

RECONFIGURING ECCLESIAL IDENTITY: IN CONVERSATION WITH PAUL RICOEUR

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Abstract

The complex interrelated histories of the family of churches within the Dutch Reformed Church pose serious historiographical questions. At the heart lies the methodological question of the representation of the past. This question is also central to Paul Ricoeur's monumental work *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (translated in 2004 as *Memory, history, forgetting*). After giving a broad outline of Ricoeur's overall argument in this book, the main body of this article attends to Ricoeur's discussion of the uses and abuses of memory, as well as his theory of the three phases of the historical operation. The last section of the article draws in part on Ricoeur's work and gives a brief outline of four trajectories that seek to contribute to the discussion regarding an adequate methodology for doing church history in Southern Africa today.

1 THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PAST THROUGH MEMORY AND HISTORY

The Dutch Reformed Church, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa and the Reformed Church in Africa are currently in a process of reunification. This challenging, and often painful, process has left its mark on these churches' understanding of their identity and mission. During this very sensitive period, this process is still in need of thorough theological reflection and faithful embodiment. A web of questions regarding the complex and interrelated histories of these churches arises from a theologically informed church historical perspective:

- How do these respective churches remember the past?
- What memories, and whose memories, are privileged?
- How do these memories relate to notions of identity and otherness?
- How are the traces of memory archived, recalled and displayed in the face of contestation?
- How does one deal with the revisionist temptation to either romanticise or demonise the past when writing or recording church history?

These questions, to which many can be added, pose serious historiographical challenges, not merely for the aforementioned churches and their theologians and (church) historians, but for all those who struggle with the challenge of a responsible representation of the past.

It is important to note that within the life of churches, as well as within South African society at large, there is some tension surrounding questions that deal with memory, history and the representation of the past. In certain quarters there seems to be a willingness to engage with the past, despite this being within a context in which revisionist temptations lurk beneath the surface. A good example is the discourses in academic, church and public life emanating from the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But for many churches today, questions regarding memory and history are not a priority. There seems to be a general culture of apathy regarding the past, coupled with a lack of historical consciousness among many segments of South African society. This attitude is not to be abstracted from the economisation of life within our global society of societies, or from what Miroslav Volf (2006:39) refers to as “the fast-paced, novelty-obsessed, entertainment-saturated culture in which we live”. Volf uses this descriptive phrase in a discussion of the moral ambiguity of memories. On the one hand, our accelerated consumer culture makes us forget important matters as the media confines us to the extended present. In the process the past becomes a blur, “a landscape viewed from a fast-moving train” (Volf 2006:39). On the other hand, our fast-paced culture creates, in a paradoxical manner, the desire to memorialise events to counter events slipping into forgetfulness. In this regard, Volf refers specifically to the fact that discussions about an appropriate monument for the victims of the 9/11 attacks in New York proceeded in earnest only weeks after the attacks. Volf (2006:40) comments:

We demand immediate memorials as outward symbols because the hold of memory on our inner lives is so tenuous. And then because we have tangible, observable memories, we feel absolved from the obligation to remember on our own; we feel free, in good conscience, to immerse ourselves in the blur of the present. Thus does the memory boom try to compensate for an actual memory bust.

Indeed it seems possible to make the cultural diagnosis in our globalising world that we suffer either from too much memory or too little memory.

This is also the view of the influential French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. In the preface to his monumental work *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Ricoeur (2004:xv) refers to the private, professional and public preoccupations from which his investigation has grown. With regard to his public preoccupation, he refers to the fact that he is troubled by “the unsettling spectacle of memory here, and the excess of memory elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory - and of forgetting”.

Amidst growing amnesia, the need arises to take the medicine of memory - to remember the past and to fund our historical imaginations. Moreover, one must also be aware of the abuses of memory - memory (and history) can be remedy or poison.

This article seeks to engage with Ricoeur's extensive discussion of the interplay between memory, history and oblivion. It is, however, impossible to do justice to the scope of *Memory, history, forgetting* (642 pages in the

English translation) as well as to the depth and nuance of Ricoeur's argumentation. The focus is therefore more limited. After outlining Ricoeur's overall argument, this article attends to Ricoeur's discussion of the uses and abuses of memory, as well as his theory of the three phases of the historical operation. Finally, drawing in part on Ricoeur's work, the four trajectories that seek to contribute to the discussion regarding an adequate methodology for doing church history in Southern Africa today are briefly outlined.

2 RICOEUR ON MEMORY AND HISTORY

2.1 The dual figure of history

Just before the table of contents in *Memory, history, forgetting*, there is a picture of a baroque bronze statue from the Wiblingen monastery in Ulm, Germany (it is also found on the cover of the French text). Ricoeur interprets this image in an adjacent inscription as the dual figure of history. In the foreground Kronos, the winged god, is represented as an old man with a wreathed brow. His left hand grips a large book, while his right hand attempts to tear out a page. Behind and above Kronos stands History itself, gazing searchingly. One foot topples a horn from which spills a cascade of gold and silver (Ricoeur interprets this as a sign of instability). The left hand of History is on the shoulder of Kronos and the book, checking the god's acts, while the right hand holds the instruments of history: the book, the inkpot and the stylus.

This enigmatic sculpture offers a fitting announcement of Ricoeur's intention to grapple with questions relating to the importance of, and difficulties associated with, the quest for the representation of the past. Kronos as an old man represents the fleeing of time into the past, while History as a young person holds the instruments for conquering time. With the passing of time, the past moves into oblivion and becomes, in a way, inaccessible to us. Nevertheless, we try to gain access to and interpret the past, seeing that traces remain in memory. Through the writing, recording and reading of history, we try to represent - to make present - the past by attending to the traces of the past through memory. It is between the fallible power of memory and the force of forgetfulness that Ricoeur places his philosophy of history in his aptly titled book, *Memory, history, forgetting*. Although this book resists easy summary, the broad argument of the book is presented in three clearly defined parts. It is tempting to see these three parts as three separate books, but as Charles Reagan (2005:9) observes: "The genius of the book is the structure, the interconnections, that Ricoeur weaves among the philosophical paradoxes of memory, the aporias of forgetting, and the mediating role of history."

The first part of the book is, as the title suggests, devoted to a discussion of memory. It can be described, in the Husserlian sense, as a *phenomenology* of memory. It begins with an analysis of the object of memory (*le souvenir*) and passes through the search for a given memory (anamnesis, recollection). It then moves to memory as it is exercised (reflective memory).

The second part of the book can be viewed as an *epistemology* of history. Here Ricoeur discusses the three phases of the historical operation: the stage

of testimony and the archives (the documentary phase); the phase of explanation and understanding; and the historian's representation of the past on a scriptural level (the representative phase). Throughout this discussion, Ricoeur is interested in the historian's intention of a truthful reconstruction of the past.

The third part of the book is framed within a *hermeneutics* of the historical condition. In this section, Ricoeur (2004:xvi) argues for a critical philosophy of history that is "attentive to the limits of historical knowledge that a certain hubris of historical science transgresses time and time again". This section also contains a meditation on forgetting. The epilogue of the book (an entire 50 pages) deals with forgiveness.

Ricoeur also emphasises that the three parts of the book do not constitute three separate books, but can be seen instead as three masts with interlocking but distinct sails that belong to the same ship setting off on a single itinerary. There is a common concern that "flows through the phenomenology of memory, the epistemology of history, and the hermeneutics of the social condition: the problematic of the representation of the past" (2004:xvi). The difficult question of the representation of the past also lies at the heart of the struggle for an adequate methodology for doing church history. How do we represent the Christian past? How do we tell the stories of churches and their missions? As the past is often misrepresented, and we are susceptible to ideological forces, we are in need of critical and constructive engagement. But before making a few searching remarks in this regard, it might be worthwhile to follow the long route via Ricoeur's discussion of how history depends on memory and offers an antidote to forgetting. Although Ricoeur's treatment of forgetting and forgiveness also warrants careful consideration, particularly as it forms an integral part of Ricoeur's overall argument, this article's focus will be on Ricoeur's discussion of memory and history.

2.2 Vulnerable memory: The uses and abuses of memory

In his phenomenological sketch of memory, Ricoeur offers an informative discussion of the uses and abuses of memory that highlights the vulnerability of memory. The reality of the vulnerability of memory is often responsible for the fact that one seeks recourse in the security of the noble dream of historical objectivity, hence privileging history above memory. From the outset Ricoeur warns against this temptation. He strongly argues that we do not approach memory merely from the viewpoint of its deficiencies, but also in the light of its capacities.¹ Ricoeur argues that with regard to our reference to the past we have no other resource than memory itself. Consequently, the emphasis on the unreliability of memory is intertwined with the admission that memory is our one and only resource to signify the past-character of what we declare we remember. The deficiencies relating to memory should not be viewed from the outset as pathological and dysfunctional, "but as the shadowy underside of the bright region of memory" (Ricoeur 2004:21). As Ricoeur (2004:21) writes: "To put it bluntly, we have nothing better than memory to signify that something has taken place, has occurred, has happened *before* we declare that we remember it."

Thus for Ricoeur the acknowledgement of the vulnerability and weakness of memory goes hand in hand with the trust placed in the signifying capabilities of memory. Moreover, it must also be noted that memory is tied to a desire to be faithful to the past. Hence the importance of the notion of truthful testimony in Ricoeur's (2004:21) thought, for "testimony constitutes the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history".

This emphasis on the irreplaceability of memory does not prevent Ricoeur from discussing at length the abuses of memory. In the light of the previous comment that we seem to suffer either from too much memory or too little memory, let us attend more closely to Ricoeur's instructive discussion of what he calls the abuses of natural memory, which can be divided into three levels.

Firstly, there is the *pathological and therapeutic level* on which one finds the disturbance of blocked memory. It is on this level that one can speak of wounded or sick memory, which relates to themes such as traumatism and scarred memory.ⁱⁱ

Ricoeur does not, however, merely locate the abuses of memory on the therapeutic level, but also on what he calls the *practical level*, the plane of manipulated memory. On this level, Ricoeur places the important problem of memory and (personal and collective) identity. Ricoeur is especially interested in the way in which memory functions in the service of the quest and demand for identity. As Ricoeur writes elsewhere, "the diseases of memory are basically diseases of identity" (Kearney & Dooley 1999:7). The fragility of memory is interconnected with the fragility of identity. Ricoeur mentions three causes for the fragility of identity. The first cause relates to the complex relationship between memory and time.ⁱⁱⁱ At the heart of the matter is the question of what it means to be the same or identical over time. The second cause Ricoeur highlights concerning the fragility of identity lies in the confrontation with others that is experienced as a threat. The other is perceived as a danger for my and our identity. Ricoeur also refers to a third cause for the fragility of identity, namely the heritage of founding violence. In this regard, Ricoeur (204:82) makes the provocative statement: "There is no historical community that has not arisen out of what can be termed the original relation to war. What we celebrate under the heading of founding events are, essentially, violent acts legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of right." Therefore, the same events signify glory for some and humiliation for others. So the celebration of the event by some is accompanied by the execration of the event by others.^{iv} It is important for Ricoeur that we recognise the fact that the manipulation of memory plays out between the demand for identity and the public expression of memory. It is tied to ideology, and ideology revolves around power.

Ricoeur also emphasises that memory can be ideologised through the various resources of narrative configuration. The stories of founding events, glorious deeds and humiliating actions feed the discourse of flattery and fear. The imposed history is armed with "authorised" history: the "official" history that is publicly learned and celebrated. On the institutional level, forced memorisation is enlisted in the service of this history in addition to customary

commemorations. Thus, “a formidable pact is concluded in this way between remembrance, memorisation and commemoration” (Ricoeur 2004:85). In this context, Ricoeur refers to Tzvetan Todorov’s essay *Les Abus de la mémoire*. This essay is an indictment on the frenzy for commemorations with their parades, rites and myths. Todorov warns against the unconditional praise for memory as the stakes are too high to leave memory to enthusiasm or anger. Ricoeur employs the following quotation from Todorov:

The work of the historian, like every work on the past, never consists solely in establishing the facts but also in choosing certain among them as being more salient and more significant than others, then placing them in relation to one another; now this work of selecting and combining is necessarily guided by the search, not for truth, but for the good (Ricoeur 2004:86).^v

According to Ricoeur, one can justifiably be critical of Todorov’s juxtaposing of truth and goodness. However, it is nevertheless important to understand that the use and abuse of memory raise moral questions: questions that fall under the auspices of the search for justice. One can indeed ask whether the (church) historian can bracket these ethical concerns.^{vi}

This already brings us to the third level, which Ricoeur terms the *ethico-political level*, where he situates what he calls obligated memory. Obligated memory centres on the question of the alleged duty to remember (*devoir de mémoire*). For Ricoeur the discussion of the obligation to remember is not to be abstracted from the struggle to deal with the memory of the horrible events of the mid-twentieth century. Ricoeur complicates this discussion by pointing out that the emphasis on the duty to remember also risks being heard as an invitation to short-circuit the work of history. In light of Ricoeur’s insight that memory is the womb of history, it is important for him to affirm the duty to remember. For Ricoeur, the obligation to remember comprises, at one and the same time, the epitome of the good use of memory as well as the abuse of memory. Therefore, the imperative of the duty to remember must not be isolated from the imperative of justice. Ricoeur (2004:89) comments: “The duty to remember is the duty to do justice, through memories, to an other than the self.”

Ricoeur’s discussion of the use and abuse of memory on the ethico-political level in *Memory, history, forgetting* can be augmented with some interesting remarks he makes in a parallel essay *Memory and forgetting*. In this essay he mentions that the duty to remember “consists not only in having a concern for the past, but in transmitting the meaning of past events to the next generation. The duty, therefore, is one that concerns the future” (Kearney & Dooley 1999:10). Ricoeur highlights several reasons that it is important to remind the next generation of the past. I want to draw attention to one of the reasons Ricoeur gives for cherishing the duty to remember.^{vii} Remembering the past keeps alive the memory of suffering over against history’s tendency to celebrate the victors. The philosophy of history in the Hegelian sense of the term is concerned with advantage, progress and victory. In contrast with this, Ricoeur observes:

We need therefore, a kind of parallel history of, let us say, victimisation, which would counter the history of success and victory. To memorise the victims of history - the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten - should that not be a task for all of us (Kearney & Dooley 1999:10, 11).

2.3 The historiographical operation

Ricoeur's phenomenological sketch of memory highlights the vulnerability and fragility of memory. In the midst of this reality, one ought to reiterate Ricoeur's assertion that memory, individual and collective, is all we have as resource for the representation of the past. Historiography can only take the long route through memory, since memory is the matrix of history. Moreover, history also has a certain "autonomy" that aims at strengthening or challenging the collective memory. It is in this context that Ricoeur places his epistemology of historical knowledge (the second part of *Memory, history, forgetting*). In this section, Ricoeur gives a detailed discussion of what he calls the historiographical operation.^{viii} The first phase of the historiographical operation ranges from the reports by eyewitnesses to the constituting of archives which aims at establishing documentary proof. Ricoeur refers to this phase as the documentary phase. Next is the explanation/understanding phase. This is the phase that seeks to deal with the complexity of the "because" response to the "why?" question ("Why did things happen in a certain way?" "Because ..."). The third phase, which is termed the representative phase, has to do with written or literary representation that is offered to readers of history. Before returning in more detail to Ricoeur's discussion of the three phases of the historiographical operation, one should state that these three phases are not seen by Ricoeur (2004:137) as three distinct chronological stages, but as "methodological moments, interwoven with one another".^{ix}

- *The documentary phase*

For Ricoeur history begins with testimony.^x Testimonies are collected, preserved and consulted in the archive. In passing through the archives, testimonies enter the critical zone in which competing testimonies are evaluated. Crucial questions with regard to the trustworthiness of testimonies are posed, balancing both confidence and suspicion. Hence testimony opens an epistemological process "that departs from declared memory, passes through the archive and documents, and finds its fulfillment in documentary proof" (Ricoeur 2004:161).

Ricoeur sees testimony, by definition, as oral. It is listened to and heard. The archive, on the other hand, is written. It is read and consulted.^{xi} One can probably ask whether Ricoeur does not make too strict a separation between the oral and the written, but his point is nevertheless clear. Testimonies can be recorded, taken down in writing and deposited. The archive is the institutional - and also social - space where the traces of the past are collected, conserved and classified with the aim of being consulted by qualified personnel who seek to establish documentary proof. However, the change in status from spoken testimony to archived material constitutes the first historical mutation. This implies the need for a critical engagement with

the very notion of the archive. Ricoeur (2004:169) affirms Pierre Nora's exclamation: "Archive as much as you like, something will always be left out."

Ricoeur also emphasises the fact that the historian does not come to the archive as a blank slate, but is armed with questions. Therefore one must guard against what Marc Bloch called "epistemological naïveté" (Ricoeur 2004:177). This is the idea that there is a first phase where the historian gathers the documents, and reads and evaluates them; and then a second separate phase where s/he writes them down. Rather, documents do not speak if someone does not ask them questions. There is thus an interdependent relationship between facts, documents and questions; "trace, document and question thus form the tripod base of historical knowledge" (Ricoeur 2004:177).^{xii}

The possible confusion between confirmed facts and past events also underlines the need for a vigilant epistemology. In the historical operation, documentary proof and facts are established. However, what we call "facts", do not necessarily coincide with what really happened, with the living memory of the eyewitnesses. The fact is not the event. Therefore history cannot cut all the lines with declarative memory. While history aims at providing a probable and plausible narrative, it consistently needs to be accompanied by a critical epistemology - not only on the level of explanation and understanding, but also during the documentary phase.

- *The phase of explanation/understanding*

Ricoeur refers to the second phase of the historical operation as the explanation/understanding phase, because he wants to challenge the dichotomy that is often created between explanation and understanding (as famously posed by Dilthey in the nineteenth century). Interpretation, however, is not merely limited to this phase of the historical operation, but is present during the whole historical operation. Nonetheless, the explanation/understanding phase adds the new dimension of "the mode of interconnectedness of the documented facts" (Ricoeur 2004:182). In this instance, Ricoeur is especially interested in the representation of the past. To represent the past is not to offer a copy of the past (a passive mimesis). It is linked to explanation/understanding that seeks to provide a model for dealing with the past. This "modelling" is for Ricoeur the work of the scientific imagination - an action that prevents the domain of history slipping over into that of fiction.^{xiii}

In his discussion of the second phase of the historical operation, Ricoeur gives a thorough review of the important moments of French historiography during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. He also indicates a gradual shift from the idea of "mentalities" to that of "representation" in the vocabulary of historiography during the last third of the twentieth century - a move he favoured.^{xiv} This essay cannot elaborate on his extensive discussion in this regard, but I would like to call attention to Ricoeur's remark that this movement to representation is congenial to a global approach to the history of societies as proposed in a collection of essays edited by Bernard Lepetit entitled *Les Formes de l'expérience: Une autre histoire sociale*. The historians

in this volume take as their focal point the social bond and the modes of identity attached to the societies they studied. It is a pragmatic approach where the “principle accent is on social practices and the representation integrated in these practices” (Ricoeur 2004:217). In the last section of the essay, I will return to the promising notion of *social practices* as an interpretative lens for understanding (ecclesial) identity.

- *The representative phase*

The third phase that Ricoeur discusses in his portrayal of the historiographical operation is that of the historian’s representation in written form. This is not to say that the writing of history or historiography is limited to this phase. It is one of Ricoeur’s theses that writing is involved in all the respective phases. To mark the specificity of the third phase, Ricoeur prefers then not to speak of historiography, but of literary or scriptural representation. Such representation must understand itself as “standing for” (*représentance*, the German *Darstellung*). It has intentionality. This intended “something” makes history the learned heir of memory.

In this process of intentional representation, narrative form plays an important role. Ricoeur also acknowledges the rhetorical aspect of staging a narrative. In this stage of the historiographical operation, the historian selects certain figures of style, chooses a plot and mobilises probable arguments within the framework of the narrative. In the process, the writer uses rhetorical means to persuade the reader, while the reader displays certain postures in the reception of the text. Ricoeur is also interested in the confrontation between historical and fictional narrative. What is at stake for Ricoeur in his discussion of the respective relationships between representation and narrative, representation and rhetoric, and representation and fiction, is historical discourse’s capacity for representing the past. This intentional aim, the “standing for”, of history is important as it indicates the expectation that historical knowledge constitutes reconstructions of past events. This is the contract between the writer and the reader. Unlike the contract between a writer of fiction and his or her reader, the author and the reader of a historical text “agree that it will deal with situations, events, connections and characters who once really existed, that is, before the narrative of them is put together” (Ricoeur 2004:275). The question, though, is “whether, how and to what degree the historian satisfies the expectation and promise conveyed by this contract” (Ricoeur 2004:275). The claim to the truth of historical representation cannot be limited to the phase of written representation. It is the three modes of the historiographical operation together that enable the claim to truthfulness.

This short discussion of Ricoeur’s view of the threefold nature of the historical operation highlights his commitment to affirm history’s role in interpreting declared memory with the intention of truthful representation, while at the same time asserting the position that memory is the womb of history. In the process history also serves as an antidote to forgetting. This essay will not focus on Ricoeur’s intricate discussion of the use and abuse of forgetting. Suffice to say, Ricoeur wants to counter any overburdening of the notion of “the historical” that separates it from life. Something of this is evident in the poetic expression with which Ricoeur (2004:506) ends the book:

*Under history, memory and forgetting.
Under memory and forgetting, life.
But writing of life is another story.
Incompletion.*

3 TRACING SOME METHODOLOGICAL TRAJECTORIES FOR DOING CHURCH HISTORY

In the light of the above excursion on Ricoeur's understanding of memory and history, one can ask questions pertaining to the implications thereof for the methodology of church history. This last section of the article briefly explores - as an invitation to further dialogue - four possible trajectories that deal respectively with the (interrelated) notions of "identity", "exclusion", "practices" and "theology".

3.1 Memory, history and identity

Ricoeur's work emphasises the importance of understanding the link between memory, history and identity. As indicated, he underscores the abuses of memory that result from the experience of the fragility of identity. Given the dialectical relationship between memory and history, the functioning of the historiographical operation also cannot be separated from matters of identity. As formulated by Rowan Williams (2005:1) in his book *Why study the past? The quest for the historical church*:

History is a set of stories we tell in order to understand better who we are and the world we're now in; as a written affair it is never just a catalogue of things that happen to have happened ... We start telling the story to get a better definition of who we are or of what the subject is that we're describing.

Good history helps us to see that the past is *our* past. Williams also argues that church history becomes popular when the definition of the church seems less clear than it has been or when the church needs defending against what are seen to be mistaken definitions. This suggests that history as a discipline flourishes when there is uncertainty with regard to identity. One can add that these are also the times when communities and societies are susceptible to an upsurge in nationalism and fundamentalism. Ricoeur's critical and constructive engagement with memory and history serves as a possible resource to counter such a short-circuiting in the representation of the past.

On a formal level, we can learn much from Ricoeur's methodology of the "long route" - the method that opens itself to hermeneutical detours in order to arrive at a fuller articulation of the problem, as well as possible ways to deal with it. Richard Kearney summarises Ricoeur's (2004:2) methodology well: "The self returns to itself after numerous hermeneutic detours through the language of others, to find itself enlarged and enriched by the journey." Ricoeur often states that the shortest route from self to self is through the other.

This emphasis on the connection between identity and otherness suggests, among other things, that churches in the Dutch Reformed Church family may benefit greatly from studying their interwoven histories by means of conversation and interaction, thereby growing in understanding. This can play an important role in the understanding and reconfiguring of ecclesial identity. The realisation that otherness enriches identity also points to the methodological gains achieved when church history is practised as an ecumenical endeavour. A responsible ecumenical paradigm for church history challenges reductive constructions – such as an uncritical Eurocentric approach to church history^{xv} – something which has contributed much to “the changing shape of church history” (to use the title of a book by Justo González).^{xvi}

3.2 Exclusion and an ethics of memory and history

A second trajectory worth exploring has to do with Ricoeur’s insight that history begins with testimony, and that testimonies are collected, preserved and consulted in the archive. But certain testimonies are not preserved, while others are not consulted. Therefore Ricoeur rightfully emphasises the need for a critical engagement with the notion of the archive,^{xvii} as well as with the historical operation as a whole. One needs to be sensitive to the power relations and the ideological forces at work in the process of *including or excluding* voices in the intended project to represent the past. When church historical discourse uncritically privileges “official” history, it neglects the “forgotten ones” on the other side of history. These “forgotten ones” are often the dissidents or the suffering victims. Such omissions raise questions regarding the *ethics* of memory and history. In her book *An ethics of remembering: History, heterology, and the nameless others*, Edith Wyschogrod (1998:xii) writes: “The historian’s responsibility is mandated by another who is absent, cannot speak for herself, one whose actual face the historian may never see, yet to whom ‘giving countenance’ becomes a task.” Should not the church historian also be haunted by omissions that secure unjust structures, policies and ideologies? Through the collection and display of these “forgotten voices”, the church historian can contribute to a richer understanding of Christian and ecclesial identity. Attention to the unheard voices (“ongehoorde stemme” in Afrikaans) - which may be quite strange to say the least - can enliven our historiographical landscape. An adequate church historical methodology also requires that the tension between the “excluded voices” and “official history” be maintained. The messiness of the past ought to be respected - therefore the need to resist the temptation to demonise or to romanticise figures and events from the past.

3.3 Practices as interpretative lenses

In his discussion of the phases of historiographical operation, Ricoeur sympathises with the method that attends to social practices. In the wake of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s influential discussion of the notion of practices in his book *After virtue*, recent moral philosophy, as well as theological ethics and systematic theology, have also given much attention to the promising notion of practices. In their different ways these discourses

emphasise the value of the notion of practices as an interpretative lens to understand, and even reconstruct, identity. This holds much promise, in my view, for research on ecclesiastical history. For instance, a focus on certain practices (such as the Eucharist) in the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church can enable a deeper description of the (interwoven and divisive) histories of these churches. The power of practices as interpretative category is partly due to the fact that practices display theology in a distilled form (one can also make a similar argument concerning church policies). The notion of practices should not, however, be overburdened. I would suggest a stereoscopic way of doing church history that focuses both on illuminating practices and the reception of theologians and theological ideas (or other significant personalities and theoretical frameworks) within the communities - hence respecting the continuity and discontinuity between ideas and practices, professed belief and embodied faith.

3.4 Church history as a theologically sensitive endeavour

A reading of Ricoeur's magisterial book, *Memory, history, forgetting*, reveals that Ricoeur is interested in the ethics of memory and history. The book also displays the presence of more implicit *theological* concerns, which Ricoeur seems to bracket in his discussion. It is, for instance, Alain Badiou's thesis that Ricoeur's book presupposes a Christian subject that only appears at the critical stage of the discussion on forgiveness towards the end of the book (Badiou 2005). This probably has to do with Ricoeur's methodology and the influence of phenomenology on his theoretic framework. Nevertheless, church historians must guard against the assumption that a bracketing of theological concerns will lead to a more "objective", and thus more scientific, church historical methodology. The idea that history and theology belong to totally separate domains ought to be challenged. Terence Tilley (2004) correctly argues that the problem of faith and history (or theology and history) should not be resolved, but rather dissolved. An adequate methodology for church history requires the interplay between the disciplines of theology and history, respecting both similarities and differences in method and intention. It is important that the practice of church history does not fuel the growing polarisation that currently exists between church and theology. A theologically sensitive approach to church history does not mean that theological interests are used to settle historical questions, or that psychological, social or political motives are not important for the interpretation of the Christian past. As Rowan Williams (2005:2) writes: "good theology does not come from bad history". However, I would argue that it is exactly a theological understanding of church history that enables a critical interrogation of the past (and ourselves), while also offering a horizon of expectation that opens the possibility of being strangely surprised by the past.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 The themes of fallibility and capability are important to Ricoeur's philosophical project. See, for instance, his earlier work *Fallible Man* (1965). In an interview with Sorin Antohi, Ricoeur refers to a move in his philosophical anthropology from fallibility to capability: "In the intermediate book between *Memory, history, forgetting* and *Time and narrative*, namely, *Oneself as another*, the central concept is man as he is able and capable. What man *can* do: I *can* speak, I *can* narrate, I *can* act, I *can* feel responsible ... therefore my last book on memory, history and forgetting is related not to fallible man but to capable man, this is to say that man is capable of making memory and making history" (Ricoeur & Antohi 2005:17).
- 2 In his discussion Ricoeur engages creatively with two essays by Freud, namely "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through" and "Mourning and Melancholia". Source for these two essays.
- 3 On the relationship between time and identity and time, see Ricoeur's influential discussion in his books *Time and narrative, vol. 1-3* (1984, 1985, 1988) and *Oneself as another* (1992).
- 4 In the South African context one can think, for instance, about the commemoration of, and concomitant reactions to, an event like Blood River.
- 5 This quotation by Todorov also reminds one of a remark by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay "Theses on the philosophy of history": "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger ... In every era an attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition from conformism that is about to overpower it" (1969:255).
- 6 In his essay "Memory and forgetting" Ricoeur writes: "It is the power of justice to be just regarding the victims, just also regarding victors, and just towards new institutions by means of which we may prevent the same events from recurring in the future" (Kearney & Dooley 1999:9). This quotation offers a haunting challenge concerning the intentionality at work in church historical discourse.
- 7 Ricoeur offers three other reasons as well. First, the emphasis on the duty to remember is a means of fighting the erosion of traces brought by time. Secondly, Ricoeur argues, in conversation with Hannah Arendt, that such a work of memory makes a continuation of action possible in the midst of the erosion of traces. A third reason has to do with the fact that by cultivating the duty to remember we become heirs of the past. See Kearney and Dooley 1999:10.
- 8 Ricoeur acknowledges that his use of the term "historiographical" has been influenced by Michel de Certeau's contribution to the project edited by Jacques le Goff and Pierre Nora under the title *Faire de l'histoire*. See Ricoeur 2004:136. We also need to mention that Ricoeur does not narrow the concept "historiography" to the writing phase of the operation (as the literal meaning of the word suggests). He writes: "Writing, in effect is the threshold of language that historical knowing has already crossed, in distancing itself from memory to undertake the threefold adventure of archival research, explanation and representation. History is writing from one end to another. And in this regard, archives constitute the first writing that confronts history, before it completes itself in the literary mode of 'scripturality.' Explanation/understanding thus finds itself encased, upstream and downstream, by two writings. It gathers energy from the former and anticipates the energy of the latter" (Ricoeur 2004:138).
- 9 Ricoeur (2004:137) notes: "[N]o one consults an archive apart from some project of explanation, without some hypothesis for understanding. And no one undertakes to explain a course of events without making use of some express literary form of a narrative, rhetorical, or imaginative character. Any idea of chronological succession must be banished from our use of the term 'operative phase'."
- 10 Therefore Ricoeur's (2004:147) remark that "we must not forget that everything starts, not from the archives, but from testimony, and that, whatever may be our lack of principle in such testimony, we have nothing better than testimony, in the final analysis, to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past".
- 11 Ricoeur (2004:169) underlines an important difference between oral testimony and the document in the archive: "A document in the archive is open to whomever knows how to read. Therefore it has no designated addressee, unlike oral testimony addressed to a specific interlocutor. What is more, the document sleeping in the archive is not just

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- silent, it is an orphan. The testimonies it contains are detached from the authors who 'gave birth' to them."
- 12 Ricoeur (2004:177) also quotes Antoine Prost's declaration that the historian's question "is not a bare question, it is an armed question that brings with it a certain idea of possible documentary sources and research procedures". The document is not simply given. It is sought and found. It must also be noted that for the historian everything can become a document (debris from archaeological excavations, parish registers, wills, price curves, etc.). Everything can be interrogated by the historian who seeks information about the past.
- 13 In this process there are two important guiding principles. The first has to do with the fact that historians use explanatory models that have in common their tendency to relate to human reality as a social fact. Hence, history takes its place among the social sciences. A second feature has to do with the construction of time spans (for instance, macrohistorical or microhistorical scales). In this regard, Ricoeur imaginatively proposes the use of a variety of time scales in the explanatory process.
- 14 Ricoeur refers here to the French *Annales* school (and the overarching figure of Fernand Braudel) with its privileging of the notion of "mentalités". Ricoeur also considers the work of what he refers to as the three advocates of rigour (Foucault, Certeau and Elias). With regard to the move from mentalities to representation, Ricoeur (2004:227) writes: "Therefore, over against the unilateral, undifferentiated, massive idea of mentality, that of representation expresses better the plurivocity, the differentiation, and the multiple temporalisation of social phenomena."
- 15 Ogbu Kalu refers, for instance, to the shift from the missionary and nationalist genre to ecumenical historiography as one of the key concerns in modern African historiography. See Kalu 2005:21-23.
- 16 González, J L, *The changing shape of church history* (2002). González argues that these changes require a new geography and cartography.
- 17 For another critical perspective on the notion of the archive, see Jacques Derrida's influential deconstructive reading in his book *Archive fever: A Freudian impression* (1995). For an engagement with Derrida, see also Vosloo (2005).