MEMORY AND FAITH

Tested by Eschatological Hope

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FAITH IN THE GOD OF JESUS CHRIST encompasses all facets of human existence – civic, communal, familial and individual. Memory binds this faith to history. Following on its Jewish heritage, Christian faith is shaped by corporate testimony to God's salvific deeds in history. Faith is a committed response[1] to the meanings revealed in the history of the Jewish people, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and the living traditions of believing communities. Thus memory is the vehicle and expression of faith. Past, present and future interact through the power of imagination at work in memory.

The faith engendered by communal memory of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is ineluctably tied to hope. It is a faith that trusts in God's saving power and attests to the coming reign of God. Christian belief is thus the personal and communal embrace of an eschatological vision of God, humanity and the earth.[2] Hope keeps us attuned to the liberating potential of faith. Christian memory is made salvific by eschatological hope.

Furthermore, hope exposes to critical evaluation the multi-faceted relationship between memory and faith. Hope enables the future reality of the reign of God to affect the past and present. Because it is rooted in the paschal mystery, hope does not hesitate to embrace the uncontrollable potential of the oppressed, the marginalized, those who have been 'the other' for individuals and groups. Hope is not deterred by the mysterious powers of sexuality or by demonic threats of death and destruction. Eschatological hope makes freedom possible in the face of radical evil. Within the perspective of eschatological hope Christian faith becomes creative fidelity, not rigid obedience.

The dynamic relationship between faith and memory is affected by current attitudes that question the meaning and relevance of the very category of history, either in itself or as applied to a 'salvation history'. Two factors prevail. First, for large segments of contemporary society the general awareness of historical events and their significance is minimal. Second, varieties of postmodern thought deny that history constitutes an authentic and/or intelligible category.

Nevertheless, however great the temptations people feel to deny the importance of history and memory, our past is integral to our identity as human beings and we can never isolate ourselves from it. History shares with all forms of narrative the power of a story to express and orient human experience with respect to time. It thus displays forms of intelligibility proper to narrative.[3] Such intelligibility provides a basis for critical evaluation and liberating innovation.

This article examines the integral link between memory and faith in order to expose them to the testing of eschatological hope. We first investigate memory as a function of the imagination and then consider narrative as a work of the creative imagination. Thus the stage will be set to re-evaluate the memories of Christian tradition from the perspective of women's stories. It will be seen that fidelity to the promised reign of God requires that faith communities foster the retelling and reconstructing of the stories of their tradition. Finally, we consider the indispensable role of lament and repentance in the face of the memory of suffering and oppression. Eschatological hope makes such lament possible.

Imagination in memory and narrative

Because memory is linked to imagination and desire in the most basic experiences of human existence, its impact is profound and multifaceted. Through imagination and desire memory establishes its unique relationship to eschatological hope. The creative potential unleashed into narrative through the poetic imagination makes it possible for memory to be an agent of change and renewal. Nevertheless, imagination and desire at work in memory continue to obscure the realities of suffering and to mute the challenge to act with freedom.

Imagination is fundamental to all human activity. Without imagination, which remembers the past, projects possibilities for the future and shapes human desire, there can be no action. As the creative, critical and integrative process central to human becoming, imagination is integral to an understanding of Scripture and tradition. It underlies the process of memorial celebration that formed the originating Jewish and Christian communities and continues these traditions.

Memory is a product of imagination. Critical insights into the nature of memory and history accurately identify their selective quality. Memory is inherently a process marked by enhancement, denial, forgetting and distortion. It is affected by desire and in turn shapes desire. Understanding the function of imagination helps evaluate the various uses of memory. Thus we consider a twofold aspect to imagination – its

power to be creative and liberative and its power to fascinate and obscure.

Imagination is often appreciated because of its ability to reproduce the absent or to reconstitute past events. However, the expected rarely encompasses what has actually been present. Reproductive imagination is not necessarily authentic. Reproductive imagination readily supports efforts to describe the past according to the interests of those in power. By contrast, it is the creative imagination that possesses the potential to reveal what has been rendered invisible and to correct distortion.[4]

Significant variations on the theme of imagination and memory abound in the provocative and enigmatic novel, *The book of laughter and forgetting*, by the Czech dissident writer, Milan Kundera.[5] Some are cited here to illustrate the many varieties of memory. In a series of seemingly unrelated short stories he conveys the power and dangers of memory. Communist rulers airbrush photos so that discredited leaders are forgotten. Pointedly, Kundera observes that those who would dominate the future fight for the right to determine the past. They fight for the control of archival material. They promote activities in the present that would distract from critical and creative expression. Such manipulation of the past has the power to seduce not only the young, but also the complacent or discouraged of any age. A consciousness captivated by a need for security and control embraces a memory that would relate the present only to the past.

There are additional ways in which memory can actually be a form of forgetting. Paradoxically, efforts at reproductive exactness can turn presence into absence. Kundera describes the futile efforts of an exiled widow to retrieve diaries that recount the many past vacations spent pleasurably in the company of her husband. Her focus on the diaries with their promise of chronological accuracy becomes an obsession. As her search progresses she finds it increasingly difficult to recall the joyful times or to sense his presence. Sadness overwhelms her. Efforts to deaden her grief lead her to seek out an idyllic existence. She forgets her husband and eventually her life disintegrates into grotesque encounters. Finally, in an effort at escape, she drowns. The all-consuming search for exactitude did not leave room for her own memories. These had rolled the many vacations into a kaleidoscopic presence, appearing somewhat different at each recall.

We have thus seen that attempts at reproductive accuracy and control actually can obscure what is most essential in the past. Memory can readily be expressive of a fixated consciousness.

In contrast, creative imagination allows memory to encompass the absurd, the negative, the shadow, evil, destruction and death. It is

precisely these aspects of human existence that religious faith can address forthrightly. How faith engages human desire in relationship to what seems meaningless determines whether that faith can be salvific.

Creative imagination with its comic potential also features in *The book of laughter and forgetting*. Laughter allied with a critical stance brings memory into play as a refusal to interiorize communist ideology. Absence itself becomes a kind of presence. In an oft-cited passage Kundera describes how communist efforts to change history are sabotaged by that very effort itself. A discredited and executed Czech communist official actually remains present in a 1948 group photo although he has been airbrushed out of the scene. The photo was taken on a cold day and the official had placed his own hat on the head of the party leader. The story of the hanged official is told whenever the picture of his hat is on public display. The hat becomes an expansive symbol of the struggle that memory wages against efforts to use it as a tool of control.

Kundera's work exposes the many forms of memory. Significantly, it is the power of creative imagination to link presence and absence that challenges dominative control. Reproductive imagination intends an imaginative presence which would re-present the absent object. Creative embrace of absence acknowledges that it is impossible and even undesirable to re-present the past. To be authentically liberative, memory must participate in a poetic creativity. It is a dialectic of presence and absence, not a re-presentation of a lost presence.

As we turn to expressions of faith in the texts of Scripture and the processes of tradition we observe that narrative is a privileged vehicle of memory. Narrative is essential to human existence. Unless our endeavours are shaped by story, they readily disintegrate into disjointed fragments. Narrative helps appropriate the past in anticipation of a promised future. Narrative, both as fiction and as history, configures human action in relationship to time.

Narrative thus participates in poetic processes akin to the creation of metaphor. That is, it brings together things that are otherwise unconnected. Narrative is a yoking of unlikes that appeals to our imagination to create patterns of likeness.

What one appropriates in reading the narratives of the Christian tradition is a way of being in the world that resonates with the reign of God revealed in Jesus. The parables are narrative metaphors which exemplify the power of narrative to appeal to the imagination and effect a reorientation of life and action. Both the originating narratives of Scripture and the process of reading and appropriating their meaning

participate in the creativity of the metaphoric imagination. Thus eschatological hope prevents Scripture and tradition from becoming the agents of a fascinated consciousness.

Creative imagination and biblical memory: contributions from women's experience

David Power has set out three features of Christian memory which correspond to the perspective just examined. First, Christian memory is an interiorization of narrative, relating one's life story to the story of Christ and the believing community. Second, in its presentation of a narrative memory involves a creative shaping of past events which anticipates the future. And third, Christian remembering involves the generation of a new meaning – a 'generative poetics' – and a critical attitude.[6] To apply these insights to the question of memory and faith we need to look at Scripture and tradition as particular instances of the creative imagination.

This approach to memory bears strong kinship to the Jewish understanding of the command, *Zakhor* – 'Remember' – as sketched by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in the engaging work, *Zakhor: Jewish history and Jewish memory*. He notes that though the Hebrew Bible commands its readers to remember, 'memory is among the most fragile and capricious of our faculties'. He continues:

> Altogether the verb *zakhar* appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times, usually with either Israel or God as the subject, for memory is incumbent upon both. The verb is complemented by its obverse – forgetting. As Israel is enjoined to remember, so is it adjured not to forget. Both imperatives have resounded with enduring effect among the Jews since biblical times.[7]

The Jewish tradition not only cherishes history as the event of God's activity; it also sees each individual and each gathering as present to the events of its history. In this light the stories of that history are told with the awareness that the gathering here and now is present to the past event. Christian liturgy picks up that same sense when it proclaims 'This is the night' on which our salvation is won.

Furthermore, Jewish tradition prizes midrash, the transformation of biblical narrative. Succeeding generations of Jews could identify with their past by creative retelling of the biblical stories. The well-known recounting of the sacrifice of Isaac in the Akedah tradition, which presents Isaac not as a passive child but as a young man who freely accepts his father's decision, is but one instance. Midrash changes the stories of the tradition in order to adapt to new situations.

Throughout the history of Christian proclamation individuals and communities have employed a wide variety of strategies to bring the memories of tradition into dynamic relationship with their own lives. Preaching, prayer, rituals, places, pilgrimages, pictures, statues, stained-glass windows, sacraments, drama, lives of the saints, story-telling – all have been able to be bearers of faith. Popular devotions have not only filled the gaps left by empty rituals of formalized liturgy. They have been the way in which believers, especially the poor and marginalized, have been able to apply the tradition to their lives.

Efforts of women to speak their reality into the memory of Christian faith have long been essential to their spirituality. For instance, novena devotions to Mary as Our Sorrowful Mother or Our Mother of Perpetual Help held special meaning for the many women who could identify with the struggles and expressions of care in the life of the Mother of Jesus. The rosary combined devotion to Mary with direct contemplation of the saving mysteries of Jesus' life. Those prayer forms which have sustained faith across the centuries are those that engage personal and communal creativity. The province of popular religion has been sustained by women. Through the rituals of family, community and parish life the memories essential to faith have passed down the generations.

Feminist scholars seek to continue those traditions through which women have made expressions of faith a part of their hope for the future of humanity. Christian feminist scholarship identifies aspects of popular religion that have been most particularly the expression of women's reality. This article can only recognize these extensive efforts.

Here I am primarily concerned with the liberative and creative connections that women have made between their own histories and biblical narratives. By considering how women continue to appropriate and transform a Christian tradition that has demeaned, diminished and marginalized them, we can enlarge our own personal appropriation of the meanings conveyed in the memories of the tradition. This study is grounded in the conviction that the heart of Jewish and Christian belief is liberating and salvific for women and all the world's outcasts.

In women's writings we find several approaches that engage the transformative power of Scripture. These include attentive re-reading, scholarly re-construction, creative re-telling and effective re-connection. All these strategies blend imagination with a vigorous scepticism. A hermeneutics of suspicion is necessary. Among the marginalized and oppressed it is women who must analyse the expressions of Christian faith most carefully. Not all of Scripture, nor all of tradition, nor all of

ritualization promote the full humanity of women.[8] Centuries of diminishment demand that they question: 'Is this usable history?' 'Is this usable tradition?' 'Is this usable ritual?' The answers, to such critical questions have the potential to be life-giving for them. I will briefly review each of the four processes – re-reading, re-construction, re-telling and re-connection.

Attentive and critical *re-reading*, especially on the part of feminist biblical scholars, has brought to the surface scriptural accounts that clearly identify women as agents of the promise, bearers of the covenant, witnesses to the resurrection and disciples to the nations. A few examples are cited here.

In her brilliant and judicious work, *Sisters in the wilderness: the challenge of womanist God-talk*, Delores S. Williams scrutinizes the story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman who is the personal servant to Sarah, wife of Abraham (Gen 16:1–6; 21:9–21). At Sarah's urging Abraham has sexual relations with Hagar and the slave woman becomes pregnant. Sarah's ill-treatment impels Hagar to flee. God pursues her and convinces her to return, promising blessings on her child. Abraham delights in Hagar's son Ishmael, but is persuaded to exile mother and child lest Isaac's inheritance be challenged. Outside the safety of Abraham's camp for a second time, Hagar continues to receive the promise of posterity. This biblical account of God's blessing on a slave woman's decisive action has long been treasured by African-American communities. Here Williams recognizes the *leitmotif* for her constructive theology of liberation. Noting the limitations of space she makes the basis of her hermeneutics clear:

> Therefore, I selected from Hagar's story those issues that had, simultaneously, personal, social and religious significance for black women and for the African-American community: the predicament of motherhood; the character of surrogacy; the problem of ethnicity; and the meaning and significance of wilderness experience for women and for the community.[9]

Williams' study not only helps us to empathize with Hagar's plight as Egyptian slave, but it also forces us to recognize the religious implications of Hagar's personal agency. Hagar risks the punishment for runaway slaves and thus 'becomes the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power struggles'.[10] In Gen 16:10 she 'steps into the usual male role of receiving a promise of numerous posterity'.[11] She responds to divine intervention by assuming the unique power of naming God and draws on her Egyptian heritage in so doing. Her story

concludes as she carries out the patriarchal task of finding an Egyptian wife for her child (21:21). She has seen to it that the promise of posterity will be fulfilled. In Williams' sensitive re-telling, Hagar's story helps African-American women to recognize their religious identity as 'sisters in the wilderness'.

Although the stories of women's agency in the First Testament have been widely neglected in official liturgies, their memories persist to be sources of hope. Rebekah, the Hebrew midwives, Miriam, Rahab, Deborah, Judith, Ruth, stand within scripture as a critique of biblical traditions which regard women and slaves as the property of patriarchal heads of households. Our memories also need to hold the 'texts of terror' that recount the horrors visited upon women in the course of religious history.[12]

As in the First Testament, so in the Second, attention to the text unlocks its revelatory character. The surprise and profundity of God promising posterity to Hagar is re-echoed in Jesus' response to the woman who anoints his head for the passion: 'Wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her' (Mk 14:9). It is actually disconcerting to realize that Jesus calls for a memorial of *her* in language equivalent to his Last Supper admonition.[13] In addition, the stories of the Syro-Phoenician woman, of Martha, of the Samaritan woman, of Mary Magdalen, of Phoebe and of Mary the mother of Mark are re-told along with the story of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. No longer need one woman's story obscure the stories of other women who were truly disciples of Jesus and witnesses to the resurrection. Memory can function as an agent of awareness leading to conversion and transformation.

Akin to attentive re-reading is the second approach, *critical reconstruction.* This process draws on and incorporates insights from archaeology, sociology, comparative religions and so on in order to flesh out the implied meanings in a given text. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's elaboration of a 'discipleship of equals' at the beginnings of Christian proclamation is but one example of this scholarly approach to remembering.

The work of creative imagination comes more strongly into play when women draw on the Jewish tradition of midrash. Judith Plaskow has recourse to this long-standing Jewish practice in her struggle with the exclusion of women from the giving of the Covenant (Exod 19:15). How are Jewish women to accept a tradition in which sexual intercourse with women would prevent the men from receiving the tables of the Covenant? She invokes Yerushalmi's appreciation of Jewish

historiography and midrash to challenge her Jewish sisters to creative re-telling. The story cannot simply be repeated as given in the written Torah. It must be re-told with additional characters and insights.[14]

In a similar fashion Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has encouraged groups of women to *re-tell* the stories of Scripture *from the perspective of the women characters*. In this manner patriarchal interpretations can be questioned and rejected while women's faith experience gains a voice. About ten years ago I was privileged to participate in one such session. Our small group of seven was challenged to read Revelation 2:18–23 from the perspective of the condemned prophetess. We struggled with the text for over thirty minutes. An unnamed woman, who teaches and is recognized as a prophet, is accused by the author of luring others into fornication and idolatry. We recalled how easily women's valid religious perspectives are misrepresented. History records that women who have dared speak out have been accused of many varieties of sexual misconduct. From our sharing valuable insights emerged, but none hung together. As the moment to proclaim the new reading rushed upon us, one in the group finally volunteered. Each of us was amazed as our understanding came to life in the persona she assumed. The prophetess of Revelation is not a Jezebel misleading the faithful. Rather she is a former prostitute who embraced the saving message of Jesus and has not kept silent regarding its profound meaning in her life. She recognizes the demeaning attitude reflected in the text. She had experienced it before in the disdain displayed by her clients!

As a form of midrash such re-telling is not totalitarian, like airbrushing of photographs or the manipulation of archives. Rather, it attempts creatively to appropriate the redemptive impetus that persists in the tradition despite inherent distortions.

The fourth and final mode is the *effective re-connecting of women's reality with core expressions of faith* such as ritual celebrations, preaching, catechesis and prayer. Jesus' parables reveal the power of the reign of God at work in the ordinariness of daily life. Such dailyness comprises the bulk of women's experiences. Most of women's time is taken up with work that 'perishes in the using'.[15] In the sweep of historical meaning such activities as cleaning, baking, washing, knitting, weaving, appear negligible. They appear to be fleeting, like the endless planting and harvesting of the farmer or the struggles of the day labourer. And yet in the gospels these become the images of eschatological hope.

Such daily efforts do persist in memory. Their redemptive quality may surface with haunting clarity. From the many examples of women's

memories that are celebrated in the play *Quilters*, I relate one of particular significance. In this musical an ageing mother pieces a legacy quilt for her daughters and tells the story of each fabric as it is stitched in place. Included is the account of a vibrant young couple. The husband dances with delight at the quilt his wife Cassie has secretly made for him. Within the year he is struck by a train and his mangled body returned to her, literally in a basket. After weeks of numbing silence and grief she is barely able to pick up her piecing on a baby's quilt. By sheer endurance Cassie finishes the quilt in four months time and her baby is born. Her eyes are able to see again, for as she remarks, 'my hands remembered'.[16]

Thus does the creativity engendered and sustained by hope bring women's reality into the remembering of the stories of faith. Whether through attentive re-reading, scholarly re-construction, creative re-telling or effective re-connection, the fruit of such activity is an engagement with the promised reign of God.

Lament and repentance

Lament is essential to this renewal. We must remember the dark side of history. By holding some memories and neglecting others, communities of faith foster and condone marginalization and oppression. Where memory is selective in this way, it demands repentance. And repentance is impossible without a time and liturgical expression of lament. David Power has set forth the twofold aspect of this crucial process. Biblical lament applies not only to repentance for sin but also to outrage against God in the face of injustices that find their way into the core of religious expression. Without this disturbing process of lament the Christian communion will not reject what is false and oppressive in its doctrine and pastoral practice.[17]

As Pope John Paul II prepares the Roman Catholic Church for entry into the third millennium, this notion of repentance has emerged as a key aspect of the spiritual renewal he seeks to stimulate. *Commonweal* has reported on documents that were presented under the Pope's direction to the June 1994 consistory of the College of Cardinals. These contain a call to corporate examination of conscience and repentance for evils done in the name of Catholicism. They mention particularly the attitude of anti-Semitism and those which have fostered totalitarianism.

Whether such public expressions of repentance will actually come to pass or what form they will take is not clear.[18] Nevertheless, the Vatican discussion does highlight two essential features of the relationship between memory and faith. First, the future is intimately related to the past and its memories. In the Catholic tradition time – including

centenary and millennial periods – does not take on apocalyptic characteristics. Rather, the present time is the place for God in memory and hope. Secondly, lament – both corporate and individual – is vital to the Church's mission of proclaiming the gospel to the nations.

In this article we have seen that the relationship between memory and faith is established and renewed through narrative. Where a controlling consciousness prevails, memory seeks merely to re-present the past and cannot embrace the absent or the absurd. Faith in this context readily takes the form of a rigid obedience. Where people's memories are nutured by creative imagination, the narratives of the tradition and the narratives of people's lives intersect to celebrate the liberating dynamism of the reign of God. Faith is creative fidelity to memory, a fidelity engendered by hope. Eschatological hope makes freedom possible in the face of radical evil and a history of remembered oppression.

NOTES

[1] For an overview of the dimensions of faith see Mary Ann Fatula OP, 'Faith' in Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), pp 379–90.
[2] For the pertinence of memory and faith to today's ecological issues see Thomas F. McKenna, 'Saints and ecology', *New Theology Review* 7 (August 1994), pp 47–60.
[3] *Time and narrative* vol 1, trans Kathleen McLoughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984). See also my doctoral dissertation, 'Eschatology and social action in the work of Paul Ricoeur' (The Catholic University of America, 1988), for an elaboration of the themes of this article.
[4] See Paul Ricoeur, 'Imagination in discourse and action', *Analecta Husserliana* 7 (1976), pp 3–22. This seminal article is basic to the discussion presented here.
[5] Trans by M. H. Heim (New York: Knopf, 1980). The discussion of Kundera's book is adapted from my article, 'She laughs at the days to come: memory and metaphor' in M. Downey and R. Fragomeni (eds), *A promise of presence* (Washington DC: Pastoral Press, 1992), pp 93–112.
[6] *Unsearchable riches* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1984), pp 121–24.
[7] New York: Schocken Books, 1982, 1989, p 5.
[8] For a clear exposition of the tasks of a critical hermeneutics see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She who is*, ch 2, 'Feminist theology and critical discourse about God' (New York, Crossroad, 1992), pp 17–41.
[9] Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993, pp 8–9.
[10] *Ibid.*, p 19.
[11] *Ibid.*, p 23.
[12] See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), for a feminist interpretation of four First Testament passages that present the abuse of women. The careful reading even of these texts can be liberating.
[13] See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), for extensive exegesis of the passages concerning the unnamed woman at Bethany.
[14] 'Jewish memory from a feminist perspective' in J. Plaskow and C. P. Christ (eds), *Weaving the visions: new patterns in feminist spirituality* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), pp 39–50. Plaskow records that E. S. Fiorenza first alerted her to the possibilities inherent in midrashic traditions for Jewish women who desire to infuse their heritage with the experiences of women. The following paragraph describes Fiorenza's approach.

[15] Important theme from the play *Quilters* by Molly Newman and Barbara Damashek (New York: Dramatists Play service, Inc., 1986), p 9.
[16] *Ibid.*, p 51.
[17] 'When to worship is to lament' in *Worship, culture and theology* (Washington DC: Pastoral Press, 1990), pp 155–73, and also 'Sacramentalization of penance' in the same volume, pp 213–41.
[18] Jerry Ryan, 'The news that didn't fit: a repentant church?' by Jerry Ryan, and Desmond O'Grady, 'The perils of penance: contrition is not a cardinal's virtue' in *Commonweal* CXXI (21 October 1994), pp 6 and 7.