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Acts of contrition: Forgiveness and effective intergroup apologies for historical institutional abuse

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Abstract
This article examines some of the complexities of the apology–forgiveness nexus within the context of intergroup apologies by church and state for historical institutional abuse (HIA). Drawing on primary research conducted in Ireland, North and South, including the voices of a sample of victims/survivors, it argues that effective intergroup apologies for HIA and the extent to which they might elicit forgiveness among victimized communities are impacted by a range of factors including (1) leader apologies and the ‘normative dilution effect’; (2) the lack of emotion and remorse; and (3) in the case of church apologies in particular, the use of religious rhetoric and ritual. The analysis ultimately suggests that while ‘pure’ forgiveness may not be possible in this specific context, effective intergroup apologies for HIA, delivered in a collective, public context, which have the potential to promote forgiveness among victims/survivors, are those which closely approximate the relational dimensions of private, interpersonal apologies. This entails demonstrating emotion; humility; proximity to historical wrongdoing; connectivity with victims/survivors; and the commitment to non-recurrence.

Keywords
Apologies, intergroup, historical institutional abuse, forgiveness, reconciliation

[Int] It is an act which has importance and relevance within a wider context, within a relationship which has been developed . . . It is not just the words that are said, it is the way they are said . . . That is what makes an effective apology . . . It is meaningless to just go out into the media and deliver an apology to a camera and say ‘we’re very sorry for everything that has happened here’.

Introduction
Collective public apologies and ‘the rhetoric of atonement’ (Koesten and Rowland, 2004) have featured as a constituent element of contemporary political responses to high-profile cases of
historical wrongdoing as part of the expression of ‘national regret’ (Cuthbert and Quartly, 2012). Within this wider context, there have been a number of official apologies by state leaders on behalf of their respective nations for historical institutional abuse (HIA) internationally. This has included, for example, Kevin Rudd’s apology for Australia’s treatment of ‘the Stolen Generations’ of aboriginal children; Justin Trudeau’s apology for the abuses of Indigenous children in church-run residential schools in Canada; and the apology by Mette Frederiksen to children abused in care homes in Denmark during the post–World War II era. Within the Republic of Ireland, the three notable State apologies for HIA are those delivered by Bertie Ahern on behalf of the Irish State to those abused as children in residential institutions; by Enda Kenny to survivors of the ‘Magdalen laundries’; and by Micheál Martin to survivors of the ‘mother and baby homes’ regimes. More recently, an apology was delivered to victims and survivors of HIA in Northern Ireland by five members of the Northern Ireland Executive, representing each of the main political parties. These state apologies have also been accompanied by apologies issued by religious orders and the Catholic Church in particular, examples of which are drawn upon below. While there are some variations in the context and choreography of church and state public apologies which are explored below and elsewhere (see e.g. McAlinden, 2022a, 2022b), not least in terms of enhanced state accountability, the analysis focuses predominantly on the shared complexities and factors which may impede the perceived authenticity and reception of intergroup apologies by victimized communities.

The article draws on the literature on the nature and effects of both interpersonal (individual) and intergroup (collective) apologies as well as primary research conducted in Ireland, North and South, including archival research on public apologies, focus groups with members of the public and with victims/survivors, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. It examines some of the key complexities of forgiveness within the context of intergroup apologies for HIA by church and state leaders in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and how they may be overcome. While the empirical sample is focused on experiences within the island of Ireland utilizing the case study of HIA, the analysis nonetheless offers an important window into the perspective both of those issuing and receiving intergroup apologies and the implications for forgiveness and reconciliation.

While apology is now the subject of a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature across a range of fields, it is the literature from criminology, sociology, social psychology and theology, which is most pertinent for this discussion, and which is predominantly drawn upon below. Situated within these broader theoretical frameworks, and as discussed further, forgiveness is central to the conceptualization of apology and dealing with the past within both interpersonal and intergroup settings. However, this article will argue that although the apology–forgiveness link is well established within the context of the literature on interpersonal apologies, this nexus is much more complex and variable within the context of intergroup apologies for HIA – that is, those collective public apologies made on behalf of a group for a wrong that the group, or some of its members (i.e. the state or the church or their agents), committed against another group (i.e. victims/survivors of HIA).

Indeed, while apology may facilitate forgiveness, this sequence is not always linear or clear cut (see e.g. Suzuki and Jenkins, 2022). As discussed further, there are a range of complexities relating to forgiveness in the HIA sphere, including the magnitude of the wrongs and the diversity of victims/survivors and their needs (see e.g. Keenan, 2014; Lundy, 2016), which may problematize the
reception of intergroup apologies by victimized communities. There are also issues related to the perceived authenticity of ‘inter-temporal or historical apologies’ (Celermajer, 2009: 15) offered decades later for wrongdoing by predecessors. Moreover, the enmeshed historical network of ‘coercive confinement’ of vulnerable and marginalized groups in Ireland (O’Sullivan and O’Donnell, 2012), underpinned by the coalition of Church, State, family and community, undoubt-
edly obfuscates questions concerning who bears responsibility for issuing an apology and to whom in turn any forgiveness might be directed. In addition, as in Ireland, Australia and Canada, for example, the offer of financial compensation as part of a broader redress package to classes of HIA victims (see e.g. Daly, 2014; Gleeson and Ring, 2021; Llewellyn, 2002), including as part of ex gratia (no fault) schemes, may also shape the content, sequencing and reception of any official apologies.

Addressing the dearth of empirical literature on both intergroup apologies more broadly and in the specific field of HIA, the article makes two core arguments. First, it argues that the perceived sincerity and effectiveness of intergroup apologies for HIA, and the extent to which they may elicit forgiveness among victimized communities, are impacted by a range of factors, including (1) ‘leader apologies’ delivered on behalf of an organization and the related ‘normative dilution effect’ (Blatz and Philpot, 2010; Okimoto et al., 2015) where the cultural overuse of apologies by public or political figures weakens their significance and impact; (2) the lack of emotion and remorse and in particular the eschewing of shame or guilt on the part of the apologiser; and (3) in the case of apologies by the Catholic Church, the use of religious rhetoric and ritual within the construction and delivery of the apology. Thus, consistent with Derrida’s (2001) two types of forgiveness – ‘unconditional purity’ and forgiveness for pragmatic, legal or political reasons – this article suggests that, in intergroup settings, apology and forgiveness take on a ‘pragmatic’ and conditional quality. That is, the focus of the apologiser is often personal or political expediency rather than ‘pure’ contrition and remorse.11 Second, it contends that effective intergroup apologies for HIA which have the potential for forgiveness are those which closely approximate private or interpersonal apologies in terms of creating the relational and personal dimensions of apology at a collective level. These broader contextual factors, it is argued, entail the demonstration of the sincerity of the remorse via emotion; humility; proximity to historical wrongdoing; connectivity with victims/survivors; and the commitment to non-recurrence.

The structure of the article is as follows: Part I begins by providing a critical overview of the existing literature and the core themes on apology and forgiveness in both interpersonal and intergroup contexts. Part II provides a brief outline of the research methodology utilized in the study. Part III draws out the range of factors emerging from the empirical research which may inhibit the effectiveness of intergroup apologies for HIA in terms of forgiveness or wider reconciliation. Based on the previous analysis, Part IV concludes by drawing out the broader implications concerning the meaning and significance of apologies and forgiveness in the context of intergroup apologies for HIA by church and state leaders which will have resonance for other societies coming to terms with the legacy of past abuses.

Part I: The apology–forgiveness nexus

To begin with, it is useful to unpack some of the core themes from the literature on apology and forgiveness in both interpersonal (individual) private settings and within intergroup (collective) public settings as well as the extant differences and emphases between these two contexts.
Apologies and forgiveness in interpersonal contexts

At the interpersonal level, studies in social psychology have examined the effects of apologies in reducing the negative feelings of individual victims (including anger and a desire for retribution), laying important groundwork for forgiveness and improved relationships (see e.g. Carlisle et al., 2012; Dhami, 2016). For many classic apology theorists, forgiveness has emerged as an integral part of apology processes (see e.g. Lazare, 2004; Tavuchis, 1991) and an important foundation of the broader aims of reconciliation or reparation. For example, for Tavuchis (1991: 20), ‘an apology is the middle term in a moral syllogism that commences with a call and ends with forgiveness’ [emphasis in original]. Similarly, Lazare (2004: 247) emphasizes the ‘causal relationship between apology and forgiveness’. According to this view, while it is generally accepted that forgiveness cannot be demanded by perpetrators but must be freely given by victims (Minow, 1998; Tavuchis, 1991),12 the expression of sorrow or regret is seen as the bedrock of apology while forgiveness and restoration of the relationship are the end goals. For others, however, forgiveness is less important (La Caze, 2006), as the ultimate goal of apology is not always reconciliation between victims and perpetrators, nor indeed redemption for perpetrators. In this respect, apologies can also be perceived as broader political tools, whereby relationships between perpetrators and victimized communities can be restored without forgiveness. Indeed, as acknowledged above and as explored further within the analysis, for a range of reasons, this symbiotic link between forgiveness and apology is more ambiguous and uncertain at the intergroup level.

Social psychologists have also explored the effect of apologies on levels of forgiveness (e.g. Ohbuchi and Sato, 1994; Takaku et al., 2001) and the specific factors that moderate the reception of interpersonal apologies including the magnitude of the wrong (Bennett and Earwaker, 1994); perspective-taking by victims (Takaku et al., 2001); the perceived sincerity of the remorse (Scher and Darley, 1997); and timing (Frantz and Bennigson, 2005). The related literature on restorative justice also endorses the importance of the perceived sincerity of the apology, where apology features as a core part of the ‘emotional processes’ that facilitate ‘forgiveness’ (Armour and Umbreit, 2006). As Steiner (2000) further explains, the expression of remorse via apology forms part of a broader ‘transaction analysis’ or interactive ‘exchange’ between victims and perpetrators that may result in reconciliation or reparation at the individual or collective level via the eliciting of forgiveness. As the present analysis argues, it is ultimately the approximation of these core emotional and relational elements which lie at the heart of interpersonal apologies, which have the potential to promote forgiveness when transposed to intergroup contexts.

Furthermore, most of the literature interprets forgiveness as a multi-dimensional process,13 encompassing not only compassion and clemency shown by victims towards offenders but also the victim’s journey towards closure and self-healing via the ‘letting go’ (Lennon, 2017; see also Allan et al., 2006) as well as wider elements of societal reconciliation (Shapland, 2016). Although a minority of scholars have questioned the possibility of forgiveness in the context of collective state apologies (see e.g. Bentley, 2020),14 the present analysis adopts the view that meaningful intergroup apologies for HIA by church or state actors incorporate these broader dimensions of forgiveness. That is, the article explores the complexities of the apology–forgiveness nexus within the context of intergroup apologies for HIA by state or church leaders to victimized communities including victims/survivors and wider society.
There is also a related, predominantly theological, literature on key concepts such as forgiveness and repentance, the preponderance of which relates to interpersonal contexts. Apology and associated terms such as ‘contrition’, ‘repentance’, ‘atonement’, ‘forgiveness’, ‘redemption’ and ‘reconciliation’ have strong religious connotations with many scholars connecting apology discourse to religious terminology and ritual (see e.g. Celermajer, 2009, 2010; Koesten and Rowland, 2004). Indeed, for some, apologies are considered a form of ‘confession’ which enables repentance and renewal (Andrieu, 2009; Tavuchis, 1991) as part of the ‘guilt-redemption’ cycle (Burke, 1984: 278). For others, however, (e.g. Celermajer, 2010; Kampf and Lowenheim, 2012), religious rhetoric and practice, and in particular the notion of ‘purification’ – where ‘the offender’ issues an apology to neutralize their offending past but without the need for the approval or forgiveness – also impact contemporary intergroup apologies. Here, the act of apologizing in itself is often regarded as more important than any response it elicits, as it publicly reaffirms core values and principles to which the community aspires (Celermajer, 2009: 795). In this sense, the ritualistic aspects of apologies have also been traced within political apologies by state leaders which are said to embody the same performative or symbolic effects (Borneman, 2005), rather than genuine remorse or contrition. However, as discussed further, contrary to the interpersonal context, the use of religious language within intergroup apologies for HIA, together with religious ritual, emerge as potential barriers to, rather than facilitators of, the perceived sincerity of apologies and thus to forgiveness and reconciliation more broadly.

**Apologies and forgiveness in intergroup contexts**

At the collective or intergroup level, there is some divergence on the function of intergroup apologies across disciplines, including their capacity to elicit forgiveness. For political scientists, for example, forgiveness is considered unnecessary, as collective wrongs, such as systemic or mass human rights violations, are often unforgivable (Howard-Hassmann, 2012); or is considered ‘elusive’ given, inter alia, the diversity of victims (Bentley, 2020). Instead, an official apology forms part of the broader processes of societal reconciliation which are characterized by the restoration of victims’ self-worth and increased societal trust (Howard-Hassmann, 2012) and re-invention of a more inclusive national identity (Murphy, 2011; Nobles, 2008). Similarly, within transitional justice discourses, apologies may directly promote forgiveness (David and Choi, 2006) and function to restore dignity to victims (Howard-Hassmann, 2012), reaffirm moral norms (De Greiff, 2008), transform collective identity (Celermajer, 2009) and as a symbol of accountability (Teitel, 2006).

For scholars in management and communication studies, however, the aim of apology, including within the specific context of HIA, is often ‘crisis’ or ‘reputation management’ (Barth, 2010) as part of ‘image repair’ (Benoit, 2015), rather than forgiveness. Other scholars, particularly in history and anthropology, are also dismissive of the utility of collective apologies, viewing them as ‘empty rhetoric’ (Weyeneth, 2001: 29), ‘cheap’ reconciliation (Marrus, 2007: 90) and ‘sentimental politics’ (Cowlishaw in Mookherjee et al., 2009: 349). In this vein, collective public apologies are prima facie rhetorical rather than relational as they do not require a direct interchange with victims. This article, however, highlights the potential utility of intergroup apologies and argues that such collective, public apologies for HIA and the extent to which they might elicit
forgiveness are those which endeavour to create the relational aspects of interpersonal apologies at a group level.

However, the link between apologies and forgiveness is more tenuous and complex within intergroup settings, and what works at the interpersonal level does not necessarily translate in the same way to the intergroup context. For example, although some earlier research demonstrates that intergroup apologies can facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation (see e.g. Brown et al., 2008), more recent experimental studies have noted more limited effects and a weak or inconsistent association between intergroup apologies and forgiveness, typically measured by a change in attitudes or perceptions of remorse held by the victimized group (see e.g. Blatz and Philpot, 2010; Philpot and Hornsey, 2011), irrespective of the emotionality of the apology or the apologiser (see e.g. Philpot and Hornsey, 2008; Wohl et al., 2012). The lack of empirical research on whether or not apologies are effective and why in intergroup settings, also underlines the importance of empirical research on apologies in such contexts, a gap which this article addresses utilizing the case study of HIA.

While there is much less empirical research on the apology–forgiveness link at the intergroup level, existing studies have attributed the weak causal relationship between apologies and forgiveness to a number of factors, including (1) ‘leader apologies’ delivered by someone on behalf of the group leading to questions regarding whether the offending group is in fact remorseful (Basford, 2013; Hornsey, 2016); (2) ‘infrahumanisation processes’ (Wohl et al., 2012) where ingroup members (victims) believe that members of the offending group are incapable of experiencing human emotions such as shame or guilt; and (3) the ‘normative dilution effect’ (Blatz and Philpot, 2010; Okimoto et al., 2015) where behavioural norms, in this case the cultural saturation of apologies, reduce their meaning and significance. As discussed further, these factors within the predominantly theoretical literature on intergroup apologies also found empirical support within the context of the primary research and findings from the present study.

Given the extent of possible barriers to effective intergroup apologies, some scholars have argued that apologies alone are insufficient to promote intergroup forgiveness or reconciliation as there is too much distrust and scepticism among victims regarding the underlying motivation and sincerity of the apology (see e.g. Hornsey and Wohl, 2013). However, while highlighting possible barriers to intergroup forgiveness as derived in the primary research, this article ultimately contends that effective intergroup apologies for HIA are possible if they attempt to approximate the relational dimensions of interpersonal apologies at a collective level, chiefly by demonstrating emotion; humility; proximity to historical wrongdoing; connectivity to victims; and the commitment to non-recurrence.

Part II: Methodology

Utilizing the island of Ireland, Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI), as a case study, the aim of the wider study was to explore the way in which apologies have been constructed, delivered and received across three domains – paramilitary violence, HIA and the economic crisis. While the present article focuses on the single case study of HIA, these broader case studies were chosen as they represented three domains featuring an abundance of public apologies by state and non-state actors within the island of Ireland, North and South, and were thus disposed to rich analysis.

The fieldwork was informed by an extensive interdisciplinary literature review (see above). Over an approximate 5-year period (June 2016–November 2021), the research employed a mixed
methodology comprising (1) a bespoke archive of public apologies across the three domains over the last two decades; (2) focus groups with the public \((n=14)\) and with victims/survivors \((n=9)\) across the three domains. Public focus groups were composed of approximately 6–10 participants and were conducted across Ireland, North and South, using stratified purposive sampling techniques to capture diverse populations (based on age, gender, class, religious background), totaling 110 individual members of the public.\(^7\) While the public were recruited via a market research company, victims/survivors were recruited either via victim/survivor organizations or professional contacts of the researchers; and (iii) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders across NI and RoI \(n=24\) related to HIA; 68 in total). This included an approximate number of ‘apologisers’ (including Church representatives, lawyers and politicians) and victims/survivors of HIA (including victims/survivors and their families or their advocates/supporters).\(^8\) Interviewees were recruited initially via a purposive sampling strategy – based on who these key stakeholders were or what organization they represented – followed by a snowball sampling strategy where interviewees were asked to suggest other possible interviewees. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the School Research Ethics Committee at Queen’s University Belfast. Data supporting this study cannot be made available due to the sensitive nature of the research and the fact that no interviewees consented to their data being shared.

For the public focus group element, respondents were asked a series of questions relating to importance, awareness and adequacy of public apologies across all three domains of paramilitary violence, HIA and the economic crisis. For the victim focus groups and the individual semi-structured interviews, the aim was to seek the views of individuals who could speak to key public apologies or their particular experience of being involved in apology processes. In light of potential risks to participants and researchers, a detailed ethical protocol was developed, including avoiding retraumatisation and access to follow-up and support services.

Data sets were transcribed and analysed thematically with the support of NVivo software enabling a comprehensive examination of emerging themes. Consistent with most qualitative research, data analysis incorporated both deductive approaches (which explore whether the data are consistent with existing theories) and inductive approaches (where theory emerges from the data) (see e.g. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Transcripts were initially blind-coded and agreed by the project team and themes reviewed periodically. The primary research, therefore, is presented thematically as a broad sample of experiences. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the School of Law, Queen’s University Belfast.

**Part III: Intergroup apologies for HIA – barriers to forgiveness**

An analysis of the themes arising from the primary research highlighted several factors which may impede effective intergroup apologies for HIA given by church or state in terms of their capacity to elicit forgiveness or reconciliation at the collective level. These relate to (1) ‘leader apologies’ delivered on behalf of an organization where the cultural overuse of apologies by public figures also weakens their significance and impact; (2) the lack of emotion and remorse on the part of the apologiser and in particular their failure to express shame or guilt; and (3) in the case of apologies by the Catholic Church, the use of religious rhetoric and ritual. While there is a degree of overlap in these elements, each is differentiated and unpacked separately below. As discussed further and as the opening quotation attests, the perceived sincerity of the apology among victims/survivors depends on the affective as well as the effective dimensions of apology within the overall context.
of establishing a relational connection both to victims and the wrongdoing. Thus, the focus becomes not just the words themselves but how they are choreographed and delivered.

**Leader apologies and the ‘normative dilution effect’**

The first factor underpinning the effectiveness of intergroup apologies for HIA in eliciting forgiveness at the collective level concerns the perceived sincerity of ‘leader apologies’, delivered publicly on behalf of the offending group (in this case church or state), and the extent to which they are regarded as remorseful by victimized communities (see Basford, 2013; Hornsey, 2016). As noted at the outset, there have been three significant official State apologies for HIA within the Republic of Ireland relating to the historical abuses of children within residential institutions; to survivors of the ‘Magdalen laundries’; and to survivors of the ‘mother and baby homes’ regimes. Responses to these examples of ‘leader apologies’ – typically offered decades later by state leaders for historical wrongdoing by their predecessors – among research participants in the present study were mixed.

Some interviewees in the Republic of Ireland, including both survivors of residential institutions and their legal representatives, described these apologies as ‘powerful’, ‘meaningful’ and ‘impactful’. Others, however, including victims’ advocates and members of the public, questioned the utility of so-called ‘surrogate’ (Gavrielides, 2012: 635–636) or ‘third-party apologies’ delivered by political leaders for individual or organizational wrongdoing which they themselves did not commit, describing them as ‘architected’, ‘tokenistic’ and ‘scripted’. Several writers have also questioned the utility of so-called ‘leader apologies’ delivered at distance from historical wrongdoing and whether it is ever possible in such circumstances for a collective to offer genuine remorse or regret (Thaler, 2012; Trouillot, 2000).

One of the principal factors underpinning the reception of ‘leader apologies’ relates to the ‘normative dilution effect’ (Blatz and Philpot, 2010; Okimoto et al., 2015) whereby the cultural saturation of apologies for a wide range of wrongdoing is thought to dilute their significance, meaning and impact. In essence, over the last few decades, ‘contrition chic’ (Jeffery, 2011; Shapiro, 1997) has become a perpetual feature of public life within what has been termed the ‘age of apology’ (Gibney et al., 2008). However, the potential overuse of apologies by public and political figures surrounding, for example, the global #MeToo and #TimesUp! movements (Nigro et al., 2020), has led in some senses to ‘apology aversion’ (Garber, 2019) and the undermining of the perceived sincerity of official apologies for serious wrongdoing.

This viewpoint was shared by several interviewees in the present study, including victims/survivors as well as some Church representatives, who reflected on the reflexive and perfunctory nature of contemporary public apologies for HIA: as ‘lip service’; that ‘it means nothing’; ‘words come cheap’; and ‘saying sorry is the easiest word. Showing that you’re sorry is a different thing’. While some survivor interviewees in Northern Ireland expressed the view that they would welcome a fulsome apology for HIA; for others, the prevalent cultural scepticism around apologies was such that an apology would be meaningless:

> Personally, I don’t want an apology from anybody . . . I wouldn’t care if X made an apology to me, it wouldn’t work for me, it wouldn’t make any difference to my life whatsoever. I would just brush it off, it would just go over my head.
In such circumstances, apologies, however effusive, are unlikely to be perceived as effective by victims/survivors. Furthermore, in the current cultural and political climate surrounding public apologies, official apologies for HIA, as a serious and systemic form of wrongdoing and human rights violations, may have a very high threshold to reach in terms of establishing their authenticity and connection with victims/survivors as a step towards forgiveness or reconciliation.

These critical viewpoints concerning ‘leader apologies’ are also consistent with the broader literature on apologies which establishes the ritualistic or performative aspects of political apologies as ‘art’ (Boyd, 2011: 299) or ‘stage events’ (Cels, 2015: 355). Viewed in this context, what appears to be missing is the ‘transaction’ (Steiner, 2000) or relational ‘exchange’ between apologisers and victims, which as highlighted above characterize interpersonal settings, without which apologisers may simply be ‘apologising to the mirror’ (Hornsey, 2016: 103). As discussed below, such concerns surrounding the perceived authenticity of ‘scripted’ leader apologies may in part be alleviated by the demonstration of emotion and remorse on the part of the apologiser, where ‘there’s an honesty in it’, thereby establishing sincerity and a relational connection to historical wrongdoing. According to this view, the sincerity of apologies is to be judged, not only by the perceived remorse or guilt of the agent apologiser, but the consequences of the apology in terms of the official actions taken on the basis of the apology.

**Lack of emotion and remorse**

The second factor underlying the capacity of official apologies to elicit forgiveness for HIA at the collective level relates to the lack of emotion or remorse on the part of the apologiser. This chimes with what the literature on intergroup apologies terms ‘infrahumanisation processes’ (Wohl et al., 2012), where ingroup members (victims/survivors) believe that members of the offending group (that is, either church or state) are incapable of experiencing human emotions such as shame or guilt. The literature on interpersonal apologies also establishes that the moral emotions of shame and guilt may be alleviated by the ritualistic elements of apology and forgiveness, relieving both victims and perpetrators of the emotional burdens of harm or offending (Lazare, 2004: 9). As I have discussed at length elsewhere, however, while many of the official public apologies for HIA by both Church and State in RoI, have specifically utilized the language of shame, demonstrating a measure of moral culpability and self-shame (McAlinden, 2022a), they have deliberately stopped short of admitting guilt or blame for HIA in a legal sense with the ensuing responsibility for remedial action (McAlinden, 2022b). While many of the interviewees or focus group participants specifically referenced the state apologies by Taoiseachs (Irish Prime Ministers) Bertie Ahern and Enda Kenny, perceptions were also decidedly varied.

On the one hand, the sincerity of these official apologies for HIA were regarded rather sceptically by some victims/survivors and their advocates in the Republic of Ireland as well as by members of the public and were described as ‘just crocodile tears’; ‘just going through the motions’ and ‘a quick tick box exercise, you know, that we’ll look good’. As such, arguably the aim of official intergroup apologies for HIA is not eliciting forgiveness from victims/survivors or the restoration of relationships but rather their broader performative effects. In the words of one interviewee, ‘the apology is delivered for the public audience, for the whole of society’, rather than to victims/survivors directly.

However, that said, and as noted above, official public apologies also have a broader social utility characterized by the restoration of victims’ dignity and the ensuing restoration of public trust.
In this vein, for many victim/survivor interviewees, intergroup apologies were fundamentally about removing blame and self-shame via public recognition and acknowledgement of wrongdoing as well as vindication of their suffering. As several victim/survivors of residential institutions in Northern Ireland stated, reflecting on the type of collective public apology they would like to receive: ‘we apologise . . . because we believe you’,\(^{38}\) ‘this is what happened’\(^{39}\); ‘just let them know it’s not their fault’.\(^{40}\)

These viewpoints also accord with the literature and the potential criticisms of intergroup apologies noted above as ‘empty rhetoric’ (Weyeneth, 2001: 29) as part of ‘gestural’ (Cunningham, 2008: 288) or ‘sentimental politics’ (Cowlishaw in Mookherjee et al., 2009: 349). In this sense, therefore, the seeking of forgiveness via an official public apology takes on a ‘pragmatic’ rather than ‘pure quality’ (Derrida, 2001) for reasons of personal or political expediency. That is, intergroup apologies often become subsumed within broader political or organizational considerations such as ‘image repair’ (Benoit, 2015) or the deliberate avoidance of liability (Tyler, 1997). As discussed below, the humanity of the apologiser and the perceived sincerity and authenticity of the remorse for historical wrongdoing within intergroup apologies for HIA, and what Derrida (2001) terms ‘pure contrition’, is evidenced ultimately not only by the display of human emotions but by appropriate follow-through mechanisms.

As noted above, at the intergroup level, existing studies have generally found a weak association between apologies and emotions and the extent to which they promote forgiveness (see Philpot and Hornsey, 2008; Wohl et al., 2012). The findings from the primary research, however, also suggest a firmer correlation between the visible and outward display of emotion on the part of the apologiser and the perceived sincerity of the apology among victimized communities, than previous literature has suggested. A victims’ advocate, reflecting on their experiences of acting as an interlocutor between HIA victims/survivors and representatives of the Catholic Church, articulated how the failure to openly display emotion in the delivery of apology can act as a barrier to perceived authenticity and, therefore, to victim receptiveness:

I remember saying to Bishops . . . one of the most positive things you can do is . . . actually show the victim that what happened to them really matters to you and you want, at a human level, to respond to that. That is very much a step too far for many of them. They wanted to be distant . . . they didn’t want to be exposed . . . That is the big barrier.\(^{41}\)

Similarly, victims/survivors and representatives of apologizing institutions in Northern Ireland tended to judge the sincerity of a collective apology by the degree of emotion conveyed by the apologiser: ‘[it] should have feeling, it should be humane’\(^{42}\); ‘A true apology is one with emotion in it’\(^{43}\); ‘an apology is at least partly an act of solidarity, a way of saying I am moved by what you have experienced’.\(^{44}\) Reflecting on some of the examples of high-profile State apologies for HIA in the Republic of Ireland, such apologies were judged by a wide range of interviewees on both sides of the border to be effective because they were ‘made with feeling’\(^{45}\) were ‘very well meant’;\(^{46}\) or ‘very moving . . . it meant a lot’.\(^{47}\) In relation to the Enda Kenny apology in particular,\(^{48}\) the fact that his voice was choked with emotion during the delivery of his apology to Magdalen laundry survivors demonstrated publicly that ‘he was quite emotionally in it’.\(^{49}\) As a senior Church representative explained in relation to the perception of sincerity and remorse: ‘I think an apology can work if the victim knows it’s meant . . . that’s the bottom line’.\(^{50}\) For victimized communities,
the significance of the emotive expression of regret is that it also establishes proximity to historical wrongdoing committed by predecessors.

It is also important to guard against essentialist or reductionist accounts of victimhood as survivors of HIA are not a homogeneous group. In this respect, while most of the victim/survivor interviewees were receptive to the idea of receiving a collective apology for HIA, a minority also highlighted the limitations of such apologies in promoting healing or forgiveness. One survivor of residential institutions in Northern Ireland reflected,

How could I accept any apology? . . . How could I? You would have to take all these memories out of my brain and really filter them and wash them and then put my brain back in. But if you did that, there’d be nothing there, nothing, nothing . . . I have a right to feel angry . . . That hurts me more than anything that I haven’t got the capacity to forgive . . . and I haven’t got the capacity to accept anything that they say that might resemble an apology.51

For some victims/survivors of HIA, therefore, the magnitude of the wrong is such that it may constitute ‘the unforgivable’ and may thus prevent them from accepting an apology regardless of the context of delivery or how sincere it may otherwise be. In such circumstances, therefore, an apology is unlikely to be effective in promoting forgiveness – both in terms of offender absolution as well as personal healing for victims/survivors – regardless of how or when it occurs.

The use of religious rhetoric and ritual

A third factor, which emerged as a major theme within the primary research, is the use of religious terminology or ritual within collective public apologies for HIA by church leaders. As noted at the outset, there is a body of literature which highlights the strong religious connotations of apologetic rhetoric and the prevalence of key religious themes such as ‘contrition’, ‘repentance’, ‘atonement’, ‘redemption’ and ‘forgiveness’ (see e.g. Celermajer, 2009, 2010; Koesten and Rowland, 2004). However, while the previous literature has supported the analogy between apology and religious themes or practices within interpersonal settings, within the context of intergroup apologies, the use of religious rhetoric or ritual may actually impede, rather than facilitate, the effectiveness of collective apologies for victimized communities, including any potential forgiveness.

Interviewees who were members of Catholic religious orders explicitly framed apology within core doctrinal concepts relating to forgiveness and remorse, such as repentance and atonement:

You use the word ‘apology’ and I use the word ‘repentance’. Repentance is a religious term and . . . repentance includes apology, but it’s . . . more than an apology. It includes recognition that wrong was done, it includes taking responsibility for having done that wrong . . . it means taking actions to ensure you never do it again.52

Many religious interviewees contextualized apology within the two-stage process of contrition where the forgiveness of sins comprises restitution as well as expressing regret or remorse for the wrongdoing. As a senior clergyman explained,

In the Catholic definition of contrition there were two things – one was ‘sorrow for sin’, but the second was for ‘a purpose of amendment’. . . . the burden is to make sure . . . that things have changed, that values are different, the structures are in place . . . so that people can at least say well, that will not happen again
So I think in terms of a broad apology, what is important is that substantial progress can be pointed to as a sign of the commitment of the Church today to make sure that what happened in the past cannot happen today.53

Forgiveness in this context has a much broader meaning and is sought not only from the individual victims/survivors of HIA but the wider body of the Church: ‘It includes, in the Catholic sense, confession to the Church . . . because the body of Christ is hurt by your own individual sins’.54 Consistent with broader discourses on transitional justice (see e.g. Tarusarira, 2019), these viewpoints underline the ‘transformative’ possibilities of intergroup apologies for HIA in expressing contrition or sorrow for past wrongdoing, making reparations and leading ultimately to offender redemption and victim or societal healing. However, as the theological literature explains, true contrition is evidenced ‘not [by] a mere apology but a change in behaviour’ (Pittelli, 2017: 4). As such, it is the absence of the second element – explicit reference and commitment to non-recurrence – often missing from Church apologies in particular, which may act as a barrier to forgiveness.

It is instructive to consider some examples of the use of religious terminology or ritual within collective Church apologies related to HIA. In February 2011, at a special ‘Liturgy of Lament and Repentance’ held at St Mary’s Pro-Cathedral in Dublin offered for victims/survivors of clerical sexual abuse, former Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, along with Cardinal Sean O’Malley (Boston Archdiocese),55 lay prostrate in silence before a bare altar. They also washed and dried the feet of eight survivors, recalling a similar gesture where Jesus washed and dried the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper.56 The apology delivered by Archbishop Martin at that service had a pronounced tone of humility and humanity while drawing heavily on the religious vernacular of forgiveness:

When I say ‘sorry’, I am in charge. When I ask forgiveness, however, I am no longer in charge. I am in the hands of the others. Only you can forgive me; only God can forgive me . . . I, as Archbishop of Dublin and as Diarmuid Martin, stand here in this silence and I ask forgiveness of God and I ask for the first steps of forgiveness from all of the survivors of abuse . . . There is still a long path to journey in honesty before we can truly merit forgiveness . . . This afternoon is only a first step . . . The Archdiocese of Dublin can never rest until the day in which the last victim has found his or her peace.57

This apology and the religious rhetoric and practice in which it was embedded is reflective of the notion of ‘purification’ (see Celermajer, 2010; Kampf and Lowenheim, 2012) – where ‘the offender’ issues an apology to neutralize their offending past but without the need for explicit approval or forgiveness. Here, the act of apologizing in itself is often regarded as more important than any response it elicits, as it publicly reaffirms core values and principles to which the community, and in this sense the religious community, aspires (Celermajer, 2009: 795). Indeed, the appeal to God and the asking of forgiveness from a higher authority in one sense appears to effectively bypass the need for forgiveness from victims/survivors.

On one level, this apologetic discourse again reflects the broader ritualistic aspect of apologies as ‘stage events’ (Cels, 2015: 355) or ‘performative redress’ (Borneman, 2005). At a deeper level, however, it also conveys the importance of the ‘transaction’ (Steiner, 2000) or relational connection with victims/survivors, from whom forgiveness is also explicitly sought. That is, the use of the ‘I’ pronoun helps establish personal proximity to and ownership of responsibility for historical wrongdoing, accompanied by the use of humility to demonstrate the authenticity of the remorse. Moreover, the expression of regret for past wrongdoing coupled with the envisaging of a changed
normative context, and a new and different Church where victims/survivors are made central, also augments the perceived sincerity of this collective apology among victimized communities. In fact, this apology was well received by victims/survivors more broadly.58

This apology can be contrasted with an apology given by Cardinal Sean Brady, former Catholic Primate of All Ireland, in the aftermath of the Report of the Apostolic Visitation in Ireland in 2012:59

In expressing true sorrow and regret we make our own heartfelt plea for forgiveness from the victims, and from God, for those terrible crimes and sins . . . We particularly welcome today the call in the report for a new focus on the role of the laity, who are called to be engaged both within the Church and in bearing witness to Christ in the world.60

Unlike the first example above, this apology, while expressing regret and ‘sorrow for sins’, as the first part of contrition in seeking forgiveness, stops short of the second element – ‘the purpose of amendment’ – by failing to mention what will be different within the institutional Church in future to avoid repetition of abuses. Echoing the literature on types of forgiveness (Derrida, 2001), while the first example of an apology may denote genuine or ‘pure contrition’ on the part of the apologiser with a realistic prospect of forgiveness from victimized communities, the second evidences contrition of the pragmatic variety where remorse or regret is expressed publicly for expedient organizational or political reasons.

Reflecting on such examples of intergroup apologies for HIA by the Catholic Church, the impediments to forgiveness were framed by several interviewees in terms of both religious language and ritual. In relation to the first of these, a survivor of residential institutions in the Republic of Ireland described the use of religious language as a ‘distancing’ tool which could also be used to ‘sanctify’ any perceived wrongdoing and which has the effect of undermining the perceived sincerity of intergroup apologies by religious figures:

They have their own language, their own way of thinking . . . this kind of sanctifying . . . It is what I call distancing in language . . . It is religious and it is a distancing tool . . . it is designed to keep them distant from what they did and what it is they think they are apologising for because when they do that, as far as I am concerned, they don’t mean a word of it . . . They are just using their profession . . . to do down somebody else.61

This interviewee, however, also recognized that apologies ‘shouldn’t be just words . . . forgiveness ought to be a lot more than that’, echoing the focus on future actions and changed norms and practices that were also articulated by Church representatives above as an integral part of remorse and forgiveness.

In the context of the Catholic Church, as Celermajer (2014: 70) notes, an additional aspect of the apology–forgiveness relationship is that ‘Church practices of repentance have been so thoroughly privatized’. In this respect, while the Catholic rite of contrition is deeply imbued with religious meaning and ritual, as outlined above, this is usually done in private between a priest and a penitent, rather than in public, within the sacrament of confession or reconciliation. Therefore, although collective apologies may be considered a form of confession that enables repentance, leading to spiritual renewal or contrition (see e.g. Andrieu, 2009), the essential performative nature of intergroup apologies is incongruent with Catholic religious tradition and ‘the seal of the confessional’62 where ‘apologizing [is] something that is done very privately’.63 As a priest explained,
We do have individual confession to protect the person and that goes back to the fact that confession in the early Church was public . . . and it was kind of out of sensitivity to human nature and shame and embarrassment of people that private confession evolved . . . Nobody wants to be stood up and publicly humiliated.64

Taken together, therefore, in reflecting on the examples and perceptions of intergroup apologies by Church leaders for HIA, humility on the part of the apologiser as well as relational connectedness with victims emerge as pivotal factors in establishing the sincerity of the remorse and therein the reception of such apologies by victimized communities.

**Part IV: Concluding thoughts**

This article has critically examined some of the core complexities of the apology–forgiveness nexus within the specific context of intergroup apologies for historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland by church and state. The article makes a potential scholarly contribution on a number of fronts: by offering empirical accounts of how intergroup apologies are evaluated both by those who give and receive them, including their potential to elicit forgiveness among victims/survivors; and, in addressing the dearth of empirical work on HIA specifically. Echoing the predominantly theoretical literature on intergroup apologies, it suggests that within the context of HIA, effective collective public apologies are impacted by a number of specific factors, including leader apologies delivered on behalf of an organization and the associated normative dilution effect. Furthermore, against the grain of the existing literature, it highlights that the lack of emotion and remorse including the failure of the apologiser to express shame or guilt may undermine the perceived effectiveness of the apology. Moreover, the analysis also demonstrates that a further factor, not expressly supported in previous literature on intergroup apologies, is integral to the delivery and reception of apologies and the possibilities of forgiveness for HIA at the intergroup level: the use of religious rhetoric and ritual.

The range of literature surveyed above confirms that apologies are traditionally envisaged as ‘gestures of finality and closure’ (James and Stanger-Ross, 2018: 289) in bringing about the forgiveness of others or personal resolution. Utilizing HIA as a case study, the present analysis has highlighted that the effectiveness of intergroup apologies and the extent to which they may promote forgiveness among victimized communities is ultimately contingent upon broader contextual factors and specifically the relational contexts of apology which are more usually associated with interpersonal settings. Addressing each of the potential deficits of intergroup apologies set out above establishes the need for apologisers on behalf of offending groups to demonstrate the sincerity of the remorse via emotion; humility; proximity to historical wrongdoing; connectivity with victims/survivors; and ultimately the commitment to non-recurrence. Although not all of the envisaged factors must coalesce in order for an intergroup apology to have perceived value or elicit forgiveness from the persons to whom it is offered, the presence or absence of each of these factors may make the acceptance of such apologies for HIA by survivors in particular more or less likely.

The remainder of this discussion will draw out some of the broader implications relating to the meaning and significance of apologies and forgiveness in the context of intergroup apologies for HIA which will have resonance for other societies coming to terms with the legacy of past abuses. First, while experiences of and attitudes to apologies in general are subjective (see generally Allan
and Carroll, 2017) and highly complex, so too forgiveness appears equally as nuanced and complex in the context of HIA. That is, although general themes and impediments to forgiveness concerning intergroup or collective apologies for HIA have been highlighted throughout, the journey to any potential forgiveness of perpetrators is deeply personal and individualistic, and often complex for victims/survivors. In this respect, the voices of HIA victims/survivors captured above make clear that some do not want an apology no matter how well it is constructed, choreographed or delivered. Equally, the cultural prevalence of public apologies is such that it is also entirely possible that while some victims/survivors may seek an apology as part of the desired official acknowledgement of wrongdoing, they may not accept them when they receive them. Arguably the burden of forgiveness is even more complex for victims/survivors of HIA abused in religious settings who have been taught ‘that they must forgive in accordance with the tenets of their religion’ (Armour and Umbreit, 2006: 125–126). Moreover, as Bentley (2020) contends, ‘closure’ cannot always accommodate intra-group tensions as victims may seek resolutions to wrongdoing and interpret efficacy in significantly different ways other than apology. This can include, for example, a gamut of transitional or restorative measures including truth-seeking as well as other reparative measures such as policy reform. In this sense, the perceived authenticity of intergroup apologies for HIA must also be appraised within the broader context of church and state responses to redress via, for example, follow-through on providing timely and uncontested access to compensation and personal records. Acknowledging some of this complexity, also cautions us to think beyond the binary elements of apology such as sincere or insincere, effective or ineffective and thus to interpret forgiveness as being part of a continuum of responses rather than being ‘pure’ or absolute.

Second, and following on from the previous point, victims/survivors appear more likely to accept intergroup apologies and report higher levels of forgiveness when perpetrators offer apologies that are commensurate with victim/survivor expectations, and in particular which meet their affective needs in terms, for example, of empathy and remorse. That is, just as ‘apology’ is not a neutral word’ (Kerstens, 2008: 188), so too ‘forgiveness’ is strongly encoded with emotional connotations. Such ‘congruent apologies’ (Cowden et al., 2019), which correspond with victims/survivors’ needs and sentiments, have a higher capacity to generate forgiveness and thus appear to be integral to the apology–forgiveness cycle. In other words, while official public apologies by church or state are often subject to ‘sanitizing’ and depersonalized and ‘distancing’ processes by lawyers or advisers as suggested above, ultimately it is the overtly human and personal elements of intergroup apologies which work towards establishing both a connection to the wrongdoing and authenticity for victims/survivors. As a senior clergyman expressed it, ‘with the apology, more important is . . . not the words, it’s the relationship that’s established’.65 Thus, while the emotional and psychological dynamics of apologies as a whole are undoubtedly complex and significant as apology research is beginning to countenance (see e.g. Berndsen and Wenzel, 2021), it is the relational rather than the rhetorical aspects of intergroup apologies which are the ultimate gauge of sincerity and key to promoting forgiveness or reconciliation for HIA among victimized communities.

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Notes

1. Interview 2, Victims’ advocate, 28 November 2017.
2. The broad term ‘HIA’ includes historical abuses of women and children in residential settings; abuses by members of religious orders or ‘clerical abuse’; and forced removal of children from their families.
5. Mette Frederiksen, Danish Prime Minister, state apology, 13 August, 2019.
6. Bertie Ahern, former Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister), state apology while announcing the setting up of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and the Redress Board, 11 May 1999.
7. Enda Kenny, former Taoiseach, Dáil Debates, 19 February 2013, state apology following publication of the McAleese Report (Inter-Departmental Committee to Establish Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries, 2013). ‘Magdalen laundries’ were institutions run predominantly by the Catholic Church on behalf of the State for ‘fallen women’ and operated in Ireland from the 18th century to the late 20th century.
8. Micheál Martin, Taoiseach, Dáil Debates, 13 January 2021, state apology following publication of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (2021). ‘Mother and baby homes’ were institutions where unmarried mothers were sent to have their babies. Many were attached to ‘Magdalen laundries’.
9. State apology in fulfilment of one of the recommendations of the HIA Inquiry (2017: para. 11), 11 March 2022. The HIA Inquiry examined whether there were systemic failings by institutions or the state in their duties towards children in their care between 1922 and 1995. This apology was delivered after the completion of the field research. The Truth Recovery Design Panel into Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalen Laundries and Workhouses in Northern Ireland also recommended ‘unqualified apologies’ for these victims/survivors (Mahon et al., 2021: 17).
10. See, for example, law, criminology, political science, history, management and communication studies, restorative justice and transitional justice. For a brief synopsis, see: McAlinden (2022a).
12. Note, however, that a minority of theorists on forgiveness argue that it is the responsibility of victims to forgive: see e.g. Derrida (2001).
13. Note, there is also a broader debate on the relationship between acceptance and forgiveness within the context of apologies: see e.g. Strickland et al. (2018).
14. Bentley (2020) attributes the ‘elusiveness’ of forgiveness in such contexts to a number of factors including the diversity of victims, some of whom are deceased, and the absence of a ‘higher authority’.
15. Celermajer (2010: ch. 3), for example, highlights parallels between ancient Jewish rituals of repentance and contemporary public apologies as mechanisms of norm transformation at the collective level.
16. ESRC Grant Ref: ES/N010825/1.
17. Of the nine victim focus groups, only one was held with individuals who self-identified as HIA victims/survivors due to ethical reasons, in order to avoid retraumatisation of survivors. This focus group comprised five individual victims. Additional individual interviews were conducted instead with nine victims/survivors, all of whom self-identified as such, with most having a public profile.
18. The methodology also encompassed a public survey across every county in Ireland (n = 1,007). However, the findings from this element are not drawn upon here. For an analysis of some of the themes from the public survey, see Bryson and MacCarthaigh (2022).
19. See Notes 6–8 above.
21. See Note 20.
22. Interview 10, Lawyer, 20 April 2018.
24. Public Focus Group, Dublin 1, Male 9, 13 November 2017.
27. Interview 13, Survivor, 18 May 2018.
29. Interview 22, Survivor, 24 June 2018.
30. Interview 15, Senior Clergyman, 22 May 2018.
32. Interview 15, Senior Clergyman, 22 May 2018.
33. See Notes 6 and 7 above and accompanying text.
34. Interview 22, Survivor, 24 June 2018.
35. Interview 8, Victims’ Advocate, 21 February 2018.
36. Focus Group with HIA Survivors, Female 3, 12 November 2018.
38. Focus Group with HIA Survivors, Female 1, 13 November 2018.
40. Interview 12, Survivor, 27 April 2018.
42. Interview 14, Survivor, 14 May 2018.
43. Focus Group with HIA Survivors, Female 2, 12 November 2018.
44. Interview 5, Senior Clergyman, 22 January 2018.
46. See Note 45.
47. Interview 19, Priest, 12 November 2018.
48. See Note 7 above.
49. Public Focus Group, Dublin 1, Male 1, 13 November 2017.
50. Interview 5, Senior Clergyman, 22 January 2018.
51. Interview 13, Survivor, 18 May 2018.
52. Interview 6, Priest, 25 January 2018.
53. Interview 5, Senior Clergyman, 22 January 2018.
55. The Boston Archdiocese has also been the subject of high-profile cases of clerical sexual abuse where investigation of alleged cover-ups by the Boston Globe in 2002 led to a number of prosecutions of priests.
58. See Note 57.
59. See https://www.catholicireland.net/apostolic-visitation-in-ireland-report/
60. See ‘Clergy Urged to Listen to Victims’, The Irish Times, 20 March 2012.
62. In the sacrament of penance or reconciliation (also known as ‘confession’), Catholics confess their sins to a priest, as a representative of God, usually in a private cabinet called a ‘confessional’. By expressing contrition for sins or wrongdoing, penitents are thought to experience God’s healing through forgiveness. For a historical overview of ‘confession’ in the Catholic Church, see Cornwell (2014).

63. Interview 1, Nun, 22 November 2017.

64. Interview 19, Priest, 12 November 2018.

65. Interview 15, Senior Clergyman, 22 May 2018.

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