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Article

# Miroslav Wolf's Theology of Memory in Relation to Zimbabwean Social Narratives

Joseph Chifuniro Useni

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**Abstract:** 'The End of Memory' by Miroslav Wolf, which begins with a detailed account of his terrible memories of being interrogated by 'Captain G' in Yugoslavia, is the source of his public theological concept of memory. In light of Wolf's public theology of memory, the article addressed the issue of what should be done for Zimbabweans who witnessed the public tragedies of Gukurahundi, Fast Tracked Land Reform Program, Murambatsvina, election-related conflicts and death. Every one of these people has a slightly unique story to tell. Stories on social injustice in Zimbabwe can be told from different kinds of angles. Aspects of Wolf's theology of memory that encourage the development of both new narratives and memories of social injustice narratives are discussed in the article's conclusion. The article examines social justice in Zimbabwe through an interpretation of Miroslav Wolf's public theology of memory. Miroslav Wolf's theology will be used as a point of departure and critique in this article, along with a mixed approach to qualitative research and the gathering and analysis of relevant research data.

**Keywords:** theology of memory; narratives; remembering; Miroslav Wolf; wrongdoing; healing; new identity; social injustice

## 1. Introduction

When Wolf discusses his experiences with "Captain G," who interrogated him during his required military service in the former Yugoslavia, Wolf recognizes the significant impact that experience may have on Christians and people. Wolf (2016: 10), says he included these examples from his life because of how they affected him: "In looking at the kinds of questions that arise when a victim seeks to remember in accordance with the commitment to love the wrongdoer, I will refer throughout the book to my own interrogations, since in large measure, these have been the crucible for exploration of this topic." Wolf asks his listeners to ponder how we ought to remember those who have cruelly and unjustly wronged us throughout this life. The climax of Wolf's book switches to a different question: What will happen to the memory of those horrific events at the end of time?

## 2. Questions to Think about When Discussing Theology of Memory in Zimbabwe

Wolf (2006:10) discusses the topic of how Christians ought to remember wrongs done to them. In the words of Wolf, memories must be forgotten in order to make way for new ones. He also contends that this process offers a public theology of memory, which holds because these memories have a significant influence on the future personality. Wolf's theological reflection on memory is set against the backdrop of his traumatising experience. How can Zimbabweans recall correctly after going through so much adversity is the key question. Should they recall mistreatment, detention, and injustice as people devoted to forgiving the guilty and defeating evil with goodness? People are aware that it is difficult to remember all of the wrongs committed against them, including the loss of their justice and the abuse they endured. Wolf is conscious of the suffering's anguish and the challenges it presents for Christians trying to act in accordance with God's purposes for the world.

We do not live with the events that make up our lives; rather, we exist with the stories that we tell ourselves about these events, according to Wolf's truth about memory (Wolf 2006: 41). In a dynamic



relationship between self and memory, we shape the memories that mould us. Volf (2006:26), asserts that 'what we do with our memories will depend on how we see ourselves in the present and how we project ourselves into the future.' Zimbabwe's future is defined by its past experiences. This suggests that Zimbabwean citizens require healing. According to Volf (2006:28), 'healing will not simply result from viewing a remembered incident in a new way. More broadly, remembering your suffering is a requirement for personal healing but it's not a cure in and of itself. The meaning of healing is the interpretive work a person does with memory' Christians in Zimbabwe need to practise 'remembering well' as one of their key life skills. Thus, according to Volf (2006:55), "the duty to remember truthfully is fundamentally a duty to act justly, even in such a seemingly straightforward act as 'identifying' what one person has done to another." How may theologically be reflective on social justice and social injustice in Zimbabwe by benefit from weaving these theological strands together? The natural tendency is to try to make sense of events when Zimbabwean citizens go through crisis or trauma. According to Bourne (2011:268), Zimbabwe is going through these challenging times because of decades in which its people did not view their fellow countrymen as equal members of society. Working hard, rewriting their past, avoiding power monopolization, and gaining genuine respect are all necessary to restore Zimbabwe to its former glory. Making sense of many kinds of unpleasant experiences may be simple, but in instances of abominable evil and unjust suffering, Volf contends the public theology that provides the most profound meaning. Regardless matter how the one who suffers fare, we may count on God's steadfast justice to triumph perhaps not in our lifetime, but at a moment of God's choosing, or the victims of the social injustice may turn to their faith in the things that will matter to help them make sense of the tragedies they must endure now. We will one day be 'changed from glory into glory,' and then we will see Jesus, and nothing else.

### 3. The Quest for Theology of Memory in Zimbabwe

Adichie (2016:87) narratives are important. Stories can be used to empower and humanise people, but they have also been used to oppress and dehumanise. A people's dignity can be damaged by stories, but it can also be restored. The church must understand that it develops into a community that is both reconciled and reconciling. It is evident that if the people do wrong some actions has done and that they have committed an offence when judgement is rendered as a moral discriminatory act. In this way, judgement helps both the person who was hurt, and the perpetrator remember the offence correctly. Three main principles of damage remembered right are identified by Volf (2006:96): remembering the truth, remembering to heal, and remembering to draw lessons from the past. Even though Volf is explicit about how memory might be distorted to preserve the innocence of the rememberer and lost over time, it is still necessary to recall as accurately as possible.

Denying the perpetrator's identity or the severity of the damage they caused is a significant obstacle to victims' ability to heal. Restoring broken relationships, resolving imbalances, and attempting to rehabilitate both the victim and the offender who ought to be given the chance to reintegrate into the community he has harmed by his offense are the main concerns, according to Tutu (1999:55). Zimbabwe's government and church need to realise that acknowledging the wrongdoing honestly helps victims recover from their trauma by avoiding denial. Denial isolates offenders from the full consequences of their actions and prevents them from growing from their transgression. Sincere recollection gives offenders the chance to reflect on the effects of their actions and learn from them in order to make changes. The Zimbabwean government needs to stop living in denial and accept that what they did during the Gukurahundi, the Land Reform Programme, and Murambatsvina's mistakes were genuine. Bates (2020:31) asserts that it has taken a lot of practical rethinking to adapt narrative approaches to working with people in a distant community. Keeping in mind that every discussion should focus on the local context facilitated communication and generated resonances that ran across the stories, including themes like language, culture, connection, the immensity of distance, and time. Stories are constructed with local context by their narrators. This

needs to be done authentically, taking into account the actual circumstances of the traumatised individuals in Zimbabwe.

#### 4. The Meaning of the Theology of Memory

The topic that Volf (2016:9) draws attention to is the memory of wrongdoing endured by a person who chooses to love the wrongdoer rather than to detest or disregard him or her. This may seem like an unusual method to approach the issue of remembering wrongs that have been done to you, but if you embrace the core of Christianity, you will be drawn out of your comfort zone and into the dangerous region designated by the vow to love your enemies. Being right-minded is important. The residents of Zimbabwe must be aware that how we create our memories and pass them down from one generation to the next has significant implications for identity, value clarification, and soul care. People need to be aware that our memories affect how we understand the world around us, how we act out our values, how we make decisions, and how we define our purpose. Denis (2016:4) argues that through emphasising the past, people may give the present context. The churches, ecumenical organisations, religious groups, and theological institutions all use different methods to express their memories. When the context changes, memories can be lost, found, challenged, or marginalised. In the church as in society, memories that were oppositional at one time can become dominant at another.

In the words of Butticaz and Norelli (2018:79), memory is a broad term used to understand how the past and present are related to one another. It is defined as an exceptional career. Memory also has a significant influence on public discourse on critics' involvement with their own history and the significance of the past for comprehending the present in politics and the media. Memory teaches people how a country, a society, or a religious community view itself; hence, the past takes on significance when it is remembered in the sense that it is understood, honoured, and ritualised. Even while memory refers to individual recollections, it should be distinguished from public memorial celebrations. In order to access the past in the present, memory depends on the preservation and transfer of the remnants from the past.

In the opinion of Volf (2006:28), the interpretive implies a person conducts with memory is what healing means. Therefore, remembering is a necessary component of salvation as well as personal healing, but remembering alone does not guarantee restoration. Truth telling is the only way to bring about healing. The truth is ready to be openly admitted by Chitando, Chikonzo, and Chivandika (2020:17), both individually and collectively. Every survivor has a right to the truth and information about how abuses affected them. For instance, many Zimbabweans experience shakes at Gukurahundi time. It is made worse by the continued mystery and denial surrounding the Gukurahundi era, which is bad news for national healing and reconciliation, not to mention the pursuit of justice. To remember is to participate in the past, to experience the past, to experience the past as a part of the story of a community's present, and to inspire the community's imaginations regarding its future, according to Cockayne and Salter (2021:275). The idea of actualization, which refers to the process through which a ritual or story enables the community to relive historical events, is essential to this corporate religion's sense of memory. Then, people might consider how to apply these biblical notions of memory to modern practise by considering contemporary study on psychology and philosophy of memory.

Given that memory is such a fundamental ethical and religious idea, Vosloo (2017: 5) contends that we should legitimately consider whether speaking of an art or even a responsibility of forgetting is consistent with our theological notions. Most of Zimbabwe's recent events have been purposefully untruthful because politicians have taken charge to advance their own agendas. In the culture of "just memory," as described by Vosloo (2017:14), the emphasis ought to focus on the need to remember. This duty to remember should be utilised to criticise the unfair promotion and glorifying of forgive and forget and emphasise the obligation to recall circumstances of historical injustice. Volf and Vosloo can be viewed as public theologians who were interested in a thorough defence of forgetting in all its complexities and ambiguity.

## 5. Retelling Zimbabwe's Stories of Social Injustice

Awareness of oneself and other awareness are fundamentally based on memory. As stated by Volf (2006:24), "when we serve ourselves from memory, we lose our identity—particularly the part of our identity that is rooted in God." Volf continues by stating that to remember the Exodus is to be a Jew, and to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus is to be a Christian. Memories bring individuals together and aid in self-understanding. According to Volf (2006:96), "when they think of Christ, they think of themselves as members of a group of people who have died and risen with Christ and whose fundamental identity is this spiritual connection with Christ. They recall the life of Christ not just as his life but also as their life and the life of every human being." Denis (2016:5) echoes the same that "memory is a theological theme." In Zimbabwe, communal and national memories are primarily what constitute the sacred memories of social injustice.

Muchakanja (2010:1) contends that, Zimbabwe's history is marked by several difficulties that later materialised as violent challenges at various significant points. A lack of comprehensive solutions to the problem of human rights violations has made it difficult to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity since independence. Zimbabwe's political developments during the past decade have presented issues that have caught the interest of both local and foreign players. People still remember events like Gukurahundi, Land Reform, and Murambatsvina, and to a greater or lesser extent, the victims of such events can pass on their memories and tales from one generation to the next. As Volf (2006:100) points out, "Take away a community and sacred memory disappears, take away the sacred memory and the community disintegrates." Its capacity to influence how the nation and its people will develop in the future is the source of what we have encountered in life. Zimbabwe in particular has to understand that our "memories" of the past serve as the foundation for our hope for the future. If Zimbabweans' memories are rooted in instances of dependability, trustworthiness, and love, the nation should anticipate these same virtues in future to come. Pirner and others (2018: 14) states "reconciliation is the belief that unity is insufficient. We have histories of conflict and division, which has resulted in sorrow and bitterness. We also have memories of wrath and fear, as well as sentiments of resentment, suspicion, and alienation". Zimbabwe is experiencing all of these feelings as a result of the brokenness that occurs both within and amongst individuals. Even unity in Zimbabwe will remain on the surface if people there do not find methods to deal with these histories and memories of brokenness and resentment. Christians must maintain the belief that the church has been given the mandate to preach and practice the ministry of reconciliation. Through Christ, Christians have already experienced peace with God and one another.

## 6. Zimbabwe Remembers its Social Injustice

In the view of Denis (2016:7), all memories are positioned on a continuous interaction between individuals and shared memories, but recollection is still an individual act that is influenced by the context. The difficulty of "remembering rightly" is a topic Volf writes on. People in Zimbabwe frequently forget things and mistakenly believe they are recalling facts when they are not. The majority of Zimbabweans have covertly helped their deteriorating memory so they may unintentionally pass off fiction as truth. Christian and political leaders need to be aware of how memory helps us connect our current selves to our past selves. Falsehood can penetrate the space between now and then, and imagination can fill in whatever gaps in "memory" that exist. Most stories do contain some truth, but it is usually truth that has little to do with what actually happened. Sometimes people will tell themselves a made-up truth. Volf (2006:47), asserts, "The truth about the past is merely the story we find most compelling, either because it is attractive and useful to us or because it has been imposed upon us by some social constraint or subtle persuasion." The stories that the nation talks about its past must be understood by both church and state officials to be fictionalised recollections of some significant event. Because they have been moulded over many generations of narration and interpretation, the majority of the Zimbabwean stories told in Gukurahundi, 2000 Land Reform, and Murambatsvina are exceptionally complex. The interpretation of facts that the original

storytellers placed on the victims, the government, civic society, church, and political opponents shapes the myth of land distribution in Zimbabwe.

The fictionalised narratives of social injustice and land reform from various groups in Zimbabwe have been influenced by how they have been used by the intervening generations and ultimately by how we choose to tell the story today. Political leaders and Christian institutions in Zimbabwe must work together to help the nation re-examine its history and reframe its central narratives. The interpretation must respect the veracity of what occurred (as accurately as we can piece together that veracity) and mould the memory's presentation in a way that elevates national ideals while incorporating crucial new values as necessary.

People in Zimbabwe must first express their past emotions and have the capacity to forgive the wrongdoers in order to reunite and move past the changes in their lives. In accordance with Volf (2006:9), the memory must be directed by the pledge to be kind and helpful, even to the wrongdoer. Many victims consider they are under no responsibility to love the perpetrator and are likely to assume that if they did, it would betray rather than fulfil their humanity. As defined by Denis (2016:6), memory is the capacity to encode, store, and retrieve information. The process of remembering involves numerous interrelated parts of the brain.

As we are all aware, when you repeatedly portray a group of people as one thing, they end up being that thing. This is what happened in Zimbabwe during the land reform. "Rambai Makashinga, (Continue to endure)" is a song (jingle) that the Zimbabwean government introduced. The topic of land and its redistribution was raised in the song. According to Sibanda (2004), these songs conveyed an ideologically articulated support for land reform, which served as the focal point of ZANU PF's election campaign and selling point, in both an overt and covert manner. Sibanda (2004) provides an eye-opening number, noting that one jingle, "Rambai Makashinga," was broadcast on all four radio stations 288 times per day and 72 times per day on television. Land was a recurring motif in the music created during that time. Most often, it is necessary to permit those in positions of authority to rewrite our memories. The past must be understood by the government. The future is uncertain, and the present is cloudy. This circumstance may encourage an unhealthy connection with the past. As noted by Chitando (2005: 224), the President and Cabinet, which were led by a pro-government critic, were in charge of postcolonial propaganda campaigns. A department of 20 religious themes were created in the last quarter of political activities and were frequently broadcast on radio and television. The setting was set by a deep narrator whose voice was similar of most biblical documentaries: "In the beginning was the land". On the land were the people. The land belonged to the people. It will always be the same as it was in the beginning. Greetings from Zimbabwe. We are reasonable people."

## 7. A quest to Inform Correct Stories in Zimbabwe about Social Injustice

Volf (2006:15) "In memory a wrongdoing frequently spreads over and colours the character of the one who committed it, rather than remaining an isolated stain in his character." People's thought processes frequently change as they gain experience. The people of Zimbabwe must work on the issue of having a genuine goodness in trying to find ways out from under the wreckage of their mistakes before deciding who is right or wrong in terms of land reform. It's possible that they were engulfed in political influences and structures to prevent others from speaking the truth. The Zimbabwean administration has to understand that the fight of the populace is connected to public memory, and that people need to hear more about the fairness of some of the issues that have been discussed in public and disseminated around the country.

Volf (2006:18) In the case of public remembrance, "so it happens, the protective shield of memory frequently transforms into a vicious sword, and the just sword of memory frequently sever the very good it seeks to defend." The Zimbabwean leadership must consider the history of wrongs committed in order to put an end to social unrest and other concerns of social injustice. Even now, ordinary residents continue to call for justice for those who lost their land. If we can recall things clearly, then we can help people, as Volf challenges us to do. In the words of Volf (2006:42), "learning to remember well is one key to redeeming the past is nestled in the larger story of God's restoring of our broken

world to wholeness." Volf (2006, 74–75) is deeply concerned about the ways in which the interpretive process can lead to memory distortion, particularly in light of what he thinks occurs when therapists advise clients to process traumatic memories through narrative. According to what he writes, would retelling the interrogation's tale in a different way actually aid in healing, as opposed to people truly being healed when they are able to live their lives without restriction and with a sense of peace regarding what transpired? A study by Sachikonye (2011:13), political conflict has its roots in pre-colonial times when conflicts over land and chieftainship were the main causes of violence. During the colonial era, conflicts over land and ethnic supremacy were the main causes of conflict. In the post-colonial era, conflicts over political dominance and hegemony were the main causes of conflict. Rewritten memories shield from the incident and increase the likelihood of ongoing inner anguish. They are not a real approach, but rather a persistent disease's symptom and a way to deal with the two sides of a corroded coin.

## 8. A biblical Hermeneutical Perspective on Memory from Volf

Volf talked about how victims of heinous evil should remember what happened to them, how remembering helps people heal, and how it's necessary to recall wrongs that are a part of bigger stories. The biblical framework, according to Volf, is based on the idea that "the call to truthfulness in remembering was underwritten by God's final judgement of grace, which is itself an extension of the way in which God treated human sin as God delivered Israel from oppression as Jesus Christ hung on the cross." Volf argues that victims would not have to consider the wrongs that have befallen them when God recreates everything in the new heaven and new earth. He calls this "non-remembrance of wrongs suffered." Not that we will have forgotten the difficulties we have faced.

According to Volf (2006:9), we will be so absorbed in God and his perfect love that we would not even need to think about the wrongs we have done in the past. God's love will just flood into us. We shall go through a "not-coming-to-mind of sufferings." As we become more like Jesus Christ, even our memories will have undergone a makeover. In the case that our wrongdoers are, they will also undergo transformation via the work of the Holy Spirit and the crucifixion of Christ, joining God's family. According to Volf, being in God frees our lives from the tyranny the irrevocable past wields with an iron fist of time. God does not erase our past; rather, God brings it back to us in pieces, with the tales reimagined, our true selves fully redeemed, and people who were once divided now live in peace (Volf 1996:201). Volf also discovered that he came with elements of memory healing that are a new identity, new possibilities, and integrated life story in Exodus and Jesus Christ.

### 8.1. Exodus Memory of Volf as motif of Liberating and Redeeming

As noted by Volf (2006:105), the Israelites treated their own slaves and aliens differently than how they were treated in Egypt because they accurately remembered their servitude and liberation. As Volf (2006:107) noted, the Exodus event can be linked to the Zimbabwean setting two drives lesson. The first is "deliverance," which is an act on behalf of the oppressed and weak, much to how God acted on your behalf when you were weak and afflicted. The Exodus motif can be utilised to reassure Zimbabweans who are seen as weak and who have experienced oppression that God is for everyone and that the right time for deliverance will arrive. The second lesson teaches us to confront oppressors and punish those who have oppressed others in the sake of unbending retributive justice. As noted by Volf (2006:108), "the memory of the Exodus suggests that in a just and violent world, the deliverance of the oppressed requires unrelenting struggle against their oppressors." Volf (2006:112) aptly puts it:

For the Israelites, properly remembering their slavery and liberation involved treating their own slaves and aliens differently from the way they themselves were treated in Egypt. Their model was the redeeming God, not the oppressing Egyptians. Emulating the Egyptians was to return to Egypt even while dwelling in the Land of Promise. Emulating God was to enact the deliverance God had accomplished for them.

Liberation and redemption are therefore things that should start from within the individual and then be reflected outwardly.

### 8.2. *The Memory of Jesus' Death and Resurrection in Wolf's Theology*

As stated by Wolf (2006:111), "the memory of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to Christian identity". Jesus Christ's passion frees and seems to liberate all of mankind from the slavery of sin by means of forgiveness and may even bring us back together with God and one another. Zimbabwe still has the capacity to forgive one another since they are all its citizens. Instead of arguing over points of agreement while having regions of difference, Zimbabweans must cooperate where they have a shared interest and where they can agree. A study by Wolf (2006:119), victims can be entirely emancipated and healed from the pain of wrongdoing only if the perpetrators truly repent and the two parties are reconciled. Bond in preserve bond with wrongdoers by having suffered at their hands. Both the injured and the wrongdoers have been made right with God, themselves, and each other through Christ.

## 9. Applying the Wolf's Five Christian Faith Proposal in Zimbabwe

Both Christian and political leaders in Zimbabwe might apply the questions laid out by Wolf (2006:43). Zimbabweans need to ask themselves: Who are we as a nation, as people, as communities, and as humans as a whole? Why are we in this place? What is our destination? Wolf offers five arguments for the Christian faith that are applicable to Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe, which prides itself on being a Christian nation, can use God's wider redemptive story to remember its suffering rather than relying just on personal experience. As Zimbabweans, we must comprehend what God has done in the past, how God engages with us today, and what God means to accomplish in our future as part of the redeeming story of God. Wolf (2006:43–44) lays out the five propositions, the first of which is that "God of Love created each of us along with our world." As Zimbabweans, we must base our love on God's creation of the world and humanity. The value of each person's life cannot be underestimated. Everyone must be treated with respect as a human being. The second is that "God created us to live with God and one another in communion of justice and love." Zimbabweans need to realise that they were made for a world of justice and love, not self-serving desires, where they could coexist with God and one another. All things must be distributed equitably among everyone, including land, resources, and judicial fairness. Third, "God entered human history and through Christ's unchangeable atoning work on the cross, made us right with God and with one another." We can say that people harmed God's exquisite creation. However, God entered human history through the death of Christ on the cross, and as a result, we are now at peace with both Him and one another. We must recognise that Christ is there for us in the context of Zimbabwe and that we are not left to clean up our own messes.

Fourth, according to Wolf (2006:44), "God will make our frail flesh imperishable at the end of history and restore true life to the redeemed, so that we may forever enjoy God and each other in God." God, who took on our finitude in Jesus Christ, will do this. As Christians in Zimbabwe, we must be aware that, at the end of the age, we shall undergo a change that will allow us to live with God and one another in Christ for all eternity. Fifth, "God will make wrongs clear, denounce every evil deed, and redeem both the repentant perpetrator and their victims, bringing them to peace with God and each other." Because social injustice and land reform are the focus of our study, it is crucial that we understand this idea. When God exposes injustices, condemns immoral behaviour, and reconciles repentant perpetrators with their victims.

## 10. Conclusions

The church in Zimbabwe has a responsibility to play in crafting a compelling narrative that will help in the healing of the entire nation, even though many years have passed, and the stories of injustice are becoming a distant memory. To recover, the nation must remember the hurtful incidents

and ensure that they are properly remembered. To assist the public in appropriately recalling their traumatic past experiences, the church can employ the theology of memory model, which must include these components Volf (2006:27-33). In order to rebuild an objective of truth in terms of true stories in Zimbabwe, the church must take the lead in the community and among the general public. Memories that are not true are memories that are unpleasant. The principle of "*remembering as truthfully as possible*" must be upheld by the church.

People recount how the story has resulted in healing and redemption as they reflect on the past events. Christians are expected to assist those who have been harmed by the narrative, teach them how to deal with shame and grow from it, and demonstrate God's kindness and grace to everyone who has been affected by the event. Zimbabwean citizens need assistance from the church in telling new stories and "*viewing the remembered experience in a new light*."

The church must remember that the memory's shaping cannot result in additional suffering for potential victims. In Zimbabwe, victim identity shall remain confidential unless the victim has requested to be identified. Christians, who are in charge of retelling the traumatic incident, must ensure that the victims are taken care of, so they are not mistreated again; this is all about "*protecting victims from further suffering and violence*." Speaking truthfully about people's unstirred memories is something that Christians need to learn. Listening to the narrative that the public is narrating about their current experiences and how they are influencing their future recollections is another aspect of remembering correctly.

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