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***MEMORIA CHRISTI* IN THE AMISTAD STORY: TRANSFORMING THE MEMORY OF RACE THROUGH THE MEMORY OF GRACE**

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Abstract

This paper offers a theologico-anthropological interpretation of the Amistad story - the 1839 grounding of a slave ship in the United States and the subsequent trial of its African captives. It highlights the central role played by the memoria Christi (the memory of Jesus Christ's passion, death, and resurrection) alongside abolitionist Christians in rekindling hope among the captives, who recognized a shared community of destiny with an unjustly condemned Christ. Despite significant cultural divides, the narrative of God's grace enabled both Africans and Americans to reconnect with their ancestral memories, re-envisioning themselves as wounded brothers and sisters. Furthermore, grounding this memory of grace in the evangelical doctrine of justification provides vital theological resources for redefining human identity and affirming universal human dignity. Ultimately, this reflection demonstrates how the memoria Christi remains vital for healing wounded memories and transforming the memory of race through the memory of grace in contemporary, racially polarized contexts.

Keywords: Identity, Memory, Race, Grace, Justification, Theofiliation.

Introduction

This reflection proposes a theologico-anthropological interpretation of the role played by the story of Jesus-Christ - *memoria Christi*, in the *Amistad Story*, named after the slave ship, loaded with Africans, that ran aground on Long Island in the United States on August 26, 1839. The story remained unknown until 1997 when Steven Spielberg's film of the same name gave a luminous account of the episode of the trial of the captives in the United States and the considerable role played by Christian abolitionists during the trial.

After a brief presentation of the historical background of the Amistad Story and the crisis of identity and communication experienced by both Africans and Americans, the reflection will make the following claims; that it was the discovery of a community of destiny with Jesus - unjustly chained and condemned to death, but saved by God(*memoria Christi*) - that rekindled hope in the captives and gave them a new self-understanding; that the memory of God's grace in Jesus Christ led Africans and Americans, despite the gap between their cultures, to overcome their respective identity crises and reconnect with each other as wounded brothers and sisters; that in the present context of identitarian fragmentation and racial polarization, the *memoria Christi* could provide resources for a renewed self-understanding and living together of people from different cultural backgrounds. Precisely, the narrative of the *memoria Christi* could lead to the recognition of the *theofiliation* of all human beings and open the way for a *reconfiliation dynamic*: the transformation of the memory of *race* through the memory of *grace*.

The Amistad Story

Historical Background

The slave ship, named Amistad, belonging to two Spanish merchants, Don José Ruiz and Don Pedro Montes, loaded with 53 enslaved Africans, mostly from Mende land, in Southern Sierra Leone¹ left Havana, Cuba, in June 1839. They had been captured from different parts of Sierra Leone, then bought by Joseph Ruiz and Pedro Montes. Ruiz purchased 49 adults and wanted to take them to Puerto Principe and sell them to local sugar planters. Among them were three children, Margu, Kagne, Teme, and one adult, Kale, purchased by Montes. The crew of the Amistad included Captain Ramon Ferrer, sailor and cook Celestino (a 26-year-old mulato from Puerto Rico), Antonio (teenage Afro-Cuban sailor/cabin boy), two sailors, Manuel Padilla of Catalonia, Spain, and Jacinto Verdaque of Santo Domingo.²

Along the way, the Amistad Africans led by Singbe Pieh, alias Joseph Cinque, managed to kill the captain and the cook. They forced Montes to sail the ship and demanded that he take them back to Africa. Montes succeeded in deceiving them and sailed towards the coast of the United States. On August 26, 1839, they were arrested at Long Island, New York, by the U.S. Navy Coast Guard and immediately imprisoned in New Haven, Connecticut. Soon the Amistad Africans were taken over by Christian abolitionists, particularly Lewis Tappan and an attorney, Roger Baldwin. Baldwin later solicited the help of John Quincy Adams, former president of the United States and attorney by profession.

¹ Cf. Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion. An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Penguin Book, 2012), 22; Bernard VINCENT, *Amistad. Les mutins de la liberté*, 13-49

² Cf. Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 65.

The judges had complex issues to adjudicate. First, to determine whether the Africans were to be tried as pirates and murderers. Then came the salvage claims by Lt. Thomas Gedney and other naval officers, as well as salvage claims by the Long Island hunters, Henry Green and Peletiah Fordham. There were also claims by Ruiz and Montes for their slave property. Furthermore, there were claims by the Spanish consul on behalf of the family of Ferrer for the schooner and enslaved cabin boy Antonio, and finally, the request by the US Federal Government that all property, both vessels and slaves, be returned to Spain.³

Lawyer Roger S. Baldwin defended the Africans. On January 8, 1840, Judge Judson ruled that⁴: 1) the court district did not have jurisdiction because the Amistad had been found on the high seas; 2) Lieutenant Thomas Gedney and his fellow officers were entitled to salvage, on the vessel but not on the Africans, who under Connecticut law could not be considered property; 3) The Long Island hunters Green and Fordham were not entitled to salvage; 4) Cabin boy Antonio to be send back to the heirs of the deceased Captain Ferrer in Cuba; 5) The Africans were in fact each of them Natives of Africa and were born free and ever since have been and still of right are free and not slaves. The Amistad Africans would therefore be turned over to President Martin Van Buren for repatriation to their native land. Unfortunately, following the appeal from President Martin Van Buren in support of the Spanish crown, the verdict declaring the Africans free was reversed when the US Federal Government appealed to the Supreme Court.⁵

Defended by Roger Baldwin and John Quincy Adams, between February and March 1841, the Supreme Court set the Africans free. "They are natives of Africa, and were kidnapped there, and

³ Cf. Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 131-132.

⁴ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 147-148.

⁵ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 152.

were unlawfully transported to Cuba, in violation of the law and treaties of Spain, and the most solemn edict and declarations of the Government. The court lamented the dreadful acts by which they asserted their liberty during the rebellion but implicitly acknowledged them as legitimate.”⁶ The Africans were finally released with permission to stay in the United States or return home. Between March and November 1841, they stayed with the Christian community at Farmington, where they studied English, Bible studies, and theology.

The history of the Amistad gave considerable impetus to the struggle of the abolitionists and to the missionary opening of the churches from the United States to the West Coast of Africa. Missionaries of the American Missionary Association (A.M.A.) decided to accompany the Africans on their way back to Sierra Leone in November 1842, aboard the ship, the *Gentleman*. Together they founded a “mission” on Sherbro Island, in Mende country, from where they proclaimed the Gospel to the people while providing concrete answers to their material needs.

Identity Crisis as Crisis of Memory of Race

The Amistad experience displayed the limits and crisis of the memory of race. As the Amistad Africans struggled to tell their own story to their American captors and allies, the question of their identity and the identity of the Americans became more and more problematic. Who are we? On what is our identity founded? John Baptist Metz’s description of identity crisis could be applied to this context.

The destruction of memory turns out systematically to hinder identity, to prevent people from becoming subjects or continuing to be subjects in their social-historical contexts.... Uprooting slaves and deporting them always tends to destroy

⁶ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 190.

their memories and precisely in this way serves as a powerful reinforcement in the interest of their complete subjugation.⁷

The enslaved people were obliged to see themselves through the prism of the propaganda of the powerful and the rulers. Metz calls this “the history of the victors” which eclipses the “memory of the vanquished and the oppressed. He also talks of “the agonizing experience of non-identity brought on by violence and oppression.”⁸

There is also “the experience of non-identity” that happens in guilt, in being fated to finitude and death. The experience of non-identity is “the experience of division, the experience that everything just isn’t as good as it appears to be.”⁹ This could be applied to both parties, Africans and Americans. The greatest damage the trans-Atlantic slave trade did to the Africans was the confusion of memory. Being reduced to merchandise was horrible. The experience of the great crossing was deeply damaging. As Marcus Rediker stated, “Casual violence was commonplace on slaving vessels, and the Amistad was no exception. Captain and crew alike used whips, clubs, and fists to terrorize and control the captives. On the deck of any deep sailing ship could be found many tools and other items that handily became instruments of violent discipline.”¹⁰

The Amistad Africans also knew domestic slavery in their own societies. It is on record “that slavery existed by the early seventeenth century, its extent was unknown, and throughout the region the free and the enslaved were easily distinguished from one another. West African varieties differed fundamentally from plantation slavery across the Atlantic where people were brutally

⁷ John Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trs J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Herder and Herder 2007), 75.

⁸ John Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 192.

⁹ John Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 192.

¹⁰ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 69-70.

exploited as they produced commodities such as sugar for the world market.”¹¹ Rediker noted that one of them Gabeau, told the story that his wealthy uncle owned slaves. Several of the rebels had slaved for African masters. Singbe Pieh originally from the village of Mani in the Dzopoa District, Sierra Leone, was captured when he was 25 years old. He was reportedly captured in the spring of 1839, by a certain Mayagilo, an inhabitant of the Mende region. The latter, unable to pay his debts, had the idea of capturing and selling a man from another village. He then turned to Singbe, who himself was in debt to him. So, he sold his debtor to the suppliers of the Spanish slave traders.¹²

The experience of being captured, sold, resold as well as the humiliation during the great passage, led the Amistad Africans to doubt themselves. They always expressed resentment and hatred against their people for selling them to the slave traders. Being from different ethnic groups that were also in war against each other, they had difficulty trusting themselves. Warriors, killers, former threators found themselves in the same situation as people considered as weak and preys. Moreover, the Amistad Africans were hunted by the horrible memory of their own violence. They did not forget that they killed their masters in order to defend their dignity and freedom. Their action is part of a larger story of resistance to domestic slavery and transatlantic slavery.

The enslaved resisted, on African soil, in a wide variety of ways: they committed suicide, they ran away, and they formed fugitive (maroon) villages in inaccessible places, just as the enslaved were doing simultaneously on the other side of the Atlantic.... The Amistad Africans knew the struggle

¹¹ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 38.

¹² Cf. Bernard VINCENT, *Amistad. Les mutins de la liberté*, 17-18

against slavery in the 1830s and would carry their knowledge into the Atlantic world.¹³

The consequence is the difficulty to trust themselves and any other person, particularly the Whites whom they automatically identified as enemies. They would want to return to their land. But how do they communicate that? On the other hand, the Amistad story brought the Americans to question their own identity. American society was divided between pro and anti-slavery. The abolitionist movement gathered Americans of different colors and walks of life. They were black and white, male and female, middle-class and working-class, enslaved and free.¹⁴ They appealed to the right to freedom in the Constitution as well as the humanism that had been at the heart of western civilization. They also appealed to the Christian understanding of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God.

Some other Americans insisted on the superiority of White people over the black people. They appealed to the same American constitution and laws to justify the right to enslave the other human beings and claim them as merchandise. Some of them considered the Amistad Africans as a ludic attraction. The prison supervisors used them to make money, by transforming the prison to a quasi-attraction park. Some politicians used the Amistad case to advance their political interests. The American

¹³ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 39.

¹⁴ The abolitionists included businessmen such as Tappan, whose home had been trashed by ant-abolition mob in 1834. They included ministers such as Simeon Jocelyn, who preached to an interracial congregation in New Haven; “enlightened” figures such as Professor Josiah Gibbs, a scholar of oriental languages at Yale University; artisan-artists such as Warner Barber and Nathaniel Jocelyn; black sailors such as James Covey; Lydia Maria Child, an eminent writer and feminist; and former slaves such as James Pennington, the runaway “fugitive blacksmith” who became a leading black minister in Hartford, and Isabella Baumfree, who would become known as Sojourner Truth, a leading figure in the women’s movement....” (Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 123).

president, Martin Van Buren, in order to ensure his re-election, was ready to sacrifice the Amistad Africans to appease the anti-abolitionist South of the United States on the one hand and, on the other, to avoid a diplomatic problem with Spain.

John Quincy Adam's plea before the Supreme Court in favor of the Africans exposed the complicity of politicians and traders in the commodification of human beings. The attorney invites the judges to choose sides: either they side with the American ancestors who bequeathed the Declarations of Independence of 1776 to America, based on the equality of every human being before God,¹⁵ or they give in to pressure from politicians and merchants. He invoked American ancestors to come and help the judges exercise their responsibility in the present. Staring at portraits of former presidents,¹⁶ the old lawyer prays:

We have long resisted asking you for guidance. Perhaps we've feared in doing so, we might acknowledge that our pure individuality, which we so revere, is not entirely our own. Perhaps we've feared that an appeal to you might be taken for weakness. But we have to understand finally that this is not so. We understand now (...) We have been made to understand and to embrace the understanding that who we are is who we were.¹⁷

The contradiction among the Americans made the Amistad Africans see their American counterparts as untrustworthy. How could they claim to be their friends when they could not agree among themselves. What power had they to defend the truth? What is the truth in this context? What shows that they were not sent by the government to extract information from the African to better expose them to the Government?

¹⁵ Cf. Bernard VINCENT, *Amistad. Les mutins de la liberté*, 205-206.

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, George Washington and his father, John Adams.

¹⁷ Alexis PATE, *Amistad*, 298.

The identity crisis of both Africans and Americans aggravated their communication problem.¹⁸ Something significant needed to happen to them in order to open a way for communication and collaboration. The turning point of the encounter between the Amistad Africans and the Abolitionists was when the Africans discovered their community of identity with Jesus Christ, who was unjustly tortured, killed, but rose again from death. This is what we call the *Memoria Christi*.

The *Memoria Christi*: as Revelation of Community of Destiny between Africans and American Abolitionists

The Amistad Africans encountered the story of Jesus within the context of what the historians called “the God palaver”. First, the religious discussion on a shared general idea of God (the Great God) and the possibility of judgment led the Africans to open up to their interlocutors. Then, the communication will be facilitated by the Africans’ self-identification with the story and person of Jesus.

The God-Palaver as Possibility of Communication

John Ferry and Lewis Tappan, tried to build friendship with the Amistad Africans in order to dispose them to speak the truth. Tappan came up with the idea to engage Cinque and another companion on the idea of God and the spirits. Historians refer to this conversation as the “God palaver or religious discussion, between the Amistad Africans and the American abolitionists.”¹⁹ The Africans acknowledged to have some idea of good Spirit, and

¹⁸ The Amistad Africans struggled to tell their own story to their American captors and allies. They could only communicate through sign language and Burna’s few words of English (Cf. Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 118). They spoke at least fifteen languages, but none of these could be understood by the people in whose hands they were (Marcu Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, p. 123).

¹⁹ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 125

also of an evil Spirit. They also showed that they were away of the possibility of judgment. “When Tappan asked Cinqué if he knew that God would punish him if he did not speak the truth. The Amistad leader answered yes and added in his own language “me tell no lie, me tell the truth.” Asked where God lived, “he pointed upward” no doubt to nods of approval from the onlooking Christians.”²⁰

Sensing that their interlocutors were friendly to them, the Amistad Africans began to tell their personal histories with the help of John Ferry. As the search for better means of communication continued, the Reverend Thomas Hopkins, a pioneer in education, sought to know about the religious ideas of the Amistad Africans. “So he tried to discover whether they had any distinct idea of the Supreme being. He asked by signs whether they knew of anything higher than the sun, moon, stars etc., and several of them answered in succession that they did know that Gooly (their name for God) was above all things.”²¹ The “God palaver, gradually evolved to the “Jesus palaver.” At a time when they were desperate, uprooted, considered a commodity, locked up in a foreign prison, Africans experienced a “moment of grace” thanks to the discovery of the story of Jesus.

The Memory of Grace: The Self-identification with Christ’s Experience

Steven Spielberg’s film amplified and dramatized the Amistad African’s discovery and identification with the story of Jesus. This reading of Scripture overturned the understanding the Africans had of themselves and others. The Bible scene is a powerful moment that symbolizes hope. Cinque and another companion examine the illustrations in a Bible and begin to grasp the story of Jesus-despite not knowing how to read English. They

²⁰ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 125.

²¹ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 135.

recognized Jesus by a particular sign: “Everywhere he goes he’s followed by the sun.”²² Thanks to this sign, they can understand the course of Jesus’ story, his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. They are touched by Jesus’ miracles, how he walked on the waters, healed the sick, the lepers, the lame, the blind, and raised the dead. Through the images, they connect with the narrative of suffering, sacrifice, and eventual triumph, drawing parallels between Jesus’ story and his own struggle for freedom.

When Singbe (Cinque) and his companions understood that their story resembled that of Jesus, everything changed. Their reasoning can be translated as follows: if the man unjustly chained like us is the same one who walks on the waters, then there is no fatality. If the man hanged on the cross and descended into the grave is the same man who later rose up to speak again to his people, then there is indeed justice somewhere. If the man who was thought to be dead is the same one who ascended to heaven, then “It is not all that bad”, we have a future.²³ It is not just about imitating Jesus as a cosmic hero, but through the story of Jesus, Cinque and his companions understood that *someone* was taking care of Jesus and giving him a future. They concluded that this *someone* is also their future and that, therefore, their identity as men and women goes beyond the situation of humiliation and inhumanity to which slavery subjects them. Since this someone who raised Jesus stands there for them, they too are persons.

As they deepened their theology courses, they learned that this *someone* is God, the Father of all human beings, the one they had identified as the Great God. They understood that Jesus’ victory on the Cross depended not only on his efforts, but above all on the grace of God, the Father who supported his Son in his fight

²² Alexis PATE, *Amistad*, 249-251.

²³ “This is where we’re going when they kill us.”

against the forces of evil and took charge of his future when these forces threatened his life.

At a deeper level, Cinque and his companions had an experience that can be described with Jüngel as an *interruption* of the old self-understanding. It is an eschatological distancing of the human being from the history of the man Jesus Christ: “a distancing into the concrete past represented by his death on the cross and into the concrete future of Jesus Christ represented by his resurrection and *parousia*.”²⁴ It is the encounter with the good news of Jesus Christ that announces that we live from God, because God, through his love, gives each one of us the opportunity to be and become a person. Moreover, whether one succeeds or fails in this world, God gives each person a future, because the person is not reduced to their works.

A letter written by one of them, Kale, to a certain Miss Juliana Chamberlain who had contributed the sum of five dollars to the Amistad case mentioned “the love of the ‘Great God’ who sent his beloved son into the world to save sinners who were lost and sent the Bible into the world to save us from going to hell.”²⁵ He prayed “that God would help and bless the benevolent Miss Chamberlain, give her a new Soul, and take her to heaven when she dies.”²⁶ He added, “I want to pray to the Great God, make us free and go our home and see our friends in African Country.”²⁷

Markus Rediker noted that one passage that seemed to have special resonance for the Africans was Psalm 124:1-7, “which the rebels themselves used to explain their own ordeal of enslavement and emancipation.”²⁸

²⁴ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, trs from German by Darell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans, 1983), 175.

²⁵ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 157.

²⁶ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 157.

²⁷ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 57.

²⁸ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 138.

*If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,
3 then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
4 then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
5 then over us would have gone
the raging waters.
6 Blessed be the Lord,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth.
7 We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.
8 Our help is in the name of the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.*

This overwhelming experience opened them up to others. Indeed, since they killed their masters in the ship, the captives could no longer free themselves from violence, hatred and the sense of guilt. But thanks to the encounter with the story of Jesus, they understood that they shared a community of destiny among themselves and that those who gave them the Bible were their brothers and sisters. They also understood that they could trust the abolitionists and their lawyers who believed in the freedom of justice in the face of political and economic maneuvering. This experience restored their desire to continue their struggle for freedom and dignity.

The next section will explore how the *memoria Christi* can offer resources for a new self-understanding and living together of peoples in the present context of identity fragmentation and polarization. How can we think the identity of the human being in a way that enables us to move away from the ideology of superiority of some people over others?

Transforming the Memory of Race through the Memory of Grace

Polarizations in contemporary society

My interest in the Amistad story dates to 1997 when Stephen Spielberg's movie was released in Paris. I was then student's chaplain at the University of Rennes II, Villejean. I was only three years a priest. Three years earlier, ten French friends (six lay people who adopted me in their families and four priests) accompanied me to Nigeria for my priestly ordination. One evening, my aunt, my father's elder sister, so elated by the presence of the French visitors and the way communication flowed between them and our family members, despite the language barrier, pulled me by the side and spoke to me in Igbo, "Nnaa, when you were going to France, your dad and your uncles were worried. But I told them not to worry. I was convinced that wherever you go you will meet people from the tribe of Jesus. Now I have been vindicated." My aunt's conviction stayed with me, that in every nation, there are people from the tribe of Jesus. This is another way of saying that there is a communion of identity beyond race and ethnicity.

My aunt's conviction came back to me as I watched the movie Amistad, with a community of students from different nationalities. I had at different instances voiced out my revolt against the west for the Transatlantic slave trade and the colonization of Africa. I had frictions with some French students who felt that I was dumping the sins of their ancestors on them. After watching the film, I found it awkward to always play the victim. First, as a priest, I was called to witness to Christ before the students. The latter trusted that I could lead them to a better knowledge of Christ and humanity. Identifying as victim of their ancestors and indirectly making them fill guilty for the sins of their ancestors did not honor my responsibility as witness. On the contrary, it risked eroding their trust in me. I was led to broaden

my understanding of human identity. The truth of human existence and identity cannot be reduced to a particular moment of history or social context.”²⁹

Unfortunately, modern times have reduced the question of truth to “a cultural and historical relativism”³⁰ which includes classification of identities into dominators and victims. Identitarian logic leads to the rise of nationalist movements or extreme right movements that radicalize cultural relativism.

Moreover, in today’s world, discussions surrounding race and identity have become increasingly polarized, reflecting deep divisions within society.³¹ One significant factor contributing to this divide is the legacy of historical discrimination and systemic inequalities. Marginalized communities continue to fight for recognition and equitable opportunities, while some resist these changes, perceiving them as threats to established societal structures. The rise of social movements like Black Lives Matter has heightened awareness but has also led to strong counter-movements, creating an atmosphere of conflict rather than collaboration. In France, the extreme right will say that France is for the French. The same logic is rearing its head in the slogan of the MAGA, America for Americans. This leaves the impression that it is easy to define who is a French person or an American.

²⁹ Cf. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, trs Ray Brassier (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press), 5.

³⁰ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, 6.

³¹ Cf. Jill Kimball, “U.S. is polarizing faster than other democracies, study finds” (January 21, 2021, <https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-21/polarization> consulted May 5, 2025; Rachel Kleinfeld, “Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says”(September 5, 2023), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/09/polarization-democracy-and-political-violence-in-the-united-states-what-the-research-says?lang=en>).

The consequence is the arbitrary persecution of those considered as non-nationals.³²

Furthermore, the influence of media and digital platforms has intensified ideological divisions. While social media allows for the amplification of marginalized voices, it also fosters echo chambers where individuals are exposed primarily to opinions that align with their beliefs. This lack of exposure to differing perspectives contributes to a rigid understanding of identity politics, often escalating discussions into confrontations rather than constructive debates.

Educational systems and policy-making also play a role in shaping the discourse on race and identity. The way history is taught, the policies implemented to address inequalities, and the rhetoric used by political leaders can either bridge or widen the gaps in understanding. Without intentional efforts to promote empathy, education, and intersectionality, society risks remaining trapped in cycles of resentment and misunderstanding.

Hence the relevance of our question: how can we think the identity of the human being in a way that enables us to move away from the ideology of superiority of one people over others? The response to this question requires that we displace the identitarian singularity with the universal singularity corresponding to the anthropological implications of the event of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – *the memoria Christi*. This is what we mean by *transforming the memory of race through the memory of grace*.

Memoria Christi: The Event of Grace, Justification and Adoption

Pauline theology is widely recognized as a resource for the thinking of the identity of the human person from the point of view of grace. For Paul, grace is the event of the death and

³² Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, 8.

resurrection of Jesus Christ. “Jesus died on the cross and resurrected. This event is ‘grace’ (*kharis*). Thus, neither a bequest, nor a tradition, nor a teaching. It is a supernumerary relative to all this and presents itself as pure givenness.”³³ Grace is “that which occurs without being couched in any predicate, that which is translegal, that which happens to everyone without an assignable reason. Grace is the opposite of law insofar as it is what comes without being due.”³⁴ It follows that justification is not by the fruit of any human work.

One consequence Paul draws from the event of grace, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the equality between Jews and Pagans. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul argues that other peoples who have come to believe in Christ are children of God. In fact, for Paul, it is God himself who wants to give other peoples the same blessing as Jews through their faith in Christ. They become heirs of Abraham. Because they are united to Christ, they belong to the posterity of Abraham according to the promise (Gal 3:26-29). There is therefore, neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor freeman, neither man nor woman (Gal 3:28).

To the Roman community divided between Christians of Jewish and pagan origins, Paul offers a way of reconciliation in the name of God who adopted all in the same Church-family.³⁵ This he argues with the concept of *adoption* using the Abrahamic covenant as motif. First, all are subject to sin, Jews and Pagans, and are in need of salvation through divine grace. In Romans 4:3 Paul refers to Genesis 15:6 and argues that Abraham was justified through faith (Romans 4: 5). It was God’s gracious act, God’s justice, followed then by the promise (Romans 4:13) which was the heritage of the world (Kosmos) (Romans 4:17 quoting

³³ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, 63.

³⁴ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, 77.

³⁵ Cf. Trevor Burke, *Adopted into God’s Family. Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (Donners Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 160.

Genesis 17:5). All the nations, including Israel whose father Abraham has become now belong to the Abraham's posterity—a multiethnic posterity.³⁶

The chronological order between the justification of Abraham, the prescription of circumcision and the gift of the law to the Jewish nation is of great interest here. Justification preceded circumcision (Romans 4:10) and the promise preceded the law (Romans 4:13). It means that “it is not circumcision that obtained justification, rather justification called for the mark of circumcision.”³⁷ If the promise precedes the law, then the accomplishment of the promise cannot come from the law. This excludes any ethnic privilege based on the law. What remains of the Jews and Pagans is the justification by faith. Abraham is the father of both the circumcised and the uncircumcised (Romans 4:16).

What place does this conviction accord to differences? Do people have to give up the differences that allow them to situate and recognize themselves in the world? In Paul's thought, the universal is not the negation of particularity. What changes is the status of the differences. Paul argues that with regard to the event of grace in Jesus Christ, “differences are indifferent and the universality of the true collapses them.”³⁸ Differences are not destroyed. The universal manifests itself in the differences, even in their divisions and contradictions and shows that they are capable of welcoming the truth that traverses them. Man or woman, Jew or Greek, slave or free born, all have access to divine grace and it is through the different realities that grace manifests

³⁶ Cf. Sylvain Allaboe, *Eglise Famille de Dieu et loyauté ethnique au Bénin*, Doctora Dissertation, South African Theological Seminary (January 2017), 125 (https://sats.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Thesis_PhD_2017_AlleboeS.pdf; consulted June 3, 2025).

³⁷ Sylvain Allaboe, *Eglise Famille de Dieu et loyauté ethnique au Bénin*, 125.

³⁸ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, 106.

its power without conforming itself to the differences. This is in line with Paul's affirmation "Do not be conformed to the present century, but be transformed by the renewal of your thought" (Romans 12:2).

A Christian anthropology capable of providing the resources for the living together of people in the cotemporary world should be grounded in the *Memoria Christi* as the *ratio essendi et cognoscendi* of the identity of the human being. It will recognize and affirm that human being's identity is fundamentally grace. It will concomitantly affirm the *theofiliation* of all human beings through Christ.

Memoria Christi as *Ratio Essendi et Cognoscendi* of the Identity of the Human Being

Theofiliation

Theofiliation according to Archbishop Anthony Obinna is "creation's new and integral sense of kinship with God derived from its relationship with the Son of God who has become the Son of Man."³⁹ It is also humanity's new kinship with God, through His Son Jesus Christ born of the Virgin Daughter Mary, which makes of humans new sons and daughters of God endowed with the Spirit of Christ."⁴⁰ It is the event of the redemption of humanity and the entire creation through the self-donation of Jesus on the cross.

³⁹ Anthony Obinna, "African Cultures and Development: The Rectifying Challenge", in *Cultures and Faith*, Vol. XVIII, no 4, Rome, 2010, 321-333; "The Pastoral Approach to the Challenges of Caste Systems" in *Beyond Frontiers to the End of the Earth*: Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu, 2011/2012, 14-18; Bede Ukwuije, *The Trinitarian God, Contemporary Relevance and Challenges*, Mumbai, Paulines, 2009, Chapter 9, "Trinitarian Relation and Theofiliation".

⁴⁰ Anthony Obinna, "African Cultures and Development", 328.

As demonstrated above, in the Amistad story, Africans and Americans, despite the gap between their cultures, were led to a new understanding of themselves, made possible by the discovery of the story of God's work in Jesus Christ, which we have called the *memoria Christi*. It is not the call for racial awareness that will reconcile peoples of different cultures today. The narration of the *memoria Christi* has the potential of bringing people to recognize their common humanity and destiny in God.

John Baptist Metz calls for a political theology that will articulate "the memory of persons becoming subjects in God's presence."⁴¹ It will not be personal identities as defined by race or class. It will be a "memory of the neither fully into the currently prevailing system of social interrelations nor arises out of them."⁴² Political theology refuses to let persons be subjects of "any institutionalization of hatred." It will be a Christian anthropology that will articulate the possibility that all people become subjects in solidarity with one another.⁴³

This then opens the way for the *reconfiliation* of all human beings divided by the identitarian logic.

Reconfiliation

Reconfiliation is the project of the new evangelization that flows logically from the correct understanding of theofiliation of all human beings. Archbishop Obinna defines reconfiliation as a "*corrective-redemptive dynamic*", the rectifying or corrective force which assures that the dignity of every son or daughter in the human family is held and defended beyond all biological, cultural or religious divides. Re-confiliation, he writes, affirms "the primacy of sonship and daughtership of every human ahead

⁴¹ John Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 75.

⁴² John Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 76.

⁴³ John Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 80.

of the still important category of brother and sister.⁴⁴” In that sense, “the sociological or religious extension of brotherhood and sisterhood, fraternity and sorority are secondary to the primacy of filiality, confiliality or cofiliality.”⁴⁵

Reconfiliation as a redeeming and healing dynamic aims at the liberation and redignification of humanity. Obinna has other neologisms that express the same dynamic of reconfiliation: the recti-valuing one another, that is bringing people to think of one another correctly; new-joining, con-joining or new-kinning of humans into fellow sons and daughters in equal dignity. The new-creating, recti-valuing project can be achieved through the following concrete ways.

Recognize our woundedness.

Grounding the identity of the human being in the grace demonstrated in the dangerous “*memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*” leads us first to recognize our sinfulness. The identity crisis experienced by the Amistad Africans and their American counterparts points toward the reality of the common wounds of humanity which Christian theology calls sin. The transatlantic slave trade rendered African and western values numb and inoperant.

On October 5, 2003, the bishops of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) went to the island of Gorée, off the coast of Dakar, for a pilgrimage of repentance. One of the courageous contributions of the bishops at Gorée was their recognition of the responsibility of the Africans themselves in the slave trade. The bishops had the courage to recognize that if there were *buyers*, there were also *sellers*. If the slave trade is a betrayal of the Christian mission by Europeans who benefited from the grace of revelation, “the black man is not

⁴⁴ Anthony Obinna, “Reconfiliating Americans”, 5.

⁴⁵ Anthony Obinna, “Reconfiliating Americans”, 5.

justified in treating his racial brother in this way.”⁴⁶ Because deep down, African cultures were not devoid of values, such as the attachment to life, which should have made blacks refuse to sell their brothers.

Why, then, did the grace of Christian revelation on the one hand and the value of life in African cultures prove to be inoperative? Adoukonou gives a clear answer: both the seller and the buyer lost the awareness of belonging to the same humanity. He verifies this in the answers to two types of questions⁴⁷ : first, *how can one be a buyer of the other human being?* Second, *how can one be both seller and merchandise in such an odious trade?* The answers are also clear. In order to be a buyer in such a trade, the buyer had to challenge the belonging to the same humanity of the one they wanted to reduce to the status of merchandise. As a result, the Christian who was equipped with the revelation did not recognize the other as an image of God.

As for the second question, in order to be both seller and merchandise, the black seller had to believe that people of other ethnic groups are not human beings. In fact, this is in line with certain anthropological structures in African cultures, such as what is called witchcraft, the mutual devouring of people from the same family. Some African tribes have done this lucidly by inventing magical rites and myths justifying the practice of slavery.⁴⁸ Theologically, these practices can be described as sin, a common wound, a tearing apart of the human family. Neither

⁴⁶ Barthélémy Adoukonou, « Poids de l’histoire sur la race noire et Pastorale de l’église d’Afrique », Darkar, SCEAM, 2003, 18 p, « <http://www.sceam-dakar.sn/poidsdelhistoire.htm> » (consulted September 26, 2005), 6.

⁴⁷ Cf. Barthélémy Adoukonou, « Poids de l’histoire sur la race noire et Pastorale de l’église d’Afrique », 8-9.

⁴⁸ The case of the cult of *Chukwu* among the Aro People in Igboland is a clear example.

buyer nor seller has understood that humanity is a family created in the image of God.

African bishops also affirmed the complicity of the sons of the Catholic Church and the weight of this history on Africans. It is known that this trade is being extended today in a more sophisticated way, in modern forms, including globalization, no thanks to the complicity of all the states of the world. It is therefore important to recognize that Africans, Westerners and peoples of other continents share the same guilt and suffering in this history.

The reconfiliation dynamic mutually espoused will then lead all peoples to engage in “confrontation with persons, groups, ideas, practices, customs, institutions and systems that distort and assault the dignity of humans in so many places on earth.⁴⁹” Moreover, it will encourage forgiveness and healing. While history cannot be erased, the memory of grace empowers individuals and communities to move forward without being bound by resentment. The memory of grace will also bring people to build bridges through shared humanity by emphasizing common values, shared struggles, and collective hope. They will also create spaces for honest dialogue, conversations that allow for vulnerability, understanding, and mutual growth.

Conclusion

A theologico-anthropological reinterpretation of the central role played by the *Memoria Christi* in the *Amistad Story*, reveals the potentials of the narrative of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the healing of wounded memories. In a critical moment of inhumanity, the story of God’s grace in Jesus Christ led Africans and Americans to gain a new understanding of their

⁴⁹ Anthony Obinna, “Reconfiliating Americans”, 5.

community of destiny and attain an effective collaboration in the fight for the dignity of enslaved people.

The present context of identitarian fragmentation and racial polarization requires that Christians mobilize the *memoria Christi* in order to transform the memory of race through the memory of grace. The recognition of the *theofiliation* of all humanity through Jesus Christ, will inaugurate a *reconfiliation* dynamic. This includes the acknowledgment of shared history, shared guilt and shared suffering. It will also enable people of different cultural backgrounds to understand others in a different way, other than the complex of superiority and mutual suspicion.