

# REGRETS, APOLOGIES AND REPARATIONS

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**THE YEAR 2007 MARKS THE TWO HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE WITHIN THE BRITISH EMPIRE.** The act abolishing slavery itself was not passed until 1833, and did not come fully into effect until five years after that; but the end of the slave trade stands as a hugely significant milestone on the road towards final abolition.

The anniversary has prompted renewed calls for an apology for slavery – with varying responses from different institutions. The city of Liverpool, very heavily involved in the trade prior to 1807, made an apology as long ago as 1999. The Church of England, which prior to abolition owned a slave plantation in Barbados, apologised last year. The city of Bristol has expressed regret but stopped short of apologising. The Prime Minister has also expressed regret in a high-profile statement last November.

Many white Britons that I speak to see no particular reason to apologise. They question why there is any point in apologising for something that finished 170 years ago, that did not involve them personally, and probably only did involve a minority who actively mistreated slaves or participated in the trade. Also they feel that, if they were to apologise on behalf of their ancestors, they would be entering into judgment upon people who lived in a different age and are unable now to speak for themselves.

Caribbean and African people sometimes display impatience with these views, which are, however, sincerely held by a great many people and deserve, at the least, to be heard with respect. It is a telling statistic that, in a telephone poll carried out by a local newspaper on the question whether Bristol should apologise for its role, nearly 92 per cent said no. There are enormous cultural differences between the parties to the debate, and until both sides listen to each other and try to understand what the other is saying, it is certain that misunderstanding and resentment will continue.

For white Britons, slavery is not generally an important issue. Not many of them have the least idea whether or not they are descended from anyone involved in the trade. To them, slavery is part of history and there are all sorts of injustices in history, not least those that white working-class people suffered at the hands of other whites during the industrial revolution and after. No one is suggesting an apology or reparations to, say, the descendants of the children who worked unspeakably long hours in the mills and whose labour contributed as much to Britain's wealth and power as

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► the slave-worked plantations in the West Indies. Why should a special case be made for slaves and their descendants? Slavery, or at any rate legalised slavery, is all very remote now.

For most black British people, especially those of Caribbean origin, slavery is anything but remote. They know for a certainty that several generations of their ancestors suffered appalling treatment as slaves, and were considered as the property of their owners rather than valued as human beings. The only people they have in history with whom to associate are those who heroically resisted against the oppressor, or who made good on the oppressor's terms against the odds. Their culture, their literature, their music and their language are all steeped in and shaped by slavery, serving as a constant reminder of those evil days. And to many black people it is staggering that whites even now still do not care or understand enough even to apologise.

There is, therefore, a reasonably well-defined group of people who are still acutely conscious of the effect that slavery has had on their ancestors and themselves. This seems to me to amount in itself to a powerful case for accepting the idea of an apology in principle. For if someone has been genuinely wronged and feels that wrong deeply, then forgiveness and reconciliation can often come about only if those who perpetrated the wrong – or failing that, those connected with the perpetrators – will acknowledge their fault and apologise.

Acceptance of the notion of an apology in principle gives rise immediately to certain questions. Who should do the apologising, and to whom? It is too simplistic to portray even the transatlantic slave trade, let alone slavery as a whole, as a wrong committed against black people by white people, for black Africans operated the white slavers' supply lines and received what the slavers would pay, and whites were often the victims of treatment as barbaric and dehumanising as that meted out to black slaves.

More promising, therefore, is the idea that certain institutions should apologise, and of these the British government heads the list of candidates (not least because it has access to large amounts of money). Should the British government be apologising then? For my part, I would welcome this, although I understand its reluctance to do so bearing in mind the claims for reparations that would no doubt follow. I shall return to the question of reparations shortly.

There are, of course, other institutions that have been in existence since the days of slavery and can provide a link with the past in a way that individuals cannot. The cities of Bristol and Liverpool are clear candidates for such an apology and have come to their own decisions. (Whatever one thinks of Bristol's decision, it would have been meaningless as well as hypocritical had its leaders decided to apologise in defiance, if the poll is to be believed, of 92 per cent of its electorate.)

When the Church of England considered its motion for an apology last year, the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke movingly in support. Quoting from a letter of Bonhoeffer, he made the point that 'the body of Christ ... exists across history; we therefore share [as well as the joy] the shame and sinfulness of our predecessors, and part of what we can do with them and for them in the body of Christ is prayerful acknowledgment of the failure that is part of us, not just of some distant "them".' I agree with him, and in my view the Church (by which I do not of course mean just the Church of England) has the opportunity to play a hugely important role in reducing some of the bitterness and damage that slavery has caused. It occupies a unique position in being such an important part of the culture of both the wrongdoers and the wronged. And if Christians on both sides of the divide fail to take the trouble to listen to each other and understand each other, I would see that as an opportunity missed for the Church to fulfil part of the mission for which she was put into this world.

If the case for an apology is made out, another question follows hard upon it, 'What about reparations?' It is unfortunate that this latter question seems to be so important to some of the protagonists that the issue of apology is sacrificed to it and devalued. This is happening on both sides – one hesitant to apologise for fear that that will lead to a demand for compensation with no limit in sight, the other dismissing any apology as empty unless reparations follow as a matter of course. For the British government, and for those with an eye on tough bargaining ahead, there may be some excuse for such an attitude. But for ordinary Christians like you and me who seek to follow our Lord's teaching, it is desperately sad that some will not say, 'Forgive us our trespasses' because they are afraid that others will not respond, 'We forgive those who trespass against us.'

My own opinions regarding reparations can be summarised very briefly indeed. First, it is clear that the payment of money can never put right the wrong that

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humanity'*

was done. Second, I hope that those institutions that feel it right to identify in some way with the wrongdoers, and to apologise, will also find some interesting and imaginative ways of demonstrating, not necessarily by incurring any great expenditure, that their apology is indeed more than words, and that they do intend to combat some of the legacies of slavery.

I have neither the qualifications nor the space to consider in any detail the *legal* case for huge sums of money to be paid in compensation for slavery. I do, however, wish to make a comment arising from one strand of the argument that is commonly put forward. In order to justify bringing a legal case so long after the event, some of the proponents say that a special case can and should be made on the grounds that the transatlantic slave trade, and/or slavery more generally, was a 'crime against humanity', i.e. a crime that was particularly abhorrent, and committed on a very large scale against a whole body of people.

It certainly was on a large scale, and from today's perspective it was indeed shocking and barbaric. But by eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century standards, was it really so much worse than anyone could expect of humanity? I suggest possibly not, and that a better view from a Christian standpoint is to see slavery as a *typical* product of humanity. To examine the history of slavery is to look at greed, cruelty, ruthlessness, wilful ignorance, shortsightedness, good people doing nothing for too long, an attitude that the status quo must be preserved at all costs – in fact, most of the sins that sent Jesus to the cross.

A wrong that stares us in the face as obviously wrong now was defended then as a necessity. And a very important – perhaps the most important – part of apologising for slavery is the acknowledgment that we may be blinded to many of the world's injustices today by some of the same factors that allowed slavery to be tolerated then. There is nothing original in pointing out that slavery or virtual slavery still persists in some dark corners of the world, or that other countries much poorer than ours are still struggling under the burden of debts (in some instances clearly as a legacy of slavery), or that our country is still using far more than its fair share of the earth's dwindling resources, but it is precisely those sins mentioned in the last paragraph, once again, that permit these obvious evils to continue.

I would like to advertise an event that I have assisted in planning, I would like to encourage my readers to consider taking part in the London 'Walk of Witness'

on Saturday, 24 March. This event follows on from the Church of England's apology last year, and several other ecumenical partners have been invited to send representatives to join the archbishops on the route from Whitehall to Kennington Park. If you do decide to join us, it would be most helpful to the organisers (who have to inform the police of likely numbers) if you would also register that you are coming, using the website at [www.makingourmark.org.uk](http://www.makingourmark.org.uk).

Whilst there will be recognition of Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, please note that the focus of the occasion will be the remembrance and repentance of slavery rather than a celebration of the work of the abolitionists. This is not to belittle their contribution or to deny that honour is due to them; I can think of no more stirring example of a Christian-inspired campaign that really made an impact for good in the world than the British abolition movement. But its very excellence begets a danger that our repentance may be distracted by finding, amongst the evil, something that we can really be rather proud of!

The Walk of Witness contains, however, a third element besides remembrance and repentance – restoration, which is why those sections of the press who have dubbed it a 'guilt march' are being inaccurate as well as amusingly provocative. I can finish in no better way than by quoting the Archbishop again: 'It is not about trying to gratify some sense of wanting to wipe the record clean. On the contrary, it is part of what we are as a Christian community; corporate acknowledgment of repentance which ... ought to stimulate us to action, which is why it is costly ... and [to] open ourselves up to the grace of God which is part of the good news.' ■