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<b>Autor:</b>	Mayo, Joël / Feenstra, Madelief
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# Introduction to the Thematic Focus – Exploring Postcolonial Religious Memory

Joël Mayo/Madelief Feenstra

While there is no doubt that a multiplication of *lieus de mémoires* characterises our present<sup>1</sup>, one of the lingering questions seems to be whether the pluralisation of contemporary memory culture is accompanied by some form of cultural integration that translates colonial entanglements into a postcolonial interweaving of memories. Since Maurice Halbwachs' foundational insight that access the past through collective, socio-cultural frameworks, social and cultural memory studies have tightened the relationship between *history* and *memory*.<sup>2</sup> But although the postcolonial reassessment of history has always been linked to the themes of individual and collective historical experience, and the selectivity and perspectivity of historiography, it is only recently that the topic of *memory* has become an explicit area of attention in postcolonial studies.<sup>3</sup> Highlighting the inequalities

<sup>1</sup> On the trend towards emancipation from memory imperatives and the internal pluralisation of cultures of remembrance since the 1990s, cf. Karl-Ernst Jeismann, *Geschichtsbilder: Zeitdeutungen und Zukunftsperspektive*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 51–52(2002), 13–22; Jakob Krameritsch, *Die fünf Typen des historischen Erzählens – Im Zeitalter digitaler Medien*, in: *Zeithistorische Forschung/Studies in Contemporary History*, 8/3(2009), 419–420; Aleida Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne*, München 2013, 245–280; Christoph Cornelissen, *Der Beitrag von Schulen und Universitäten zu Erinnerungskulturen*, in: Peter Gautschi/Barbara Sommer Häller (eds.), *Der Beitrag von Schulen und Hochschulen zu Erinnerungskulturen*, Schwalbach 2014, 28–31.

<sup>2</sup> Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, Basingstoke 2011, 14–37; cf. Peter Burke, *Geschichte als soziales Gedächtnis*, in: Aleida Assmann/Dietrich Harth (Hg.), *Mnemosyne. Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung*, Frankfurt a.M. 1993, 290–292.

<sup>3</sup> As one of the central authors: Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford 2009, esp. 1–29; cf. Lucy Bond/Jessica Rapson (eds.), *The Transcultural Turn. Interrogating Memory between and Beyond Borders*, Berlin/Boston 2014; Barbara Törnquist-Plewa/Niklas Bernsand/Marco La Rosa (eds.), *In Search of Transcultural Memory in Europe*, Lund 2017; Dirk Götsche (ed.), *Memory and Postcolonial Studies. Synergies and New Directions*, Oxford/Bern/Berlin/Wien 2019.

this situation (re-)produces, ‹memory activists› and academic scholars alike frequently point to the gaps and exclusions that characterise public awareness of the colonial past.<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, the demand for a more inclusive, transcultural practice of remembrance intertwines questions about the cultural ways and means of remembering with questions about the memorial function of historiography. On the one hand, the implications of of asymmetrical narrative powerrelations raise scientific questions about the conditions under which historical narratives are configurated.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, societal questions about their functionalisation are raised, referring to the modes by which memory is practiced and enacted.<sup>6</sup> The 2024 thematic issue of the *Swiss Journal of Religious and Cultural History* is dedicated to the tense and interwoven relationship across and between these areas of interest, aiming to break new ground by bringing religion into the emerging synergy between postcolonial and memory studies.

Regarding its entanglement with European imperialism, particularly in the field of missionary history, religion was a central thread within the colonial fabric of cultural violence.<sup>7</sup> Although many indigenous beliefs did not survive its profound challenges, the colonial history of religious encounters cannot be limited to the term of subjugation. It describes processes of cultural adaptation and accommodation, wherein merging components of alterity into new hybrid identities also

<sup>4</sup> Cf., for example in the Dutch context: Markus Balkenhohl, Silence and the Politics of Compassion. Commemorating Slavery in the Netherlands, in: *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 24/3 (2006), 278 – 293; Gert Oostindie, Postcolonial Netherlands. Sixty-five years of forgetting, commemorating, silencing, Amsterdam 2011; Esther Captain, The Selective Forgetting and Remodelling of the Past. Postcolonial Legacies in the Netherlands, in: Stefan Jonsson/Julia Willén (eds.), *Austere Histories in European Societies. Social Exclusion and the Contest of Colonial Memories*, London/New York 2017, 73–87.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcoloniality and the Critique of History, in: *Cultural Studies* 6/3(1992), 337; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History, Boston (MA) 2015, 22–30; Michael Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization, Stanford 2009, 1–29.

<sup>6</sup> On the modes or representation, cf. Astrid Erll, Narratology and Cultural Memory Studies, in: Sandra Heinen/Roy Sommer (eds.), *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, Berlin/New York 2009, 220–221; for a diagnosis of the ubiquity of the antagonistic mode from a sociological perspective, cf. Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*, Berlin 2022, 394–423.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Willy Pfändtner/David Thurfiell, Introduction, in: Willy Pfändtner/David Thurfiell (eds.), *Postcolonial Challenges to the Study of Religion*, Uppsala 2008, 6; on the central theme of epistemic violence, cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in: Patrick Williams/Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory. A Reader*, New York 2013, 76–77.

represented a complex form of cultural resistance.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, what we usually designate as ‹religious› plays an important role in the societal and cultural developments of both, the colonial, and the postcolonial era.<sup>9</sup> Against this background, the theme of this thematic issue, namely Postcolonial Religious Memory, is an invitation to explore, and reflect on how this multilayered history and its perpetual impact affects the configuration and collocation of memory on the terrain of the religious.

(1) *Media of memory*: What can be known, thought and said about the colonial past appears to be depending on the media in which we communicate.<sup>10</sup> In the opening contribution, *Felicity Jensz* provides an insight into this ‹mediality of memory›<sup>11</sup> by focussing on Protestant missionary films as a medium of postcolonial religious memory-making in inter-war Germany. Jensz succeeds in demonstrating, how these films popularised a nostalgic image of missionary work in the ‹lost› colonies, which in turn provided a ‹lieu de mémoire› for the promotion and spread of colonial revisionist ideas and the promise of a religious continuation in German postcolonial spaces.

(2) *Entanglements of missionary memory*: Continuing with the theme of memory-making, other contributions address the legacy and heritage of missionary histories, with a connecting moment arising from their respective focus on the contents and voids in representations of history. Using the example of two missions from Italy and Switzerland, *Fabio Rossinelli* and *Filiberto Ciaglia* illustrate how missionaries pursued scientific, and financial interests outside of their mandate, offering an insight on how the imbalance between highlighting their erudite activities and maintaining discretion regarding economic affairs shaped the way in which the missionary memory was constructed. Shifting the geographical focus, *Christian Antonio Rosso*'s contribution offers a reflection on Italian missionaries as actors of remembrance in a field of tension between religios and ‹civilising› mission. Through various phases of colonialism and missionary expansion at

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, *Die Verortung der Kultur*, Tübingen 2000, esp. 151–180; on the concept of cultural hybridity in general cf. Patricia Purtschert/Barbara Lüthi/Francesca Falk, *Eine Bestandesaufnahme der postkolonialen Schweiz*, in: id. (eds.), *Postkoloniale Schweiz. Formen und Folgen eines Kolonialismus ohne Kolonien*, Bielefeld 2012, 17–19; with a focus on the role of memory, cf. Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory. A Critical Introduction*, New York/Chichester 2019, 19–17.

<sup>9</sup> Willy Pfändtner/David Thurfjell, *Introduction*, in: Willy Pfändtner/David Thurfjell (eds.), *Postcolonial Challenges to the Study of Religion*, Uppsala 2008, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Aleida Assmann/Jan Assmann, *Einleitung*, in: Eric A. Havelock, *Schriftlichkeit: das griechische Alphabet als kulturelle Revolution*, Weinheim 1990, 2–3.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Harald Welzer, *Die Medialität des menschlichen Gedächtnisses*, in: BIOS, *Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen*, 1/21 (2008), 15–27; Astrid Erll/Ann Rigney (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, Berlin 2009; Astrid Erll, *Media and the Dynamics of Memory*, in: Brady Wagoner, *Handbook of Culture and Memory*, Oxford 2018, 305–324.

the Horn of Africa and in view of various ideological production centres the author shows how political events and shifts affected their writing and measured rewriting of the history of Catholic presence in Somalia. Drawing from concepts and approaches in social and cultural memory studies, *Madelief Feenstra*'s contribution revisits the tension-filled entanglement of Christian mission and colonial (business) through the lens of the present, analysing the transformation of mission memory constructions in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. Her contribution sheds light on recent efforts to examine, acknowledge, and address one's (own) history in regard to the Dutch participation in the transatlantic slave trade. By highlighting tensions and competing memories, these contributions offer stimulating examples of the means, the selectivity and dynamic nature of memory-making with respect to the integration of mission into the logic of imperialism.

(3) *Decolonising mission through memory?* At the intersection of this trend towards increased (self-)reflexibility, two contributions are dedicated to mission and inculcation as central categories of religious and church history pertaining to the history, heritage, and legacy of colonialism. In his article, *Marcello Grifò* turns his attention to local theological reflection of postcolonial memory formation to demonstrate how the research approach of a theology of African memory can intervene in the foundation of a hopeful culture of memory in the spirit of universal reason. In turn, *Ilaria Macconi Heckner* shifts the perspective to the impact postcolonial revisions of memory can have on theological thought and its implementation into everyday missionary work. In her exploration she illuminates how decolonisation processes and the Second Vatican Council initiated a profound process of self-reflection, which, through the medium of memory, re-configured the narrative on evangelisation and the missionaries' understanding of their role, revealing that the debate on the complex relationship between faith and culture, the missionary past and future, ultimately leads to decolonising the very idea of mission.

(4) *Individual experience and memory:* While memory can be described as «[...] the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts»<sup>12</sup>, questions about the types and particularities with which colonial and missionary experiences are organised<sup>13</sup>, are also tackled in this thematic issue. How do religious individuals remember colonial religious encounters in a postcolonial present? How do these religious' memories align with or contrast dominant narratives? *Mick Feyaerts, Simon Nsielanga and Idesbald Goddeeris* answer these questions

<sup>12</sup> Astrid Erll, Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction, in: Astrid Erll/Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin 2008, 3–4.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jeffrey K. Olick, From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products, in: Erll/Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies* (see note 12), 151–163.

in their article on the memories of Congolese religious', whereby the silencing of dark pages is explored as a political practice of postcolonial empowerment and identity-making. In a way complementary to this examination of a collective typology in the modes of remembrance of Jesuits and Annonciades in Congo and Congolese clergy in Belgium, *Daniel Annen* explores how Swiss Catholic missionary Thomas Immoos' contact with Japanese religiosity affected his religious consciousness. Dealing with the complexity of individual experience, the author uses the concept of *reciprocal missionary work* to examine how Immoos' scientific inquiries into Japanese cult theatre, Shintoism and Buddhism opened him a new source of meaning. With their respective approaches and foci, both contributions succeed in demonstrating how individual experience and collective memory can serve as instruments for their bearers in critically examining deficient aspects of their socio-cultural present.

(5) *Historiography and sermon as modes of remembering*: Turning from experiences as a source to historiography and sermon as modes of remembering, another field of attention is opened: The place of religion in discourses and practices of postcolonial memory. *Silvia Cristofori*'s discussion of the groundbreaking work of the Ibadan School of History in 1950s Nigeria unpacks how colonial historiographical traditions and narrative constructions were countered by incorporating pre-colonial oral traditions and non-academic histories written by the Christian elite into an Africanist, decolonial history of Nigeria in service of burgeoning nationalism. Similarly linked to the function that history and religion have in terms of identity and political legitimisation, *Francesca Badini* explores the politics of remembrance in the sermons of Egyptian exegete Muhammad al-Ġazālī in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. His references to the Qur'anic *«Battle of Badr»* tapped into and reactivated a *«collective religious memory»* to justify the political and military decisions of Egypt's President Anwar Sadat.

Covering these topics, this year's volume maps an interconnected and multi-faceted field of approaches to the complex phenomenon of religious memory, its construction, public usage, contestation and transformation, taking into account different agents in the public sphere, in the past and the present, between colonisation and decolonisation.

Joël Mayo/Madelief Feenstra

