

F is for forgetting: A theological dictionary

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 13, 2010](#) issue

A half phrase from Augustine has challenged and inspired me for a half century: “God is like the nature he made.” It appears as a virtual throwaway line, quoted in José Ortega y Gasset’s *History as a System* (1941), in which Ortega adds a flourish connecting ideas about God with ideas about humans: the human “likewise finds that he has no nature other than what he has himself done.” This comment was helpful back when I was trying to connect my theological-pastoral interests with my calling to be a historian. I’d like to think that it could help others as well.

For example, take a puzzler that has bemused thoughtful Christians across the ages. They ask God to “forget” their sins, as if an all-knowing God could forget anything. They also ask God to “remember” Israel, as if God might need a nudge to be reminded of something. The canonical books never say that it is of God’s nature or essence to forget, but the biblical writers often describe God as one who does forget and does not always remember. And God is revealed in “what he himself has done.”

A modern parable has it that God created the world in six days, rested on the seventh, looked around and appraised everything “very good” and then, on the eighth day, created rust, one of the greatest of divine gifts. Without rust, the world would now be nothing but a cosmic junk pile of things that never decay, never cease to exist.

The divine creation of rust is nowhere more beneficial than in the human mental world. The brain gets rusty, which means it can consign to oblivion much that is ephemeral, irrelevant or obsolete. Of course, memory loss in the case of Alzheimer’s disease is a tragic underside of the creation of rust, and even ordinary forgetting can inconvenience or frustrate us. But the concept of God forgetting, which appears in psalms (25:7, 79:8) and biblical narratives (Heb. 10:17), can create peace in the souls of worshipers.

It can also address problems in the minds of believers. These occur when thoughtful people try to square the witness of a forgetting God with the character of God, to whom scholastics have ascribed all of the attributes that begin with “omni.” Most schooled Christians can rattle them off: God is omnipresent, omnipotent and, most relevant here, omniscient. Pop-instruction books for Christians join high-theology works in posing a natural question: “How can an all-knowing God no longer know what God once knew?” The logical conclusion to this conundrum is that something is wrong with either the idea of omniscience or the biblical depiction of God.

For years before I came out as a historian, in pastoral counseling and confession I testified that the omniscient God forgets sins. Most of us catechists learned by experience that we never made a dime intellectually by stressing those “omni” attributes of God. In the end, “true” though they may be, they do not square with some straightforward readings of the Bible or with the breadth of human experience.

Ortega, perhaps somewhat reductively, italicizes his conclusion to his pairing of Augustine’s God and humans: *“Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is . . . history.”* Expressed differently, “What nature is to things, history . . . is to man.” I have always found Ortega’s words helpful, as most historians would. A reductionist-minded scientist might present the human as simply the possessor of a neuron-firing brain. But when historians discuss the essential character of human beings, we content ourselves with *stories* of the human, whom Alasdair MacIntyre has called “a storytelling animal.” What the human has is history.

All talk of God as rememberer or forgetter is, of course, anthropomorphic. Thus the same worshipers who confess that God is invisible also ask that God’s countenance be lifted in blessing. Such anthropomorphic transactions can sometimes sound embarrassing, but the biblical authors show no embarrassment in employing similes and metaphors about God. In the Gospels the references to God from the lips of Jesus are not reduced to the logic of propositions. The idea that “God is like the nature he made” squares with the witness that God, like the “human, has no nature: what he has is . . . history.” For example, God is love *and* God loves and has loved.

When people pray that God will forget divine threats or that God will not remember the iniquities of God’s people, one sees the value of the God who forgets. If God tucks away in memory those divine threats for future use, humans can enjoy no reassurance or true freedom. As an omni-rememberer, God would store away the evidence of transgressions. But God, who created rust, knows how to forget and,

forgetting, no longer knows what offended. The one who prays and is forgiven is therefore unhaunted, truly free.

And on the eighth day God created rust. Thanks be to God.