

# A is for availability: A theological dictionary

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 30, 2008](#) issue

God is “eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, holy, just, faithful, benevolent, merciful and gracious.” I can still rattle off those divine attributes learned in catechism class. Well-tutored Christians will remember learning that some of these attributes of God are “incommunicable attributes,” which means that they have no analogies among humans, who are not able to share the various “omnis.”

Others of God’s attributes are communicable, which means that humans can relatively and analogously share in them—by being merciful or gracious, for example. Karl Barth spoke of the incommunicable as belonging to the freedom of God and the communicable as belonging to the love of God.

Here is where we humans come in. Suppose an editorial board of a new theological dictionary invited you to nominate another communicable attribute. If they asked me, I’d at once nominate *availability*.

The term is grounded in biblical witness and hints at a dialectic familiar in human experience: God is not both eternal and uneternal, but God is both hidden and revealed. God is available to anyone who asks—“it shall be given.” But God is apparently unavailable at times, such as when the most fervent believer experiences the turned back and deaf ear of God. Believers from Abraham to our time and saints through the ages have known both experiences. People at their best and worst play this dialectical and analogical game involving availability.

Most writing on availability stresses this human expression and dwells less on theology—which means, on God. The master on this subject is philosopher Gabriel Marcel, who, being French, spoke of *disponibilité*. Marcel scholars agree that the term is untranslatable and then translate it as Katherine Farrer did: “disposability.” Marcel himself once suggested “handiness.” The basic idea is “that of having or not having, in a given contingency, one’s resources to hand or at hand.” Forget “handiness”; let’s settle for the more standard if not fully satisfying translation, the

one which suggests the concept of “being at the disposal of” someone; such a person manifests *disponibilité*—yes, “availability.”

Marcel scholar Joe McCown fished for a metaphor to illustrate *disponibilité* and found one in the philosopher’s own words: *disponibilité* is “opening a line of credit” to someone. To quote Marcel, that means that “I put myself at the disposal of or . . . make a fundamental engagement which bears not only *on what I have, but on what I am.*” Such a notion, it seems to me, squares with biblical witness to the “I am of God” more than do the “omnis” of theology.

God could not be portrayed as un- omnipotent, unomniscient. But God can be experienced as unavailable, as is shown in biblical witness. God was not or did not seem to be available to Job, to various psalmists—the author of Psalm 88, for example—or to the One who shouted “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Still, it is the available face of the God with the lifted-up countenance that predominates in the Bible. It is a witness not only to what God has but to what God is. It is this disposition of God that has evoked petitions and prayers, shouts and resolves. And since availability is, shall we remind ourselves, an available realization among humans, people get to make fundamental engagements which bear not only on what they have, but on what they are.

The biblical story of creation finds God making a fundamental engagement with creatures. The story of Abraham and his heirs is one of promise, since the covenant bears on what God had and has to share and on what God is. The witness to the incarnation is the supreme story of God’s *disponibilité*, God’s availability. And the onrush of the Holy Spirit is an empowerment of the blessed ones who are now to be available to those who cried and mourned, those who were hungry, or who did not know to whom to turn when in anxiety or agony.

I have spent years looking for those to whom availability has been richly communicated. No one expects everyone at all times and in all circumstances to be available for all purposes. I would ordinarily prefer that the surgeon be occupied with surgery, the pianist with the recital, the student with studies—and that they not be always available for interruption. Yet my hunch is that most of us would point with awe to those who engage in what I call “creative schedule interruption” for others. You will rarely be able to point to celebrities who do this, since they are, in Marcel’s

term, encumbered (*encombré*) with themselves. You will, however, meet many busy and famous people who can sort out the important call from the not too important demand.

Models for being available are present in all the faiths and many nonfaiths; Christians have no monopoly on *disponibilité*. But those who claim to be called by the Divine Presence to be open to the other have special reason for giving thanks that they get to be open and available, to know the freedom of the unencumbered.