

# MEMORY AND RESPONSIBILITY: AN ORTHODOX VIEW

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After the rich presentation of Prof. Halpérin, some things that I had to say myself have already been said by him. I am especially grateful for the remarks made to all of us that memory obliges in the same way as rank has its obligations (*noblesse oblige*), or even more than every human nobility. For myself, I will express some thoughts as a humble personal witness which may remind us that memory and responsibility are among the main points of contact and mutual understanding between Jews and Christian Orthodox. This is perhaps the greatest opportunity of witness and offering, which no one else is in a position to offer to the modern world.

We notice daily that today's world has mostly lost its memory and consequently its responsibility. And this is clear, in a particularly painful way, where we can touch with our hands the bloody wounds of the people of God or, in Christian language, where we can place our finger on the place of the nail in the body of our crucified Lord! I dare say that we also see this in my country, ex-Yugoslavia, where the theme of memory and responsibility can be the key for the solution of the bloody and inhuman drama which unfortunately no one from within or outside can invoke or think as directly related to what is actually happening.

But I would like, first of all, to remind you that memory, as has already been said, is one of the basic concepts in the Jewish tradition. Prof. Halpérin recalled to our memory how many times we find forms of the verb *remember* in the Old Testament. This holds the same value for our Christian Orthodox understanding. Memory is, in fact, one of the basic biblical and ecclesiastical concepts, and also a synonym for

tradition which is determining and binding to both of our traditions, because without memory there is no tradition. Only the things which have been received are handed over, preserved through the living memory, and are entrusted to future generations. Whatever has been said about memory, confirmed through passages in the Bible, also holds absolutely for us and expresses us.

Please allow me also to say that five thousand years should be immediately added to the age of a Hebrew — according to the witty parable which we heard — five thousand years of the preceding history of the people of God. In an analogous way, in the Christian and Orthodox perspective, I would say that not only five thousand years should be added to the memory of each Orthodox Christian, but also the years which still wait for us in the future until the end of times. Because memory, in its full biblical dimension, as interpreted already in the New Testament and in the entire ecclesiastical tradition, is twofold. It is on the one hand a historical memory, in the sense that we always remember the greatness of God, all the works of divine love for the life and salvation of the world with the center as the chosen people of the Old and New Testaments, and also on the other hand the catholic and eschatological memory, memory which expresses the mind of Christ, according to the theological language of the Church, the mind of the Church. This in turn includes all the works of God, of which only a part have been historically completed, and eschatologically and on the level of Divine Providence and love of God since before the beginning of times are already accomplished, whereas the full revelation of the whole work of God will take place, in agreement with the Christian faith, during the Second Coming and the end of times. I consider this dimension of memory necessary, because it is only through the catholic eschatological memory that we will be able to have a Lydian stone which will be a criterion for the value and noteworthiness of historical memory.

As Prof. Halpérin correctly stressed, there can also be a misuse of historical memory. It would not be necessary to stress how the New Testament continues and develops further the Old Testament remembrance and commandment to remember, and how the liturgical language and life of the Orthodox Church is one continuous remembering.

Responsibility belongs to the category of spirituality and theology. I am not referring here to philosophical and other dimensions of this notion. Responsibility is not understood outside the limits of the biblical anthropology which is common to both of our traditions. Only man, who is a being created according to the image and likeness of God and who has the gift of free will, as the Fathers of the Church say, is really responsible for his works and his initiatives. Without wanting to confine myself to abstract analysis, allow me at this point to mention with much

simplicity and directness that I consider responsibility dependent upon memory, and upon the whole memory of the people of God, and not the reverse. Wherever this entire memory is missing, there will also be missing sooner or later a responsible attitude toward ourselves, our neighbor and the Giver of our life and salvation. Of course, memory cannot be cultivated in a correct manner without responsibility. Memory entails responsibility. This relationship between the two is so profound and organic that only in a scholastic way could we separate them. I personally see the aim of responsibility in this holy memory which has been transmitted by tradition.

The situation with the modern world, especially after the fall of the communist utopia and the very timid announcement of a new order of things, seems to be contrary to this basic Judaic and Christian sense of holy history and holy memory that is identified with tradition. The modern world is interested in its economic stability and also the economic well-being, if not for all at least for those who are the happy few, and consequently rejects every kind of memory which could cut down or be an obstacle to this natural chain of things.

I will give you a simple example. We recently had visitors from North America in Belgrade who came clearly for issues concerning humanitarian aid. This meeting had no ecclesiastical or political dimension. There was nothing sensitive which could create difficulties. An Orthodox friend from America who is familiar with the mentality of the Orthodox people, informed us not to mention anything about history in front of our visitors, and not even to mention the word history, because they would immediately become nervous. I don't know if this example could be characterized as happy or sad. In addition, during different meetings in which we tried to explain historical reasons, that is to recall in the memory of our interlocutors the causes and the preceding events for today's tragedy in our country, they usually responded to us by saying that we should leave the past, the old histories, long memories, and erase everything, and that we should only deal with the present and the future things. In one such discussion, I obliged myself to say that this is not feasible because the forgotten history and memory is our identity and has brought forth the present war in our country. The people who are fighting each other, Croatians, Muslims and Serbs, speak the same language, live in the same area, have a common or similar history which is full of painful memories, and yet have a problem of coexistence because they are differentiated radically — unfortunately at this moment the differences cannot be bridged — over the question of memory and consequently the feeling of responsibility. Each of them has a different kind of approach to memory and consequently to responsibility.

Prof. Halpérin, in order to portray in an artistic way his attitudes, mentioned impressive examples from Russian life and literature. Personally I would like to draw from my humble examples of painful experience of my own country. I will mention very briefly how I see the people fighting each other in our country with respect to the subject of responsibility and memory. Of course, there are some determining factors coming from the outside for the faith and tragedy of our people. For reasons of sincerity and correct memory and responsible attitude, I have to declare that I consider, as the historical sin of my people and one of the main reasons, the fact that the same people have allowed themselves to be entangled with foreign ones in their tradition and their own authentic memory and incidents.

This sin can be described as a lack of memory, forgetfulness in a certain historical moment after the departure of the Turks from the Balkans, and consequently spiritual and ontological but also historical irresponsibility which is now paid for at a very heavy price. Without referring to many details, what I mean here is that the Serbian people in the first decades of our century left behind different memories, traditions, spiritualities, and have been leaning only on the common racial origin and linguistic relationship. Based on these facts they went on to create the state of Yugoslavia. This proves the deeper spiritual loss of memory and insensibility.

After the Second World War, the Serbian people committed the same sin even in a heavier form. During the Second World War, like the Jews and certain other peoples of humanity, they were victims of genocide during the Hitler occupation. The memory of this genocide in the state of Croatia, which was a satellite state of Nazi Germany, not only has not been experienced and interpreted as it ought to be, but no effort has been made to draw conclusions and place the whole theme on a different basis, without of course any evil and hate. On the contrary, the Serbian people, being oppressed by the Communist system, agreed to erase and forget the genocide in the vain hope that reconciliation would take place. And on this point, the attitude of the Jewish people has many things to teach and to show through example, how much frivolousness and irresponsibility has been expressed in the attitude of my own people. No regime, no violence, no temptation allowed our leaders and also our people to cover with deadly silence the fact that approximately one million of that nation were lost especially because of their identity.

A great artist and intellectual friend of our people, and in a parallel way a great figure of the Jewish community of Belgrade, Ericos Joseph, has declared many times that he considers the Serbian people as one of the very few people on earth that can really say they have lived all the

traumatism and all the persecutions of the people of Israel through history. At the same time, they are one of the peoples in history in which there was no anti-Judaism, neither on a theoretical or a practical level.

Allow me to make a parenthesis to say that in our dialogues it would be perhaps good to stay away from the term "antisemitism." Those who are against the Jews, consider them bad people or have a dislike for them, do so for whatever other reason, but not because they belong to the Semitic race. The same enemies of Jews do not have anything against other Semites in a parallel way. Therefore the correct terminology is anti-Judaism or anti-Jewish.

For us Christians, on a theological level, there can be no possibility for such persecution of faith, because the central theological problem that differentiates us is the quarrel concerning the person of Christ, the Messiah. We, the Christians, believe that ancient Israel was the chosen people of God who had already been announced by our common prophets, and the Messiah who was accepted by Israel came and that this was Jesus Christ, although the majority of the Jews of that time and of today have another belief: they believe that the Messiah has not yet come. But this quarrel is not a problem which exists inside Israel. The first Church was wholly Jewish. There were only a few non-Jewish Christians from the pagan nations who, as we see clearly from the theology of Saint Paul and the New Testament in general, were considered and considered themselves as people coming from outside and having access to the Israel of God.

Consequently, Orthodox Christians do not consider themselves strangers to Israel, but rather as belonging to Israel based on spiritual identity and faith, and in this way they want themselves to be related to Abraham and the forefathers of Israel. They cannot be enemies of the Jews. Yet on the practical level — as is happening in a tragic way in Western Europe and sporadically in Eastern Europe and certain areas in Russia — there were persecutions, pogroms against the Jews. Those who committed these practices not only sinned against the Jewish people but also against their own faith and their own Church. Therefore, the works of these people cannot be considered as guilt of the Orthodox Church. I will not say any more about this subject. I mentioned this as a parenthesis, having been moved by the examples mentioned earlier.

Allow me to describe the attitude, as I see it, of the other peoples in our country, who in the same way are suffering. The Serbs have tried, after the fall of Communism, to remember their historical and ecclesiastical memory, which goes together with their responsibility toward their past but also toward their future. But after so many decades of loss of memory and irresponsibility, this brought conflict because it was already considered natural and inevitable that the Serbs are not a well-

structured people: they have no memory, no tradition, no spirituality, no responsibility, but they are a herd of human beings lead by the desire of others.

Our neighbors and brothers, the Croats, unlike us, never lost their memory. Their fault, as I understand it, was the separation of memory and responsibility. They have conserved the memory but in a very irresponsible way without the analogous responsibility. This appears very clearly in their effort to realize their perennial dream, which is also at the same time their right, which I cannot blame, to restore an independent state. It is irresponsible, however, to recall from the historical memory the rhetoric and symbols which are tied in with the independent state of Croatia during the Second World War and the genocide, where there were in the concentration camps Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and others who were considered as people not worthy of living. One of the symbols was the Croatian flag of today, the Hitleric swastika! Even if there was nothing else, neither violence nor threat with arms nor obliteration of the Serbian people from the constitutional Croatia, this simple fact of an irresponsible use of historical memory would be enough to create a war. My dear Jewish friends who are present here, who among you, your Jewish brothers, your children, would tolerate the rule of a chief of a state where you live as a minority, to accept in your own house the symbol of Hitleric swastika? Would you prefer the martyrdom of death, or to have the swastika over your heads? The answer for me is obvious. No child of the Jewish people can tolerate this symbol. The same is happening with the Serbs of Croatia. That's why I stress again the fact that many of us Serbs have unfortunately lost our memory and responsibility, and now in a very painful way we are trying to restore this two-natured good: memory and responsibility. The others having memory but no responsibility found themselves in the same or worse situation.

With respect to these points, it is neither humble nor problematic in any way, but rather helpful and encouraging for us, the Orthodox Christians, that persevering and uncompromising cultivation of holy memory does not imply vengefulness or rejection, but rather each time examining in light of the divine economy and providence of the historical events and under the catholic light of the mind of Christ, the mind of the Church, the question of responsibility of memory or holy memory of responsibility. We have many things to be taught and to draw from these examples, not only of the past centuries which are preserved in memory in a zealous way, which the Jewish Diaspora has also preserved, but also especially today concerning the genocide during the Second World War. It is our concern and anxiety to name and write down all the victims so they cannot be forgotten, to be preserved in the sense of

the Orthodox term — may their memory be eternal in man and not only in the memory of God where all just people are preserved eternally. At the same time, these names must be written on a list, not because of revenge which doubts the judgment of God, but precisely to avoid the repetition of these tragic events. I don't know what the State of Israel accomplished on this, but I am of the opinion that important personalities of the Jewish people have done this on the philological, philosophical and also on a practical level, like Wiesenthal in Vienna. I think we should be grateful to the Jewish people for this reminder and this example.

To conclude, from different discussions that I have had occasionally with Jewish friends, I think that in some cases there is a threat to your own memory and latent spiritual danger or temptation. I dare limit this to some Jewish friends who have the tendency to evaluate persons and things within the Church on the basis of their attitude and direction against the State of Israel where the sense of Israel is identified with the State of Israel of today. For example, a man who with his acts and being proved that he has no hate toward anybody, but in a certain moment of carelessness or passion he wrote or said certain things which were anti-Jewish, does not in such moments express the ethos of his Church or even many times of himself. So I think that without ignoring those lapses, because of the duty for memory and responsibility, such cases must not be blown out of proportion and create a climate of distrust or reservation in our dialogue. Our dialogue must be open and sincere if we are to be faithful to the biblical spirit. In this manner, I am convinced that misunderstandings born of lack of healthy memory and similarly responsibility can be resolved.

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