

A RESPONSE TO MIROSLAV VOLF

One could not imagine a more fitting address to begin this conference. Miroslav Volf's paper brings together so many of the important theological, social, and cultural issues related to memory and reconciliation confronting us today. In re-membering, that is, gathering and putting back together sacred memories in the religious imagination, Professor Volf calls our attention to the intricacies of memory in everyday life. I will begin by teasing out only a handful of the rich insights in his paper in an attempt to build on his argument. I will discuss how remembering cannot be cut off from a larger conversation about feelings. If we consider current scientific research on the brain, we realize that memory is an embodied process—intertwined with emotions. Creating a place for this affective dimension of remembering, I will close by commenting on the need for mourning in reconciliation.

Let me start by returning directly to the text. Volf poses a difficult question: "How do we enjoy the blessings of memory without suffering under its curses?" The blessings of memory are many. These are the life-giving stories of empowerment, justice, and hope for both individuals and communities. The curses represent the injury or hurt associated with narratives of oppression, injustice, and despair. One way to avoid these curses is to employ memory, and here I paraphrase Volf, to reveal truth, to be healed, and to learn. Nonetheless, truth-telling, healing, and learning for one individual or community is not done in isolation, and is often enacted at the expense of another. When we find ourselves sharing the *truth* about a specific event, the person with whom we are sharing may become hurt. Memory is tied to emotions. The question that many of us face is whether getting at the truth is worth the trouble of this affective dissonance. To underscore the affective risk of remembering with others, it might help to give an example. When siblings recall memories from their childhood with one another, these memories can have a different emotional impact on each of them. We do not all remember the same story. While this has the potential for new positive revelations about our being, it often leads to negative emotions that ferment into conflict. Carefully negotiating the tension between positive blessings and negative curses, Volf introduces a practice of "remembering rightly."

The two redemptive events that Volf chooses to help us remember rightly are the Exodus of the Israelites and Christ's Passion. These salvific moments are not without problems, especially when read within contemporary culture. It is impossible to sever the memory of Exodus from current political and religious spectacle. One only needs to have a remote control and a television set, or *The New*

Yorker,¹ to catch a glimpse of the fury in the Middle East between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Memories of the exodus and liberation of Israel are entangled within each group's claim to the land. The link between memory and the Passion is also part of our ordinary lives. One only needed to be awake during Lent to hear about the controversy surrounding Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Volf realizes the impact that these sacred memories have on human existence. He adds that the memories which fuel this fury and controversy become cursed, even deadly when they are cut off from larger stories, when they become devoid of context. In his paper, then, he contextualizes these sacred stories by underscoring the ways in which they inform individual and communal identity, complicate the future, and relay memories of God. He does this in hopes that these sacred memories become "instruments of peace."

Agreeing with the need for a more nuanced understanding of memory, I want to push his contextualization process further. Contextualization here demands not a study of stories from a detached, purely rational position, but an empathetic stance that takes the emotions of the involved parties seriously. Neuropsychologists studying the limbic system, which is located in the center of the brain, are becoming increasingly convinced that there is a link between memory and emotion. It is argued that if a person hears two stories, which seem the same except for the fact that in one there is more of an emphasis on "emotional content," in all probability, the story remembered in most detail will be the affectively charged one.² Simply put, excitability drives memory. If this is true, for sacred memories to become instruments of peace and positively affect the future, there needs to be a sustained discussion of the conflicting emotions in any memory.

In beginning his effort of situating sacred memories in context, Volf focuses on Israel's Exodus experience. The overflow of memories of suffering in slavery and the diaspora functions as a catalyst for Israel to be in solidarity with others, strangers and aliens. When God calls the Israelites to remember when they were enslaved in Egypt, God indicates how they should not act. Instead of modeling an oppressive regime, they are to mimic a redeeming God, a liberating and just one. God's command to the Israelites signifies more than a moral dictum or an abstract idea. It signifies a call for empathy. God demands human feeling. The Israelites remember how they felt. Those feelings change their behavior toward others who suffer under analogous situations. It is necessary to make plain that remembering is an affective affair.

¹For instance, see Jeffrey Goldberg, "A Reporter at Large: Among the Settlers; Will They Destroy Israel?" *The New Yorker*, 31 May 2004, 46-69.

²Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999) 294. Damasio cites James McGaugh as a pioneer in connecting learning with emotion. See McGaugh, *Learning and Memory: An Introduction* (San Francisco: Albion Pub. Co., 1973).

In addition to being called to solidarity with the Other in need, the Israelites are chosen to struggle against injustice—those who are an obstacle to their liberation. If I am reading Volf correctly, this legacy of what he calls an “unbending justice” perceived in the memory of Exodus is potentially dangerous. It could be read as a story that leads to, or even validates brute power. Such unbending justice could escalate into damaging dichotomies in which good is pit against evil, victim against aggressor. These sorts of binaries, which are found in all aspects of our lives, including in much of the commentary on U.S. involvement in Iraq, are problematic. They erase any place for the ambiguity of conflict and reconciliation to emerge. I would have to add that none of us really wants to escape the security of binary oppositions. One could probe Volf’s essay, specifically the way in which he begins by presenting a stark contrast between blessings and curses, as well as between victims and perpetrators, and question if this reflects a need for clear answers.

Still, we feel otherwise. Think about your most intimate relationships and dialogue partners. Sure at times there is a lot to feel good about—agreement about this person or that event. But in these relations of intense proximity, at times there looms unutterable emotion—feelings that signify different memories. Recollections of the same event are never singular. They overlap and are intertwined with an/Other’s memory. Depending on where one stands, meaning how one feels, influences one’s perception of being a victim or a perpetrator. The plurality of and crossings among stories, which we call memories, lead finally to the belief that at some point each one of us is the victim, and at another point (or even at the same point) each one of us is the aggressor.³ The future of reconciliation depends on a fuller, graced sense of memory—one which captures the ambiguity of conflicting stories.

To help wade through this impasse, to answer the question of an unbending justice, the Passion is invoked as a sacred memory, that pushes the Exodus story, opens a place for ambiguity to arise, and allows for forgiveness. The Passion tears down polemical boundaries between victim and perpetrator. To be sure, I am convinced of Volf’s argument that there exists overlap between Exodus and the Passion in terms of suffering and deliverance. Moreover, I am intrigued by the way in which he invokes the Passion as a memory, which allows for the positions of victim and aggressor to become complicated and embraced in solidarity in Christ. For Volf, this highlights the enmity-reconciliation axis of being human. Nevertheless, I am a little uneasy with the transition from Exodus to the Passion—a somewhat seamless movement that culminates in reconciliation. To be fair, this is what (we) Christians say. The cross is the space and story of remembering—that is putting back together—humanity, both victims and

³Cynthia S. W. Crysdale expands on the anthropological and Christological implications of being both victim and perpetrator in her book, *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

aggressors. Yet, the way in which one moves from the unbending justice of Exodus to the unconditional grace of the Passion could be read as consonant with supersessionist claims. These types of insidious ideas, which one finds in Paul's christology, Aquinas's exegesis, and in modern day culture, have anything but reconciled those with different memories, namely Jews and Christians.

Volf's aim, however, is to find resources in the Christian tradition to help us remember rightly. He certainly accomplishes this. So my critique here is less about his work, and more about the way in which it is read. I am inserting into our conversation this evening a preemptive strike to the listener not to hear this as Christian triumphalism. Implicit in Volf's essay is the notion that we live in a world with many stories. These stories have actors with complicated lives, who occupy multiple positions, sometimes good and sometimes dangerous. The challenge then is that in our attempt to highlight the plurality of memories, we do not assume a linear, singular, totalizing story in the process. The movement from Exodus to the Passion is far from uncontested.

I share many of Volf's concerns about any easy answer to conflict and reconciliation. Allow me at this time to further his argument. Already, I have addressed the need for attentiveness to emotion in reconciliation, as memory is intertwined with feeling. Now I want to propose a religious and psychic place for these feelings to be engaged—a place of mourning. Here I am not referring to mourning the loss of a person, which has been explored by many, but rather to mourning that occurs due to a loss of privileged story or self.⁴

The evocative way in which Professor Volf writes makes me think about these sacred memories as sacred scenes. I find myself asking what does this sort of reconciliation look like in the everyday. Many images flood my mind. *Men in prison. Children in the West Bank. Women on a reservation. Estranged Family. Those at the foot of the Cross.* These images I invoke pertain to suffering due to conflict. In order for forgiveness to occur, the Other's story in each of these scenes must be acknowledged. In hearing the Other's story, that is, in remembering with them, one feels pain, shame, guilt, and *even a loss* for the righteous sense of self and story. Acknowledging the Other exposes one's culpability and vulnerability. Time to pause and to deal with the affective messiness of reconciliation is needed. In the midst of reconciliation, a place needs to be set for these difficult feelings—a place of mourning.

This place of mourning at the foot of the Cross counters any triumphalism that anyone might read onto the Passion. Indeed, we mourn because we have no

⁴For more on the link between death and mourning see Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Martin Heidegger, *Being in Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); and Emmanuel Levinas, "Time and the Other," in *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987; repr. 2002).

special place or story. This is precisely what Exodus and the Passion reveal. Only in the loss of relinquishing any privileged story do we heed God's command. Our story is analogous to an/Other's. Our feelings are similar to an/Other's. All sense of being special or having a privileged story dissipates here. So the putting back together of stories in remembering is precisely the realization that there are other stories within us and outside of us.

In his work on the psychology of the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians, Ofer Grosbard speaks of a sad peace, which can be related to the need for mourning in reconciliation. In *Israel on the Couch*, he writes that "we must remember that real peace is initially a *sad* event and not happy for many of us, because it requires recognition of the other."⁵ Recognizing the Other is a painstaking process because it forces one to realize that no one has the hold on being a victim, no one has exclusive rights to being a perpetrator, and no one has the monopoly on being in general. In relinquishing any one story, whether related to being the victim or aggressor, we are called to imagine being strangers in Egypt or being one of the many at the foot of the Cross. Letting go of any one position or story involves not only intellectual and moral change, but an emotional transformation as well. In the in-between space between self and Other, in the stories of justice and injustice that overlap and intertwine, we find a place to mourn. Guilt or shame finally do not cause this mourning, but by a realization of a loss of privileged place, in recognition of the Other. By mourning this loss, we can become vigilant to Volf's call for solidarity, and embrace the Other not in triumphalism, but in empathy and care.

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⁵Ofer Grosbard, *Israel on the Couch: The Psychology of the Peace Process*, foreword by Vamik D. Volkan, SUNY series on Israel Studies (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003) 33.