Religious Identity and Renewal in the Twenty-first Century: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Explorations
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Religious Identity and Renewal in the Twenty-first Century: Christian and Muslim Explorations

Edited by Simone Sinn and Michael Reid Trice

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THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN THE FORMATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Binsar Jonathan Pakpahan

INTRODUCTION

Identity is always connected with memory and its formation cannot be separated from remembering the past—a process which can be either personal or communal. Identity is formed in relation to a wide range of personal, communal, national or even regional memories (and sometimes myths). These compete internally within us, so that one particular memory seems more important than another at any given moment. In short, memory plays an important role in the development of our identity.

Recent research in psychology, sociology, philosophy, medicine and anthropology has affirmed the importance of memory. The factors that play a role in how memories are shaped compete with one another, with context, culture and politics. In this, individual and communal factors are of varying importance. Today’s technologies allow us to store vast amounts of data, which has created problems in terms of how we actually deal with memories.


2 I have extensively dealt with the problem of memory of past hurt, in Binsar I. Pakpahan, God Remembers: Towards a Theology of Remembrance as a Basis of Reconciliation in Communal Conflict (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2012).
Religious identity is partly based on memory. Remembering the saving acts of a specific deity is important in the formation of a religious community and the story of most religious communities is based on the memory that has been handed down over generations. For instance, Christians base their identity on the remembrance of God’s saving act in Jesus Christ.

The Bible is in itself a book of memory, consisting of the recollections of those who encountered God in their lives and who were inspired to tell and write down their stories, thus passing them down to future generations. In the following, we will look at the role of memory in the formation of Christian identity by examining how biblical communities perceived remembrance and how they treated their memory.

This essay will draw on recent social memory theory in order to understand how remembrance is used in the Old and the New Testaments. Furthermore, I shall analyze how biblical communities understand memory in their contexts and, by using two different methods, hopefully establish the function of memory in the formation of Christian identity.

The role of memory is more active than the mere recollection of certain events that occurred in the past. This essay will demonstrate how the recent exploration of social memory in the biblical communities has shaped their identity. For Israel and the early Christian communities, the act of remembering the past is connected with action. Remembrance takes place in the community that preserves the memory of the event and reactualizes it every time it celebrates the memory. For Christians, the command to remember is deeply rooted in the Eucharist. While celebrating the Eucharist, memories of Jesus remind us of the past pain while, at the same time, possibly providing a redemptive memory.

**MEMORY AS A BATTLEFIELD**

The first theologian comprehensively to deal with memory was Augustine, who regarded memory as a dynamic, active and continuous notion that helps us to recognize God. According to Augustine, memory is “a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse for countless images of all kinds which are conveyed to it by the senses.” At first sight, we might surmise that Augustine implies that memory is like the hard disk of a computer on which a certain set of data can be stored. Memories can then be retrieved whenever needed, each through its own gateway. Nonetheless, although Augustine compares memory to a storehouse, he believed that one can never fully control what is actually stored nor control the ability to recall the content whenever desired.

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Augustine's theory of memory is connected to his theory of time. For him there are three different times: a present of past things (memory), a present of present things (perception) and a present of future things (expectation).

He believes there to be no real present except our present perception of what the past was, what the present is and what the future will be. What has happened to us will be stored in our memory and used to recognize our present and future.

The feelings that in part make up our memories change over time. Thus, my feelings toward something are kept in my memory and can be retrieved whenever I want. However, once recalled it will not exactly correspond to what I felt when I experienced the original feeling. Augustine refers to memory as the stomach of the mind and to feelings as food. Sad feelings (food) that are digested in my memory (stomach) stay in my memory but the "food" no longer tastes the same as it did when it first entered the "stomach."

Remembering is the dynamic process of reinterpreting our memories. Memories are reexperienced when the one who remembers gives meaning to them. This is why the process of forgetting is an interesting phenomenon. According to Augustine, "When I remember memory, my memory is present to itself by its own power; but when I remember forgetfulness, two things are present, memory, by which I remember it, and forgetfulness, which is what I remember." Forgetting is actually the act of remembering that we have forgotten something. We do not realize that we have forgotten something if we have no memory of it in the first place.

Augustine suggests that memory is always present but that we cannot fully control it. Remembering the past involves reinterpreting an event and giving meaning to it. Feelings are not an integral part of memory. Rather, what we remember is the "taste" of an emotion rather than the emotion itself. Remembering always involves giving another meaning. Augustine's theory of memory captures the difficulty of understanding the role played by memory in the formation of Christian identity.

Recent philosophical studies have further explored Augustine's memory theory and defined different categories of memories. The memory of an event is different from the memory of the emotion experienced. A person can remember what happened during a football match—who scored, where the match was played, how many people attended the match, etc. and subsequently recall the memory ten years later. Meanwhile, however, the emotions will have changed. While, at the time the match was played, one might have been happy that one's team won, ten years later, one will re-

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8 Ibid., Book XI, 20.
9 Ibid., Book X, 16.
member that one had been happy without necessarily feeling this happiness. While the memory of the event stays the same, the emotion has changed.

In the construction of memory and identity, the memory of the emotion can also be passed on. The passed on memory of the emotion could take its original form, be strengthened or lessened according to the need of the formation of identity, especially communal identity. A community needs emotion to strengthen the bond between individuals. It is often the memory of the emotion that brings individuals together instead of the memory of the actual event. A group of people who played football together have bonded because of the shared memory of the emotion instead of the event. They feel connected because of the memory of the tears and joy experienced during the matches. After ten years, they might still remember how happy they were as a team while having forgotten the details of how they won. It shows that the relationship between memory of an event and memory of an emotion is a dynamic one.

In the formation of religious identity, the memory of the emotion plays a more important role than the memory of what actually took place. Such distinctions and categories provide helpful perspectives when examining how Christian identity has been shaped by the social memory of the biblical communities.

**THE FORMATION OF SOCIAL MEMORY**

With reference to social memory theory, some Bible scholars have argued that the Bible consists of a web of stories, delivered by different storytellers, rooted in their respective community and with differing opinions as to how memory should be delivered and preserved. The study of social memory began as a philosophical and social analysis research methodology that attempted to look at how the social environment of the storyteller or writer shaped the memories that were included in the texts.7

Phillip Davies, an Old Testament scholar, acknowledges the recent interest in cultural or collective memory. He recognizes Maurice Halbwachs’s, Jan Assmann’s and Paul Ricoeur’s contributions to the field of biblical social memory.8 For him, the purpose of social memory as a methodology

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is not to ascertain what precisely happened in the past, but "rather as a narrative of the past that makes sense of (and in) the present and for the future. Hence, it is a constitutive function of ethnicity, the ethos being in this case the group bonded by the shared 'memory' of the past.""^{9}

In biblical research, the concept of social memory is used to analyze how groups influence the writer in delivering the memory that was later passed on in the form of narratives, texts, images or even rituals. This is why the study of social memory particularly encourages us to move away from a mere historical approach of finding out what truly happened in the story, to moving toward what we remember and how we remember it."^{10}

Social memory emphasizes "the importance of history for understanding and interpreting the context that gives shape to social memory as it is encountered in literary texts. Material remains, diaries, letters, and the like."^{11}

Hearon established that stories of the past can indeed become a group's social memory if they speak to the people, and their relevance is being emphasized by the storyteller. Most of the time, the story of God's saving power in the past is being transferred as the hope that God will intervene in the present and the future. Hope gives certain stories their power and durability in social memory. Stories can also function as acts of resistance toward the present and foster hope for the future.

An analysis of the social memory takes into account the context within which a story was produced as well as the social powers that might have influenced the way in which the writer remembered and delivered the story. As we explore what remembrance means in terms of biblical theology, or how communities in the Bible understood the terms "memory" and "remembrance" and what they meant for them, we must first comprehend how memory and context shaped the society and how important their cultural memory was. Thus, we seek to establish what remembering means in a biblical context, and to what extent remembering influenced the forming of the identity of the people at the time the text was written and in the future.

We must bear in mind that, for certain reasons, some memories have been preserved while others have not. Usually, memories have already travelled far from an oral to a written tradition. Fully to comprehend


"Davies, ibid., 32.


\footnote{Hearon, "The Construction of Social Memory . . .," ibid., 349.}
the complexities of social memory in the biblical context implies trying to perceive the narratives within the horizon in which they were written or remembered. In the biblical context, remembering and forgetting are social actions related to hearing and choosing a story so that it becomes the community’s definitive story in terms of identity formation.

Despite the different environments and the great time span over which the Bible was written, its narratives share the same basis. One thing that social memory theory clearly establishes in biblical research is that the basic memory that underlies the whole remembrance in Israel, and later in Jesus’ time, is the purpose of remembering God’s saving action. While the defining moments when and where God saved God’s people are remembered in different ways, the purpose always remains the same, namely, never to forget how great God’s saving action is to the people of the covenant. The command to remember is then being translated into written narratives about what to remember.

**THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN THE BIBLE**

The Old Testament notes that the commandments to remember and behold played a very important role with regard to Israel’s identity. Israel was asked to remember God’s saving act from Egypt to the land of Canaan. Israel is told to remember and pass on the memory of God’s saving action through generations (Deut 11:19).

The Hebrew word for remembrance connotes an activity of more than just an activity of the mind. As we see in the Old Testament, God’s remembrance is strongly connected to actions such as blessings (e.g., Ps 132:1; cf. also Ps 20:3; 2 Kings 20:3; Isa 38:3) and punishment (Hos 7:2; 9:9; 8:13; Jer 14:10). If Israel is being punished, they will ask God not to remember their

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13 For an argument that defended the visibility of understanding the story of the past, despite the different contexts and understanding in looking at the context, see Philip Francis Esler, New Testament Theology: Communion and Community (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 67–87. He uses intercultural communication arguments to understand how specific contexts understand their narratives, and how we can use those findings in understanding that context from a distant time span. He thinks that by using four factors, culture, groups and social roles, the individual and the environment, we can interpret a document in its context or in its social memory.

11 In the Old Testament, the word that is translated with “remember” has the root ṣāḥ (ṣāḥ), which is a verb common masculine singular construct and means to think (about), meditate (upon), pay attention to; remember, remembrance, recollect; mention, declare, recite, proclaim, invoke, commemorate, accuse, confess. See Brevard S. Childs, Memory and Tradition in Israel (London: SCM Press, 1962). Also see Craig Dykstra, “Memory and Truth,” in Theology Today, vol. 44, no. 2 (July 1987), 159–62.
iniquities (Isa 64:9). For Israel, the memory of God’s saving acts is not about what really happened, but about the testimony of how they encountered God. These memories of encounters will be looked at from a new perspective. The memory renews and changes them over generations and each event becomes relevant for each subsequent generation.

In the New Testament, Jesus asked the disciples to remember him in the institution of the Eucharist. Jesus took over the remembrance of the Passover and continued the celebration in remembrance of him. God’s past saving action is now being actualized in the remembrance of God’s saving act in Jesus’ life, work, death and resurrection. The remembrance of the memory of Jesus is also active. When we remember Jesus in the Eucharist, we know that it is not only about remembering what happened in the past but that Jesus is present with the celebrants.

**The role of memory in the early communities in Jesus’ time**

In the New Testament, memory plays an important role in the forming of Christian identity. Early Christian communities preserved their memory of Jesus in oral form. New Testament scholar Werner Kelber posits that Jesus’ teaching was subsequently represented through storytelling for present needs. This tradition of preserving the past is carried on through repeated patterns of oral transmissions. The problem that can arise is that the repetition of the message by the second storyteller is perceived as if the story were told for the first time. The audience regarded the stories they were told as original while the storyteller always tried to keep the structural core of the original. Thus, memory is preserved through the repetitive mode of memory transmission in the form of its structural core.

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16 Martin Luther holds that Jesus is really present in the tasting the bread and drinking of the wine. The remembrance in the Eucharist is an active one, the event is re-actualized every time it is celebrated.
The action of preserving the memory of the past was motivated by the urge to keep the message alive for the present. Tradition is based on the stories and the actions to preserve those memories in the communities. The traditions are not accepted as such, rather, as Hendel claims, "tradition can and must be—revised in order to retain its truth," because what matters most is the interpretation and revision of the past instead of truth or fiction. The remembered and reinterpreted social memory in the tradition will then form the identity of the new communities that received it. The purpose of remembering is "as a functioning social memory, e.g., as a continual process of commemorative activities, intent on commitment to the past and serving social relevance and identity in the present." Precisely because of this mode and purpose of transmitting social memory, it comes as no surprise that memory was a strong force in the forming of the early Christian communities.

In these communities, memory was a powerful force behind the preservation of the tradition. Memory was more than a mere recalling of an event that had occurred in the past. Rather, remembrance served to relive and reexperience Jesus' teachings and make them relevant to the present context. Within the context of the early Christian communities, memory and the order to remember were vital in order to continue the tradition.

In *Jesus Remembered*, James D. G. Dunn discusses the impact of the Jesus tradition. He is convinced that, during Jesus' time, remembrance in the oral tradition was so powerful that his teachings were remembered so vividly by his disciples and passed on to others as if the memory of Jesus were Jesus himself. The memory of Jesus' teachings that was passed on through oral traditions was considered as valid as Jesus' teaching. Dunn agrees with Kelber that memory transmission, especially through the oral tradition, is intended to transmit the message rather than the actual facts. According to him, "in oral transmission a tradition is performed, not edited." The essence of the memory lies in the core of the story and not in the detail.

1983). According to this, the community in Jesus' time preserved the tradition through a repetition of the structural core of Jesus' story.


11 Kelber, "The Generative Force of Memory," op. cit. (note 17), 21. He continues, "At this point, one can agree with the observations of Kirk and Thatcher that "every act of tradition is an act of remembering" (39) so that "tradition is in fact the substance of memory." (40).


Dunn, op. cit. (note 21), 248–49.
However, free interpretation does not mean that the story of Jesus can be interpreted in whatever way. Dunn believes that in the New Testament, Jesus’ earliest community and followers passed on the tradition in a controlled manner. Dunn refers to Kenneth E. Bailey, a New Testament scholar specialized in Middle Eastern life, who identifies three types of oral traditions in the Middle East that were used during Jesus’ time: formal controlled, informal controlled and informal uncontrolled.²⁴

When tradition is transmitted via an informal, uncontrolled oral tradition the community does not express an interest in preserving or controlling the tradition. One example of this type of oral tradition is the spreading of gossip. He argues that Rudolf Bultmann’s view on the synoptic tradition belongs to this type.

Bultmann does not deny that there is a tradition stemming from Jesus, but asserts that it has, for the most part, faded out. The community, he feels, was not interested in either preserving or controlling the tradition. Furthermore, the tradition is always open to new community creations that are rapidly attributed to the community’s founder.²⁵

The second model is the formal controlled oral tradition.

It is formal in the sense that there is a clearly identified teacher, a clearly identified student, and a clearly identified block of traditional material that is being passed on from one to the other. It is controlled in the sense that the material is memorized (and/or written), identified as “tradition” and thus preserved intact.²⁶

The defender of this model is the Scandinavian Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson school.²⁷ An example of this tradition is the memorization of the Bible.

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²⁵ Bailey, ibid., 38. Bailey quoted Bultmann to show his argument when Bultmann wrote, “I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary, and other sources about Jesus do not exist.” See Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus and the Word (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934-1958), 8.

²⁶ Bailey, op. cit. (note 24), 38.

hymns or the Qur'an as a way of preserving the content. Jesus used the mnemonic techniques of preserving the Torah when teaching his disciples. The church also recited Jesus' teachings under the guidance of the apostles. Until today, this tradition has survived in the Middle East where people recite and memorize the Qur'an or the Bible.

Bailey argues that while the gospels are too similar to be the result of uncontrolled oral tradition the fact that they are not exactly the same proves that this tradition is not fully formally controlled.

According to Bailey, the third model, which he calls the informal controlled type, is the model of oral tradition most likely to have been used during Jesus' time. The retelling of Jesus' story was informal in the sense that there was no "one correct story," but they were controlled in the sense that the stories had to be within certain more or less strict limits. What is important is that the core of the memory remains the same, while the way in which the stories were told could differ. It is the content not the detail that is crucial in the transmission of memory.

An example of this model is a gathering called haflat samara (a party for preservation), which until today still takes place in mainly isolated communities in the Middle East. The stories told in the form of haflat samara involve three levels of flexibility. During the first level, which includes poems and proverbs, not a single word can be changed and the public will correct the reciter should they make a mistake. This is a question of honor and no one wants publicly to recite poems or proverbs unless they are sure that they have accurately memorized entire passages. During the second level, the core of the story must not be changed but the way in which the story is told is subject to the storyteller's style. This level of flexibility applies to historical stories and parables that are of importance for the identity of the community. The third level gives the greatest flexibility and is used for telling jokes and sharing daily news or reporting on inter communal violence.  

According to Bailey, at one point the stories about Jesus had to be preserved accurately. Yet, the different accounts of the story show that the informal controlled tradition is the best explanation for the oral tradition in preserving Jesus' teachings. James Dunn refers to Bailey's third model and concludes that Jesus' followers were careful to preserve and pass on the Jesus tradition, but because of the nature of the oral tradition in storytelling, the dialogue and oral interpretation may change slightly while the core essentially remains the same. The only realistic way to understand Jesus is to understand the way in which Jesus is being remembered.

Although Dunn did not describe exactly how Jesus was being remembered, or what remembrance means for a society at the time of the storytelling, we can assume that what he was describing is how collective memory or social memory worked at the time of the early New Testament communities.

In Jesus’ communities we sense a strong element of the Old Testament tradition of remembrance since the apostles were familiar with this tradition. The call to remember is also actively connected with a sense of identity. In the early Christian communities, memory was preserved orally in order to remember, recognize and to give a sense of communal identity.

**The Eucharist and the Command to Remember**

Our exploration of remembrance in the New Testament leads us to the Eucharist, celebrated to remember Jesus. Jesus himself institutes the command “to remember” in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not a whole new tradition that Jesus created; it is indeed a continuation of remembrance expressed in the Passover meal. The past deliverance of Israel is retrieved for the present moment by making present Christ’s redemptive act, and is to be remembered for the future. Jesus is the paschal lamb that is to be sacrificed on the cross, and his sacrifice is a unique, one-time event of lasting impact.

The Eucharist provides the opportunity together to celebrate the memory of the past, including one’s own. The liturgy or the Eucharist is the place to celebrate the memory of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascendance and his promise to return. This memory is experienced as if Jesus himself were present in the celebration. This is what the disciples understood when they were celebrating it after Jesus returned to his Father. The Eucharist therefore functions as a safe place of communal remembrance. This remembrance can be used to heal other memories as well. The memory of God’s saving act in Jesus helps the community to receive and change the emotion of the memory that they have.

One of the factors in the Eucharist is the forgiveness of sins during the communal meal. When forgiveness happens around the table, then the memory of the event can be preserved with a different meaning. It is not a memory of pain alone, but more: it has become a memory and a life story, a life lesson for the entire community. They will be enabled to give new meaning to what had happened in light of God’s love for and forgiveness of all involved. The past is still there as is the story. Yet, personal remembrance can diminish when the person realizes that the community has remembered their pain. Then the memory is not only a memory of pain but is on the way of being transformed into a memory of healing, for both victims and perpetrators.
Three theologians have contributed their thoughts on the importance of memory in the Eucharist. First, Johann Baptist Metz, a Catholic theologian, reminds us that in the Eucharist we also remember the suffering of Christ, or *memoria passionis*. The remembrance of the suffering can be translated into remembrance of the past hurt. Thus, what Metz proposes is a theological basis for the remembrance of past hurt. Second, Alexander Schmemann, an Orthodox theologian, brings the Eucharist to the fore as the most important sacrament because of its communal aspect. Schmemann also reminds us of the centrality of the Eucharist in worship and theology. Because of its central place, we should be aware of any hidden motives for using the Eucharist for one's own purpose. And third, Miroslav Volf, a Protestant theologian, states that we should remember for the sake of embrace and reconciliation. His plea to remember truthfully is not only addressed to the victims and perpetrators but the entire community. There is a quasi handing over of personal memory to communal memory that is based on the theological premise that Christ will enable us to remember truthfully in love.

In the liturgy of the Eucharist we remember the suffering. If the perpetrators feel the pain of shame and regret about which cannot be undone this implies that they recognize that they are in need of healing and forgiveness. The Eucharist invites and embraces us to come together as one and offers a safe place to let go of negative memories toward people who do not want to remember the past because it is too painful. At the same time, the Eucharist also offers a place of remembrance so that the memory of the past will not be lost.

**Memory that demands**

The formation of Christian identity was based on the preservation of the memory of Jesus. Recalling those memories demands that we act out our identity. Although in the oral tradition the remembering of details of a given event is not entirely unimportant, it is the emotional connection and the feeling of connectedness to the story that count. The memory of God’s saving action is being re-actualized and re-membered, thus involving and claiming everyone who celebrates it.

The contribution of the three theologians have advanced the concept of active memory by saying that the remembrance of God calls us to remember the suffering (Johann Baptist Metz), to embrace everyone including those who have wronged us (Miroslav Volf) and to produce a theology that is responsible to its context through the liturgy of the Eucharist (Alexander Schmemann). The concept of an active memory helps us to provide a
theological foundation for remembering past hurt and the possibility to change the memory of the emotion. This is an idea that we need further to explore in the theology of remembrance and memory.

The elements of redemptive memory in the liturgy of the Eucharist will help people to reconcile with the painful past. In the new culture of remembrance, memory will most likely stay entrapped. Eucharistic redemptive memory gives us fresh hope that our remembrance of the past will not be a negative one. It encourages us to remember and deal with our past. When past hurt is being remembered, it will be transformed into a redemptive memory of God's remembrance.
Religions carry strong visions of renewal and thereby have the potential to trigger dynamics of change in all spheres of human life. Religions have contributed to societal transformation and processes of renewal spark intensive theological debates. The renewal of religious identity is informed by how religious communities interpret their traditions and past, present, and future challenges to themselves, society and the world at large. How do religious communities understand their own resources and criteria for renewal in the twenty-first century?

In this publication, Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars analyze and reflect on the meaning and dynamics of religious renewal and explore the meaning of religious renewal across religious traditions.

CONTRIBUTORS: BORELLI, John; BUSI, Suneel Bhanu; IBRAHIM-LIZZIO, Celene; JUNGE, Martin; LANDER, Shira L.; LAYTNER, Anson Hugh; MOYO, Herbert; PAKPAHAN, Binsar Jonathan; PUNSALAN-MANLIMOS, Catherine; SANDMEL, David Fox; SINN, Simone; STRASKO, Paul Moses; TRICE, Michael Reid; van DOORN-HARDER, Nelly