

Apology in International Affairs

A deeper look at the historical roots of international conflicts reveals that a large part of these conflicts are not only due to obviously known adversaries and problems, but are also the result of old, unresolved conflicts.

In the process of dealing with old conflicts, apologies play an essential role.

They serve to restore dignity, heal old wounds and help alleviate emotional suffering. For the victims, this is a significant prerequisite to continue participating in the dialogue.

Fact-based analyses and economic discussions have been the focus so far. However, it is about human beings and their dignity, as it is explicitly laid down as inviolable in Article 1 of the German Basic Law, for example. Therefore, they belong with their needs and feelings unrestrictedly in the foreground. This also determines addressing and inclusivity throughout the process.

Fundamental Aspects of Apologies

Definition of Terms

In the German language, the term apology (Entschuldigung) is used in two ways.

In the English language there are two different words for this: "Apology" and "Excuse". The German word for apology is linguistically closely related to the word "guilt" (Schuld). Guilt has been used as an ancient means of power in many social systems, and unfortunately it still is today.

The "apologizing for something" is more about regretting what happened. This is followed by the corresponding acceptance of responsibility including the willingness to compensate for it or make reparations. This restorative principle is known from "Restorative Justice".

Expression of Regret

The people who suffer decide whether the expression of regret is acceptable to them or not.

For this, it is up to the originators to have a coherent inner attitude and to acknowledge the facts for themselves and to be willing to accept responsibility for this. Without honest signs of remorse, accepting the apology becomes unlikely.

The regret must be done in front of the world public and must be transparent. Symbolic acts, such as [Willy Brand's genuflection in Prague in 1970](#), are very helpful in this regard.

Authenticity

A person who expresses regret, for himself or for a collective, must be clear about his own motivation. Only when it is truly about alleviating the victim's suffering does it become a truly convincing expression of repentance.

As with the preceding acknowledgement, the expression must include a minimum level of concreteness. A blanket "sorry for everything" doesn't work.

The expression of regret must be unconditional, without restrictions and without justifications.

What else is needed?

It takes a discernible seriousness to focus only and exclusively on the suffering of those affected, without fear of accepting responsibility and compensation.

It is up to the persons affected whether they accept the expression of regret as such, and are then ready for a more in-depth dialogue, or not. Acceptance cannot be forced and any negotiation and demanding of the same, is only a sign of dishonest intentions and cannot lead to sustainable peace.

Indulgence Trade versus Cash Cow

Unlimited unrealistic demands for compensation hinder the apology process. It is not surprising, however, when on the one hand the effort to buy oneself out of debt is in the foreground, and on the other hand negotiating partners appear who only demand quick money and only pretend to heal old wounds. This becomes recognizable when over a long period of time only the acknowledgement and the "expression of regret" are negotiated, and this is primarily opposed by high monetary demands.

First and foremost, it's not about money, it's about people.

The emotional aspect, in the form of compassion, counteracts the objectification of the victims and supports them in respectfully participating in the process of reconciliation, practically inviting them to do so.

Is there such a thing as Forgiveness?

"Forgiveness is a myth" and reconciliation is a process in the progress of which peace can arise. In the case of past wrongs, such as colonialism, it is often a matter of emotional suffering for the survivors and descendants. For those affected, depending on the severity of the atrocities, it is problematic to impossible to think of forgiveness. The concept of forgiveness is too meaningful and too powerful. A great achievement would already be peaceful, respectful coexistence with continuous dialogue. Nevertheless, the request for apology and forgiveness is often expressed and, unfortunately, almost always includes the expectation of fulfillment.

Forgiveness is a process towards an inner attitude and not an event. This cannot be settled by contract. It should be kept in mind that it is not about guilt, but about accepting responsibility. It is not the person affected who is obliged to apologize, but those responsible are invited to live up to their responsibility. This full acceptance of responsibility implies a willingness for compensation.

To concretize or even negotiate this compensation, of any kind, at this early stage is counterproductive. This is part of the possible subsequent dialogue if the willingness and readiness to make reparations has been recognized by those affected. This is then already a significant step.

How earnest is it with the Inviolable Dignity of the Human Being?

At the global level, countries or ethnic groups that are considered "victims" have problems asserting their need for restoration of dignity, justice and reparations. The power imbalance that usually exists prevents a dialogue at eye level. A paternalistic behavior as well as a Eurocentric and egocentric attitude is prevalent despite all proclamations of fairness, equality and humanity.

Obvious weaknesses in dealing with one's own feelings of guilt and shame make it even more difficult to accept responsibility.

Thus, maximum efforts are made to evade responsibility. The public pressure from civil society reveals that it is obviously no longer possible to prevent it, but that it only has a postponing effect.

Pathway of Apology

Apology Process in International Affairs

