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Time as Gift: God’s Journey

Things, events, that occupy space yet come to an end when someone dies may make us stop in wonder – and yet one thing, or an infinite number of things, dies with every man’s or woman’s death, unless the universe itself has a memory, as theosophists have suggested.


6.1 Introduction

Augustine, meditating in his *Confessions*, maintains that the passage of time is as filled with mystery as is God. Time speaks and sings and acts, simultaneously present, drifting into the past, and anticipating in its overtones the future melody or words. The past and the future have reality only in the surplus within the present, not in a reified fashion on their own. God, in an analogous way, is eternal simultaneity, always present, yet God knows and loves all times. When Aquinas studies God’s eternity, he notes that since it is ‘outside time’ and ‘indivisible,’ it can coexist with any other point in the temporal order. ‘The divine intellect, therefore, sees in the whole of its eternity, as being present to it, whatever takes place through the whole course of time.’

This parallel poses the *theological* question of this chapter: How are God and time co-implicated? What is it about time that evokes a notion of God? What is it about God that can include a divine relationship to time?

Religion and the sciences have always been in dialogue about time. Classical medieval philosophy and theology, while criticizing popular images of mythic origins, the supernatural and the soul conversed about time with ancient natural philosophy, science, and medicine.
The new sciences of the early modern period with their aggressive programs of experimentation and mathematical analysis challenged the religious stories and theologies as mythic or ideologically oppressive, and developed their own stories and images to interpret humanity and the larger universe. Some religious traditions responded with their own hyper-rationalized theologies, such as Deism. Others retreated into various forms of textual literalism, private devotion, domestic morality, or ritual archaism; or they camouflaged themselves in the reigning culture of science by forms of relativism in textual hermeneutics, morality, and ecclesiastical restructuring. What must continue, in between the extremes, is a constructive, non-defensive dialogue about time with the data and rhetoric of the sciences.

In earlier chapters, we studied how time is inscribed empirically in the emergent, unrolling narrative of the universe (chapter 2). We have also examined how time appears in chaotic, self-organizing systems (chapter 3); what the political organization of time is for macro-evolutionary biology (chapter 4); and the interior workings of empirical memory in neuroscience (chapter 5). These studies have been linked through an analysis of the heuristic and truth-telling nature of metaphors (chapter 1). By offering parallel accounts of how metaphors for time work in the various sciences and Christianity, we have been able to see some similarities and differences. The multiple meanings that strike even readers in poetry or religion may evoke confusion or wonder; but when metaphors are used in science, they provoke questions about their status. Are they mere decoration? Are they what scientists use to communicate their results to the less initiated? How does the surplus of meaning in science work? Does the excess lead beyond itself, referring to an Ultimate Transcendence? Can one discriminate between the metaphors of excess that guide the Holocaust or other ‘terrors of history’ and those that awaken ecstatic love or altruistic generosity? Does the work of scientists require judgments about its metaphors that are similar to the claims and judgments that must be made about religious metaphors?

This chapter explores the ways in which God can be understood to interact with the empirical patterns of the universe. In systematic or constructive theology, it would be labeled a study in ‘continuous creation’ – the belief that God’s action in or upon the universe did not cease with creation, but that God forever tends intimately to all created history. As Aquinas states: ‘No thing can remain in being if divine operation cease.’ At the heart of all that is perdures a cooperative, divine-creational relationality. God continues to be an ‘actor’ in