

TIME AS RESPITE FOR DISCERNING AND BEGINNING ETERNAL COMMUNION WITH GOD

Prof. Ph.D. Gheorghe F. ANGHELESCU,

Ovidius University of Constanța,
ROMANIA.

Email: anghelescug@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the Holy Apostles' mission, Greek philosophy was dominated by ideas of permanence and return. Despite the great variety of the existing trends, a common model seemed to be accepted in all the systems: the vision of an eternal cosmos. Each thing worthy of existing was considered to have existed in a perfect manner before all times and was impossible for it to be added in this perfect plenitude. It was considered that no essential change was possible, and no real novelty could ever emerge. However, in this framework dominated by the idea of cyclicity, the Saviour's disciples were going to bring a new message: the good news of the birth, death, and Resurrection of the embodied Son of God. This unique reality would open the perspective of a linear time endowed with the concept of union with eternity.

Keywords: *time, cyclicity, Church, East, Greek philosophy,*

INTRODUCTION

When the Holy Apostles came out of Palestine to preach Jesus Christ's Gospel, they were faced not just with a world that was using a different language, Greek, but also with one that had mentalities and philosophical concepts different from the Jewish ones. However, Christ's disciples had the power to speak with these people and even attracted them on the side of their teaching by the redeeming message and the power of the miraculous deeds they were performing. Among the features marking the difference between paganism and Christianity, there were, as well, the notions of time, which the Greek philosophers already possessed and submitted to a careful elaboration. Were these notions adaptable to the Christian meanings about the cosmos and life or did the Christian teaching suffer a Hellenization of its content through this contact? This is a topic worthy of a more careful examination, considering the fact that, often, these two visions about the notion of time, the pagan and the Christian one, are presented as totally opposite.

1. THE CYCLICAL TIME OF THE WORLD OF GREEK-ROMAN ANTIQUITY

Before presenting the Christian vision about the notion of time, it is necessary to prioritize with a brief presentation the more elaborate conception of temporality specific to Hellenic thinking and philosophy.

Far from constituting a unitary vision, it included at least two perceptions: one, absolute, and another one, relative. The first was represented by thinkers such as Strato of

Lampsacus (c. 269 B.C.)¹ and Boethus of Sidon (c. 50 B.C.),² who considered time as a quantitatively invariable temporal flow within which the other processes, dynamic or static, took place in a larger or smaller area of space. The second, dominant viewpoint, starting with Aristotle's affirmations from *Physica* (IV. 10–14. 217b–224a)³ and nuanced by the Stoic philosophical school and the Neo-Platonic one, associated time with the cyclical movement of the celestial bodies, identifying even a psychological dimension of time, with a particular inner rhythm, different from soul to soul, either slower or more alert.

This second perception of a time, related to the spatial dimension and with the cyclicity of celestial motions, gained in popularity, even imposing itself as scientific, having on its side the doubtless support of the succession of seasons in a year and of the continually uniform “rotation” of the aether world in a stable and intangible position. Time, therefore, was going to be measured using periodical “spatial” measurement units (such as those related to the movement of the bodies in space), and the spatial “movement” (be it the simple rest or that on a certain distance) using a certain temporal interval.

Before Aristotle, there had been other visions of temporality. The Platonist one, for instance, firmly distinguished between eternity as an absolute (perfect) idea of time and time as imperfect image of eternity (*Timaeus* 37D–38B).⁴ In this vision, the One, the absolute principle of the intelligible and material universe, was conceived as exempted from any temporal attribute and “located” beyond space and time (idea taken over and elaborated especially by the Neo-Platonists).

Thus, what eternity represented in Plato's vision, was going to become transposed in the language of the Aristotelian realism by the association with movement (as defining element of temporality), a succession of present moments (“now”) in close connection with the movement of the objects in the universe and, therefore, characteristic of the cosmos. The eternity of the cosmos was going to become, with the Stoics, that *continua*,⁵ a permanence made up of divisions of “present”, in an indefinite chain, and was going to be associated implicitly with the existence and movement of the bodies.⁶

Plotinus in his work *On Eternity and Time*, refuting all the previous definitions the philosophers applied to eternity, makes a step forward developing his own conception of eternity as “the life which belongs to that which exists and is in being, all together and full,

¹ Samuel Sambursky, *The Physical World of Late Antiquity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2014, pp. 10-12.

² Philo IX, *De aeternitate mundi* 76–84, in col. “Loeb Classical Library” (“LCL”), vol. 363, edited by Jeffrey Henderson, with an English translation by Philips H. Wicksteed and Francis M. Cornford, 1954, pp. 239-245. Boethus dismisses the Stoics's opinion that the world would undergo a destruction. He supported the world's perennity and, at the same time, according to Philo's testimony, the world's existence along with its Principle / Cause (Divinity), as environment of manifestation of the divine action, understood in the sense of the philosophy of time (a meaning taken over by Origen, as well, along the line of Gnosticism), of *anima mundi* (world soul).

³ Aristotle IV, *The Physics*, books I-IV, in col. “Loeb Classical Library” (“LCL”), vol. 228, with an English translation by Philips H. Wicksteed and Francis M. Cornford, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1957, pp. 372-427.

⁴ Plato IX, *Timaeus. Critias. Cleitophon. Menexenus. Epistles*, in col. “LCL”, vol. 234, with an English translation by R.G. Bury, 1929, pp. 74-77.

⁵ Paul Scade, “Plato and the Stoics on limits, parts and wholes” in Alexander G. Long (ed.), *Plato and the Stoics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 92.

⁶ Samuel Sambursky, *The Physical World of Late Antiquity...*, p. 16: “Periodicity on a small and on a large scale, and the return of the identical, must have been a welcome counterbalance to the conception of an eternally lasting universe, existing without beginning and without end.”

completely without extension or interval“ (ch. 3. 36–38).⁷ Plotin’s view of the origin and nature of time consists in the life of the soul in its restless movement from one thing to another (a feature associated with the separation of the soul from the quiet unity of Intellect); the universe is, consequently, in time because the soul has put itself into time (ch. 11). If the soul turned back altogether to the intelligible world and its eternity, time would stop.⁸

With this vision about time from Antiquity, we will move on to exploring the reception of this notion in the Revealed teaching of the *Holy Scripture*, and in the way it was received and interpreted by the Church Fathers and Church writers of the Greek language.

2. CONCEPTIONS ON TEMPORALITY IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

The Old Testament proposes a different vision of temporality compared to that of Hellenic philosophy. It speaks about a beginning of the world, a creation of the cosmos by God and the setting of a succession of nights and days for humans by the creation of “luminaries” with specific functions: the Sun, the Moon, and the stars (*Genesis* 1: 14-16). In other words, we have in front of us a time of Divinity with an infinite dimension, beyond the human power of quantification, and a time of creation encompassed in God’s generous time (measured in divine “days”, *Ps.* 89: 4), but with a beginning and with a possible end. Adam and Eve, the forefathers of humanity, appear as destined through the creation to an eternal communion with God, but, opposed to it, by cunning, is the tempting devil’s intervention, who proposes to man an autonomous existence, in competition with God.

The rupture of the connection between man and the Creator, by the sin of disobedience / opposition to the divine “plan” inscribed in human nature, leads to a breaking up of the whole human universe on all levels of existence, including in relation to time. Time becomes, from partner on the way to eternity, a merciless chronometer of its biological life toward the desolating end of corruption and death.

Only the divine theophanies and prophetic words of the prophets inspired by the Spirit keep filling with meaning the life of the earthly humans sent out of the closed Eden, waiting for a Saviour Who is a red thread of the history of humanity, especially by the chosen representative, the Jewish people, selected due to the faith of its forefather: Abraham. The coming of the Messiah awaited from generation to generation, king and archbishop at the same time, is accompanied by the promise of restoration of the entire created existence in a state of abundance synonymous to happiness and eternal peace. Mention is made of a reward for the just and a punishment for God’s enemies, with both of them situated in a temporal framework (*Psalms* 32: 35; *Wisdom* 11: 21; *Isaiah* 11: 6).

In brief, we have a linear vision of temporality and the time of the creatures in the divine time, without God’s “time” also supposing a limit or a beginning of His existence, but only the image that can be sketched by the creatures submitted inseparably to temporality and to the idea of time.⁹

⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III. 7. *On Eternity and Time*, in col. “LCL”, vol. 442, with an English translation by A.H. Armstrong, ³1993, pp. 304-305.

⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III. 7, pp. 294-295; 336-343.

⁹ Paul Plass, “The Concept of Eternity in Patristic Theology”, in *Studia Theologica*, 36.1 (1982), pp. 11-25. Saint Gregory the Theologian underlines the same powerlessness of the created beings to conceive an existence not encompassed by time, as God is: “we cannot avoid the imagery of time when we wish to express what is above time. For such expressions as *when* and *before* and *after* and *from the beginning* are not timeless, however much we twist their meaning. It will be necessary for us to adopt the standard of Eternity, that interval which extends through all things above and beyond time, and which is not divided or measured by any movement, nor by the revolution of the Sun, as time is measured.” (Gregory of Nazianzus, “Theological

The New Testament maintains itself along the same linearity of time, with some specific nuances. The embodiment of the Word, the Son of God, marks in the human time an indelible imprint of the divine plenitude, becoming a signpost for all the generations of humans. It is the sign of the Annunciation, of the beginning of salvation and of discovery of He Who is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end (the Creator and the supreme target) of all. As human, Christ fills the time with meaning, his ascent in time as a man being synonymous with a spiritual ascent He is realizing in union with His humanity, a means and, after the Resurrection, a source communicating holiness and life to all.

Christ comes to accomplish what had been written in the divine plan, namely in man's being, those moments *kairoi*¹⁰ necessary for the perfecting of virtue, salvation, and deification. "The day" and "the hour" ordained by God as saving and perfecting for man and creation are known only to Him, rather out of man's powerlessness to perceive them and instability in respecting them. Without representing predestinations or suspensions of man's freedom, they have to do with the providential divine action which intervenes in a saving manner when the creatures are heading toward self-destruction, the biological death of each man in turn and the eschaton of the world representing such stops "set" by God for mankind to avoid the general advancement of the being toward the abyss of the Gehenna. They are, therefore, like a necessary "freeze-frame", without which no one could achieve salvation (Mark 13: 20).

Christ's Resurrection refills with power the time of mankind, opening for man the communication and the communion with the spiritual world and with God by the fact that man can pre-taste "the lost paradise" ("the Tree of life", the Eucharist) and from the feast prepared in the Kingdom of heaven, realized partially "already", as beginning, here and now, but "not yet" in full. So, as Oscar Cullmann observed, time in the biblical vision does not appear to be a problem for the divine majesty, but, we could add, springs from Him as a life-carrying energy that offers a framework of existence to the universe created with a view to being made perfect: "The terminology of the New Testament teaches us that, according to the Primitive Christian conception, time in its unending extension as well as in its individual periods and moments is given by God and ruled by Him. Therefore, *all* His acting is so inevitably bound up with time that time is not felt to be a problem."¹¹

3. TIME IN THE VISION OF THE HOLY FATHERS

This vision of time, defined by its linearity ascending toward a restoring end, suffered in time under the inherent influences of Hellenistic culture and philosophy. There were Christian doctrines, such as Gnosticism, which "apostatized" from the understanding of time as a divine "gift", a framework for the human existence and forgetting to discern the way of meeting and knowing God as man's supreme (only) Benefactor.

The rejection of the vision of God's continual presence in creation (by His providential energies and by the embodiment and Resurrection) led to heresies such as Docetism (and later Arianism), which started from the presupposition of an incompatibility between the divine "unbegotten" simplicity and the multiple, "begotten" existence.¹²

Orations 3: On the Son, 1", in *Five Theological Orations*, translated with an introduction and notes by Stephen Reynold, Estate of Stephen Reynolds 2011, p. 47.)

¹⁰ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and time: The primitive Christian conception of time and history*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 41962, p. 39-42.

¹¹ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and time...*, p. 49.

¹² Mihail Neamțu, "Teologie, metafizică și politică în secolul al IV-lea: Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa versus Eunomie al Cyzicului", introductory study to the vol. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Împotriva lui Eunomie I (Contra Eunomium I)*,

Even great theologians like Origen and Evagrius Ponticus, under this cultural influence, were inclined to accept a cosmological model and a perspective on temporality alien to the divine revelation. The distinction between an eternal pre-temporal framework in which the spiritual beings pre-existed and a cyclical, enslaving, temporal framework, in which they fell out of negligence (by committing a *hybris*), sliding into materiality and finitude, was going to mark Christian theological thinking for centuries, depriving it of the sap and clarity of a presence and imminent arrival of God's Kingdom (synonymous with the transfiguration of the present time by the communion with God and with one's fellows).

It is the merit of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons for redrawing the boundaries of a Christian understanding of temporality. He did so by accentuating the redeeming character of time as temporal "topos" of man's restoration in Christ, the true God and true man. The Fathers of Nicaea followed the same line of reasoning, then Saint Athanasius the Great, the Father of Orthodoxy (defender of the Divinity of the embodied Logos), and the Cappadocian Fathers, who clarified the distinction between the limited, generative character of the being and the unfathomable, yet revealing, infinity of the Tri-Hypostatic Divinity.

Far from being a fruit of abstract thinking, the patristic vision about time is one guided by the Tradition of the Church and outlined out of pastoral necessities and practical reasons. In his sermons to *Hexaemeron*, Saint Basil the Great rejects the co-eternity of the cosmos with God, a conception supported by the philosophy of Antiquity, as we have seen, but also by some Christian heresies and cosmological models, which insisted on God's feature as Creator since eternity. In this polemic, the great Cappadocian theologian brings into focus several conceptions about temporality, some applicable to the divinity, others to the creation, indicating temporal divisions appropriate to the things that exist, as an adequate framework for their development. First, he insists on God's attribute as Creator, an attribute conferring Him a minimal "pre-existence" to the creatures, the creation being an act of will on His part, not an emanation of the Divine Being. About God's existence prior to creation, as Saint Basil the Great shows, we cannot affirm anything, as it goes beyond the power of our "age" as creatures; all we can do is express the conviction that "an order of things existed of which our mind can [only *our note*] form an idea."¹³

At the same time, the creation seen in time was preceded by a temporal reality unknown to man, "eternal and infinite," in which the spiritual beings, the angels, were created:

The birth of the world was preceded by a condition of things suitable for the exercise of supernatural powers, outstripping the limits of time, eternal, and infinite. The Creator and Demiurge of the universe perfected His works in it, spiritual light for the happiness of all who love the Lord, intellectual and invisible natures, all the orderly arrangement of pure intelligences who are beyond the reach of our mind and of whom we cannot even discover the names. They fill the essence of this invisible world, as Paul teaches us (Col. 1, 16).¹⁴

"At the end," "a new world" was added to this creation, "both a school and training place where the souls of men should be taught and a home for beings destined to be born and

bilingual edition, translation and notes by Ovidiu Sferlea, edition curated by Adrian Muraru, Polirom, 2010, p. 52.

¹³ *Homily I, 5*, in Schaff, Philip (ed.), *Basil: Letters and Select Works*, in col. "The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Second Series", vol. 8, translated with notes by Rev. Blomfield Jackson, M.A. T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1997, p. 217.

¹⁴ *Homily I, 5*, p. 217-218.

to die. Thus, was created, of a nature analogous to that of this world and the animals and plants which live thereon, the succession of time, for ever pressing on and passing away and never stopping in its course.”¹⁵

Saint Basil insists on the pedagogical character of human time, in which the spiritual growth of the creatures, being largely abandoned through sin, impresses the flow of growth, maturity, and death of the biological creatures in the universe. The “natural” state of growth and decomposition, specific of the world seen after the separation of man from God, is, however, a temporary and finite one, as a supplementary certitude that the visible existence, too, will undergo, after death, a transfiguration in harmony with God’s will and providence. The provisional character of the visible existence excludes, all the more, the claim of some that it would be simultaneous to the divine Principle:

*Therefore, if he [Moses n.n.] makes the world appear in the beginning, it is not a proof that its birth has preceded that of all other things that were made. He only wishes to tell us that, after the invisible and intellectual world, the visible world, the world of the senses, began to exist.*¹⁶

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus admits, in his turn, that time has a preparatory character. The limits of time have an instructive character and revitalize in people the desire of eternity and of “permanent” things. All the more in the Church, the sanctifying topos and kairos, time is shaken and suffers a transfiguration unfathomable to the human mind, related to the temporal framework submitted to transience and ephemerality. The Church, Christ’s Body extended in his humanity, experiences an intangible time, an Eucharistic time, living with restoring and anamnestic intensity all the blessed moments of the history of salvation. This is accomplished through Christ’s presence in the Holy Spirit descended from the Father, Who fills to the full human time, outpouring the heavenly overflow in the souls thirsting for the absolute. The old Adam submitted to death has passed, the New [Adam], Christ, is and will come.

The present time finds its plenitude on the eighth day, the day of God’s Kingdom. It erupts in our daily life even since this life when the Christian believer lives in time, yet in an eschatological manner oriented after the existence of God’s Kingdom. The eighth day has as equivalent in the ecclesial vocabulary those points by which the eschaton penetrates the present time and remakes, even since this life, in a mystical manner, the connection with the eternity of divine communion.

The Cappadocian Fathers reinterpreted the restoration that Origen was speaking about in scriptural terms, identifying it with the eighth day, when those disturbed through sin would resume their perpetual stability-movement to God by recapitulating all the people in Christ. “The Day of the Lord”, “the nightless Day”, “the day with no succession”, or “the endless day” will have neither night, nor end, being independent of the main characteristics of the rotation of the celestial bodies, the graceful light of the divine knowledge illumining man and every being by an overflow of endless life.

CONCLUSION

Far from being a corruption of the linear vision of time as it is presented by the divine Revelation written in the *Holy Scriptures*, the Christian vision of the Holy Fathers presents several necessary mentions in the cultural and religious context of the Hellenistic world of Antiquity. Faced with heretical Christian doctrines, the Church came with the edifying answer, reinterpreting the terminology of the philosophy of Greek Antiquity in

¹⁵ *Homily I, 5, p. 218.*

¹⁶ *Homily I, 5, p. 218.*

conformity with the revealed truth. In brief, the immeasurable distance between the uncreated Trinitarian God and the created spiritual and material universe supposes not just a qualitative ontological difference, but also a radical difference between the divine and human ways of thinking, the latter being powerless to discern the features of the divine being.

From a human perspective, one can speak about an infinite time or about the eternity as a mantle of the divine existence, as the authors of the *Scripture* express themselves, but, more adequately, man ought to keep silent regarding the divine.

Similarly, about the created spiritual beings, the angels, one can emit the opinion that they exist in an immense time, of the order of the aeons (“aeon”, αἰών), which extends beyond the power of comprehension of the human mind, which does not go against spiritual progress. Although it has a beginning through creation, it has no end in the direction of the communion with God.

Man, finally, is determined by some spatial-temporal coordinates that are provisional for him in their present form, as a consequence of his drifting away from the sense, by his drifting away from God. However, Christ, the embodied Son of God, reconnected man to the divine communion, offering as a gift to each human being an unshakeable stability in this spiritual ascent.¹⁷ The daily time is, therefore, a moment of meditation offered to man in order to formulate a decisive answer to his relation with God (the Way of entering the eternal Life) or, as the Romanian theologian Father Dumitru Stăniloae states: time is the distance between God’s calling and man’s answer.¹⁸

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¹⁷ Jerom. Basil Lourié, “Temporality and a Metric for Created Natures in Gregory of Nyssa. Toward two recent monographs on his concept of time”, in *Scrinium*, 12 (2016), p. 351: “Διάστημαῖς is precisely this distance. In the «distance spaces» on the intelligible creatures it defines their infinite distance that they have to overcome for reaching the deification.”

¹⁸ Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Timp și veșnicie*, SLG Press Convent of the Incarnation Fairacress, Oxford, 1971, p. 8.

- Stephen Reynold, Estate of Stephen Reynolds 2011.
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