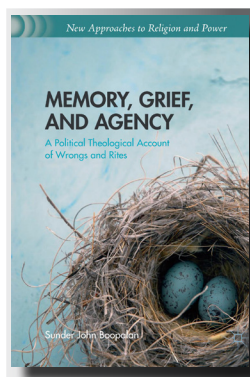


## *Memory, Grief, and Agency: A Political Theological Account of Wrongs and Rites*

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Juxtaposing racial and caste-based discrimination, evidenced in “brutal” and “ordinary wrongs,” Sunder John Boopalan traces the intricacies of discrimination and humiliation faced by Dalits in India and the African Americans in USA. Relying on incidents and experiences in India and the USA, Boopalan exposes the violence meted out to individuals from Dalit and African American communities for ordinary human actions. *Memory, Grief and Agency* challenges the dominant theological articulations of the processes of grief and elevates the agential role of memory and grief in transforming structural wrongs. It argues that “rituals of humiliation” can be redressed through “rites of moral responsibility.” The pragmatic framework of the book offers critical lenses to any reader to interrogate implicit violence in uncritical and ordinary human behavior.

The foundational claims that advance the thesis of *Memory, Grief and Agency* are fourfold: first, “wrongs have ritualistic character”; second, wrongs can be categorized as “brutal wrongs and everyday ‘ordinary’ wrongs”; third, wrongs emerge from “uncritical examination of social conditions”; fourth, “wrongs are socially conditioned corporeal habits” (21). The first step towards the goal of arguing for an agential and transformative role of memory and grief is a discussion around social conditioning and violent identities. By establishing a theoretical foundation for the “rituals of humiliation,” Boopalan unfamiliarizes the familiar and familiarizes the unfamiliar.

Identifying racism and casteism as structural wrongs, the book first delineates the ways in which such wrongs are systematically and socially conditioned. Violence is perpetrated against bodies that move “out of place” yet find sanction in religious, cultural, legal, and social logics. This legitimization allows such wrongs to permeate into all domains of life without punitive consequences. Employing the category of “rituals of humiliation,” the author exposes the historicity and the problematic continuity of violence faced by the racial and caste oppressed communities. Avoiding abstraction in the definitions of caste, the text describes the several “rituals of humiliation” experienced by Dalits that are often glossed over as ordinary. The “ordinary” and uncritical human behaviors and actions give rise to “violent identities,” normalizing and continuing the “wrongs.”

Second, the text shifts from a discussion on the theorization of caste to theorization of the grammar of bodies. It demonstrates that just as rituals which are often external, perpetuate or give rise to violent identities, so do corporeal habits. Racialized experiences of Dalit and Black bodies are often understood as “inviting.” “Racialized outbursts” (65) are claimed to be triggered by racially marked bodies. The text terms the ‘triggers’ as “socially conditioned corporeal habits” (65). These habits, rather than being triggered by the targeted bodies, are rooted in the “logics of domination and discrimination” (83). In the absence of discriminatory words, “bodies communicate a message” (85). To claim unintentionality is to be uncritical to the inherent logics derived from the impulse to maintain a power dynamic between the dominant and dominated communities. Corporeal habits are inherited, adopted, learned, and performed. Spontaneous bodily performances prevent critical evaluation to inform the body to perform consciously in the presence of different bodies. A conscious attention to the bodily impulses can evoke ethical responsibility to transform “violent identities.” By carefully examining the ways in which violence is perpetrated by bodily responses that are inherited and adopted, the text suggests that such socially conditioned habits can only be transformed by fostering “life-affirming corporeal habits” (107). Third, the text draws attention to the *theological unease with remembering wrongs*. Engaging the work of Miroslav Volf and Oliver O’Donovan, the text challenges the dominant articulations of grief over wrongs as a weak bodily action that continues the vicious cycle of violence. The text reclaims grief as a theological or perhaps spiritual act (my emphasis) that enables the memory of wrongs possible. The wrongs of the past are the lenses to understand the wrongs of the present. ‘Knowing’ should be accompanied by “*grieving* over remembered wrongs [for, it] engenders positive agency and the transformation of violent identities” (115). Miroslav Volf and O’Donovan challenge the “active remembrance of wrongs” (115) and suggest that such remembrance have adverse consequences. The text contests their theological reluctance to acknowledge the “positive agential role of grief” (157). O’Donovan’s theological claims are centered around the limitations of human memory, the “vengeful” nature of human beings, the rejection of human vulnerability, and the need to view justice as an eschatological vision. The text identifies the several ways in which victims and sufferers are “vilified” for remembering wrongs that need redressal. Volf posits that

in memorializing ‘memory’ victims can turn violent and resort to violence rendering “evil for evil” (132). He proposes that memory should lead to reconciliation; if not for reconciliation, “memory” can turn to hatred and violence. Engaging the scriptures superficially, O’Donovan and Volf oppose the agential role inherent in memory. The text questions the loopholes in their theological arguments and uplifts ‘memory of historical wrongs’ (143) as agential. The text articulates the importance of an active memory of wrongs of the past in preventing such wrongs in the present. “An active memory of wrongs” (145) benefits the survivors in promoting solidarity, challenges the perpetrators to ethically evaluate their actions, and facilitates onlookers of their role in forming violent identities.

Fourth, the text counts on the knowledge and “common” experience of grief to emphasize its transformative role. Defying the dominant definitions of grief that are understood primarily in “stages” which is expected to be overcome, the text proposes a “continuous” grief. Boopalan uplifts “continuous” grief of the vulnerable against structural wrongs as an epistemological site that can help the privileged to interrogate the violent identities they perpetrate. The text resorts to the “goodness of human being” (150) to extend oneself to understand and grieve for others. By grieving, the dominated communities seek “redress and not retribution or vengeance (153).” The “multi-dimensional” grief is categorized as having an “internal work” (170) and “external work” (156). While the *internal work* enables individuals to pay attention to the formation of violent identities and be cognizant of the social conditions that perpetuate wrongs, the *external work* erases binaries and promotes solidarities between communities irrespective of differences. Although the text elevates the significant role played by both internal and external grief work, it is conscious of the ambiguities of grief and doesn’t undermine the “devastation” that grief causes to people. It elevates grief as a positive “agential work [that] has a theological force” (173). It disallows articulations of hope and justice as otherworldly expectation and suggests redressal of injustice and wrongs in earthly time and space.

Fifth, the text demonstrates that the continuous presence of “in-group/out-group identities” (186) hinder the formation of solidarity beyond differences. Many resort to religion to justify and legitimize the articulation of in-group/out-group differences. The complicity of religion in acts of humiliation against the marginal groups should be rectified by locating theological imagination in the grief of the survivors. Boopalan suggests, “a liberative political theological imagination critically remembers dominant racialized and casteist plots that are violent and offers in their violent in-group/out-group differences via agential grief (201).”

The theological task is to affirm the agency of grieving bodies. The grieving bodies, when conscious of the social conditions that caused the grief, resist forces that humiliate and discriminate. Such resistance to the “rituals of humiliation” enables communities to “move out of place” and defy the casteist and racist structures. The task of “moving out of place” applies to all categories of people: to survivors, to the perpetrators and everyone in-between. The theological action of “moving out” transforms casteist and racist impulses into conscious and critical “re-ordering.”

Addressing a wider theological audience in India and the USA, Sunder John Boopalan's book provides a framework to address "structural wrongs," be it casteism or racism as discussed in the book, or sexism, ableism, totalitarianism, etc. The text systematically and creatively presents the agential role of memory and grief and exposes that "rituals of humiliation" are manifested both in "brutal" and "ordinary" wrongs. Although Boopalan provides a clear distinction between the dominant and dominated, oppressor and oppressed, privileged and peripheral, he does not undermine the "rituals of humiliation" perpetuated by those occupying the in-between spaces. The task of resistance and grief pertains to all groups—to survivors, perpetrators, and the bystanders. While he describes an overall account of "rituals of humiliation," the intricacies and power dynamics within the marginal communities and the "rituals of humiliation" within those have not been addressed. An engagement with the "ordinary wrongs" experienced by women within the suffering communities would make this book a methodological resource for feminist theologians engaged in the struggles of minority groups globally.