

Chapter Five

The Christian Understanding of Time and Eternity

Behind the problem of history stands the much more fundamental question of the meaning of time. Never yet in the history of human thought has the problem of time stood out so clearly as at the present day. Since Bergson's sensational work *Time and Freewill*,¹ the stirring effect of which went far beyond specialist philosophical circles, the puzzle as to the meaning of time has not ceased to command discussion. As a result of George Simmel's *The Problem of Historical Time*,² but above all through the pioneering work of Heidegger's *Being and Time*,³ it began to compel attention as one of the main philosophical concerns of our day. Einstein revolutionized the basis of physics by a new understanding of time. Theology turned to this problem relatively late⁴ and only in most recent times has it shown itself to be a key to the understanding of the New Testament message as a whole.⁵

We cannot avoid the question: What contribution has the New Testament and Christian faith to make to the understanding of time, a problem so far the exclusive concern of philosophy? Is there such a thing as a specifically Christian understanding of time and, if so, how is it related to the original views which contemporary philosophy has worked out on this theme? We can hardly accept as sound the opinion of Cullmann,⁶ who has done so much to elucidate the New Testament idea of time, when he says that in order to grasp the New Testament or primitive Christian view of time we must think as unphilosophically as possible. Certainly the Christian understanding of time is different from that of the philosophers; but we understand its otherness

rightly only when we do not ignore the work of contemporary philosophy but remain, on the contrary, attuned to it and in reaction to it. Otherwise it might happen only too easily – as the example of Cullmann shows – that in thinking to be faithful to the New Testament view of time we speak not only as unphilosophically as possible, but even at times simply falsely. And the aim of modern philosophy since Bergson has been precisely to overcome the traditional notion of time which has its roots in Plato.

The linear conception of time which Cullmann rightly stresses is in fact not, as he supposes, a special feature of the New Testament but is what everyone means when he says time. We term it, in distinction to any sort of philosophical interpretation of time, the *primal experience of the time-factor*. Everyone knows that time passes away. Everyone knows that the moment which was just now and is now gone never more returns. What men of all times and countries have been conscious of as the painful experience of time is the unceasing flow of the time stream, transience, the irreversibility and inexorability of this movement from the “not yet” to the “now” and onwards to the “no longer”. Precisely this feature, the character of the one-way street, this time-form which is different from space by the fact of its linearity and irreversibility, is “the deepest source of the world’s sorrow”;⁷ Karl Heim rightly says. The flow of time is inseparably bound up with transience, mortality, the not lingering, the not being able to return to what has once been, and just that constitutes the linearity of time. Space is open to us in every dimension; we can move, whether in thought, whether in reality, from any one point to any other, and we can as often as we wish repeat this movement. The time stream does not permit us this freedom; it carries us powerfully along with itself from the “not yet” to the “no longer”; there is no turning back and no abiding. This is everyone’s experience of time; this naïve straight-line conception is assuredly not a peculiarity of the New Testament⁸ but is the time experience of “everyman”.

Time as experienced is, however, different from time as thought, time as it appears to reflection and exact knowledge,

and indeed because in reflection this linear aspect becomes still more thoroughgoing. In spite of the fact that time flies, there is for living experience such a thing as a present, a “now”. But reflection makes of the experienced present a mere *punctum mathematicum*, the passing moment incapable of extension, where the “not yet” becomes the “no longer”. Measured time is of this kind. Although “for the happy man no hour strikes”, the thinker and the mathematician can accord to the present not even the slightest extension. This fact was already noted by the first man who pondered on the nature of time – Augustine:⁹ the present is without extension. The ideas which he felt to be implied in this discovery – viz. that time is “nothing”, since we have “not yet” (the future), have “no longer” (the past), and the present is a point without extension – need not yet occupy our attention.

Bergson starts from this consideration that for the thinker, and especially for the measured time of the physicist, time is but a point and sets in contrast to this *philosopher's time*, *time as experienced*,¹⁰ the time which everyone is aware of, where the present, although fleeting, is yet not simply without extension. That is the time of every man who on the one hand feels transience, the sweeping onwards of the time stream, to express his bitterest sorrow, but who on the other hand lives out the present, however fleeting it may be. Every man has indeed the linear, but not the radically linear, experience of time. In spite of all conscious reflection, there is such a thing as *durée réelle* (Bergson). Lived time is not a radically linear experience where point is added to point, each only touching the other; in time as lived there is a certain intermingling of elements, a mixture of the past and the present.

Thus, for example, the life of the organism shows an intermingling of past and present. The seed which was is present in the tree which is, the tree is in some way identical with the seed, the plant with the shoot. The organism represents a suspension, although only partial and fragmentary, of the time stream; it grows old, it has *durée réelle*. The same applies still more to human existence. I am what I am not only as

what I am at this precise moment but also as a result of what I was – just like the living organism; but in distinction to it, I am also always my past in virtue of my memory. Memory is the presence of the past – it too brings about an overcoming of the time stream, although but partial and fragmentary, a partial suspension of pure linearity and transience. Memory produces permanence in transience.

Here the work of Heidegger begins, his interpretation of human existence as “being in time”. He too does not attempt to formulate a philosophy of time but simply to bring into conscious reflection what every man experiences as time. He certainly experiences time as transience; but he also experiences it as a certain unity of past and future in the present. I am never without my past and I am never without my future. Even today I am he who I once was, I am my own history; it belongs to me; without it, without the knowledge of my past and the persistence of my past in me, I am not a man; the presence and the responsibility for my past gives to my being its human character. Even so is it in regard to the future. Only as one who anticipates his future in expectation and aim can I be human; for only in reference to my future do I experience my freedom. Just as I am my past I am also my future. What I plan, am anxious about, fear or hope, belongs to my present. The fact that my past belongs to me I experience particularly in the sense of guilt; the more man feels responsibility for his past, i. e. bears his guilt, the more is he a human being. The more a man penetrates into his future, in planning or expectation, in fear or hope, the more does he experience his specifically human existence.

Thus there is in fact *durée réelle* in the onward-sweeping stream of time. But that this is only a very relative, fragmentary and all too piecemeal phenomenon is clear from the fact that I – everyman – know that my being is a being “orientated towards death” (Heidegger). Here are no philosophical theories of time but in fact what everyman experiences as his temporality and knows in experience. He does not *think* these things *about* time, he is *implicated in*

time which has this character; it is his destiny, his reality, an extraordinary hovering between persistence and annihilation, between a holding of the present and a constant losing of the present.

We must distinguish between this universal awareness of time and the way in which man in reflection reacts to it, the way in which his consciousness of time colours his total world-view. The experience of time is common to all; differences arise in regard to the *interpretation of this experience*. First of all, we must speak of the mythological view of time. The man of the myth-religions, i. e. man who understands his being from the point of view of nature, sees his life as part and parcel of nature, and thus regards it as something integral to the ever-revolving course of natural processes. What he experiences as linear time he interprets as merely a part of the unending revolutions of nature – the process which ever turns upon itself and has neither beginning nor ending. The conception of time as non-linear, as circular, is therefore distinct from the *experience* of time – everyman's experience: it is rather a specific *interpretation* of time, an interpretation which makes the time experience part of an eternal process. The individual man is indeed mortal and transient. But the forces manifested in the revolving course of nature's life, like the latter itself, are eternal, unchanging, abiding, immortal. Through his integration in the order of nature mortal man somehow shares in the eternity of nature.

To be distinguished from this mythological interpretation is the philosophical one which in India and Greece slowly struggles free from the former. The philosopher deals with the problem of time and transience. He does so either by means of an ontology proceeding from the object or by means of a system of ideas springing from the subject. Briefly, the sequence of ideas characteristic of ontology is the following: the transient, hence the temporal, is not that which truly is since it constantly passes into non-being. Time, linear time, the time stream, represents an unceasing movement towards non-being. That which truly is, is the timeless: that which has no share in this movement from the "not yet" to the "no longer".

The second form in which philosophy seeks to overcome temporality is that which arises from reflection on the truth. The truth which I think is timeless. The true has no relation to the temporal. What is true, is true from all eternity, unaffected by time. So also are the ideas by which I think the truth timeless. Not only that. The subject too, the “I”, the thinking consciousness, which thinks the truth, shares in timeless eternity through that very process. Hence the true “I” is the timeless eternal “I”, identical with the truth, while the mortal “I”, imprisoned within the time stream, is not the true self. I am therefore composed of two elements, the eternal spiritual “I”, identical with eternal truth, and the temporal, transient “I”.

This theory, whether in its objective ontological or in its subjective form as an interpretation of knowledge, has been reproduced again and again in various forms since its first appearance in the Vedanta and the philosophy of Parmenides and Plato, and forms – especially as expressed in late Neoplatonism – an integral part of the Western history of ideas. It is *this* philosophy of timelessness which Cullmann has in mind when he sets in contrast to each other New Testament and philosophical thought. But this type of thought should not be confused with the cyclical thinking proper to mythology, although the latter – even in Plato – is constantly reflected in it. Fundamentally the philosophy of timelessness and mythological thinking in terms of cycles are radically distinct.

Into this world where the alternative is that between the cyclical thought of mythology and the idea of timelessness the Christian faith intervenes. It declares that the span of world-time runs from the beginning of creation to the completion of redemption. For it, world-time is a straight line which runs from a beginning to an end that is not identical with the beginning. But the decisive thing is not this linearity – which it has in common with Judaism. The decisive thing is rather that in the midst of time eternity has revealed itself, that He who is above and beyond all time – Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever – has entered into time, has

become clothed with temporality,¹¹ in an event which differs from all other events by the fact that it is unconditionally once-for-all. The Christian faith is founded upon the uniqueness of this event which is incomparable with all other events.¹² On that basis, and no other, everything is to be understood, both time and eternity and the relation of time and eternity. Temporality, existence in time, takes on a new character through its relationship to this event, Jesus Christ, the *eph hapax* of history, the once-for-all quality of His Cross and Resurrection, and it is thus newly fashioned, as we shall soon see, in a paradoxical manner that is unintelligible to thinking guided by reason alone. We must consider in detail the aspects of this new orientation. All three dimensions of temporality, of being in time, are reorientated by faith:

1. *My Past.* – The man who understands himself anew through faith in Christ takes full responsibility for his past. He does not see it lying behind him like the skin which the snake has shed; he knows himself to be identical with it. He is in fact not only in full solidarity with his individual past but also with the past of humanity. He knows himself to be identical with Adam, created by God and fallen from God. He realizes his oneness with humanity, divinely created and estranged from its divine origin. He knows that in his present he is corrupted by the sin and guilt of humanity. He knows, however, that this guilt is effaced and forgiven through the Cross of Christ and that he is no longer alienated from God by sin. The barrier, sin, has been overcome by the Cross of Christ, the broken relationship with God is restored. Further, he recognizes in Jesus Christ that which precedes his past, his existence in God's election before all world-time.¹³ As one who is elected from all eternity in Jesus Christ, he is exalted into the eternity of God and raised beyond the stream of time. His being has its deepest root in the eternity of God preceding all time and all creation; "Thine eyes saw all my days when as yet none of them was",¹⁴ they saw me as the one destined to eternal life in Jesus Christ.

But the believer enjoys all this through his exclusive relationship to what has happened in history, the uniqueness

of Jesus Christ, the Crucified and the Risen. He has it, not as a result of any gnostic vision but as the fruit of penitence, by the fact that he is himself gathered into the death of Jesus Christ, shares now in what happened then, and because his self-security, his self-praise are destroyed by that historical event, because the divine Word of Grace takes the place of human self-confidence. So remarkably and variously interwoven are his past and present in this event which gives him an utterly new orientation towards his past.

2. *My Future.* – Equally fundamental is the change brought about in regard to the dimension of the future. Of course my being does not cease to be a being unto death. The seriousness of this view is not diminished but, on the contrary – we deal with the point in more detail in Chapter Eleven – increased by the thought that death is not simply fate, it is rather the ordinance of God as a punishment for sin. Being unto death is being unto the judgment of death. But this negative aspect is not the final and decisive thing: that is rather the turning towards the positive through the gift of Christ, towards the fact that in Christ my being unto death has become a being unto life eternal. He who through the awareness of sin is buried with Christ in His death is also through the awareness of forgiveness risen with Him.¹⁵ The Crucified is no other than the Risen One and communion with Him is communion with His risen life. Thus death is not the terminus, the last stop, it is only a point of transition to eternity. Anxiety and sorrow, which determine the character of temporality from the standpoint of the future, have become the triumphant certainty of eternal life and of participation in the Kingdom of God. The fear of death has been replaced by hope, by secure, confident and firmly based hope, secure and firm through the certainty that God is for me and not against me, the certainty that nothing, not even death, can separate me from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ.¹⁶ To move into the future means now to wait for the future coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. *My Present.* – If even in the natural human experience of time, the temporality of everyman, the present is the decisive

thing, because it alone has full reality – the past is no longer, the future is not yet, only the present belongs to me – that is still more true of the new life, of life in Christ. The *durée réelle*, which the experience of time distinguishes from the *punctum mathematicum* of conscious thought, is of course, as we saw, a very precarious reality, a hovering between being and non-being, an almost illusory stay and pause in the ever-sweeping movement of the time stream. It is burdened with the load of the guilty past and overshadowed by the anxious expectation of the future and by fear of death. But as a result of the fact that this burden of guilt, this carefulness and fear of death, are removed by faith in Christ, the present now becomes a living reality. Hence it is clear that *durée réelle*, the real present, is God's own mode of being. For God alone transcends the time stream; He alone embraces the span of past and future, He alone is unchanging from all eternity. The present of God does not crumble away like the temporal present, it alone does not hover between being and non-being. We share in this plenitude of the divine present by the gift of the Holy Ghost, through whom Christ is present with us. The life of the Christian, in its difference from that of everyman, is life in the Holy Ghost, life in the radiant present of God. It is – if only in a borrowed and provisional form – in very truth eternal life. The life of the believer is in fact eschatological, a manner of life according to ultimate reality. The witness of the New Testament is unequivocal that the Holy Ghost is the pledge and first-fruits, the anticipation or first instalment of the eternal life which is to come.

Only provisionally, we said: for we still live in this body of death,¹⁷ still being unto death is a bitter reality. But this natural reality, this temporality of everyman, is, as it were, covered by another reality, that of life in Christ, just as a second shot in a film passes over a first and is unrolled. It remains valid that inasmuch as we are Christians “we have eternal life”,¹⁸ that “we live, although we die”.¹⁹ But this eternal life is still enwrapped in the temporal experience common to everyman; hence it is true to say with regard to it: “Ye are dead and your life is hidden with Christ in God”.²⁰

One final and extremely important thing must be said. The decisive manifestation of Christian living as life in the Holy Ghost is the reality of *agapé*, of self-giving love. That is the very life of God Himself. God *is* love.²¹ And what Christ operates through faith is just this, that the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts, that man through faith is gathered into the love of God as the reality of his new life. Thus love is greater²² than faith and hope because it is God Himself. “Whosoever abideth in love, abideth in God and God in Him.”²³ Love is the sensitivity of the “I” for the “Thou”. This means essentially: for the divine “Thou” which has disclosed itself to me in the Christian revelation. In so far as this happens, the co-relative thing also happens necessarily – that my “I” is sensitive to the human “thou”. Union with God in Christ expresses itself and works itself out inevitably in communion with my fellow-man. This very reality is what we mean by the present. It is the merit of Eberhard Grisebachs in his work which bears the title *The Present* to have insisted tirelessly upon this sequence of ideas, that only the man who loves enjoys the full reality of the present, because he alone is present with his fellow-man, and the latter with him. Everyman cannot truly love and has no real present because his present, as we have just said, is loaded with the burden of the past and shadowed by anxiety and care about the future. He can never therefore be truly present with his neighbour since he is a prisoner of himself and is ever preoccupied with himself. He never enjoys true fellowship with his neighbour, for he is separated from him by the weight of his own past and anxiety about his future. But because Christ removes from me the load of the past and my anxiety about the future I can be fully present with my neighbour and he with me.

Love is thus the necessary fruit and also the infallible criterion of faith.²⁴ In love the reality of the Holy Ghost is manifested in me, Christ Himself, God Himself, is present with me. In love alone does man attain the fullness of his true life; for he is made for love just as he was made through love. Love is thus the most distinctive gift of the Spirit;²⁵ it

is shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Ghost²⁶ so soon as it has become true that we no longer seek our lives in ourselves but receive them as the gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

4. Such, according to the witness of the New Testament, and it is confirmed by the experience of true believers in all ages, appears to be the transformation of life wrought in man through faith in that which has happened once for all in time. But this actual change in temporal existence is accompanied by a new understanding of time, and indeed such an understanding as is fundamentally different from all others and utterly unintelligible, completely paradoxical, to all those to whom the experience of faith is alien (p. 48). This new understanding of time is implicit in the life of the believer wherein time and eternity are fused. To formulate it as such is a matter for reflection and theology, not for faith itself. We have now to expound this new interpretation which is the secret of the believer but which concerns time as world-time.

(a) Time has a beginning, it was created simultaneously with the world. God Himself is not in time, He stands above time in the same sense and in the same way as He stands above the world. Augustine was the first to formulate this insight of faith. He anticipates too the view of the modern physicist:²⁷ there is time only where there is a measurement of time, only where there are clocks, physical bodies by whose changes time can be measured. Time no more than the physical world is the product of the fall. God's relation to time is the same as His relation to the physical world. Thus it is false to assert in the Biblical view that time is uncreated, existing before all creation.²⁸ Before all creation there existed nothing but the eternal God who is Lord of time and the Giver of time. That time has a beginning is a statement which modern physics does not at all contradict but is, on the contrary, inclined to assent to (cf. Appendix, pp. 57 f.).

(b) Just as time has a beginning so also will it have an end. It will be dissolved, in the fullness of time, in eternity. The representation

of eternity as an endlessly long stretch of time which has been put forth recently in all seriousness in the name of New Testament exegesis is absurd.²⁹ For in that case the difference between God's mode of existence and that of His creatures would be merely quantitative, and the qualitative difference between time and eternity would be expressly denied.³⁰ If that were so God would not really be Lord of time and it would not be true that a thousand years in His sight are but as yesterday,³¹ that for Him the future is just as much present as the past. The well-justified reaction against the Platonic idea that eternity is timelessness must not lead us into the opposite error of supposing that the eternal is to be thought of as distinguished from the temporal merely by the endlessness of its time elements. What the real Biblical view of eternity is must now be discussed.

(c) Only through the clear delimitation of time as having a beginning and an end does time really become a straight line and is the cyclical conception proper to myth religion dissolved. Only so does time become historical time. The formula "the end of time equals the beginning of time"³² must be recognized as the quintessence of cyclical myth-thinking. The first Adam and the second Adam are clearly kept apart in the witness of faith;³³ otherwise, with the completion of redemption, the fall would be again possible and everything could begin again in an endless circle.

(d) But beginning and end are held together by God's eternal plan, and God manifests His Lordship over time just by the fact that from the beginning He aims at the end. For this reason there is history not only of humanity but of the cosmos. All is moving towards an ultimate goal. Everything has its place within this world-history. The goal and the meaning of this world-history towards which all is orientated is eternal life in the communion of God and creature. This insight into the essential character of time is possible only through the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, in whom my life gains new foundations, is the Word that was in the beginning, in whom and through whom and unto whom all things were created.³⁴