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# Christianity and Time

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**CHRISTIANITY HAS NO** one theory of time. But there are several constraints that Christian conceptions of time should meet, among which are the following three. First, Christianity arose within a fundamental monotheistic assumption that the world is created by God, and therefore time must be related to divine creation somehow. Second, Christianity arose in response to the person of Jesus of Nazareth who was supposed from the earliest times to have been historically decisive so that time needs to be understood in part in terms of history. Third, Christianity carries on always in the conceptual world of the cultures it engages, currently that of late-modern science, and therefore now it must come to terms with time as defined by physical cosmology as well as other sciences. Conceptions of time in Christianity thus need to be understood historically in relation to the historically developing conceptions of God and creation, of the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ, and of physical cosmology.

In the ancient world, *eternity* was more an object of religious interest than time. Or more exactly, time and eternity were thought of together.<sup>1</sup> This surely holds for Christianity in the ancient world and down through the Christian medieval period in the West. The temporality of historical existence could not be conceived except in close connection with eternity.

By no means was there unanimity about the nature of eternity or time.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, although the Platonic assumption that time is the moving image of eternity was not universally held, something like that formed the background in terms of which the essential dependence of time on eternity was variously analysed. The

Christian version of this was that the world of human affairs is temporal (in some sense or other) and is created by God who is eternal (in some sense or other).

European modernity, in a striking shift, diminished and then suppressed conceptions of eternity and treated time as the primary reality. Kant famously claimed time to be the form of inner sense and the necessary condition for the knowability of anything.<sup>3</sup> In our own days, it is common for Christian theologians to believe that their topic is the Christian *narrative* or *story*, a kind of salvation *history*.<sup>4</sup> Process theologians are perhaps the most straightforward in abandoning, nay attacking, any sense in which God is said to be eternal and time derivative from that.<sup>5</sup>

How should that extraordinary shift be understood and assessed? I shall offer some conceptual and historical observations about the shift, and then argue that Christianity today is better served by regarding time and eternity as one topic, defending a theory that holds eternity to be the true identity of temporal things.

## Christian Developments

Christianity began in its first generation as a form of Second Temple Judaism. Judaism in most of its manifestations then was already significantly hellenized. Although Jesus and his disciples came from small-town Galilee, the earliest Christian writing in the New Testament, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, was addressed to an urban congregation of non-Jewish Christians. Begun with a transformative experience of a group of international pilgrims (Acts 2), Christianity emerged as a cosmopolitan religion of the hellenistic world.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing this fact, we must remind ourselves that early Christian conceptuality involved a very high stack of layered metaphoric systems. The metaphoric systems within the Hebrew Bible, which the first Christians had in Greek translation as the Septuagint, were themselves extremely diverse. Early images of Yahweh as a storm-god are mixed with images of God as a warrior delivering Israel from Egypt, as a creator-potter shaping human beings from clay, as a king over Israel or over the entire world, as the majestic creator of everything beginning with a big-bang-like Light, as the creator who told Job there is no place to stand to understand God's creation. There are of course other metaphoric systems for God's relation with the world in the Bible. The hellenistic context of early Christianity included the problem of a divine confrontation with cosmic evil, as reflected in Zoroastrianism, and apocalyptic expectations of the end of the world. Moreover, the educated hellenized Jews and early non-Jewish Christians of the first and second centuries would have been familiar with the Greek philosophic schools, or at least their main ideas. Justin Martyr, a Christian theologian of the second century used the Greek form-matter distinction to say that God creates not just order but everything, even that which would be chaotic if not ordered.

The important point to recognize is that all of these metaphoric systems, and many more besides, were exercised together in the imaginations of the early Christians. They did not think with only the very anthropomorphic conceptions, or only the very philosophic ones, but all together. The early Christian imagination embraced them all, with much inter-resonance and mutual reinforcement. German scholars in the nineteenth century attempted to draw a sharp distinction between "Jerusalem" and "Athens", the point being that Christianity was corrupted by Greek philosophy which sullied its purity as a Semitic religion. But this was hostile hindsight, prompted by anti-philosophical nineteenth (and twentieth) century motives. The hellenistic world of

early Christianity was already a pluralistic culture with many capitols, and this fact stood in striking contrast with the rabbinic culture of talmudic Judaism which emerged after the Bar Kochba revolts of the second century as the other major form of Second Temple Judaism to last beyond the destruction of the Temple to our own day.

Medieval western European Christianity enhanced the role of philosophic conceptions of eternity and time in the great scholastic debates, nurtured by the dialogues with Judaism and Islam, and by the recovery of Aristotle's texts and more texts of Plato. Driven to clarify the uniqueness of the creator, medieval Christian theologians emphasized God's transcendence and internal simplicity. As Thomas Aquinas said, God is not in a genus and hence is no kind of thing. Although such theological reasoning is a far cry from the biblical imagery of God acting in and for the world, medieval Christianity set it in resonance with an extraordinary, vivid conception of cosmic place. From the human perspective, the historical world was pictured as nested between heaven and hell, with the places of limbo and purgatory too. The great question for every human being then is geographic destiny: where to end up! Within this cultural imagery, human time is the brief historical span within which decisions are made that result in one's geographic destiny. Present life is the time of decisive action. After immortal placement, which might involve a term in purgatory, time is nothing more than more of the same, a kind of endless temporal extension of static bliss or torment. It is the eschatological place with its qualities, not what goes on within it in a changing or historical sense, that counts.

The medieval representation of eschatological place and decisive and enduring times is clearly a schematization of how finite temporal human life can relate to the eternal infinity of God. As Kant said that a schema is a way of translating a non-spatio-temporal thing into the structures of space-time, so all religions have schemata whereby what is not thinkable within the human sphere can be translated into the terms of

human life. The great religions of the world all represent the ultimate as not within the structures of ordinary life, except by descent or incarnation; so they must all imagine the meeting of the human project with the ultimate in some schema. All the major religions, for instance, have images of heaven in which people can imagine "going to" God, "entering the divine presence", "working out one's justification", or some such. Religions differ in how heaven is imagined. Kant distinguished between a schema and a schema-image: the imaginative rules for constructing the spatio-temporal structure of "place" is the schema for the conjunction of the finite and infinite, whereas the throne-room, the golden city, or the garden is the schema-image.<sup>7</sup>

Although we are inclined to associate the medieval imagery of cosmic eschatological place with popular religion and conceptions of divine transcendence with elite theologians, in fact the religious culture integrated them in the ways the relatively pure thinking, schemata, and schema-images were integrated. Persons whose imaginations are limited to the schema-images of popular religion might not be aware of the fact that the images derive from schemata for representing an eternal and nowhere God in a spatio-temporal frame friendly to human contact, though most would say, when pressed, that God does not really wear a robe with a hem (Isaiah 6:1) or have a right hand by which Jesus sits (Colossians 3:1). They would say only that this is a right way to *picture* God. They would be very unlikely to be aware of conceptions of divine purity, simplicity, and unchangeableness. Popular images are deceptive when inferences are drawn from them that ignore the imaginative rules that connect them to the reality they are schematizing. So, the beliefs that a deep enough mine should end up in hell and that the cosmonauts should find God if there is one are mistakes that come from neglecting the fact that the images of hell and heaven are justifiably derived only from schematic rules for translating the meeting of finite and infinite into finite terms. One of the

functions of theology is the circumscription of the schema-images of popular religion in terms of their justifiable ground in reality otherwise conceived. Theologians in Christianity, as well as the other great religions, are aware of the limits of conceptions of the real and hence acknowledge apophatic moments.

The modern period of Western culture destroyed the possibility of taking the ancient or medieval schema-images of cosmic eschatological reality at face value. Modern astronomy and earth science shape the imagination so that heaven and hell find no place, and the modern measurements of time do not allow the distinction between a life's time of eschatologically significant actions and an immortal time of unchanging bliss or torment. If those images of popular Christianity are to be employed today, they need to be regarded as what I call "broken symbols" in order to be addressed to the modern imagination.<sup>8</sup> Kant himself argued that anything to be regarded as real needs to be schematized to the form of time in the human mind. He denied that there could be knowledge of things that are non-temporal even if they are also schematizable in space-time terms; this is what he meant by denying the possibility of metaphysics. Believing him, many subsequent thinkers have rejected the cognitive elements of Christianity which say so much about the eternal God (and either affirm pietism or reject Christianity). Theologians for their part have tried to conceive of God in temporal terms, either metaphysically like the process theologians or imagistically like the narrative theologians. Thus has arisen the situation described at the beginning of this paper.<sup>9</sup>

### A Contemporary Christian Theory of Time and Eternity

There are many reasons for not accepting Kant's rejection of a metaphysics that might know something beyond temporal schemata. One is that the premise of his argument, that knowledge in mathematics and science is based on synthetic a priori principles, is generally rejected today, and has been since the development of non-Euclidean geometries. A second is that classical pragmatism

developed a conception of metaphysics to which Kant's critique does not apply even if his argument were valid against the kind of metaphysics he attacked.<sup>10</sup> A third is that Alfred North Whitehead actually developed a serious metaphysical system explaining how mathematics applies to the world without conforming to the form of human experience; if Whitehead's metaphysics is mistaken, it is mistaken in its particular assertions, not in being metaphysics.<sup>11</sup>

Christian theology today is in a position to return to issues of time and eternity and formulate conceptions that on the one hand can retrieve the ancient images now as broken symbols and on the other hand feed the contemporary imagination with positive symbols attuned to the vastness of the cosmos conceived by late-modern science. What follows is a sketch of a metaphysical hypothesis with reflections on its applications.

Let us suppose that there are three modes of time – past, present, and future – and that each has two kinds of features – essential and conditional.<sup>12</sup> The essential features are those that define the uniqueness of the modes, and the conditional ones relate the modes to one another so that time “flows”.<sup>13</sup> The essential features of the past have to do with actual, fixed, achievement. Those of the present have to do with decisive becoming or actualization, with decisions made among alternative possibilities. The essential features of the future are those having to do with pure form. The future functions conditionally in the past by providing the possibilities that have been actualized by present decisions, including the values actualized. The present functions conditionally in the past by actualizing more possibilities into conformity with what had previously been actualized, so that the past is always growing and extending, as it were. The past functions conditionally in the present by providing the potentialities for becoming that the decisive, creative present has to integrate in its becoming; when a present moment has fully become, it is past and incapable of further change. The future

functions conditionally in the present to provide possibilities for integrating the past potentialities for becoming. The past functions conditionally in the future by providing the actual things that need to be integrated and thus require pure form to be determinate, limiting purely logical possibilities to real ones. The present functions conditionally in the future by actualizing new things so that the structure of real possibilities is constantly shifting.

Time's flow requires the togetherness of the three kinds of dynamism, the steady growth of the past, the creative decisive novelty of the present, and the shifting kaleidoscope of real possibilities of the future. Nineteenth-century scientific imagery emphasizes the growth of the past, minimizing or denying creative novelty and alternative possibilities. Existentialism, process philosophy, and many kinds of Buddhism emphasize the present mode of time as becoming, minimizing or denying the reality of the past and the normative structure of the future. When present experience is emphasized, with the intentional structure of consciousness, change itself is minimized or denied as in some forms of advaita Hinduism. In Christianity, God's time (or eternity) has been represented as a *totum simul* gaze encompassing all times as if they were present. The optional structure of shifting or shiftable future possibilities is emphasized by some artists and moral thinkers, though usually without losing sight of the different dynamics of the present and past. Time's flow requires the togetherness of all three. A situation with a future date and containing alternative possibilities is rendered wholly definite by present decisions and added in fixed form to extend the past. The human experience of time's flow in the present apprehends a real future constraining and rushing toward us, and a real past into which our present actions and enjoyed qualities pass. Human moral identity requires the togetherness of all moments of life as future options to be decided, as present acts of decisions, and as pasts for which the deciding presents are or were responsible.

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Thus true temporal human identity is eternal, requiring that one eternally be the one who as a youth had a wide-open future, who as middle-aged was committed to a way of life, and who as old was almost wholly definite.<sup>14</sup>

The actual structures of the three kinds of dynamics and their interconnection may not be as commonsense has them. Modern physics suggests some structures that are hard to imagine and perhaps counter-intuitive. This abstract hypothesis about the dynamics of the three modes of time allows for anything that science might suggest as time's structure relative to space, mass, and motion.

What is the togetherness of the three modes of time such that time flows? It cannot be a temporal togetherness: the past is not before the present, nor the future after. Only the togetherness of the modes, ordered by the linear order of dates whereby present moments come to actualization, fixing the past and reordering the future, makes it possible for some things to occur in time before others, conditioning them. The linear order of dates and simultaneity are complicated notions in modern physics; but however the causation works, temporal flow can be understood according to this hypothesis.

Rather, the togetherness of the modes of time is eternity.<sup>15</sup> What we ought to mean legitimately by eternity is the togetherness of the temporal modes. Eternity need not be conceived to be static, which is how most moderns would represent it, as if it were a form (an "eternal object" is Whitehead's phrase). Rather it is the inclusive composite dynamism of the three kinds of dynamism that make time possible – growing past, creative present, and shifting formal future.

Christians arguing for divine creation can conceive the eternity within which time flows as the terminus or result of the divine creative act.<sup>16</sup> The act itself is not in time, because it creates time. The act is singular, encompassing not only all things, but all dates of all things, within its complex nature. As the medievals saw, God so conceived does not have any potentials that

are unactualized because all actualizations, finite creative acts, and possibilities are the result of the divine creative act. But as the ancient Christians saw, God is fully alive, containing all changes within the divine actuality. The divine life is not like our lives, lived from present moment to moment, with the past slipping out of touch and the future hard to imagine and manage. The divine life is far more dynamic than that, including all moments exhibiting the dynamism of the growing past, the becoming present, and the structurally shifting future. The divine life is never "now" because it contains every date within it as a "now" as well as as a "past" and as a "future possibility" relative to every other date as now, past, or even further in the future. This is an extremely rich notion of eternity that does justice to its ancient usages as describing the living God and to its medieval usages for articulating God's transcendence of all idolatrous finite ascriptions. It expresses the dictum that eternity and time are one topic, each conceived in terms of the other.

History is to be understood as important within this conception of time and eternity because there is a real causal asymmetry to time's flow, with decisive events fixing the past and altering future possibilities. History itself, of course, involves human meaning, and the history important in Christian claims about Jesus is about historical life on earth as understood especially in terms of the history of Israel. To claim that Jesus is the centre of history, closing off certain possibilities and opening up others for intelligent sinful beings on other planets with no part so far in our history, is hard to make interesting to the modern imagination. But if it is to be made interesting, it will be by establishing causal temporal connections between our history and theirs. More likely, Jesus will be seen as the incarnation of the fundamental principles of divine creation (the Logos) for earthly history, with other possibilities for the histories of other planets.<sup>17</sup>

From our finite perspectives within time's flow, the past is both a burden and the source of our potentials; it constitutes the

achievement of our lives and society. The future is both an opening for free choice sometimes, and the headlong rush of what William James called a "force option". From the present perspective, the human future is somewhat open. If God were in the present, the future would be open for God as well, who at most could make well-informed predictions; but God is not in the present, God is eternal. It makes perfect sense in our present sufferings to lament our past sins and plead for future life beyond what seems possible or likely. Not to beg God for the future for which we long would be to deny our temporal nature. So we can schematize God as being in time, listening to prayers and working providentially.<sup>18</sup> But that is only a schema for eternity relative to our temporality. The truth is, God is the eternal creative act within which time's flow has its being.

At one level, this Christian view of time and eternity is at odds with all the Hindu views according to which the root experience of reality is based on metaphors of consciousness. Consciousness is like a gaze, an intuition, and as a model for reality lends itself to the inference that the really real cannot be changing. For if something changes, then its past is out of conscious sight and the future not yet determinate for conscious discrimination. The Christian root experience is of change, especially change in soul relative to God, change from sinner to saint. Human identity endures through change because the New Creature, to use St Paul's phrase, is still the same person who previously was lost in bondage to sin. An underlying unchanging reality impervious to salvific transformation would be beside the point, according to root Christian convictions, contrary to many forms of Hinduism that treat changes as relatively superficial. History is important within Christianity precisely because the really real in human life has to be subject to transformation.

At another level, the hypothesis here of time and eternity is not far from conceptions such as Ramanuja's that the temporal world is the body of God. God is temporal only in

bodily movement and from temporal perspectives within that movement. With respect to the Christian hypothesis, God does not first create the earlier event and subsequently create the later, but instead eternally and singularly creates the events such that one is earlier, open to possibilities in the later, and the other is later, determined by what is fixed in the earlier. So with Ramanuja's God: apart from the temporal body, God is unchanging; but God eternally bodies forth such that there are earlier and later events and God is *not* apart from the temporal world. So the Christian creator-God is eternally creative and it is within that divine life that Christians believe we live and move and have our (eternal temporal) being.

#### Notes

1. "Time and eternity make one topic, not two", writes Peter Manchester in reference to late antique Mediterranean thought, including Christianity; see his "The Religious Experience of Time and Eternity", in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, edited by A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 384.
2. Richard Sorabji's extraordinary study *Time, Creation, and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) is an indispensable source for tracing out the various main positions and their critical interactions.
3. See his *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1956; first edition [A] 1781, second edition [B] 1787), part 1, "transcendental aesthetic".
4. Oscar Cullman can write, for instance, that "If we wish to understand the Primitive Christian use of *aion* ("age"), we thus must free ourselves completely from all philosophical concepts of time and eternity", in *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, translated by Floyd V. Filson (revised edition; Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1964), p. 48. See also Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth*

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- and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), an analytical complaint that elevated narrative to the dominance of postmodern or postliberal theology. For a critique of the cogency of narrative for such a framing of religion, see David Tracy's *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).
5. The classic text is Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929). See also Charles Hartshorne's *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), John B. Cobb Jr's *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), and Marjorie Hewett Suchocki's *God-Christ-Church* (Revised edition; New York: Crossroad, 1989). For a systematic criticism, see Robert Cummings Neville's *Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Theology* (New edition; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995; original edition 1980).
  6. See Wayne A. Meeks' *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
  7. For Kant's discussion, see *The Critique of Pure Reason*, B170-187. For my technical discussion of Kant's theory of schematism in the context of a larger theory of imagination, see my *Reconstruction of Thinking*, part 2, especially pp. 149-52, 183-86, 222-28, 245-58, 168-84. For the application particularly to religious symbols of the ultimate, see my *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, chapters 1-3.
  8. See *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, preface.
  9. I have analysed this situation in more detail in *Eternity and Time's Flow* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), chapters 1-3. Chapter 3 in particular deals with Kant and Whitehead.
  10. See my *The Highroad around Modernism*, preface, chapters 1 and 6.
  11. See his *Process and Reality*. See my criticism in *Creativity and God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995; original edition 1980). Actually, it might be argued that Whitehead's conception of God and mathematics does indeed schematize them to the temporal form of human experience, and hence that his is a metaphysics within the Kantian mode. However, Whitehead was clear that metaphysics has reference beyond what is schematized, and it was transcendent reference that Kant denied.
  12. This hypothesis is argued in great detail in my *Recovery of the Measure: Interpretation and Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), chapters 9 and 10. See also *Eternity and Time's Flow*, part 2.
  13. For a phenomenological as well as logical analysis of temporal flow, see *Eternity and Time's Flow*, chapter 7.
  14. For a more complete argument that moral identity through time is eternal, see *Eternity and Time's Flow*, chapters 3 and 13.
  15. *Eternity and Time's Flow*, chapter 8.
  16. To connect these claims with a theory of divine creation see my *God the Creator*; see also *Eternity and Time's Flow*, parts 3 and 4.
  17. For a conception of a contemporary Christian theory of Logos and incarnation, consistent with this hypothesis about time, eternity, and creation, see my *A Theology Primer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). Indeed, perhaps Jesus is the fulfilment of the historical promises of God only for Israel's history, with other sources of religious renewal for the ancient Chinese, Africans, and so forth; only after Jesus did those histories intertwine and Christianity define itself in terms of Chinese, African, European, and other cultural symbols. To affirm the historical centrality of Jesus for Christians is not necessarily to deny different histories, with different religious centres, for other peoples.
  18. See *Eternity and Time's Flow*, chapters 12-16.