

Honest Patriots

Loving a Country Enough to Remember Its Misdeeds

Donald Shriver argues that recognition of morally negative events in American history is essential to the health of our society. The failure to acknowledge and repent of these events skews the relations of many Americans to one another and breeds ongoing hostility. To obscure the suffering of anyone's ancestors, says Shriver, is to be blind to the continuing impact of that suffering upon the descendants. Yet our civic identity largely rests on denials, forgetfulness, and inattention to the memories of neighbors whose ancestors suffered great injustices at the hands of some dominant majority. Shriver contends that repentance for these injustices must find a place in our political culture. It must be carefully cultivated through the accurate teaching of history, public symbols that embody both positive and negative memory, and public leadership to this end. Religious people and religious organizations have an important role to play in this process. In the past, the Christian tradition has so concentrated on the personal dimensions of forgiveness and repentance that their collective aspects have been severely neglected. More recently, however, the idea of collective moral responsibility has come into public prominence. Official apologies for past collective injustice have multiplied, as have calls for reparations. Focusing on the wrongs suffered by African Americans and Native Americans, Shriver examines the challenges associated with the call for collective repentance: What can it mean to morally master a past whose victims are dead and whose sufferings cannot be alleviated? What are the measures that lend substance to language and action expressing repentance? What symbolic and tangible acts produce credible turns away from past wrongs? What are the dynamics-psychological, social, and political-whereby we can safely consign an evil to the past? How can public life witness to corporate crimes of the past in such a way that descendants of victims can be confident that they will never be repeated? In answering these questions Shriver creates a compelling vision of the collective repentance and apology that must precede real progress in relations between the races in this country.

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