

A Christian Case for Racial Reparations

Daniel Philpott

April 5, 2023

Abstract: National healing for the persistent wounds of racism, America's original sin, can be advanced through a national apology, reparations and forgiveness. The frequent practice of apologies and reparations around the world in the past generation provide precedent for such measures. Christianity's teaching of reconciliation and accompanying notions of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and atonement provide a strong moral basis for these measures and resonate with the rationales through which the United States's greatest champions of civil rights and equality have fought against racism and slavery. Because racism and slavery were supported with the sanction of the state, in the name of the collective body, measures of repair may now be performed by the state, in the name of the collective body. Questions of who pays, who receives, and what form reparations take are important ones and can be answered adequately. Through collective apology, reparations, and forgiveness, the United States would enact and renew its national covenant, acting in the tradition of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Credits: For helpful comments, I thank Therese Cory, Chris Kellerman, Ji Eun Kim, Gerard Powers, Alfred Turnipseed, and four anonymous readers and am grateful for the opportunity to present it to the Notre Dame Reparations Design and Compliance Lab, Kellogg Institute for International Studies, December 2, 2022.

It often has been said that racism is America's original sin.¹ The fierce protest and argument provoked by the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 appears to bear out this theological observation. The question of racism persists and festers, has a history dating back to the nation's origins, and involves the shared experience of the national community. Yet in Christian theology, is it not individual persons who commit sin, repent for it, do penance for it, are forgiven for it, and are healed from it? The phrase, "America's original sin," by contrast, suggests that it is a collective, a nation, that has sinned and that might seek atonement for it. Theologically speaking, is this possible? Can a nation commit sin and undertake actions to atone for it? Ought it? If so, might such actions promote healing in a time of notorious division?

Yes, I argue in answer to all these questions. In the midst of a renewed and fractious national debate about racism, it is possible, indeed urgent, for a nation, our nation, to undertake actions that redress the ever-raw wounds of racism. One such action that has garnered increased support is national reparations. Support, but also formidable opposition: White Americans consistently oppose financial reparations – only 28% favored them in 2021 – while 86% of Black Americans favored them in the same year.² I argue, though, that reparations as a collective, political measure, one form of which is political apologies, are defensible as measures for healing the wounds of

¹ An example of one who has used the phrase in the Catholic world is Bishop Robert Barron. See his "Charlottesville and America's Original Sin," August 22, 2017, find at <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/barron/charlottesville-and-americas-original-sin/>, accessed October 29, 2022.

² See Ashley V. Reichelmann and Matthew O Hunt, "How we repair it: White Americans' attitudes towards reparations," December 8, 2021, find at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/12/08/how-we-repair-it-white-americans-attitudes-toward-reparations/>, accessed October 29, 2022. The study from which they draw was conducted at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and can be found at <https://polsci.umass.edu/sites/default/files/RaceBLM100Crosstabs.pdf>, accessed October 29, 2022.

historical racial injustices that were committed through state action on behalf of the entire country. A distinctive Christian response to these wounds also would involve a sibling practice that has little track record in the affairs of nation-states but is theologically sound: forgiveness. Together reparations, apology, and forgiveness are components of a political theology of reconciliation, a Christian response to injustices that contains promise for healing our land, which is more divided than it has been in decades.³ Developing this theology, explaining how these component practices reflect and enact it, and making a case for how this theology and these practices would address America's original sin of racism are the tasks of the essay that follows.

Reparations and Its Siblings in Contemporary Global Politics

What are reparations? In today's political debates, they are ordinarily spoken of as a transfer of money, goods, and/or services from a government to a victim or group of victims as just compensation for political injustices suffered. More expansively, the Basic Principles and Guidelines approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2005 set forth four sorts of reparations. The first is restitution of liberty, human rights, citizenship, and property to the condition that the victim(s) possessed them prior to the violation of the victim(s)' human rights. The second is compensation in the form of financial payments for any "economically assessable damage." The third is rehabilitation, which entails medical care and psychological, legal, and social services. The fourth is satisfaction, which includes guarantees against recurrence of the human

³ The arguments in this paper draw heavily from Daniel Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). I discussed reparations in making arguments with respect to polarization in the United States in Daniel Philpott, "Healing the Land," *Comment*, December 16, 2021, find at <https://comment.org/healing-the-land/>, accessed October 29, 2022.

rights violations, the exposure of truth, and apology.⁴ Here, I will consider reparations of the material sort, encompassed by the first three kinds, as well as apologies, which are included in the fourth category. Along with apologies, I also advocate forgiveness, which, although it is not a form of reparation, nonetheless is closely tied to reparations, particularly to apology, which, on a Christian understanding, includes a request for forgiveness. Although forgiveness is relatively rarely voiced in today's debates, if properly understood and practiced, it would join reparations and apologies in constituting a characteristically Christian approach to healing societal injustices. These are not the only practices through which people, including political orders, respond to past injustices. Others include acknowledgment, truth-telling, judicial punishment, just wars, non-violent movements for change, and the building of institutions that restore human rights, constitutional government, and market economies. Reparations and its close cousins complement these other practices.⁵

Reparations, apology and forgiveness are representative of the “age of peacebuilding,” a worldwide expansion of practices that has taken place over the past half-century. An age of peacebuilding, to be sure, is not the same as an age of peace. Wars in Congo, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, South Sudan, Timor Leste, Ukraine, the Tigray Region of Ethiopia, and many other locales have begun, ended, and taken millions of lives since the end of the Cold War in 1989. Rather, it means that a wave of new measures for building peace has arisen within countries around the globe and through international organizations. Over forty truth commissions have formed; the International Criminal Court began operation in 2002; national tribunals have been

⁴ Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace*, 191.

⁵ Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace*, 171-174.

created to prosecute war crimes in countries such as Rwanda and Argentina; United Nations military peace operations increased multifold after 1989; museums and memorials have been built.

An expansion of reparations settlements is another instance of these practices. Reparations in politics took place earlier, to be sure. The Allied victors in World War One imposed reparations on Germany, to whom they assigned guilt for the war. After World War II, the government of the Federal Republic of Germany pledged three billion Deutschmarks to the state of Israel as reparations for survivors of the Holocaust in the Luxembourg Agreement of 1952, which remains history's largest single reparations payment. Germany has continued to pay reparations for Nazi atrocities in the intervening years, amounting to some 70 billion dollars to date.

Reparations payments, though, have become more common around the globe in recent decades. In the 1980s, Argentina extended reparations to victims of its Dirty Wars of 1974-1983, as did Chile in the 1990s to victims of the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet that reigned between 1973 and 1990. The Government of the United States paid reparations to Japanese Americans interned by the government during World War II and to African-Americans upon whom the U.S. government performed the Tuskegee experiments. Following the fall of communist dictatorships in 1989, governments in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary made efforts to compensate for property that the communist governments had confiscated. In 2006, the Government of Canada, churches, and indigenous groups agreed to pay out \$2 billion to survivors of its Indian Residential Schools. Australia's government agreed in 2021 to pay reparations to members of Australia's "stolen generation" whom the government removed from the families when they were children. As an example of a non-

governmental entity that has paid reparations, the U.S. Catholic Church has conferred more than \$3 billion in settlements upon victims of clerical sex abuse over the past several decades. These are not the only cases of reparations of the past generation, though they are among the best known.⁶

The age of peacebuilding likewise has seen a rise in political apologies, which expanded sharply in the 1990s.⁷ A political apology takes place when a leader who speaks for an entire institution (most commonly, a head of state) publicly names as wrong a misdeed committed by a previous leader or agent of that institution in the name of that institution, expresses regret for the wrong, communicates the regret to victims, accepts the institution's responsibility for the wrong, and pledges not to repeat it. Perhaps the most well-known political apologies have been those voiced by German chancellors and presidents for the crimes of the Holocaust, beginning with Chancellor Willy Brandt's *kniefall* in 1971 in Warsaw at Poland's Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, continuing through President Richard von Weizsäcker's speech to the Bundestag in 1985, and taking place again subsequently. The reparations settlements in Canada, Australia, and the United States in the cases of Japanese-Americans and African-American victims of the Tuskegee experiments were complemented by apologies delivered by these countries' heads of state. Australia has held an annual "National Sorry Day" on May 26 since 1998. Here again, these examples of political apologies are not exhaustive; the Institute for the Study of Human Rights documents 738 instances of such apologies between 1990 and 2020.⁸

⁶ This short history of reparations draws on *Just and Unjust Peace*, 191-198.

⁷ Aaron Lazare, *On Apology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6-7.

⁸ Institute for the Study of Human Rights, "Political Apologies," find at <https://www.humanrightscolumbia.org/ahda/political-apologies?>, accessed October 13, 2022.

This trend of collective apology, too, is one in which the Catholic Church has participated. During the pontificate of Pope St. John Paul II (1978-2005), following the theology of the Second Vatican Council, he issued over 100 mea culpas for at least 21 different historical episodes of injustices committed in the name of the Catholic Church, culminating in his apology of Ash Wednesday in the Jubilee Year 2000.⁹ The practice has continued. In summer 2022, for instance, Pope Francis apologized to indigenous people in Canada for wrongs that members of the Church had committed in Canada's Residential Schools system.

Forgiveness is much rarer in global politics, especially when practiced by officials, yet it too has grown in stature in the past generation. The most famous champions of forgiveness in political affairs have been Pope John Paul II and two South African leaders, President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.¹⁰ Forgiveness has

⁹ By historical injustices, I mean deeds that violate the natural law. Some were committed on the basis of principles that were thought to be legitimate at the time they were committed but later judged to be injustices. John Paul II regarded them all as injustices worthy of apology. See Luigi Accatolli, *When A Pope Asks for Forgiveness: The Mea Culpas of John Paul II*, trans. Jordan Aumann, O.P. (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 1998). For the theology of Vatican II, see *Lumen Gentium: The Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Church*, November 21, 1964, which states, “[w]hile Christ, holy, innocent and undefiled knew nothing of sin, but came to expiate only the sins of the people, the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal.” Find at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, accessed October 29, 2022. John Paul II announced a period of examination of conscience on the part of the Church in 1994, to culminate in the Jubilee Year, 2000, in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, November 10, 1994. There, he wrote: “Hence it is appropriate that, as the Second Millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*. Although she is holy because of her incorporation into Christ, the Church does not tire of doing penance: before God and man *she always acknowledges as her own her sinful sons and daughters*” (italics in original). In the next sentence, he quotes the sentence in *Lumen Gentium* quoted above. Find at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html, accessed October 29, 2022.

¹⁰ John Paul II advocated forgiveness in the political realm in John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, encyclical, 1980, sec. 14 find at <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii>

also found less well-known proponents in countries that have faced past injustices in the past generation, including South Africa, Rwanda, Uganda, Timor Leste, Sierra Leone, Northern Ireland, Poland, Chile, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere. Surveys of populations who have suffered armed conflict in Uganda, Rwanda, and Iraq show strong support for forgiveness though often accompanied by demands for other practices such as accountability.¹¹ My own study of Uganda shows high rates of performance and favor for forgiveness, as I document below.¹²

Rarely, though, has forgiveness been practiced collectively. Whereas leaders of states, churches, and other organizations have apologized and conferred reparations in the name of their entire collectivity, it is difficult to find an instance in which the leader of a victim group has responded by forgiving. Although such an act may be difficult to imagine, does Catholic theology warrant it? Might Catholics advocate it as

[ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html), accessed March 21, 2023; John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace: Offer Forgiveness and Receive Peace*, January 1, 1997, find at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121996_xxx-world-day-for-peace.html, accessed October 29, 2022; John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace: No Peace Without Justice, No Justice Without Forgiveness*, January 1, 2002, find at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20011211_xxxv-world-day-for-peace.html, accessed October 29, 2022. John Paul II forgave his assassin, Mehmet Ali Ağca, on December 27, 1983. On Tutu, see his *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999). On Mandela's forgiveness, see Lyn Graybill, *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Miracle or Model?* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 16-22.

¹¹ Phuong Pham et. al., *Forgotten Voices: A Population-Based Survey of Attitudes about Peace and Justice in Northern Uganda*, Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley and the International Center for Transitional Justice, July 2005, 8, 26, 27, 42; Phuong Pham et. al., *When the War Ends: A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes About Peace, Justice, and Social Reconstruction in Northern Uganda*, Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley and the Payson Center for International Development, Tulane University and the International Center for Transitional Justice, December 2007; Phuong Pham et. al., *Iraqi Voices: Attitudes Toward Transitional Justice and Social Reconstruction*, The International Center for Transitional Justice and the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley, 2004, 46; Timothy Longman, Phuong Pham, and Harvey M. Weinstein, "Connecting Justice to Human Experience: Attitudes Toward Accountability and Reconciliation in Rwanda," in *My Neighbor, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity*, eds. Eric Stover and Harvey M. Weinstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 220.

¹² Refugee Law Project, *Forgiveness: Unveiling an Asset for Peacebuilding*, 2015, find at https://www.refugeelawproject.org/files/others/Forgiveness_research_report.pdf, accessed October 29, 2022.

a mode of repair of injustices in societies riven by history? I argue for the possibility below.

Reparations, apology, and acts of forgiveness performed by individuals have become common occurrences in global politics, sometimes taking place in developed democracies such as Canada and Australia. These practices, then, are not without pattern or precedent but rather have garnered legitimacy and have been tested in tumultuous political orders. To advocate that they be practiced in the United States, then, is not a merely theoretical or a utopian proposal.

What, then, is the Christian case for reparations, apology, and forgiveness as practiced in the political order?

Standards of Justice

An ethic of repair begins with injustices and the wounds they leave behind. Human dignity is the core principle that is violated by the atrocities that have given rise to the age of peacebuilding – war, genocide, dictatorship, the maltreatment of indigenous peoples, and the case considered here, slavery and racial discrimination. In Christian theology, humans have dignity, or irreducible value, because they are created in the image of God, superior to other animals in their possession of reason and will. Human dignity is in turn the source of human rights, entitlements that people possess by virtue of their dignity. Dignity and the obligations to which it gives rise are the source of rights in the magisterial teaching of the Catholic Church, a logic especially pronounced in Pope St. John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris, Gaudium et Spes*,

and the writings of Pope John Paul II.¹³ That dignity is the basis of rights is also articulated in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

Racism is an injustice defined by norms that uphold rights and dignity. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops defines racism in its pastoral letter of 2018, “Open Wide Our Hearts”:

Racism arises when – either consciously or unconsciously – a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy or equal regard. When this conviction or attitude leads individuals or groups to exclude, ridicule, mistreat, or unjustly discriminate against persons on the basis of their race or ethnicity, it is sinful. Racist acts are sinful because they violate justice. They reveal a failure to acknowledge the human dignity of the persons offended, to recognize them as the neighbors Christ calls us to love (Mt. 22:39).¹⁴

Prominent here are dignity and the various behaviors against which people have a right: discrimination, exclusion, ridicule, and mistreatment.

Racism also takes the form of structural sin. Structures of sin are institutions, laws, cultures, and shared norms that legitimate and incentivize injustice. Structural sin has been a key tenet of liberation theology but also made its way into papal teaching more broadly. Pope John Paul II gave the concept a prominent place in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* in 1987 and described the

¹³ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, encyclical, 1963, find at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html, accessed October 29, 2022; Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution of the Catholic Church: Gaudium et Spes,” 1965, secs. 26 and 27, find at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, accessed October 29, 2022; Pope John Paul II, “Redemptor Hominis,” encyclical, 1979, find at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html, accessed October 29, 2022; Pope John Paul II, “Evangelium Vitae,” encyclical 1995, 5, 18, 19, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html, accessed October 29, 2022.

¹⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love: A Pastoral Letter Against Racism,” 2018, 3, find at https://www.usccb.org/resources/open-wide-our-hearts_o.pdf, accessed October 29, 2022.

“culture of death” as a structure of sin in *Evangelium Vitae* of 1995. Structures do not sin, people do. People, though, “introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove” so that the structures “grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior,” John Paul II wrote.¹⁵ With respect to racism, structures of sin are most explicit in laws that allow people to be enslaved or that deny people a right to vote, the use of public and private facilities, protection against lynching, and other basic entitlements. They are subtle but still powerful in attitudes and cultures that, for instance, deny people top positions in businesses or universities on account of their race, religion, and ethnicity.¹⁶

The Wounds of Injustice

What leaders of states and other collectives alleviate through reparations and related practices are the wounds of injustice. A wound is some form of ongoing diminishment of right relationship or damage to persons that results from an unjust act. Examples of wounds include the death of loved ones, injury from torture or abuse, loss of property or livelihood, permanent injury, trauma or other damage, the failure of fellow citizens to accompany or to acknowledge a victim's suffering, and hatred, resentment, memories, social isolation, and lack of recognition.

The most central wound is the standing victory of injustice. It is the rupture in right relationship between persons that is created by the act of injustice itself, apart from any other damage that the act inflicts. Once a serious wrong has been committed,

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, encyclical, 1987, sec. 36.

¹⁶ See Therese Scarpelli Cory, “A Thomistic Approach to Structural Racism,” *Church Life Journal*, April 26, 2022, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/a-thomistic-approach-to-structural-racism/>.

it stands as a “moral fact,” a reality that persists. The deed – the war crime, the invidious discrimination – stands victorious and unrepudiated. To take an ordinary example of a standing victory of injustice, if Bob insults Michelle, he has created a new moral fact in their relationship, one that cannot be ignored. Now, Michelle must decide: return Bob’s insult? Refuse to talk to him? Forgive him? Confront him? Even ignoring him is a willful response to the insult. Bob, for his part, may apologize, double down, claim that he was justly responding to a previous wrong, explain that he was joking, misunderstood, or acting under pressure, all of which presuppose the moral fact that his words have created. Philosopher Pamela Hieronymi expresses well the idea of the standing victory of injustice: “I suggest that a past wrong against you, standing in your history without apology, atonement, retribution, punishment, restitution, condemnation, or anything else that might recognize it as a *wrong*, makes a claim. It says, in effect, that you can be treated in this way, and that such treatment is acceptable.”¹⁷

People’s ordinary responses to injustice often reveal their recognition of and concern about the standing victory of injustice. Again, to take an ordinary example, imagine that four-year-old Teddy envies his playmate Patrick’s truck, rashly seizes it from Patrick, and in the process elbows Patrick in the face and knocks him to the floor. Teddy’s mother steps in, swiftly retrieves the truck from Teddy and returns it to Patrick, comforts Patrick, salves his wounds, and reprimands Teddy, firmly teaching him the malice of such contumely. This is not enough, though, Teddy’s mother believes. Teddy must renounce his unruly deed by apologizing and performing some gesture of repair towards Patrick, perhaps giving Tommy a hug or donating a piece of his candy collection

¹⁷ Pamela Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXII, no. 3 (May, 2001), 546. Italics in original.

to Tommy. It is essential that Teddy take these actions, she believes, and not merely that Patrick receive his truck back, Teddy be taught a lesson for the future, and the like. Teddy must remediate the wrong for which he is responsible, that is, dismantle the standing victory of injustice. The act itself, at least for the moment, has sundered the boys' friendship, the right relationship by which they each expect that the other will respect his possessions.

Similar kinds of judgments can be found towards grave political crimes, judgments that will point us towards how to view racism's legacy. Law enforcement officials in European countries arrested Nazi war criminals as late as the 1990s, long after the Nazis had been defeated and at a time when these criminals had grown old. Human rights activists sought the trial of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet well after he had left office and was elderly and infirm. Their cry, "no more impunity," communicates what they and the Nazi hunters thought was at stake: the fact that the deeds of these criminals had not been shorn of their legitimacy, the victory that still stood.

Closely related to the standing victory of injustice is the moral status of the wrongdoer that her wrongdoing creates – a status of indebtedness. Old Testament scholar Gary A. Anderson has argued that the Bible came to describe sin in the language of debt in the Old Testament from the fifth through the second century BCE and on into the New Testament: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," teaches Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (6:12).¹⁸ Economic debt is the Bible's metaphor for the moral debt that a wrongdoer owes to the people whom she wronged.

¹⁸ Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 27-54.

Debt for sin can also be grasped through plain reason as an axiomatic insight. When a person commits a wrong, he now owes something to his victim(s). In the case of a wrong that is also a crime, he also owes something to his fellow citizens, who also are bound by the law, which expresses right relationship between them. The wrongdoer is indebted to his victim(s), and also to his fellow citizens, because he has created a tear in his relationship with them, a tear that is constituted by the moral fact of the standing victory of injustice. He is responsible for this wound; thus he is the one who owes something. Those whom he wronged possess a corresponding right to his performing actions that will discharge this debt to them. What these actions are, what he owes them, are usually apology, undergoing punishment, restitution, or some combination of these. What is important for the moment is that the wrongdoer is indebted because – and *only* because – he has created the moral fact of the standing victory of injustice.

Besides the standing victory of injustice, tied to the wrongdoer's guilt for the deed itself, though, injustice also creates other wounds. There are wounds to the person of victims, including death, the loss of loved ones, permanent injury, grief, humiliation, trauma, sexual violation; the loss of wealth, property, and livelihood; involuntary separation from family; the demeaning of a victim on account of her race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or gender; and other impairments to flourishing. There is the wound of social isolation, or lack of acknowledgment of the victim's suffering, expressed by South African political philosopher Andre du Toit: "For the victims, [the effective refusal to acknowledge atrocities and violations in public] is a redoubling of the basic violation: the literal violation consists of the actual pain, suffering, and trauma visited on them; the political violation consists in the refusal (publicly) to

acknowledge it.”¹⁹ Further, an old idea in the Christian tradition, also sounded by Plato, is that an injustice’s greatest damage is to the soul of the wrongdoer. “His soul is in jeopardy as his victim’s is not,” writes philosopher Herbert Morris.²⁰ Recognition of this wound prepares the way for mutual ministry between victim and perpetrator, a relationship of solidarity rather than domination. Like the standing victory of injustice, these wounds are rifts in right relationship. Though they may be suffered mainly by individuals, unlike a disease, they are the result of egregious mistreatment at the hands of others. Like the standing victory of injustice, they persist in memory if unhealed.

Injustices, then, inflict wounds that consist both of the standing victory of injustice, which arises from the act itself, and of additional forms of damage. This distinction concurs with the Catholic Church’s theology of sin and penance. Sin results in guilt, which is incurred by the act itself, as well as in disorders to the soul of the sinner, broken relationships with others, and material, psychological, and spiritual forms of damage. In the sacrament of reconciliation, the priest absolves the penitent of her sins, thereby removing the guilt incurred by the act, while separately prescribing a penance, through which the disorders from the sin are gradually healed. As we shall see, both kinds of wounds – the standing victory of injustice and the various resultant forms of damage and disorder – define the legacy of racism that demands to be redressed.

Collective Wounds

¹⁹ André du Toit, “The Moral Foundation of the South African TRC: Truth as Acknowledgment and Justice as Recognition,” in *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*, eds. Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 132.

²⁰ Herbert Morris, “A Paternalistic Theory of Punishment,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1981), 268.

Wounds become all the more relevant to the legacies of racism and other evils committed in the political realm in light of their collective dimension. Some injustices carry two dimensions, an individual one and a collective one. These are injustices that members of organizations commit in the name of that organization – under authority, in uniform, acting on behalf of the state, the army, the company, the church, the team. To be sure, it is individual perpetrators, acting deliberately, who commit these injustices. They bear varying levels of responsibility and culpability depending on their position in the chain of command, to what degree they initiated or planned the injustices, and what level of duress they were under. Still, every individual who commits or helps to commit an injustice on behalf of an organization bears some level of responsibility and guilt for his actions.

This sort of injustice also has a collective dimension. When the organization is a state, perpetrators of injustice act under the authority of, in the name of, and in cooperation with the political order and its purposes. This is most obviously the case when the perpetrator is a head of state but is also true when the perpetrator is far lower in the hierarchy and acts under the authority of an official or a commander. It is also true when a legislator passes a law that promotes injustice or when an official enforces such a law. When this person commits an injustice – wearing a uniform, working for the state – the collective also commits an injustice. Victims discern this collective dimension all too clearly. Contrast a massacre in a civil war with an armed robbery; the government's promotion of medical experiments on African Americans with a private doctor's culpable misdiagnosis; a legally sanctioned slave auction with a religious cult leader's captivity of a brainwashed member. In each of the former

cases, the victim of the injustice is violated doubly, not only by the perpetrator's harm to her but also by the state's sanction of actions from which she has a right to protection by that very state, whose duty is to uphold justice.

Each dimension of this sort of injustice, both individual and collective, leaves in its wake a standing victory. The possibility of pursuing a remedial response to this injustice, though, differs in each dimension. With respect to the individual dimension only the perpetrator of the injustice can apologize, offer restitution, or undergo punishment to atone for the injustice insofar as she was responsible for it. Her standing to remediate the individual dimension dies with her. The collective dimension, however, lives on, indeed as long as the collective does. The crime of Germany, the United States, the Catholic Church, or Exxon, committed by someone acting in its name, lives on as long as there is a Germany, a United States, a Catholic Church, or Exxon. Victims of these crimes, or descendants who rightfully act in the victims' name, then, call for a redress of these crimes on behalf of leaders who speak for these collective entities. They do so even while the perpetrators who committed the crimes, and sometimes even the regime or the constitutions under which they acted, have long disappeared. Thus, heads of the Federal Republic of Germany have apologized for the crimes of Nazi leaders, while many people believe that the current leaders of the Republic of Turkey ought to apologize for the Turkish government and army's genocide against Armenians in 1915, and that the United States government ought to apologize for slavery, Jim Crow, and other discriminatory laws. The same conviction about the collective dimension of injustice underlies historical cycles of

revenge in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Kashmir, Rwanda, Israel and Palestine, and many other sites of violence – unless action to heal the wounds of history is taken.²¹

A Response of Reconciliation

“The evil of racism festers in part because, as a nation, there has been very limited formal acknowledgment of the harm done to so many, no moment of atonement, no national process of national reconciliation and, all too often a neglect of our history,” the United States Catholic Bishops write in “Open Wide Our Hearts.”²² What does a moment of atonement, a national process of national reconciliation, and formal acknowledgment involve? More broadly, what is an apposite Christian response to the wounds of injustice?

God’s definitive response to sin is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through which God defeats sin and death and inaugurates the restoration of the entire world. The New Testament describes this response as reconciliation, a term that the Apostle Paul uses 13 times to describe the saving action of Jesus in the cross and resurrection. The Old Testament prefigures God’s reconciliation through several images and episodes, most vividly in Second Isaiah, in which God restores Israel after its exile in Babylon for its sins, a restoration in which a suffering servant plays a starring role. This restoration is holistic, involving “all things,” as Paul writes in

²¹ Something akin to the distinction between the collective dimension and the individual dimension of injustices is expressed in the International Theological Commission’s document, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, December 1999, sec. 5.1, which distinguishes between the objective responsibility and the subjective responsibility for an injustice. It is the objective responsibility that lives on, while the subjective responsibility dies with the perpetrator. Find at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-its_en.html#Some%20Ethical%20Criteria, accessed October 27, 2022.

²² “Open Wide Our Hearts,” p. 10. On reconciliation, see also, *What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization From the Black Bishops of the United States* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1984); Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0: Moving Communities Into Unity, Wholeness, and Justice* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2020).

Colossians, meaning the entire “heavens and earth,” including its political orders (1:16). Launched by Christ’s resurrection, the restoration will be consummated at the end of time.

Followers of Christ are called to participate in God’s reconciliation of the world by becoming “ambassadors of reconciliation.” “Now all [new] things are from God,” writes Paul, “who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their wrongdoings against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5: 18-11). Because reconciliation involves the entire creation, including its social and political orders, Christians who accept the call to reconciliation seek the transformation of these orders. God “so loved the world,” and so should we.

God’s reconciliation of the world, and our participation in it, are virtually the same as what the Bible describes as justice. This will surprise many readers of the Bible, especially Westerners, who are accustomed to thinking of justice as the constant will to render another his due, a concept that emanates from Roman Law and has evolved into a notion of justice that centers on rights. Rights, especially natural rights and human rights, are an important part of justice and have a strong place in the Catholic tradition and in the social teachings of many Protestant churches. Justice in the Bible, though, is wider than rights and is understood best through the words *sedeq* (or its feminine equivalent, *sedeqah*) in Hebrew and *dikaionune* in Greek, which translate to comprehensive right relationship. In contemporary English bibles, these words are often translated as righteousness, but in the Latin Vulgate, Christianity’s bible for 1000 years, they are rendered as *justitia*

(or a cognate), in Romance language bibles, as a close translation of justice, and in the English Douay-Rheims Bible, as justice. Justice is God's establishment and restoration of comprehensive right relationship in the world and is also human participation in this work, including in political and social orders.²³

In the aftermath of massive injustices, humans carry out the work of reconciliation, the justice of restoring right relationship, through practices that aim to address the wounds of injustice. The wounds are severances in right relationship; the practices aim to restore persons and relationships. There are several of these practices, each of which addresses a different set of wounds in a different way. One is acknowledgment, which seeks to learn the truth about past injustices and to convey recognition and empathy for victims of injustice. Another is "restorative punishment," which brings accountability to perpetrators so as to restore right relationship among everyone involved in a crime. It reflects what is known as "restorative justice" and accomplishes what the Catechism states as the purpose of punishment, "to redress the disorder caused by the offense."²⁴ A separate practice is the building and reform of laws and institutions so as to protect and promote everyone's dignity. Still other practices are reparations, apology, and forgiveness, the subjects of the analysis at hand.

Apologies

In the case of apologies and reparations, it is the collective dimension of a standing political injustice for which a head of state (or another body speaking

²³ The arguments about justice here are drawn from Daniel Philpott, "There Is a Wideness in God's Justice," *Nova et Vetera* Vol. 18, 4 (Fall 2020), 1147-1179; and Daniel Philpott, "Resurrecting Justice," *Journal of Moral Theology* Vol. 11, 1 (2022), 167-192. For a shorter version, see Daniel Philpott, "The Eucharist is Justice," *Church Life Journal*, March 24, 2022, find at <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-eucharist-is-justice/>, accessed October 29, 2022.

²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 2266.

authoritatively for the state such as a legislature) may apologize even though she may not have committed or presided over the one who committed the injustice. The constitution or laws of her state (or basic rules of another organization) give her standing to speak for the political order. The President of Chile, Patricio Aylwin, thus declared, “I dare – as President of the Republic – to assume representation of the entire nation in begging forgiveness from the victim’s relatives,” when he apologized to the victims of General Augusto Pinochet on behalf of all Chileans in 1991.²⁵

A head of state who apologizes presides over the same collective as the perpetrator head of state yet within a successor administration, regime or constitution, and may have no additional tie to the perpetrator leader. It is also possible that the boundaries or makeup of the governed people may have shifted. For instance, between 1949 and 1990, the Federal Republic of Germany, whose chancellors and presidents articulated apologies, did not encompass millions of Germans who had lived under the Nazi regime but ended up outside of Germany’s borders after the war, either through partition or exile. Such demographic metamorphoses do not negate the existence of an ongoing nation or political association, in this case, Germany, for which a head of state has standing to speak. Finally, the fact that many citizens of an apologizing state will be ones who bear little or no responsibility for the crime does not diminish the authority of the head of state to apologize on behalf of the collective. It was the entire collective whose authority was brandished in the committing of the crime, the collective in whom the injustice stands victorious, and in whose name the apology must be delivered. All citizens of the collective, then, may rightly participate in the collective apology – give

²⁵ Quoted in Ernesto Verdeja, “Official Apologies in the Aftermath of Political Violence,” *Metaphilosophy* 41, no. 4 (2010), 576.

their assent to, echo, attend the ceremony – even though they may bear no individual guilt.

Conversely, the victims to whom an apology is directed may not have suffered directly from the crime yet possess a standing to receive the apology on account of the tie established by their membership in the group to which they belong. Just as political crimes may have both a collective and an individual dimension, so, too, such crimes are often targeted at people because of their group membership. Killed, tortured, displaced, or discriminated against are Jews, Tutsis, Ukrainians, Maoris, African Americans, Communists, and bourgeois. Philosopher Trudy Govier makes a distinction between primary victims, who are directly harmed by a crime; secondary victims, who are friends and family members of the primary victims; and tertiary victims, who are members of the same community – national, ethnic, religious, political – as the primary victims and may include members of future generations.²⁶ Secondary victims suffer wounds from the crime themselves; they lose a friend or a family member. It is tertiary victims who may receive an apology on account of their membership in the attacked group even if they or their loved ones were not attacked. I was not sent to a concentration camp, a Jew living in contemporary Germany, Israel, or the United States might say, but I accept an apology to Jews insofar as Jews were attacked because they were Jews, a group to which I belong.

How does a political apology address a society's wounds of injustice and thus aim to bring about reconciliation? Most of all, it negates the standing victory of a collective injustice. The spokesperson for the state, speaking on behalf of the people, declares that

²⁶ Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 93.

the laws or actions that violated the rights of their victims were unjust in light of the norms that the political order now professes. When the one who is authorized to speak for the political order decries an injustice, she shears its legitimacy in a way that nobody else can. A good apology declares that the victims of these injustices were violated in their dignity and that they are now full citizens in good standing; expresses remorse; communicates this remorse to the victim; accepts the state's responsibility; and commits the state to ensuring that the violations are not repeated. Apology also confers recognition upon victims and endorses their full membership in the political community as equals. It invites victims to give their support for a political order whereas they previously may have been alienated. Members of the polity – individuals and organizations – who are not or do represent victims are free to support or oppose the apology, as they are towards any law or policy of the regime in a democracy. The more they support the apology, though, the more effective it will be.

Apologies are not always effective, meaning well-received by and unifying of a population.²⁷ Japan, for instance, did not apologize for its war crimes during World War II until the 1990s, and when prime ministers did so, the apologies elicited a backlash from nationalists. Japan's crimes continued to be misrepresented in history textbooks while Japanese leaders continued to commemorate Japanese war dead over foreign victims. By contrast, state apologies in countries such as Germany and Australia have elicited a strong popular consensus in support of them.²⁸ In a careful comparative study of the conditions under which apologies are likely to be well received, political scientist

²⁷ Jennifer Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 179-98.

²⁸ On Germany, see David Art, *The Politics of the Nazi Past in the Two Germanies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 145-175. On Australia, see Ji Eun Kim, "Good and Bad Apologies: Determinants of Successful State Apologies" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2017), 88-136.

Ji Eun Kim finds that four factors are important. First, the apology is performed in a satisfactory manner, consisting of sincere language, a strong ceremony, and the high political rank of the official uttering the apology. Second, the performer of the apology is consistent in his behavior. If he apologizes to a given class of victims he must not act to undermine their welfare in another manner. Third, the apology is not associated with conspicuous opportunism, for instance, an imminent election or temporary advantage in building a political coalition. Fourth, there is communication and interaction with the victims. The best received apologies are ones that follow careful negotiation with representatives of victim groups.²⁹

Material Reparations

Apologies, again, may be thought of as reparations. Other forms of reparations involve a transfer of some mixture of money, goods, and services from the state to groups of victims or their representatives. Morally speaking, these material forms of reparations do much of what apologies do. They are conferred by the one who has standing to speak for the collective; they negate the standing victory of injustice; they confer acknowledgment upon victims; they expand the legitimacy of a just regime; and the citizens of the collective are free to support or oppose them. They differ, though, in remediating victims through material payment. These forms of reparations are apologies materially fortified.

The premise behind material reparations is that some set of victims suffers economically, bodily, or psychologically on account of an injustice. The damage may take the form of lost wealth, property, economic opportunity, educational opportunity,

²⁹ Kim, "Good and Bad Apologies: Determinants of Successful State Apologies," 210.

or psychological health; trauma; loss of loved ones; and other forms of injury.

Reparations are remedial. They involve restitution, which seeks to approximate what was lost, or compensation, which renders payment for losses whose amounts are less easily calculated. That a victim has suffered material loss on account of an injustice is critical to the moral logic of reparations. In this sense, recipients are determined more strictly than they are with respect to apologies. The recipient of an apology may be deemed a member of a community in which victims were targeted as members of that community – Jews, Tutsis, Native Americans – even though the one receiving the apology is a secondary or tertiary victim. Material forms of reparations, though, are given to sufferers of material loss, ones who can demonstrate this suffering. The suffering need not be direct. The child whose parent was permanently injured or killed, or was denied an opportunity for education or employment on account of an injustice, can claim also to have suffered materially. It is not enough, though, simply to be a member of a group.

In cases of large-scale political injustices, whose victims number in the thousands, it is impossible to determine the proper amount of restitution or compensation for each individual victim as a civil trial aspires to do. Reparations instead will be paid to classes of victims. Material suffering remains the criterion for receipt of reparations and there may be methods for determining eligibility – perhaps a person must show that she was tortured or that her indigenous father was removed from her homeland and family – but these will often be rough and general when a mass scale is involved.

The difficulty of such determinations leads political philosopher Jeremy Waldron to be skeptical of reparations, especially when claimants are descendants of victims of

long previous injustices. Historical counterfactuals are dubious: How do we determine how much worse off a claimant of reparations is because his great great grandfather was a slave or had his land seized? Had the event not taken place, how do we know what would have happened to this ancestor's financial fortunes? Relatedly, Waldron argues that historical injustices may be "overtaken by events in a way that means their injustice has been superseded." An unjust event several generations ago may be superseded by subsequent events that also affect what people are entitled to, events that accumulate over time so as increasingly to flood over the force and effect of the original injustice. What matters for justice, Waldron argues, are the claims of the living, the people who presently put forth needs, entitlements, and claims.³⁰

Waldron's arguments – that it is difficult to make a causal connection between current conditions and past injustices, and that subsequent events often supersede injustices – are valid in many cases of historical injustices, especially the farther back in time that the injustices take place. Yet in other case, current conditions are far more demonstrably attributable to past injustices, and far less discernibly superseded by subsequent injustices, than Waldron allows. Many of the reparations claims made around the world in the past generation's "age of peacebuilding" are put forth by direct victims. Other claims can be asserted plausibly by the children of victims, say, of the internment of Japanese-Americans, the Nazi Holocaust, or racial discrimination in the United States up to the mid-1960s. It is entirely plausible to attribute vast inequalities in wealth, position, and opportunity faced by African-Americans today to historical injustices faced within the past two generations, as is argued further below.

³⁰ Jeremy Waldron, "Superseding Historical Injustice," *Ethics* 103, no. 1 (1992), 4-28; and Jeremy Waldron, "Settlement, Return, and the Supersession Thesis," *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 5, No. 2 (2004): 237-268. The quote is found in the latter piece, 240.

Forgiveness

In the penitential practice of the Church, repentance, apology, and restitution are the actions of sinners, while forgiveness is enjoined upon those sinned against. If apology and reparations may be practiced at the collective, political, level, may also forgiveness?

Of the practices in the age of peacebuilding, forgiveness is the least lauded by the community of activists, scholars, and international officials who are involved. They ignore forgiveness or criticize it for burdening victims or for being too religious.³¹ Yet, Christian reconciliation can hardly ignore it. Jesus commands forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount and later in the Gospel of Matthew when he tells Peter to forgive seventy-times-seven times and follows with a stark parable about a servant whose crippling debt is forgiven by his king yet who refuses to forgive his own debtor, earning him debtor's prison. The New Testament describes the Cross as the event where Jesus forgave his executors and through which Jesus forgives humanity its sins. Forgiveness is central to God's reconciliation of the world to himself.

In the age of peacebuilding, it is mostly individuals, speaking for themselves, who have practiced forgiveness. True, South African President Nelson Mandela forgave his jailer under apartheid and commended forgiveness to South Africans, but he did not perform forgiveness in the name of South Africans as a head of state. Rarely if ever has a head of state spoken for a state in forgiving another collective who wronged that state and its members. One example of collective, mutual, apology and forgiveness took place

³¹ These criticisms of forgiveness in contemporary transitional justice contexts is articulated by Thomas J. Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue: Jean Améry and the Refusal to Forgive* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 1.

in 1965 between the Catholic bishops of Poland and Germany covering the entire history of the two peoples and especially the events of the Second World War. A pivotal leader of the Polish bishops in this endeavor was Archbishop Karol Wojtyla, later Pope John Paul II.³² The latter event suggests that in Christian theology, collective forgiveness is warranted.

In the Bible, forgiveness is a victim's relinquishment of moral debt towards a wrongdoer, accompanied by an expression of will towards the wrongdoer's renewal through repentance and reform. In forgiving, a victim chooses to adopt a new standing construal of the wrongdoer. Forgiveness practiced by Christians models Jesus' forgiveness on the Cross, which not only cancels the debt of sin but is also a part of Jesus' renewal of the sinner. Forgiveness is also taught in other religious traditions such as Judaism and Islam, though both traditions place relatively greater emphasis on the requirement of prior apology, and can also find justification in natural law.³³

If an apology might be delivered by a head of state who was not a direct victim of the wrongdoing, and if the recipients of an apology might be a group of victims that is spoken for by a leader and includes secondary and tertiary victims, why cannot forgiveness be conducted by an authorized spokesperson for a group of victims? To be sure, no person may speak on behalf of another victim in forgiving a wrongdoer for an injustice against that victim. Rather, a secondary or tertiary victim may forgive the harm that an injustice has inflicted on her – say, a mother for the hardship that the murder of her son has caused her, or a member of an ethnic community for the harm that an

³² Luigi Accattoli, *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness*, 49-50.

³³ On forgiveness in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, see Daniel Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace*, 274-276. Pope John Paul II claims that forgiveness can be a natural virtue in "No Peace Without Justice, No Justice Without Forgiveness," sec. 8.

injustice has done to the community. So, too, the spokesperson for a group, even one who has not suffered an injustice directly, might forgive another collective, its leader and its members, for the injustice committed against the victim group. In doing so, this spokesperson acts on behalf of her collective in conferring forgiveness, adopting the new construal of the wrongdoer group as being no longer morally indebted. In fact, heads of state adopt standing construals of other states and collectives regularly. They speak of them as enemies, rivals, allies, and trusted trading partners and call for remembering their past crimes, their generous favor, or their friendship. If they adopt these standing construals, they can also confer forgiveness. As is true for apology and reparations, the members of a group are at liberty to support, oppose, or remain neutral towards the spokesperson's act of forgiveness.

Forgiveness in its own way defeats the standing victory of injustice. The practitioner of forgiveness names the injustice and seeks to overcome it as an obstacle to good relations between his collective and a perpetrator collective. Forgiveness is thus an act of peacebuilding, one that can apply the brakes to cycles of revenge, which may persist for centuries. True, forgiveness is sometimes abused, particularly when it is pressured upon victims or proposed in the absence of other measures of justice. It is justly practiced when it is accompanied by other practices of peacebuilding all of which aim to fulfill the rights and alleviate the wounds of victims: acknowledgment, judicial punishment, reparations, apology, the fighting of justice wars, and the building of just institutions. Here, it is meant to accompany a national apology and reparations. Yet, it is not a utopian practice and does in fact take place in politics, even in the aftermath of violence. In a study I conducted of forgiveness in the aftermath of armed conflict, I surveyed 640 residents of war-torn regions of Uganda and learned that 68 percent of

victims of violence reported having practiced forgiveness and that 86 percent of respondents favored the practice of forgiveness even in settings of nightmarish violence. In speaking with forgivers in focus groups and interviews, the vast majority of whom were Christian, I learned that while forgiveness was not facile or automatic, people had been healed and strengthened by it and viewed it as an act of building peace.³⁴ Although forgiveness has little track record on the collective level, that alone is not an argument against it. The same could be said for truth commissions and the International Criminal Court until recently. Conceptually, the way is clear for collective forgiveness.

Reparations for Racial Injustice in the United States

What is the case for reparations, including apology, and their twin practice, forgiveness in the matter of racial injustice in the United States? The focus here will be on practices on the part of the government to redress injustices towards African-Americans in United States history. As collective wrongs, these injustices are in some way sanctioned by law – congressional or state legislation, or administrative practice among public officials at federal, state and local levels – and thus enacted by officials who have a moral responsibility for upholding justice in a community. Meriting to be addressed are also other injustices, those against native Americans, Latino Americans, and Chinese Americans, for instance, and other collectivities who may be complicit in the injustices, say business corporations or families. Public injustices towards African-Americans are chosen both to illustrate the argument and because these are among the largest class of injustices in U.S. history.

³⁴ “Forgiveness: Unveiling An Asset for Peacebuilding.”

Proponents for reparations for African Americans have advanced proposals for several decades. Congressman John Conyers annually introduced H.R. 40, the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, from 1989 up until his death in 2019. At that point, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee took up the lead sponsorship of the bill and mobilized a coalition of over 300 groups in its favor. On April 14, 2021, the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee voted to move the bill to the House floor for full consideration. The bill proposes to establish a commission to study slavery and discrimination, a step towards actual reparations. Reparations efforts have also been advanced in California and in several U.S. cities.³⁵ The House of Representatives in 2008 and the Senate in 2009 passed resolutions apologizing for slavery, but no joint congressional resolution came about, while both resolutions remained relatively obscure.³⁶

What are the injustices that African-Americans have suffered? First and foremost is slavery, which was first legal in American colonies in 1619 and remained so in U.S. states through 1865. At its core, slavery is a gravely unjust practice because it involves one human being owning another, treating her as a possession, forcing her to work without pay and depriving her of her freedom of action.³⁷ It was chattel slavery that was

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Historical Progress on U.S. Slavery Reparations Bill,” April 15, 2021, find at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/15/historic-progress-us-slavery-reparations-bill>, accessed October 22, 2022. An important development in and source of momentum for reparations was the publication of Ta-Nehesi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014, find at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>, accessed October 29, 2022.

³⁶ NBC News, “Congress must officially apologize for slavery before America can think about reparations,” August 30, 2019, find at <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/congress-must-officially-apologize-slavery-america-can-think-about-reparations-ncna1047561>, accessed October 29, 2022.

³⁷ Contemporary Catholic condemnations of slavery can be found in “Gaudium et Spes,” sec. 27 and Pope John Paul II, “Veritatis Splendor,” August 6, 1993, sec. 80, find at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html, accessed October 29, 2022.

practiced in the American colonies and then states, a far more severe and demeaning form than that practiced in ancient times, involving harsh labor, whippings, rape, torture, murder, the separation of husbands and wives from each other and their children, and the malnutrition and forced labor of children. It is estimated that 10 million slaves lived in the United States between 1619 and 1865, 40% of whom were living at the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War in 1861, and that they contributed 410 billion hours of labor.³⁸

Second, after the Civil War, especially after Reconstruction ended in 1877, Jim Crow laws were passed in seventeen states and remained in force until 1965. Legalizing discrimination, these laws mandated separate and unequal public facilities, schools and transportation; prohibited interracial marriage; prevented African-Americans from voting through measures such as the poll tax, rules governing voter registration and elections, literacy tests, and requirements pertaining to residency and record-keeping; and widely prevented African-Americans from running for office. Officials also selectively enforced laws against or refrained from prosecuting actions that intimidated voters and candidates in elections, seized property, and stymied African-Americans' efforts to progress economically through working a small farm, owning a business, building a school, or forming a trade union. Wage theft was common, as was land theft, which one study estimated to include 406 victims and 24,000 acres valued at tens of

³⁸ J. David Hacker, "From '20 and odd' to 10 million: the growth of the slave population in the United States," *Slavery & Abolition*, 41:4, 2020, 840-855, DOI: [10.1080/0144039X.2020.1755502](https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2020.1755502). Estimates of hours of slave labor vary greatly and depend on counting methodology. Jason Hickel argues that the total hours between 1619 and 1865 is 222,505,049 in *The Divide: Global Inequality from Conquest to Free Markets* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), quoted in Brennanna Hare and Doug Criss, "Six questions about slavery reparations, answered," August 15, 2020, find at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/15/us/slavery-reparations-explanation-trnd/index.html>, accessed October 29, 2022.

millions of dollars.³⁹ The whole system was sustained by fear, most of all by fear of lynching. More than 4000 African-American men, women, and children across 800 different counties in the U.S. were lynched between 1877 and 1950.⁴⁰

The third form of injustice consisted of federal laws passed in the New Deal and the Fair Deal that were designed and administered vastly to exclude African-Americans and thus perpetuated and widened racial disparities in wealth, education, home ownership, and opportunities to hold a job or start a business. Let us call this injustice “distributive discrimination.” The largest government-mandated economic transfers in U.S. history took place through the Social Security Act (1935) and the G.I. Bill (1944), while contemporaneous laws provided unemployment compensation, expanded the minimum wage, and modernized unions. The G.I. Bill alone conferred some \$95 billion between 1955 and 1971. Yet, these programs were written – deliberately at the behest of Southern Democratic Senators – so as to confer their resources on whites and to direct them away from African-Americans to a vastly disproportionate extent; placed the administration of these laws in the hands of local officials who exercised this discriminatory transfer, especially in the South, where three in four African-Americans in the U.S. lived; and omitted anti-discrimination provisions.⁴¹ Similar in spirit, between the 1940s and 1960s, a time when home ownership in the U.S. was expanding sharply among the population, cities across the U.S. practiced “red-lining” policies under the auspices of the Federal Housing Administration and the Home Owner’s Loan

³⁹ Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”

⁴⁰ Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* (3d Ed., 2017), find at <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>, accessed October 29, 2022. Most lynchings were conducted by private actors but they were typically unprosecuted by the state. It is in this sense that they are a public, collective injustice.

⁴¹ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: The Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 22-23.

Corporation that made it comparatively difficult for African-American families to purchase a home. As a result, African-American ghettos and de facto segregation in residence widened and became more entrenched.⁴² Although this distributive discrimination is not as widely taught or known as slavery and Jim Crow, its effects on present inequalities and residential separation are at least as great.

An ethic of political reconciliation first asks: What are the enduring wounds of these injustices? Central is their standing victory, created by the acts of injustice themselves – a persistent moral fact that stands as a wound to right relationship in the polity. The injustices are collective, political ones, perpetrated by laws and by government officials whose duty is to uphold the common good, which includes justice.⁴³ Even after the laws were repealed or superseded and the officials who brutally discriminated are dead, the collectives in whose name and on whose behalf the injustices were committed remains. A person or body who possesses the standing to speak in the name of this collective order – a president, a governor, Congress, a state legislature, or local official – therefore may perform an act that authentically negates the injustices and reaffirms and fortifies the principles that the state now upholds on behalf of the political order. By contrast, thousands of acts of racism that individuals committed, but not with the authority of the state, are ones whose standing victory dies with the individual. It is the collective injustices for which one who speaks in the name of the collective may atone, potentially joined by the free assent of members of the collectivity.

⁴² Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”

⁴³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, secs. 1807, 1928.

Do collective racial injustices in U.S. history continue to stand victorious? In significant ways, to be sure, state action has repudiated them. In President Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, he argued that the hundreds of thousands of deaths in the Civil War were an atonement for slavery:

Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword as was said three thousand years ago so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, ratified between 1865 and 1870, outlawed slavery and other pervasive forms of discrimination through the supreme law of the land. Public schools teach that slavery is a colossal injustice, while officials have condemned it through speeches repeatedly over the years. The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both passed by the U.S. Congress, outlawed Jim Crow laws, while the Fair Housing Act of 1968 sought to outlaw redlining. Affirmative action measures since the late 1960s have been justified in part as a remediation for injustices. In other respects, though, official acts since 1865 have sustained, not repudiated, the standing victory of injustice. The widespread adoption of Jim Crow laws in seventeen states curtailed the Constitution's repudiation of slavery as did the distributive injustices of the middle twentieth century.

This balance of laws and principles, though, falls short of the explicit, public, authoritative repudiation of and contrition for evil acts that apologies and other forms of reparations serve to communicate. The acts through which colossal injustice was performed in the name of the collective – those of legislators who passed unjust laws

and of officials who used their powers of enforcement to uphold the injustice (and refrained from using it to enforce against the injustice) – are not negated alone by laws and principles that assert the contrary of the injustices, notwithstanding their value in this negation. It is the acts themselves that must be renounced, expressed sorrow for, and remediated. Implicit in apologies that leaders have recently performed around the world is the conviction that they were warranted over and above the fact that their collectives had adopted laws and espoused principles that superseded the previous injustices. Presidents and chancellors of Germany saw fit to apologize for the crimes of Nazi Germany, and Germany continued to offer reparations for the injustices that the Nazis committed against their victims, long after the Federal Republic had established a constitution that outlawed the Nazis' crimes and affirmed the principles that the Nazis had flouted. Pope John Paul II apologized for actions committed in the name of the Catholic Church over and above the Church's affirmation, sometimes through centuries of teaching, of the principles in whose light the actions are shown to be evil.

In addition to the standing victory of racial injustices, other wounds persist as a result of these injustices. Perhaps most dramatic is the wealth gap between African-Americans and whites, which adjusted for household size, is about \$350,000 per individual, according to William A. Darity and A. Kirsten Mullen. While the size of the gap differs along the scale of wealth among the population, Darity and Mullen point that "significant relative differences exist at all points along the income distribution." For instance, the poorest white households, those in the bottom 20% of the nation's income distribution, possess a higher median amount of wealth than the entirety of African

American households combined. This divergence is not only a salient indicator of inequality but is much harder to eliminate than other forms of gaps such as income.⁴⁴

Further, in a country that has one of the world's highest percentage of its population in prison, African-Americans are imprisoned at six times the rate of whites and in 2014 made up 2.3 million, or 34% of the total U.S. population, in prison.⁴⁵ Middle-class African-Americans have worse health profiles than working-class whites. Highly educated African-Americans with high incomes and no criminal record are less likely to be called back for a job interview than white people with a criminal record. African-Americans are less likely to obtain a home loan than White Americans, even when having the same credit score, or have their home appraised at equal value, even controlling for other relevant factors.⁴⁶ They are disadvantaged in buying or selling a house, opening a bank account, and gaining employment, and disproportionately pulled over by police officers, arrested for low levels of offense, and wrongfully convicted of serious crimes, disparities that are not explainable apart from racism, sociologists such as Brandon Vaidyanathan, and Michael Emerson and George Yancey, have concluded after surveying a wide range of empirical studies.⁴⁷ While African-Americans have

⁴⁴ William A. Darity and A. Kirsten Mullen, *From Here to Equality: Reparations For Black Americans in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), xii. Another study found that in 2016, the net worth of a typical white family was \$171,000 while that of an African-American family was \$17,150. See Kriston McIntosh, Emily Moss, Ryan Nunn, and Jay Shambaugh, "Examining the Black-white wealth gap," February 27, 2020, find at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>, accessed on October 29, 2022. Darity and Mullen discuss reasons for different estimates, including judging from the median rather than the mean. See xii.

⁴⁵ The Sentencing Project, "Growth in Mass Incarceration," 2020, find at <https://www.sentencingproject.org/research/>, accessed October 29, 2022.

⁴⁶ Rashawn Ray, "Is the United States a Racist Country?," May 4, 2021, find at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/05/04/is-the-united-states-a-racist-country/>, accessed October 29, 2022.

⁴⁷ Emerson, Michael O., and George Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Toward a Mutual Obligations Approach* (2010; online edn, Oxford Academic, 24 May 2012), find at

increased their income and wealth since 1970, the gap between their wealth and that of white Americans has increased while the gap in income has remained about the same.⁴⁸ These disparities in resources and opportunity, affecting jobs, careers, education, health, ability to support a family, and the pursuit of a wide range of ends, arise from the crimes and injustices of the past and the resulting racism that persists in the present. Further, they carry emotional and psychological effects, depriving victims of the sense of being heard and respected as equally valued parts of the community.⁴⁹

An apology by one who has authority to speak for the United States and its citizenry – the President, the Congress, or some combination of the two – would serve to defeat the standing victory of racial injustices committed by legislators, executives, and other administrators, including slavery, Jim Crow, and distributive injustices. Committed in the name of the state, these injustices live on with the collective. *Mutatis mutandis*, an apology might take place on the level of a state or municipality. The apology would be addressed to all African Americans living in the United States (or state or municipality). Although not all African-Americans were directly harmed by these injustices or are descendants of those who were directly harmed, all African-Americans in the United States are members of a group many of whose members were mistreated qua members of that group. So, in addition to secondary victims (family members), tertiary victims, who are tied to primary victims by group membership, may rightly

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199742684.001.0001>, accessed 28 Oct. 2022; Brandon Vaidyanathan, “Systemic Racial Bias in the Criminal Justice System is Not a Myth,” June 29, 2020, find at <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/06/65585/>, accessed October 29, 2022.

⁴⁸ Tami Luhby, “These charts show how economic progress as stalled for Black Americans since the Civil Rights Era,” CNN, July 5, 2020, find at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/05/politics/inequality-black-americans-civil-rights-economic-progress/index.html>, accessed October 29, 2022.

⁴⁹ I am indebted to Max Elimam Ali Alhaji for this point.

claim that the injustice stands over them and that they are among the rightful recipients of the official apology.

A good apology would be stated in the presence of representatives of the African American community. Which ones? While no single leader speaks for all African Americans, a coalition of political, civil society, and religious leaders would represent the community best. An effective apology would be formulated through the participation of such leaders and prepared for delivery with their cooperation. Citizens, including those of the United States at large, and African Americans, to whom the apology would be directed, are free to endorse, oppose, and remain indifferent to the apology, just as they are towards any law that a legislature adopts or stance that a president takes.

While apology addresses primarily the wound of the standing victory of injustice, reparations address this wound as well as the material harm that the injustice has caused. Perhaps on account of this material demand, reparations have garnered more public controversy than have apologies in the matter of racial injustices. Three disputed questions are: Who confers reparations? Who receives them? What form (and amount) do they take?⁵⁰

On the question of who confers the reparations, the account at hand answers straightforwardly: the state, through authoritative spokespersons. It is the collective dimension of injustice that stands over time, from which present material wounds

⁵⁰ For skepticism of reparations, see Camille Paglia, "Ask Camille: Camille Paglia's Online Advice for the Culturally Disgruntled," in Roy L. Brooks, Ed., *When Sorry Isn't Enough: The Controversy Over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 353-354; and David Frum, "The Impossibility of Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 3, 2014, find at <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/06/the-impossibility-of-reparations/372041/>. For a leading case for reparations, see Darity and Mullen, *From Here to Equality*. For two Christian arguments for reparations, see Duke L. Kwon and Gregory Thompson, *Reparations: A Christian Call For Repentance and Repair* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).

result, and that the spokesperson for the state redresses. The funds are levied generally from the members of the collective, who, though they may not be directly guilty, rightly share in the remedial response for the collective injustice.

As for recipients of reparations, in principle they ought to be more particular than those of apologies: people who suffer materially on account of historical injustices perpetrated by the state. Yet pinpointing who suffers from injustices is often difficult. Present inequalities of wealth and status and the psychosocial wounds to esteem and respect resulting from the injustices perpetrated by the state during the three periods noted – slavery, Jim Crow, and the distributive injustice of the mid-twentieth century -- result not only from the many who suffered from direct discrimination and denials of entitlements and benefits but also from the many who did not apply for benefits because they believed receiving them was futile, or who did not know of the benefits, or were members of families or communities who were deprived and suffered indirectly. If it is difficult to narrow down exactly who has suffered from injustices in a narrow and strict sense, it is also difficult to deny that virtually all African Americans during these periods suffered discrimination. It is also wildly unrealistic to evaluate the cases of 41 million African Americans for their connections to these injustices. Eligible for reparations, then, ought to be African Americans who lived in the United States up to 1970 or are descended from ones who did. This would cover African Americans who lived under the state-perpetrated injustices of slavery, Jim Crow, and distributive injustice, which persisted up through about 1970 (the Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968).

What level of reparations ought to be conferred? Determining the monetary equivalent to what any individual African-American has suffered from past injustices is even more difficult. While it may be entirely plausible – and more plausible than

Waldron argues – to establish that an individual African-American’s level of wealth today is stunted by the fact that his grandfather was a domestic housekeeper in the Georgia who was excluded from the GI Bill, or that his great-grandfather was lynched under Jim Crow, for instance, it remains very difficult to determine: How much wealthier would he be now if his forebear had lived in circumstances of comparative equality? Even were it possible to make such a determination in individual cases, here again, procedures for ascertainment, which normally take the form of a civil trial in the cases of material injustices, are manifestly unrealistic.⁵¹

Again, though, on the aggregate level, the link between state-perpetrated historical injustices and present disparities is undeniable. The injustices were ones that involved the colossal and systemic deprivation of wealth and opportunity to the vast majority of African Americans over many decades. Darity and Mullen argue that the best indicator of the cumulative effect of racism over time is the wealth gap.⁵² Acknowledging this disparity and its clear connection with past injustices, as well as the practical necessity of determining reparations on a mass scale, the best solution is not to make an effort to demonstrate material loss person by person but rather to confer reparations in the form of a financial transfer to the wide group of African Americans. Fitting reparations also would take the form of those goods that the collective injustices denied most demonstrably. Examples that have been proposed include educational scholarships, especially for first-generation college students; aid to historically black colleges and universities; grants and loans for starting businesses; and subsidized mortgages. Reparations might also include the building of museums and monuments

⁵¹ Pablo de Greiff, “Justice and Reparations,” in Pablo de Greiff, ed., *The Handbook of Reparations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 454.

⁵² Darity and Mullen, *From Here to Equality*, xii.

that convey a public message of remembrance, healing, and education regarding racial injustices. To be sure, any form of reparation raises questions about how it would be conferred and what its effects would be, questions that are empirical and subject to policy analysis. What is conveyed here is the principled argument for reparations for African-Americans in the political order and broad guidelines for what form they might take.

Because forgiveness on the collective level has little historical track record, the form of its practice is more speculative. Forgiveness, again, is the foregoing of moral debt for injustice and the exercise of a will towards restoration – a collective act of building peace. Forgiveness here might mean a declaration of satisfaction for apologies and reparations justly and adequately delivered, a release from moral debt, and a recommitment to fraternity in the political order, or a national “beloved community,” in Martin Luther King’s phrase. Forgiveness would not mean the end of just reparations payments or of efforts to oppose persistently racist attitudes and practices. To forge a reciprocal and complementary link among practices in a common process of reconciliation, forgiveness might be voiced in a ceremony where apology and reparations are also announced. An act of forgiveness, and the apology and the agreement upon reparations, might be recalled annually, for instance on Martin Luther King Day. Like the other collective acts, forgiveness would be practiced through authoritative spokespersons, and members of the collective would remain free to endorse or oppose the act. Who these spokespersons ought to be is difficult to determine precisely; the best candidates are respected leaders of the African American community or of major African American organizations. Because of the distinctively Christian

character of forgiveness, leaders of Black churches would be important practitioners, and their followers some of the most likely people to affirm the act.⁵³

Conclusion: Enacting Our National Covenant

In the introduction, I posed the question: can a nation trod the path of sin and redemption as individuals do? In one sense, no: Only individual persons can repent for their own sins and receive sanctifying grace, and will be judged at the moment of their death. No claims about collectivities replace this fundamental Christian truth. Firmly lodged in the Christian tradition, though, is the notion that nations, too, have covenants with God, carry divine vocations, perform sin, suffer divine punishment, may repent, and may experience redemption. Israel, of course, is the prototype of a nation with a religious destiny. In a recent volume, *Race and Covenant*, editor Gerald R. McDermott and the authors of other essays hold that the notion of a covenant between God and nations has been common in Christian history. McDermott writes:

It is not too much to say that for most of the last two thousand years, most Christians have believed in the national covenant. This is the idea that a) God deals with whole nations *as* nations, and b) he enters into more intimate relationships with societies that claim him as Lord. In other words, God not only deals with individuals during their lives and at the final judgment but also deals providentially with every corporate people and enters into special relationships with certain whole societies.⁵⁴

⁵³ Jeff Diamant, “Blacks more likely than others in U.S. to read the Bible regularly, see it as God’s word,” Pew Research Center, May 7, 2018, find at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/07/blacks-more-likely-than-others-in-u-s-to-read-the-bible-regularly-see-it-as-gods-word/>, accessed October 29, 2022; Jeff Diamant and Besheer Mohamed, “Black Millennials are more religious than other Millennials,” Pew Research Center, July 20, 2018, find at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/20/black-millennials-are-more-religious-than-other-millennials/>, accessed October 29, 2022.

⁵⁴ Gerald R. McDermott, “Introduction: Our National Dilemma,” in Gerald R. McDermott, ed., *Race and Covenant: Recovering the Religious Roots for American Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2020), xvi-xvii. While I cite this volume for its commitment to a national covenant, I note that some of the authors of its essays oppose reparations.

The idea of a divinely bestowed national purpose can be found in the thought of Pope John Paul II, who thought that Poland was a “Christ among nations” and carried a mission of evangelization in Europe.⁵⁵ In the United States, scholar Mark Tooley argues in his essay in *Race and Covenant*, national covenant was a commonly held notion among Christians until the Vietnam War, when it largely went out of favor.⁵⁶ Calling President Abraham Lincoln the “chief theologian” of the national covenant, McDermott quotes Lincoln’s Proclamation of a National Fast in 1863: “[I]t is the duty of all nations as well as of men . . . to recognize the sublime truth, announced in Holy Scriptures and proven by all of history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.”⁵⁷ Holding that nations had divine vocations was also the African American scholar and champion of the anti-slavery cause, Frederick Douglass. Both Lincoln and Douglass thought that the United States had entered into a covenant at its founding.

Both Douglass and Lincoln also thought that a nation’s sins incurred divine punishment and that America’s civil war was such a punishment for the sin of slavery – a form of exile. Douglass held “that nations, not less than individuals, are subjects of the moral government of the universe, and that . . . persistent transgressions of the laws of the Divine government will certainly bring national sorrow, shame, suffering, and death.”⁵⁸ Douglass thought that a nation could be redeemed, achieving peace and reconciliation, but only if it repented.⁵⁹ He believed, too, that he could forgive

⁵⁵ On these themes, see Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2005).

⁵⁶ Mark Tooley, “National Covenant in American Churches,” in McDermott, ed., *Race and Covenant*, 43.

⁵⁷ McDermott, “Our National Dilemma,” xxiv.

⁵⁸ McDermott also points that German Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg considered Germany’s destruction in World War II as divine punishment for its treatment of the Jews, in “Our National Dilemma,” xxv.

⁵⁹ McDermott, “Our National Dilemma,” xvi.

practitioners of slavery, though he insisted that he would not forget.⁶⁰ McDermott quotes God's words to King Solomon: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14 ESV).⁶¹

The notion of a national covenant must be set in the full body of Christian teaching if it is not to be abused. The concept of a Christian nation has justified imperialism, the conquest of native peoples, the subordination of minorities, and, yes, racism. Still, we should not make the mistake of discarding the use of a venerable source of justice on account of its abuse. Christian thought about justice, with its concepts of dignity, human rights, solidarity, and many other principles, contains the capacity to sift the redemptive possibilities of a national covenant from its use for unjust discrimination and domination. That racism is our nation's original sin, that it was committed through official collective acts, that the nation can make acts of atonement, that collective forgiveness is possible, and that these acts can lead to national reconciliation, are ideas that Lincoln, Douglas, King, and John Paul II have espoused and arise from the core of the Christian Gospel. Absent them, left only with secular concepts, we are much impoverished in our capacity for healing and reconciliation.

⁶⁰ In the McDermott volume, Derryck Green discusses forgiveness in "Black Churches and the National Covenant," 199-220, 218.

⁶¹ McDermott, "Our National Dilemma," xxxv.