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Matters of Opinion: Me? Apologize for Slavery?

I may not have owned slaves, but I've benefited from their having been used.

Gordon Marino | posted 10/05/1998 12:00AM

Gestures of collective repentance have become popular in recent years. In 1994, the pope offered an apology for past sins committed against non-Catholics. In the summer of 1995, the Southern Baptists, who number over 15 million, voted to express a resolution of repentance that read in part, "We lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest." Last year, President Clinton apologized to the African Americans who were the unwitting subjects in the infamous Tuskegee study of syphilis, and he seriously considered the possibility of apologizing for slavery in general.

Reactions to Clinton's proposed mea culpa varied. Ward Connerly, an African-American entrepreneur, regent of the University of California, and architect of the California anti-affirmative action referendum, Proposition 209, pronounced this verdict on the idea: "Apologizing for slavery is probably one of the dumbest things anyone could do." Conversely, civil-rights leader Julian Bond maintained that an apology for slavery would be a good and important symbolic gesture.

Last summer, in between Little League baseball games in a largely white Minnesota town, I did some informal polling of my own. Though none of the people I talked to took the President's proposed apology to be an urgent matter, about half expressed mild support for the idea. Others scoffed at repenting for what they took to be ancient history. The wife of a professor commented, "Why should I apologize for something done to blacks more than a hundred years ago?" A fair question, which might be restated: "Why should I apologize for a crime that I had nothing to do with?" Or more to the point, "By what authority can I apologize for someone else's actions?" It would, after all, be hubristic for me to think that I could repent for a mugging that I did not participate in.

As a professor of philosophy, I have encountered many white students over the years who accurately or out of paranoia believe that they are constantly being asked to feel guilty and repent for racist institutions and actions in which they themselves had no hand. When it comes to race and repentance, these students are of the Aristotelian opinion that we should only be praised or blamed for our own voluntary actions. Oddly enough, many of them feel no qualms about taking pride in the accomplishments of the various communities with which they identify—their college, church, country, or for that matter, their local major league baseball team.

This minor inconsistency aside, many of those who sneer or snarl at the suggestion of apologizing for deeds from the deep past need to consider the possibility that we may bear a moral connection to actions that we did not ourselves commit. In this regard, it would be useful to distinguish between actions that one neither commits nor profits from and actions not committed but profited from.

Suppose, for example, that unbeknownst to me, a friend of mine robs a bank and makes off with \$7 million. Clearly, I am neither responsible for the robbery nor am I in a position to apologize for it. However, if after telling me about the theft, my friend offers me a million dollars of the stolen loot, and I

accept it, then I am no longer innocent of the robbery, despite the fact that I had nothing at all to do with the heist. It could be argued that white people have profited from our racist past, and thus, relative to slavery, we are more like receivers of stolen goods than innocent bystanders who just happen to bear a physical likeness to slave owners.

Paradoxically enough, Americans do not shy away from admitting that we profit from access to cheap foreign labor, and yet whites find it hard to believe that we have benefited in any way from hundreds of years of free labor. Obviously, this lack of awareness would be exculpatory if, in fact, slavery and discrimination did not serve the interests of whites. However, if ignorance of being privileged is an ignorance we ourselves are responsible for producing, then we become morally reproachable receivers of stolen goods. And to be psychologically realistic, whites have a strong investment in blinkering their assessment of the broad effects of racism.

Let's return to my earlier example: assume that when I accepted the gift of a million dollars, I had no reason to think that the money had been stolen. Years later I came to understand that the funds upon which I had built a comfortable and respectable life had been pilfered from the accounts of your great-grandparents. Would the fact that many years had gone by cover the sin to such a degree that I would not bear any responsibility to the descendants of my great grandparents' victims who, thanks to my ancestors, now led a distinctively unprivileged existence?

Individuals who benefit from a crime are mistaken in thinking that they have nothing to do with the crime. If responsibility does not extend from the robber baron to his children, then the material benefits of his wrongdoing can be passed along with impunity to future generations.

Once again, it is essential to distinguish between cases in which one generation is entirely innocent of a transgression committed by an earlier generation and those in which the sins of the father continue to bear fruits of advantage for his descendants. Although I am not sure that a presidential apology would have the healing effects that some anticipate, I do know that white Americans have profited from slavery and discrimination. In a competitive society, whites have always had a leg up on African Americans, whether it be in hunting for a job, loan, house, or a position in a corporate firm.

Consider the Texaco scandal in 1996, when unsuspecting white corporate executives were caught on tape espousing racist sentiments. Or consider a story that a friend recently shared with me. My friend, who is about 35, recently returned to his hometown in a Detroit suburb for a class reunion at his richly integrated public high school. After the reunion, four of his old school chums convinced him to go out and play a few rounds of golf. All were corporate executives and registered Democrats. And yet, when the issue of race came up, all of them swore they would never "take the risk" of hiring an African American to fill a leadership role in their respective companies. In other words, any white applicants who sought employment in one of their firms would have a decisive advantage over all African American applicants.

Apologies are becoming all too easy to make today. But abuse is no argument against use.

I was not involved in the civil-rights struggle of the sixties. While I have huffed and puffed and shaken my head about racial injustice, I have made no significant sacrifices for the cause of racial justice. I have no special authority to preach on the matter, and yet I have lived long enough in this country to recognize by whose sweat and on whose backs this country has been built and why. Because of slavery and discrimination, African Americans have provided an endless supply of cheap labor. They still work the fields, wash white babies

and white octogenarians, shake drinks in country clubs, and mop floors in the classrooms in which white folks debate about race. It was not by chance that a black woman closed my dead father's eyes. It was no accident that a black woman was there when my child first opened his blue eyes.

As a result of institutionalized racism, African Americans have been cornered into doing more than their fair share of protecting, building, and preserving this land. For that reason, I suggest that even white Americans who have cursed racism have unwillingly and perhaps unwittingly benefited from it. Thus, whites are in no position to slough off the call for an apology by insisting that they have no connection to slavery.

The Hebrew scriptures ring with intimations that blessings and blandishments can be passed on from generation to generation. The children of Abraham are blessed because of Abraham's faith. On the other side, there was clearly a time when the Israelites believed that the sins of the fathers would be punishable unto the fourth generation.

The revolutionary prophet Ezekiel inveighs against the notion of cross-generational responsibility. Attempting to focus his people's attention on their individual actions, Ezekiel proclaims that if a man "has a son who sees all the sins that his father has done, considers, and does not do likewise, ... he shall not die for his father's iniquity" (Ezek. 18:14, 17, NRSV). When we refuse to acknowledge the harm that our community has inflicted upon others, when we the unoppressed refuse to acknowledge that, at least for a time, oppression benefits those who are not forced to walk on the other side of the street, then we fail to turn away from the sin of oppression.

By turning a blind eye, the sins of the father become the sins of the more passive son. By refusing to acknowledge who has been doing what for the last four hundred years, we fail to turn away from the grievous sins of our forefathers.

There is some sense today that apologies are becoming all too easy to make. Perhaps so. But as the philosopher Stephen Toulmin has pointed out, abuse is no argument against use. If Americans ought to feel sorry that people in our community ever permitted slavery, then we ought to be willing to say that we are sorry for slavery. Clearly, it is a sorry character who does not regret our slaveholding past.

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