

Memory as a Key Concept in Inter-religious Education

Reinhold Boschki

Introduction and Primary Thesis

Whenever two people meet in an inter-cultural and/or inter-religious setting, they are not alone: their predecessors, who belonged to one or the other religion and culture, as well as their histories, are with them. These historical figures, be they grandparents or great-grandparents, are present in any modern inter-religious encounter – sometimes in a conscious, but frequently also in a subconscious way. As an example, this can be observed clearly in the relationship between Jews and Christians. A young Jew meeting a Christian from any European country may recall his special family biography in this encounter as soon as the other mentions his place of birth. Frequently, direct ancestors of the Jew would have been expelled from the very country the Christian person comes from. Often, the family will have been humiliated, concentrated in a Ghetto, deprived of all property, deported, most of them murdered. How could this not directly affect the present coming together of the two people? A second-generation Holocaust survivor told me that when she was young the Holocaust was an everyday topic at the family table. Even if nobody spoke about it, the experience of ultimate humiliation and death remained present; it dominated family life and, in particular, the children's upbringing. The memory of that time of destruction is just as present in the education of the third generation. When I, as a German, met her for the first time, the remembrance of our peoples' shared history was there and it still is there. Although the destruction of the European Jewry by the Nazis was not an inter-religious conflict, religion was involved and cannot be excluded from any attempt to understand the context of this tragedy. Anti-Semitism, the core element of Nazi ideology, builds on a long tradition of hate and hostility against Jews within Christianity. Every encounter between Christians and Jews, therefore, carries a heavy burden of history; we cannot simply be indifferent to the

R. Boschki (✉)
Bonn University, Bonn, Germany
e-mail: reinhold.boschki@uni-bonn.de

events and developments of the past. Even inter-cultural or political conflicts of our time that appear to be entirely removed from any religious context frequently do have their inter-religious backgrounds.

The same can be observed whenever a Muslim meets a Hindu in India today. Innumerable violations between these religions took place in the past and, alas, are still taking place. How could these persons meet without being somehow aware – again, consciously or subconsciously – of all the negative aspects of the history of their inter-religious relationship? One can only hope for an equal awareness of its positive aspects!

These examples highlight that inter-religious relationships of the present are dominated by remembrance of the past. No modern-day encounter can be removed from historical events – even if these took place very long ago. In inter-religious encounters, it is impossible to start at point zero or in a vacuum as if history never had happened.

One explanation for the fact that memory underlies religious as well as inter-religious life can be found in the inner core of religious traditions themselves: religions are institutions of memory. The very nature of religion is to recall what others, the predecessors and founders of the religion, the scribes and representatives, have experienced, thought, spoken and written. Religion, therefore, *is* remembrance of religious tradition. On the basis of this starting point, the primary thesis of this chapter is that all religious traditions are based on memory and that both religious learning and inter-religious learning must therefore also be related to memory.

Memory as a Key Concept in Religious Tradition and Theology

One of the main figures in French sociology of religion, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, attempted to establish a definition of religion that would enable an understanding of basic elements of religious phenomena in *sociological* terms: “Religion is one of the possible ways to satisfy the human need for identification, for classification of collective experience and the need for anticipation of the future. . .” (Hervieu-Léger, 1987, p. 28). She later concretized this general definition of religion with a special term that is a basic element of all religious communities: *tradition*. Religion is a way of believing closely related to a *chain of memory* (Hervieu-Léger [1993] 2000). All religious expressions within a specific religious community – be they narrative, theoretical, practical, liturgical, symbolic or in prayer, songs, sermons, etc. – refer to tradition and, therefore, to memory.

In religious terms, the concepts of memory and tradition are interchangeable. Religion is always based on memory. All religions “remember”: they continuously refer to their founders and predecessors, their historical roots, their legends of origin. All religions furthermore use traditional texts based in the past, practice liturgy that is passed from generation to generation and use long-established prayers. In this way, members of the tradition place themselves *within* an established chain of memory.

This is equally true from a theological perspective, as memory can be seen as a basic religious and theological category. Recent theological publications argue that memory is a key concept in both religious tradition and theology; the latest German yearbook of biblical theology is titled “The Power of Remembrance” (Ebner et al., 2008). In this, as well as in other theological publications (e.g. Theobald & Hoppe, 2006; Petzel & Reck, 2003), the basic texts in Judaism and Christianity are interpreted as expressions of a biblical “culture of memory” (Metz, 2006). Biblical and traditional texts tell the story of the past – the history of suffering as well as the history of liberation and of salvation – both narratively and reflectively. This reiteration and interpretation of historic events create a specific religious hermeneutics through which Jews and Christians, as well as other religions, attempt to understand current reality. Memory is therefore made into a hermeneutics through which to interpret life in general. It never concentrates solely on the past, but gives meaning to historical and present events as well as anticipating the future (Manemann, 2005).

Liturgy is a prime example of various forms of celebrated memory that bring historical and present experiences in touch. Jewish and Christian liturgy may be seen as a “shape of memory” (Meyer-Blanck, 2008). The Pessach festival (Passover), for example, is one of the focal points of Jewish religious life and memory: this family ceremony recollects the slavery of the people of Israel in Egypt, the act of liberation and the exodus from the oppressing country as well as the new beginning in the promised land. The liturgical rules advise participants not only to remember the story cognitively but also to initiate a kind of existential and intense role play: *you*, descendant of the liberated slaves, should act today (at the festival of Pessach) as if *you* were a slave of Egypt yourself, as if *you* were liberated, as if *you* were part of the exodus. In doing so, the liturgy of the Pessach festival promotes direct historical identification on the part of the participants. Here, memory is far from being a mere recollection of historical facts; memory becomes part of the religious individual’s identity. This example allows a further important observation: as stated above, memory must, by default, involve interpretation. At Pessach, the interpretation of historical events provides the framework for a religious interpretation of the world and history in general: God does not want Israel (and, in a universalized understanding of the biblical story, any people) to be enslaved; God therefore initiates the exodus from slavery himself; God accompanies the people on their way to freedom; God promises and guarantees a new beginning.

The same structure of memory can be found in Christian liturgy, which is also rooted in the remembrance of historical events. In the Eucharist, Christians celebrate the remembrance of the story of Jesus’ suffering and death. This leads the believing participants to identify with the first disciples of Jesus: *today* we partake in the last supper, *today* we become part of the fate of Jesus Christ, *today* we gain part of the new life, of the resurrection and salvation.

Again, the past is remembered existentially as part of the own identity and brought into the present, causing a re-*present*-ation. In this way, past events become a new reality – highlighting the fundamental anamnestic structure of liturgy and religious festivals, as well as of religion as a whole. Liturgy and religion are

memory-based (Wahle, 2006), fundamentally making religions institutions that preserve memory. Although these examples are chosen from Judaism and Christianity, it appears to me that similar or analogue structures of memory take place in other religions: the *Hajj*, the Muslim pilgrimage to *Mecca*, can be understood as an anamnetic identification with the deeds of Mohammed, the ultimate prophet in Islam; the various Buddhist forms of meditation are aimed at a close remembrance of and identification with Buddha; Hindus and believers in various other religions act and pray in memory of their ancestors and follow their traditions by ritually identifying with them.

In the following second part of the chapter this hermeneutical approach is complemented by an empirical one: by focusing on young people, *their* approaches to remembrance and religion are investigated. These results are then placed within the framework of the basic thesis of this chapter in its third part.

Young People in Europe and Their Approaches to Memory and Religion

Having investigated the *objective* structure of memory within religious traditions, it is necessary to examine the *subjective* part of memory: the so-called historical consciousness and/or historical awareness of people. In a first approach this will be explored in a non-religious setting. Historical consciousness has been a focus of empirical research for several decades. The history of National Socialism with its millions of victims, especially European Jews, is a good example, as it is still very much a guiding theme in current European research on historical consciousness. As such, it can frequently be identified as a subconscious or unreflective element that fundamentally shapes the “historical conception” and “historical consciousness” of individuals (Levstik & Barton, 2008; Barton & Levstik, 2005; Wineburg, 2001; Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000).

“Historical conceptions” are mental constructs, created by individuals in dialogue with others and through mutual exchange within society: they form an understanding of history. “Historical consciousness” is more wide-ranging, a human competence that combines “history” (i.e. historical facts, historical knowledge) with the present (Zuelsdorf-Kersting, 2008, 13ff). Historical consciousness can therefore be defined as a personal relation with history, causing an individual identity to be affected and touched by historical events. The interpretation of history, therefore, becomes part of the world view, self-definition and identity formation of a person.

A full analysis of past research on youth and the Holocaust would greatly exceed the scope of this chapter. As such, the results of the last decades of research, as well as those of recent empirical studies, are summarized in order to identify structures of memory that directly affect the thesis of this chapter. It is generally true to say (Zuelsdorf-Kersting, 2008, pp. 35–121) that *knowledge* of the Holocaust among young people has remained constant on a very low level since the 1960s and may even have decreased slightly. Knowledge of concrete facts, however, is

highly deficient. An example of this can be found in the research of Silbermann and Stoffels (2000) titled “Auschwitz – I have never heard about it”. Many young Germans attempt to play down National Socialism and the Holocaust in order to disburden and exculpate their families, as well as their own identity as grandchild or great-grandchild of a generation of murderers. Simultaneously, most young people condemn National Socialism and morally judge the Holocaust as negative. This shows that knowledge of facts is clearly separated from the ability of historical judgement. Historical judgement is learnt socially because, in the case of this example, it is a social requirement to condemn the Holocaust – especially in Europe. This shows that historical consciousness is not formed by awareness of historical facts but by social impulses. This mechanism is called “communicative memory” (Welzer, 2008), meaning that memory of historical events does not exist on its own but its emergence is the consequence of a communicative process. Memory is generated in a social exchange on the meaning of history among members of a special ethnic, social or political unit. Historical consciousness, therefore, is a form of social interpretation of the past that is guided by specific interests and frequently bears little relation to knowledge of historical facts and their historical context.

In a structural analogy to these results, the same is true for religious consciousness and religious life. The dominant result of all recent studies on religiosity of young people in Europe is that most of them know virtually nothing about religion and religious tradition. Even if baptized, they have limited knowledge of the major Christian teachings and biblical or traditional details. The majority of views are based primarily on stereotypes and superficial information (i.e. Shell, 2006; although results must be differentiated with respect to gender as well as religious beliefs of migrants, especially Muslims).

On the other hand, *studies of young people’s religiosity* from the last decades consistently show that *religion still plays an important role in their lives*. Andreas Feige, a German sociologist of religion, concludes from his own studies, as well as from research carried out by others, that approximately one-third of German youths explicitly reject the notion of religion (Feige, 2000). These young people dissociate themselves completely from religion, the Church, faith and the quest for God. Another one-third expresses ambivalence towards religion as a whole while showing a degree of interest in religious themes and questions. These young people are open to religious impulses and look for religious answers to their specific questions and experiences, but mostly dissociate themselves from institutions such as the Christian Churches. The final one-third of young people are in agreement with the principles and basic elements of a religious tradition, be it Christian or Muslim. This does not necessitate their attendance at regular religious ceremonies such as weekly Masses or a life according to the morality and norms of a religious institution. Instead, the general attitude of these young people is one of affirmation, as summed up by Ziebertz, “. . . religion is not booming among adolescents, but neither is it out of fashion” (Ziebertz & Kay, 2006, p. 72). In the recent publication “Monitor of Religion 2008” (Bertelsmann, 2007), it is reported that 70% of the German population describe themselves as religious, 18% of whom can be seen as “deeply religious” (p. 27; in the United States, Poland and Italy the percentage is

greater; in the United Kingdom, France and Russia it is smaller). The majority of this group is made up of young people. Nonetheless, the religiosity of young people “. . . is devoid of content and not dogmatically outlined” (Ziebertz & Kay, 2005, p. 78). Feige and Gennerich (2008) conclude that both a religious dimension and a strong ethical ambition are there, but these dimensions are not connected with any religious tradition.

It is clearly difficult to combine both of the empirical results shown above, as there is no research regarding the combination of historical consciousness and religiosity. There can be little doubt, however, that young people are open to both the historical dimension of life and the religious one. This openness allows hope that learning processes can and may be initiated in both fields.

Learning Memory: A Basic Competence of Inter-religious Learning

Religious learning does not simply mean the learning of facts related to religion. Spirituality, for example, a fundamental of any religion, is not a merely cognitive matter, but a realm of acting, living, meditating, praying and approaching life and reality in religious terms. To learn spirituality means to learn a way of life. This includes not only cognitive but also emotional, social and action-oriented aspects. Spirituality is an integral concept (see several articles in De Souza et al., 2006). If an individual wants to learn about religion, he/she must make an effort to learn about the spirituality of their religious community. Religious insights cannot be gained by reading of books or learning of facts alone. It is impossible to acquire religion in a library. To learn about a religion, one must visit the places where religious life takes place and seek contact with people who live a religious life; in other words, it is necessary to learn about and understand a *religious tradition*.

According to the results shown in the previous sections of this chapter, religious education must help people who are open to the religious dimension of life to bring their own religious feelings, yearnings and questions (their *subjective religiosity*) into contact and dialogue with an *objective religious tradition*. This is not a mere adoption or assumption of tradition by simply taking on what is traditionally handed down. Religious learning is an active and dialogical process of encountering religious traditions where people acquire basic religious competences. As I have argued in the first part of this chapter, it enables individuals to develop *their own* answers in contact with tradition, *their own* hermeneutics and *their own* interpretation of the world and reality. Religious learning requires dialogue with a religious tradition, and therefore religious memory.

For this reason religious education must include a significant amount of learning about history or, to be correct, learning about a specific interpretation of historical events. It may be assumed that learning in religious terms can actively help an individual to become sensitized in historical terms, as religious learning involves a significant amount of *historical* learning – again, not in terms of learning mere facts

but as a deeper learning that provides a sense of history. Learning religion, therefore, means learning memory.

This begs the question what happens when people from different religious traditions come together? Instead of their sharing the same memories quite the opposite is the case: often their memories are contradictory because memory is interlinked with interpretation, as shown above. This interpretation of the past, however, forms the basis of identity formation for the in-group, while the out-group is perceived in a completely different way. As such, memories of religious groups frequently conflict with one another, especially where two religions are close together and share a common history with several contact points. Sometimes these contact points mark hate, oppression, persecution or even war.

Learning about these events, and about the interpretation and narrative concerning meaningful events in the history of religion in particular, may help to understand the other religious identity in the same way as the own. As any religious identity is formed by identification with historical experiences and biographies, an understanding, even if only partial, of this historical self-interpretation can act as an important competence in an inter-religious encounter. This is reflected in inter-religious learning, which generally aims to establish several such competences (Leimgruber, 2007, 100f; see the chapter by S. Altmeyer, this volume):

- The competence of *perceiving* the documents, testimonies and expressions of other religions;
- The competence of *knowing* (at least some) concrete details about other religions;
- The competence of *understanding* the contents of other religions, their beliefs, their religious conviction; The competence of *dealing with respect* with the expressions of other religions (even if they are strange, as long as they respect humanity);
- The competence of *inter-religious communication and encounter*;
- The competence of *acting together* for common goals.

It is clear that not all of these competences can be achieved together and completely. They are goals and it must be seen as a success if they are realized only partially. There is, however, one core competence that acts as a fundamental basis for all of these skills: the *anamnetic competence*, the competence of remembrance, meaning the ability to remember the history of the religion – again at least partially.

But how are we to achieve this basic competence of remembrance? Usually, history is far removed from the everyday life of (young) learners. The main way to learn historical sensitivity is by learning about history from the perspective of suffering individuals and families. Not only the deeds of conquerors, not only the victories of emperors should be learnt, but the biographies of persons who had to endure persecution, violence or war. These enable the listener or reader to see a completely new perspective. Students who learn about other religions should learn about the stories of individual children, young people, adults and families who tell *their* story and who express *their* interpretation of what happened in the past. Likewise, they should learn from similar biographies of their own religious tradition in order to

learn both the history of suffering *and* the history of salvation not only of the *own* but also of the *other* religious tradition. Without understanding the “chain of memory”, the tradition of remembrance of religions, it is impossible to create situations of equal communication between two (or more) religious traditions. To a large extent, therefore, learning in inter-religious terms means learning about the interpretation of past events by both the *own and* the other religion. Furthermore, study of historical situations of suffering by various religions (e.g. the Holocaust, the Crusades, inter-denominational wars) from the perspective of individuals, families and groups sensitizes learners to situations of oppression and suffering in today’s world, thereby contributing to a human rights education (Benedek, 2006).

Naturally, the task of learning memory in terms of inter-religious exchange is primarily a task for teachers themselves and for teacher training. Universities and teacher training institutions should focus on the memory of other religions in order to make students understand the self-understanding and self-interpretation of these religious systems. This collective memory is summed up in personal prayers, forms of liturgy and rituals, testimonies and diaries, essays and novels, etc. Learning about and from other religions means learning about and from their life-world in history.

Only if the “other”, meaning the person from another religious tradition, can identify a sensitivity to the history of oppression and injustice done to their religion in the past (and perhaps in the present), i.e. when a true and cordial sense of *remembrance* is in evidence, can dialogue take place at the same level, eye to eye, with mutual respect and understanding.

References

- Barton, K. C., & Levstik, L. S. (2005). *Doing history: Investigating with children in elementary and middle schools* (3rd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Benedek, W. (Ed.). (2006). *Understanding human rights. Manual on human rights education*. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag.
- Bertelsmann, S. (Ed.). (2007). *Religionsmonitor 2008*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag.
- De Souza, M., Durka, G., & Engebreston, K. (Eds.).(2006). *International Handbook of the religious, moral and spiritual dimensions in education*. New York: Springer.
- Ebner, M. et al. (Ed.). (2008)“Die Macht der Erinnerung” – *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* (Vol. 22). Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag.
- Feige, A. (2000). Jugend und Religion. In H. H. Krueger & C. Grunert (Eds.), *Handbuch Kindheits- und Jugendforschung* (pp. 805–818). Opladen: Leske und Budrich, S.
- Feige, A., & Gennerich, C. (2008). *Lebensorientierungen Jugendlicher. Alltagsethik, Moral und Religion in der Wahrnehmung von Berufsschülerinnen und – schülern in Deutschland. Eine Umfrage unter 8.000 Christen, Nicht-Christen und Muslimen*. Muenster: Waxmann.
- Hervieu-Léger, D. (1987). *Faut-il définir la religion?* Paris: Selon.
- Hervieu-Léger, D. (2000). *Religion as a chain of memory* [La religion pour mémoire, Paris 1993]. Cambridge/Oxford: Polity Press.
- Leimgruber, S. (2007). *Interreligiöses Lernen*, München: Koesel-Verlag.
- Levstik, L. S., & Barton, K. C. (2008). *Researching history education. theory, method, and context*. New York: Routledge.
- Manemann, J. (2005). *Rettende Erinnerung an die Zukunft: Essay über die christliche Verschaerfung*. Mainz: Grünewald.

- Metz, J. B. (2006). *Memoria passionis. Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft*. Freiburg : Herder.
- Meyer-Blanck, M. (2008). *Liturgie als Erinnerungsform*, in: Ebner (2008), (pp. 361–379).
- Petzel, P., & Reck, N. (Eds.). (2003). *Erinnern. Erkundungen zu einer theologischen Basiskategorie*. Darmstadt: WBG.
- Shell (2006). 15. Shell Jugendstudie; Konzeption und Koordination. In K. Hurrelmann & M. Albert (Eds.). Frankfurt/M: Fischer.
- Silbermann, A., & Stoffers, M. (2000). *Auschwitz: Nie davon gehört? Erinnern und Vergessen in Deutschland*. Berlin: Rowolth.
- Stearns, P., Seixas, P., & Wineburg, S. (Ed.). (2000). *Knowing, teaching, and learning history: National and international perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Theobald, M., & Hoppe, R. (Eds.). (2006). *“Für alle Zeiten zur Erinnerung” (Jos 4,7): Beiträge zu einer biblischen Gedächtniskultur*. Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk
- Wahle, S. (2006). *Gottes-Gedenken: Untersuchungen zum anamnetischen Gehalt christlicher und jüdischer Liturgie*. Innsbruck/Wien: Tyrolia.
- Welzer, H. (2008). *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (2nd. ed.). Muenchen: Beck Verlag.
- Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Ziebertz, H.-G., & Kay, W. K. (Eds.). (2005). *Youth in Europe II. An international empirical study about religiosity*. Münster: LIT.
- Zuelsdorf-Kersting, M. (2008). *Sechzig Jahre danach: Jugendliche und Holocaust. Eine Studie zur geschichtskulturellen Sozialisation*. Münster: LIT.