

RECONCILIATION-TO-FORGIVE VERSUS RECONCILIATION-TO-FORGET

Author(s): Derek Rasmussen

Source: *Peace Research*, NOVEMBER 2001, Vol. 33, No. 2 (NOVEMBER 2001), pp. 115-124

Published by: Canadian Mennonite University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23608079>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Canadian Mennonite University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Peace Research*

JSTOR

RECONCILIATION-TO-FORGIVE VERSUS RECONCILIATION-TO- FORGET*

Derek Rasmussen

Former Policy Advisor to Nunavut Tunngavik
Iqualuit, Nunavut, Canada

Last 11 November Americans, Canadians, Australians and others, commemorated the Remembrance Day (Veterans Day). One week later, during his keynote address at Hanoi National University, Bill Clinton became the first U.S. president to call for “reconciliation” with Vietnam, urging the Vietnamese to “bury the painful, painful past” and focus instead on “building a prosperous future.” What do these two events, one week apart, have to tell us about how Europeans and their descendants view “remembrance” as distinct from “reconciliation”? Moreover, how does this European notion of reconciliation compare with the notion propounded by indigenous peoples seeking acknowledgement and redress for land theft and cultural and physical genocide?

On 11 November Europeans and their descendants admonish themselves never to forget the heroism and sacrifice of air, land and sea conflicts recalled from their histories. The newspapers and television are filled with commemorations, ceremonies, and recollections, which focus mainly on World War I and World War II and on the suffering, sacrifice, and valour of the soldiers who fought in those wars. Following an annual practice begun in 1918, some 200 million plastic poppies are distributed throughout the United Kingdom,

* *The ideas in this essay were first presented at a Cultural Survival forum on “Justice before Reconciliation in Canada” held at the Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, in October 2000. These ideas originate from discussions with Trudy Govier, Ian McIntosh, Ann Damude, Brian McLeod, Jimi Onalik, Robert Vachon, Kalpana Das, Annie Quirke, Hagar Idlout-Sudlovenick, George and Dayle Rasmussen and Tony Hall. Thanks to Andrew Van Velzen for research assistance.*

Canada, the United States, France, Belgium, and other Commonwealth countries, to serve as reminders of military sacrifice.

How does this contrast with the official language of reconciliation? Apparently, when we seek to reconcile, our goal is (1) to “settle” and “close” matters (Vatican reconciliation);¹ (2) to “bury the painful, painful past” (President Clinton in Vietnam); or (3) to settle “problems...disputes... arguments” (Prime Minister Howard of Australia). The goal of reconciliation appears to be to remove events from our history, whereas the job of remembrance is to recall them. The Euro-American attitude towards reconciliation could almost be summed up as follows: “There—I’ve apologized—are you happy now? How much money will it take for you, once and for all, to go away and quit bothering me?” The fact that this posture is so dismissive—so unfeeling—explains in part why it fails and why some indigenous leaders refuse to accept apologies in this form. First Nations Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come, for example, says he will not accept the Canadian government’s apology for the “cataclysmic injury” inflicted by its residential school program of assimilating Native children. After his election as Grand Chief, Coon Come told the assembled chiefs that the government’s expression of “regret” was like “the expression of regret felt by a rapist caught in the act. If the regret were sincere, the federal government would meet its obligations to the aboriginals by settling centuries-old debts incurred when most of the country was taken from its possessors.”²

There are two competing notions of reconciliation at work in the world today: reconciliation-to-forgive, and reconciliation-to-forget. Reconciliation-to-forgive has been pioneered and practiced by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission; reconciliation-to-forget is represented to various degrees by President Clinton in Vietnam, the Liberal government in Canada, and the Vatican apology for the Crusades.

Reconciliation-to-forget

Reconciliation-to-forget is a process of denial, justification, excuse, minimal grudging acceptance, carefully worded and fiscally cautious apology, and minimal negotiated compensation, concluded by a final resolution to settle matters once and for all. “Forgiveness facilitator” Sheldon Kumar calls this “sweeping away the webs of the past.”³ A helpful parallel for this approach to reconciliation can be gleaned from the mechanisms of denial enumerated in John Conroy’s recent book,

Unspeakable Acts, Ordinary People: The Dynamics of Torture.⁴ Finding commonalities in three different cases of government use of torture against citizens (as in U.K., U.S., Israel), Conroy presents what could be systematized as a series of seven steps governments use to deny, justify, or excuse abuses: (a) deny absolutely, (b) minimize the abuse, (c) disparage the victims and their supporters, (d) justify abuse as warranted under the circumstances (“they deserved it,” or “they were just as bad”), (e) argue that abuse occurred so long ago as to be irrelevant to the present (“ancient history”), (f) grudgingly admit that, if abuse did occur, it was the action of misguided underlings (“bad apples”), and (g) urge victims to put it behind them, get over it, and bury it.

After grudging acceptance comes negotiation of compensation. Reconciliation in this sense, however, does not entail forgiveness; it implies nothing more than forgiveness of a bad debt. This notion of debt springs from the moral accounting metaphor, “one of the most important moral concepts we have,” according to philosophers Lakoff and Johnson.⁵ They write: “Thus when [parties] interact causally with each other, they are commonly conceptualized as engaging in a transaction, each transferring an effect to the other.... Thus moral action is conceptualized in terms of financial transaction.... Justice is when the moral books are balanced...it is moral to pay your debts and immoral not to.”

When a debt has been discharged, it can then be forgotten. The reconciliation-to-forget notion is in vogue today in large part due to forces of globalization. According to Kumar, “Ironically due to globalization, sweeping away the webs of the past has become an unexpected new imperative of geopolitics.” Cleaning up, settling past grievances, letting bygones be bygones—all this is part and parcel of Euro-Americans wiping the slate clean, so that they can design new societies in their newly adopted homelands.

Reconciliation-to-forget goes further. Euro-Americans are using it to stake a claim to indigeneity in their new homelands.⁶ Other approaches include neutralizing the indigeneity of host peoples by arguing that all human beings are immigrants from somewhere else; we all arrived at slightly different times. The “Bering Strait Theory” of the immigration of Amerindians has proved helpful in this regard (Anishinabe activist Winona LaDuke calls it the “BS Theory”). An even more extreme rationale has been adopted by Brazilian environment officials seeking to nullify indigenous claims to parklands: the “vegetable immigration theory,” currently being propounded by the Brazilian Minister of Parks, purports that trees were earlier

immigrants than humans, and since the Portuguese descendants are guardians of trees, their moral claim to the land is greater than any claims of the indigenous people.⁷

Four Fictions of the “Great Transformation”

Reconciliation-to-forget is primarily a tactic of the indigenous people of Europe who tried to assert claims to lands that were not theirs (whether these were in India, Africa, Southeast Asia, the Pacific, or the Americas). Between the years 1821 and 1932 alone, 34 million people immigrated to the United States from Europe, while 16 million went to Canada, Argentina, and Brazil; millions of others went to Australia and Southern Africa. It is important to note that in some years almost half of these immigrants were re-immigrants; that is, they were doing wage-labour in America for the second or third time, having returned home to an enclosed Europe desperate to buy a *piéd-à-terre* in their true homelands.⁸ A shortage of ownable land at home led Europeans to claim lands abroad—a kind of real life game of musical chairs, albeit one with a tragic outcome. Thus the enclosure of, America, Australia, New Zealand, and southern Africa can only be understood against the earlier enclosure of England and Europe. The desperate scarcity of the means of life, generated by the ravages of enclosure, created homeless masses eager to invade and claim the “new world.” As Henry Luce said 50 years ago, democracy needs a lot more territory to support itself than tyranny does.⁹

What Luce was referring to is the young civilization born of the “Great Transformation” of the past 500 years. Fifty-six years ago, economist Karl Polanyi argued that as a result of the Great Transformation, this new civilization was dominated by four fictions: the illusion that pieces of the earth’s surface could be owned by individual members of one species; the fiction that leasing humans is noble (whereas slavery—owning humans—is immoral); the fiction that coloured paper and metal (money) can abstractly represent almost everything of value; and, finally, the superstitious faith in those “hugely fictitious bodies” called “corporations.”¹⁰ These four fictions dissolve a society’s roots—they dissolve the essential connections between people and people, as well as between people and place.¹¹ When a map of species extinctions is superimposed over a map of human wanderings, one discovers that the areas with greatest human immigration and emigration are the areas with the highest level of plant and animal extinctions.¹² People who connect with a place look after it;

those who are rootless do not. “Globalization is creating a world of powerless places at the mercy of placeless powers.”¹³ Wendat-Huron Georges Sioui, head of the Institute for Indigenous Governance, states the following:

Modern Amerindians... see the Euroamerican concept of society as mere artifice and illusion. It is now permissible to think, and urgent to see, that the notion of classifying societies according to their “evolution” has been sheer fantasy on the part of certain civilizations isolated from natural, fundamental needs, which have been busy seeking and perfecting theories to legitimize their cultural imperatives.¹⁴

One would be hard-pressed to portray modern economic civilizations as being more “evolved”—especially by any yardstick of peacefulness or non-violence. William Eckhardt’s research has shown that 73% of all war-related deaths since 3000 BC occurred in the twentieth century AD. Of these deaths, the victims were increasingly non-combatants—civilian deaths made up 58% of deaths in the first part of the twentieth century, rising to 74% in the 1980s, and up to 91% in the 1990s.¹⁵ However, despite the evidence, Euro-Americans are not about to admit that their economic needs have driven them to commit terrible crimes in the name of territorial expansion; they therefore need to explain and justify their past. Reconciliation-to-forget is one of the many ways Euro-Americans have of avoiding saying that their economic system is monstrous. Since it seems likely that their economies will continue to encroach into the territories of others, they will likely continue to need further reconciliatory exercises in forgetfulness.

Reconciliation-to-forgive

What of the other notion of reconciliation? Reconciliation-to-forgive is not about forgetting. “Without memory there is no healing,” said Desmond Tutu, Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. “We remember so that we can forgive. Without forgiveness, there is no future.” This approach insists that reconciliation is a process, not an event. Reconciliation has a beginning, but no end. According to Georges Sioui’s father, “The day is coming when the Indians will be understood and cease to suffer. Time is the Father of Truth.” The following statements are an attempt

to formulate an outline of reconciliation, as remembrance and forgiveness, owe a heavy debt to the work of Govier and Verwoerd.¹⁶

- 1) *Empathy*: The first step in reconciliation-to-forgive is empathy. This is the foundation of reconciliation. This is the foundation of civilization. We may not have experienced starvation, but we can empathize; thus, we can wish that others were not starving and we can make an effort to alleviate their suffering. Empathy cannot be artificially evoked merely as part of a commercial agenda to bring (as the Canadian government says) “certainty” to land title, so that economic activities may carry on unimpeded. Empathy is not something that can be state-ordered. This is why the current Grand Chief of the Association of First Nations (AFN), Matthew Coon Come, has asked Euro-Canadians to visit First Nations to apologize directly, person-to-person.
- 2) *Remorse*: If we empathize with the suffering of others and we discover that we actually caused or are still causing that suffering, then remorse should flow automatically, and we should stop any and all of our actions that are causing suffering.
- 3) *Public Apology*: The Euro-descended government should acknowledge its wrongdoing and apologize for it. Most important is the moral recognition by it of the human worth and dignity of the victims; this acknowledgement is important, otherwise a “second wound of silence” is inflicted.¹⁷ A public apology is an example of how a government can make moral amends. Since reconciliation, in this understanding, is a *process* (not an event); it does not aim to settle or bury matters, but aims to unearth and acknowledge painful matters long suppressed and denied. This sustained effort at moral amends will continue long after any practical amends are made, as can be witnessed by the holocaust remembrance.
- 4) *Practical Amends*: The government makes restitution, offers compensation; nonetheless, both parties recognize that the wrongdoing cannot be absolved by money and is not merely reducible to a financial matter.
- 5) *Never Again*: Reconciliation acknowledges that the wrongdoing should never have occurred in the first place and should never happen again.¹⁸

This final step is the most important one. Unless we understand our motivation for committing these acts—unless we check to see whether the factors that spawned our monstrous acts have been rooted out—we will likely commit the same wrongs again. When we say that we resolve not to do these things in the future, we are saying that we commit to changing some of the assumptions guiding our lives. So, near the end of these observations, we address the beginning of the process: truth and reconciliation means truth before reconciliation. During a recent appearance in Ukraine, the Pope said that “the only way to clear the path is to forget the past,”¹⁹ but that means tossing history into the dumpster; in reality, the only true way to avoid the wrong path is to identify clearly and recall our mistakes. The Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples refers to this recollection as healing with “an intercultural meaning:” “Learning about and acknowledging the errors of the past, making restitution where possible, and correcting distortions of history are essential first steps in the process of healing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.”²⁰

Commonwealth Panel of Reconciliation

In order to enact this process of reconciliatory forgiveness, and in order to acknowledge that much of the world’s land theft and cultural destruction stems from the same cause (namely, the European exodus of 1500–2000), an international effort at reconciliation is required. Perhaps initially restricted to the Commonwealth, an international Panel of Truth and Reconciliation should be established to overcome the tendency of Euro-descended governments to treat their land thefts as purely domestic matters. The sophistry of modern land claims language holds that one signatory to an agreement can assume the role of partisan advocate as well as the role of supposedly objective adjudicator. Professor Anthony Hall has made clear the contradiction: “How could the newcomers’ courts deliver impartial justice when it came to deciding the guilt or innocence of the newcomers own legal establishment in rights and titles of those indigenous peoples affected by the European colonization of ancestral lands?”²¹

Because Queen Anne recognized this contradiction nearly three hundred years ago in England, there is a firm legal and historical precedent for a Commonwealth Commission to assume a role in these matters. On March 9, 1704, in the case of *Mohegan Indians v. Connecticut*, “on the advice of her Privy Council, Queen Anne...

called for the creation of a Royal Commission to give an objective, third party ruling on the legal contentions dividing the disputants.²² Subsequently, one of her commissioners (Commissioner Horsmanden in 1743) ruled that: “the matter of property in lands in disputes between the Indians as distinct people (for no act has shewn whereby they became subjects) and the English subject cannot be determined by the laws of our land, but by a law equal to both parties, which is a law of nature and nations.”²³

Apart from initiating a sincere effort at reconciliation-to-forgive, the Commonwealth nations also ought to reconfigure their state systems to include genuine political representation from the First Nations.

A House of Host Peoples

In 1996, Canada’s Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples called for “new institutions” to be created to bring about a new relationship between host peoples and newcomers. In particular, the Commission’s Recommendation #2.3.51 called for the establishment of an Aboriginal House of Parliament, or a “House of First Peoples,” an idea originally proposed by the Native Council of Canada in 1992. In order to reconcile truly, host Canadians and new Canadians need an assembly to meet within, a place for discussion and deliberation. Reconciliation comes from the Latin root *concilium*—meaning a calling together, an assembly, a gathering for deliberation. Canada’s British-derived Houses of Parliament offer half of this assembly; re-conciliation will truly require the other half—the *concilium*, a third house of parliament, the House of Host Peoples. Canada comes from the Cree term *Ka-Kanata-Aski*—“the land that is clean.” With a truly representative House of Host Peoples, “the land that is clean” would be a land cleansed of ignorance, not a land cleansed of history. Canada could offer a model of reconciliation to forgive, rather than just another example of reconciliation to forget.

NOTES

1. Garry Wills, “The Vatican Regrets,” *The New York Review of Books*, 25 May 2000, p. 19.
2. William Johnson, “Throwing Down the Gauntlet,” *The Globe and Mail*, 14 July 2000, p. A11.

3. Sheldon Kumar, "The Dawn of the Age of Forgiveness," *The Globe and Mail*, 10 April 2000, p. R7.
4. John Conroy, *Unspeakable Acts Ordinary People: The Dynamics of Torture* (New York: Knopf, 2000).
5. G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 292.
6. Contrast this with the methodology espoused in Aboriginal Australia, where mutually beneficial adoptive strategies on the part of both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples is contingent on "remembership," honouring respective origins, traditions, and rights. For further details on this theme see, for example, Ian McIntosh, "When Will We Know We are Reconciled?" *Anthropology Today* (October 2000), p. 3–11.
7. Alex Bello, "Land Disputes Fuel Anger over Celebrations for 500th Anniversary of Portuguese Arrival in South America," *The Guardian Weekly*, 20 April 2000, p. 3.
8. Gabriel Kolko is the only historian I am aware of who has emphasized these points. See his *Main Currents in Modern American History* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 69–70.
9. W. Shoup and L.H. Minter, *Imperial Brain Trust: The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1977), p. 42.
10. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957; originally published 1944), p. 33–67. For more on the modern superstitions underlying our economic system see David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hanford: Berret-Koehler, 1996), and John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1998).
11. On rootlessness, see Simone Weil's classic essay, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*, translated by A. Wills (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), p. 43–51. For an examination of this theme in an Arctic context see Derek Rasmussen, "Dissolving Inuit Society Through Education and Money: The Myth of Educating Inuit out of 'Primitive Childhood' and into Economic Adulthood," *Interculture Journal*, no. 139 (October 2000), Intercultural Institute of Montreal.
12. Gary Nabhan explores this idea in *Cultures of Habitat* (Washington: Counterpoint, 1997), p. 2.
13. Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (Gabriola Island, BC and Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1995), p. 143.
14. Georges F. Sioui, *For an Amerindian Autohistory: An Essay on the Foundations of a Social Ethic*, translated from French by Sheila Fishman (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

15. William Eckhardt, "War-related Deaths Since 3000 BC," *Peace Research* 22, no. 4 (November 1990), p. 80–86; and "Death by Courtesy of Governments 1945–90," *Peace Research* 24, no. 2 (May 1990), p. 51–55.
16. Trudy Govier and W. Verwoerd, *The Practice of Public Apologies: A Qualified Defence* (Unpublished essay, 1999).
17. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
18. Steps three to five are adapted from Govier and Verwoerd, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
19. CBC Radio, "Pope Calls for Forgiveness for Past Tragedies," Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 27 June 2001.
20. *Renewal: A Twenty-Year Commitment, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, vol. 5 (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1996), p. 12.
21. Anthony Hall, *The American Empire and the Fourth World, Part One of "A Bowl With One Spoon: Indigenous Peoples on the Frontiers of the American Empire of Private Property,"* vol. 2 (Forthcoming: Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2001), p. 627.
22. Smith, cited in Hall (Forthcoming: 2001), p. 627.
23. Henderson, cited in Hall (Forthcoming: 2001), p. 627.