Book Reviews

Binsar Jonathan Pakpahan


Recently, some influential studies have been published on remembrance. Some of these studies address the specific relationship between a traumatic past and situations of current conflict in which the (often ruined, tainted or disfigured) memory of the ‘past’ plays an important role in the social ‘framing’ process of what is at stake. ‘To remember’ seems to be an activity that cannot go without a certain use of social memory that may link with political strategies about what how to remember and what certainly not (see the literature of Jenny Edkins for instance).

Within philosophical discourses thinkers started to reflect upon this politics of remembering, asking about the language and symbolic representations of memory as it is used in popular culture, see for example the work of Jaques Derrida on the archive, Jean-François Lyotard on representation and the landmark-study of Paul Ricœur on memory, history and forgetting. Most of these efforts were predominantly European and took the holocaust as most important historical point that produced problematic representations, tainted memories and neurotic politics in the present.

How to remember and what is there to remember? Another important question is whether ‘to remember’ is something that means something different in different contexts. Of course, the holocaust is not remembered in Indonesia the same way as in Europa and traumatic historical events belonging to Indonesian history are remembered differently in Europe and Indonesia. Even shared histories may be remembered differently, as shows the current discussion in the Netherlands about studying its role during the so-called police-actions in the late 1940s. In 2005, Mary Zurbuchen published an edited volume on the importance of memory in the Indonesian context: *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present* (Singapore University Press), with a strong emphasis on political violence in postcolonial Indonesia. This emphasis on memory and trauma and its impact on present-day representations has not left theologians unaware. Miroslav Volf for instance who has
published widely on reconciliation and forgiveness, reflects upon the difficult structures of memory within a theological context, see his ‘God’s Forgiveness and Ours: Memory of Interrogations; Interrogations of Memory’.1

These developments within both memory-studies and theology (where forgiveness and reconciliation becomes important terms) is taken up very well in Binsar Pakpahan’s book, which is based on his 2011 dissertation at the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam. Pakpahan’s research question is enormous rich and covers different disciplinary fields: He takes a start at recent developments in the culture of remembrance, enriches this ‘culture’ with exegetical and Biblical-theological notions about a God who remembers, together with liturgical notions (especially on the Eucharist), and applies these insights and notions within the context of an Indonesian church-conflict.

The aim of the study is to understand the consequences of a situation in which remembrance is replaced by forgetting as a strategy to deal with the past. The conflict Pakpahan studies arose within the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP) in 1992 and was mainly about authority, which resulted in uncertainty and different perspectives on the church. When the conflict was ended in 1998 (not due to conflict-management but because of changing political frames and the age of some conflict-actors), the violent conflict was covered by a culture of forgetting.

Pakpahan asks whether there could be a shared source to uncover this conflict in order to deal with past trauma’s and pains inflicted on this Christian community. He searches for theological and communal frames to reopen the past. In Pakpahan’s perspective, the Eucharist is an important instrument to connect the present community with the past. It is God who remembers in the work of Christ. Following this narrative, the traumatic history of the community relates to the work of remembrance — not in order to forget, but in order to remember and to forgive. This way, Pakpahan argues, the Eucharist serves a worldwide community and gives the opportunity to ‘give away’ pain and trauma to a God who remembers.

Pakpahan has written a brave and comprehensive, thought-provoking study. Brave, because a study about remembrance in Indonesia may count for some cultural resistance. Indonesia’s burial grounds are full of unsolved histories that ‘one do not speak about’. Only lately, there is a growing interest among the younger generation into Indonesia’s past. Pakpahan’s dissertation surely contributes to this interesting development. His study is also comprehensive in combining different academic fields of research, although his study

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