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The Concept of Memory in the Work of Miroslav Volf: A Critical Survey

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Abstract: Miroslav Volf's concept of memory is deeply connected to his broader theological vision, shaped by his understanding of grace, reconciliation, and eschatological hope. This article surveys how memory fits within Volf's Christian framework, particularly its relationship to atonement and divine generosity. In *The End of Memory*, he argues that while memory is essential for justice and identity, it must ultimately be transformed by grace. In the eschaton, the memory of wrongdoing will gradually fade as a gift from God, making perfect communion with God and one another possible. This study explores how Volf's eschatology informs this claim and considers whether his framework sufficiently accounts for the moral weight of past suffering and the need for recognition. Engaging with critiques of his position, the article examines how his reflections on forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation shape his approach to remembering rightly. By situating his concept of memory within his larger theological project, this survey provides an overview of its role in his vision of redemption and the world to come.

Keywords: Miroslav Volf, theology of memory, reconciliation, justice, forgiveness, eschatology, Christian identity, wrongdoing, ethical memory, eschatological forgetting.

Introduction

Memory is a recurring concern in cultural and political discourse, at times framed as a moral obligation to preserve the past for the sake of our future or sense of identity. Yet beyond its role in society and religion, memory is an inevitable experiential struggle of life–sooner or later, each of us wrestles with how we remember our own past and how we will be remembered by others. We struggle to remember, unable to let go of what we wish to forget, while forgetting what we desperately want to hold on to. Moreover, memory is often faulty and deeply subjective, shaped as much by perception as by reality. This tension between remembering and forgetting is not only a personal challenge

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but also a broader moral and societal question. Elie Wiesel, reflecting on the Holocaust, warned that "without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque" and that the remembrance of past wrongs serves as a shield against future atrocities.[1] Yet the relationship between memory and justice is not straightforward. While memory can safeguard against the repetition of past evils, it can just as easily fuel cycles of resentment and division.

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian American theologian, is known for his work on reconciliation, shaped by both theological scholarship and personal experience. Growing up as a Protestant in the predominantly Catholic and Orthodox Yugoslavia, he belonged to a religious minority that faced marginalization under the communist regime. His father, a Pentecostal pastor, instilled in him a deep faith that was tested by social pressures and, later, by his own wrongful interrogation under the Yugoslav authorities.[2] These experiences helped shape his lifelong concern for how faith fosters human flourishing and reconciliation in divided societies.[3] While reconciliation is a major theme in his theology, his contributions extend beyond it, engaging with the nature of the church, the Trinity, and the role of faith in public life. His reflections on memory, most fully articulated in *The End of Memory*, emerge as an important sub-theme in his scholarship. These reflections are rooted in real experiences of violence–his own interrogation under a totalitarian regime and the ethnic conflicts of the Balkans–contexts in which memory becomes not just theological, but morally and politically urgent. In this work, he examines how memory shapes identity, serves justice, and ultimately participates in God's work of reconciliation. He argues that while remembering wrongdoing is necessary in the present, the eschatological future calls for a final release of memory to make way for perfect communion.[4]

Volf's broader theological vision, developed in *Exclusion and Embrace*, links memory to Christian identity, emphasizing how narratives of past suffering can reinforce antagonistic identities rather than fostering reconciliation.[5] This tension raises profound theological and ethical questions: Can one remember past injustice without being defined by it? Does true reconciliation require forgetting, or can memory itself be transformed? And what does it mean for Christian communities to practice "remembering rightly" in a world marked by violence and division?

In the theology of Miroslav Volf, memory plays a vital–though at times theologically fraught–role within the broader movement toward reconciliation. While not the central focus of his work, the way we remember, especially in the aftermath of wrongdoing,

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[1] Elie Wiesel, "Hope, Despair and Memory," *Nobel Lecture*, December 11, 1986.

[2] Rupert Shortt, "Miroslav Volf: Faith and Reconciliation–A Personal Journey," in *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 214–230.

[3] Mark Oppenheimer, "Embracing Theology: Miroslav Volf Spans Conflicting Worlds," *The Christian Century*, January 11, 2003.

[4] Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

[5] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, rev. and updated ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019).

becomes an unavoidable concern within his vision of justice, forgiveness, and eschatological healing. This article offers a critical survey of the concept of memory as it emerges across Volf's theological writings, with primary attention to *The End of Memory*. It begins by outlining the foundational features of his understanding of memory, before tracing how this concept interacts with major theological themes–particularly identity, atonement, eschatology, and ethics.

Volf proposes eschatological forgetting as a resolution to the burdens of memory–but critics raise concerns about justice, identity, and the enduring moral weight of past suffering. Some argue that his account does not fully resolve the tension between memory's role in securing justice and its potential to perpetuate resentment;[6] others question whether eschatological forgetting risks undermining the meaningfulness of reconciliation.[7] Rather than seeking to resolve every tension, the article examines how memory functions within Volf's wider theological framework, drawing out key questions about justice, reconciliation, and the moral responsibilities of remembering and forgetting. By tracing these themes, the aim is to clarify the internal logic of Volf's approach and highlight how his theology brings the demands of justice into conversation with the hope of future eschatological healing. In doing so, it provides a foundation for further theological reflection and analysis on whether memory can be transformed without coming to an end–and whether forgetting, as Volf envisions it, ultimately supports or unsettles the ethical meaning of reconciliation.

Though the article does not attempt to apply Volf's theology directly to any specific context, it is written against the background of the horrendous and ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has prompted deeper theological reflection on evil, identity, and memory. Writing from a Western context, though with Ukrainian heritage, I do not presume to tell Ukrainian theologians–amid the lived daily reality of war, violence, and injustice–how to respond to Volf's proposals about memory or forgiveness. My aim is not to evaluate these ideas on their behalf, but to present Volf's theology carefully and clearly, trusting that Ukrainian readers are best positioned to make their own theological judgments in light of their experience.

Theological Foundations for Remembering Rightly

The question of how Christians should remember past wrongs is an important aspect of Volf's theological vision. In *The End of Memory*, he argues that memory is not merely an act of recollection but a profound moral and theological responsibility. How we remember wrongdoing shapes both personal identity and communal relationships, making memory a force that can either contribute to healing or deepen

[6] Chris K. Huebner, review of *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, by Miroslav Volf, *Modern Theology* 24, no. 3 (2008): 513–516; Joshua Kira, review of *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, by Miroslav Volf, *Themelios* 46, no. 3 (December 2021): 738–739.

[7] Ante Jeroncic, review of *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, by Miroslav Volf, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 46 (Spring 2008): 156–158; M. Jane McArthur, *Memory in the New Creation: A Critical Response to Miroslav Volf's Eschatological Forgetting* (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2004).

division. For Volf, the challenge is particularly acute in the context of Christian reconciliation, where justice and love must be held together in the practice of remembering rightly.[8]

At the heart of his argument is the Christian imperative to love even those who have inflicted us harm. This does not mean ignoring injustice but remembering in a way that fosters reconciliation rather than resentment. He states:

> "Loving those who do me harm was precisely the hard path on which Jesus called me to follow him – a path that reflects more than any other the nature of his God and mine. Not to follow on that path would be to betray the One who is the source of our life and miss the proper goal of all our desires."[9]

Furthermore, memory is inherently ambiguous–it can serve justice, yet it can also entrench hostility. Volf warns that misused memory reinforces a sense of identity against the wrongdoer, perpetuating cycles of enmity rather than fostering restoration.[10] This risk is heightened when victims, in seeking justice, mirror the very patterns of oppression they suffered.[11] He describes memory as a shield and a sword–it protects against injustice but can also be wielded as a weapon of vengeance.[12] If remembering becomes an instrument of exclusion, it undermines the very justice it seeks to uphold. This aligns with Volf's broader argument that true justice is not about reversing power structures but about breaking their hold over identity. For Volf, justice must go beyond retribution; memory should not only expose wrongdoing but also create space for reconciliation. When memory is wielded only to condemn, rather than to transform, it risks reinforcing divisions rather than overcoming them.[13]

Thus, "remembering rightly" is both truthful and oriented toward reconciliation. Memory must acknowledge wrongdoing without allowing past harms to define relationships indefinitely.[14] At the same time, Volf stresses the fallibility of memory–it is shaped by interpretation, bias, and personal experience. This requires humility, ensuring that memory does not become distorted by self-righteousness or resentment. He argues that truthful remembering prevents memory from being weaponized in the service of either vengeance or self-righteousness.[15] This concern becomes especially urgent in post-conflict societies, where memory is burdened with collective trauma and often mobilized for political or national purposes. Volf's theology of memory responds directly to this dynamic, particularly in the context of the Balkan

[8] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 9–10.

[9] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 17.

[10] Miroslav Volf, "Difference, Violence, and Memory," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2009): 3–12; Volf, *The End of Memory*.

[11] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

[12] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 18.

[13] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*; Volf, *The End of Memory*.

[14] Huebner, review of *The End of Memory*, 513–516. Volf makes clear that reconciliation is not a passive process that disregards justice but requires that perpetrators take responsibility for their actions. True reconciliation is possible only after justice has been enacted–where wrongs are fully confronted, acknowledged, and addressed before relationships can be restored.

[15] Volf, *The End of Memory*.

wars, where the remembrance of injustice was used not only to grieve but also to justify cycles of retaliation.[16]

This approach challenges dominant narratives that use historical grievances to reinforce division. While Volf insists that victims must never be forced to forget, he also warns against being trapped in cycles of resentment. Remembering rightly requires self-examination–acknowledging not only the wrongs suffered but also one's own moral frailty before God. Ultimately, Volf argues that memory must serve the work of healing rather than obstructing reconciliation. This does not mean ignoring injustice but ensuring that memory contributes to restoration rather than hostility.[17] For Christians, remembering rightly means remembering truthfully and redemptively, aligning with the broader vision of reconciliation in Christ.[18]

Identity, Memory, and the Challenge of Wrongdoing

Miroslav Volf's theological approach to memory is deeply tied to the question of identity, particularly in the face of wrongdoing. While remembering past wrongs is often seen as necessary for justice, Volf warns that if memory is left unchecked, it can entrench division rather than foster reconciliation, particularly when it becomes the foundation of identity.[19] When identity is grounded in suffering endured, it necessitates a perpetual accusation of the wrongdoer, reinforcing division rather than fostering reconciliation.[20] This is particularly evident in collective memory, where historical injustices are often woven into national, ethnic, or political identities, making reconciliation appear as a betrayal rather than a step toward healing.

In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf warns against an identity built on antagonism, where self-understanding is dependent on opposition to others. When wrongdoing becomes the core of identity, it locks both victim and perpetrator into rigid roles, preventing transformation. Rather than allowing suffering to define the self, Volf argues for integration–acknowledging painful memories without allowing them to shape the self's core. Memory is to be reoriented within a redemptive framework, where past suffering forms identity without controlling it.

Volf situates this vision of identity within a distinctly theological anthropology. Against modern notions that define the self through memory and personal history, he insists that Christian identity is fundamentally received–shaped not by what we remember about ourselves, but by how God remembers us in Christ. This identity, given rather than grasped, liberates the self from the need to cling to grievance as a foundation of meaning, allowing memory to be integrated within a larger redemptive whole. Instead of defining itself over against the other, the self is reconstituted

[16] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 110.
[17] Jeroncic, review of *The End of Memory*, 156–158.
[18] Volf, *The End of Memory*.
[19] Volf, "Difference, Violence, and Memory," 3–12.
[20] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 124.

through God's embrace–a divine act that both affirms and transforms, making space for memory to participate in the work of reconciliation. This vision of identity as relational and grace-formed echoes Volf's broader theological claim that human personhood is patterned after the Triune God, whose being is constituted in love and openness toward the other.[21]

Accordingly, Christian identity must be shaped by grace rather than grievance, acknowledging past injustices while integrating them into a broader redemptive story. As Volf explains, "With a new identity in the center of that quilt, wrongdoings suffered are relegated to its periphery; they do not dominate the whole."[22] Even the meaninglessness of horrendous wrongs, he argues, "cannot ultimately shatter the wholeness of our lives," because of the hope for future disclosure of meaning.[23] This hope allows memories of wrongdoing to remain part of one's story without distorting it, freeing individuals and communities to become agents of healing rather than prisoners of grievance. While memory must not dominate identity, it is also not erased; rather, it finds its place within a redemptive narrative, where past suffering is acknowledged without becoming the defining feature of the self.

At the heart of this transformation lies Volf's theological account of redemption. Redemption, for Volf, is not limited to personal salvation or psychological relief, but involves the reconstitution of relationships, identities, and memories disfigured by wrongdoing. Through God's redemptive action, memories are no longer sites of moral accusation or exclusion but are transfigured into witnesses of grace. In this sense, redemption makes it possible to remember truthfully without remaining captive to grievance. It enables memory to serve identity without controlling it, drawing the self into a narrative of hope rather than enmity.[24]

The Passion of Christ provides the ultimate model for this transformation. At the foot of the cross, both victim and wrongdoer stand in need of truth and grace, revealing that no identity is reducible to past suffering or wrongdoing. Christian identity, therefore, is not shaped solely by suffering but by participation in God's self-giving love, which allows for a differentiated view of both the self and the offender.[25] Rather than reinforcing rigid divisions, the cross reorients identity around divine love, making reconciliation possible without erasing injustice. For Volf, the hope found in God's redemptive work enables memory to be engaged without becoming a source of perpetual estrangement. This hope does not invalidate past suffering but transforms its significance, ensuring that memory serves healing rather than grievance. By grounding identity in God's promise rather than past wounds, individuals and communities can move toward reconciliation in a way that honors truth while making space for new possibilities. In this way,

[21] Volf, *The End of Memory*; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

[22] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 81.

[23] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 78.

[24] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*; Volf, *The End of Memory*; Miroslav Volf, "The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (2000): 91–113.

[25] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 124.

memory itself is reshaped–no longer a force that imprisons identity in past suffering, but one that integrates pain into a redemptive narrative, preventing it from defining the self or perpetuating division.

The Biblical Framework of Memory in Volf's Theology of Atonement and Grace

Volf's theology of memory is deeply shaped by biblical paradigms of atonement and divine grace. He argues that Christian memory must be transformed by God's redemptive acts, particularly as expressed in the Exodus and the Passion of Christ, which serve as regulative meta-memories that shape Christian identity and ethical responsibility.[26] These sacred narratives establish a theological framework in which memory is not merely a tool for justice but a means of participating in divine reconciliation.

For Volf, the Exodus functions as a memory of liberation, a foundational event in which Israel is called to remember God's saving work as the basis for ethical life. This memory, however, is not about perpetual grievance but about shaping a redeemed identity.[27] Similarly, the Passion of Christ reconfigures memory through self-giving forgiveness, offering a framework in which even wrongdoing is remembered through the lens of grace.[28] The Eucharist, as a central Christian act of memory, reinforces this theological structure–"Do this in remembrance of me."[29] Volf argues that this command is not about static recollection but about entering into Christ's redemptive self-giving.[30] Memory is thus reoriented toward reconciliation rather than retaliation.

Atonement, in Volf's theology, is an act of divine generosity in which Christ's self-giving love absorbs enmity and transforms it into reconciliation.[31] This has profound implications for memory–if God remembers sin in light of atonement, then human memory should also be shaped by forgiveness rather than resentment. Volf underscores that Christ's death is not only in solidarity with victims but also as a substitute for perpetrators:

> "But Christ did not die only in solidarity with sufferers but also as a substitute for offenders. He died for those who do wrong, who cause suffering–for the enemies of God."[32]

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[26] Volf, *The End of Memory*.

[27] Miroslav Volf, "Love's Memory: Redemptive Remembering," in *The 2002 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture* (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2002), 71–82.

[28] Miroslav Volf, "Memory, Eschatology, Eucharist," *Liturgy* 22, no. 1 (2007): 27–38.

[29] Luke 22:19.

[30] Volf, *The End of Memory*.

[31] Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

[32] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 115.

This substitutionary role means that memory, like atonement, must be transformative. It does not simply retain the past but reframes it in light of Christ's self-giving love.

Moreover, Volf insists that Christ is not a third-party mediator in atonement but is both creditor and debtor:

> "On account of his divinity, Christ is one with God, to whom the 'debt' is owed… But since on account of Christ's humanity he is also one with us, the debtors, it is we who die in Christ and are thus freed from guilt."[33]

This robust understanding of atonement presents a challenge for the role of memory in justice. If Christ absorbs the burden of human transgression, does memory still serve justice, or does it primarily function to facilitate reconciliation? Volf suggests that just as atonement cancels the debt of sin, memory should move beyond perpetuating cycles of grievance.

While Volf acknowledges that justice must precede reconciliation, his theology prioritizes transformation over retribution, raising questions about whether his model sufficiently accounts for justice and accountability. If atonement ultimately leads to reconciliation, does memory still serve justice, or does it become primarily an instrument of healing? Volf maintains that justice is necessary but not ultimate–memory should not perpetuate grievance but enable grace-filled reconciliation.[34] However, this emphasis raises concerns about whether justice retains its full moral weight, particularly in cases where perpetrators refuse acknowledgment or structural injustice remains unaddressed. The issue of universal reconciliation further complicates this tension.

At the same time, Volf explicitly rejects universalism, arguing that although God's love is universal, some may ultimately reject it and remain separated from God,[35] his vision of final reconciliation and the fading away of memory of wrongdoing leads some to question whether his eschatological framework still leans toward universalism in practice, raising concerns about how justice functions in the eschaton.[36] If all are ultimately reconciled in Christ, does this mean that the fading of memory of wrongdoing diminishes the necessity of justice? Would this imply that justice serves only a temporary role before being subsumed into grace? Volf maintains that divine justice is fully enacted through Christ's atonement, yet these tensions remain unresolved. Ultimately, he envisions an eschatological reality where memory no longer functions as an indictment of past wrongs but ceases to bear the weight of division, becoming instead a participation in the redemptive work of God.

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[33] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 117.

[34] Volf, *The End of Memory*.

[35] Volf, *Free of Charge.*

[36] Kira, review of *The End of Memory*, 738–739.

The Eschatological End of Memory

Miroslav Volf argues that in the eschaton, memory of wrongdoing will no longer be necessary because all relationships will be fully reconciled in God's world of love. This does not mean that past events are erased, but that they will no longer define individuals or their relationships. Rather than being erased, memory of wrongdoing will lose its power over identity and relationships because reconciliation and justice will have been fully realized. Volf clarifies:

> "Complete erasure would go against the way we remember and forget now; though important memories may completely fade, they never really get erased. I propose instead that memories of wrongs, rather than being deleted, will simply fail to surface in one's consciousness–they will *not come to mind*."[37]

Drawing on Isaiah 65:17 – "the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind"–Volf suggests that in the world to come, wrongs will be so fully healed that they will cease to surface as sources of pain, resentment, or division, but instead testify to God's redemptive work.[38]

In the present world, memory plays a crucial role in justice and reconciliation, ensuring that wrongdoing is acknowledged and addressed. However, once justice is fully realized in the eschaton, memory will no longer serve this function. Clinging to the memory of wrongs indefinitely risks perpetuating cycles of resentment, whereas true reconciliation requires a transformation of memory so that past suffering no longer holds power over identity and relationships.[39]

Volf links eschatological forgetting with forgiveness, arguing that forgetting in the eschaton is not a passive loss of memory but an active transformation in which past offenses no longer cause harm.[40] He questions the common appeal to the image of Christ's resurrected wounds as visible yet painless signs of redemption, noting that many theologians–including Luther and Calvin–believed those wounds would no longer be visible after the ascension. Rather than serving as permanent reminders, the wounds–and by analogy, memories of wrongdoing–may themselves be healed. Volf even goes so far as to suggest that in the eschaton, Christ himself will no longer be related to as "the Crucified One," but as the exalted and glorified member of the Triune God. Once redemption is complete and irreversible, he argues, the cross becomes a

[37] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 145.

[38] Volf, *The End of Memory*; Volf, "The Final Reconciliation," 91–113.

[39] Rather than diminishing the necessity of justice, eschatological forgetting follows from its full realization. Justice must be enacted before memory ceases to carry a moral function in relationships. Volf, *The End of Memory*; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace.*

[40] Volf carefully qualifies the concept of "forgetting", preferring terms like "non-remembrance" or "not-coming-to-mind" to distinguish it from erasure. He rejects the idea of forgetting as an unintentional failure to recall or as motivated repression but instead aligns it with a divinely given state in which memories of wrongdoing no longer surface due to the world's complete healing and reconciliation. This form of non-remembrance is not an active deletion of history but a passive consequence of being fully immersed in a redeemed world of love. Any expectation that victims should actively forget before reconciliation has been achieved is, according to Volf, both impossible and wrong. Forgetting, in his eschatological vision, must arise naturally from the restoration of relationships and the transformation of the world itself. Volf, The End of Memory, 145–147.

stage that can be left behind–its effects enduring, but its form no longer necessary. To insist that Christ must be eternally crucified, Volf warns, would be to take sin more seriously than the redemption that overcomes it.[41] Similarly, the Eucharist offers a model for transformed memory: Christ's suffering is remembered not as a source of division but as a means of redemption.[42]

In this vision, the eschatological transition is not only about divine judgment but also about the transformation of relationships. If the eschaton is truly a world of love, then the memory of wrongdoing must either be transfigured or cease to hold relevance.[43] While memory is necessary for justice now, its ultimate purpose is reconciliation, which, in the eschaton, renders memory of wrongdoing obsolete.

Volf's eschatological vision is deeply hopeful. He presents eschatological forgetting as the fulfillment of reconciliation, envisioning a world in which past wrongs no longer divide and memory ceases to bear the weight of judgment. This vision, however, has not gone unchallenged. Several theologians raise concerns about its consequences for justice, identity, and the role of memory in shaping relationships, prompting important questions about the coherence of his account of memory in the eschaton.[44]

Ian McFarland challenges the notion that eschatological forgetting serves as the remedy for evil, arguing that true justice requires the retention, rather than fading, of memory. He cautions that if wrongdoing is entirely forgotten, redemption risks becoming a replacement rather than a restoration of past lives.[45] Justice, McFarland contends, is not merely about rectifying past wrongs but ensuring that their moral weight remains acknowledged.[46] He further argues that any form of eschatological forgetfulness undermines the confession of creation's goodness and, by extension, Christian hope. If divine redemption involves fading of evil's memory, then creation in its entirety is not truly vindicated but partially discarded.[47] If wrongdoing ceases to be remembered, reconciliation loses its depth, as it is no longer tethered to the reality of what was once broken.

[41] Volf, *The End of Memory*, 190-191.

[42] Volf, "Memory, Eschatology, Eucharist," 27–38.

[43] Volf, "The Final Reconciliation," 91–113; Volf, *The End of Memory.*

[44] Volf insists that eschatological forgetting does not bypass justice but follows from its complete realization. Before wrongdoing can be forgotten, it must first be confronted, acknowledged, and rectified. Only once justice is fully enacted–whether through divine judgment or reconciliation–can memory lose its necessity as a safeguard against future harm. However, critics question whether this fulfillment of justice is truly sufficient to justify forgetting or if retaining transformed memory remains necessary for reconciliation. Some argue that rather than fading away, memory in the eschaton must serve as a witness to redemption, affirming that past suffering has been integrated into God's redemptive work rather than erased.

[45] "Before a life can be glorified, it must be redeemed – and that redemption is not forgetting." Ian A. McFarland, "The Goodness of Creation as an Eschatological Claim" (unpublished essay, presented at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture Consultation on Goodness of Creation, February 25, 2023).

[46] "Where forgetfulness is conceived as the remedy for evil, the more that earthly life is marked by evil. . . the less it seems possible to speak of its being glorified at all." McFarland, "The Goodness of Creation as an Eschatological Claim."

[47] "To the extent that evil's legacy is excluded, such a life is seemingly not so much redeemed as replaced." McFarland, "The Goodness of Creation as an Eschatological Claim"; Ian A. McFarland, "Creation," in *University of St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al., 2022.

This raises the question of whether reconciliation can be truly meaningful if the very history that necessitated it no longer comes to mind.[48]

M. Jane McArthur critiques the idea that eschatological forgetting can be a natural extension of reconciliation, arguing that memory is integral to personal identity. If past wrongs are forgotten, she questions whether individuals in the eschaton remain fully themselves. Rather than erasure, she contends that true healing requires memory's transformation, not its loss. Drawing on Christ's resurrected body, which bore the marks of crucifixion without pain, she suggests that human identity in the eschaton should retain the imprint of past experiences–not as wounds, but as testimonies to redemption.[49]

Jonathan Tran critiques Volf's sharp distinction between remembering and forgetting, suggesting that memory should be seen as a process of re-narration rather than erasure. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur, Tran argues that reconciliation does not require forgetting but rather a reconfiguration of the past within a redemptive framework. If forgiveness is about transformation, then the memory of wrongdoing should itself be transformed, allowing it to serve as a witness to grace rather than a source of division. Tran warns that by advocating for forgetting, Volf may inadvertently strip reconciliation of its narrative depth, reducing it to a passive dissolution rather than an active engagement with history.[50]

Volf's vision of the eschaton as a world where wrongs are no longer remembered stems from his conviction that love will render memory unnecessary. However, these critiques highlight unresolved tensions in his argument. If reconciliation is to be meaningful, must not the past remain present in some way? Rather than being forgotten, might eschatological memory be best understood as transfigured? If justice, identity, and reconciliation are truly fulfilled in the eschaton, it may not be through the absence of memory, but through its transformation–where past suffering no longer divides but instead testifies to the redemptive work of God. This raises a crucial theological question: is true reconciliation achieved through the fading of memories of evil, or does it require a sanctified form of remembrance?

Certainly, once justice is done and reconciliation is fully realized in the eschaton, it may no longer be necessary for former enemies to recall their past and resolved enmity at every encounter. Yet this assumes that such recollection would detract from God's world of perfect love, when it is just as plausible that memory will make the eschatological reality all the more remarkable–that despite former enmity, love and grace now

[48] Ian A. McFarland, "Eschatology," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Michael Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Similarly, Jon Horne questions whether divine non-remembrance, as Volf describes it, weakens the ethical responsibility to remember past injustices. If even God no longer recalls wrongdoing, does this absolve humanity from the responsibility of acknowledging history? Horne suggests that transformed memory, rather than forgetting, might better preserve both justice and reconciliation. Jon Horne, "A Reservation about Miroslav Volf's Theory of Non-Remembrance," *Theology* 114, no. 5 (2011): 323–330.

[49] McArthur, *Memory in the New Creation*.

[50] Jonathan Tran, "Emplotting Forgiveness: Narrative, Forgetting and Memory," *Literature and Theology* 23, no. 2 (June 2009): 220–233.

reign within perfect communion. As Paul writes in Romans 5:20–21, where sin increased, grace increased all the more–not by denying sin's reality, but by overwhelming it with righteousness unto eternal life. In the same way, memory of past wrongdoing may not undermine reconciliation but deepen its meaning, bearing witness to the redemptive power of grace.

Volf seems right to suggest that in the eschatological future, past wrongs will no longer define who we are or how we relate to one another. Yet a subtle tension remains: the communion of that future reality is made possible by God's grace–a grace that, by its very nature, presupposes real wrongdoing and undeserved salvation. If grace is what enables perfect communion, then the moral weight of what has been forgiven cannot be entirely irrelevant, even in a fully healed world.

A transformed and renewed memory–one that will accompany renewed and transformed bodies–opens a number of hypothetical possibilities and implications for memories of evil. Their fading, even if it is longed for in the present age, may not be necessary if transformed memory entails resolution, the revelation of meaning, or even the recognition of its ultimate banality.

Perfect union with God and with humanity does not necessitate the erasure of memory concerning evil and wrongdoing. It does, however, require some form of its transformation. Volf himself stops short of claiming that forgetting is necessary; rather, he presents it as the likely consequence of a fully reconciled world–a divine gift that follows from the healing of all relationships and the creation of a world of love.

Volf's suggestion that memories of wrongdoing will not be erased but simply "fail to surface" in the eschaton attempts to preserve both moral continuity and eschatological healing. Yet the distinction is a fragile one: if such memories never come to mind again, it is difficult to see how this differs meaningfully from erasure. This conceptual fragility may help explain why many of Volf's critics tend to skip over his preferred language of "fading" or "not coming to mind," and instead read his position as advocating outright erasure. The practical indistinguishability between these formulations makes it challenging to sustain the nuance Volf aims to preserve.

This, in turn, raises the question of whether eschatological forgetting undermines the weight of past evil, or whether it signals the moral and relational completion of memory's work–a form of peaceful silence after the storm, rather than denial. It also places further pressure on the coherence of memory's moral function in the present: if memory is crucial for justice, can it be discarded once justice has been fulfilled? Or does it need to be retained in some transfigured form to affirm the story of redemption itself?

Ethical Implications of Remembering Rightly for Victims and Perpetrators

For Volf, justice is not bypassed in the pursuit of reconciliation but is its necessary foundation. He insists that reconciliation cannot take place without the naming

and condemnation of wrongdoing. This corresponds to what Volf calls "justice 1"–the acknowledgment of the wrong as wrong and the recognition of the perpetrator as one who acted unjustly. Yet he also distinguishes this from what he refers to as "justice 2"–namely, no longer counting the wrong against the wrongdoer.[51] Forgiveness, in this view, is not owed but offered freely as an undeserved gift, and it only becomes possible after justice has been served through truth-telling and repentance. Volf consistently maintains that memory must first serve the cause of justice before it can become a vehicle for healing. Only once wrongdoing has been truthfully named and responsibility acknowledged can memory be transformed from a site of accusation into a witness to grace.

This theological account of justice has direct ethical implications. Volf argues that victims and perpetrators bear ethical responsibilities in how they remember past wrongdoing. For victims, memory must be truthful and just, serving the goal of healing and reconciliation rather than retaliation.[52] He frames this within Christian theology, where God's forgiveness serves as a model for human relationships.[53] However, reconciliation does not bypass justice–wrongdoing must be acknowledged before reconciliation can be fully realized.[54]

In the 2021 edition of *The End of Memory*, Volf expands his argument to consider the moral responsibility of perpetrators. Just as victims must resist resentment, perpetrators must not suppress or deny their guilt. Instead, they must engage in honest memory–acknowledging their wrongdoing, repenting, and actively seeking justice.[55] Forgiveness and reconciliation, Volf insists, are incomplete unless perpetrators undergo transformation and take responsibility for their actions.[56]

In a 2022 interview, reflecting on Russian aggression against Ukraine, Volf affirms that while forgiveness should be extended even to the unrepentant, full reconciliation remains conditional on the wrongdoer's transformation.[57] While forgiveness is a unilateral act reflecting divine grace, reconciliation is relational and requires the wrongdoer's active participation in justice. He warns against the dangers of weaponizing memory, acknowledging the deep wounds caused by war but cautioning that:

"Sometimes people say: 'We will forgive, but we will not forget,' or even: 'We will never forgive and never forget.' I understand the emotional position of a person against whom a crime has been committed. . . But I hope that over time, this stance will shift

[51] This distinction appears in the revised and updated edition of *Exclusion and Embrace* and does not appear in these exact terms in the first edition. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 339.

[52] Volf, *The End of Memory.*

[53] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace.*

[54] Miroslav Volf and Fedor Raychinets, "Війна. Ненависть. Прощення" (War, Hatred, and Forgiveness), *Bogomyslie* 32, no. 1 (2022): 160–69.

[55] Volf, *The End of Memory.*

[56] Miroslav Volf, "Memory, Salvation, and Perdition," in *That the World May Believe: Essays on Mission and Unity in Honour of George Vandervelde*, ed. Michael W. Goheen and Margaret O'Hara (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 133–144.

[57] Miroslav Volf and Fedor Raychinets, "War, Hatred, and Forgiveness.»

toward a willingness to forgive, and when full healing comes, perhaps in the future, it will become possible to forget or at least not recall [the committed evil]."[58]

This aligns with his earlier argument that memory, when misused, can become a tool of exclusion rather than a means of justice and healing.

He further argues that **perpetrators must bear the weight of their own memory** and take responsibility for injustice. Without acknowledgment and repentance, reconciliation remains incomplete, as **"Forgiveness will only be possible when the perpetrator understands and admits that they have committed a crime and desires to renounce what they have done."**[59] While victims may be called to forgive, true peace requires more than regret–it demands a moral and relational transformation from the wrongdoer.[60] Volf upholds the necessity of justice and transformation in the present but places these ethical demands within a larger eschatological vision, where memory itself is redefined.

Reconciliation, in Volf's theology, is the culmination of the redemptive process to which memory, justice, and forgiveness all contribute. It is not merely the end of hostility, but the restoration of communion between former enemies–a mutual embrace that reflects the self-giving love of God. While forgiveness may be extended unilaterally, reconciliation is relational and requires truth, justice, and transformation on both sides. Volf insists that reconciliation cannot bypass the naming of wrongdoing, yet it must move beyond accusation toward the hope of renewed relationship. Ultimately, reconciliation is not simply a human achievement but a divine act–a social dimension of God's eschatological work of healing. In this vision, memory must be reshaped not to perpetuate grievance, but to make reconciliation possible–not by denying the past, but by placing it within the redemptive future God promises. While Volf grounds reconciliation in eschatological hope,[61] this vision carries ethical demands that press upon the present–raising the question of how such hope can be lived out in a world where justice remains unfulfilled.[62]

Yet the challenge remains: Can victims be expected to embody the ethics of final reconciliation while injustice continues to unfold? In conflicts like war, where wrongdo-

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[58] «Sometimes people say: 'We will forgive, but we will not forget,' sometimes: 'We will never forgive and never forget.' I understand the emotional position of the person against whom the crime was committed... But I hope that over time, this position will change to a desire to forgive, and when full healing occurs, perhaps in the future it will be possible to forget or not to remember [the evil committed].» Miroslav Volf and Fedor Raychinets, "War, Hatred, and Forgiveness,» 162.

[59] "Forgiveness will only be possible when the offender realizes and admits that he has committed a crime and is willing to renounce his actions." Ibid., 162.

[60] Volf asserts that perpetrators must bear the weight of their own memory and actively work toward justice. He warns that one of the greatest dangers in conflicts is the tendency of wrongdoers to justify or erase their past actions, distorting history to avoid responsibility. Without truth-telling and repentance, forgiveness may be offered, but reconciliation remains impossible. Justice and accountability must precede reconciliation, anticipating the eschatological reality where both are fully realized together. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace.*

[61] In the final reconciliation of all things, enmity will be fully overcome, and memory will be transformed rather than erased. Volf, "The Final Reconciliation," 102–105.

[62] Miroslav Volf, "Christianity and Violence," *Reflections*, Winter 2004.

ing persists, the call to forgive and the demand for accountability stand in unresolved tension.

Volf's vision of reconciliation offers a profound theological framework, but its practical application raises ethical questions. Scholars have identified two central challenges in translating this vision into real-world contexts: the emotional burden of memory and the risk of prioritizing reconciliation over justice.

First, some argue that Volf underestimates the emotional and psychological weight of memory. Michele Saracino contends that memory is deeply tied to grief and trauma, making reconciliation more complex than Volf acknowledges. For many victims, trauma resists easy theological reframing, and the call to "remember rightly" may unintentionally place the burden on them to process their pain in ways that prioritize reconciliation over justice. Rather than assuming that victims can quickly reframe their memories toward reconciliation, the process of healing must allow space for the slow and painful confrontation of past wounds.[63]

Second, critics question whether Volf's emphasis on reconciliation risks downplaying the necessity of justice. Jasna Ćurković Nimac and Bethan Willis argue that in post-conflict societies, reconciliation alone is insufficient without legal and structural justice. While Volf's eschatological vision is theologically compelling, they caution that it may be interpreted in ways that shift attention away from present-day accountability and redress for victims. If reconciliation is prioritized over justice, perpetrators may evade responsibility, and historical wrongs risk being overlooked rather than truly addressed. This raises the concern that Volf's framework, though hopeful, could unintentionally weaken the demand for justice in the present.[64]

While theologically rich, Volf's ethical vision requires careful balance in real-world application. If justice and reconciliation are not pursued together, there is a risk that forgiveness will be expected prematurely, and accountability too easily overlooked.

Conclusion

Miroslav Volf's concept of memory presents a challenge: How do we remember past wrongs without allowing them to define us or perpetuate cycles of enmity? His vision of eschatological reconciliation suggests that, in the fullness of God's redemption, even memory itself will be changed. Yet for societies living amid suffering and injustice, memory remains an unavoidable moral responsibility in the present reality.

In Ukraine, the call to remember is not abstract–it is bound up with the reality of war, the pursuit of justice, and the survival of a nation. The phrase "*We will not forget, we will not forgive*" expresses a deep conviction that to forget is to risk erasure, to weaken

[63] Michele Saracino, "A Response to Miroslav Volf," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 59 (2004): 14–18.

[64] Jasna Ćurković Nimac, "An Ethical Outlook on the Influence of Memory on Violence," *De Ethica: A Journal of Philosophical, Theological and Applied Ethics* 2, no. 1 (2015): 35–48; Bethan Siân Willis, *Enlarging Justice: Miroslav Volf's Theology of Embrace and the Problem of Justice in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Croatia* (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2013).

the demand for justice. In this context, Volf's argument for eschatological forgetting may seem distant, even troubling. Can reconciliation be imagined when the wounds of war are still open? Does forgetting truly honor the suffering of heroes and victims, or does it risk minimizing the weight of their loss and sacrifice? Volf is right to nudge us toward the Christian reality that *never* forgiving is not an option. Even if forgiveness cannot be genuinely realized in the present age–because the basic conditions for it are entirely absent amid ongoing war crimes–as Christians, we believe that in the eschaton, ultimate reconciliation will take place, for true justice will be carried out and every hidden or unknown wrong will be named. And however distant and difficult that hope may feel in the face of war's open wounds, Christian faith calls us beyond vengeance–toward a future in which even the deepest injuries are healed, not through erasure, but through revelation and transformation.

Volf's Balkan context and Christian heritage under the Soviet regime may resonate deeply with many Ukrainian Christians, yet there remains an elusive but lingering distance in time, scale, and historical specificity between the Croatian war and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict. While his eschatological vision may be more debatable within the wider context of Christian theology, Volf's broader theological framework for memory remains strikingly relevant. His emphasis on remembering rightly and his warnings against identity shaped by grievances offer poignant insight into the ethical and spiritual challenges Ukraine now faces.

Volf himself insists that justice must precede reconciliation, and this is where his vision remains relevant. The challenge is not whether to remember but how to do so in a way that resists injustice without becoming captive to hatred, that upholds truth while leaving open the possibility of a future beyond enmity. His vision does not call for forgetting in the midst of suffering, nor does it demand premature reconciliation. Rather, it points toward a hope in which even the most painful memories are no longer wounds that define and divide, but are transfigured–neither erased nor weaponized, but redeemed. This is especially vital for a nation whose identity, while marked by suffering, must not be confined to it, but should also be shaped by its resilience, rich heritage, and vision for the future. Until that day, the task remains: to remember rightly, to seek justice, and to hold fast to the Christian hope that, in the hands of God, even the deepest wounds of history will not have the final word.

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Концепція пам'яті у працях Мирослава Вольфа: критичний огляд

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Анотація: Стаття пропонує критичний огляд богослов'я пам'яті Мирослава Вольфа, простежуючи, як пам'ять функціонує в межах його ширшої візії справедливості, ідентичності, прощення, примирення та есхатології. Визнаючи моральну необхідність пам'ятати про вчинене зло в теперішньому часі, Вольф стверджує, що пам'ять зрештою має слугувати зціленню, а не відтворенню ворожнечі. Його пропозиція есхатологічного забуття – коли спогади про злочини втрачають свою владу над ідентичністю та взаєминами – порушує важливі богословські й етичні питання щодо справедливості, примирення та тривалого значення страждання. Спираючись на ширшу богословську концепцію Вольфа, стаття досліджує як сильні сторони, так і внутрішні напруження його бачення, особливо в аспекті поєднання справедливості та примирення в умовах глибокого зла. Написана на тлі тривалих роздумів про насильство та пам'ять, ця праця не має на меті остаточно розв'язати всі напруження у пропозиціях Вольфа, а прагне висвітлити внутрішню логіку його мислення та запросити до подальшого богословського осмислення викликів і надій, які пам'ять ставить перед християнським життям і свідченням.

Ключові слова: Мирослав Вольф, богослов'я пам'яті, примирення, справедливість, прощення, есхатологія, християнська ідентичність, вчинене зло, етична пам'ять, есхатологічне забуття.

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