1. Discipline: anthropology

Should religious groups apologise for converting indigenous peoples from traditional belief systems?

Introduction

The legacy of religious conversion during colonial expansion remains a contentious and painful chapter for many Indigenous communities worldwide. In Australia, Anglican and Catholic missions actively participated in the systematic suppression of indigenous spiritual, linguistic, and cultural practices, often in tandem with state policies of assimilation (Harris, 1990; Haebich, 2000). Throughout this essay, I use the term “indigenous” rather than “aboriginal” to refer to the original inhabitants of Australia and Canada, in order to include other indigenous groups such as Torres Strait Islander, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. Additionally, some Indigenous Australians find "Aboriginal" to have colonial connotations and prefer self-determined terminology. Conversion was seldom a matter of free choice; rather, it was often imposed through material incentives, social exclusion, or even outright force. (Bringing Them Home Report, 1997). The process, often operating under the guise of benevolence and intentions of “salvation”, was also not solely spiritual—it was a mechanism of colonial control that disrupted intergenerational knowledge transfer and fractured Indigenous identities (Wolfe, 2006). Missionary work was predominantly about “civilising” those deemed primitive, a belief deeply rooted in European superiority. When Christian missionaries arrived in Australia in the 19th century, they didn’t just bring the Bible; they brought an entire worldview that saw indigenous culture as something to be replaced.

This essay argues that religious institutions should issue formal apologies for their role in these conversion practices. Such apologies must go beyond symbolic regret to address the enduring harm caused to Indigenous communities. The discussion is divided into four sections: (1) the relationship between religious conversion and colonial power; (2) the intergenerational impact of these practices; (3) the ethical responsibility of institutions to address historical injustices; and (4) the need for sincere, action-oriented apologies. While acknowledging that some Indigenous individuals embraced Christianity, the essay contends that the broader systemic context of coercive conversion justifies formal institutional apologies followed by restorative action.

1. Religious conversion as a tool of colonial power

Religious conversion in Australia was inextricably linked to the broader colonial project of cultural assimilation. Christian missionaries, often with state support, established missions on or near indigenous reserves with the explicit aim of replacing traditional belief systems with Christian doctrines (Haebich, 2000). While they worked within government policies, religious institutions carried out the day-to-day operations of assimilation (Reynolds, 1998; Wolfe, 2006). This assimilationist rationale often stemmed from paternalistic attitudes: government officials and missionaries deemed indigenous peoples in need of "uplift," based on the racist assumption that their lifeways were "inferior" (Reynolds, 1998). This process was not merely spiritual but served as a form of social control that aligned with ethnocentric colonial objectives of dispossession and assimilation (Wolfe, 2006). Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality" helps explain how missionary efforts extended colonial power by embedding control within everyday social institutions—schools, churches, and welfare systems, contributing to a comprehensive strategy of cultural erosion (Foucault, 1978). For instance, conversion was often not a free choice but rather a form of "forced or strategic conversion," where those who conformed were rewarded with better access to food, education, and clothing—seen as gateways to modernity and socioeconomic opportunities—while those who resisted were marginalised and punished (Bringing Them Home Report, 1997). Conversion here was not an act of individual faith but an imposed cultural realignment designed to render Indigenous communities more compliant with settler norms. Case studies from other colonial contexts echo these patterns. In Canada, the residential school system similarly employed Christian teachings to erase Indigenous identities, resulting in widespread trauma and intergenerational suffering (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The parallels between Australian and Canadian missionary practices underscore the systemic nature of religiously driven cultural suppression and provide a compelling basis for religious institutions to acknowledge and apologise for their historical roles.

2. The intergenerational impact of forced conversions

The effects of religious conversion did not end with the initial victims subjected to missionary practices; they persist across multiple generations. Forced religious conversion often severed the intergenerational transmission of language, cultural practices, and spiritual knowledge (Bringing Them Home Report, 1997). For instance, at the Moore River Native Settlement in Western Australia, indigenous children were taken from their families and placed under strict missionary regimes that suppressed Indigenous languages and customs (Bringing Them Home Report, 1997). This loss continues to manifest in contemporary issues such as identity dislocation, community disempowerment, and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems.

Generations later, descendants still grapple with lost cultural knowledge, fractured family ties, and ongoing identity dislocation stemming from that forced separation. For example, many indigenous communities in northern Australia report a decline in the use of traditional languages, partly due to mission policies that banned Indigenous languages and spiritual practices (McGregor, 1997). The Tiwi Islands mission, for instance, required children to speak only English and practice Christianity, leading to a significant loss of Tiwi cultural practices over subsequent decades (Haebich, 2000). Similarly, in Canada, the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia was a site where Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their families, often prohibited from speaking their languages and practicing their cultural traditions. This disruption broke intergenerational ties and spiritual knowledge transmission, with impacts that still echo through descendant communities today (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Psychological and social harm is also evident in intergenerational trauma. The work of Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1999) on historical trauma in Indigenous communities demonstrates how colonial violence, including religious assimilation, has contributed to persistent patterns of psychological distress. In Australia, the Stolen Generations remain a stark example of this impact, as survivors and their descendants continue to experience higher rates of mental health challenges, substance dependency, and social marginalisation (Bringing Them Home Report, 1997). Apologising for religious conversion, therefore, is not merely about addressing historical events; it is about acknowledging the ongoing harm that these practices have caused to Indigenous communities. Recognition of this intergenerational impact aligns with Indigenous justice frameworks, which view reconciliation as a long-term process involving historical acknowledgment and contemporary support (Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017).

3. Institutional responsibility for historical injustices

Religious institutions that participated in assimilationist policies bear a moral and ethical responsibility to acknowledge and address the harm caused, regardless of leadership turnover. As Nobles (2008) argues, institutions maintain historical continuity even as their members change. The Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran churches, for instance, continue to benefit from the land and wealth accumulated during the missionary era (Banivanua Mar, 2006). Apologies, in this context, serve as an institutional acknowledgment of both historical complicity and contemporary privilege. Some critics contend that current religious leaders should not apologise for actions taken by their predecessors. However, Indigenous communities argue that the trauma resulting from these actions remains present in their lives today (Maddison, 2019). The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) illustrates the importance of institutional accountability, showing how apologies accompanied by reparative

measures can restore trust and promote healing, even when those issuing the apology were not personally responsible for the original harm.

Moreover, institutions that issued half-hearted apologies have faced increased skepticism. The Catholic Church's apology following the *Bringing Them Home* report and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's formal national apology to the Stolen Generations (Rudd, 2008) have provoked a wave of demands for active restoration of culture and wealth. This is emphasised by many Indigenous leaders who continue to highlight that true reconciliation requires not only words but meaningful action in the form of financial reparations, land restitution, and Indigenous-led healing programmes (Dodson, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). In contrast, Canada's United Church combined its apology with funding for Indigenous language programmes and the return of certain lands. These measures aimed to address the intergenerational impact of cultural disruption, supporting communities in reclaiming their languages and traditions. In the years since this intervention, some communities have reported increased engagement in language learning, greater participation in cultural ceremonies, and a stronger sense of collective identity. These steps have helped rebuild trust in certain regions by affirming Indigenous sovereignty over cultural and spiritual practices, allowing for the revitalisation of traditions once disrupted under colonial policies (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). This demonstrates how meaningful apologies can contribute to reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

4. The role of apology: meaning, principles, and practical action

The purpose of an apology in this context is twofold: to acknowledge past wrongs and to foster a foundation for future reconciliation. Apologies that merely express regret are insufficient; they must convey genuine remorse, accept institutional responsibility, and commit to reparative actions (Gibney & Roxstrom, 2001). There are three principles that are essential for an effective apology. Firstly, institutions must acknowledge the harm they have done. They should explicitly recognise the damage caused by forced religious conversion, including the loss of cultural practices, spiritual traditions, and intergenerational knowledge (Bringing Them Home Report, 1997). Secondly, institutions must accept responsibility for the harm they have done. Apologies must avoid conditional language that diminishes responsibility. Institutions should clearly state their complicity in past practices and the enduring impact of these actions (Nobles, 2008). Finally, institutions should commit to providing reparations to all affected indigenous communities. Concrete actions must accompany apologies, such as land restitution, funding for Indigenous-led cultural programmes, and support for community healing initiatives (Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017). While many indigenous people appreciate formal acknowledgments of past wrongs, they emphasise that apologies without structural change are

insufficient (Schaap, 2005). The phrase "Sorry means you don't do it again" is often cited, meaning that genuine remorse should lead to meaningful reforms (Manne, 2001).

These terms of an appropriate apology have seldom been put into practice effectively, evident in the Anglican Church of Australia's apology in 1988, which exemplifies both the strengths and limitations of institutional apologies. While the church publicly acknowledged the harm caused by its missionary activities, many indigenous leaders criticised the apology's lack of substantive follow-up actions (McGrath, 2015). In contrast, the Canadian experience demonstrates how ongoing financial support for language preservation and cultural education can enhance the credibility and effectiveness of an apology (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). In Australia, indigenous leaders emphasise that financial compensation could support Indigenous-led initiatives in education, cultural preservation, and economic development (Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017; Moreton-Robinson, 2015),whilst legislative reforms are necessary to strengthen protections for Indigenous religious and cultural rights, ensuring that no future interference occurs (Tats, 2011). Others argue that one of the most significant forms of restitution would be the return of land that was taken and used for missions (Banivanua Mar, 2006). Some churches have already begun this process, but much more needs to be done to acknowledge and address historical injustices (Attwood, 2005).

A meaningful apology must also respect the diversity of Indigenous experiences with Christianity. Many felt that embracing Christianity risked losing vital parts of their cultural identity (McGregor, 1997; Langton, 1993). Yet, numerous Indigenous Australians have reimagined and reshaped Christianity in ways that affirm rather than erase their heritage. Institutions like the Uniting indigenous and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) and Nungalinya College in Darwin, exemplify how Christian faith can be woven into indigenous cultural practices (Langton, 1993). While Indigenous Christian communities today express a faith that is meaningful to them, this should not be used as an argument to dismiss the harms caused by coercive conversion (Reynolds, 1998). Recognising this diversity of experiences is essential for crafting meaningful apologies—figures such as Reverend Djiniyini Gondarra, a Yolŋu leader and Christian minister, have called for recognition of past wrongs while also affirming that Yolŋu spirituality and Christianity can coexist (Maddison, 2019). Apologies should acknowledge the harm inflicted by colonial frameworks while also honouring the resilience and creativity of Indigenous communities in preserving their spiritual traditions.

Conclusion

Religious groups should issue apologies for their role in the coerced conversion of Indigenous peoples, but these apologies must be more than symbolic gestures (Schaap, 2005). Historical

evidence from Australia and comparable contexts like Canada demonstrate that religious conversion was often used as a tool of colonial assimilation, resulting in profound cultural, psychological, and social harm. These impacts persist across generations, underscoring the contemporary relevance of institutional apologies. Such apologies are most meaningful when paired with reparative actions that address the intergenerational consequences of these practices. Land restitution, support for cultural and language revival, and long-term partnerships with Indigenous communities can transform apologies into genuine acts of reconciliation. By acknowledging past harm and committing to future collaboration, religious institutions can contribute to a more just and inclusive future for Indigenous peoples.

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