Can time be redeemed?

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IF WE WERE TO THINK OF ONE WORD which best sums up the feeling of what it means to be alive in the modern world, the word 'time' says it all. 'Time' one way or another is usually present somewhere in our conversation with each other or in our private consciousness. We often complain that either we have too much time at either end of our lives, or not enough time during our middle years. So time is either not full enough, or too full, for what we need to do. This is equally true of us both as individuals and as a global society confronting massive problems: millions of starving people, dwindling energy resources, escalating unemployment, ecological catastrophes – these and other problems will, it is judged, overwhelm us or be solved by us if 'time' is a possibility. At a deeper level, time is weighted by the way we construct it so that, eventually, we too are changed by our constructions. Experiencing time as a package, a commodity, something to be negotiated, filled in with a marker pen and, when it is done, turned over like a page, inevitably constructs our life as a race with time in which we are invariably losers. It is perhaps then not so surprising that in 1996, the *Wall Street Journal* found 40 per cent of people said lack of time was a bigger problem than lack of money.

It was not always so, this awareness of time as constituting human experience. For centuries it has not been time that has absorbed us so much as space – the period of so-called western expansion when all sorts of boundaries were pushed back: geographical spaces and astral spaces, to name but two, made possible by the rise of the physical sciences and the growth of technology. Inevitably, what happens in the secular consciousness is also true of our religious imagery. Ask yourself what your first quick mental pictures of these biblical words are: God – heaven – hell – soul. It is more than likely that they will be spatial in nature.

Perhaps it is not without significance that when there are scarcely any more 'spaces' left for us to discover, our attention and preoccupation should be directed to time. And the most basic question about time has to do with our discomfiture about what we are doing with time. Can time, we ask, be redeemed? But, as we shall endeavour to show, that is not really a straightforward question.

The pathos of the question

If our observations so far are plausible, our title might just as well have read: the problem of *time* in our time, in which case consciousness that we are about to embark on a new millennium heightens our apprehension. For it will not be enough for us simply to have been privileged to be present at the start of the third millennium if, after the celebrations have receded, we have made no advance in gaining a more secure grasp of time than heretofore.

But the title, by incorporating the theologically loaded word 'redeemed', might just as well have read: The problem of *God* in our time. For the question 'Can time be redeemed?' expresses a fundamental doubt not simply about time, but also about God. Because God and time have become conceptually separated, God, it is widely believed, belongs to a time that has passed. It is no exaggeration to propose, at least in what we call western societies, that time itself has in large measure taken the place of God, in this way declaring the Creator of time to be a product of time. God, too, is subject *to* time as is everything else. And precisely with this recognition, God consequently has had his time. For many this masculine pronoun in particular reinforces the problem, but if the *reality* of God in our time is the crucial question, the matter of how to *speak* about God is surely secondary.

It can hardly be denied that the primary question for western culture is in truth that of the reality of God. No more graphic description of this dilemma is available to us than that offered by Nietzsche a century ago in the terrible parable of the madman,[1] who in the face of the uncomprehending and uncaring crowd in the market place declared not only that the God of the western tradition was dead, but more to the point, that *we* had killed him. Well might we ask in the face of this incomprehensible deed: 'Can time be redeemed?'

How is it that God and time have become conceptually separated in such a way that at a particular point in time it became possible not only to register that separation, but also to experience the eclipse of one party in the equation? Ironically enough, that has happened because of the durability of a particular theological concept that at first sight might well appear to be the most unambiguous attribute of God that it is possible to affirm, namely that of the concept of eternity. How, we may ask, should eternity be understood in such a way that it may not only assist the answering of our question but (which amounts to the same thing) make speech about God once again central to our life in time?

Can God be liberated?

In the history of the western tradition, eternity has been understood in two ways: either as the negation of time, or as the infinite prolongation of time. Both have been responsible for making the equation between time and reality problematic. It was Ludwig Feuerbach in the nineteenth century who laid down what today has become axiomatic, namely that only consciousness of existence in space and time really counts as existence for human beings. Consequently, if God is equated with eternity understood in these terms, there arises a radical disjunction between speech about God and consciousness of the particularity of our human time. That disjunction, which it was the genius of the biblical tradition to overcome, has become a fact of our time, first through the radical symbiosis of the biblical tradition and Hellenistic philosophy, and second, in its decisive and rapid dissolution in recent times. For the fact is that the Old Testament does not know 'eternity' as a concept opposed to time. There, God has time unlimitedly as the One who has sovereign control of time in the allotting of time. God's eternity is consequently not timelessness, but *fullness* of time, authority over time.

It is not as widely known as it should be that instead of the three tenses which Indo-European languages embrace – past, present and future – Hebrew knows only a temporal bi-polarity, which it is misleading to designate in terms of our grammatical thinking. Instead of objectively grasped succession within the empty continuum of time, the language of the Old Testament knows only a distinction based upon whether one is speaking of something in its finished state or in its incompleteness. In the latter case, time is now experienced not simply as formal duration, but as the beginning and end of a period of ripening or growth to maturity. Time, consequently, is always concrete time – time of weeping or laughter, time of need or time of salvation. Time for the Hebrew thus resonated with a structure of reality that always possesses the character of event. No better text expresses this understanding than the well-rehearsed verses of Ecclesiastes 3:1ff: 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die . . .'

The New Testament built on this foundation in its understanding of time, 'eternal life', for example, being the opening up of temporal life through the word of God as a time-determining word, in contrast to the prevailing Greek view of time as merely a limited piece of the unending duration of the divine. In Aristotle's understanding, just as the word 'infinite' testified to the lack of all *spatial* boundaries, so the word

'eternal' testified to the lack of all *temporal* specificity. One can begin to understand how attractive this understanding became as the Christian faith made its way into this philosophical world, for the overcoming of the perceived limitations attaching to life in this world appeared to parallel the temporal and spatial limitlessness of the developing 'Christian' view of God. But it is just this understanding of the timelessness of God that has become disastrous for us today. Hence the urgency of our question: can the biblical God, who has tied his presence inextricably to time, be liberated once again in our understanding and in so doing open up for us a renewed grasp of the mutuality of God's and our engagement with time?

The liberation of time by the liberation of God

The claim is being made that for time to be liberated, God must be liberated. In a striking phrase, the Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson has described our dilemma as being due to the fact that the God of the western tradition is essentially an 'unbaptized God',[2] that is, that our basic problem stems from an incompletely Christianized interpretation of God. The specific and unique Christian language for God is that of Trinity, but the history of western Christianity has demonstrated that the antecedent Hellenic God has proved to be too formidable and intractable an entity to be reformed by the iconoclastic subtlety of the trinitarian God. The history of western theology is in fact the history of Christian monotheism, that is, the dressing up of the ontotheological God of the philosophical tradition in ill-fitting clothes. Witness the high point of this symbiosis in, ironically enough, a Reformed tradition:

> There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.[3]

The point is simply to note what is taken to be most characteristic of the Christian God: the significance of the only semi-colon in the passage which has the effect of making secondary specific, historical, personal,

biblical language for God, on the foundation of natural, impersonal, universal, philosophical categories. When these categories become no longer inherently believable, inevitably the specific Christian realities collapse with them. Such is the fate of Christian faith in the modern world. And such too is the fate of time in our culture, for time in the West is correlated with a fundamentally unitarian interpretation of God. Not surprisingly then eternity is understood as 'immunity to change rather than as a trinitarian mutuality as faithfulness in action'.[4] So it is that God and time fall together.

For the unitarian God, all points on the line of time are equidistant, but this means that for human beings only the present is realizable since past and future are only receding or approaching. By contrast, the trinitarian 'baptized' God's eternity is 'faithful adventure in and through time'[5] in which our time is subsumed in God's triune life as Father, Son and Spirit. That is to say, now we experience God's eternity not as timelessness nor as the infinite prolongation of chronological time, but, we might say, as 'pure duration' (Karl Barth), in which both the brokenness of past time and anxiety about the future are swept up into the triune life of God.

God's time as the best time of all

It may come as something of a shock to register that these past centuries when space has preoccupied us are really an aberration from the standpoint of the Bible, which from first to last page is about this new interpretation of 'time' – from the opening words of the book of Genesis, 'When God began . . .', to the final 'Even so, come Lord Jesus' of Revelation 22. We may note in passing that the fact that the Bible is all about time and the fact that for us time is a problem as well as a possibility should make Christian communication compelling and illuminating for our contemporaries. Whether that will happen or not depends on whether Christians are able to shake off their cultural shackles and become as contemporary as the biblical God. If this should happen, then it may well be that once again Christians will be able to tell the time *now* for the world rather than, as sometimes appears, telling the world what time it *was*.

'Telling the time' is in fact only to resurrect in our own time what the word 'kingdom' meant for the New Testament Church. We can never ponder too often the understanding of the Old Testament that the name of God is a name which is first of all about time rather than space, or perhaps better, space qualified by time. One of the contested translations of the acknowledged primary name for God is 'I will be there as

I will be there' (Exod 3:14). The kingdom of this God, then, is the time when the life and purpose of the world meshes with the intention of its Creator. The fact that John the Baptist *points* to the coming of that time; that Jesus proclaims the *advent* of that time, and demonstrates signs of it in his words and deeds; that he *inaugurates* it in the face of human hostility to God's time on his bloody cross, and himself receives its *promise* in the totally unexpected relinquishing of the power of death in his resurrection – all this comes together in the triumphant and exultant confession of the New Testament that in Jesus Christ the world has reached its end and its goal; that the 'time' has come; that the new world is beginning. It is in this sense that the scandalous claim of Christian faith regarding the raising of the crucified One does not consist so much in its purported reality as in its timing.

'I will be there as I will be there': that is the promise that God is our contemporary. Indeed, we may be bold enough to claim that, in assuming time, God (temporarily?) forgets that he is eternal, such is the reliability of his promise. Time is, as it were, 'embodied God'. If we are able to acknowledge something like this, all the expansive claims made of God in the tradition become accessible with new power: that God is the fulcrum on which all history moves, or that from now on we may live out the end of time in the middle of time. The time of God is here. The future is now. Once God's time has struck, the life of God destined for the whole creation commences.

Commences but is not concluded. The prayer which the Church receives from the one it calls Lord contains the petition 'Your kingdom come', or as we are proposing, 'Your time come'. The promise of the 'I will be there as I will be there' presence of God is not exhausted in its confirmation in Jesus Christ, but there receives its expansion and its prolongation in the assurance that what has taken place in him must become a reality for our world and for us. Why, we are now able to ask, should the world in which we live really not be like the world which Jesus invokes for us in his parables of the kingdom? Why should not life be like a banquet where a father and two sons eat the fatted calf together, where irresponsibility and legal sense of duty are alike transcended by joy? Why should not the rewards of God be measured by grace rather than human deserts, as experienced by the labourers in the vineyard, paid as they are the same wage regardless of when they started work? Why should not the goal of life for all be the discerning of the precious pearl for the sake of which we are prepared to sacrifice all lesser jewels? Why should not our relationship with the source of life be as for the importunate widow who keeps on asking, or as for the

friend at midnight who keeps on knocking, even when the circumstances appear to be inappropriate? Far from the common fatalistic view of time which is quietly submissive to what is taken to be 'the will of God', Jesus calls for a sense of time which expects great, even unreasonable, benedictions. Like shafts of light, these images of redeemed time illuminate for us what life should be and, perhaps most importantly of all, what it is destined to be.

Can time be redeemed? In the face of these foregoing questions should not our question read: can time *not* be redeemed, in this opening up of a future which is God's future, yet a future which has already come? This 'having come' is, of course, the only basis on which it makes sense to look to the future; otherwise such a course of action would be visionary, or romantic, or escapist. God's time is none of these evasions. Rather God's time makes our time controversial. It tells us that true time is not clock time – the spaces on a watch, the days on a calendar, the years on a tombstone – but true time is hope, that is, living in the reality of that which is coming. What makes time controversial is the question whether it is time that is empty, hopeless, void of future, or whether it is time that is fulfilled, hopeful, loaded to the brim, so to speak, with future.

This is the gift of time that Jesus came to bring; this quest for a richer time is what the so-called post-modern world is thirsting for. God and the world, here as in all things, belong together. Christians, then, are those privileged to pray 'Your time come', because they know that present time has already been redeemed.

The redemption of time as Church

The word 'crisis' is perhaps overused in our day. We can be charged with contributing to that phenomenon by speaking of the crisis both of the interpretation of God and of time in western culture. But if such foundational entities as God and time are as problematic as we have attempted to demonstrate, then 'crisis' is eminently justified. Moreover, to these two must be added yet a third crisis – that of 'church', a crisis that scarcely needs documentation. In this respect, it is not difficult to establish a direct correlation between the 'unbaptized' God and the 'timelessness' of eternity making the Church fundamentally uncompelling once the acids of modernity hasten still further the erosion of institutional loyalties. The social and cultural hegemony of the sort of generalized 'Christian' presuppositions we have been considering eventually destabilize even the most sincere believers. So it is that in the modern world which seeks to drive a wedge between God and the

Church, the credal confessions which insist on the inextricability of that relationship – 'I believe in God . . . I believe the Church' – materially break down despite their formal weekly repetition. Such confessions literally become unbelievable for the vast majority of people whether or not they regard themselves as within or without the institution. For you do not need a 'church' when it is assumed that everyone more or less believes what you believe. A 'shapeless' God and a 'diffuse' sense of time combine to make the Church irrelevant to its cultural context on the one hand, and on the other, exacerbate the ever-present temptation to institutional reductionism on the part of its adherents.

But when God is liberated and time is redeemed, a 're-formed' Church emerges with a new significance, for only in such a community will the world find its true time. Axioms such as 'outside the Church there is no salvation', which have become so offensive and unsustainable from the time of the Enlightenment to our own day, now assume new contours through the conferral of a particular grasp of *time* by a particular presence of *God* making possible a particular appropriation of *salvation* in a particular *community of faith*. Quite literally, familiar and insoluble conventions are reconfigured. So, for example, under the model we are seeking to deconstruct, worship appears to have lost its compulsion for the reasons we have advanced. Worship, it is widely assumed, is a consequence of believing in God. If one so believes and is serious in that belief, one will seek to participate in its consequences and participate in the gathered life of the Christian community; if one does not believe, worship is in principle repudiated. But in the liberation of God and the redemption of time, worship is not the *result* of believing in God but its *precondition*.

The case we have been seeking to advance is that in the contemporary crisis of God and time, both language and experience are breaking down. Much theological endeavour testifies to that breakdown, for as Hegel observed in the introduction to *The philosophy of right*, those who want to get an intellectual grip on their time always arrive too late. They can only grasp that past which no longer determines the present. By contrast, the 'rejuvenation' of Christian faith in our day will come about only in that worship of the trinitarian God through which our culture will be given a language which will generate genuine new experiences for people. For when the world exists simply apart from the Church, it has no coherent grasp of time, but is always in the process of deconstruction. By contrast, the Church confers temporal continuity and significance for the world.

More than fifty years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned these words from his prison cell:

> It is not for us to foretell the day, but the day will come when men [*sic*] will be called to utter the Word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. There will be a new language, perhaps quite unreligious, but liberating and saving, like the language of Jesus, so that men are horrified at it, and yet conquered by its power: the language of a new righteousness and truth, the language which tells of the peace of God, and the coming of his kingdom.[6]

Perhaps we are at the dawn of that day.

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NOTES

1 F. Nietzsche, *The happy science* (*Fröhliche Wissenschaft*), p 125.
2 R. W. Jenson, *Unbaptized God: the basic flaw in ecumenical theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
3 *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), ch 2.
4 R. W. Jenson, *op. cit.*, p 138.
5 *Ibid.*, p 139.
6 D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers from prison* (London: Fontana, 1959), p 160.