigines for a time were institutionalized on segregated reserves.

These policies have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on fellow Australians, on a proud people and a proud culture. Rudd declared that "The time has come for the nation to turn a new page in our history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future." The country was exhorted to harness the determination to close the gap that lies between Australians in life expectancy, educational achievement, and economic opportunity. But problems remain as the Aborigines experience discrimination in various areas of life such as being denied a job or unfairly discouraged from continuing education.

In East Germany the situation for rectification of wrongs is disappointing regarding the former German Democratic Republic, 1949- 1990, part of the Communist Eastern bloc during the Cold War. There has been acknowledgement of the role of Stasi, the Ministry for State Security, and its spying by audio and video surveillance, reading mails, extortion and bribery. There is ample evidence of the horrors of the Communist dictatorship, and of the fate of prisoners of the Stasi. About 4% of the population of the GDR was officially or unofficially, a spy. Opponents of the regime were imprisoned and prisoners were tortured by psychological tricks and other methods. Most Stasi victims have given up hope of any apology and are unable to forgive the regime. There has been some exposure of Stasi

employees, but no apology for victims, although the Bundestag in 2008 agreed to pay victims a small pension each month. But most of the 200,000 former Stasi prisoners have received nothing. Meanwhile, former Stasi officers have spread disinformation and even attacked former prisoners in public. They have shown no repentance. Indeed, a considerable number have found employment in the German civil service and even in the police force.

Will these cases help in the U.S. dilemma and in the era of BLM? There appears to be no rush for forgiveness for the discrimination against black individuals, some of whom believe that apologies and forgiveness are not likely to induce a white majority society to make substantial changes. Yet, there is one recent incident in the U.S. that suggests hope of change is possible. The former woman Dallas police officer Guyger had been sentenced to 10 years in prison for shooting a black man Mr. Jean in his own apartment. Jean's younger brother made an unusual request and asked the judge he could give Guyger a hug, which he did. After this, he said "I forgive you, and I know if you go to God and ask Him, he will forgive you."