

# Time and a certain sense of God

*Michael Barnes*

TO WRITE THIS ARTICLE I WENT ON A JOURNEY. I have always told friends that the best way to see London is by taking a trip on the river. Apart from being able to enjoy a spectacular waterfront with so many magnificent buildings paraded along the embankment, a journey by river takes time. There is always something of a sense of relief in exchanging the commuter chaos of train and bus for the more sedate, slow but reliable, movement of boat cutting through water.

It was not always so, of course. Nowadays a trip on the Thames is one of the few genuine joys of living in London. But there was a time when the river played a more practical role in the life of the great city. It was London's single most important thoroughfare, crowded with merchant ships and tiny skiffs, a forest of masts which told its own tale of the excitement and danger of trade and travel to distant parts.

The place to which I was going, the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, is built on the site of a royal palace. The present great complex of buildings used to be a hospital, then a college, for the Royal Navy. It now plays host to a university while the museum itself houses the most important collection of naval records and memorabilia in the country. The passing of time, one might say, is etched into its very walls. It is nothing if not a monument to a great naval tradition and I am convinced that the only way to approach it is – slowly and sedately – by river. That was how Sir Christopher Wren designed it: a triumph of baroque architecture which stands sentinel over the last great bend of the Thames as the estuary begins to unwind on its way to the sea.

Not so far away, up on the hill above the museum, is the former Royal Observatory. Nowadays it is of largely antiquarian interest, yet in a very real sense it continues to mark the centre of the world map. Through the centre of the Observatory runs the 'prime meridian', 0° of longitude, the point from which Greenwich Mean Time is still measured. As divisions of the globe the lines of longitude are, of course, a totally arbitrary invention. Unlike the lines of latitude, which are calculated according to the movement of the sun over the equator, lines of longitude could have been drawn by starting from any fixed point. It was only in the late nineteenth century that the convention

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which fixed on Greenwich met with international approval – and, even then, the French resisted.

Today the prime meridian is marked, all too prosaically, by a brass plate set into the ground. This unlikely indentation, dividing East from West, is proudly proclaimed as the centre of time itself. But does time have a centre? Can time really be measured? In what sense is time ‘real’? Perhaps time is to be understood in purely subjective terms as a projection of our consciousness of the changing seasons? Or, more objectively, as somehow written into the very structure of the universe, inseparable from the working out of the Big Bang?

*Movement, change and the passing of time*

Big questions. But this is not a philosophical article. Nor does it have scientific pretensions. All I intend are a few brief reflections on the effect that time, and our attempts to measure the passing of time, have on faith and spirituality. I will return to Greenwich and the problems of time-keeping and navigation shortly. For the moment, however, let that originating line of longitude serve as a metaphor for the more universal spiritual journey.

Nowadays we treat time as if it were a ‘thing’ to be used, a commodity to be bought and sold like so much convenience food from the local supermarket. A harassed friend remarked to me recently, ‘There is so much time about. Sixty of this and that, three hundred and sixty-five of something else, and now a thousand of something more. But why is there never enough time to do anything?’

There is, of course, more to time than the relentless rush of human existence. Time has a paradoxical quality. Human existence is temporal of its very nature; we can remember the past and anticipate the future. To that extent we get a glimpse of eternity, and the possibility of a world which is unchanging. But we never cease to exist ‘in time’, and however much we may strain to get the measure of the entire span of time we are bound to fail. We cannot stand above time – outside the rush. To be temporal beings, to be conscious of living *in* time yet unable to overcome time, is both the glory and the tragedy of human life.

In order to explore this paradox I want to suggest that the ways we understand time and the marking of time introduce us to a certain sense of God. The religious quest is led by the ‘desire for order’ but religious traditions as different as Christianity and Buddhism recognize that there is something ultimately incomprehensible about the mystery of time. I then want to take up a more Christian reflection on eschatology not as the ‘end-time’ so much as the overturning of any sense of

privileged time in favour of the 'now' of God's time, a present always haunted by the past and filled with hope of a strange yet promising future. But let me set the scene by first of all returning to the National Maritime Museum and explaining the reason for taking that self-indulgent journey down the Thames.

### *Marking the progress of time*

I wanted to see four clocks, the masterpieces of the greatest of British horologists, John Harrison. His story is told in a wonderfully absorbing book by Dava Sobel – the story, as she puts it, of 'a lone genius who solved the greatest scientific problem of his time'.<sup>1</sup> In 1676 the first Astronomer Royal, John Flamsteed, was appointed by King Charles II to apply

the most exact Care and Diligence to rectifying the Tables and Motions of the Heavens, and the Places of the fixed Stars, so as to find out the so-much desired Longitude at Sea, for perfecting the art of Navigation.<sup>2</sup>

Why was the establishing of longitude 'so-much desired'? Because, as Sobel graphically explains, without the ability to measure longitude sailors were often literally lost at sea. With the immense fortunes of colonial empires at stake it became increasingly important during the eighteenth century to develop a reliable guide to navigation. Thus it was that in 1713 an act was passed offering a prize of £20,000 to anyone who could devise a method of checking longitude at sea.

In 1728 Harrison, a self-taught clockmaker from Yorkshire, came to London with drawings of an instrument which, he claimed, would enable navigators to calculate the distance they had travelled from the home port. He encountered opposition which, in retrospect, seems incredible. But he was taking on the astronomical establishment, men who were convinced that the secret of safe navigation lay with a reading of the stars, not with the calculations of a mere mechanic. It was not until 1773 that Harrison managed to prove his point satisfactorily. At the personal intervention of King George III he was awarded the prize for which he had given his life. The clocks he built, each more sophisticated and accurate than the last, now sit in majestic state in the museum. The first looks more like the innards of a ponderous steamship than a scientific masterpiece. The last is more familiar, in style a somewhat bulky pocket-watch which could calculate

the distance in longitude on a transatlantic journey to within a very few miles.

In an age of instant communication, with satellites capable of tracking the position of ships to the nearest inch, it is difficult to appreciate the significance of Harrison's work. His intricate inventions are now admired as objects of extraordinary beauty. At the time, however, they had a ruthlessly practical and purely economic purpose. On top of the old Greenwich Observatory is a complicated set of cones which, from the first decades of the nineteenth century, was used to set the time. When the cones dropped at midday, the sea-going ships on the river would adjust their chronometers and set off to distant parts. So long as their chronometers remained accurate – so long, that is, as they carried the 'true time' – they could always calculate the distance they had travelled.

At the risk of a certain over-simplification, the modern obsession with time as a commodity, an object to use, make, waste, kill or fritter away, time as hunks of history and culture to be marketed with the 'Millennium Experience', began in the eighteenth century.

### *Images of a timeless God*

Harrison's four chronometers represent a major scientific advance which has important cultural – and religious – implications. Both for Aristotle and Newton, as Stephen Hawking tells us, time was absolute. They believed that 'one could unambiguously measure the interval of time between two events, and that this time would be the same whoever measured it, provided they had a good clock'.<sup>3</sup>

From the earliest times the way to check and control the passing of time lay in harnessing the natural rhythms inherent in creation itself. Horologists and astronomers alike were thus united in thinking of the universe as a sort of giant clock, a single continuum ticking away with absolute regularity. But not even the profoundly devout Newton could escape the theological consequences of such a model. By effectively fixing the passage of time within a universal system, our image of God subtly changes. God is no longer that manifest yet mysterious power, present in a multiplicity of rhythms and cycles of life, but – to put it crudely – some sort of eternal clockmaker. God is the deistic *philosophes'* distant benign creator, who wound up the original clock and then left it to run on, inexorably, into a future of endless, ever-repeating seasons and ever-extending years and millennia.

At the end of the twentieth century, Newton's laws of motion have been superseded by Einstein's theory of relativity. The measurement of

time can no longer be reckoned in absolute terms, but depends on a number of variables, such as where observers happen to be positioned with reference to each other and the events they are observing. Hawking explains the paradoxes of temporal relativity with a fascinating clarity.<sup>4</sup> As he explains the implications of Einstein's theory, contemporary cosmology becomes hung about with weird and wonderful hypotheses – from black holes and string theory to wormholes and time-travel. Such possibilities have had a decided impact on our notions of free will, causality and even the nature of human personhood. They reinforce the more subjective shift in philosophical theories of time, from Kant and Kierkegaard to Husserl and Heidegger. But what – if anything – do they have to say about God?

If in Harrison's world God is the great clockmaker, in Hawking's God has become the apotheosis of all computer software, not the first mover but the ultimate synthesis. Hawking finishes his book not with speculations about the place of God in some unified 'grand theory' but by noting that it is the job of scientists to ask the question *what?* and philosophers to ask the question *why?* An important distinction, certainly, but one which underestimates the extent to which the answers we give to 'why?' questions are already formed according to the theories which underpin our linguistic capacity to frame 'what?' questions.

We cannot stand outside or above the object of our reflection. We are always 'in language' just as we are always 'in time'. Philosophers and theologians are always reflecting on particular 'languages', traditions of faith by means of which human beings seek to come to terms with whatever they take to have a transcendent significance. To bring that idea back to the original point with which I started, our comprehension of time is always conditioned by the world we experience and by the stories which we tell in order to make sense of that experience.<sup>5</sup> There is more, in other words, to our sense of God than some model of infinity which can be squared with what we discover about the inner workings of the universe.

### *Religion, ritual and the passing of time*

The powerful drive to construct a fixed system which homogenizes all movement and change remains a real temptation in theological accounts of temporality. But there is also something else. We use all sorts of signs and pointers literally to 'mark time', from the regular rhythm of the ticking and chiming of clocks to more casual marks scribbled on diaries and calendars. The swing of a pendulum, the

shadow on the sun-dial, the pile of sand trickling through an hour-glass, so many tried and still familiar mechanical means for telling the time, all depend on the calibration of a regular movement. Without certain fixed points by which to chart the passing of time it is impossible to measure space and distance, to find ourselves in an ever-changing world. But they remain conventions, attempts to model natural phenomena like the rising and setting of the sun or the waxing and waning of the moon. To forget this is to risk turning models of time's passing into Promethean attempts to surmount time, to keep ahead, to remain somehow in control.

That our models are just models, and that time always escapes our grasp, becomes clear when we think for a moment of the many ways in which time is recorded ritually. In all religions is found some form of regular prayer which orders the time of the day, 'from the rising of the sun to its setting'. If the day is punctuated by such moments, so is the year with its liturgical round, its feasts and ceremonies. The daily chanting of Cistercian monks is not an ancient time-keeping ceremony, it is an act of thanksgiving which celebrates God's world. Similarly, the monthly observance of a community of Theravadin *bhikkhus* is more than a regular reminder of the Buddhist refuges and precepts, it is also a ritual of expiation and renewal. And when rites of passage are celebrated the whole of life is acknowledged to have a temporal dimension. A baptism or a *bar mitzvah*, for instance, is not just a formal initiation into the life of a community but the beginning of a new stage of life, a new time to be negotiated.

In other words, before time-keeping assumed the status of a 'scientific problem' it had a much more straightforwardly religious purpose. 'Religious', however, does not mean the cosily irrational. It is easy to ignore the intellectual and practical problems which liturgies and rites of passage are designed to address. The monks who chant the office are seeking to enter into the process by which God sanctifies creation; nevertheless, time-keeping, marking the hours with prayer, is part of the necessary discipline of a life committed to bringing harmony and order into a potentially chaotic world.

To take a slightly more obscure example, the ancient Mayan calendar, with its endless correlations of the positions of heavenly bodies with the natural cycles of human existence embodied in creation myths, appears like the worst form of tabloid newspaper astrology. More recent scholarship, however, has begun to recognize that something more complex was at work. The task was not to impose cosmic cycles on human life but to integrate them with memory – and

therefore to construct a history which could anticipate the future. As Anthony Aveni observes, 'solving the puzzle – finding order in the perceived chaos of natural time – was vital in promoting methodical living'.<sup>6</sup>

Further examples could be quoted. The Vedic altar, with its 360 bricks, was regarded as time itself; the sacrifice, for all its mounting complexities, was essentially concerned with the regeneration of time, making sure that the round of birth and rebirth is always pushed forward. For the people of Israel, on the other hand, a succession of historical memories was recalled and celebrated at regular festivals as divine events which befall a chosen people. Whatever the differences between supposedly 'cyclical' and 'linear' models, the function of sacred rituals is to narrate an orderly passage through time. By correlating the movement of the heavens with the cycles of human life our daily existence is given a meaningful structure, even if – to quote Aveni again – 'in our most candid moments, [we] must admit we can never really hope to fully comprehend'.<sup>7</sup>

### *Time which eludes our control*

We all have to mark time, make time, take time, be in time, if we are to make sense of a time-bound existence. But we are also subject to time. Not even the most elaborate of liturgical constructions of time – the eucharist, for instance, or Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting – allows us to stand above time. Mysteriously time holds us in its grasp. Our thoughts, our prayers, our most sublime and intimate moments of presence to God or to the ones we love, all come to an end and have to be repeated. To make sense of our existence we have to learn how to work within the sometimes baffling rhythms of light and darkness, birth and decay. Yet in the end time eludes our control.

In one way the Buddhist philosophers were right.<sup>8</sup> All that can really be said to exist is the present moment, the 'now' in which we stand. Everything else exists – literally 'stands out' – in so far as it relates to that which is quickly past, but without which there could be no sense of the pattern of experience. Just as listening to a piece of music is only possible because we can hear a pattern which is always moving forward and always disappearing into the past, so we can only make sense of this present moment of our lives because of the memories which mysteriously lead us to, and beyond, this present 'now'.

There is a certain sense of God in this constant and unprovoked, sometimes unwanted, return. Like the series of lines marking degrees of longitude such memories enable us to describe the stories which

pattern our experience. They provoke our imaginations to explore the future we anticipate as a projection of the past. But they also provide reference points, a sense of the continuing self-revelation of God, to which we can return when – as so often happens – the charting of the way forward turns out to be anything but smooth.

### *Being known in the present moment*

The present moment is all we really ‘know’; the past and the future must always elude us. This is not to say that we do not have to go on reconstructing the past. But the wisdom which truly understands the ways of God is not a secret *gnosis*. Hence the scare quotes round that word ‘know’. The New Testament contains plenty of confident predictions of a future consummation which fulfils all that has been revealed before. But the gospel story itself is, more properly, a story of how we come *to be known* by the God who dwells among us. When Jesus announces that the ‘kingdom of God is in your midst’, when he preaches in parables of the imminence of God’s kingdom, he overturns the symbolic world of Jewish faith – the order of land, temple, Law and the eschatology of messianic fulfilment – in favour of the reconciling ‘now’ of God’s time. And in the justice which overturns the ethnic distinctions of Jew and Gentile, which reconciles the sinner, which welcomes the outcasts, *God makes God known*.

It is this radical insistence on the gratuitousness of the present moment, its power to reveal God, which enables a different perspective on past and future. Such a perspective is very different from a privileged ‘fixed’ moment from which we can survey the passage of time. Rather it suggests a response to the sanctity of a present which recognizes how every time – and indeed every place – is graced by the love of God and haunted by the traces of God’s kingdom.

### *The ‘now’ of God’s time*

How can we become attuned to this vision of the eternal present of God’s ‘now’? In the first place, to return to the analogy of my journey down the Thames, it is to ‘take time’, to enter into the mystery of the unfolding of God’s self-giving. More particularly, just as John Harrison struggled to fashion chronometers which modelled the rhythms of the universe itself, so we have to ‘take time’ in order that we may be formed by the rituals which mark the passing of time.

For the Christian liturgy does not just rehearse a story but makes it a present reality. Indeed the whole of Christian life is not just a sign of the kingdom but the celebration of its gift. Like any good narrative



Christian liturgy, especially the liturgy of the eucharist, is structured by indicatives which connect past, present and future. But the narrative is also interrupted by a series of imperatives. 'Take; Eat; Do this; Go in peace', are not stage directions for the ritual but words addressed to *this* particular community – and all the particular relationships from which it is formed – which root it thoroughly in the 'now' of the present moment.

In the first place these imperatives are reminders of the constantly repeated commands of the Torah which express the purpose for which God has called the people. When, for instance, Moses makes his farewell address, rehearsing the mighty deeds of God and exhorting the people to faithfulness as they enter the promised land, he reminds them: 'What great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?' (Deut 4:7). Repeated in the present moment of liturgical performance, Jesus' imperatives continue to proclaim the gratuitousness of God's self-giving in Christ. The community of the Church is *God's* work – and the missionary work or action of the Church is a response to God's initiative. What the Church responds to is an historical imperative, a moment which marked Israel's vision of their future in the promised land, and which continues now in Jesus' New Covenant to make similar demands of justice and reconciliation.

Thus the narrative at the centre of the eucharistic liturgy, punctuated with its own imperatives, reflects the same *ethical* basis as the Jewish recapitulation of Torah. In the Deuteronomic code this is achieved by ordering the people of Israel, with all their responsibilities and relationships, within the frontiers of a single space. In the eucharistic ordering of the People of God, it is within the frontiers of a single time.

### *Living between different times*

In practice, of course, we can no more live totally in a single time, the 'now' of the present moment, than we can ever completely give up all attachment to place in favour of a radical homelessness. Christian eschatology overturns all our possessiveness, both of time and of place. But, rather like those eighteenth-century ships setting out from the port of London, the journey is always one of risk, an expression of a willingness to go on living in an imperfect moment which involves both departure and return. We live, therefore, uneasily between two times or moments, in faithfulness to the disturbing otherness of the past which constantly returns, and in openness to a present which leads to the otherness of an unknown future. What enables us to remain faithful to

such a call, and to grow through such a journey, is the sense of God not as timeless and exempt from our struggles but as Emmanuel, the God who leaves the traces of his presence as much in the rhythms of creation as in the anti-rhythms of crisis.

In one way such a sense of God-with-us reflects a familiar story, repeated as contemporary events are refigured by old memories. Abraham stands at the head of the covenantal tradition which responds in faith to the call of God. He does not stay in his familiar world but sets off for 'a place which he was to receive as an inheritance'. And so, as the author of Hebrews goes on, 'he went out not knowing where he was to go' (11:8). In another way it speaks of what is new in the gospel story: the disciples are told not just to go forward, with eyes fixed on the eschatological kingdom, but to keep coming back to the beginning, and to the renewal of God's original covenant with creation.

Time is always the most mysterious and enigmatic of all God's gifts. Yet gift it remains. The 'now' of the kingdom is not a time of empty waiting on the absent God nor an anxious struggle for self-justification before God's presence. It is a time which enables us to live with the glory as well as the tragedy of human existence, which dares to name the graces of the past, and which strengthens us to look forward with joy to the splendour of an unknown future.

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#### NOTES

1 Dava Sobel, *Longitude* (London: Fourth Estate, 1995).

2 Quoted in Sobel, *op. cit.*, p 31.

3 Stephen Hawking, *A brief history of time*, illustrated edition (London: Bantam, 1996), p 28.

4 *Ibid.*, pp 22ff.

5 See especially Paul Ricoeur's trilogy, *Time and narrative* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984-88).

6 Anthony F. Aveni, 'Time' in Mark C. Taylor (ed), *Critical terms for religious studies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), pp 314-333, quotation from p 321.

7 *Ibid.*, p 331.

8 I am thinking here particularly of the *Sarvastivadins* (literally those who hold that 'sarvam asti', 'all is'), one of the most prominent of the early pre-Mahayana schools in north India.