



Memories as religion: What can the broken continuity of tradition bring about? – Part two

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Dates:

Received: 01 Sept. 2014

Accepted: 13 Mar. 2015

Published: 09 June 2015

How to cite this article:

Urbaniak, J., 2015, 'Memories as religion: What can the broken continuity of tradition bring about? – Part two', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71(3), Art. #2933, 10 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2933>

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In postmodern societies the symbolic vacuum, a result of the loss of a unified religious tradition, calls for substitutes in the form of fragmentary and isolated memories. By drawing from the reservoir of those memories in an arbitrary and subjective way, privatised (de-institutionalised) religion creates a kind of symbolic *bricolage*. Can such a bricolage become more than a mere 'counterfeit' of collective meaning that religion once used to provide? Can religious tradition, based on a broken continuity of memory, still bring about a matrix of the ways of expressing one's faith? If so, how? This twofold study seeks to explore those and similar questions by means of showing, firstly, in what sense religion can be conceived of as memory which produces collective meanings (Part One) and, secondly, what may happen when individualised and absolutised memories alienate themselves from a continuity of tradition, thus beginning to function as a sort of private religion (Part Two). Being the second part of the study in question, this article aims at exploring the postmodern crisis of religious memory, which includes the pluralisation of the channels of the sacred and the differentiation of a total religious memory into a plurality of specialised circles of memory. Firstly, it examines the three main aspects of the current crisis of continuity at large, namely the affirmation of the autonomous individual, the advance of rationalisation, and the process of institutional differentiation. Secondly, the plurality of the channels of the sacred is discussed in light of religion's apparently unique way of drawing legitimisation from its reference to tradition. This is followed by two illustrations of the reconstruction of religious memory. In the final section of the article, a theological reflection on possible directions that may be taken in the face of the postmodern crisis of religious memory is offered.

Introduction

Qui traîne son Dieu dans ses bagages croit vivre à l'ombre de Dieu alors qu'il n'en vénère que l'ombre. Mieux vaut perdre la trace de Dieu parce qu'on est parti à sa recherche, car lui du moins ne nous perd pas de vue (Moingt 1985:286).¹

Postmodern societies are less and less capable of maintaining the continuity of memory which used to lie at the very core of their religious identity; that is why they have become less and less religious. Or – perhaps more accurately – that is why currently one witnesses the emergence of a myriad of new forms of quasi religiosity which can be seen in the new social-cultural roles assumed, for example, by social media, music or sport. But traditional religions are subject to change in no lesser degree. The symbolic vacuum, a result of the loss of a unified religious tradition, calls for substitutes in the form of fragmentary and isolated memories. By drawing from the reservoir of those memories in an arbitrary and subjective way, privatised (de-institutionalised) religion creates a kind of symbolic *bricolage*. Can such a bricolage become more than a mere 'counterfeit' of collective meaning that religion once used to provide? Can religious tradition, based on a broken continuity of memory, still bring about a matrix of the ways of expressing one's faith? If so, how?

My research on the religious meanings of memory has resulted in two independent though interrelated articles. This twofold study aims at showing, firstly, in what sense religion can be conceived of as memory which produces collective meanings (cf. Urbaniak 2015) and, secondly, what may happen when individualised and absolutised memories alienate themselves from a continuity of tradition, thus beginning to function as a sort of private religion. In my analysis, I refer mainly to the Judeo-Christian tradition, though I believe that the general tendencies regarding the role of religious memory in both pre- and postmodern societies, as captured and described in this article, can be observed *mutatis mutandis* in other religious traditions as well.

As a coherent study in its own right, this article seeks to explore the postmodern crisis of religious memory, which includes the pluralisation of the channels of the sacred and the differentiation of

¹Whoever carries God in his luggage thinks he is living in God's shadow, whereas in fact he is worshipping nothing but shadow. It would be better to lose sight of God, for then one has set out to find him [sic], for he, at least, never loses sight of us (author's translation).



a total religious memory into a plurality of specialised circles of memory. Firstly, I examine the three main aspects of the current crisis of continuity at large, namely the affirmation of the autonomous individual, the advance of rationalisation, and the process of institutional differentiation. Secondly, the plurality of the channels of the sacred in postmodern societies is discussed in light of religion's apparently unique way of drawing legitimisation from its reference to tradition. This is followed by two illustrations of the reconstruction of religious memory: The practices of the ultraconservative movements are shown as an example of the manipulation of Christian tradition, whereas Focolare and Taizé communities are used as an example of a creative re-appropriation thereof. In the final section of the article, I offer a theological reflection on possible directions that may be taken in the face of the postmodern crisis of religious memory. My three proposals are based on the insights of Paul Ricoeur, Tomáš Halík and C.S. Lewis.

The postmodern crisis of continuity

Modernity has implied two major movements within religion: firstly changed forms of religious expression, and secondly changed needs of referring to tradition. Postmodern societies experience extreme tensions due to globalisation on the one hand, and radical atomisation of the individual on the other. Religious practice can be seen, in this context, as an expression of symbolically dealing with the lack of sense and the continuous dialectics between a progressive *amnesia* and an uncontrolled thirst for *anamnesis*. Change and discontinuity, which are functions of modernity itself, have resulted in postmodern societies failing to nurture the capacity of individual believers and religious communities to assimilate a lineage of belief (Hervieu-Léger 2000:123).

The crisis of the church and the crisis of society in the West are organically interconnected. Mobility's threat to community, pluralism's threat to professing one's fundamental convictions, and enlightened reason's threat to the authority of tradition all affect the secular realm as well as the religious (Heinz 2001:152–153). The crisis that has been brought about by the modern ethos seems now to be reaching its summit in our postmodern era.

A loss of faith in the ideals of the Enlightenment, disillusion with the idea of progress, and the disappearance of old certainties are generally considered as the chief characteristics of a postmodern society. But what is even more relevant to this analysis is that in postmodern societies religious memory has lost its continuity and thus is no longer capable of calling up its integral store of remembrances. Instead, postmodernism calls to mind 'actors without a system, enclosed in their imagination and their memories' (Touraine 1992:224–225).

The reason why postmodern societies become less and less religious is that they are less and less capable of maintaining the continuity of memory which lies at the heart of their (once) religious identity. This insight is shared by various

contemporary authors, though they name this phenomenon in different ways. While Hervieu-Léger (2000:ix) coins the term 'amnesic societies', Paul Ricoeur (2004:122) speaks of the 'amnesia characteristic of social action' and, in a similar context, also recalls the notion of the 'crisis of testimony' (2004:176, 180). Ricoeur's (2004:284) most original contribution, however, consists in his reflection on 'forgetting' which, in his own words, is the 'emblem of the vulnerability of the historical condition as a whole', for 'what is lost in *forgetting* is the past, in its twofold mnemonic and historical dimension'.² Hanspeter Heinz (2001:146), in turn, describes the same process as '*extinctio memoriae*' which in his own mind implies expunction from historical memories which used to orient people in the world and provided them with a sense of rootedness in a community of rich and diverse traditions (Ellenson 2001:170).

One may wonder what particular elements of postmodernity should be held accountable for this crisis. According to Hervieu-Léger, there are three main factors that denote the end of societies based on memory: The affirmation of the autonomous individual, the advance of rationalisation breaking up the 'sacred canopies', and the process of institutional differentiation (Hervieu-Léger 2000:127). Each of these factors deserves a brief comment.

The affirmation of the autonomous individual

David Ellenson considers the notion of the autonomous self to be a crucial determinant of the ethos of modernity as such. He argues that allowing the past to inform and guide one's choices in the present demands ceding the individual's right to self-determination to the heteronomy of tradition. Today's believers, excessively concerned with their own autonomy, seem incapable of such a cession, and thus fall into narcissistic traps (Ellenson 2001:171, 172). In a broader sense, Ricoeur (2004:390) points to the experience of solitude as one of the agents that account for the break in the *dialogicality* proper to a shared memory. The speed with which subjectivism is encroaching on the territory of religion is proportionate to the degree of the unloading of memory. The absolute imperative for each individual to find her own way of expressing and satisfying spiritual needs and aspirations inevitably leads to the progressive erosion of collective religious identity (Hervieu-Léger 2000:140). As a consequence, in postmodern society the fact of religious adherence has been reduced to a concern of the individual who incurs no sanction even though he or she keeps it at a distance, decides to change, or resolves to do without it altogether (Hervieu-Léger 2000:164).

Another side of modern imperative of self-determination is expressed in the fact that options and choices that were once unthinkable have now become acceptable in ways that would have been unimaginable a generation earlier: People leave their native towns, women become clergy,

²According to Ricoeur (2004:443–444), individual manifestations of forgetting are inextricably mixed with its collective forms, 'to the point that the most troubling experiences of forgetting ... display their most malevolent effects only on the scale of collective memories'.

and gays and lesbians 'step out of the closet' – of course, such examples can be multiplied a thousandfold (Ellenson 2001:171). Distinction between 'societies of memory' and 'societies of change' may seem somewhat rigid. And yet, as Hervieu-Léger (2000:123) notices, 'it is perfectly reasonable to point out how [*in the present societies*] the evidence of social, cultural and psychological continuity is eroded through the effect of change'. In his book, *The heretical imperative*, the American sociologist Peter L. Berger (1979:11) maintains that the quintessential feature of modern Western culture is that *haeresis*, that is, option or choice, has become inescapable; modernity is marked, in his felicitous phrase, by the move from *fate to choice*. In *The homeless mind*, Berger supplements this argument by contending that the modern condition of choice has left many persons without a secure sense of roots and stability, extinguishing both universal memories and values (Berger, Berger & Kellner 1973:92).³ In this context, Charles Taylor (2007:478ff.) points to the widespread abuses of the choice-based rhetoric. In today's society 'choice' has become a *prime value*, irrespective of what it is a choice between, or in what domain. Needless to say, the cult of a choice as such, a choice as a value in itself, leads to trivialising a number of weighty debates. The sacrificed alternatives in a dilemmatic situation, the real moral weight of the situation – almost everything significant is being occluded by this all-trumping argument.

The advance of rationalisation

As for the advance of rationalisation, which is the second mark of modernity suggested by Hervieu-Léger, it leads to the gouging of religion from postmodern societies not only in an obvious sense of undermining the legitimacy of religious assertions by proving them unverifiable and/or unfalsifiable, but also paradoxically by stimulating an anti-rational tendency that might be labelled a 'subjective fundamentalism' (Hervieu-Léger 2000:169). It has its roots in a polarisation characteristic of present societies in which the absolute claims of reason generate, in a sense, the absolute claims of the individual to reinterpret the reality in an arbitrary yet apparently binding manner. Put simply, the thinking subject claims to *know* the 'real meaning of things' for which he or she alone holds the key. There is a separation which – when taken to its extreme – might be described as schizophrenic. The real world, with its own laws, is contrasted to the subjective world of constructed meaning which to the subject appears as 'realer than the real world' (Hervieu-Léger 2000:169). Subjective fundamentalism thus comprehended results in marginalising the traditional role of collective Christian memory. It also implies a sort of amnesia, which can be observed especially in the more technologically advanced societies in which *immediatism* in both consumption and communication leads to the 'obliteration of all recall that is not immediate or functional' (Hervieu-Léger 2000:140).

3. Some consider it to be a sign of liberation from 'tribal brotherhood' [*sic*] and promotion of a personal responsibility for an order recognised as proceeding exclusively from the individual will; most people, however, experience it as the anomie and alienation of 'universal otherhood' (Ellenson 2001:174).

The process of institutional differentiation

Perhaps what constitutes the greatest threat to religion, understood as a chain of memory, is the third of the modern agents mentioned above, that is, institutional differentiation which in many cases is tantamount to factual de-institutionalisation, so characteristic of secularising tendencies in today's societies. Secularisation is seen by many as another name for the crisis of collective memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000:130). Certainly, the growth of secularisation and the loss of total collective memory coincide completely (Hervieu-Léger 2000:127). However, the great debate on secularisation which seemed very topical a few decades ago now appears to be superseded. As Hervieu-Léger (2000:167–168) remarks, at present 'the real debate relates to the consequences for the traditional institutions of religion of the radical de-institutionalisation of the religious' (cf. also Taylor 2007:507–508, 520, 727). Some argue that what we deal with is simply a case of the *reconstruction* of religious identity, whereby a new pattern of religion comes into being which undermines every attempt to imagine continuity. Others, however, hold that we face a radical and definitive *disintegration* of both the religious and the moral order, the social consummation of what Friedrich Nietzsche long ago forecast as the 'era of nihilism', in which all values lose their value (Hervieu-Léger 2000:139, 164).

Decomposition in general, and decomposition of religion in particular, constitutes no doubt the essence of modernity. Religion is often seen, in such a context, as a victim of implacable social processes leading to de-institutionalisation. It is worthwhile noting, however, that unlike Judaism or Islam, both of which attach more emphasis to the fulfilment of observances as a criterion of religious belief, Christianity has itself contributed to the disintegration in question. By giving the believer's personal faith, *in spirit and in truth*, pride of place Christianity de facto facilitated the destabilising of reference to an authorised memory, which is the essential structure of the religious. Hervieu-Léger (2000) observes that:

[The] modern de-institutionalisation of the religious which reaches its culmination in the cultural world of high modernity is, in part at least, an offshoot of the Christian subjectivisation of religious experience. (p. 170; cf. also Casanova 1994:40–66; 2006)

It remains arguable to what extent Christianity itself can be held accountable for preparing the ground for its own deconstruction (or – to be more precise – the destruction of its particular cultural forms). In any case, the ongoing crisis of continuity in postmodern societies is a fact and its implications for Christianity are implacable. The role of the church as the depository, the custodian, of collective memory has been undermined. From this point of view, Christianity seems to have lost for good the role of 'religion' in the sense of a *common language* for Western culture.

Various channels of the sacred

One of the most significant direct ramifications of all three factors described above is that present societies became



sorts of 'religious markets' or, broadly speaking, 'symbolic markets', to use the metaphor which has been originally proposed in a classic article by Berger and Luckmann (1967:120–121).

As the Czech theologian Tomáš Halík (2011) points out, today various phenomena are seeking to play religion's integrative social and cultural role. This tendency has its roots in the second half of the 18th century when natural science and later (in particular during the Romantic era) culture and art started making claims for a status of a 'common language' of Western culture and its 'social cement'. In the 19th century it was often nationalism and 'political religion' (especially the ideologies of totalitarian movements such as Nazism and Communism) that took over. At present religion's sociological role as universal 'cement' is played by the market (the capitalist economy) and perhaps even to a greater degree by the most powerful force in today's society, namely the information market. Mass media have been most effective in taking over religion's social role by arbitrarily interpreting the world and offering new symbols and stories that shape the lifestyles and thinking of millions of people. In the sociological sense, contemporary media might be described as *the religion of the present-day West*. Of course, the elements that for centuries were fundamentally associated with religion – spirituality, moral values, faith, hope, love, the struggle with selfishness and idolatry, the quest for communication with the transcendental dimension of reality and the ultimate concern of life – cannot simply disappear from the social sphere along with certain traditional forms of religion. Instead, they are articulated differently, that is to say, they *overflow* – whether in the institutional or intellectual sense – into other domains, forms, and means of expression.

Thus postmodernity pluralises ways of producing meaning by continuously increasing dissociation of the 'modes' of accessing the sacred and giving an account of it (Taylor 2007:553–554). The experience of the sacred may still be made to serve a religious ideal of continuity in belief, but what changed is that the linking of the two dimensions is no longer automatic, nor even necessary (Hervieu-Léger 2000:107). The fact that forms of experience known by the term 'sacred' may occur outside established religion is not an object of social or ideological agreement, but rather an intuitive assumption made by the postmodern person and demonstrated by prevailing cultural attitudes to the domains of life. Political ideologies, scientific fantasies or even sport are de facto treated as equally valid (or competitive) channels of the sacred. Thus what is 'religious' does not necessarily belong to 'religion' per se. 'Religious' has a broader meaning today: It includes not only new sects and movements, but also a de-institutionalised faith that constitutes the believer's own arbitrary composition derived from the reservoir of collective memory.

The contemporary fragmentation of space, time and institutions entails also the fragmentation of collective memory which, in effect, appears as composed of bits and pieces. Being able to differentiate between a family memory,

a religious memory, a national memory, a class memory or even a soccer fans' memory is already a token of having left behind the pure world of tradition (Hervieu-Léger 2000:127). Since each individual belongs to a number of groups, the functional dissociation of the experience he or she undergoes 'forbids access to a unified memory, which in any case is beyond the power of any single group to construct, restricted as each is by its specialisation' (Hervieu-Léger 2000:129). Competitiveness between the dominant purveyors of meaning in today's societies results in a general uncertainty regarding all references, itself being an expression of the mistrust felt for the dominant religious traditions and their claim to permanence and stability (Hervieu-Léger 2000:164). The pluralism offered by the world in an age of religious consumerism makes the weight of tradition and memory an unappealing option for many people. Once essential to forming people's 'habits of the heart', today religion – if it is relevant at all – tends to be reduced to a therapeutic activity of some sort, one among many. Ellenson (2001) observes that:

This is why, even when religion thrives, many people pay principal attention to personal moments and rituals of passage and transformation, while relatively scant interest is shown to the commands religious traditions issue about the daily conduct and practice of life. (p. 172)

In this context one may wonder whether there is anything that makes religion distinctive from other channels of the sacred. Though it appears to be only one of many figures in the pluralised world of believing, religion in general and Christianity in particular still attempts to define itself by the legitimising *exclusiveness* of reference to tradition. It does not mean that the normative dimension to memory is, of itself, specific to religious memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000:100, 124). What is peculiar to the memory of religious groups is rather that, as Halbwachs (1992:91–92) notices, 'while memories of other groups permeate each other mutually and tend to correspond, the memory of religious groups claims to be fixed once and for all'. It seems doubtful, however, whether Christianity – or any religion for that matter – can succeed in defending such claims.

Could the current radicalisation of modernity, with its emphasis on the plurality of ways in which meaning can be produced or transcendence attained, not be conceived as an opportunity to rediscover and radicalise the church's openness towards other faiths and towards human cultures declared *inter alia* by the Second Vatican Council? Is the religious fundamentalism that urges believers to fend off the enemies of faith and keep the circle of chosen ones fortified not sufficiently threatening? (Caputo 2001:35–36; 2006:15) At this point, let me leave those questions without answers.

From memory to memories

Finally, it has to be stressed that in postmodern societies the pluralisation characteristic of producing meaning and relating to the sacred, concerns also the way of referring to religious tradition itself, which no longer constitutes an order constricting (or shaping) the life of the individual



and society. Hence there is no more 'automatic overlapping of the fragmented world of believing and the equally fragmented world of tradition' (Hervieu-Léger 2000:97). A de-institutionalised faith draws from the reservoir of memory in a selective way, thus creating a kind of a religious *bricolage*. Then, the isolated fragments of what was once a coherent system of Christian remembrances is preserved, though in a deviated form, and guarded by highly specialised religious groups. In such a way, the differentiation and transmutation of total religious memory into a plurality of specialised and alienated circles of memories occurs.

Religious memory is forced continually to reconstruct itself in new forms so as to ensure some sort of continuity for both individual believers and the church as a whole. However, without there being an organised and integrated collective memory, such reconstruction takes place in an entirely fragmentary and arbitrary way. What follows is an interlacing of shattered memories that have been worked upon, invented, and constantly reshaped in response to the demands of a present, itself being subject to the pressures of change. Those alienated memories can be seen as forms of compensation that develop in reaction to the symbolic vacuum resulting from the loss of depth and unity in total religious memory. Thus the growing number of such attempts on whatever scale, especially in Western countries, constitutes the reverse side of the discontinuity of memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000:141–143). From this perspective, the main task of today's sociology of religion consists in following successive stages in the crumbling of collective memory and, more specifically, in the examination of the ways in which the body of fragmented memory is constituted, reconstituted and cross-related (Hervieu-Léger 2000:127, 143).

Two illustrations of the mechanism in question – the negative and the positive one – may prove helpful.

Ultraconservative movements: The manipulation of Christian memory

The ultraconservative Christian movements, such as the Society of Saint Pius X, an international traditionalist Catholic organisation, founded in 1970 by the French archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, represent a relatively integral attitude to the tradition of the church. At the same time, however, their followers seem to be reluctant to confront tradition with the challenges of today, thus neglecting the continuity between the past and the present, which is so essential for the dynamic understanding of memory in Catholicism. The outcome of their static and rigid approach to tradition is that religious memory, held by traditionalist communities, tends to be alienated from the context of the church's salvific presence and mission in the world and absolutised, that is, elevated to the level of something self-sufficient and *sacred* in itself.

Some ultraconservative movements go even further in their manipulation of a total Christian memory. A suggestive example can be found in Poland where a significant social group (sometimes labelled 'a church within the church') has

emerged, centred around the *Radio Maryja* ('Radio Mary'), a Polish conservative Catholic radio station and media group, founded in 1991 and run since its inception by the powerful and highly controversial Redemptorist, Fr Tadeusz Rydzyk. Symptomatically, the founder is often referred to as 'Father Director' by his followers who describe themselves as the 'Radio Maryja Family'. In spite of being warned several times by both the Vatican and the Episcopate of Poland about 'political broadcasting' that promotes xenophobic and anti-Semitic attitudes, the Radio Maryja continues to function. What is more, it gains increasing influence not only among its primary audience of the elderly rural poor, but also among leading politicians from the major opposition party. What characterises this movement's approach to religious memory is firstly that its followers draw selectively from the reservoir of Christian tradition and secondly that they objectify and reconstruct this tradition in order to use it as a weapon against their ideological opponents (and not, for instance, to engage in dialogue with an increasingly secularised society). Their selectivity and arbitrariness in relating to the body of Christian remembrances leads to attributing great importance to persons and events significant from the point of view of the Polish national and religious identity, but which remain secondary from the perspective of the universal faith.⁴ What is more, to enhance the patriotic message and to encourage the militant response in the audience, a deep religious meaning is often ascribed to events which are not originally of a religious nature. For example, when on 10 April 2010 a military jet carrying the Polish president, his wife and many notable political and military figures crashed in a wooded area near Smolensk killing all passengers on impact, the Radio Maryja immediately started a social campaign aimed at presenting this accident in terms of a long Polish martyrology ('victims died for their patriotism and Catholic faith').⁵ More dangerously, it started spreading conspiracy theories regarding an alleged presidential assassination plot by Russian authorities. Thus to establish their ultra-Catholic identity, movements such as the Radio Maryja select the most useful memories from the deposit of Christian tradition, add some remembrances from outside, and hierarchise all of them by merging them into a new system whose aim is to support their immediate political agenda. It might be said that in such cases, memory *de facto* becomes religion, an elitist and often a fundamentalist one.

Focolare and Taizé: A creative re-appropriation of Christian memory

A positive illustration of a postmodern approach to religious memory can be discovered in numerous examples of a successful transition from the classic parochial form of religious practice to relatively new modes of communal

4. Listening to patriotic (or nationalistic) talks that the Radio Maryja broadcasts daily one may easily get an impression that, for instance, the baptism of Poland in 966, the Defence of Jasna Góra (the most famous shrine to the Virgin Mary in Poland) during the Polish-Swedish War in 1655 or the martyr's death of Jerzy Popiełuszko (a Polish priest associated with the Solidarity union who was murdered by the communist agents in 1984) are to be conceived as equally fundamental for Christian self-awareness as Christ's Incarnation and Passover.

5. What allowed such speculations to fall on fertile ground was the fact that the purpose of the presidential visit was to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, in which some 22 000 Polish prisoners-of-war were murdered by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD).



life, such as the *Focolare* Movement in Italy or the *Taizé* Community in France. Those movements emphasise the ecumenical dimension of Christianity and, at the same time, offer opportunities to acknowledge an often neglected emotional side of religious experience. As Tomáš Halík (2011) remarks, such a trend appeared particularly in Western countries as a reaction, firstly, to the evident decrease in the numbers of 'dwellers' and an increase in the numbers of 'seekers', secondly, to the shift 'from religion to spirituality', and thirdly, to the growing tendency of 'believing without belonging'. At a time when family life is in crisis, new communities offer their members a 'substitute family' and a firm identity which is specific for a given group. That does not prevent them, however, from being rooted in the universal identity of the church.

Certainly, by requiring of their followers a renunciation of a more traditional and exclusivist understanding of the position of the church in the world, these new movements bring about a deconstruction (and then a creative reconstruction) of religious memory. They invoke substitute memories – multiple, fragmentary, diffuse and disassociated as they are – promising that with their aid 'something of collective identification, on which the production and reproduction of social bonds depends, can be saved' (Hervieu-Léger 2000:141). At times, in their attempts to respond to the present longing for spirituality by developing the mystical and meditative traditions of Christianity they have no qualms in *enriching* Christian identity – as they see it – with elements borrowed from other religions or secular culture. Inevitably this generates tension between them and the hierarchy of the church. Besides, in some of these new movements (particularly those of a charismatic nature), one can encounter a specific form of pietism. It appeals to those who take part in large rallies at sports stadiums, but does not make any factual demands on them, thus leading to a sort of Christian conformism and complacency. Nonetheless, once the collective nature of spiritual insights brought about by these communities and their genuine rootedness in Catholic tradition are recognised, the church tends to retain them as a type of witness which can indeed enrich its own memory. Both *Focolare* and *Taizé* are examples of such a successful assimilation.

New ecclesial phenomena such as these demonstrate that in certain circumstances social uncoupling of religious beliefs and practices is reversible: The social re-identification of the Christian identity may produce meaning and express collective aspiration, with concrete social, political, and cultural consequences (Hervieu-Léger 2000:92). Hervieu-Léger gives two illuminating examples of such a positive reconstruction of religious identity, namely the role of religion in the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe and the importance of the Islamic reference for young second-generation North African immigrants in France. These examples show that religion in the modern world is more than just a residual facet of culture: '[Religion] can retain or reassume a creative potential of society, given that it functions as reawakened or invented memory for actual social groups' (Hervieu-Léger 2000:92).

Reconstructing religious tradition: Opportunities and pitfalls

What conclusions can be drawn from these contrasting illustrations of the cultural shift from memory to memories? Today religion, which still claims to be the form of a collective memory and imagination, finds itself in the universe of the pluralistic models of faith which are no longer limited by the exclusivist reference to tradition. Various circles of memories, fruits of the decomposition of religious tradition, are now treated by different subjects, individual and collective, as a common reservoir to be utilised for the purpose of creating new meanings:

Tradition is thought of, even by believers, not as a sacred trust, but as an ethico-cultural heritage, a fund of memory and a reservoir of signs at the disposal of individuals. (Hervieu-Léger 2000:168)

In such a context, it is extremely difficult for religious institutions, whatever theological notions of religious authority they deploy, to find the middle ground between their purpose of preserving and transmitting a tradition on the one hand, and the need to reform their own system of authority, which is essential for the continuity of a line of belief, on the other. It is extremely difficult, but at the same time absolutely necessary, provided they want to continue to play (or start to play again) a role as the dominant purveyors of meaning in today's societies (Hervieu-Léger 2000:168).

As the above examples show, the danger lies in the possibility of manipulating the true religious memory to be used as an ideological weapon by believers for whom the subjective truth of their own line of belief is primary. To avoid the danger of extremism, religious memory must renounce the claim to subjugate history by means of the 'abuses of memory that the commemorations imposed by political powers or by pressure groups can turn into' (Ricoeur 2004:393). The problem of memory basically concerns faithfulness to the past, but when total memory undergoes the process of fragmentation, the very principle of *remembering* has to be rethought. The intention of being faithful, at any price, to selected scattered memories may lead to fundamentalism which has little, if anything, to do with the original values that memory was supposed to preserve and protect. By failing to remember in a more holistic and coherent way, one allows the alienated and absolutised memories to become independent forces that can exert a crippling effect on one's functioning as a human being. Due to the collapse of the framework of collective memory, which used to provide everyone with the possibility of a link between tradition and their own actual experience, the individual cuts down her own history to a pleasant, comfortable size trying to make it conform to her own daydreams and thus becomes a stranger to her true past (Nouwen 1977:21–22).

We must all beware of the *extinctio memoriae*, not on account of nostalgia, but for the sake of our individual and collective identity (Heinz 2001:154). But how is one to approach this new condition of religious memory? On the one hand, if



religious institutions concentrate solely on fragmented memories, detached from the holistic context of tradition, they will indeed find themselves in profound crisis due to a lack of fundamental reference points necessary to produce new social and cultural meanings. On the other hand, if the same institutions invest all their energy in resorting to a 'ghetto mentality', to a 'theological withdrawal-strategy' (Küng 2006:330) to defend their tradition at any cost, without allowing it to interact with the secular culture, they will also fail in their mission to be a channel of universal meaning simply due to the irrelevance of their message. Therefore, as Hervieu-Léger (2000) suggests, it seems that the only possible strategy for traditional religions in the present social context is to:

[H]old their own by tentatively exploiting the symbolic resources at their disposal in order to reconstruct a continuing line of belief for which the common experience of individual believers provides no support. (p. 176)

As noted before, transformation in religion within modernity rejected the notion of a necessary continuity between past and present, and thus devalued the forms in which such continuity was supposed to impress itself upon individual believers and the religious community as a whole. At the same time, however, it gave rise – though in new forms – to a social and individual need to have recourse to the security of such continuity (Hervieu-Léger 2000:4). In its historical forms, today's culture completely removes the need for and the sense of religion, but in its utopian forms it cannot but stay in touch with the religious; thus the amnesia coincides with the need for a religious future (Hervieu-Léger 2000:ix). Ironically postmodernity creates something that is, by principle, alien to its nature. In the acceptance of movement and changeability, it produces the need to refer to authority imposed from outside and to the continuity of memory.

Therefore, the disintegration of religious memory in postmodern societies can be conceived of as the consequence of the conjunction of two apparently contradictory currents: A tendency towards the expansion and homogenisation of memory, on the one hand, and on the other the limitless fragmentation of a total memory, which is replaced by anomic memories, made up of isolated recollection and scraps of information which are increasingly incoherent (Hervieu-Léger 2000:128). Paradoxically, the former process creates the conditions for the latter and vice versa. While the continuity of memory provokes deconstructive endeavour on the part of both, the autonomous subject and de-institutionalised social agents, the symbolic vacuum stemming from the loss of a unified memory calls for its fragmentary substitutes. The postmodern era has not done away with the individual's or society's need to believe. On the contrary, the uncertainty that flows from the dynamics of accelerated change, which is at the root of the characteristic instantaneousness of both individual and collective experience, has made the need for belief based on religious memory even stronger (Hervieu-Léger 2000:93, 141). In this sense, the inability of postmodernity to respond to the aspirations it gives rise to, and to produce corresponding collective meanings is what

may, in the end, foster the renewal of religious belief linked to the authority of tradition (Hervieu-Léger 2000:92).

Instead of a conclusion: *Where from here?*

In this last section, I draw upon my analysis and speak as a theologian concerned about the postmodern crisis of memory which affects the realm of religion. I believe that this crisis demands the activating of our – that is, theologians' – symbolic and analogical imagination (Tracy 1981:410). Therefore, I venture to sketch three proposals of possible directions that may be taken in order to overcome, or at least relativise this crisis. The first is conceptual in nature, though not entirely conceptual, as it includes ethical implications as well; the second concerns the theological meaning of God and faith in God as a fundamental factor accounting for the shape of Christianity in today's world; the final proposal refers to the eschatological dimension of religious memory.

From remembering to forgiving

Memory defines itself, at least in the first instance, as a struggle against forgetting. The celebrated duty of memory is proclaimed in the form of an exhortation to remember, and not to forget. But is forgetting really the *enemy* of remembering, an attack on the reliability of memory? (Ricoeur 2004:284, 413) In his insightful work *Memory, history, forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur (2004:391) advocates for the paradoxical idea that forgetting can be so closely tied to memory that it can be de facto conceived as one of the sine qua non conditions for it. Put simply, there exists a 'reserve of forgetting' which constitutes a resource for both memory and history (Ricoeur 2004:426). From this point of view, we cannot simply classify forgetting as an effacement of traces among the dysfunctions of memory alongside amnesia; forgetting must no longer be in every aspect an enemy of memory. Instead, memory may *negotiate* with forgetting, groping to find a right measure in its balance with it (Ricoeur 2004:413).

What pairs with forgetting is *forgiveness*, described by Ricoeur as a sort of 'happy forgetting' and the figure of 'reconciled memory' (Ricoeur 2004:284). Forgiveness consists in the appeasement of memory which is the final stage of forgetting understood as *ars oblivionis* (Ricoeur 2004:412–413). As shown in the caricature of forgiveness found in amnesty, the institutional form of forgetting, there are no 'politics of forgiveness' (Ricoeur 2004:488). In the last analysis, it always comes down to an individual act in which the person transcends her own self and, by means of a 'blessed forgetting', allows reconciliation to be brought about. In this sense, as Ricoeur (2004:413) concludes, forgiveness offers itself, as it were, as the ethical (and perhaps even eschatological) horizon of the entire problematic of memory, history and forgetting.

Taking into account this opposite side of remembering, a *memory lost and redeemed*, may also bring a new perspective on the question of 'dangerous memories' upon which some

quasi-religious groups attempt to build their religious identity. The *euangelion* of Jesus Christ makes it clear that Christian memory cannot become a foundation of the redemptive presence of the church in the world unless it finds its counterbalance and its fulfilment in forgiveness.

From the 'God of the fathers' towards the 'Father of Jesus Christ'

When we look at the history of Christianity, we cannot fail to notice that the church, that had been called to become the universal community worshipping God *in spirit and truth*, quickly withdrew into a new particularism of its own. The notion of a 'new Israel' did not 'engender the courage to be constantly *people on the way*, boldly crossing all borders' (Urbaniak 2014:481); instead, Christians started turning their faith into a 'heritage of the fathers', an inherited property, thus becoming a 'second Israel', another particular community *alongside* Israel and many others (Halík 2009:50–51; Urbaniak 2014:481). If today we pose questions about the modern crisis of memory that cost Christianity (or at least significantly contributed to) the loss of its political and cultural function, this fundamental orientation adopted by the church in the first centuries after Christ, whose ramifications are to be seen in our time, cannot be neglected.

Marcel Gauchet (1985:236) wrote that Christianity was the religion that would surpass religion (*la religion de la sortie de la religion*) – that it would gradually abandon its political role and move out of the infrastructure of society into its superstructure, that is, into the realm of culture. And indeed, in the course of modern times, Christianity allowed itself to be manipulated into the role of a cultural factor, a *worldview* (the basis of which was the long-standing tendency to regard faith as 'conviction'). In the postmodern era, a period of plurality of opinions, that role is greatly undermined. This is why traditional Christianity, together with its claim to universality, finds itself in such a serious crisis. One may venture a thesis that the roots of this crisis go back to the early Christians reducing the 'Father of Jesus Christ' to the 'God of the fathers'.

Tomáš Halík (2009:51–52) holds that for the church to come out from its Christian past, to have the capacity to leave much of its 'heritage' behind and thus to liberate itself from the oppressive sort of memory, the emphasis has to be shifted from the notion of God as the 'custodian of the past' to that of God who comes from the future, the 'God of sons and daughters' as well as the 'God of others'. Halík is aware that the appeal to abandon the 'God of the fathers' and replace him with the 'Father of Jesus Christ' can, at first sight, recall one of the oldest (and most dangerous) heresies, namely Marcion's attempt to set the God of the Old Testament against the Father of Jesus Christ. In the face of that heresy, the early church realised the risk of deracination and shallowness if the 'memory of Israel' were renounced, and so it established the Canon of the Holy Scripture, which incorporated two *Testaments*. But the postulated transformation of the Christian approach to God does not necessarily entail – Halík (2009:54)

argues – the view that 'God of the fathers' is a false god, nor does it call for a 'clearance sale' of Christian tradition. The main concern here is to break with the concept of God as 'property', which Christians have inherited as some kind of chattel that can be handled and to which they can lay a special claim. Far from reducing God to 'something merely human', such a shift in the theological understanding of God is simply consistent with Incarnation theology taken to its consequences.

The ground-breaking discovery of one living God (who can still be identified with the 'God of our fathers') resides then in the realisation that this God is *also* the 'God of others' (Urbaniak 2014:479). The contemporary French theologian Joseph Moingt (1985) insists that we have access to God, to the way God is in God's own self, 'only insofar as we are prepared to forgo attempts at making God "our God", our property, God in our image, the custodian of our past' (Urbaniak 2014:479), and a confirmation of our common identity. Put briefly, 'we ought to let God be "other" and exist for others' (Urbaniak 2014:479). If we profess the God of Abraham – and not some abstract philosophical concept of a 'supreme being' who might appeal to everybody – we prove our faithfulness, not by clinging to a specific tradition of the past, but, like Abraham, by entering new territory. *Our* God is a pilgrim God, the God of the eternal exodus, who leads us out of our homes and homelands even though we would prefer to settle in them and enclose him in our borders, in the confines of our notions, concepts, traditions and creeds (Halík 2009:53). Unless we have the courage to leave behind 'inherited religion' and our infantile fixation on the forms of the past, we will never discover the life-giving *faith of sons and daughters*. Invoking Jesus' words, 'it is better for you that I go' (Jn 16:7), Moingt (1985 as quoted in Halík 2009) urges Christians to *let God go* – that is to say: to let him go to others:

Only then will we discover that he is the one universal God, and not a particular deity among the deities of the Chaldean Empire; precisely because he is the one universal God, he is not a God on which we could have a monopoly. (p. 49)

Halík considers such a position to be a radical emulation of St Paul who presents Christianity:

[N]ot as an aspect of some orthodoxy or orthopraxis, but as a faith capable of dissociating itself from its past, ridding itself of old customs and certainties, rejecting particularity *and going to others*. (Urbaniak 2014:481)

In this context, he insists, 'Paul's crossing of the borders of Israel and setting out for the "people" (the pagans) should be a paradigm for the entire history of the church' (Halík 2009:50). Making light of the Gospel's novelty by clinging to the past and remaining in the narrow confines of particular traditions within the church would be equivalent to *emptying the cross of Christ* that destroyed all previous barriers and thus became a bridge of reconciliation (Halík 2009:51; Urbaniak 2014:481–482).

Last but not least, Halík (2009) remarks that in the interval between losing the 'God of the fathers' and finding the *faith of sons and daughters* (no longer an 'inherited religion', but

a free response to the way the Spirit blows today), atheism may make an appearance:

This period of becoming empty, of exchanges with strangers, can be a period without God, but this time of absence is necessary, so that we enable God to offer himself to us the way he is (p. 51)

Some death-of-God theologians, such as Thomas Altizer, were speaking, in a similar context, of the *dark night of the Christian soul*, the *pain of abandonment* and the *silence that must ensue before what we mean by 'God' can become meaningful once more* (Altizer & Hamilton 1966:15; 110). Perhaps the former notions of divinity, of the God who is merely a custodian of the past, must die before Christian faith could be resurrected, like a phoenix reborn from ashes to a new life (Armstrong 2009:278). If that is the case, then the phase of atheism, which we are witnesses to, should be accepted by the church without fear. Halík (2009) stresses that:

[W]e must let God come in His [*sic*] newness, even if we might then be incapable of recognising the God of our fathers in the one who comes from elsewhere. (p. 50)

Eschatology of memory

Christianity – presented, in a sense, as a continuation of Hebraic religion – had been founded upon memory about God's salvific actions in history. At the same time, however, the tradition of Israel oriented Christian thought towards the future (Halbwachs 1992:87). The promise regarding the coming of the historical Messiah has been superseded by the promise of the *Parusia* of Jesus Christ which will bring about 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Rv 21:1). As Halbwachs (1992:96) notes, 'there is no doubt that it was this element in Jewish worldview that the Christians retained above all'. In such a way, the worlds of predecessors and successors extend in two directions: into the past and into the future. Memory is organically connected with promise (see Ricoeur 2004:130).

From the sociological point of view, eschatological promise is nothing but an integral element of religious utopia which serves to complement a continuity of belief. The reason why many contemporary sociologists of religion pay considerable attention to utopia is that, in the absence of continuity of memory:

[U]topia serves to create in a renewed way an alternative imagined continuity: a continuity reaching back further than the one that suits the social conventions of the present, a continuity which reaches more nearly the foundation that feeds the consciousness of the chain. (Hervieu-Léger 2000:144–145)

Thus religious utopia can redefine the way society operates in terms of its economic, political, symbolic and other functions, because it contains the proposition to install – in place of an official memory that has become corrupted or misappropriated – a new imaginative order of memory. Such a 'utopian memory' is based on a symbolic innovativeness which always incorporates an imaginative strain; it contributes to the reinvention of the chain of belief not only by means of its relationship to a past, but more importantly by embracing actuality in the present. Therefore, in the postmodern era,

utopia becomes a formula both for secularising memory *and* for its religious recharging (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 145, 146).

From the perspective of a living faith, the link between memory and promise may be discovered – though only on a speculative level – in a Christian vision of the eschatological reality, which 'starts from and builds on the wish for a happy memory' (Ricoeur 2004:459). After Ricoeur, one might call such an approach an '*eschatology of memory*' (2004:459). In *L'Amour Fou*, André Breton (1987:6) asks: 'Who will teach us to decant the joy of memory?' The answer comes, perhaps unexpectedly, from a Christian writer C.S. Lewis (1955), who in his *Letters to Malcolm* paints a beautiful picture of human memory that finds its resurrection and ultimate fulfilment in eternal life.

Against such a background, I propose the third and final direction for reflecting theologically upon the ways of overcoming the postmodern crisis of memory. May the continuity of a unified religious memory, which has been broken due to undermining the authority of Christian tradition, not be in a sense restored by means of relating scattered memories to their eschatological accomplishment? A new heaven and a new earth would thus become a space where the redeemed person could 'arrive in the fields and vast mansions of memory, where are treasured innumerable images brought in there from objects of every conceivable kind perceived by the senses', in St Augustine's lovely phrase (1997:244–245 [X.8, 12]). Lewis's point of departure is precisely that the soul cries out for the resurrection of the senses. After all, even in this life matter would be nothing to us if it were not the source of sensations. Memory appears in this context as a power of 'raising dead sensations from the graves' (Purtill 2004:168). Further, Lewis (1955) develops his own *eschatology of memory*, which is Platonic in form and Christocentric in content. May his poetic vision conclude my reflection:

Now we already have some feeble and intermittent power of raising dead sensations from the graves. I mean, of course, memory. You see the way my thought is moving. But don't run away with the idea that when I speak of the resurrection of the body I mean merely that the blessed dead will have excellent memories of their sensuous experiences on earth. I mean it the other way round: that memory as we now know it is a dim foretaste, a mirage even, of a power which the soul, or rather Christ in the soul (He 'went to prepare a place for us') will exercise hereafter. It need no longer be intermittent. Above all, it need no longer be private to the soul in which it occurs. I can now communicate to you the vanished fields of my boyhood – they are building-estates today – only imperfectly by words. Perhaps the day is coming when I can take you for a walk through them ... The hills and valleys of Heaven will be to those you now experience not as a copy is to an original, nor as a substitute to the genuine article, but as the flower to the root, or the diamond to the coal ...

Then the new earth and sky, the same yet not the same as these, will rise in us as we have risen in Christ. And once again, after who knows what aeons of the silence and the dark, the birds will sing out and the waters flow, and lights and shadows move across the hills and the faces of our friends laugh upon us with

amazed recognition. Guesses, of course, only guesses. If they are not true, something better will be. For we know that we shall be made like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (pp. 121–124)

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my colleague and friend Professor Nicholas Row, who since 2014 serves as an Academic Dean of St Augustine College. His ongoing commitment to a holistic education and a responsible transformation in South Africa provides a great inspiration to all who have the privilege to work with him.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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