

A THEOLOGY OF FORGOTTENESS

A preliminary inquiry.

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Introduction.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this exploratory paper here today. I'm particularly intrigued with this word, 'Forgotteness' and grateful to find no such word in the Oxford dictionary. This is of course a great joy to all theologians, for theologians just love to invent their own meanings to words, even if the word already has a meaning. And I'm going to do just that, offer you a meaning for the word 'Forgotteness'

Forgotteness is the sense of being forgotten. 1. The state of those wilfully forgotten, especially those forgotten by agencies or people charged to remember them. 2. Describing the state or condition of those, society has disregarded. 3.theol. Those who God never forgets, e.g. the weak, the sick, homeless, lost, or the weary.

It is my contention that one of the most serious weaknesses of the human condition is the memory. There is nothing more controlling, fickle, more unreliable than human memory. We know from personal experience and from psychological research that our **memory is very selective**. We remember only what we want to remember. And it is usually that which is to our own advantage or that which makes us look good.

An example of this might be the idea that **the oppressed have long memories and the oppressors have short memories**. I believe that to be true of my life. I can vividly remember the harm that I have had to suffer but remember little of the harm I have inflicted. The neuropsychiatrist Peter Fenwick said memory will store both the true version of an event and the re-imagined version and that the re-imagined version can take over and wipe out the true recollection. Some modern day psychologists believe that memory leaks others believe it doesn't it is simply a matter of being unable to recall. There is of course a very great difference between losing memory and simply not being able or unwilling to recall it. What ever the outcome of psychological research we would surely acknowledge that our memories are far from perfect and therefore not an authentic record of what actually occurred. The problem arises when we willingly forget. So what is needed is for the every day wellbeing of society an authentic memory. Not only will it keep us and society on track, it will also keep us honest to God.

Where exactly does God come in? I'm going to suggest that apart from all the well known attributes of God such as God is love, forgiving, gracious, compassionate merciful and just God is also memory. Not just memory as we know it but what we might call 'authentic memory'. That is to say a memory that

is not distorted, not selective, does not leak nor does it forget. God as memory is then a counter to our own inadequate memory, it serves as a benchmark for us to maintain a consistent personal integrity and ethic.

So what is divine memory? And how can we relate to this memory. If divine memory is authentically the truth it is surely able to reveal all without contradiction then we may not wish to be confronted by it. After all one of the biblical pictures we have of divine memory is the picture in Revelations of the final judgement. Here God's memory is used to call us to account for all our wrong doings, a very scary prospect. Whilst I believe God as memory does call us to account, my understand of that calling is somewhat different than that in revelations. As I understand divine memory it is something close to Carl Jung's collective unconsciousness. Or what Tibetan Buddhism calls the, "train (stream) of consciousness" (The Tibetan Book of the Dead page 183.) Probably closer still is William James's concept of 'More', by which he means that in addition to the visible world there is 'More', an extra dimension of reality. (Varieties of religious Experience) And I would add to this list something I call the "Biblical unconsciousness", that which lies below a surface reading of scripture, that which engages the spirit within us.

How then might we access this divine memory? I would suggest by tapping into the collective unconsciousness or more pointedly the Buddhist, 'stream of consciousness' which is more specifically in tune with the divine by the clarifying process of 'Karma'. But it must be acknowledged that we can access the Divine memory through almost avenue ; prayer, meditation, reading scripture, conversation, a novel, poetry, a religious experience, religious conversion. It is of course always important to remember that we can never restrict the way God would choose to act. There will be more ways to God than we dare imagine. But for today I wish to concentrate on what we call Christian Scripture. When we do we will find this 'Biblical Unconsciousness' in the words of the prophets who frequently speak of social injustice. And of course in the words of Jesus himself exhorting us and all people to defend the poor, integrate the leper, support the weak. We might also explore the 'Biblical Unconsciousness' of stories such as the Exodus, the Exile, the Priestly story from the First testament and such primary stories from the New Testament as the Prodigal Son/Father, the Zacchaeus Story, the story of the Samaritan and the Emmaus road story. Storing these stories and more pointedly the underlying consciousness in our own memory is to assimilate this, 'Biblical unconsciousness' and to begin the process of 'authenticating' our own conscious memory. This in turn would go some way to combat our own 'forgetfulness'.

Given then that God's memory is contained in the scriptures, albeit inadequately, is also available through most religions and even lodged in the human psyche – we all know the difference between right and wrong - what then is the concern of God? What is it exactly that God holds in such great store that in turn is so important to us who choose to attend such a forum as this? If God is the authentic memory of everything what parts are we primarily concerned to discover and live by?

God then remembers those we would tend to forget. It is one thing to speak of the attributes of God and another to speak of the implications of those attributes which is surely their whole purpose. God is not a theorist. God is that spirit which prompts us to act for the good of those in need. To do what is good is to remember those who are forgotten. These people are the easiest people on

earth to identify. They are not only all over the planet in every country they are the majority of people on the planet. These are the people Jesus identified as 'the concerned of God' the list is as well known as it is endless. Endless because are 'forgetfulness' is endless. And society has forgotten that they are dear to God's heart.

So any thought of a theology of 'Forgottenness' must boldly name 'forgottenness' as a crime against humanity and God. To forget ***the poor the oppressed the homeless the unemployed, the under paid the sick the widow the elderly and the beaten child*** is to forget God. If these people are no longer in our memory then neither is God for God is with them. In so much as you have done this to one of these you have done this to me. The one essential purpose of the Divine memory is to remind us of our own need for an 'authentic memory' and that we and society as a whole is not to rely on our selective memory.

What then is this divine memory concerned with? If we are right to claim that the God of our scriptures is in fact first and foremost a God of love, mercy and justice. A God of forgiveness, grace and compassion then it naturally follows that God's memory would be consistent with these attributes. In fact the First Testament records time and again that Israel remembers God's goodness to them and urged them to do the same as it is the only authentic way to live. In short God reminds us of what we are called to be and what we have forgotten to be. God calls us and all society to remember and never forget. Our role is to banish 'Forgottenness'.

Bibliography:

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