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Christians and Time

J. S. WHALE

WE assume that time is real and no illusion. This is the obvious meaning of our clocks and calendars, our diaries and anniversaries. But what is time? We cannot say. Our attempts at definition break down because they always include some temporal reference. That is, they make use of the very thing to be defined: which is like explaining a liquid as something wet, or a flame as combustion. Any mystery which is resolved in terms of itself must remain a mystery. It was the profound and subtle mind of St. Augustine which gave classic expression to this difficulty when he wrote: "If anyone asks me what time is, I cannot say; if no one asks me, I know very well." How, then, do Christians understand time?

I

Let us approach the problem, not by way of our Hebraic-Christian heritage as set forth in the Bible, but by way of that other heritage which is also ours, the Hellenism of the ancient world into which Christianity came. It is beyond controversy that theology has often stood thus in the court of the Gentiles. One of the declarations which Christian thought has frequently made about time and the meaning of history has its source, strictly speaking, in Athens rather than in Jerusalem. It has never completely forgotten what it learned from its "ancient Platonick nurse," namely that men are aware of time because they belong to eternity. Our very consciousness of temporal succession and change is possible because

our destiny, our being's heart and home
is with infinitude and only there.

Like the animals we are creatures of time and sense; but, unlike them, we know it. It is because we thus transcend time, that we do what ape or ant or intelligent sheep-dog can not do: we look before and after; we carry the tragic knowledge of our temporality; we wear watches and hang up calendars. In the very act of calling ourselves mortal we presuppose the immortal and the eternal. The absolute is already implied in the relative. Our finiteness has meaning only in correlation with infinity. Indeed, Tillich has argued that man alone possesses genuine finiteness because he alone is able to look beyond it. "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our heart is restless until it finds rest in Thee." It is St. Augustine's Christian Platonist way of saying that the things which are seen are temporal because the things which are not seen are eternal.

But is Christian *Platonism* a possible combination? Our stricter biblicists say no, but no one may deny that this type of philosophical theology has

influenced Christian thought from the beginning. Though it comes from Hellas rather than from Mount Zion, it may not be repudiated as altogether alien. Despite certain Barthians, there is a true sense in which Plato also is among the prophets; and Tillich would surely add Parmenides. And yet, these philosophical intuitions, belonging as they do to the genius of Hellenism, are not Hebraic and not truly biblical. They are but dubiously Christian. We are as yet only in the outer court of the Temple. It is not a bad place to be in, and at certain notable epochs of its history, Christian Theology has been prone to linger here. The Christian Platonists of Alexandria; the neo-Platonism which passed into the blood-stream of the Church as Catholic mysticism; the Franciscans of the earlier scholastic era; Nicholas of Cusa; the Renaissance Platonism of the Florentine academy; John Colet; the Cambridge Platonists; and, to cut short a list which, if full, would be quite unmanageable, modern platonizing theologians as diverse as Dean Inge, Paul Elmer More and Professor A. E. Taylor. This continuous tradition illustrates Whitehead's dictum that European thought is a series of footnotes to Plato. The immediate relevance of this tradition is its reluctance to allow that time is man's ultimate concern. Time is but the moving image of eternity, a copy or shadow—no more—of the Real which is laid up in heaven. Because the eternal alone is the real, the wise man—as Stoicism put it—is not concerned with time.

How important, then, is history? This is the crucial issue. For the Aryan tradition of Hellenism and philosophical Hinduism, history does not ultimately matter; it does not affect eternity in any way. Seen in the dimension of the eternal, it is a momentary ripple on the ocean of absolute being. Time, at best, is only a second best. In Lessing's famous sentence, "Accidental truths of history can never establish necessary truths of reason." Admittedly, the hold of this transcendental idealism upon the Western mind has been much weakened during recent decades, but it is still powerful. A contemporary philosopher, John Macmurray, has even called it the most serious disease of contemporary spirituality.

II

But now let us leave the outer court and enter the Temple itself. Here the Hebrew prophets are speaking. Israel's understanding of history is dominated by the insight of men who are neither philosophers nor mystics, properly speaking. For them, time is no shadow or copy of the eternally real, but the context and very condition of God's speech to man and of man's response thereto. Time is sacramental in the sense that it is the vehicle of the eternal God's activity; the means whereby He discloses Himself as holy and expresses His will as law; the roaring loom on which His mighty acts of judgment and redemption are woven. Because time is the form through which will necessarily expresses itself, Israel's history (and ultimately all history) gives actuality to the eternal purpose of the living God.

The prophets understand time, then, in terms of will; the purposive will

of God and the responsive will of man. Indeed, certain events in Israel's history make continuously actual a relationship between God and man so close and intimate that it is constantly understood and explicitly described as a covenant-relationship. This is no mere contract, arbitrarily terminable; it is as inherently indissoluble as is the relationship between a son and his father. To the philosophical-Greek mind such a relationship between the infinite and the finite is unintelligible foolishness: to Israel it is the supreme issue, the final meaning and the ultimate glory of human existence. History matters, therefore. Here in the Temple, the wise man, God's servant the prophet, *is* concerned with time. Time is the vehicle, not only of God's dynamic self-disclosure, but also of man's effective response thereto. Time is God's time and He is sovereign lord of it. And so the concern which pervades the prophetic understanding of history is a moral concern; knowing the truth means doing the truth. The inescapable content of time is decision and action.

Time without content, empty time, is inconceivable. If nothing "happened" time would be not empty but non-existent. Without events of will and act to give it content, time would have no conceivable form. Hence the scriptural insistence (Deut. 30: 11f.) that man may do but two things with time: he may misuse it, or use it to God's glory, "redeeming the time"; that is, making the most of every opportunity which it presents. What he cannot do is to live in a neutral dimension of timelessness, where there would be no acts of will, and therefore no effective vindication of the divine purpose.

Throughout the Christian centuries great moralists, our latter-day prophets, have been prone to linger here in the Temple, witnessing to the "categorical imperative," to duty as the "stern daughter of the voice of God"; that is, to the moral urgency implicit in this Hebraic understanding of time. It was one of the greatest Puritans, Richard Baxter of Kidderminster, who lamented that he had "these forty years been sensible of the sin of wasted time." Puritanism's restrictive virtues were sometimes unlovely, but they were a heroic attempt to live "as ever in the great taskmaster's eye." And the great Victorians—to name only Mill and Carlyle, Matthew Arnold and Martineau—had the same high sense of life as a swift and solemn trust. "A man," wrote Carlyle, "cannot make a pair of shoes rightly unless he do it in a devout manner. All work properly so called is an appeal from the seen to the unseen, a devout calling upon higher powers; and unless they stand by us it will not be a work, but a quackery." This moral consciousness of Western man has been nurtured on Israel's prophetic awareness that time is no mere clockwork sequence of neutral moments, but the ordinance of God for the fulfilment of His purpose in creation.

But who can meet this unconditional divine demand, of which time is the symbol? No one. The sublime moralism which braces man for heights of victorious achievement, also mirrors his abiding predicament as guilty sinner and reduces him to despair. The much-quoted question of the prophet Micah (6:8) is in fact a devastating word of judgment. Man is not only judged

and doomed, but also mocked, if this threefold divine imperative is God's only way of dealing with him. He cannot (empirically speaking) redeem the time, making the most of every opportunity for justice, mercy and humility which offers. "Not the labours of my hands can fulfil Thy law's demands." Here is the dilemma of all ethical religion, that the higher the conception of God's holiness the more impassable is the gulf between man and his only source of salvation. Unless there is in the Temple a gospel of God's grace in forgiveness, vindicating yet transcending the judgment of His holy law, who can escape the final condemnation? "I wept much," records the seer, "because no man was able" (Rev. 5:3-4).

And, *a fortiori* no nation is able; not even Israel, consciously called though she is to stand in a specially vital relationship to God and, through the very particularity of this vocation, to be the sacramental nation, symbolizing and mediating the final truth about God's righteousness to all humanity. It is to the elect nation herself that the prophetic word of penal judgment comes (Amos 3:2).

Does God add nothing, then, to the word of judgment and doom uttered through His servants the prophets? Is there no pattern of grace, forgiveness and renewal in their understanding of Israel's history and of universal history, anticipating that gospel which evoked Luther's ecstatic cry of gratitude, "He has another word" (*Er hat noch ein Wort*)? To this question St. Augustine gave the succinct and classic answer that in the Old Testament the New is latent, and in the New the Old is patent. Here the great doctor of grace, writing as biblical theologian rather than as Christian Platonist, was vindicating not only the unity of the scriptures but also their evangelical genius. For essential to the prophetic interpretation of history is what has been called its "two-beat rhythm": that is, the holiness of God *both* visiting her iniquities upon Israel in judgment and disaster, *and* renewing her life in mercy and redemption. As the distinguished French Calvinist Auguste Lecerf once observed to me, "The key to the Old Testament is *tamen*" (i.e. the "nevertheless" explicit or implicit in passages such as Ps. 31:22, 66:11-12, 73:23, 89:33, 106:8, 44; Ezek. 16:60, 20:17; Nahum 9:31; Isa. 54:7-8, 10-13). This is the two-beat rhythm which throbs in the prophetic books. God confronts Israel with forgiveness through judgment, gospel through law, love through wrath, renewal even through destruction and death. His proper work (*opus proprium*) is ever to have mercy and forgive; yet it is made effective through His strange work (*opus alienum*). It was Isa. 28:21, of which Luther made notable use in this connection.

This very polarity is a call for man's response in penitence, gratitude and the new life of faith. But, plainly, it is inconclusive. Heartening to sinful men though God's "nevertheless" is, the disheartening question remains: will human history always be incomplete; will it never reach its purposed goal with humanity's full and consistent response to the holy will of God? The ding-dong struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness on the battlefield of every human heart throughout historic time—"there's no

end to it," as we say in moods of frustration and gloom. But ought there not someday to be a triumphant, final vindication of God's redeeming righteousness, when history will reach a climax or goal, and the purpose of God will be conclusively exhibited, and God's last word spoken: when the two-beat rhythm will be finally resolved into "one chord of music like the sound of a great Amen?"

This faith, implicit in prophecy from the beginning, that the purposed divine pattern will finally be completed, becomes explicit in the later form of prophecy called apocalypse. Here Israel's understanding of history becomes dominated by eschatology; that is, a doctrine affirming an end which will be the conclusive manifestation and achievement of God's purpose in history.

In principle, apocalypse adds nothing new to prophecy. It is a vivid, dramatic, and sometimes extravagantly precise statement of the prophetic view of history. Its relation to prophecy is not unlike the relation of "cinerama" to the flat screen, where no different kinematic principles are involved, but where we are made vividly aware of a third dimension. Like the prophets, the writers of the apocalypses realize that every truth about God is eschatological; that is, it necessarily concerns the climax and "end" of history. Because God is lord of history, its ultimate issue must express His purpose. As J. A. T. Robinson has put it with a neatly ambiguous use of the adverb, "What is ultimately real must be ultimately realized"; he adds that whereas for the Aryan tradition of Hellenism and Hinduism the essential is what is true timelessly, for the Hebraic-Christian tradition the essential is what holds true at the end of time. In the Bible, therefore, goal and end, *telos* and *finis*, are equated. It is the end of history rather than a timeless eternity beyond history which expresses the complete and perfect will of God. Therefore, to see in history the hand of the Eternal is to see there the mark of the *eschaton*. Every event which reveals and mediates the judging redeeming will of God in history, prefigures that final consummation of all history which is that "consolation of Israel" for which the Jews still wait: the Messiah is still to come: they are still in the Temple.

III

For the full scriptural and Christian understanding of time the gospel takes us further; from the Temple into the Holy Place itself. For here we are on our knees in thanksgiving and adoration before One who is not only eternal Reality; not only the holy law of righteousness which judges and renews; but God's presence and His very self in a human life and death, manifesting perfectly, representatively and conclusively that complete obedience to the will of God which is the goal and end of humanity in time (Gal. 4:4). Here we are primarily concerned, not with the moral efforts of the will; but with final revelation in the person and work, the passion and victory of the God-Man. Here we are on our knees, because here is One, the only One, who is able (cf. Rev. 5:4-7) to enter within the veil and to stand for ever as our High Priest. We come here and kneel here only in Him.

In Him deity calls saying, "Come unto Me"; and in Him humanity answers saying, "Lo I come . . . to do Thy will, O God." For the biblical understanding of time, what is ultimately real must be finally realized. Jesus the Christ is that final, conclusive realization. Here *is* the kingdom of God. Here the "end" of history has come upon men because He has finished the vicarious, representative work given to Him to do (John 19:30).

In short, the conviction which is the very basis and *raison d'être* of the New Testament is that the Messiah has come; that God has indeed visited and redeemed His people in the action and passion of this "Man,"—whose Work is the *ratio cognoscendi* of His Person, and whose Person is the *ratio essendi* of His Work; that the purposed end of history has here been disclosed with power and great glory; that the Christ is Jesus. This, presumably, is the meaning of Dodd's striking sentence: "That beyond which nothing can happen has already happened." And as it was axiomatic for Israel that the era of the Spirit would have come when this happened, it is not surprising that Spirit is the inclusive atmosphere of New Testament thought. The Acts of the Apostles is a book dominated by the fact of the Spirit, and of the signs which accompany, manifest and interpret its creative activity. The church, the new community of the Spirit, is indubitable proof of the presence of the Age to Come, the era of the Messiah. This presence of the Spirit in power authenticates the gospel of the new age, since it is the constitutive sign of the new age. Christians are people who are already tasting of its powers.

Nearly thirty years ago, when I was learning the history of Christian doctrine at Oxford by the time-honoured method of teaching it, I received much kindness from the Master of University College, Sir Michael Sadler. And I well remember the animation of his handsome features as he greeted me one afternoon, early in the Michaelmas term, and began to tell me of a recent, unique experience. He had come from Switzerland. Voice and eye betrayed his emotion as he spoke of a remarkable man there to whom he had been listening the previous week. "His name was Barth . . . Karl Barth, I think it was . . . You see, . . . he made me feel that tomorrow had already happened."

Sir Michael Sadler was not a theologian, and we may assume that he had not so much as heard of "realized eschatology" in 1929. But through the preaching of the Word, the Spirit had newly convinced him of that finality of God's deed in Christ, which is the purposed end of all history. Barth's preaching had made him freshly aware that this unambiguously historical figure, crucified under Pontius Pilate, is the eschatological figure: that in Christ all time, past and future, discloses its final, divine meaning.

But is this realized eschatology convincing? It is difficult for modern man even to imagine the thrilling hopes aroused when Jesus came into Galilee declaring that the promises were being fulfilled, the decisive hour was even then striking, the end was already happening, and that God was even then acting, with decisive finality, to redeem the world. "He made me feel that tomorrow had already happened." It was the self-authenticating experience

of the Spirit which made men feel it. At Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, it became abundantly convincing. Admittedly, the fourth gospel represents the other tradition according to which the gift of the Spirit is the immediate sequel and effective sign of the Resurrection. Divergent traditions, apparently, linked the Spirit's outpouring with Easter and Pentecost respectively. But is there any significant divergence? Both traditions attest the one reality which matters, namely that the Spirit—the effective sign of the new creation—is the risen Lord at work in the imperishable community of His Body. As St. Paul put it explicitly in one place, “the Lord is the Spirit.” Through the Spirit at Pentecost this became convincing; and in the fourth gospel the Spirit is called Paraclete, a word which certainly meant “convincer” rather than “comforter,” even though the dominant New Testament meaning may be “advocate.” The New Testament is saying that He, the Lord, the Spirit, makes us feel that the end has already been disclosed, with power and great glory.

Difficulties remain, however. The end thus realized is, in another sense, not yet realized. We still sin and suffer; we still have to die. Satan has fallen as lightning from the court of heaven, but he still goeth about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. We see Jesus crowned with glory and honour, but *not yet* are all things put under him. There was precisely this same duality or antimony in the experience of the first Christians, even though they knew that they were already living in the new age. This paradoxical duality is characteristic of the New Testament as a whole; its emphasis is constantly twofold; the great gifts of God to which it bears witness are both present possessions and objects of hope. Just as St. Paul speaks of our justification by faith as a present reality and a future event (see Gal. 2:17, 5:5; Rom. 3:13), so the eschatology of the New Testament as a whole is both “realized” and “futurist” in its emphasis. That end which is already here is not yet. Christ's advent is thus twofold; a *geminus adventus*. The risen Christ is that which also shall be; the *'arrabôn*, the “earnest” or sample, “which guarantees that the main consignment will be of the same kind and quality” (C. H. Dodd). In modern Greek the word means “engagement ring”; that is, the prophetic realization of that which is nevertheless “not yet.”

In cynical mood we may feel provoked to dismiss this as a perverse appeal for ambiguity; a cool attempt to have it both ways; present, yet future; here, yet not here; yes, and yet no. But here is something which has played too big and enduring a rôle throughout three thousand years of our religious history to be so dismissed. It has been called the telescoping of time. It has been called the sense of contemporaneity; that is, the sense of the contemporaneous oneness of past, present and future in every “now” which is taken seriously. Anyone who knows anything about sacramental religion knows that to be confronted by the saving act of God in all its intrinsic uniqueness, is to be taken out of all temporal limitations.

The research of modern anthropology into the ways in which so-called primitive peoples think is here instructive. Their mentality being synthetic

rather than analytical, they think in terms of relatedness; for them perceived phenomena participate in some sort of whole; their thought grasps a totality. And this awareness of totality informs their sense of time and its passage. This may not be patronizingly dismissed as pre-logical and primitive: it recalls profound Semitic ways of thinking and of awareness. Indeed, every believing Jew understood this wholeness of time supremely during the eating of the Passover meal. There, present and past tenses were indistinguishable. He was truly an Israelite only as he appropriated to himself those great moments in the history of Israel which disclosed the mighty acts of God. Because the exodus from Egypt was Israel's exodus, he was there; he took this commingling of past and present tenses (as western man might express it) with realistic seriousness. He was there too, at Sinai for the giving of the sacred Torah; indeed, his daily meditative study of the Torah was what it is now fashionable to call "existential"; that is, it was truly effective only as he could say, "This day I myself have received this holy law from Sinai." And so, at the annual Passover ritual, with its paschal lamb and unleavened bread, its bitter herbs and its solemn verbal recital of God's mightiest of His mighty acts of deliverance, he knew *himself* to have been redeemed from bondage in Egypt. Further, he looked forward as well as backwards; for him our western tense-distinction between present and future was also dissolved; just as this present feast was a ritual realization of the historic past so, too, it realized proleptically the future feast of joy in the Messianic kingdom. Future as well as past became contemporary in the religiously apprehended "now."

Every believing Christian understands this. What is the Christian Year but a time-sacrament, conveying what it symbolizes through the temporal sequence of its festivals—Advent and Christmas, Epiphany and Lent, Holy Week and Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost? It is the story of our race understood religiously and redemptively, through that gospel story which begins in Eden and ends in the New Jerusalem. Certain historic events thus become perpetually contemporary in Christian worship. For, in Christian worship, present tenses become past, and past tenses present. The Church means what it says when it declares, "Christ the Lord *is* risen today"; or, "This *is* the night in which Thou didst first lead our fathers . . . out of Egypt"; or, when it asks "When they crucified my Lord, *were* you there?"

Further, in proclaiming the gospel from pulpit, altar and baptismal font, the Church is the sacramental instrument for this making-present of divine action in historic time. God's mighty acts in history are actually mediated and conveyed by every proclamation of the gospel today. The *kerugma* is the shewing forth, the re-presentation, of those temporal events in which the kingdom of God came. Real preaching of the Word places those who hear and receive it in the very presence, the *real presence*, of that eschatological event in which the Church had its origin. "As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup ye do show the Lord's death"; that is, "ye do re-present the drama." Thus the supreme importance of the gospel sacraments lies in their

contemporaneity. In the Eucharist the Church is neither recalling a last supper in an upper room long ago, nor imaging the banquet of the redeemed in the eternal kingdom at the end of history: it is experiencing, now, in one symbolic rite, the *geminus adventus Christi*—His coming in humiliation and His coming in glory.

This, too, has been the Church's solution of a crucial and notorious difficulty. The earliest Christians not only lived in terms of the antinomy "already" and "not yet"; they also said "soon"; they confidently expected the second coming of the Lord, and declared it to be imminent. No verse in the gospels is more difficult than Mark 13:30, since this confident expectation was unfulfilled. To say with Schweitzer that Jesus died the victim of a delusion is christologically unconvincing. To say with J. A. T. Robinson that such precise notes of temporal urgency in the New Testament express that moral urgency which is eschatology's essential meaning, is true but hardly satisfying. Robinson quotes II Peter 3:8-9 in support of his contention that true eschatology is concerned with the ultimate divine victory rather than with its date, and that the moment of consummation has nothing to do with the almanack. He is right; but he is on firmer ground in reminding us that the Church survived its misapprehension. "The note of temporal immediacy was a misunderstanding of an urgency itself independent of it" (*In the End, God*, p. 51). It is that urgency which continuously informs and interprets the eschatological "now."