

Course: Understanding the Profane and the Sacred

To: Fr. Louis Ha

Unit 3: Sacred Time

Assignment: May 16, 2024

### ***Some Scattered Questions about Time***

I am fascinated by images that are out of this world, ranging from “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” and the Earthrise to swirling galaxies, the miraculous birth of stars and monstrous black holes brought before us by the Hubble and James Webb telescopes.

I believe in eternity, and that time as we know it, our existence on earth, even geological time scale and evolutionary history ... is but a twinkle. As my background is not in science, I don't often spend time wondering about how the cosmos was born, or how time and space are relative. But I have been interested in mythologies, how early civilizations made sense of, and told stories about the meaning and trajectory of life.

The first book of the Judeo-Christian Bible is properly called the book of Genesis. Traditionally the authorship of the first five books (the Pentateuch) was attributed to Moses who lived around 1400 BC. Not a few scholars dated the composition to about 500 BC, when king Cyrus of Persia allowed the Israelites to return home from exile in Babylon. A special covenantal relationship with Yahweh, the God of their forefathers, as well as the codification of laws that bind them as a chosen, righteous people were key to the restoration of Jewish national and religious identity. Toward the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholarly hypothesis that the Bible is a composite of four streams of traditions, namely, Yahwistic (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomistic (D) and Priestly (P) gained ascendancy, though pinpointing the confluence, authorship and authority remains elusive. Today some scholars, drawing on the fields of historical linguistics, textual criticism, and cultural history, posit the Hebrew Bible as an organic text with materials that span from the early Iron Age to the Greek age.

Another beginning that we as Christians reckon with is the Gospel according to John, whose very first line asserted “In the beginning was the Word.” I learned from earlier materials for this course how significant the editorial intervention was, both in the Prologue’s adaptation of earlier songs, and in identifying the Word with one historical person --

Indeed, from his fullness we have, all of us, received –  
one gift replacing another,  
for the Law was given through Moses,  
grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ. (John 1: 16-17)

In the person of Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh (1: 14). God, who is not bound by time or any limits, has become incarnate and entered human history. The almighty God is no longer transcendent only (akin to the distant mythological gods that Eliade cited in his cross-cultural study of religions). God became one of us, with a checkered genealogy, and identifiable with a people and culture. But from early on Jesus' followers and the evangelists expanded the notion of the chosen people beyond the Hebrews.

Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. (Matthew 28: 19-20)

Paul extended it even further, attributing to divine intention "that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God." (Romans 8: 21) Thus all are called to be the children of God, despite our human tendency to exclude. This text, written almost 2000 years ago, acquires new meanings and calls for urgent Christian response in light of today's grave need for ecological conversion.

The point I wish to make is that for this believer, I have my work cut out for me to sift through the sediments of foundational texts of my faith, brush against the grain (of hearsay and childish make-believe), and relate faith to the challenges we face here and now, without venturing into space-time continuum.

That said, I would have loved to go back in time to the first decades A.D. and ask Jesus some questions. Not the macro questions that Job posed to God, but smaller ones that I can feel and touch, that I do wrestle with now and then.

I remember the night of December 30, 1999, just before the turn of the millennium, I was traveling east on a train from Chicago that took me across vast rural areas. Outside the window there were occasional dim lights, but for the most part the train and I were hurtling through darkness. I thought of how life and human history seem at times to be a journey through opacity, unsure of what lies ahead, and the past being less reassuring. I was younger then and perhaps less optimistic. I thought of how life seems pitted against the powerless. Who knows what, and who controls what?

As I write now, we have entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a time bustling with technological innovations, genetic engineering, big data, artificial intelligence ..., yet we may feel less secure, as though we see through a glass darkly. Or perhaps we are being seen? For total technology is a means of totalitarian control. The conscious or unconscious surrendering of personal autonomy and data, in exchange for convenience, social identity and even the desire to belong -- what happens to our inherent human dignity and integrity?

Lies and propaganda have always existed. But today one of the greatest threats we face is about misinformation. History is the recording and distillation of what is past. Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it. Yet our access to information is tinkered by

knowledge and tools designed to change the configuration of the human mind. Does our education/ upbringing adequately equip us to tell what is real and unreal? And what is true from false? Is our own apathy at fault? Is humankind ripe for manipulation?

For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens. (Ephesians 6:12)

I have been impressed by an image that Walter Benjamin evoked in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*<sup>1</sup>:

A Klee painting named '[Angelus Novus](#)' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (IX)

The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights currently monitors 110 armed conflicts worldwide.<sup>2</sup> I would like to ask Jesus: All the senseless wars, the greed and ignorance that cause so much suffering to ourselves, to one another, and to our fellow creatures? Does it matter? Do we ever stand a chance?

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During that train ride facing the New millennium, I also thought of my ancestors, all the individuals known and unknown to me, who lived, who strove, and who survived so I had the chance to be born, to live. I could not help but be grateful....

So I draw inspiration now from another segment of Benjamin's *Theses*:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. *For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.* (XVIII B, my emphasis)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://geneva-academy.ch/galleries/today-s-armed-conflicts>

In the chapter "Sacred Time and Myths," Eliade delineates sacred time as appearing circular, "reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated by means of rites."<sup>3</sup> What if sacred time is not reversible? In a homily by Fr. Giampietro, I heard the distinction between *kairos* (the Greek word for the right and critical moment) and *chronos* (temporal time). What if sacred time is *kairos* (through which the messiah might enter) and interrupts the temporal drip of time? What would it mean for us to seize the opportune and decisive moment?

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When I began this assignment, I had thought of asking Jesus: Rabbuni, what must I do to inherit eternal life? (Mark 10) Or after countless trying and still falling short: I have labored in vain .... Why have you abandoned me?

Twenty five years after my train ride, the world seems crazier, the times more dangerous. But I am more optimistic, for I have come to experience that "grace and truth" that come through Jesus Christ. (John 1: 17)

Yahweh, my heart is not haughty,  
I do not set my sights too high.  
I have taken no part in great affairs,  
in wonders beyond my scope.  
No, I hold myself in quiet and silence,  
like a little child in its mother's arms,  
like a little child, so I keep myself. (Psalm 131: 1-2)

Now if I had the chance, I would ask for a more intimate experience, perhaps something like --

I was beside the master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere on his earth, delighting to be with the children of men.  
(Proverbs 8: 30-31)

The messianic need not be cataclysmic or heroic. I would also settle for contemplating with Christ the time it takes for a seed to grow into a tree, the many miracles and chances that are involved; or the sacred moment when a cereal grain dies, and the choice that sacrifice entails: "unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest." (John 12: 24)

And finally, "for dust you are and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:19). I do not have time here to go into Elizabeth Johnson's brilliant essay, "An Earthy Christology: 'For God so loved the cosmos.'" Having read the piece where she beautifully reveals the layers of "the Word became

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<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*. New York: (A Harvest Book) Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., p.70.

flesh" (*sarx*), I think it would be an honor to be part of that cosmic dust and join in Christ's joyful co-creating!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See the remarkable essay "An Earthy Christology: 'For God so loved the cosmos'" by Elizabeth Johnson published in AMERICA magazine, April 13, 2009. (<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/693/article/earthy-christology>)