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The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World (Book Review)

David M. Johnstone

George Fox University, djohnsto@georgefox.edu

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Miroslav Volf

The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2006 hb 244pp \$22.00

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Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian teaching at Yale Divinity School, tackles in this book the idea that for an action to be truly forgiven, it also needs to be forgotten. Volf explores whether it is possible, desirable, or even necessary to forget evil. Using experiences in the Yugoslav army, where he was frequently interrogated by the state security forces, he weaves profound reflections that draw from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, literature, reason, and the reality of life. The reader is invited on a journey that stretches, provokes, and somewhat disturbs. It is a journey where Volf and the reader wrestle with the notions of remembering, forgiving, and following Jesus. Volf wraps this exploration in gentleness, respect, and patience.

Volf's impetus for the book seems to be caught in the phrase, "To triumph, evil needs two victories, not one. The first happens when an evil deed is perpetrated; the second victory, when evil is returned" (p. 9). As a follower of Jesus, he stands in opposition to systemic and relational evil, injustice, and perpetrated wrongs. He observes that in bringing about more than justice, forgiveness and proper remembrance must be factors in the goal of preventing evil from triumphing.

Volf asserts that remembrance of injustice or evil is critical, but it must be truthful and not embellished. To remember truthfully is important for both the victim and the perpetrator. Further, it is imperative to agree that no one stands outside of the realm of wrongdoing. Beyond remembering truthfully, there must be an assent that God extends his grace to all. This grace is undeserved mercy. Therefore, the receipt of grace implies that the recipient is actually guilty. If God acknowledges guilt, extends forgiveness, and provides grace, how much more should his followers do the same? Remembering truthfully is an important part of truly understanding ourselves and our relationship to God. But remembering truthfully and forgiving does not automatically bring injustice to an end.

Volf is realistic, challenging, and pastoral. He understands that to demand forgiveness from a victim is to revictimize them. He writes that "as long as reconciliation has not taken place, the obligation to remember wrongs stands" (p. 205).

Volf suggests that forgetting may not happen until eternity, and then it becomes more of a fading than a repression. He sympathizes with the reader in understanding that complete forgiveness, the fading of memory of wrong, and full reconciliation, may be difficult on earth (p. 144). He also notes that “memory of evil is what many evildoers want” (p. 213). There are paradoxical dilemmas with memory. The notoriety that comes with evil actions is often what the perpetrator desires. Volf suggests that in heaven and at times on earth, evil will not be forgotten; it “will simply fail to surface in one’s consciousness—they will not come to mind” (p. 145). In short, memories of wrongs will no longer be relevant and will fade away.

The relevance of Volf’s reflections is manifold. Any instructor in mediation, conflict reconciliation, or peacemaking will find his thoughts rich in substance. However, I have another personal interest: I teach, coach, and encourage college student leaders to build strong communities on a college campus. Many educational theorists of the last few centuries have asserted that for higher education in particular, educators must approach student learning in a holistic manner. What happens in the classroom is affected by what occurs outside of the classroom. The impact of damaged and destroyed relationships can ripple through the lives of domestic and international students. Assisting them through forgiveness and reconciliation has a powerful personal and educational impact. This process provides a model for them to facilitate peacemaking and reconciliation in their later lives.

More specifically, residential colleges are unique in American society. On our campus, over 1,100 students live in close proximity to one another. To reinforce their educational experience, the creation of a supportive community is imperative. However, the hothouse of growing adolescence, the intensity of relationships, and the normal changes in intellectual and physical development make for interesting learning experiences. For Christian colleges, these communities are defined by the residents’ faith in Jesus, which presupposes the expectation of forgiveness and reconciliation within relationships. The residential community not only reinforces the classroom, but becomes a living laboratory for working out the dynamics of reconciliation. Beyond these settings, relationships within classrooms and among trained educators can also benefit from models of reconciliation. Simply put, Volf provides a model for educational and residential settings that encourages and facilitates transformation of the relationship between antagonistic parties. This transformation opens the door to reconciliation, thereby reinforcing the community, which is integral to the pedagogical process. *Soli Deo Gloria*

David M. Johnstone