

# TIME IN OUR TIME: ON THEOLOGY AND FUTURE-ORIENTED MEMORY

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*TIME IN OUR TIME: ON THEOLOGY AND FUTURE-ORIENTED MEMORY*

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## BIOGRAPHY

Robert Vosloo was born in Port Elizabeth in 1966, and matriculated at Bellville High School in 1984. Hereafter he studied theology at Stellenbosch University, where he received his master's degree in theology (*cum laude*) in 1991. He received a bursary that made a one-year study visit possible to Utrecht in the Netherlands in 1992, and a grant from the National Research Council was utilised for a research visit to Princeton Theological Seminary in the USA in 1993. In 1994 he received a doctoral degree in Systematic Theology from the University of Western Cape, with Prof Dirkie Smit as his promoter. Also in 1994 he was ordained as a pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church Durbanville. In 2005 he was appointed as senior lecturer in Ecclesiology at Stellenbosch University, where he also served since 2009 as chairperson of the discipline group of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology. In July 2014 he was appointed as professor of Systematic Theology, and in the same year also as editor of the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* (*Dutch Reformed Theological Journal*). He is the author, with Nico Koopman, of the book *Die ligtheid van die lig: Morele oriëntasie in 'n postmoderne tyd* (2003), which was awarded with the Andrew Murray Prize for theological literature, and his book *Engele as gaste? In gesprek oor gasvryheid teenoor 'die ander'* (2006) was published (in 2011) in Dutch translation. He is furthermore the editor or co-editor of 6 books, and about 50 of his articles have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals or books. His research interests include reformed theology, historical theory, 20<sup>th</sup>-century South African church and theological history, philosophical and theological discourses on hospitality, and the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Robert is married to Julie Claassens, a professor of Old Testament at Stellenbosch University, and has three children, Jana (20), Roux (18), and Suzanne (almost 3).



# TIME IN OUR TIME: ON THEOLOGY AND FUTURE-ORIENTED MEMORY

## INTRODUCTION

“The past is not dead, it is not even past.” These often cited words from William Faulkner’s 1950 drama, “Requiem for a Nun”, strikingly express something of the idea that the past plays in on the present.<sup>1</sup> Not only do we have a grip on the past, but the past also has a grip on us.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the past is not simply the past tense, but it is actively present in our memory and our imagination; it lives in a positive and negative way in our bodies, thoughts and dreams. The past is indeed present in a powerful and complex way or, as the historian David Lowenthal reminds us, “the past is not dead ... it is not even sleeping.”<sup>3</sup>

The question about the past with its constant impact is a deeply existential question demanding responsible theoretical reflection. This invitation to further reflection also obtains a certain urgency in contexts that are marked by historical injustice, like in South Africa with its colonial and apartheid past. But exactly *how* we remember or forget the past, or should remember and forget, is not a simple question. To me, however, the question of engaging responsibly with the past is a gripping question which not only has implications for a broader socio-political discourse, but also for doing theology in South Africa today.

I embarked on my theological studies in Stellenbosch in 1985, in the middle of the turbulent time when South Africa was in a state of emergency. Although these were wonderful years on a personal level, I experienced something of how faith and theology can function separately from time and context. In the course of time, however, I was drawn towards voices which emphasised historicity and contextuality within a broader search for justice. My love for systematic theology increased when reading the series of “Wegwysers in die Dogmatiek” by Prof Willie Jonker and Prof Jaap Durand, with the first part of each book giving a dogma-historical overview.<sup>4</sup> And as senior students, a number of us started “The Living Theologians Society” (as a type of reaction to the film *Dead Poets Society*), with Prof Jaap Durand of the University of the Western Cape as our first speaker on the question of divine action in history. Durand later on described his own theological odyssey as moving from timeless truths to contextualised metaphors.<sup>5</sup> In a contribution to a *Festschrift* for Durand, Dirkie Smit rightly points out Durand’s strongly developed historical consciousness. Smit writes: “For the greatest part of his life, he was struggling with a-historicism in different forms. According to this a-historicism, history is not important and it is not necessary to remember anything, because we have super-temporal principles, eternal values, closed systems, final formulations, timeless theology.”<sup>6</sup>

My own sense of this criticism against a timeless theology was enhanced when I read the thin but profound book by H Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, while writing my licentiate thesis in 1990 under the supervision of Prof Willie Jonker.<sup>7</sup> In this work, Niebuhr writes, among other things: “The preaching of the early Christian church was not an argument for the existence of God nor an admonition to follow the dictates of some common human conscience, unhistorical and super-social in character. It was primarily a simple recital of the great events connected with the

1. Faulkner, W, *Sanctuary and Requiem for a Nun* (New York, Signet Books, 1961), 229.

2. Cf. Assmann, A, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: C H Beck, 2006), 276.

3. Lowenthal, D, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), xxv.

4. The books in this series are: Durand, J J F, *Die Lewende God* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1985, first edition 1976); Jonker, W D, *Christus, die Middelaar* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1977); Durand, J J F, *Die Sonde* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1978); Jonker, W D, *Die Gees van Christus* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1981); Durand, J J F, *Skepping, Mens, Voorsienigheid* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1981); and Jonker, W D, *Uit Vrye Guns Alleen* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1988).

5. At a meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa, for example, Durand talked about “How my mind has changed: From eternal truths to contextualised metaphors.” Versions of this speech were later published as “When Theology Became Metaphor” in the *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* 111, November 2001, 12-16, and in Afrikaans under the title “Hoe my gedagtewêreld verander het: Van ewige waarhede tot gekontekstualiseerde metafore” in the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 43/1&2: 64-70.

6. Smit, D J, “In die geskiedenis ingegaan” in Conradie, E and Lombard, C (eds), *Discerning God’s Justice in Church, Society and Academy: Festschrift for Jaap Durand* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009), 131-166, here 164.

7. The title of this thesis was “Die verhouding Christus en kultuur in die denke van Richard Niebuhr” (Unpublished Licentiate thesis, Stellenbosch University, 1990).

historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what had happened to the community of disciples.”<sup>8</sup>

Christian life and proclamation are, therefore, historically situated in a radical way and have a narrative quality.<sup>9</sup> Theology, therefore, is not at all a search for timeless and a-historical values, but a (narrative) enterprise in the midst of time and history. Theology is interested in the word for the time, in the moment of truth, in the embodiment of the gospel amidst the challenges and temptations of the times.<sup>10</sup> Later, I also discovered this idea in the life and work of the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer – known for his resistance to Hitler and Nazism – criticises, for example, any timeless notion of anthropology, theology and ethics in his thoughts on what it means to be human, and in the process emphasises the importance of human action and ethical responsibility in the midst of time. Thus the emphasis in his thought on the moment, on “today”.<sup>11</sup>

In this inaugural lecture, I would like to look deeper into the question of the significance of taking time and historicity seriously. More specifically, I investigate the possible contours and promise of a theology of (future-oriented) memory, as part of the search in our day for a responsible and constructive engagement with the past. Reflecting on the task of systematic theology, one can do this in conversation with quite a number of formal categories. One could, for example, productively reflect on this question from the point of view of the relation between theology and categories such as language, space, rationality, embodiment or power. In this lecture, however, I would like to make a few remarks within the broader framework of the relationship between theology and time (with the qualification that the reflection on time is inextricably linked to thought on language, space, rationality, embodiment and power).

Throughout the centuries, many scholars have maintained that “time” is a shifting concept that does not reveal its secrets so easily. In Book 11 of his *Confessions*, Augustine (254-430) writes, for example: “What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it remains a fascinating question, and throughout the centuries, from many sides, there has been reflection on the complexity of the passage of time as well as the limitation and possibilities linked to a temporally situated life. In this presentation, I do not in the first place want to go into all the interesting aspects related to the question regarding the mystery and might of time, or even the fascinating theological discussion on the relationship between God and time, but I am rather more interested in the question of possible changes in our understanding of the relationship between the dimensions of time of past, present and future, and the processes of orientation and reorientation related to these changes. The question, therefore, is, to use Eva Hoffmann’s words: “What has become of time in our time?”<sup>13</sup> Or put differently, referring to CD titles of the songwriters and singers Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan: What should our thoughts be on *Old Ideas* in *Modern Times* with *The Future* in mind?<sup>14</sup>

My point of departure is that theology today certainly has to take into account shifts with regard to the reconfiguration of the relationship between present, past and future. Therefore, part of the task of theology, in my view, links with a continuing critical reflection on “time words” such as “memory”, “nostalgia”, “melancholy”, “tradition”, “kairos”, “presence”, “expectation”, “longing” and “hope”, admittedly as part of an intra-, inter- and transdisciplinary discussion.

8. Niebuhr, H R, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: MacMillan, 1941), 32. Niebuhr also states: “From the point of view of historical beings we can speak only about that which is in our time and which is seen through the medium of our history. We are in history as the fish is in water and what we mean by the revelation of God can be indicated only as we point through the medium in which we live” (35-36).

9. This emphasis on the narrative quality of the Christian faith led to my interest in narrative theology and ethics. Cf. my doctoral dissertation, with Prof Dirkie Smit as promoter, *Verhaal en Moraal: 'n Kritiese ondersoek na die narratiewe etiek van Stanley Hauerwas* (University of the Western Cape, unpublished DTh dissertation, 1994).

10. In the reformed tradition, this emphasis, for example, often goes hand in hand with the commitment to confessional creeds and the process of continuous confession. Cf., for example, Cloete, G D and Smit, D J (eds), *A Moment of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). This volume was published a couple of years after the Dutch Reformed Mission Church adopted the *Belhar Confession* as a draft confession, and the title of the volume indicates how this confession is seen as a word for the times.

11. For exploratory ideas in this regard, cf. Vosloo, R R, “The Feeling of Time: Bonhoeffer on Temporality and the Fully Human Life,” *Scriptura* 99, 2008: 337-349. This was a paper delivered in 2004 at the International Bonhoeffer Conference in Rome. Something of Bonhoeffer’s serious struggle with time, with “today”, can be seen in his well-known words to his friend Eberhard Bethge in a letter dated 30<sup>th</sup> April 1944, written from prison: “What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?” Cf. Bonhoeffer, D, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8, (ed.) John W de Gruchy, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 362. The work of the South African theologian and leading Bonhoeffer scholar, John de Gruchy, also emanates something of the same idea of time and historical consciousness. For his own reflection on theology and historical consciousness, cf. De Gruchy, J W, “Historical consciousness and theological imagination: In appreciation for Philippe Denis,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 38/1, 2012:5-15.

12. St Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York: New City Press, 1997). In the South African context, especially the Cape philosopher Martin Versfeld discussed and developed the insights of Augustine on time. Cf., for example, Versfeld, M, *Tyd en Dae* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1982) and Versfeld, M, *St Augustine’s Confessions and City of God* (Cape Town: The Carrefour Press, 1990).

13. Hoffman, E, *Time* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 131.

14. Cf. Leonard Cohen, *Old Ideas* (Columbia, 2012), Bob Dylan, *Modern Times* (Columbia, 2006), and Leonard Cohen, *The Future* (Columbia, 1992).

More specifically, I argue in this address that the theological motivation, exploration and deepening of the concept “memory” offer possibilities for the discussion on the search for a responsible historical hermeneutic. This argument will be discussed in two parts. In the first part, I take a broad look at the changing attitude towards time and temporality during the past centuries. Here, I draw especially on what scholars such as Aleida Assmann call “the modern time regime”,<sup>15</sup> as well as the increasing uneasiness in recent decades with this cultural time regime. In the second part, I make some remarks which are, in my view, important to take into account in the search for a responsible theology of memory today – amidst a shifting understanding of “time” in our time.

## A TRANSFORMATION IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF TEMPORALITY?

I recently had the privilege to visit the exhibition called “The Refusal of Time” by the South African artist William Kentridge at the Iziko South African National Art Gallery in Cape Town. Kentridge composed this 30-minute work in 2012 in collaboration with, among others, Peter Galison, a professor of the history of science and of physics at Harvard University. In his research on the work of Albert Einstein and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century mathematician Henri Poincaré, Galison discovered that both scientists independently concluded that time, as experienced in modern, industrialised Western societies, is relative and therefore not a universally fixed phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> “The Refusal of Time” – which as a work of art expresses something of an engagement with this transformation in the Western understanding of temporality – comprises of the continuous projection of time-related images and video clips against three of the walls of the art gallery. In addition, there are a couple of megaphones in the room, and in the middle of the room there is a type of time-regulating machine, made of wood, inhaling and exhaling like human lungs.<sup>17</sup> This machine, together with the other objects in the room, as well as the images projected against the walls and the soundtracks, contribute to the creation of an experience that serves as an invitation to reflect on the impact of time on our lives and the world. In this multi-faceted work, one finds, among other things, references to the temporal and spatial images associated with European colonialism (such as maps of Africa and the clock room of Greenwich), as well as allusions to the resistance in non-Western cultures against “standardised and synchronised” clock time and the order of time associated with it. The ambivalence in the title “The Refusal of Time” could possibly refer to the way in which time itself resists our attempts to understand, define or escape it, as well as to the way in which people and cultures found ways to deal with and withstand the impact of the course of time and certain constructions of time on their lives.

What particularly interests me in this work by Kentridge, is the creative depiction of the resistance against what cultural theorists like Aleida Assmann call “the modern time regime”.<sup>18</sup> Assmann argues that today we witness a shift in the understanding of Western temporality, with a significant transformation of how we view the past and the future.<sup>19</sup> In support of this idea, she quotes from Graham Swift’s novel, *Waterland*: “Once upon a time, in the bright sixties, there was plenty of future on offer.” But, Assmann continues, by the time that Swift published his novel in 1983, the situation had changed: no one had specific visions for the future crumbled, but the concept of the future itself had changed

15. Cf. Assmann, A, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne* (Köln: Carl Handt Verlag, 2013).

16. Cf. Cotter, H, “William Kentridge: ‘The Refusal of Time,’” *The New York Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2013.

17. The breathing machine – called “the elephant” – is based on a model suggested in the 1870s to pump air through subterranean pipes to calibrate the clockworks in Paris. Peter Galison writes about this in his book, *Einstein’s Clocks, Poincaré’s Maps: Empires of Time* (New York: W W Norton, 2003). In an interview with Margaret Koerner, Kentridge points out that the name “the elephant” is derived from Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, where he refers to the industrial machines in the factories as “moving up and down, like the movement of the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness”. Cf. Koerner, M K, “Death, Time, Soup: A Conversation with William Kentridge and Peter Galison,” *The New York Review of Books*, 20 June 2012, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/jun/30/kentridge-galison-refusal-of-time/> [accessed on 1st April 2015]. In her reflection, “Thinking about Kentridge’s ‘The Refusal of Time’”, Elizabeth F Cornell gives an interesting interpretation of the presence of the time-regulating machine and other objects of time in the art work: “Their presence suggests we cannot understand spacetime without referencing our deep awareness of linear time and that the illusion of linear time is impossible to escape – the proverbial elephant in the spacetime room, so to speak.” See <http://www.elizabethfcornell.net/2014/09/09/thinking-about-kentridges-the-refusal-of-time/> [accessed on 1st April 2015].

18. The subtitle of Assmann’s book, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?*, is, after all, *Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne*. Cf. Assmann, A, “Transformations of the Modern Time Regime” in Lorenz, C and Bevernage, B (eds), *Breaking up time: Negotiating the borders between present, past and future* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 39-56. Another important work on the shift in the structure of Western temporality is the book by François Hartog, *Régimes d’historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003; in English translation, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Hartog defines in a clarifying way what he understands under the notion of “regimes of historicity”: “A regime of historicity is, rather, an artificial construct whose value lies in its heuristic potential ... Depending on whether the category of the past, the future, or the present is dominant, the order of time derived from it will not be the same. Hence certain behaviors, certain actions, and certain forms of historiography are more possible than others” (xvi-xvii).

19. In this regard, Assmann links closely to the work of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, who has already pointed out in an influential work, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), how the notion of “future” has a history of its own, and that the past included the visions on different futures. For the English translation, cf. Koselleck, R, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

beyond recognition. According to Assmann, however, this shift is only one part of the story, because where the future has lost its shine and became a source of concern, the past has more and more invaded our (collective) consciousness. The reason for this renewed focus on the past coincided with the violence and horror of the twentieth century, with the growing moral appeal not to forget the past that was characterised by inhumanity and injustice. In this way, “memory” becomes a key category, and this shift in the experience of time requires continued reflection.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, Assmann points out that this recent shift (according to her since the 1980s) in the structure of Western temporality also requires investigation of the previous time structure which was replaced and transformed by the new one. Assmann describes this previous time structure as the “modern (or modernistic) cultural time regime”.<sup>21</sup> The notion of “cultural time regime” denotes the temporal ordering and orientation which provides the basis for the implicit values, patterns of thought and the logic of action of people and cultures, and Assmann identifies five aspects which, according to her, characterise the modern time regime. In order to obtain greater clarity on the transformation in the experience of time in our times, I briefly refer to Assmann’s discussion in this regard.<sup>22</sup> The first feature that she discusses has to do with what she calls the “breaking up of time”. Before the modern time regime, cultures strived for continuity between past, present and future. The modern time regime, on the other hand, brought a new development in that it posed the ideal that everything that impedes self-regulation and self-fulfilment has to be thrown overboard. Linking up with Reinhart Koselleck, Assmann shows, for example, how the expression *historiae magistra vitae* (the study of history as the teacher of life) lost its power in the process.<sup>23</sup>

The second feature of the modern time regime that Assmann points out, and which closely links with the first aspect, she refers to with the phrase “the fiction of a new beginning”. Whereas pre-modern time regimes emphasised mythical origins in ancient history, the modern time regime pinpoints the “beginning” in the here and the now. The source of inspiration is no longer in previous authorities and traditions, but in the creativity of the acting human being. Daniel Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1718), in which the protagonist of the novel illustrates that by means of his skills he can create a new world and new history on an island, can serve as a paradigmatic example of this idea.

Assmann describes a third feature of the modern time regime as “creative destruction”. To illustrate, she refers to the economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter, who introduced the concept of “creative destruction” into economic theory. In spite of the fact that Schumpeter was at the head of a bank that had gone bankrupt in the 1920s, he developed an optimistic theory according to which capitalism can renew itself in a powerful and permanent way by destroying its previous structures and products.<sup>24</sup>

A fourth feature of the modern time regime is, in Assmann’s view, situated in what she calls “the invention of the ‘historical’”. In this regard, she refers to the new method, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to collect, interpret and preserve knowledge in archives, museums and by means of historical research. Professional experts now become the custodians of the past, and the past is associated with something that is strange and distant, and not as something that can serve as a creative source for dealing with new challenges or forming identity, and therefore the past does not have any political significance. Although Assmann does not explicitly refer to this in her discussion, it is precisely this historical culture or historicism that Friedrich Nietzsche criticised so sharply in his essay, “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life”.<sup>25</sup>

20. In this context, Assmann quotes Andreas Huyssen: “One of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years has been the emergence of memory as a key concern in Western societies, a turning towards the past that stands in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth century modernity ... Since the 1980s, it seems, the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts, and this shift in the experience and sensibility of time needs to be explained historically and phenomenologically” (Assmann, *Transformations of the Modern Time Regime*, 41). Huyssen, who is known for his book, *Present Past: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), also refers in an earlier work to the way in which the renewed focus on memory links to a shift in the understanding of temporality: “(T)he current obsession with memory ... is a sign of the crisis of the structure of temporality that marked the age of modernity with its celebration of the new as utopian, as radically and reducibly other.” Cf. Huyssen, A, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995), 6.

21. Other scholars also point out this change in the understanding of temporality in the modern era. In this regard, Peter Fritzsche states in his book, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004): “But something quite new developed around 1800, in the decades around the French revolution: the perception of the restless iteration of the new so that the past no longer served as a faithful guide to the future, as it had in the exemplary rendering of events and characters since the Renaissance” (5). The historian Lynn Hunt talks in a similar way of the “modern time schema” (24-39) in her book *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest: Central University Press, 2008).

22. Cf. Assmann, *Ist der Zeit aus den Fugen?*, especially 131-207, also Assmann, “Transformations of the Modern Time Regime”, 42-51.

23. Cf. Koselleck’s interesting discussion on this in a chapter “Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process” in his book *Futures Past* (26-42).

24. This idea of “creative destruction” can also be found, according to Assmann, in the thought of the American philosopher R W Emerson, who described himself as “an endless seeker with no past at my back.” Cf. Assmann, “Transformations of the Modern Time Regime,” 46.

25. Cf. Nietzsche, F, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 59-123.



The fifth feature of the modern time regime, pointed out by Assmann, links with the acceleration of change. The modern experience of time means that everything changes faster than one expects, and therefore a feeling of unfamiliarity enters because of the experience that things are unknown. With faster means of transport and communication, a new rhythm presents itself that characterises our everyday existence which, among other things, links time to money, and in this way time is being economised. These processes of acceleration, however, are also sometimes accompanied by an experience of loss, as well as with the feeling that one wants to compensate for this loss. In this way, a situation develops in which modern people yearn for living slower in the midst of the fast pace of contemporary society.<sup>26</sup>

If one wants to reflect today on the concept of memory and the question of a responsible engagement with the past, it is necessary, in my view, to register something of the nature and impact of the modern time regime,<sup>27</sup> particularly because the regime (of terror) of this temporal experience still determines to a great extent our understanding of ourselves. Still, it is the case that an important shift took place in the last couple of decades with regard to the structure of Western temporality. What exactly follows after the time regime of modernity, is controversial and not unambiguous. Some refer to the increasing dominance of the present, and denote this with concepts such as “presentism” (Hartog), whereas others view the flourishing of interest in memory, with the accompanying attempt to link the present with the past, as one of the features of this shift.<sup>28</sup>

The renewed focus on memory, however, is ambiguous, since the possible abuses of memory have to be taken into account properly. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur therefore states in his monumental work, *Memory, History, Forgetting*: “I continued to be troubled by the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the abuses of memory – and of forgetting. The idea of a policy of the just allotment of memory is in this respect one of my avowed civic themes.”<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, then, is aware of the dangers attached to forgetting the past, but he is also aware of the abuses that go hand in hand with remembering and commemorations.<sup>30</sup> Therefore the question, and that is a question that interests me, of the rightful place of “memory” in our moral and theological discourse today.

## IN SEARCH OF A RESPONSIBLE THEOLOGY OF MEMORY

A theology of memory can draw on deep sources within the Christian tradition. Religions such as the Christian religion and Judaism are rightly described as “memory religions” bound by rituals of memory and commemoration festivals.<sup>31</sup> The Jewish author Elie Wiesel writes in this regard: “Remember ... No other Biblical Commandment is as persistent. Jews live and grow under the sign of memory ... To be Jewish is to remember – to claim our right to memory as well as our duty to keep it alive.”<sup>32</sup> Given the Jewish roots of Christianity, it is no surprise that the concept of “memory” also belongs to the heart of the Christian tradition. In Luke 22:19, we read that Jesus, in the context of the

26. In this regard, Eva Hoffmann remarks that our society is divided between those who spend a lot of time in order to save money and those who spend a lot of money to save time. Cf. Hoffmann, *Time*, 139. For reference to various “slow” movements in our day, see Hermesen, J J, *Kairos: Een nieuwe bevlogenheid* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Arbeiderspers, 2014), 31. For a nuanced study – with references to several artistic expressions – that challenges a simplistic identification between modernity and acceleration, see Koepnick, L, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

27. It is, however, important not to talk too one-sidedly about the modern time regime, because one also has to take into account the numerous ways in which resistance was put up against the modern Western understanding of temporality. As Helge Jordheim states: “The regime of temporality identified as ‘modern’ has been challenged by other times, other temporalities, slower, faster, with other rhythms, other successions of events, other narratives, and so on.” Cf. Jordheim, H, “Introduction: Multiple Times and the Work of Synchronization,” *History and Theory* 53, 2014: 498-518, here 502.

28. In the words of Andreas Huyssen: “At stake in the memory boom of the past decade and a half is indeed a reorganisation of the structure of temporality within which we live our lives ... We are living through a transformation of the modern structure of temporality itself.” See Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 8.

29. Ricoeur, P, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xv.

30. For Ricoeur’s extensive discussion on the uses and abuses of memory, cf. *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 68-92.

31. Cf. also, in this regard, among others, Signer, M (ed.), *Memory and History in Christianity and Judaism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), ix. Cf. also Marksches, C and Wolf, H (Hg.), *Erinnerungsorte des Christentums* (München: C H Beck, 2010) where the introduction by the editors describes Christianity as a “memory religion”. Marksches and Wolf remark in relation to this: “Erinnerung ist nicht irgendeine periphere theologische Kategorie des Christentums. Im Gegenteil: Gedächtnis ist ein theologischer Zentralbegriff, denn als Offenbarungsreligion ist das Christentum eine Erinnerungsreligion ... Das Christentum ist eine Gedächtnisgemeinschaft par excellence und ist das insbesondere im christlichen Gottesdienst” (15).

32. Wiesel, E, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 9, 10. In his book, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), Yosef Yerushalmi sums up the centrality of memory in the Jewish tradition well: “(A)ncient Israel knows what God has done in history. And if that is so, then memory has become crucial to its faith and, ultimately, to its very existence ... Its reverberations are everywhere, but they reach a crescendo in the Deuteronomic history and the prophets. ‘Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past’ (Deut. 32:7). ‘Remember these things, O Jacob, for you, O Israel, are My servant; I have fashioned you, you are My servant; O Israel, never forget Me’ (Is. 44:21). ‘Remember what Amalek did to you’ (Deut. 25:17). ‘O My people remember now what Balak king of Moab plotted against you’ (Micah 6:5). And with hammering insistence: Remember that you were a slave in Egypt ...” (9, 10).

meal of the Passover during the night that he was betrayed (thus in the midst of the messiness of history), took bread, broke it and said: "This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Throughout the centuries, Christians have celebrated the Lord's Supper as a meal that commemorates the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, the living and present Lord. The call not to forget the past, but to continuously remember it and draw on it as a source for the embodiment of the faith and moral orientation belongs to the heart of the Christian tradition – as a living tradition.

The call to remember the past, however, also goes beyond religious traditions, although religious dimensions are usually also present in the fibre of more secular discourses on memory. In light of, for example, the mass extinction of people and injustices in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the imperative not to forget the past (and specifically to commemorate the suffering of the victims, also as admonishment to the living) has often been emphasised powerfully in public discourse. After the transition to democracy in South Africa, the discussion on remembering the past acquired greater prominence as a result of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings. Although the commission's work has officially ended, it is clear that the question about dealing with the past is part of a continuing conversation.<sup>33</sup> Since reference is often made in this discourse to themes such as truth-telling, guilt, reconciliation, forgiveness and justice, one can expect that the question of remembering the past also demands continuous theological reflection in view of the rich theological history of interpretation of these concepts.<sup>34</sup> The question of how we should remember the past and incorporate it still awakens emotions amidst the reality of new forms of injustice and economic inequality, and therefore the urgency of questions such as: "Whose past receives priority?"; "How do we find a way among conflicting and contested constructions of the past?"; and "What do we do with the symbols, monuments and statues that reflect the history of apartheid, colonialism and patriarchy?" The question of the past, therefore, is present in a profound and radical way in the South African public discourse.

The strong emphasis on memory in the past few decades brought along an accompanying question – also in light of experiences of individual and collective trauma – namely, whether it is always a good thing to actively remember the past, and whether perhaps it is not also necessary, apart from stressing the art of remembering (the *ars memoriae*), to make a plea for the art of forgetting (the *ars oblivionis*) as well.<sup>35</sup> Harald Weinrich, for example, in his book *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, pointed out the rich cultural history of the notion of "forgetting". In Greek mythology, Lethe is the goddess opposite to the goddess of memory and the mother of the muses, Mnemosyne.<sup>36</sup> And Lethe is also the name of the subterranean river in the soft-flowing waters of which, in Weinrich's words, "the hard contours of remembrance of reality are dissolved and, so to speak, liquidated."<sup>37</sup>

In another article, I investigated more closely the question whether one could not perhaps make a stronger argument for the art of forgetting in our day, and pointed out that, even though the concepts of "memory" and "forgetting" cannot be distinguished sharply from each other and are mutually interdependent, one should indeed ask critical questions whether it is rhetorically responsible to move the emphasis from memory to forgetting in our discourse on dealing with the past.<sup>38</sup>

In the search for an adequate theology of memory, however, one seriously has to take into account the allure of the argument that the strategy to forget the past is apparently more suitable for survival and flourishing in our current cultural climate in the aftermath of the modern time regime. David Gross puts it aptly in his book, *Lost Time: On*

33. For important perspectives on these "unfinished journeys", cf. the essays in Gobodo-Madikizela, P and Van der Merwe, C (eds), *Memory, Narrative and Forgiveness: Perspectives on the Unfinished Journeys of the Past* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press), 2009.

34. For a valuable volume of ethical and theological essays in this regard, cf. Botman, H R and Peterson, R M (eds), *To Remember and to Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1996).

35. The question can rightly be asked whether the focus on remembering does not sometimes actually keep violence and bitterness alive, and in this way holds people captives of the past. In his book, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2006), Miroslav Volf, for example, refers to a remark by Elie Wiesel that memories serve as a shield, as protection, against evil. But Volf then argues that this protective function of memory can also be problematic: "As victims seek to protect themselves they are not immune to becoming perpetrators ... The memory of their own persecution makes them see dangers lurking even where there are none; it leads them to exaggerate dangers that do exist and overreact with excessive violence or inappropriate preventive measures so as to ensure their own safety. Victims will often become perpetrators on account of their memories. It is because they remember past victimization that they feel justified in committing present violence ... So easily does the protective shield of memory morph into the sword of violence" (32, 33).

36. Cf. Samuel, R, *Theatres of Memory, Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), vii.

37. Weinrich, H, *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 6.

38. Cf. Vosloo, R, "Historical Injustice and the Art of Forgetting," *Oral History Journal of South Africa* 2/2, 2014: 1-13. With reference to Paul Ricoeur, the argument is that the relationship between memory and forgetting is asymmetrical, and that the emphasis on forgetting can only take in a legitimate place as part of a moral discourse on memory, and that remembering as well as forgetting should not be separated from the search for justice. For a discussion of the dialectic interrelation between memory and forgetting, cf. also the article by Claudia Welz, "The Future of the Past: Memory, Forgetting, and Personal Identity", in Mjaaland, M T, Rasmussen, U H and Stoellger, U (eds), *Impossible Time: Past and Future in the Philosophy of Religion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 191-212.

*Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture*: “Unlike the rememberer, who tends to be excessively cautious and deliberative ... the forgetter is naturally lighter, more buoyant, even more cheerful. Furthermore, because he is not haunted by the ghosts of the past ... the forgetter is willing to strike out in new directions, to experiment and improvise, even, if he chooses, to make every instance a point of origin.”<sup>39</sup>

The apparent power of this thought, namely that memory of the past impedes our wellbeing, points in the direction of the necessity to ask about the rightful place of memory in our moral and theological discourse, particularly when one argues that the past is not dead, but is present as triumph and as trauma, as gift and as ghost. In the rest of this lecture, I therefore put forward five brief remarks on the concept of “memory” which, in my view, are necessary to take into account in the search for an adequate theology of memory amidst the changes associated with understanding “time” in our time.

### *The vulnerability of memory*

A first remark in this regard links with the fact that the plea for the power and importance of an ethics or theology of memory is confronted from the very beginning with the vulnerability (and maliciousness) of memory. Our memory is vulnerable and can easily deceive us: we remember selectively and when we recall events from the past and recount them, they are often historically inaccurate and distorted.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, processes of remembering are often embedded in an interplay of conscious and unconscious ideological powers. Richard Kearney puts it very clearly: “Narrative memory is never innocent. It is an ongoing conflict of interpretations: a battlefield of competing meanings ... Memory is not always on the side of angels. It can as easily lead to false consciousness and ideological closure as to openness and tolerance.”<sup>41</sup>

This emphasis on the vulnerability of memory as a way of access into the past may result in one’s turning to history and historiography as a more reliable epistemological route. In the process, it is possible that subjective memories are posited over against objective historiography. The criticism against the epistemological over-confidence of an inordinate faith in the value-freedom of the historian in certain forms of historiography is well known. E H Carr, for example, writes the following about this model of objectivist historiography in his book, *What is History?*: “This was the age of innocence, and historians walked in the Garden of Eden, without a scrap of philosophy to cover them, naked and unashamed before the god of history. Since then, we have known sin and experienced a Fall: and those who pretend to dispense with a philosophy of history are merely trying, vainly and self-consciously, like members of a nudist colony, to recreate the Garden of Eden in their garden suburb.”<sup>42</sup>

The relationship between memory and history as different ways of access into the past is complex and requires conceptual clarification, but for the purposes of our goals here I can mention that both history and memory are vulnerable as routes to the past.<sup>43</sup> The past remains a foreign country,<sup>44</sup> and we have to be vigilant against the false promises of hermeneutical and epistemological shortcuts to this country.<sup>45</sup>

39. Gross, D, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 54. Gross continues: “...And the forgetter appears to have greater receptivity for life, for, being generally more tolerant of the world as it is, he is ... less likely to hold grudges, since the memory of past hurts does not last long enough to issue in vengeful behavior” (54).

40. Cf. Sabbagh, K, *Remembering our childhood: How memory betrays us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Cf. also my introductory chapter in Plaatjes-Van Huffel, M and Vosloo, R R (eds), *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960-1990* (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2013), 16-21.

41. Kearney, R, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004), 105.

42. Carr, E H, *What is History?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, New York, 2001 [1961]), 21.

43. A lot has been written in the past few years about the dialectical relationship between memory and history. For a discussion and literature in this regard, cf. Vosloo, R R, “Memory, History, and Justice: In Search of Conceptual Clarity”, *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 53 (Supplementum 3): 2012: 215-227.

44. Cf. the well-known opening sentence of L P Hartley’s novel, *The Go-Between* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953), “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (7).

45. The past is irretrievably gone, and what remains is not the past itself, but traces of the past. Our attempts to represent the past by means of memory and history should therefore not be equated with the past. In the introduction to the book *Impossible Time*, the editors rightly state: “The past is past because it is gone, and nothing can prove its reality except, perhaps, for some traces of what has been: in nature, in history, in buildings, in narratives, in scars, and in art or writing. Still, if the past actually is, it must exist in terms of non-being, i.e. its *not* existing any longer. Even when the past is preserved by means of memory, this memorial presence ‘is’ not identical with the past but rather a kind of ‘presence of absence’.” Cf. Mjaaland, Rasmussen and Stoellger, *Impossible Time*, 1.

## *Memory and the reality of the historical past*

This brings me to a second remark on memory. The emphasis on the vulnerability of memory can, however, blind us to the capacity and power of memory. By means of memory, the past is rendered present; it becomes formative for the identity of individuals, groups and traditions. The past is a foreign country, but it still remains *our* past.<sup>46</sup> Memory and history (as ways of access into the past) are inextricably linked to imagination and narrativity. We construct the past in the midst of complex and conflicting information and we tell stories about the past because our own self-understanding and group identity are closely interwoven with this narrative process. These actions of remembering and narrating occur in the hope that our constructions are also reconstructions. One can put the question whether our attempts to render the past present by means of memory and history, by means of testimony and historiography, are not merely fantasy and fiction. In this regard, I am of the opinion that our attitude towards the past has to reflect a commitment to what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls “the reality of the historical past”.<sup>47</sup> In our engagement with the past, a certain respect for the past is therefore needed, a certain debt towards the dead. This is linked to an oath to keep searching for a faithful and reliable way of engaging with the past. Without this commitment, a historical hermeneutic loses its significance and power. In Ricoeur’s words: “As soon as ... a debt to the dead, to people of flesh and blood to whom something really happened in the past, stops giving documentary research its highest end, history loses its meaning.”<sup>48</sup>

The reformed theologian, Brian Gerrish, wrote an article some years ago in which he gave attention to what he calls “the Reformed habits of mind”.<sup>49</sup> Gerrish describes one of these reformed ways of thinking as “deference for the past”. The emphasis on the respect for the past in all its complexity has some implications for an ethics and theology of memory. For example, it entails that in our testimony regarding the past, as well as in listening to the testimony of others, we should be committed to truth-telling and searching for the truth, and that we shall hold one another accountable in this regard. This emphasis does not alter the fact that we have to keep on struggling with the question of whose truth has to be told, by whom, and to what purposes. We can, after all, always pose other questions to the past which bring new insights, and the information from the past can always find new narrative configurations. Yesterday can always be better ... or worse. But without the plea for taking into account the reality of the historical past one can hardly talk of a *responsible* historical hermeneutic.

## *Interwoven memories*

The emphasis on the vulnerability of memory and the idea that memory is linked to a certain commitment towards the reality of the historical past, together point to the complexity and promise tied up with the question of how we remember the past. The complexity increases in view of the fact that, although we as individuals remember the past, these processes of remembering occur within broader social and cultural frameworks.<sup>50</sup> This idea confronts us with the third aspect that I would like to point out regarding memory, namely, the interwovenness of our memories with that of others. This sensitivity for the interwovenness of our pasts and histories requires a sensitivity for the fact that the same figures or events function differently in our collective memories. Paul Ricoeur expresses this succinctly: “It is very important to remember that what is considered a founding event in our collective memory may be a wound in the memory of the other.”<sup>51</sup> In view of this, there is a challenge for communities, and also for religious communities, to

46. Cf. Williams, R, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1.

47. Cf. Ricoeur, P, *The Reality of the Historical Past* (The Aquinas Lecture, 1984, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1984).

48. Ricoeur, P, *Time and Narrative III* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 118. Cf. also Ricoeur’s remark: “Unlike novels, historians’ constructions do aim at being reconstructions of the past. Through documents and their critical examinations of documents, historians are subject to what once was. They owe a debt to the past, a debt of recognition to the dead, that make them insolvent debtors.” Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative III*, 142, 143.

49. Brian Gerrish, “Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed Habit of Mind” in Willis, D and Welker, M (eds), *Towards the Future of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 13.

50. Concepts such as “collective memory” and “cultural memory” have had a great impact on studies of memory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See the pioneering work by Maurice Halbwachs on “collective memory”, *inter alia* his *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925) and his posthumous published work *La mémoire collective* (1950), and Jan Assmann’s work on “cultural memory” in works such as *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München, C H Beck, 1997) and the essays collected in *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis* (München, C H Beck, 2000).

51. Kearney, R and Dooley, M (eds), *Questioning ethics: Contemporary debates in philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1999), 9. And in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur puts the idea as follows: “What we celebrate under the heading of founding events are, essentially, violent acts legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of right ... The same events are thus found to signify glory for some, humiliation for others” (82).

recall the past in proximity to each other and with a consciousness of our interwovenness.<sup>52</sup> Not a security mentality and isolation, but hospitality and connectedness then become the hermeneutical keys to deal with the past – as a past of interwoven pasts.

### *Subversive memory*

A fourth feature of a theology of memory that I would like to point out, is related to the potential subversive nature of memory. Earlier in the lecture I mentioned how the renewed interest in memory is linked with a shift in the understanding of the structure of temporality. The greater space created by this for a reappraisal of tradition and the temporal dimension of the past, however, also requires critical questioning. In the aftermath of the modernist time regime which brought along a renewed focus on the past, it could happen that memory gets reduced to a type of nostalgic and romanticised longing for the past.<sup>53</sup> David Lowenthal refers to this type of nostalgia as “memory with the pain removed”.<sup>54</sup> In the process, the past is idealised and sentimentalised.<sup>55</sup> Over against such a nostalgic viewpoint that can be numbing, the theologian Elizabeth Johnson shows an alternative: “But memory that dares to connect with the pain, the beauty, the defeat, the victory of love and freedom, and the unfinished agenda of those who went before acts like an incalculable visitation from the past that energizes persons.”<sup>56</sup>

The German political theologian Johann Baptist Metz refers to memory that does not take a detour to avoid pain and suffering as a fundamental form of expression of the Christian faith, and talks in this regard of the dangerous memory connected to the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*.<sup>57</sup> According to Metz, the Christian doctrines and confessions are formulations in which this dangerous memory is spelled out publicly, and the church has the task to convey this dangerous memory in a public manner; an embodied action which, according to Metz, requires anamnestic solidarity – memory in solidarity with those who suffer.<sup>58</sup>

The focus on the grounding of the Christian tradition in the dangerous memory of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ furthermore points in the direction of a certain experience of “non-contemporaneity” – to be not totally in step with the times.<sup>59</sup> To me, this is one of the challenges to Christian communities, to preserve that which is non-contemporaneous, i.e. that which is untimely or out of step with the times, in a public way, therefore *in* time, precisely for the sake of the times. That, however, requires processes of discernment in order to be able to react to the question: “What time is it?”, and to be able to then hear and voice an appropriate pastoral and prophetic word. Perhaps the 30-year commemoration of the South African *Kairos Document* and the hundredth anniversary of Beyers Naudé’s birthday this year could contribute to this discourse. Naudé, well-known for his struggle against apartheid, expressed his

52. David Tracy aptly expresses something of the implicit possibilities when we are willing to listen to the recollections of others, and how this helps us to notice the strangeness and otherness of our own discourses on the past. He states: “All the victims of our discourses and our history have begun to discover their own discourses in ways that our discourse finds difficult to hear, much less listen to ... But only by beginning to listen to those other voices may we also begin to hear the otherness within our own discourse and within ourselves. What we might then begin to hear, above our own chatter, are possibilities we have never dared to dream.” Cf. Tracy, D., *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 79.

53. It is indeed necessary to hear the criticism against a certain nostalgia according to which we live *in* the past, rather than *from* the past. We should furthermore challenge the view that memory impedes responsible action. Rather, the plea for memory should be inextricably linked to the emphasis on the need for responsible action and performativity. Nietzsche’s quotation of Goethe with which he starts his well-known attack against the historicism of his time, still deserves to be heard: “In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity.” Cf. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 59.

54. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 8.

55. “An essential element of nostalgia is sentimentality. And the trouble with sentimentality in certain situations is that it distorts reality in a particular way that has moral consequences. Nostalgia distorts the past by idealizing it.” Thus writes A Margalit in *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 62. Cf. also Blustein, J., *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10. The notion “nostalgia”, however, does not have to be interpreted only in a negative way, as Blustein also points out. For interesting historical and philosophical discussions of the multifaceted nature of nostalgia, cf. Ritivoi, A D., *Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) and Boym, S., *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). Cf. also, with reference to what it means for black South Africans to remember apartheid in all its complexity, Dlamini, J., *Native Nostalgia* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2009).

56. Johnson, E A., *Friends of Gods and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of the Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 165.

57. Metz, J B., *Faith in History & Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 90.

58. Metz, *Faith in History & Society*, 184. Cf. also Metz, *Memoria Passionis: Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), especially 215-257.

59. Although he applies it in a broader sense than the Christian tradition, David Gross succinctly describes this form of memory that can be critical of the shortcomings of the current spirit of the times, with reference to Adorno: “Theodore Adorno spoke of the kind of memory I have in mind as ‘a remembrance of the forgotten’. But a better, or at any rate less vague, term than ‘the forgotten ... might be the ‘noncontemporaneous’. This admittedly cumbersome word denotes that which is ‘from another time’ and thus discordant with the present ... Hence, what I want to suggest is that the type of memory that carries unacknowledged creative potential today is the memory of the noncontemporaneous” (Gross, *Lost Time*, 141).



feeling for the spirit of the time aptly in three articles that he wrote for the ecumenical magazine *Pro Veritate* fifty years ago. The title of the first article is already revealing: “Die tyd vir ’n ‘belydende kerk’ is daar” (“The time has come for a ‘confessing church’”).<sup>60</sup>

### *Future-oriented memory*

The emphasis on the interwoven and subversive nature of Christian memory already pointed in the direction of the fifth feature that I would like to highlight, namely, the future-oriented of an adequate theology of memory, and in a certain sense the formal elements of a theology of memory that have been discussed thus far can be encapsulated under the broader denominator of a future-oriented memory that is timely and untimely at the same time, for the sake of the times.

In the discussion of the uneasiness with the modernist time regime, mention is often made of the point of view that the future has lost its shine and is experienced as something threatening. Or the argument is put forward that “presentism” characterises our current regime of historicity, which leaves us “stranded in the present”.<sup>61</sup> Be it as it may, the future is not what it used to be. In an important book, *Historical Memory in Africa: Dealing with the Past, Reaching for the Future in an Intercultural Context*, the editors point out that the publication strives to address a structural deficiency in the discourse on memory, namely, the relationship between memory and the future.<sup>62</sup> The book proceeds from the assumption that the presence or absence of a perspective on the future influences the way in which historical memory functions. In his contribution to this volume, which has the title “Remembering with the future in mind”, Bernard Lategan therefore poses the question: “How does one remember with the future in mind?” To Lategan, such a future-oriented memory presumes a choice for privileging the possible over the existing: “For a true openness for and towards the future, the point of departure has to be the conscious choice for the priority of the possible ... The capacity to anticipate what is new is another way of describing an attitude that is open to the *unexpected* and the *contingent*. More often than not it is the experience of the unexpected that triggers the belief that the (present) reality can be overcome.”<sup>63</sup> And Justin Bisanswa argues in similar vein in his article, “Memory, History and Historiography of Congo-Zaire”, for what he calls a “memory of crossing”. This mobile way of remembering that crosses borders also presumes an openness towards the future. In Bisanswa’s words: “The memory of the crossing rejects the nostalgia of identity issues because the past is the non-achieved whose possibilities are about to hatch. The crossing is not a return to the past but a detour through the past to the future ... The irony that consists in transgressing and denying one’s launching location transforms itself into hope, for in this move of surpassing oneself something nascent always happens.”<sup>64</sup>

I am of the opinion that in the current South African context, the discourse about engaging with the past will derail without a sensitivity for a future-oriented memory.<sup>65</sup> In my view, concepts such as “reconciliation”, “forgiveness” and “justice” do not derive their meaning and longevity only from a truthful engagement with the pain of the past, but also in view of a hopeful vision of a shared and healed future.<sup>66</sup> Such an expectation of the future is exactly that which makes it possible to talk of *healing* reconciliation, *difficult but not impossible* forgiveness and *restorative or transformative* justice.

In theological terms, this means that the eschatological horizon of memory has to be accounted for. Not threat, but

60. Naudé, C F B, “Die tyd vir ’n ‘belydende kerk’ is daar”, *Pro Veritate* 4/3, 15 July 1965. The other articles are: Naudé, C F B, “Nog eens die ‘Belydende Kerk’”, *Pro Veritate*, 4/7, 15 November 1965; and Naudé, C F B, “Nou juis die ‘Belydende Kerk’”, *Pro Veritate* 4/ 8, 15 Desember 1965.

61. Cf. the title of the book by François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (2015[2003]), as well as the title of Peter Fritzsche’s work, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (2004). Hartog describes “presentism” as “the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of the unending now” (xv).

62. Diawara, M, Lategan, B and Rüsen, J, *Historical Memory in Africa: Dealing with the past, reaching for the future in an intercultural context* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010). This book is the result of a joint research project, “Dealing with the Past, Reaching for the Future”, of the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS) and the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Nordrhein-Westfalen (KWI).

63. Diawara, Lategan, Rüsen, *Historical Memory in Africa*, 158. Lategan’s article ends with the words: “Being serious about the past implies being more serious about the future” (159). In the article, Lategan also emphasises in a clarifying way that thoughts about a future-oriented memory have to take into account the changes with regard to the understanding of time (and space), and that the new upcoming experience of temporality related to technological developments in the network society present acute challenges for the preservation of a historical consciousness amidst temporal disorientation (150).

64. Diawara, Lategan, Rüsen, *Historical Memory in Africa*, 83, 86.

65. Here one should mention that everything depends of course on what you mean by future-oriented memory. The future-oriented memory that we argue for here is, moreover, not turned to the future in such a way that the injustices of the past are negated or not recognised, or that judgment is no longer possible. Cf. in this regard Dirkie Smit’s discussion “Oor Walter Benjamin: Teses oor geskiedenis? – Oor onreg, oordeel en eskatologie” in Smit, D J, *Remembering Theologians: Doing Theology: Collected Essays 5* (Editor: Robert Vosloo) (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2013), 65-75.

66. For a more elaborate discussion of the argument, cf. Vosloo, R R, “Reconciliation as the Embodiment of Memory and Hope,” *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* 109, 2001: 25-40.

promise then has the last word. In the Christian tradition, this promise entails, to link to the terms of Jürgen Moltmann, that the future is not only *futurum* (therefore, not only future tense), but *adventus* (“that which is ‘to-come’”).<sup>67</sup> It is the openness for that which comes to us, for the One who comes, for the coming God – the Word that became flesh, that is, in the words of Karl Barth, the Word that became time.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the introduction, linking up with William Faulkner, I referred to the idea that the past is not past, but plays in, in all its complexity and ambivalence, in the present in a powerful way. The past can still haunt us;<sup>69</sup> in our personal lives, as well as in socio-political contexts characterised by trauma and injustice. In times like these, we may have an acute awareness of time as being “out of joint”.<sup>70</sup> It is exactly this awareness that can trigger the impetus for continued reflection on the reconfiguration of the relationship between present, past and future. In this presentation, the argument is that a theology of future-oriented memory has potential in this regard.

Such an interaction with time in our time requires resistance from our side against the reductive and destructive viewpoints of temporality. The Dutch singer Stef Bos starts his song, “Salvador Dali”,<sup>71</sup> inspired by Dali’s painting, “The Persistence of Memory”, with the words: “De horloges die smelten als sneeuw voor de zon/ Want de tijd heeft geen tijd voor de tijd” (“the watches melt like snow in the sun/ because the time has no time for the time”). A theology of future-oriented memory can actually offer the sources for a protest against a time which does not have time for the time, and in this way remind us that we do not merely have to link time to death and money, but that time ultimately is connected with life and grace. In the words of the theologian Graham Ward: “Time is the unfolding of God’s grace, of God’s gift of God’s self in and through creation and our being created ... To ask about time as a Christian theologian is to accept that no time (nor any perspective) is arbitrary, that all time is time of and for redemption, all time is grace.”<sup>72</sup>

67. Cf. Moltmann, J., *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 22-24.

68. Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1957), 50.

69. Richard Niebuhr writes in this regard: “Our buried past is mighty; the ghosts of our fathers and of the selves that we have been haunt our days and nights though we refuse to acknowledge their presence.” Cf. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 83.

70. Cf. David Scott’s remark that it is precisely in the aftermath of political situations of crisis that our experience of time becomes more intense. He writes: “What interests me about these catastrophic aftermaths is above all the untimely experience they have provoked of a more acute awareness of time ... They have provoked ... an accentuated experience of temporality, of time as *conspicuous*, as ‘out of joint’ (as Hamlet unnervingly put it).” Cf. Scott, D., *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

71. This song is from the album *Schaduw in de Nacht* (Hans Kusters Music, 1995).

72. Ward, G., *Cities of God* (London and New York, 2000), 2, 3.