Preface

THE QUESTION OF EXPERIENCE

THIS MANUSCRIPT IS A RESULT of a dialogue between an anthropologist and a theologian, specifically, between a cultural anthropologist who has spent many years working with various indigenous groups and a theologian who has accompanied various faith communities in Latin America and is a proponent of liberation theologies. For some time now we have been struggling with the question of how to identify and describe the notion of cultural memory. In particular, we are interested in how cultural memory functions and is transmitted among marginalized communities in a constant struggle for survival. Two experiences are crucial sources for the way we have come to understand the dynamics of memory and narrative. One of us, Jeanette Rodríguez, became interested in cultural memory through her discovery of her Jewish roots. She writes:

> I was a religious studies and philosophy major at a New York college where 80 percent of the students were Jewish. I am a "cradle" Roman Catholic and a New York Latina. My parents and brothers emigrated from Ecuador to the United States in 1952. Given my own bilingual and bicultural background, I cannot remember a time when I did not live in creative, ambiguous, or hostile tension. This particular period, however, was one of intense struggle as I wrestled with the questions of religion and meaning in the twentieth century.
>
> A key to this angst was my exposure to, and understanding of, the Holocaust. I thought that anyone in touch with his or her humanity would be outraged by the massacre of many millions of women, men, and children. Yet many of those around me, and certainly our own American culture, seemed blasé about this catastrophic tragedy. My own affective reaction included youthful indignation and a commitment that this should "never again" happen. At home, I attempted to regain inner peace.

> One night while at the dinner table with the other members of my family, my father and I entered into a discussion about why I was so "obsessed" with the Holocaust. I suggested that perhaps I identified with a group that yearned to know their God and maintain their culture. As I became more visibly emotional in the discussion, my mother turned to my father and said, "Sangre llama a sangre" [Blood calls to blood]. It is time to tell her."
>
> My father then began to tell his story. He said his family had Jewish roots. As he spoke movingly of his origins, his discourse seemed cautious. While he spoke, several memories began to make sense to me: how my father would drop us off at church on Sundays and then take off—I had thought it was simply a Latin American thing for a man to do; the yarmulke (a skull cap worn by observant Jews) I had seen in one of his drawers when I was in high school—he had explained that he kept it so that he could attend the prayer services of his employer, who was Jewish; how all of my cousins on my father's side in Latin America wore yarmulkes—I had always thought this very strange during my trips there; his swaying back and forth at prayer when he did come to church with us. Once I was informed of this missing piece in my family history, things made sense, and I experienced peace.

Another experience of the profound nature of cultural memory led to the doctoral work of cultural anthropologist Ted Fortier. In his fieldwork among the Indian people of the Columbia Plateau in the western part of the United States, he observed repeatedly the deep connections the Indian people made to the wisdom and ways of their ancestors. Even though over two hundred years of missionary activities, government policies of acculturation, and the steady incursion of Western ideas had made a great impact on the people, they retained a core identity of being "Indian." The manner in which this was lived out was a combination of ritual activities, the telling of kin-based stories, and a persistent outlook on life that resisted the hegemony of a Eurocentric worldview. An example of these deeply held convictions is evident in the following story, collected on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation:

> "I do not like anthropologists. I detest what they do, always trying to drag stuff up out of the past. That stuff is over and gone. It's done. It does not do anyone any good. It was painful then, and we are living now. And things are okay now."

> Maria looked away from me, out the window and across the field to the new tribal school. It stands on the hill below the old Sister's building, where Maria and generations of Indian girls had gone to boarding school. Maria tossed her long hair over her shoulder and sighed. Her eyes glistened with the first signs of tears.
>
> "Let me tell you something," she said, touching her eyes and looking back at me.
>
> "Four or five years ago that anthropologist, I forget his name—oh, Doctor, at the University—called and told us to come and get some bones of the ancestors. So, Abe, Clem, and me went down to Moscow.
>
> "Doctor met us in his office and took us downstairs in some old building. It was really cold, and I did not know where we were going. It was cold, I did not know why, but later I did. I did not like it at all.
>
> "When we got to this big room full of shelves and boxes, he took down a box and just handed it to Clem. He just took down this big cardboard box, filled with bones of the ancestors, and handed it to us! There, that is it! Just like that! I couldn't believe it. I was crying. I was so upset. But we took the bones and placed them into a parfleche that we had with us.
>
> "Then Clem said, 'Let's sing.' But I could not, not there, and I was too choked up. Clem said that is okay, we'll go somewhere else. So that guy took us upstairs to another room with some windows and left us alone. I told Clem and Abe that I couldn't sing, not there. It was just too much for me. But Clem said we have to, and that it will be okay. And we sang the songs. Then we came back to DeSmet.
>
> "When we got to DeSmet, we took the ancestors into the church, no, wait, we took them into the chapel of the priest's house, and left them by the altar. A week later we were all ready, and we went by pickup caravan up to the mountain. It was so hard, still, and I cried all the way there. We buried them on the mountain, and sang again."

This brief story illustrates quite well one of the limitations of the Western philosophical tradition of modernism that Coeur d'Alene spirituality easily bridges: social-cultural structures are viewed in dichotomous terms. That is, one is *either* a Christian or not, one is *either* an Indian or not, and so on. What the precontact Coeur d'Alene Indians brought to the missionization process was a premodern philosophy that included an

integrative conception of being. It was, and is, completely compatible to the Coeur d'Alene to be both a warrior and a soldier of the Sacred Heart (a man of peace); the Creator-Being is not only a Mideastern deity, but also the Grandfather Spirit. The place of worship is not only the church on the hill, but also the open lakes and woodlands and mountains. For Maria and her relatives, being a Coeur d'Alene Indian is a cultural connection that calls from beyond the grave to the people living today and to those still to be born.

Several important elements in the first story differ from that of the Coeur d'Alene Indians. In the Rodríguez family, cultural memory is a serendipitous discovery of a dormant cultural/religious memory of the past that surfaced in the author's consciousness. Crucial to this understanding of a cultural memory was the instinctive need that rose from her personal journey to reveal the "otherness" hidden in her past. This experience of self-discovery, which revealed the "hidden otherness" of who she is, led her to reimagine her past, her culture, and her heritage not only in a new and unforeseen way, but in a way that validates her own existence. What was a moment of self-possession became an act of self-revelation.

Reflection on a personal experience this powerful has the distinguishing element of provoking thought, raising questions, and providing profound insights. The deeper the abyss of crisis is, the greater becomes one's connection to cultural memory and to past generations. The mediating link between personal memory and the collective memory of one's past may be a word, an image, a person, or some specific, concrete thing that makes this otherness erupt in one's consciousness and demands one's attention. This otherness is cultural memory, our past, making a claim on us or, better stated, claiming us as its own. Once this occurs, reality is seen in a different way, that is, in a way that gives meaning to our lives and validates our existence. In short, this different way of seeing things means that not only do we identify with the otherness of our experience, but we see it as our raison d'être.

On a collective level, the constituent elements described above are absent. Cultural memory at the collective level is simply there waiting to be recovered in our songs, our rituals, our ceremonies, our stories, or through other mediating elements. The difference between the personal and the collective level is this: personally, the individual discovers his or her cultural memory through crisis, and collectively, the individual recovers his or her cultural memory through songs, rituals, ceremonies, and other mediating forms. On the personal level, the otherness of cultural

memory is hidden from us. On the collective level, the otherness of cultural memory is simply there.

Fortier's story of the Coeur d'Alene Indians is told from the viewpoint of an individual, Maria, whose antagonistic feelings toward "the university anthropologist" who desecrates the remains (bones) of her ancestors represents her feelings for the white man and his institutions (which serve as instruments of oppression). As the story relates, it was up to Abe, Clem, and Maria to go "recover" the bones of their ancestors. The irreverent treatment of the remains by the no-name anthropologist who puts the bones in a "box" gravely threatened the living history within them, leaving the Indians stunned and insulted. Maria could not greet her ancestors with a song while the remains were still inside the university building, but Clem and Abe convinced her that through the mediating form of a song, they would recover the cultural memory of their ancestors. After this, they went back to DeSmet.

Finally, the mediating element of ritual and ceremony became a communal event. After the remains were taken to the church for proper observance and prayer, the caravan of cars accompanied them to the mountain for burial. The Coeur d'Alene Indian story is one of collective cultural memory.

There are two levels of structure in cultural memory that are analogous to the Marxist analysis of the base (the personal level) and the superstructure (the collective level). Over time the base changes, adapts, and transforms itself, sometimes radically. The ideas, values, and ideologies contained within the superstructure rise above the base and take on a life of their own, that is, they become objectified. For example, a medieval feudal base with a monarchical government of kings, queens, and princes slowly gave way to a national base of presidents, prime ministers, and other types of leaders. Thus, as the base changed, the superstructure also changed. This parallels what happens to the personal and collective levels in cultural memory.

Having said this, however, we must also add an important qualifier. The base may change from epoch to epoch (or, at the personal level, from generation to generation), but change also contains the constancy of past epochs. For example, today we no longer live in an industrialized base; this epoch has been replaced by the information age base. Presidents and prime ministers, carryovers from the industrial base, are becoming more and more obsolete as transnational corporations with no allegiance to any particular country are becoming more powerful than the countries themselves. Heads of corporations are now dictating foreign policy. Even

in the United States, the revolving door between government officials and corporate board members who trade places during every new administration never stops. The point here is that even though we live in an information age, the rapid changes cannot render obsolete the superstructure (collective memory) of the feudal base; today, though quite anachronistically, we still have kings, queens, and other ranked nobility. The same is true of cultural memory. Generations today are not the same as those who lived five hundred years ago, but their cultural memory still lives in our collective memory.