

# Religion as memory: How has the continuity of tradition produced collective meanings? – Part one

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Danièle Hervieu-Léger gives an account of religion as a chain of memory, that is, a form of collective memory and imagination based on the sanctity of tradition. According to her theory, in the postmodern world the continuity of religious memory has been broken and all that remains are isolated fragments guarded by religious groups. This twofold study aims at 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 first part of the study in question, this article is dedicated to a historical-theological analysis of religious memory as a source of collective meanings, as seen from a Christian perspective. Firstly, it situates Hervieu-Léger's definition of religion against the background of the most topical religious contexts in which the notion of memory appears today. Secondly, the dialectics of individual and collective memory is discussed, notably through the lens of Ricoeur's original proposal. This is followed by an overview of the traditional functions of memory in Christianity. Lastly, the interpretation of the way in which Christian tradition, in its premodern continuity, served as a source of collective cultural meanings, is recapitulated. What underlies this analysis is the conviction that to comprehend, and even more so to challenge mechanisms based on which the dominant purveyors of meaning (such as economic and information market) function in our day, one should have a clear understanding of what they attempt to substitute for. In brief, before exploring how memories become religion, one ought to be able to conceive of religion as memory.

## Introduction

If religion and memory belong together, then the postmodern crisis of memory, a 'cultural amnesia' affecting especially the most technologically advanced societies of our day, cannot remain without an impact on the condition of the contemporary *homo religiosus* (Hervieu-Léger 2000:140; Ricoeur 2004:122). Paradoxically, today this progressive *amnesia* coincides with an uncontrolled thirst for *anamnesis*. For centuries, indeed for millennia, religions used to satisfy this deep need for 'remembering'. Put metaphorically, *re-ligare* ('to bind', 'to tie together') and *re-memorari* ('to recall to mind') used to serve the common purpose of producing collective meanings. If one attempts to explore the roots and the implications of the shift that occurred in modernity with regard to both religion and memory, the analysis of how the continuity of tradition has produced collective meanings for a number of cultures throughout centuries, seems to be the right place to start.

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 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.

There are two major works within the current literature in the field that I will be referring to throughout my analysis: a noteworthy study *Religion as a chain of memory* by a French sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) and a comprehensive *Memory, history, forgetting* by Paul Ricoeur (2004). Maurice Halbwachs's classical text *On collective memory* (1992) will constitute another pivotal reference point.

As a coherent study in its own right, this article is dedicated to a historical-theological analysis of religious memory as a source of collective meanings, as seen from a Christian perspective. Firstly,

I situate Hervieu-Léger's definition of religion as a chain of memory against the background of what I consider to be the most topical religious contexts in which the notion of memory appears and is pondered today. Secondly, the dialectics of individual and collective memory is discussed, notably through the lens of Ricoeur's proposal aimed at presenting the two types of memory as *paradoxically coextensive*, rather than simply rival or even exclusive. This is followed by an overview of the traditional functions of memory in Christianity, including the social framework which was still very close to the foundational Christ-event, the period of the expansion of Christian tradition through the formalising of dogmas and cult, as well as the productive tension between the dogmatic and the mystical dimensions of Christian faith. In the conclusion, I recapitulate my interpretation of the way in which Christian tradition, in its premodern continuity, served as a source of collective cultural meanings; and I explain why the understanding of that complex process is relevant for anyone who deals with the topic of memory in a religious context today.

## From 'Religious memory' to 'Religion as memory'

There are a myriad of ways of defining memory. Some of them reflect our intuitive, essentially psychological, understanding of memory as the ability of the mind to store and recall past sensations, thoughts and knowledge. Others are particularly relevant in a philosophical context – for example, Augustine's description of memory as the present of the past (Augustine 1997:300 [XI.20, 26])<sup>1</sup> or Bergson's understanding of memory as the intersection of mind and matter (2004:xii); still others reflect its social dimension – for example, Halbwachs's (1992:22, 48) concept of collective memory as the shared pool of information held in the memories of the members of a group, and so on.

One may wonder what constitutes the prevailing *religious* approach to memory today. To answer that question adequately it seems necessary to narrow down its scope. Let us then ask about 'religious memory' within Christian tradition. Nowadays many Christians, including representatives of the highest church authority, are rightly pointing to the need of a penitential cleansing of the church's historical memory, a process of healing the wounds of the past.<sup>2</sup> Such a practice is fostered as a response not only to the gospel's call for repentance and 'change of heart', but also to the constant criticism from those who reject Christianity precisely because of the historical burdens that it carries (Halík 2009:61). In the same vein, political and liberation theologians who follow the traces of Johann Baptist Metz keep reminding us that the church cannot transform the world unless it

continually allows the 'dangerous memory of Jesus Christ' to challenge and fashion its modes of the presence in the world (Metz 1980:109, 200; Downey 1999:135–149; Morrill 2000; O'Murchu 2011; Donaldson 2012). Perhaps this *practical* dimension of memory – memory seen at once as something 'to-be-corrected' and as a potential 'corrective' – indicates, at present, the most obvious way of dealing with the problem of 'religious memory' in Christianity. I choose, however, to look at the mutual correlation between memory and religion on a more fundamental level, to deal with its essential cultural determinants and theological implications. Thus, in this article memory is to be understood in the broad and dynamic Augustinian sense in which it appears in Ricoeur's reflection when he speaks of 'the tie [*or process*] by virtue of which the past persists in the present' (2004:390).

According to Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000:4), religion is to be seen as a chain of memory, that is, a form of collective memory and imagination based on the sanctity of tradition. What is specific to religious activity is that it is wholly directed to the production, management and distribution of the particular form of believing which draws its legitimacy from reference to a tradition (Hervieu-Léger 2000:101). In what follows, the two notions, 'memory' and 'tradition', will be used *de facto* interchangeably. However, for the sake of precision, one should underscore that, within the religious-historical framework of this study, tradition is to be understood as the authorised version of the church's collective memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000:97).

What deserves particular attention is a necessary continuity between the past and the present which results in the dynamic and trans-historical understanding of both memory and tradition within Christian context. This fundamental continuity of memory transcends history and manifests itself in the essentially religious act of recalling a past which gives meaning to the present and contains the future (Hervieu-Léger 2000:125). What Christianity means by tradition then, is:

[T]he hermeneutic process by which a community of human beings rereads its rituals or statutory practices, its own historical narrative or again the theoretical constructions received from its institutional tradition. (Chauvet 1989:14)

*In relation to* the challenges of the present time. Put simply, a religious community accepts tradition and draws from it in the name of the *necessary* continuity between the past and the present.

In such a way, tradition becomes a powerful and shaping agent of the present. Religious community is capable of incorporating into its own tradition the innovations and reinterpretations demanded by the present (Hervieu-Léger 2000:87), but it always attempts to link this new data to the ancient data and thus to place it within the body of its doctrine. Such an incorporation is feasible based on the belief that since the full content of the foundational revelation was not immediately perceived, earlier remembrances may be now completed and illuminated through representations

1. For Augustine, memory is the present of the past, whereas the present of the future is expectation and the present of the present is intuition or attention (Ricoeur 2004:101, 347).

2. Two illustrations of such a tendency can be found in John Paul II's declaration of 1992 (NewScientist 1992) acknowledging the errors committed by the Catholic Church tribunal that judged the scientific positions of Galileo Galilei, and the more recent pope Benedict's apology for sexual abuses by Catholic priests (Ratzinger 2010).

which have only recently attracted the attention of the religious community, and which now, in their turn, achieve the status of official, *sanctified* remembrances (Hervieu-Léger 2000:119). *Novum in vetere latet* [the new is hidden in the old], the poetic phrase attributed to Aquinas, is what underlies such a hermeneutic enterprise. In this sense, Christian religion – in spite of its being originated *toward the past* – can still present itself as a permanent institution based on the truths that are to be seen as both historical and eternal (Hervieu-Léger 2000:88).

## Dialectics of individual and collective memory

By placing tradition – that is to say, reference to a chain of belief – at the centre of my reflection, I am immediately confronted with the problem of the tension between individual and collective memory. To which factor do religious memories owe their coherence? To the internal unity of an individual consciousness or to their being rooted in a social (collective) identity?

Members of a ‘school of inwardness’, to borrow Charles Taylor’s (1989:111) expression, would opt for the former response. Titles of nobility of this tradition extend back to late antiquity with a Christian coloration: St Augustine is at once its expression and its initiator; other critical figures include John Lock, Immanuel Kant and Edmund Husserl (Ricoeur 2004:97). Paul Ricoeur points to the high price that one must pay for the subjectivist radicalisation which was brought about by those thinkers. From their subjectivist point of view ‘any attribution to a collective subject becomes unthinkable, derivative or even frankly metaphorical’ (Ricoeur 2004:94). However, the understanding of the nature of religious memory which prevails in today’s philosophical and sociological debates stems from quite a different intellectual tradition. Fundamentally it is to be found in sociology at the turn of the 20th century, influenced by Durkheimian school of methodological holism supported by Maurice Halbwachs (1992), who coined and masterfully developed the concept of ‘collective memory’. For the representatives of this school, collective consciousness is one of those realities whose ontological status is not in question; on the other hand, individual memory, as a purportedly original agency, becomes at least problematic (Ricoeur 2004:94).

The foundational insight of Halbwachs (1992) consisted in the decision to attribute memory directly to a collective entity: one never remembers alone; to remember, we always need others. We are not original owners of our memories, which does not necessarily mean that we are not an authentic subject of the attribution of memories. But to attribute one’s memories exclusively to oneself is an illusory attempt.

To account for the logics of coherence presiding over our perception of the world, we must eventually turn to the side of collective memory, as it is within the frameworks of collective thought that we find the means of evoking the series and the connection of objects. (Ricoeur 2004:122–123)

Moreover, Halbwachs made it clear that despite religious memory’s attempts to isolate itself from temporal society, it simply cannot avoid interactions with other sorts of collective consciousness. That is why in the traditional society, even though Christianity was distinguished from the temporal world, both participated in a shared collective memory, obeying the laws which every collective memory must obey (Halbwachs 1992:113, 119). Hervieu-Léger inscribes herself into such an understanding of memory by asserting that if religion is to be seen as a chain of memory, it is definitely the *normative character of collective memory* that lies at the root of religious identity. ‘The normativity of collective memory is reinforced by ... the group’s defining itself, objectively and subjectively, as a *lineage of belief*’ (Hervieu-Léger 2000:125). And in order for a religious group to see itself as part of a lineage of belief, memories must be consciously shared with and passed on to others (Hervieu-Léger 2000:123).

In this context, individual memory and collective memory seem to be placed in a position of rivalry: either *homo religiosus* can hold memories of its own and derive from them a sense of religious identity and affiliation, as the proponents of a school of inwardness would argue, or religious memory *belongs*, by its very nature, to a collective entity which defines itself in reference to a shared lineage of belief, as the critics of a radical subjectivism would say (Ricoeur 2004:95). While collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is after all individuals as group members who remember. Therefore, there is a continuous, dialectical tension between the sociology of collective memory and the phenomenology of individual memory (Ricoeur 2004:124). As Ricoeur (2004:128) puts it, ‘the specter of the discordance between individual memory and collective memory reappears at the very moment we think we have found safe harbour’.

Is there a way out of this deadlock? Instead of a quite abrupt question, which is ordinarily posed in the form of a paralysing dilemma: ‘Is memory primordially personal or collective?’, Ricoeur (2004) proposes another one which gives us a chance to escape the alternative of *either or*, namely:

To whom is it legitimate to attribute the *pathos* corresponding to the reception of memories and the *praxis* in which the search for memories consists? ... Why should memory be attributed only to me, to you, to her or him? ... Why could the attribution not be made directly to us? (pp. 93–94)

For Ricoeur (2004:101), inserting individual memory into the operations of collective memory requires a conciliation between the time of the soul and the time of the world. What are the practical consequences of such a concept of memory? In a positive sense, ‘a person remembers only by situating ... herself within the viewpoint of one or several groups and one or several currents of collective thought’ (Ricoeur 2004:121). In a negative sense, when we no longer belong to the group in whose memory a given recollection is preserved, our own memory is weakened for lack of external supports (Ricoeur 2004:121).

Ricoeur attempts to explore the complementary resources contained within the two antagonistic approaches which allow him to grasp a double nature of memory which is at once a particular case and a singular case. A particular case, inasmuch as mnemonic phenomena are mental phenomena among others; a singular case, inasmuch as the attribution of memory adheres to the affection constitutive of the presence of a memory and to the action of the mind in finding it (Ricoeur 2004:126–127). For instance, the collective nature of Christian memory is first expressed in an appeal to the testimony of apostles (Ricoeur 2004:161); in this way, believers encounter the memory of others along the path of recollection and recognition, the two principal mnemonic phenomena of the typology of memories Ricoeur proposes. In other words, the personal act of recollection and recognition is precisely where the social mark is to be initially found. Then believers move step-by-step to memories that they hold as members of a community, of the church. Thus the social (ecclesial) framework ceases to be simply an objective notion and becomes a dimension inherent in the work of recollection (Ricoeur 2004:120–123). In this sense, ascription to others is found not as superimposed upon self-ascription but rather as coextensive with it (Ricoeur 2004:126–127).

Furthermore, Ricoeur suggests that there is an intermediate level of reference between the poles of individual memory and collective memory, namely the level of one's close relations: People who count for us and for whom we count, where concrete exchanges operate between the living memory of individual persons and the public memory of the communities to which we belong (Ricoeur 2004:131). If we assume together with Max Weber and many other sociologists that 'orientation toward others' is indeed a basic structure of social identity and action, Ricoeur's proposal appears to be plausible. He maintains that these close relations with fellow beings – with, as he puts it, 'privileged others' – occupy the middle ground between the self and the 'they'. What one can expect from one's close relations is that they approve what one attests, and even when they disapprove one's actions, they never disapprove one's existence (Ricoeur 2004:130–132). In this context, Ricoeur recalls St Augustine (1997) who beautifully paints a picture of such a brotherly [*sic*] approval:

This is what I wish my true brothers to feel in their hearts [*animus... fraternus*] ... My true brothers are those who rejoice for me in their hearts when they find good in me [*qui cum approbat me*], and grieve for me when they find sin. They are my true brothers, because whether they see good in me or evil, they love me still. To such as these I shall reveal myself [*indicabo me*]. (pp. 239–240 [X.4, 5])

The same spirit seems to be underlying Hanspeter Heinz's insight according to which both relationships and history are nurtured by memory which, in turn, is inseparable from the dimension of collectivity or even communion. Heinz (2001) insists that:

History must be condensed into imminent symbols, such as feast days and memorials. Otherwise, it will slide into the abyss of oblivion ... [*Analogically*], relationships must be condensed into

eminent encounters such as the friendship among neighbours or an agreement among nations. Otherwise they will disappear in the dichotomy of sympathy and antipathy. (p. 164)

A reference to interpersonal relationship, which involves, as it were, an intermediary level of memory (more than just *personal*, but still less than *social*), seems to be offering an opportunity to overcome opposition between two traditional approaches to memory, without dismissing what is essential in each of them. Thus the dialectics of individual and collective memory may be conceived of as the source of a creative tension constitutive of religious identity.

## Traditional function of memory in Christianity

That being said, one may now try to capture key features of religious memory and its role in a premodern type of society in which Christianity was a main factor of collective consciousness.

### In close proximity to the foundational Christ-event

In traditional societies the domain of religious symbolism was structured entirely by a myth of creation, and collective memory was given once for all in a way that was totally contained within the structures, organisation, language and everyday observances and rituals.<sup>3</sup> Israel, on the other hand, discovered its identity not in the creation myth, but in the memory of historical events, first and foremost the Exodus from Egypt and God's Covenant through Moses. In this context, the remembrance of God's choice of Israel, preserved in the collective memory of the chosen people, appears as the principle of interpretation for all historical as well as mythical events. At the same time, what remained – and indeed still remains – as the ultimate reference point for the Jewish people, is the promise of a good future, a fruit of God's grace which is organically connected with the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus' disciples adopted the Old Testament promise by discovering its ultimate accomplishment in Jesus Christ, God's Messiah. At the same time, in their experience this dynamic of the hope for God's final victory has been preserved, since they also were waiting – as the church is waiting today – for the second coming of Christ, for his coming in glory (*Parousia*). And last but not least, the young church from the very beginning was aware of Christ's active presence through the Holy Spirit, the sacramental presence *here and now*. What integrates those three dimensions is their ultimate rootedness in the Christ-event, understood both as foundational for and constitutive of Christian faith.

The category of Christ-event is to be conceived, in this context, in both historical and symbolic sense. In David

3. Hervieu-Léger notices that the practice of *anamnesis*, of the recalling to the memory of the past, is most often observed as a rite. But even in the case of religions that are without rites (for example, Baha'i where there is only the reading of or meditation on source texts) a form of *anamnesis* – one without ritual – occurs in order to enable the religious group to form (Hervieu-Léger 2000:125).



Tracy's words, 'on inner-Christian grounds there is one classic event and person which normatively judges and informs all other Christian classics ... the event and person of Jesus Christ' (Tracy 1981:233). The Christ-event and the person of Jesus Christ are so correlated that one cannot be thought of in isolation from the other. The event of Jesus Christ means for the Christian tradition 'that we recognise Jesus in the Christ-event as the person in whom God's own self is decisively represented as the gift and command of love' (Tracy 1981:234). For Tracy, it is critical to maintain that Christianity lives, not by ideas or even by scripture, but by the event and person of Jesus Christ, as normatively codified in the New Testament (Tracy 1981:249). As the paradigmatic, focal meaning of Christianity, the Christ-event constitutes the primary analogue for the interpretation of the whole of reality. As all relations of God-self-world are ordered and oriented by this event, only through its lenses can one's analogical imagination discover and explicate potentially endless analogies (similarities-in-difference) which exist among those realities (Tracy 1981:408). Thus, from a theological perspective, the category of the Christ-event encompasses the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth – his life, death and life again – as captured by scripture-in-tradition and experienced ever anew in the church through proclamation (word), manifestation (sacrament) and prophetic action (Forsyth 2010:302; Tracy 1981:447, 2011:111).

In a nutshell, it means that in Christian faith, which stems from and continuously feeds on the Christ-event, the fullness of the sacred lies simultaneously in the past (the historical-theological fact of the Incarnation, life, ministry and Passover of Christ), in the present (the Holy Spirit sanctifying Christ's church all around the world), and in the future (the second coming of Christ and what the Book of Revelation 21:1 calls 'a new heaven and a new earth'): historical memory, sacramental presence, and eschatological promise. The focus of this study is obviously on the first element of this triad. The reason why I refer to the '*foundational* Christ-event' is precisely to emphasise the concrete, historical aspect of this broad and multifaceted notion. One shall not forget, however, that the traditional function of memory in Christianity cannot be adequately examined in isolation from two other dimensions constitutive of Christian faith, namely sacramental presence and eschatological promise.

The society in which the Christian kerygma appeared was a kind of differentiated society where established religions prevailed and where distinctive communities of faith were emerging on occasion. On the one hand, the memory of a social group was given as a kind of full set, as a 'provision' that was regularly confirmed, reminded, and maintained by religious institutions. On the other hand, collective religious memory was subject to constantly recurring construction, so that the past which had its source in the historical events at its core could be grasped at any moment as having been totally meaningful. To the extent that the entire significance of the

experience of the present was supposed to be contained, at least potentially, in the foundational events, the past was symbolically constituted as an immutable whole, situated 'outside time', that is, outside history (Hervieu-Léger 2000:125). As Hervieu-Léger (2000) points out:

[I]n both Jewish and Christian traditions, the religious wresting of the past from history is given privileged significance by the core events being magnified in time; and this at once opens up the possibility of the utopian anticipation of the end of time. (p. 124)

In the beginning, Christian religious memory operated within a social framework which was still very close to the events that this memory would establish – it was not yet easy to distinguish what was remembrance from what was consciousness of the present<sup>4</sup> – and thereby testimonies, recollections, and even new facts could nourish and reinforce Christian identity without destroying or seriously changing it. In this formative period, the collective memory of the church was still dispersed among a multitude of spatially separated small communities which were not astonished, anxious or scandalised that the beliefs of one community differed from those of another and that the community of today was not exactly the same as that of yesterday. In brief, the church in these early days was preoccupied with surviving rather than remembering (Halbwachs 1992:94–95). Up to this moment religious memory lived and functioned within the entire group of believers and, what is more, was conflated in the law with the collective memory of the entire society. It did not seem necessary for those who maintained this religious memory to leave their anchorage in time, to detach and isolate themselves from all thoughts and memories circulating within temporal groups:

Why should religious memory not operate under the same conditions as a collective memory that is nourished and renewed, fortified and enriched, without losing any of its fidelity as long as the society that supports it develops a continuous existence? (Halbwachs 1992:98, 112–113)

Halbwachs asks rhetorically. If one can describe the early church in particular and Christian societies of the past in general as societies of memory, it is precisely because in them memory was compact and present in every part of life; believers had no need to call their religious remembrances up (Hervieu-Léger 2000:141).

### Christian tradition on the offensive: Formalising of dogmas and cult

However, to the degree that religious memory grew distant from the foundational events, the sum of other events, without connection with the earlier period, significantly increased. The church began to realise that the groups that it progressively attracted tended to preserve their own interests and their own memories; a mass of new remembrances

4. The main reason why past and present were confused was that evangelical drama did not yet seem to be at its end, the last act was still awaited: The hope for the return of Christ and the appearance of the heavenly Jerusalem had not yet been turned aside (Halbwachs 1992:94).



bearing no relation to its own refused to be located within the frameworks of Christian experience. Faced with these new remembrances, which were likely to shape collective consciousness, the church came to a resolution that its own memory had to be organised so as to continue to exist intact in a social milieu that was constantly changing. In order to defend itself Christianity engaged in a cultural 'tug of war' and eventually succeeded in preventing other memories from forming and developing in its midst – at least until the modern ethos took over (Halbwachs 1992:93, 98). It was at this point that a distinctively Christian tradition was established by means of formalising dogmas and cult and often in contrast to the beliefs and practices of secular society, which represented another time and obeyed impulses different from Christian society (Halbwachs 1992:113). The decisive factor that allowed the memory constitutive of Christian faith to triumph over the old religions was that their memories were already far removed from their own object. In Halbwachs's (1992) words:

[T]he new religious memory assimilated all that it could incorporate because of its content, that is, all that was most recent in the older religions and that was imprinted by the same period in which Christianity was born – that which was most exterior in the old religions. (p. 93)

A 'side effect' of this fact is that in certain respects a Catholic living ten or fifteen centuries later will understand the Gospels less well than a pagan, a Jew, an Oriental, or a Roman of the first two centuries (Halbwachs 1992:95).

Thus the church found within its traditional spirit the force necessary to maintain the primacy of its fundamental memories and to preserve its own originality in the midst of other groups. As long as Christianity was able to impose its own tradition on the premodern societies, their entire life and history yielded and conformed to its memory. At that stage, many non-religious remembrances were incorporated as confirmations of the teaching of the church, thus enriching its own memory with new testimonies, without deviating, however, from the line of its past (Halbwachs 1992:113). 'There was at that time such energy and organic vitality in the church', Halbwachs (1992) notices:

[T]hat it did not hesitate to impose its own memory on the societies that until then had remained foreign to its thought and life; their memories and traditions soon became effaced or fused within the Christian tradition. (p. 113)

However, trophies gained by means of this expansion made it evident that the church was no longer self-sufficient in arbitrarily establishing the frameworks of social memory. Insofar as Christian memory extended and sought to strengthen its sway over lay and profane groups, it had no choice but to take the form of a doctrine that responded to the concerns of the time. To meet this ongoing requirement the church was obliged, on occasion, to obscure all those aspects of its doctrine that were not in tune with the present social experience or that seemed to clash too violently with the ideas of lay circles (Halbwachs 1992:113–114).

## Creative tension between the dogmatic and the mystical

Throughout the centuries this task has been achieved with the aid of a productive tension between the dogmatic and the mystical facets of Christianity. Because of a constant conflict entailed by the claims of each of those two 'forces', integrally inscribed in the very nature of Christian tradition, the collective memory of the church always had to operate under contrasting, if not contradictory, conditions. One of the crucial points made by Halbwachs is that an effort to go back to the origins is characteristic of both mystics and dogmatics, though they attain this goal by different means. At the same time, however, both mystics and dogmatics risk losing contact with their origins. It is only the corrective function they perform in relation to one another that allows them to preserve a balanced and critical reference to the lineage of Christian belief. In this sense, 'religion results from a compromise between these two tendencies' (Halbwachs 1992:100). Let's then look more closely at each of them.

In order to establish and defend its own distinctive identity, the church had to interpret its teaching in a more systematic and coherent way; this enterprise marked the birth of dogma (Halbwachs 1992:93–94, 116–117). One may say that dogmatics play the same role in the operations of religious memory that the collective ideas or remembrances play within memory as such. Thus if religious doctrine is the collective memory of the church, dogmatics, being its quintessence, defines the framework in which particular remembrances are collected and hierarchized (Halbwachs 1992:103, 112). The dogma of a religious group is nothing else than the 'culmination of a deliberate drive to achieve a unified religious memory', to use Hervieu-Léger's (2000:126) phrase.

Mystics' approach to religious memory seems to be more complex. The mystic knows Christ through tradition: Whenever the mystic thinks about Christ, he or she *remembers*. Ultimately, all mystic life is an imitation of Jesus Christ based on the remembrance of his historical life. Besides, mystical experiences take place within the framework of notions which have neither been invented nor revealed to the mystic alone, but rather passed on to the mystic by the church. Hence the continuity between mystical states and the memory held by the church as a whole (Halbwachs 1992:105). Mysticism cannot oppose official religion in the way individual thought opposes tradition, for the church does not allow any form of religious life which would exclude essential dogmas, that is, the fundamental memories of Christianity. The religious institution insists, instead, that all devotion and every new form of belief or cult must depend on certain elements of Christian tradition and present itself as an aspect of collective Christian memory (Halbwachs 1992:104–105, 110). Halbwachs (1992) describes such an assimilation process as follows:

When the church realises that a new testimony, far from clashing with the latter [*collective Christian memory*], fortifies it, and that

a new view of doctrine sheds more light on all its components, the church accepts it and, then, tries to link it to its own system. (p. 112)<sup>5</sup>

Thus, when the collective nature of mystical states is recognised, Christian memory retains these revelations, illuminations and visions as a type of witness which, if not of the same value as that of history, deserves at least to be considered (Halbwachs 1992:118).

With such a background, we may understand how the tension between the dogmatic and the mystical dimension of Christianity can be a creative one. The danger that faces dogmatic theology lies in the fact that dogmas and rituals, which once (because of their very novelty) appealed to the imagination and sensibility of people, in the long run tend to become immobilised into literary formulas and monotonous gestures whose efficacy declines. Mystics are capable of energising and fertilising believers' connection with the memory of the church by slightly modifying the picture of early Christianity, and by attracting attention to certain facts and persons in the gospels that were initially poorly known or little noticed. Thus what distinguishes mystics from dogmatists is not that they oppose a kind of personal inspiration to the collective memory of the church, but rather that they value and give preference to those portions of early Christian history that the official tradition has eclipsed for one reason or another (Halbwachs 1992:106–107). A mystical revival of faith results in many forms of devotion which both mystics, as their initiators, and the church that agrees to adopt them, consider to be in concert with 'a new direction of religious memory fashioned to recover such aspects of evangelical history that until now had been neglected' (Halbwachs 1992:106). In this sense, the memory of the mystic may complete and even partly supplement the fundamental memories of the church preserved in its dogmas (Halbwachs 1992:105).

## Christian tradition as a source of collective meanings

To sum up the first part of my analysis, it has to be stressed that premodern societies were societies of memory in which Christianity succeeded in reaching its cultural climax (at least partially) due to legitimising reference to tradition which constitutes the authorised version of the church's collective memory.

The church gives a privileged status to the early years of Christianity because the events from which it derives trans-historical (indeed eternal) truths actually took place during a very strictly determined historical period. Religious representations are fixed:

[N]ot because they are 'outside of time,' but rather because the time to which they refer is detached, if not from all that preceded it, at least from all that follows. (Halbwachs 1992:91)

5.The mystic is then canonised and takes her place on the list of official saints; the story of her life takes the form of legend, her disciples must submit themselves to the rules of monastic life, and her teachings become reduced to the level of the common religious understanding (Halbwachs 1992:112).

The believer cannot remove herself or himself from temporal affairs and be assured of approaching the object of her or his cult, unless she or he pays incessant attention to the time in which Christianity was born. Thereby religious practice consists, at least to an extent, in continuous and mindful reliving both the initial drama on which all subsequent doctrinal and pastoral developments depend as well as the other religious events whose remembrance has been assimilated into the body of the history of the church (Halbwachs 1992:100).

As long as this mechanism was at work, Christianity supplied the structure of premodern societies by generating *continuity*. In this way, it brought about a world of collective meanings in which day to day experience was related to an immutable, necessary order that pre-existed both individuals and communities (Hervieu-Léger 2000:84, 86). However, the emergence of a new modern paradigm resulted in calling the lineage of belief into question. Once the continuity of memory had been broken, societies started suffering from a progressive amnesia. Due to this process, what we refer to as 'postmodernity' leaves a religious person with mere isolated fragments of an old coherent and holistic system of remembrances. In short, *memory* has been replaced with *memories*. To this new and complex reality I turn in the second part of my study.<sup>6</sup>

However, it would be a mistake to relegate the above analysis to the status of a purely historical account of no relevance for the understanding of the dynamics of Christian faith today. Of course it is important to gain a profound insight into the religious-cultural processes of the past, in order to adequately describe the place and the role of memory in religion at large, that is, in both the pre- and the postmodern types of society. But grasping the essence of an *identification* of religion with the chain of memory, in a premodern context, has a meaning beyond that.

First of all, one has to recognise that, as useful as the distinction between 'societies of memory' and 'societies of change' may seem in terms of categorising different approaches to memory in a religious setting, it is also somewhat rigid (Hervieu-Léger 2000:123), and thus it cannot be applied to describing the difference between the pre- and the postmodern reality without further qualification. There are still societies today in which religion remains essentially a form of collective memory and imagination based on the sanctity of tradition (Hervieu-Léger 2000:4) – to mention, for instance, theocratic Islamic states such as Iran<sup>7</sup> or, to a lesser extent, Asian nations

6.Cf. Urbaniak (in press, 'Memories as religion: What can the broken continuity of tradition bring about? Part 2').

7.This does not mean, of course, that in the societies like the Iranian the influences and the symptoms of the postmodern breaking of the continuity of religious tradition cannot be observed. Labelled a 'theocratic republic' (United States of America, Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] n.d.), with its constitution being a 'hybrid' of 'theocratic and democratic elements' (Fukuyama 2009), today's Iran can be seen as one of the last *bastions* of 'religion as memory' which is, nonetheless, more and more exposed to the impact of the postmodern fragmentation of collective memory.



with a predominantly Roman Catholic population such as the Philippines and East Timor.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, even though the cultural process which consists in the fragmentation of religious memory seems – at least in principle – irreversible, there are a number of attempts within Christianity itself, not to mention other religious traditions, to restore the continuity of tradition and thereby enable Christianity to be (once again) the prevailing *cultural form* of a collective memory and imagination. Playing up the correlation of the national-patriotic and the religious narratives, twisted together by various historical-social factors, like in the case of Polish Catholicism, is one of the ways in which such attempts, often quite desperate, are being made. Hijacking religious tradition for the immediate purposes of political or military agenda, like in the case of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Boko Haram, may serve as another illustration.

Lastly, the fact that generally religion does not play any longer the integrative social role – the one of a universal cultural ‘cement’ – does not imply that *nothing* can play such a role in the global world of today. As Charles Taylor (2007:553–554) points out, postmodernity pluralises ways of producing meaning by continuously increasing dissociation of the ‘modes’ of accessing the sacred. It seems that currently religion’s cultural role of a ‘common language’ is played quite successfully by the capitalist economy and, perhaps even to a higher degree, by mass media (Halík 2011). And yet, unlike religion in the past, none of the new purveyors of meaning in today’s societies can claim to draw its legitimacy from reference to a ‘unified memory’, for such a memory is simply ‘beyond the power of any single group to construct’ (Hervieu-Léger 2000:129).

This is perhaps the deepest (qualitative) difference between the way in which religious tradition is used to produce collective meanings in the premodern era and that in which various competitive ‘channels of the sacred’ function in our day. The authority of a ‘unified memory’ (i.e., of religious tradition) has been replaced with the consumer’s claim to arbitrarily derive from the reservoir of collective memories and thus compose, rather than discover, new meanings. To comprehend, and even more so to challenge mechanisms based on which the dominant purveyors of meaning (such as economic and information market) function in our day, one should have a clear understanding of what they attempt to substitute for. In brief, before exploring *how memories become religion*, one ought to be able to conceive of *religion as memory*.

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8. Needless to say, in the case of those traditionally Catholic societies, the tension between ‘the old’ and ‘the new’ has a different character than in the theocratic countries, where the state acts as an official guardian and protector of the authority of religious tradition. In the Philippines, for example, the authorised version of the church’s collective memory is being gradually eroded by the secular culture which continues to permeate not only the society at large but also the church itself (Martin 2015; Pangalangan 2010). In this sense, the trajectory regarding changes within the area of religious tradition seems evident: the increasing fragmentation of collective memory is inevitable.

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