

# Forgiving and Forgetting

Theology and the Margins of Soteriology

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## Forgetting the Unforgettable? Or: Memory's Mystery is Oblivion

PHILIPP STOELLGER

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten!  
May my tongue cleave to my palate if I remember you not.  
Ps 137,5–6

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this  
one thing I do, *forgetting those things which are behind, and  
reaching forth unto those things which are before,*  
I press toward the mark for the prize of the high  
calling of God in Christ Jesus.  
Phil 3,13–14

### The Quest for the Question to which Forgetting May be the Answer

The question underpinning the following explorations in the dark fields of forgetting is quite simple: Is memory good and forgetting evil – or are such distinctions to be blurred? The consequence of blurring them would be twofold: we would need to conceive of both a bad remembering and a good forgetting. What might those be? Usually, we understand a bad forgetting to be the act of forgetting the good, or forgetting God, and, reversely, a good remembering as the remembrance of God or the good. But how should we understand good forgetting? Should we understand it as the forgetting of evil? Would this not, in itself, be evil? And bad remembering: might we perhaps understand this as the eternal memory of evil and hence the perpetuation of evil?

If remembrance and memory are to be praised as cultural 'goods' insofar as they preserve the self and others, or as theological 'goods' insofar as they designate hope and perhaps salvation, then does forgetting stand for hopelessness or even sin and evil? Is it a mere disappearance and passing away from life and being? Is it the deadly loss of 'the good' and of 'God'? Or may the interplay of remembering and forgetting be more complicated? May forgetting be necessary

as well? A necessary component of memory? An aspect of salvation? A hopeful renunciation? A lack – perhaps even a loss – of evil?

As with religion, the broader horizon of the question encompasses culture: Should we preserve ourselves and especially our relationship to God through memory – and does God, *vice versa*, preserve *us* by *his* memory of us? God's oblivion would then be tantamount to the loss of life. What role, however, should remembrance play with regard to evil? Will the memory of evil be preserved in eternity or can we hope that evil will eventually be forgotten? Yet, is forgetting evil even possible?

*Forgetting the unforgettable* is a marker and reminder of the *impossibility* of forgetting or the impossibility of oblivion. Traditionally, one may claim that the 'good' is always unforgettable: Forgetting God is impossible (Augustine); and if such forgetting becomes real, it is an impossible reality or a real impossibility.

However, if we look at the dark side of life, it is trauma, it is *evil* that is *really* unforgettable.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, forgetting *evil* might be understood as an evil act itself. In the process of salvation and atonement, evil must not be forgotten, for otherwise truth and justice would be harmed. Might we conceive, nevertheless, of an alternate response to evil: *not* to remember it eternally and thereby 'eternalise' it? The most difficult therapy against evil may be to take on the challenge of forgetting this very darkness: to forget the unforgettable. This is an eschatological question for cultural and religious memory: for what can we hope? Even to consider forgetting the unforgettable evil might well be dangerous as such a desire can be seen as a form of repression rather than as a renunciation of evil. Such forgetting would then be forgetting as (self)-deception. The deep ambiguity of forgetting is thus evident and manifest. Still, if forgetting really is ambiguous and ambivalent, it may as well prove a final liberation or redemption from evil.

Thus, we must ask: can evil be healed *only* by memory (as the so-called mystery of redemption, a *sola memoria* as a soteriological principle)? Or does such an act of remembering result in the eternal preservation of evil? Might we hope for the forgiveness of the unforgivable and finally even for the forgetting of the unforgettable? Could it be impossible for us and for God, or is it thinkable as an imagination of salvation, of *impossible* salvation or salvation of the impossible? This is the question: does forgiveness demand oblivion? Can oblivion become *annihilatio mali*? And is such an annihilation of evil possible without at least some degree of oblivion?

The *form and methods* of the following considerations are twofold: anthropological, on one hand, from the perspective of phenomenology and hermeneutics, and theological, on the other hand, considering the concept of God with

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<sup>1</sup> But, not to forget: The unforgettable may as well be the highest good or an extraordinary instance of luck.

regard to memory and forgetting. The latter will lead to the intriguing question of whether God can or indeed does forget. To put the question in a theistic or metaphysical frame: What are the implications of speaking of 'God's memory?' What are the implications of speaking of God's forgetting in the context of an inventive and investigative theology?<sup>2</sup>

### The Horizon of the Question about Forgetting

When and why do we raise the question of forgetting? What challenges does it present? And what might be meaningful responses to those challenges? An evident but perhaps trivial challenge is the currently pervasive historicism – a kind of neo-historicism – in a number of humanities disciplines. Under this paradigm, theology is transformed into the history of theology, dogmatics into the history of dogma, and philosophy into the history of philosophy, such as the history of ideas or concepts. This development can make these disciplines resemble a museum: everything has passed away, is gone and preserved only in and through memory. There are no present and future questions left to be answered. Theology and philosophy (among others) would result in endless retropection and introspection without present challenges and contemporary responses. Such a dark eschatology of these disciplines is, of course, exaggerated but may point to *one* problem that the question of forgetting raises. It echoes

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. for the following: R.D. WEIJERT (ed.), *Living Memoria: Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Memorial Culture in Honour of Truus van Bueren*, Hilversum: Verloren, 2011; A. VOLMER, 'Die Umwertung der Antikerezeption als Memoria-Konzeption in den Schriften italienischer Autorinnen um 1600', in: *Welche Antike? Konkurrierende Rezeptionen des Altertums im Barock*, Vol. 2, ed. U. HEINEN, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011, 995–1006; B. WALDSMÜLLER, *Erinnerung und Identität. Beiträge zu einem theologischen Traditionsbegriff in Auseinandersetzung mit der memoria passionis bei J.B. Metz*, Münster: LIT, 2005; A. IWANAMI, *Memoria et oblivio. Die Entwicklung des Begriffs memoria in Bischofs- und Herrscherurkunden des Hochmittelalters*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2004; P.J. GEARY, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, <sup>2</sup>1996; H.I. FLOWER, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006; R. LEMARCHAND, *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial, and Memory*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011; M. VOLF, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006; J. MOLT-MANN (ed.), *Das Geheimnis der Vergangenheit. Erinnern – Vergessen – Vergeben – Loslassen – Anfangen*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012; A. MUSIOL, *Erinnern und Vergessen. Erinnerungskulturen im Lichte der deutschen und polnischen Vergangenheitsdebatten*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2012; A.D. BASTING, *Das Vergessen vergessen. Besser leben mit Demenz*, Bern: Huber, 2012; D. SCHUR, *The Way of Oblivion: Heraclitus and Kafka*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998; O. DIMBARTH/P. WEHLING (eds.), *Soziologie des Vergessens. Theoretische Zugänge und empirische Forschungsfelder*, Konstanz: UVK 2011; K. BEHRENS, *Ästhetische Oblivologie. Zur Theoriegeschichte des Vergessens*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005.

Nietzsche's praise of forgetting as a 'divine art'. However, one does not have to be Nietzschean to recognise the problem.

The countermovement may be called 'antihistoricism', the reduction of all problems to their propositional analysis in radical synchronicity. Of course, this approach lacks the sensibility and sensitivity for history and cultural difference. It might seem, then, that a combination of both approaches would be ideal: neo-historicism on one hand, antihistoricism on the other. However, does the combination of two paradigms create solutions for each, or does it just lead to a doubling of the problem? What about the wide fields in between? Is there a third way – or are there even more alternatives?

The widespread praise of memory implies a concept of forgetting in terms of danger and loss, if not as sin and evil, or the demonic and diabolic. Such a concept must be challenged because it is a '*metonymic fallacy*': while 'forgetting God' may be a metaphor for sin, it does not follow that all forgetting is sin (the same is true of 'desire'). Whenever *memory* is praised, *forgetting* is an unavoidable implication: for it is the presupposition, companion and reverse side of memory. Because forgetting is a necessary condition of memory, we cannot disqualify it in advance. What can easily be forgotten in the praise of memory is the *meaningful realm* of what *must* be remembered or recollected, but still is not *really* or *actually* remembered, whether God, others, the unconscious or the Shoah. The *realm of oblivion* is then presupposed to be significant and of symptomatic relevance as a realm of 'working through' the lost worlds or of 'real possibilities' and latency.

The concept of forgetting has to be differentiated, not immediately normatively, but descriptively. A hint may be Ricœur's last great work on *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oublié* and the distinction it makes between easy and difficult forgetting (as in preserving forgetting).<sup>3</sup> I will enquire into a *losing* forgetting or a 'good' loss through forgetting – not as the necessary destruction of the past (as Nietzsche suggested) but as a salutary loss. Forgetting in this sense is ultimately an *eschatological* topic and part of the eschatology of therapy, of forgiveness and of the 'Last Things' in theology.

The decisive test of the concept comes in its attribution to God: If God's forgetting (as a subjective genitive) is possible, then forgetting would prove a necessary theological concept. In that case the conditions and limits of God's memory must be considered: is God's memory a total recall (of everything real at any time and space, in every possible world, and in the impossible worlds, as well)?

<sup>3</sup> Cf. PH. STOELLGER, 'Bild, Pathos und Vergebung. Ricœur's Phänomenologie der Erinnerung und ihr bildtheoretischer Untergrund (mit Blick auf G. Didi-Huberman)', in: *Bezeugte Vergangenheit oder versöhnendes Vergessen. Geschichtstheorie nach Paul Ricœur*, ed. B. LIEBSCH, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010, 179–216; IDEM, 'Das Geheimnis der Erinnerung ist Vergessen', in: *Hermeneutische Blätter: Vergessen – Eine Erinnerung* 1 (1998), 31–39.

Then God's memory would be 'omnimemory': all past would be present to him, like a diachronic omnipresence, just as all future would be present to him through omniscience. If that idea is not monstrous in itself, it implies at least the eternity of evil, which would be preserved in God for all time and thereby gain eternal existence (at least in the process of being overcome). Should we hope for such an eternal perpetuation of evil in God? Or is there a 'tacit dimension' in the religious speech of God's memory – his final forgetting of evil (of sin – not of the sinners)?

Answering these questions, this paper has four parts:

1. Some conceptual remarks and imaginative explorations.
2. The praise of memory – and what it forgets.
3. Forgetting the unforgettable? Considerations of the limits and the impossibility of forgetting.
4. God's forgetting as an eschatological metaphor: not to forget forgetting in eschatology.

### 1. Conceptual Remarks and Imaginative Explorations

1. What is forgetting, actually? Unasked, I may believe I know what it is, but once asked, I find I no longer know the answer. It is as normal, omnipresent, and mighty as anything could ever be. But to define and to determine it is like pinning pudding on the wall: a real impossibility. Forgetting is always already 'floating away' when one focuses on it. The reason for this may be that forgetting is a 'phenomenon of withdrawal'.<sup>4</sup> It is not 'given' but withdrawing itself, perceivable only in traces because it is a 'loss', a permanent losing of what is given by (cultural) memory. Not only God but also forgetting seems to be impossible to define: *oblivio definiri nequit*. Nevertheless one may try to determine the indeterminable:

- Is forgetting merely a matter of *biology* or *neurobiology*? In this case, we are concerned with the physical processes of 'losing' a strata or neuronal connections, with forgetting as a material procedure.
- Is it, more than natural, a *psychological* phenomenon? If so, a theory of that strange entity named 'soul' is necessary to describe the driving forces of repression and suppression.
- Is it a *cultural* phenomenon? Does forgetting pertain not only to individual recollection but to cultural recollection, as well – like the burning of a library (for example, in Alexandria)? Then theories of culture are necessary to de-

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. PH. STOELLGER, Entzugserscheinungen. Zu den Überforderungen der Phänomenologie durch die Religion, in: Schwerpunkt: Hermeneutik der Religion, ed. G. FIGAL, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006, 165–200.

scribe how cultural oblivion works (namely, through cultural memory and its destruction, for instance, the dissolution of institutions).

- Is forgetting also a *religious* phenomenon? Is sin the ‘forgetting of God’? What about the forgetting of the covenant, of creation, of salvation or of the law?
- Is it a *theological* topic? Does faith involve the oblivion of one’s former life, as when Paul forgot his former identity as Saul?
- And lastly, might *God* be an agent of forgetting? Is there a salvific forgetting of the past – hopefully of the past – namely sin and evil? Then God’s forgetting may be the *annihilatio mali*.
- *Forgetting* appears to have a twofold meaning: a *preservation* of the forgotten and an *annihilation* of – what, exactly? If oblivion is understood as arbitrary or even accidental – an accident occurring during the usual preservation by memory – it would be a chaotic force of life – mental, communal, and cultural. The burning of a library is, for instance, brutally indifferent. But if forgetting is *selective*, it becomes interesting. Can we find, for example, an annihilation of sin in justification (by *imputatio iustitiae* and *non-imputatio peccatae* or *culpa*), or even of evil in the eschatological fulfilment? Would the realm of oblivion, then, no longer constitute the underworld of shadows but the *coming* realm of forgetting in the kingdom of God? Is this kingdom possible without the loss of the ‘old’ world, that is, old in an eschatological sense?

2. In the attempt to ‘define’ forgetting, one decisive distinction is whether it is a *positive* or a *negative* concept. One finds a similar conflict in the conception of sin understood in terms of as privation or rather as an actual position or force.

If forgetting is to be qualified negatively as *loss* and *lack* – in the same way as sin is defined as *defectus* or as *privatio boni* – then forgetting would be *privatio memoriae* or *praesentiae*. It would be rather *impotentia* than *potentia*, more a weakness than a force. The idea of *impotentia* suggests that forgetting is not an *energeia*, nor even a *dynamis*, but an *adynaton*, a shifting-away, a disappearance and a loss of actuality and of potentiality. Forgetting would then be an impossibility, but nevertheless quite present and real. One might call it a real impossibility. The experience behind this paradox is real, but the problem is that forgetting is never a decision. It is not an intentional act, but rather a form of passivity.<sup>5</sup> What cannot be done, nevertheless can and does of course occur in reality.

However, one can also positively conceptualise forgetting as a *force* or a *power* that is evident in the actual forgetting and is effective in present actions or thoughts. In this case, forgetting would not be a privation but rather something in and of itself. Forgetting as a force of its own becomes an expression of this hidden dynamic of forces, a struggle between forgetting and remembering or between repression and manifestation. ‘I would prefer not to ...’ create a myth

<sup>5</sup> Cf. PH. STOELLGER, *Passivität aus Passion. Zur Problemgeschichte einer categoria non grata*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010.

from the hidden background of forgetting. To invent a system of forces is possible, of course, as Freud's example makes clear, but it always tends to become a psychological metaphysics, a 'metapsychology'. The intuition behind such a theory would be the more plausible experience that 'behind' the apparent thoughts, desires and feelings there are hidden ones. These are not actual but potential, with their own movements and energies, of which we are not always aware, let alone in control. The related question is whether forgetting is *strictly* non-intentional, not an act but a passive occurrence: happening without agency. To supply an agent, not 'me' but '*interior intimo meo*', like the unconscious, is to invent agents or dynamics to 'explain' what happens there. I would prefer not to ... and restrain myself from doing so. There are no agents behind what is essentially a passive act.

The indefinite and vague process named forgetting may nevertheless be understood as an *anarchic force*, causing the event called forgetting and constructing the realm named oblivion. In the phenomenological tradition we are familiar with the so-called *passive synthesis*: a strange epistemic process without any activity of the ego but nevertheless synthetic. Husserl gave as examples of this association, affection and connotation. Forgetting, then, may be called *passive analysis*: the loss of presence and representation without 'my self' and its activities. Thus, forgetting is not an activity and cannot be called *intentional*, but is a resolution *happening* to me, without being chosen or desired. Of course, psychoanalysts will object that there are reasons for this, even intelligible ones. However, I will refrain from this theory of lost worlds – for the moment.

Therefore, I would conceive of forgetting as a mode of passivity, normally latent, sometimes evident. It is not an activity, it is normally non-intentional – and it is, I suppose, a strange phenomenon of *withdrawal*. Because of this paradoxical 'givenness', it is attractive for metaphors and metonymy.

3. Insofar as we can distinguish *forgetting* from oblivion, the consequence of forgetting is *oblivion*: the *being* forgotten and, furthermore, the dark *realm* of this 'being' in oblivion. One does not have to blame humanity for the mysterious 'oblivion of being' (*Seinsvergessenheit*), as Heidegger did. In culture, however, just as in personal life, there are ever-expanding fields of what has been forgotten: the realms of oblivion. The mythical name for this realm is Orcus: a universe of lost worlds, not a cosmos but a chaos, dark and strange, to which no living being is ever granted entrance.

It is the world of the *eidola*, as *eidolon* is the substantive of *apollymi*: of killing or being killed, losing or being lost. Shadows reside there, lost souls, but they do not live; they are dead or even worse, 'undead'. It is the realm of shades, whether Hades or Hell, both beyond the river Lethe, marking the borderline between life and death, earth and hell. There can be no entrance without forgetting.<sup>6</sup> It

<sup>6</sup> Note the difference between heaven and hell: There is no entrance to heaven without

is not *only* myth but an iconocritical idea of what images and imaginations *are*: dark fancy and non-existent imagery, that is, *eidola*. Here the concepts of forgetting and oblivion cross into the realm of questions about images and imagination. This seems quite appropriate: the shadows are fictions (but ‘not unreal’), they are ‘dead’ or, more precisely, they are *between* life and death, ‘undead’ so to speak. And that which, withdrawn and beyond Lethe, has no presence, must be imagined. In this sense, imagination is the way these gone shadows are given. This is why, traditionally, memory is a mode of imagination, a *special* mode of imagination of ‘what has been’. Therefore, the forgotten beings are latent imaginations, still not imagined, and they come back as imaginations like ghosts – if one is ‘imagining things’.

With regard to imagination and imaginative memory a strange idea emerges: a memory of ‘what never has been and never happened’. It might be called *mere* imagination or just ‘fancy’, like the memory of Paradise and similar myths. Artwork is full of such imaginations of ‘what never has been and never happened’. Such retrospective imaginations are ‘presented’ as memory of what no one has experienced, just as prospective ones are given as imaginations of what is expected, feared or hoped for. In myths, as in psychoanalysis, which in many ways is an ingenious, scientific mythmaker, the temptation seems irresistible to imagine these worlds and their orders in order to give *reasons* for their being-forgotten, to establish *differences* between them and invent *rules* for the border-traffic between the realms of memory and oblivion. These realms are spaces of so-called ‘projections’, more fancy than imagination, more myth than science. This is not a necessary reason to refrain or abstain from such inventions. However, they are rather literature than science. Nevertheless, they can be helpful for cultural memory: to imagine the other side of memory, of what lies beyond and beneath the cosmos of cultural recollection.

Literature and art are full of imaginations of realities that are lost, gone, withdrawn or even more than that, impossible, unreal, or irreconcilable. They act, therefore, with a licence to explore the cultural impossibilities that are nevertheless relevant and may perhaps become possible in the future. The strange ‘fact’ of a cultural memory of something that has never been present may be *more* than mere fancy.<sup>7</sup> Take, for example, the stories of Creation and Fall: a memory of something that has never been present, but that is nevertheless always a ‘real presence’ as a condition of being.

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memory (as *memoria Dei*); and one is not between death and life there, but beyond, in ‘eternal life’. The mode of being is not being forgotten but being remembered by God. But that, of course, is religious imagination, that is, not unreal.

<sup>7</sup> By the way, the normative distinction of imagination and fancy, like as pure and impure or healthy and ill, indicates a will to distinguish but is quite questionable. Cf. R. LACHMANN, *Erzählte Phantastik. Zur Geschichte und Semantik des Phantastischen in der Literatur*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2002; A. HAVERKAMP et al. (eds.), *Memoria. Vergessen und Erinnern*, München: Wilhelm Fink, 1993.

## 2. The Praise of Memory – and the Forgotten Forgetting

The theological problem of forgetting is produced by the *sacralisation of memory* – as if remembrance really *is* salvation. Such a sacralisation has a strong biblical foundation in texts such as Dt 26,5–10. In Israel, the idea was a normative concept of memory in the context of the covenant(s) between God and Israel: He remembers and is thereby keeping the covenant – and Israel must do the same (but did not). In such a paradigm, memory is the medium of keeping faith with God and thereby, of course, a medium of faith, the form of relationship with God. – However, is the generalisation of this assumption true or at least plausible?

Whenever memory is conceived as a divine command, forgetting should be understood as against God's will: it is construed as unfaithfulness, as sin, and perhaps even diabolic or demonic. Just as in our understanding of coveting: The command 'you shall not covet' is decontextualised by a general view of desire as sin. However, both concepts need to be distinguished. To demand that certain things should not be forgotten for certain reasons is one thing; to ban *all* forgetting is quite another. The generalisation becomes metaphysics or simply meaningless, an example of *metonymic fallacy* (considering a mere part as a whole).

One remarkable side effect of a specific command to remember is the following: to remember *this one thing* means to forget the *rest*. Or, to remember this as *something* forfeits other possibilities. This implies that *remembering is forgetting*: a choice that implies foregoing (forfeiting) all other possibilities. Or, one might say: the particular act of remembering is a manifestation, leaving all the latencies aside. What is forgotten thereby is not 'unconscious' but latent. Then the work on forgetting and oblivion would appear as a *hermeneutics of latencies*.

To remember the Exodus means to forget the rest of history; to remember the settlement of the Promised Land means to forget the stories of the others. Because remembering is highly selective, it is only the manifestation of the selected object, surrounded by vast lands of forgetting. And what if the remembered stories, such as the Exodus, never 'happened'? Is the memory null and void and wasted – mere fantasy and myth – but nevertheless divine command or cultural identity politics? If historical research and exegesis show (and claim to have proven) that almost nothing of what one '*shall*' remember actually happened (that, for example, there was no Paradise, no Fall, no promise, no Exodus, no Sinai, no giving of the Law, no prophets, no judgement, and so forth), then the remembered history turns into imagination. Still accepted and remembered as 'my' story, the religious performance is nevertheless vivid. Does that mean that we must *forget* history and just remember the imaginary story? Yet, to be satisfied with the story, we must forget a lot: other stories and the stories of the

others. This forgetfulness leans towards ideology, to a problematic form of religious self-satisfaction.

However, the origin of the divine command to remember is, of course, directed *against* such self-satisfaction: to remember the history means to remember it as the 'economy' of election and salvation by God alone, despite one's own unfaithfulness and aberration. The remembrances of the Sabbath day (Ex 20,8) – as a reminder of creation (Ex 20,11) and of the Exodus (Dt 5,15) are all focused on promise and covenant, that is, on the history of being preserved by God – and *not* by one's own (non-existent) virtues. Thereby, the remembered history, the Hebrew Bible, becomes a narrative confession of *sin (against God)*.

What is made to be forgotten by this memory are the *sins against the others*: not least by the distorted image of the neighbouring cultures and the conquered indigenous peoples; or the sins against other parts of Israel (Samaritans, 'heterodoxy' and 'idolatry': all the non-canonical piety and practices). Perhaps one can say that *memory's cost is injustice against others*. The religious *politics of memory*, in conjunction with the religious sacralisation of this memory, necessitates an identity politics with a dark side. Insofar as the commanded memory is a memory of God's power advancing the chosen people, such memory seizes an interpretative and symbolic power over and against the others who were 'not' chosen. Such identity politics, 'in the name of God', provides self-empowerment and self-enhancement – as Nietzsche would say (and praise). The forgetting of others becomes repressive.

The command to remember the salvation and preservation by God changes from a *narrative confession of sin*, as in the Hebrew Bible, into what becomes a *victim's perspective*. Not to be saved by God but to be lost as a victim in the Shoah and to be reconciled by its remembrance is the present command: 'never forget God' turns into 'never forget the Shoah', that is, never forget the perpetrator's guilt and the victimisation of the Jews (not to mention the ambiguity of sacrifice). The sin of forgetting God becomes the sin against the Jews. Yet, the meaning of sin is strictly theological on one hand, while on the other, the meaning is a complexity of morality, politics, history and law. The first is a sin with regard to God; the latter is a sin against the Jewish people. To remember God (that is, the covenant) is a religious relation grounded in God's own remembrance; to remember the Shoah is *not a religious* relation to God but rather a relation to the unimaginable Shoah and its Jewish victims. To identify both memories can lead to a confusion of immanence and transcendence.

The idiomatic expression is to construe *memory as the mystery of reconciliation: remembrance is the secret of reconciliation*, or even of redemption (that varies). It became famous as the inscription at the exit of the history museum at *Yad Vashem* in Jerusalem: 'Forgetfulness leads to exile while remembrance is the secret of redemption' ('*Das Exil wird länger und länger des Vergessens wegen, aber im*

*Erinnern liegt das Geheimnis der Erlösung*').<sup>8</sup> It sounds traditional (and the underlying principle is old), but the quotation is ascribed to the so-called Baal Shem Tov (the founder of Chassidism), Rabbi Israel ben Elieser in the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

'*Zachor*', remember! becomes the secular command, the categorical imperative with regard to the Shoah. Never forget! is the negative implication, prohibiting any return of fascism. However, it is about more than prohibition. The claim is rather that memory ultimately is a *religious* command, still valid in secular times and intercultural contexts as a *cultural* command. On one hand, not to forget is a duty towards the victims, which includes the duty not to forget the guilt and special responsibility of Germany. The 'remember!' is just the first part of the idiomatic expression. The continuation is the expectation or promise of reconciliation or even redemption. It seems to have a twofold meaning: strictly religious but also generalised and secularised.

Its origin is, of course, a specifically *religious* one: the *Shemoneh Esrei* (or *Amida* or *Tefilla*) is the confession to the 'God of our fathers' who remembers them (as the performance of God's fidelity). It is the same in the '*Shema Yisrael*' with the so-called historical creed. Faith in the Jewish tradition thereby implies remembering the fathers, the covenant (that is, the salvation-relation of God and Israel). Faith *is* (not only but necessarily) *fides historica* in the sense that piety towards the fathers is a religious commandment (*Zachor!*). That is *not* the veneration of the ancestors (though it seems to be similar, as in the Roman '*pietas*'), but it is the reverence for God, who preserved them and the whole of Israel. Faith is the remembrance of the covenant (*berit*) and the history of salvation over time by God's fidelity (*emet*) to the covenant with Israel.

In medieval Judaism this practise of remembering was theologically interpreted as the medium of the 'real presence' of God.<sup>10</sup> The 'sacramental' character of the concept of remembering became manifest. One may say that what preaching is to Protestantism, the *praedicatio verbi divini*, the kerygma, the prac-

<sup>8</sup> Above the eternal flame in the Hall of Remembrance at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC it is written: 'Only guard yourself and guard your soul carefully, lest you forget the things your eyes saw and lest these things depart your heart all the days of your life. And you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children' (Dt 4,9).

<sup>9</sup> Born ca. 1700 in Okop near Kamjanez-Podilskyj; died in 1760 in Midzyborz, Podolien. Cf. I. BENELIEZER, *Die Geschichten vom Ba'al Schem Tov = Schivche ha-Bescht / [Ba'al Schem Tov]*. Teil 1: Hebräisch mit deutscher Übersetzung; Teil 2: Jiddisch mit deutscher Übersetzung, ed. and transl. K.E. GRÖZINGER, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. K.E. GRÖZINGER, 'Gedenken, Erinnern und Fest als Wege zur Erlösung des Menschen und zur Transzendenzerfahrung im Judentum', in: *Alltag und Transzendenz*, ed. B. CASPER/W. SPARN, Freiburg i. Br.: K. Alber, 1992, 19–49. With Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (thirteenth century), Grözingen says: 'In der Erinnerung ist Gottes Macht und Herrschaft in Israel gegenwärtig. Das Erinnern übernimmt also die Stelle von Gottes Heilshandeln im jüdischen Volk und ist dadurch das Fundament und die Quelle des Glaubens' (ibid., 21–22).

tice of memory was to (medieval) Judaism (in prayer as in liturgy and education or instruction). Thus, we can say with the thirteenth-century Talmudic scholar Moshe de Coucy: ‘Forgetting is the root of all violation and the memory is the reason for all merits’ (*‘Das Vergessen ist die Wurzel aller Übertretungen und das Erinnern ist der Grund für alle Verdienste’*).<sup>11</sup>

One may call this phenomenon a *sacralisation* of memory. It functions as a necessary ‘identity-maker’ (and ‘marker’) for the religious identity of an individual, the community and the people of God with a continuity across time and space (in the Exile as in the Diaspora). One might say even more: *God is present in and by memory – and is made absent by forgetting*. Forgetting, then, would be the lack and loss of this identity and the breaking of the covenant. Forgetting would be the origin of sin (incidentally: not as a *malefactum* but as a passive process, a ‘*malefieri*’). The consequence of forgetting is, according to the Talmud, a severe punishment: a new slavery in Egypt or a new Exile.<sup>12</sup>

During the cabalistic period in medieval Judaism the sacramental concept of memory became *ontologised*: memory is the male power in God, the ninth of the ten Sefirot (the ‘generative limb’, an obviously phallic metaphor).<sup>13</sup> Its function is to repress forgetting. This concept presupposes an ontological dualism, represented symbolically in the struggle between memory and forgetting (as the evil).

This ontology is set in a *psychological* frame during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Lurianic Caballa with Jizchak Lurja (1534–1572). The original sin became manifest in the shattering or fragmentation of the ‘macro-soul’ (of Adam) into all individual souls. These are in oblivion, and memory is the recollection of all souls into the original macrosoul. To have the female soul (*nefesh*) means to be ‘in the realm of forgetting’. To receive the male soul (*ruach*) means to come back into memory by recollection.<sup>14</sup> Memory becomes the *cosmic* process of reunification (of ‘at-one-ment’). In other words, memory *is* redemption.

This is the background to the famous phrase of *Yad Vashem*, whose popular motto seems to originate from the Lurianic Caballa (and this should not be forgotten). Yet, the celebrated identification of memory and redemption became *manifest* in Chassidism and its psychological interpretation of exile and redemption.<sup>15</sup> Fundamental is (not astonishingly, given the cultural context) a threefold concept of exile: first, in the divine *pleroma* (a notion inherited from

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 26; G. SCHOLEM, ‘Zaddik, der Gerechte’, in: IDEM, *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit. Studien zu Grundbegriffen der Kabbala*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973, 96ff, esp. 100ff.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. GRÖZINGER, *Gedenken, Erinnern und Fest als Wege*, 28–30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–33.

the cabalistic tradition); second, in the physical world (from Egypt to Eastern Europe); and third, as the origin of man's spiritual nature (a psychological view). The biblical tradition that forgetting God leads to exile is taken to its fullest realisation: forgetting is not only the reason for exile, it *is* exile – and memory is the redemption, just as the Israelites in Egypt *remembered* and recognised their failure and their forgetfulness. Redemption begins with the insight called memory within the inner man. The sentences are explicit here: 'remembering is redemption, and forgetting is the exile' or 'the exile endures longer and longer because of forgetting, but through memory comes the redemption'. ('*Das Erinnern bringt die Erlösung [...] und das Vergessen das Exil.*'<sup>16</sup> '*Das Exil wird länger und länger des Vergessens wegen, aber vom Erinnern kommt die Erlösung.*'<sup>17</sup>)

One can summarise: memory is redemption as '*at-one-ment*' with God, reunification or '*henosis*' (mystically said); and vice versa: forgetting is separation from God, from Israel and the covenant and from oneself, in other words, exile.

Incidentally, all the '*optimisations*' of forgetting become possible here (compare the Sabbatians by Sabbatai Zevi). Forgetting is (like sin) the driving force of history, of the economy of salvation and therefore of the dynamics between God and human beings (and among human beings themselves). Thus, forgetting is not only the worst case but at the same time also the condition of movement, of life and of desire for the coming world. Forgetting is *mystery* because, though obviously bad, its performance brings life and desire.

The sacralisation and mystification of memory shifts and changes its resonance and meaning through *generalisation*. The divine and religious command 'remember!' and 'never forget' becomes ambiguous when it is transferred from God to Israel (or to Judaism?); from a divine command to a 'categorical imperative' with regard to history; from a religious identity to an international demand; from a cultural practice to an intercultural habit of speech – and so on.<sup>18</sup> The transferences, applications and translations evoke several shifts in meaning. One aspect emerging from the semantic and pragmatic 'density' is the complication of *secularisation*: the religious command is *moralised* (as, for example, reappraising acedia and melancholia as laziness). The relation to Israel and its history replaces the relation to God and his history of salvation.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibd.*, 32.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibd.* Cf. R. MATZ, Andrzej Szczypiorski. Die unsichtbaren Lager. Das Verschwinden der Vergangenheit im Gedenken, Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993, 30: 'Das Bemühen, im Rückgriff auf den Kernsatz israelischen Gedenkens nun wirklich nichts falsch machen zu können, paart sich mit grenzenloser Fahrlässigkeit gegenüber dem Wortlaut.'

<sup>18</sup> Cf. R. v. WEIZSÄCKER, Zum 40. Jahrestag der Beendigung des Krieges in Europa und der nationalsozialistischen Gewaltherrschaft. Ansprache des Bundespräsidenten am 8. Mai 1985 in der Gedenkstunde im Plenarsaal des Deutschen Bundestages: 'Das Geheimnis der Erlösung heißt Erinnerung' (<http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/02/150202-RvW-Rede-8-Mai-1985.pdf>) (last accessed on 11 May 2015).

The grave and serious ambiguity is the replacement of God with the Shoah. Of course, Israel's history remains the object of remembrance, but the salvation and reconciliation through this memory was previously implemented by its 'centre of gravitation', namely God. This deep change by transference is (made to be) forgotten and *shall* not be forgotten. Therefore, a problem appears with the promise (or claim) of redemption through memory. How can this promise be kept? Is this possible by mere human remembrance, without God? Is redemption, reconciliation or at least forgiveness provided by memory? Is memory as strong as death – or even stronger? The biblical idea was a different one: *love* is strong as death.<sup>19</sup> And *if* a memory might be strong and stronger than death, that could *only be God's* memory (subjective genitive). Human memory, particularly of an evil, would ultimately perpetuate, preserve, immortalise or even 'eternalise' it.<sup>20</sup>

However this secular transformation of a religious command may eventually be assessed, it seems to promise more than it can fulfil. It makes a promise that can never be kept by human memory. It appears to me to create an over-expectation and over-interpretation of memory. So, the forgotten backyard of cultural memory becomes a relevant problem. If one expects reconciliation and redemption through memory, does that mean, once again, that forgetting is the quintessential evil?

### 3. Forgetting the Unforgettable?

Forgetting becomes *seriously* relevant with regard to the *unforgettable* (like forgiveness with regard to the unforgivable).<sup>21</sup> Wilful *forgetting is impossible* because it cannot be actively done. Yet, *forgetting of the unforgettable is even 'more' impossible* – if such nonsense made any sense.

The subjective impossibility of forgetting is explained simply: forgetting is not an act, not an intentional possibility but a passive occurrence. It happens, but it is not 'done'. But imagine the simple command: Forget it! Of course, this is what we say! On one hand, the command is as nonsensical as the challenge to

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Song 8,6: 'Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death.'

<sup>20</sup> In Hans Blumenberg one can observe a parallel transaction: The culture of mutual remembrance (over time and generations) is thought to function as human preservation over all generations, as cultural duty against the dead, and thereby as preservation of them in cultural memory. Thereby the inter-generational memory seems to become the secular version of 'God's own memory' of history.

<sup>21</sup> Usually forgetting becomes a serious problem with regard to the unmemorable. The definitive loss is frightening. Therefore God or 'the angel of history' is keeping everything, even the unrealised possibilities (cf. Walter Benjamin). That's another trace not followed here: The unreal and unrealised, that which will never become real – unless at the end of time. Eschatology would be the final realisation of all lost possibilities.

be spontaneous or to be happy. Such imperatives entail a pragmatic contradiction. On the other hand, it might not be a challenge but a suggestion or a normative claim: 'these lines are mere nonsense, just forget them!' Once said, of course, these lines may remain present in memory for this very reason (speaking phenomenologically, they remain in retention). Nevertheless, it is arguable that 'forget it' is not so much the demand to intentionally forget but rather a suggestion intended to draw the other person's attention to other questions. As such, the statement is perfectly possible and unexceptionable. Yet, this observation does not resolve the problems and paradoxes of forgetting, which is why it might be best to forget the challenge, 'Forget it!'.<sup>22</sup>

Intentional forgetting is not even possible psychologically if the so-called unconscious preserves everything. It is morally impossible with regard to what shall not be forgotten. It is culturally impossible because the 'cultural memory' is usually not at any single person's disposal. Libraries may be burned, universities closed, but, though sometimes successful, the limits of such a *damnatio memoriae* are fairly obvious. Intentional forgetting, is, finally, theologically impossible insofar as an omniscient God cannot really forget.

These impossibilities are more or less trivial, though the impossibility to forget the unforgettable is not trivial at all. It is the *impossibility* of forgetting the dark sides of life – of evil like traumata and torture, of crimes and catastrophes – that provokes the quest for a 'salutary forgetting'. However, at the very moment one considers such an expression, the whole framework changes. The equivalence of evil and forgetting is challenged whenever a 'salutary forgetting' becomes worthy of consideration.

With regard to victims and the harm that has been done to them, forgetting is *morally* impossible, not to mention its *historical* impossibility. Nevertheless, 'more' than memory is required whenever redemption or reconciliation or forgiveness are promised or hoped for. Might one suppose that this means *less* memory or perhaps even its loss, such that one might wonder what lies 'beyond' or 'after' memory? What is the meaning of such an expression? For what reason shall we remember? If redemption or at least forgiveness is what is asked for, then memory cannot be an end in itself. This is the reason why the (political) rhetoric of memory sounds vain, sooner or later. It promises more than memory is able to deliver.

Psychoanalytical therapy (in a Freudian perspective) aims at a final healing by losing and loosening: to become free of the eternal return of the unforgettable in acting it out again and again. To be sure, this liberation is not possible by refusing memory; quite the opposite: there is no final liberation without remembering and working-through. Still, the final liberation (one may call it an

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. H. LÜBBE, 'Forget it. Über das Vergessen und die Historisierung der Erinnerung', in: Magazin. Kulturstiftung des Bundes 20 (2013), 36–39.

eschatological hope of psychotherapy) is an unfastening: to let remembrance go – into the realm of oblivion. Not ‘forget it!’, but ‘let it be, let it pass away’. Such liberation is necessary, if (and only if?) life becomes impossible without such a loss, which might be called forgetting and which is never without severe risks. The infinite return of the unforgettable can make life, social relations and communication impossible.

Forgetting is impossible for several reasons, as mentioned above. First, because it is not an intentional act and it is therefore beyond human control. As a non-intentional loss it cannot be an ability. Secondly, because it seems psychologically impossible, at least if there is a strange realm of preservation of everything named the ‘unconscious’. Thirdly, because it is morally impossible to forget the hurt and the violation towards the victims. This becomes theologically relevant as one’s guilt shall or will not be forgotten. Therefore, justification as the justification of the sinner (*iustificatio impii*) and the imputation of God’s alien justice (*imputatio iustitiae alienae*) cannot be the forgetting of sin. Fourthly, forgetting is impossible because – traditionally – God will and cannot forget.

However, what is impossible might nevertheless become real: First, as an unintentional loss, not possible for us to choose but nevertheless a real and common experience. Secondly, as the final aim of therapy, to be set free from the eternal return of the repressed. Thirdly, morally as an illegitimate forgetting of guilt and victims – or perhaps as legitimately as the eventual consequence of forgiveness. And fourthly, then, perhaps as God’s final forgetting of evil as *annihilatio mali*. Theologically, therefore, forgetting becomes important as a topic of eschatology: for what do we dare hope?

In realised (presentist) eschatology, hope is for the performance of *forgiveness*, and in *future* eschatology for the ‘end of the world’ as its ‘*fulfilment*’ and the end of the ‘old’. The theological reason for the idea of the final loss of evil or even the destruction of the old is the desire not to externalise evil, just like in the presentist or immanent eschatology of forgiveness.

Here, Ricœur’s distinction between easy and difficult forgetting may be helpful.<sup>23</sup> According to his distinction, easy forgetting would be the destruction of the past and its traces.<sup>24</sup> This may be normal – but easy? The eschatological problem of *annihilatio mali*, the destruction of evil, shows how difficult this would be in reality. The usual assumption is that the worst will be forgotten, but the best will not be forgotten. Memory, therefore, is perceived to be therapeutic, salutary or even salvific: it preserves the best and loses the worst. This idea, as seen through phenomenological reflections of memory, is not infrequently transferred to God whose memory is perceived as the mode of salvation and eternal life. But this transfer might be a form of self-deception: perceiving

<sup>23</sup> Cf. P. RICŒUR, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Paris: Edition Du Seuil, 2000, 569–574.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 8; cf. *ibid.*, 15, 33–34; 52–53; 300–301.

memory as therapeutic because of its selectiveness (as in cognitive dissonance) means relying on its power of falsification, of what Nietzsche called its '*Zurechtmachen*', the manipulation of the past.

A *difficult* forgetting is the indirect preservation *by means of* forgetting. This is Ricœur's 'last word' on the debates around the concepts of gift and forgiveness: in a certain, so-called 'difficult' forgetting there is an unnoticed element of the *preservation* of memory, withdrawn from the conscious mind.<sup>25</sup> But this sounds primarily like the well-known idea of the unconscious: forgotten but nevertheless preserved. It would be neither salutary nor a moral or theological response to the problem of evil and sin.

Regarding the possibility of forgiveness, Ricœur asks for an 'untying' (*délié*): in other words, the experience of 'being set free from' the misdeed. There is a necessary distinction between the agent and his act, or within the agent himself. Ricœur's response in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* is: '*délié l'agent de son acte*'.<sup>26</sup> The realisation of this impossible possibility is the promise: '*tu vauz mieux que tes actes*'.<sup>27</sup> The main point here is the distinction drawn between agent and act, the *salutary* difference made by another (by the victim?).

The difficult forgetting seems to be a similar, related concept: the untying (*délié*) of the agent from the act (the misdeed). But in order to maintain the difference from easy forgetting, difficult forgetting has to be *preservation without destruction*, though at the same time *dissolution*. And both together appear like 'the achievement of the impossible'. Can the impossible forgetting of the unforgettable thereby really be achieved? Ricœur's response sounds a little too Hegelian, as it performs a kind of *conservation* and *elevation* of the concept of forgetting as preservation with forgiveness and without eternal return.

I would prefer to hesitate here. It is not quite clear how this distinction between agent and act can be drawn and be effective in the performance of the spoken word. 'You are better than your acts.' However this might be possible (difficult to imagine with regard to a traumatised victim), it is *not* forgetting but a distinction between past and future in the present perception. Could it be, however, that the *impossibility of forgiveness* (as an act, as our ability) has to do with the *impossibility of forgetting* (as a condition of the imagination of new possibilities)? In this way, forgetting seems to turn into a condition for forgiveness – and that would certainly be false. Forgiveness does not emerge from forget-

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<sup>25</sup> 'À quel titre, dès lors, la survivance du souvenir vaudrait-elle oublié? Mais précisément au nom de l'impuissance, de l'inconscience, de l'existence, reconnues au souvenir dans la condition du 'virtuelle'. Ce n'est plus alors l'oubli que la matérialité met en nous, l'oubli par effacement des traces, mais l'oubli que l'on peut dire de réserve ou de ressource. L'oubli désigne alors le caractère inaperçu de la persévérance du souvenir, sa soustraction à la vigilance de la conscience' (ibid., 570). '[L]a survivance des images' (as affections, impressions) would be the basic form of deep oblivion, which Ricœur calls 'oubli de réserve' (ibid., 555).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 637.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 642.

ting. Yet, the slightly vague and risky intuition is this: out of forgiveness, forgetting will emerge, the ability of letting the past *pass* away.

Ricœur's preservative forgetting leans towards an eternalisation or immortalisation of evil as well as a conservation of sin. To transcend the eternal return and the law of guilt and sin would mean to eventually lose this law and the eternal exchange and return. Simply put, there is no fulfilment of the new without a loss of the old. Therefore, a *careful forgetting*, a selective and truly justified forgetting, might be a legitimate symbol of hope and a topic of eschatology. *This final oblivion is memory's mystery*: the aim of a salutary memory and the negative condition of possibility for the impossible.

One version of this mystery is already present in *forgiveness* (which is no less impossible). The distinction between act and agent, like that between old and new agent, implies an equivalent negation: 'you may and shall and will be another person, different and better than the one you have been.' This is not a mere possibility, latent in the potential of the agent himself, but it is a (furthermore impossible) possibility discovered and realised *in relation* to others: 'given' by them like the word of forgiveness. This is far from a sufficient explanation, but the problem is focused more precisely. The mystery here is the coincidence of reality and impossibility: it is impossible for the agent to make this difference and to 'free himself'; but this impossibility becomes real by an act performed by someone other. However, the model of speech acts is not the solution to the mystery. It is less an act and more of a *gift*, an *event between oneself and others*,<sup>28</sup> so to speak.

The theological tradition claims that forgiveness is God's privilege (and therefore administered by human beings 'in the name of God'). The differentiation between agent and act is therefore not a human ability but is reserved for the judgement called justification. Thus, forgiveness can be conceptualised as a 'nominalistic' concept: we speak of this difference, even though we cannot 'really' distinguish act and agent. The efficacy of this judgement (as with justification) remains opaque for us. It might seem plausible to generalise the problem by reverting back to the model of speech act and performance, but then every performative word would be sacramental, which is not very helpful.

The radical question concerning the impossibility of forgiving as well as forgetting would be the following: *can the past be changed* by either forgiving or forgetting? Can we, by opening up a new future, alter the past? If nothing is impossible for God and neither for the believer, it may indeed be possible to change the past. But such formulaic assertions of omnipotence (nothing is impossible – or impossible is nothing) are of course hyperbolic if not meaningless.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. PH. STOELLGER, 'Gabe und Tausch als Antinomie religiöser Kommunikation', in: *Religion und symbolische Kommunikation*, ed. K. TANNER, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2004, 185–222.

'Past' is an expression – for what exactly? For what has passed (away)? I would suggest, 'past' is an expression used for the *given past*. It is an indexical expression from the present point of view, as 'future' is an expression for what will come (not for the unrealised future). The form of the given past is memory (even cultural memory), scientifically provided by historiography and its literary methods of writing history. The mode of the future, by contrast, is manifold: while it may be hope or expectation, it is *imagination* and fancy as well. The scientific mode, of course, is prognostic calculation, a prediction possible by the extrapolation of past events in combination with rules, shown, for example, in simulations or emulations.

If past is *given past*, then the inkling remains that there has always been more than what has been given *to us*, that is, what has been memorised by us and written down by historians. Thus, we encounter the hidden or withdrawn past. We normally take it as an expression of that which is not given. One may call it *historia abscondita*, the unwritten history or the unknown. The hidden past is a *mysterium fascinosum et tremendum*, the fascination of all historical research attracted by the unknown. The idea to reveal the 'real history', what 'really happened', is (presumably?) the basic impetus or motivation for historians. Despite what they might reveal, hiddenness remains. The hidden past *is* a phenomenon of withdrawal. That is why it has to be divided: into the memorable hiddenness and the immemorable, that which is lost forever. The borderline between both is the battlefield between historical research and the impossible, the lost worlds.

I raised the distinction between *given* and *hidden past* (the latter subdivided into two) in order to question the standard idea that the past is an expression denoting the totality of all that really happened. In such a substantial sense it resembles a 'green, never seen': a mysterious thing in itself (*Ding an sich*). I would prefer to speak of the past in a critical sense: the hidden past is the regulative idea for what is still not given to us and will either remain absent ('a-present') forever or become present through historical research. In its phenomenological sense the past was *given past*, perceived from the present point of view. In its critical, methodological sense it is a regulative idea for the critique of present memory.

In either sense, however, the past is thought to be given through memory, though at the same time it is an imagination. The struggle between the two, memory and imagination, is usually perceived to take place in the field of correctness: of false imaginations of the past being rectified by better memories, which in turn are corrected by even more accurate historical research. In this way, historical research is thought to be the authoritative memory-police: the custodian of historical order. By the same token, imagination is forgotten – as a necessary condition of the possibility of memory.

One might debate whether memory is a mode of imagination or, vice versa, imagination one of memory, more specifically of *false memory*. The quest for

the ‘primacy’ of one over the other, however, frames the problem as a power struggle, in which the empowerment of one is achieved at the cost of the other. I would prefer, therefore, to draw the distinction on the basis of their function: memory is a representation (*Vorstellung*) of the past in the present. Imagination is a representation of what might be possible in the present. But for every representation – as making present – memory needs imagination: in a broad sense to look for the possible and the impossible, and in a more specific sense to look for the real. This is exactly why history is ‘written’ and why it needs the rhetoric of *energeia* and *enargeia*: of bringing the past into the eye of the mind, making it visible, readable, imaginable. The techniques of ‘representation’ are the modes of ‘giving’: saying and showing (*lexis* and *deixis*).

Imagination thus is a necessary condition of the possibility of memory. In the same way, imagination is also the decisive condition of the possibility of forgiveness: the imagination of a new life, a ‘renovation’ of the agent in the future. This is the vivid intuition in Ricœur’s idea of forgiveness as a distinction within the guilty agent enabling him to have different future than he could have had on his own. There is a transgression in this imagination of the future, a certain transcendence of the past: to let it pass away, to let it go. This *careful* forgetting is the mysterious counterpart to the forgiving imagination and imaginative forgiveness.

#### 4. God’s Forgetting as Eschatological Metaphor

‘Careful’ and ‘selective’ forgetting sounds even more impossible than ‘forgiving’ and ‘forgetting’. If forgetting is not an act but a passive analysis, it can neither be intentional nor selective – not even for God. The objection is evident. “‘*Ars oblivionalis*?’” Forget it’, wrote Umberto Eco.<sup>29</sup> His semiotic argument was quite simple: as forgetting implies the use of signs, and because signs produce presence by representation, they cannot produce absence. But that is, of course, a reduction of his argument.

If we transform the problem of forgetting analogous to ‘cultural memory’ into ‘cultural forgetting’, then it would be easy to resolve: the *destruction* of the media of cultural memory would be an intentional and selective forgetting. Absence can be produced by the destruction of ‘signs’. The whole question of forgetting thereby becomes ‘no longer mysterious’. If an *annihilatio mundi* came, cultural forgetting would be complete. Analogously, *death* is for us the ultimate forgetting – of everything, of ourselves as well as of the world and God. The ultimate impossibility (death) is making real what is impossible in our lifetime: to forget the unforgettable. But that is, of course, a little too much forgetting.

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. U. Eco, ‘An *Ars Oblivionalis*? Forget it!’, in: PMLA 103/3 (1988), 254–261.

Still, total forgetting may be less of a problem than the selective and careful variety. In antiquity, a little God named 'Amor Lethaeus'<sup>30</sup> was responsible for forgetting; he recommended to unhappy lovers a curative '*ars oblivionis*': wine, women and singing as the media of forgetting. That may not be what a psycho-therapist would typically recommend today, but it may help nevertheless. Furthermore, it is perhaps remarkable that wine and singing (if not women) are also symbols of salvation: these media of the real presence of joy will accompany eschatological happiness in the same way as they anticipate it in the Eucharist.

In the new world the old will be forgotten. That may be an understanding of what *annihilatio mundi* means: the old is no longer present, effective, no longer determining the future. There is no more presence of the past, insofar as it is old. This is exactly the distinction drawn in Ricœur's concept of forgiveness, which separates the agent from the act in order to open up a relation and a future not determined by the misdeed. The idea is, of course, borrowed from the theological notion of imputative justification (or *vice versa?*): an imputation of *iustitia aliena* to promise a salutary future – and a non-imputation of sin.

To let the past be past is the mystery of forgiveness. And to let it *really* be past, forgetting is necessary. Yet, this formulation is already *aporetic*. To 'let' it be past would treat the forgetting as an act (because to 'let' is a transitive active formulation). This is why one might invert it: forgetting is the indication or symptom that the past has really passed away.

In psycho- or neuropathology this happens, of course, through brain-defects. In everyday life the same happens as well, as the usual loss of the past, which is no longer present. With regard to the unforgettable, however, dealing with this impossibility remains a serious problem. This is the point where forgiving and forgetting touch each other. Nietzsche's famous dictum indicates this impossibility, when he praised forgetting as a 'divine art'.<sup>31</sup>

Forgiveness thus appears as a distinction *without* forgetting what has been forgiven. Because forgetting is impossible, 'the old' remains in eternity in the mode of forgiveness. That 'we' can and shall not forget what was and is 'wrong' – one might name it 'our sins' or 'the old' – is a religious commandment given in the form of conscience. It is the archive of life's falseness. 'Never forget!' And even if we were to forget it, which will at the least happen when we die, God will remember. This is one meaning of God's memory.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. H. WEINRICH, *Lethe. Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens*, München: Beck, 1997, 31–32.

<sup>31</sup> 'Wirf dein Schweres in die Tiefe! / Mensch, vergiß! Mensch vergiß! / Göttlich ist des Vergessens Kunst! / Willst du fliegen, / willst du in Höhen heimisch sein: / wirf dein Schwerstes in das Meer! / Hier ist das Meer, wirf dich ins Meer! / Göttlich ist des Vergessens Kunst!' (FR. NIETZSCHE, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*. Sommer 1888 20[46], in: *Kritische Studienausgabe* Vol. 13. *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1887–1889*, ed. G. COLLI/M. MONTINARI, Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1980, 557.

*Memoria Dei* is a possible metaphor, although it has traditionally been used as in the objective genitive<sup>32</sup> indicating that we (have to) remember God against our sinful tendency to forget him.<sup>33</sup> In Augustine's *De trinitate* the eighth triad of *vestigiae trinitatis* is *memoria Dei*, *intelligentia Dei*, and *amor Dei* (*De trin.* XIV, 12, 15).<sup>34</sup> The theological point here is this: what does it mean to remember God? To presuppose that he was just forgotten and can be remembered is a Platonic notion that is connected with a certain dualism: to remember God means to forget the world (and possibly oneself).

To use the metaphor in the subjective genitive seems to make no sense: to speak of God's *remembrance* would imply that he forgot what he remembers (or, at least, that he *can* forget and remember again). But God's forgetting (as subjective genitive) is traditionally impossible. Just as a reminder, in the Old Testament metaphors for God's forgetting are not rare.

1. In negation, indicating that he does not forget his people, his promise, the covenant, and so forth (Dt 4,31), for instance, in the context of *consolation* (Ps 9,19; Jes 44,21–22). In the same way, God can let us forget *our* misfortune and suffering (Gen 41,51).

2. In the context of *lamentation*, there is the concern that God may have forgotten 'me' or Israel (Ps 13,2; 77,9–10; Isa 49,14–15), for to be forgotten is like being dead (Ps 31,13, cf. Ps 42,10).

3. In negation, indicating that God will not forget the sinners, their sin or his enemies (Jer 20,11; 23,40), for instance, in the context of *judgement* and the threat that God will not forget *our* or *your* sin (Hos 4,6).

4. *Sceptically*, in Hebrew Wisdom, suggesting that all will be gone and we will be forgotten (possibly even by God) (Wis 2,4).

The background of the notion of God's memory can be found in the Old Testament rather than the Greek tradition. His memory is the preservation of Israel (and of the world); and his forgetting would mean loss of existence. Therefore, as our forgetting of God is tantamount to losing our identity, his forgetting of us is judgement with destructive consequences. God's forgetting is *annihilatio* – and *annihilatio* then is *God's forgetting*.

<sup>32</sup> In Augustine it is always (?) an objective genitive. Later, at least in Thomas Aquinas, there is the subjective genitive.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. L. CILLERUELO, 'La 'memoria Dei' según San Augustin', in: Augustinus Magister. Congrès International Augustinien. Vol. 1: Communications, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1954, 499–509; IDEM, 'Por qué 'memoria Dei'?', in: Revue d'Études Augustiniennes 10 (1964), 289–294; G. O'DALY, Remembering and Forgetting in Augustine, Confessions X, in: Memoria. Vergessen und Erinnern, ed. A. HAVERKAMP et. al., München: Wilhelm Fink, 1993, 31–46.

<sup>34</sup> 1) amans, amatus, amor (*De trin.* 8.10, 14; cf. 9.2.2); 2) mens, notitia, amor (9.3.3); 3) memoria, intelligentia, voluntas (10.11.7); 4) res (visa), visio (exterior), intentio (11.2.2); 5) memoria (sensibilis), visio (interior), volitio (11.3.6–9); 6) memoria (intellectus), scientia, voluntas (12.15.25); 7) scientia (fidei), cogitatio, amor (13.20.26); 8) memoria Dei, intelligentia Dei, amor Dei (14.12.15).

If one speaks of God's *memory*, then the metaphors for memory become relevant, whether the wax tablet or the *archive*:<sup>35</sup> God's memory seems to be imagined as an infinite archive without any loss. In this sense it is presupposed, for example, by Eberhard Jüngel, when he speaks of our 'entering into God's memory' after death ('*Eingehen in das Gedächtnis Gottes*').<sup>36</sup> Is God's memory, then, an '*omnimemory*' (like omniscience and omnipotence): a memory without any lack or loss? It would have to be not only a memory of everything that happened but also of all possibilities (what has been allowed and not realised) as well as all impossibilities. This expansion or excellence is necessary for a 'just judgement' because every act has to be judged at one time in the light of the possibilities and the impossibilities. The consequence is as strange as it is scary: God's memory would include all realities, possibilities and impossibilities (at least with regard to the actual world).

That a total memory ('total recall') makes no sense even for God could be made explicit but is, I suppose, self-evident. An interesting symptom therefore is the question *whether God can sleep* (as a light version of temporary and passing forgetting). On one hand, this is vehemently excluded in the Psalms: 'My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep' (Ps 121,2–4). But in lamentation God can be blamed for sleeping and forgetting: 'Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord? Arise, cast us not off forever. Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and forgettest our affliction and our oppression?' (Ps 44,24–25).

The consequence of total preservation would be a theological problem: if God's memory were thought to preserve everything that ever happened, then it would be the *preservation of evil* as well. Or, as might one say, God's memory would engender the *immortalisation of evil* – insofar as whatever is memorised by him, participates in his eternity.

The eminent problem is that when we are dead but remembered by God (as the memorial form of eternal life, no less imaginative), our identity seems to be lost completely – to us. No more 'self-consciousness' would be possible, nor any re-identification. Therefore, we cannot remember 'ourselves' after death, not even in 'heaven'. God's memory becomes decisive for any continuity over time, even over death. To ask for God's forgetting, then, would make no sense whatsoever as his forgetting would signify our own eternal loss. Being forgotten by God may be the Old Testament's idea of being in exile or dead. If there is no *apokatastasis panton*, no eventual redemption of all people, then God's forgetting

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. H. WEINRICH, 'Typen der Gedächtnismetaphorik', in: *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 10 (1964), 23–26.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. E. JÜNGEL, *Tod*, Gütersloh: Gütersloh Verlagshaus, <sup>3</sup>1985, 150–153; K. BARTH, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Vol. III/2, Zürich: EVZ, 1948, 714–780.

would be an appropriate metaphor for such a loss. However, this would be, again, only a *pejorative* meaning of forgetting as the negation (and annihilation) of ‘sinners’ leading to oblivion as a dark Orcus of eternal inexistence. Forgetting as destruction and as judgment over the unbelievers – such a paradigm is perhaps expected. God forgets those who have forgotten him. But, of course, the hope is that he *will not* forget them, not just with regard to a final judgement but with regard to *saving* them, just as the whole Old Testament narrates with regard to Israel. During history, this memory is the presupposition of a just judgement: God has to preserve all that is past for the Last Judgement – not, however, in order to preserve evil in eternity but for its final destruction when it will become lost in oblivion.<sup>37</sup>

Might it then be possible at last and theologically meaningful to look for a *good* form of God’s forgetting? Such a good forgetting may entail either a liberating, *destructive* judgement not of the old world and the sinners in total but more selectively, carefully and distinctively of the old insofar as it was sin and evil; and/or as a *creative annihilation* of the old in order to open up the new world in fulfilment. The ‘and/or’ indicates that the destruction of evil is the creation of an open space beyond sin and evil. ‘Heaven’, as a realm of freedom (from the old) would appear, thus far, as the realm of oblivion. And ‘hell’ might be the eternal memory, the eternal return of the old, of sin and evil. The possibility of God’s forgetting is intimated or hinted at in the metaphorical field of his memory as (not only the last) judgement. Whomever he forgets will be lost and destroyed. But might his forgetting then be the destruction of the old, of sin and evil – so as not to preserve evil in eternity?

The eschatological question of whether forgetting is an appropriate metaphor for the *annihilatio mali* remains, and is analogous to psychoanalysis: Is the aim of ‘therapy’ to be liberated from the repressed past, to let it be instead of repeating and re-enacting it? Evil can be overcome by love or grace. Yet, the question remains open of what will happen to evil, sin and, overall, the old order once they will be overcome. Will they be immortalised by being overcome in eternity? Ultimately, they have to be definitively lost, perhaps not in the imputative justification but at last in eschatological fulfilment as the definitive end of evil.

This distinctive forgetting – destructive and creative – may be appropriate as an eschatological metaphor for *loss as the final liberation from evil, for the final forgetting as the fulfilment of forgiveness*. Therefore, God’s forgetting is one more of the ‘Last Things’. It is a ‘good’ we may hope for: the *annihilatio mali*, not in a personal meaning but as the eschatological distinction between the old and the new.

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<sup>37</sup> A hermeneutical remark: To speak in this way, may appear to replace theistic precision by mythic vagueness. However, it is the case that after the destruction of metaphysics the metaphor comes back – legitimately: because religious speech is metaphorical, and theology has to be the investigation of its metaphors (and its relatives like metonymy and narrations etc.).

Might this selective *annihilatio* be an impossible but nevertheless real transformation of the past? The past, then, is and will finally *not* be what it was and has been.