We were on a bus, travelling to a meeting about European sacred natural sites being held by the IUCN in Sami territory in Finland. Seated beside me was Thymio Papayannis, the co-founder of WWF Greece who is also closely involved with nature conservation with the Orthodox monastic communities on Mount Athos. The two of us were discussing the physicists’ notion of “deep time” and its root in the work of the 18th century Edinburgh thinker, James Hutton. In discussing the age of the Earth this Father of Modern Geology had written: “We find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end.” In addition, as somebody who had defended his PhD at Leiden on the circulation of the blood, he sowed the seed of what Lovelock would much later call the Gaia theory. Our planet, the geologist concluded, is “not just a machine but also an organised body as it has a regenerative power.”[1]

Thymio rested his hand on my arm to emphasise his point in seeking to bridge the physical with the metaphysical. “You see,” he said, in a tone that expressed a memorable sense of urgency. “The Holy Spirit is diachronic.”

It was a new one on me and he had to explain. “Dia ‘to cut through’, and chronos, for ‘time’. The Holy Spirit cuts through time.”

When I was invited by Edinburgh University’s School of Divinity to become involved with its work on “Ancestral Time” and climate change I had little idea what it might mean, but it brought back Thymio’s intercession. Merging in my mind were two seemingly very diverse images. One was the definition given by another inspiring Greek thinker, Plato, where he wrote in his cosmological treatise, the Timaeus, and in a context also of discussing prehistoric floods, that time is “a moving image of eternity.”[2] The other came from Sami culture. It was a notion with which I’ve been working as part of an extended meditation in my forthcoming book, Poacher’s Pilgrimage, which explores what I call an ecology of the imagination.

To protect their eyes from snow blindness in the sun, Sami hunters would make goggles by cutting narrow slits in reindeer scapulae bone. Could it be that time, as we experience it, is Plato’s moving image of eternity;
the aperture of which we view as if through narrow slits of reindeer shoulder bone? Blake had said as much with his simile of the doors of perception. Eliot too, in Four Quartets with “human kind cannot bear very much reality.” My Greek friend’s point was that a God’s eye view cuts straight through such constraints of consciousness within the space-time continuum. The Holy Spirit is diachronic. This becomes very interesting when we think about the human condition in theological terms. It implies a widening of the aperture, an extension of the perceptual field, and that, arguably, is theology’s contribution and contextualisation what might otherwise be limited to a scientific and philosophical debate.

As I dug into the semiology and semantics of diachronic, I deepened my understanding that ancient Greek thought is no stranger to such profundities. I particularly latched on to two words used in the New Testament that appear to be poorly understood and often weakly translated in western writing: apocatastasis and anamnesis. The former, as it occurs as a noun in Acts 3:21, is usually translated as “the times of restitution of all things” (KJV), or sometimes as “end times”. Greek-English New Testament dictionaries seem to struggle with the word[3] – caught, one suspects, between limitations in the theology of the western church and a wariness of eastern Christianity and the pre-Christian (Platonic) “paganism” that featured particularly with the Alexandrian Fathers as distinct from those of Antioch. A wider examination of the word’s semantic range includes a sense of “restitution” in Clement of Alexandria’s mystical sense of “one thing in all things,” and building on that (as Vladimir Kharlamov articulates it) “a return from many to one.”[4] Apocatastasis might therefore be understood as a return of the Cosmos to its original (Edenic) status of being, or put another way, a return from the temporal transiency of Plato’s “moving image of eternity” to the fullness of the sphere of eternity itself. Such would be an ultimate version of apocalypse (“to remove the covering”); and that word, properly understood so as not to be limited to “catastrophe”, but to mean “revelation”, which may or may not be catastrophic. Thus the Russian Orthodox thinker Paul Evdokimov surmises: “According to St Anthony, the apocatastasis is not just a doctrine nor the subject of academic inquiry but prayer for the salvation of all.”[5]

Parallel to such exegesis of apocatastasis is the noun anamnesis, specifically where Jesus said at the Last Supper, “This is my body … this is my blood … do this in memory (anamnesis) of me.” But “memory” in our western cognitive sense of the word is a diminished understanding of the original Greek mnesis. To the ancient Greeks, a core sense of mnesis was the restoration of that which already exists in the pleroma, the fullness of eternity. As Archbishop Anastasios of the Orthodox church in Albania puts it in proceedings of the World Council of Churches:[6]

Anamnesis does not simply refer to the past. It makes present the past and the future. Being a return into the centre of our consciousness, of the work of him “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev. 1:8), the eternal and timeless, anamnesis supersedes classical categories of created time.

It was a loss of forgetfulness, a recovery, so to speak, from amnesia (“without memory”). As such, ana meaning “again” combined with mnesis suggests, as some of the NT dictionaries acknowledge, “a restoration to presence,” and that presence. I would suggest, being in George Steiner’s essentialist sense a very “real presence”; the presence of the divine, from which, as Steiner puts it, “All good art and literature begin in immanence. But they do not stop there.”[7]

Such anamnesis can therefore be viewed as an expression of apocatastasis – a revelation of what really is. Thus the Eucharist as the central Christian mystery can be understood at many layers of depth, but one of these might be that the bread (or “body”) represents the material substance of the Cosmos, the wine (or “blood”) its animating spirit. These, brought together as God incarnate. This, in Christian understanding, as the Body of Christ that, consistent with the passage just cited from Revelation, articulates the world through which the Holy Spirit operates both outside of and within history – in a word, diachronically.
If this viewpoint has validity, the Eucharist becomes, amongst other things, a call to the restoration or awakening of cosmic consciousness. As an elderly St Louis sister in Ireland put it to me when she called from her hospital bed, quite literally as I was working on this paragraph – “I feel the Cosmic Christ” (and given such synchronicity, it would not be for me not to mention this in passing). Here, all that ever has been always is. Here, to use another Greek word, is the parousia, or being alongside the essence (par as in parallel to; ousia as essence) – which the same nun described as “an opening to love, peace and light.” Such parousia – often interpreted as the Second Coming of Christ – is the restoration of the ‘is-ness’ or esse (“being”) of reality. It is the invitation to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life (Revelation 2:7).

If these ontological principles have validity, one would expect to see their resonances extend beyond purely Christian theology and spiritual experience. While Christian thought is special for its depth of integration between the human and the divine – the tenderness of its very flesh and blood sense of love that will never let us go – parallel examples abound and are best-known in the eastern faiths. A beautiful example is where the Tao Te Ching states[8]

The myriad creatures all rise together and I watch their return. Returning to one’s roots is known as stillness. This is what is meant by returning to one’s destiny.

In his 1989-90 Gifford lectures at Edinburgh University the cross-cultural Hindu-Christian scholar Raimon Panikkar expressed a similar principle in terms of the Vedic principle of advaita. Panikkarji criticised the prevailing western translation of this word as “non-duality” in the following terms. If my reader is still with me I invite similar consideration what apocatastasis, anamnesis and parousia might be reaching towards:[9]

A-dvaita was usually translated as “nonduality”, because the dialectical mind of the European Indologists who first rendered the word into European languages a couple of centuries ago interpreted the a as a negative particle. In fact the a of the advaita intuition does not connote a dialectical negation, rather, here the a is a primitive prefix poiting to an “absence of duality”. “A-rational” does not necessarily mean “irrational”, but rather indicates something outside the rational order. A-bhaya does not mean “non-fear” but the absence of fear (fearlessness – which is also a name of Śiva). Now, the “absence of duality” is not perceived if we ban love from our knowledge – as any lover knows. Only loving knowledge has this overall vision…. Reason alone cannot reach the advaitic intuition because the adualistic structure of reality opens up only to a loving knowledge or a knowing love for which we lack a proper word since the divorce between gnōsis and eros.... When love is set aside, only the dialectical method is open to us…. Advaita amounts to the overcoming of dualistic dialectics by means of introducing love at the ultimate level of reality.

A similar metaphysic, a sense of eternity’s oneness in the present moment, is expressed in early Celtic texts, for example, The Voyage of Bran first written down in Ireland in the late seventh or early eighth century. The otherworld people, the mythic inhabitants of the world of the ancestors, the ‘green world’ of the ever-young, Tir na nÓg beyond the setting sun proclaim, proclaim in anticipation of Christ what John Carey calls a “baptism of the Gods,” and I medley:[10]

There is an island far away,
Around which sea-horses glisten;
Pillars of white bronze are under it,
Shining through aeons of beauty.

Without sorrow, without grief, without death
Without any sickness, without weakness;
But sweet music striking on the ear,
That is the character of Emain.

We are from the beginning of creation
Without old age, without consummation of earth;
It is a law of pride in this world,
To believe in creatures, to forget God.

A noble salvation will come
From the King who has created us;
A white law will come over seas,
Besides being God, He will be man.

He will delight in the company of every fairy-knoll
He will be the darling of every goodly land;
He will be a stag with horns of silver,
A speckled salmon in a full pool.

Where do these reflections leave me? Recognising that we are more in the realm of Mythos, of poetry, than of Logos, of rational discourse, for we they present a vision of reality in which Cosmos, and with it, being, are a unified whole that cuts across time. Time, as Sorley MacLean’s great poem Hallaig suggests (with its epigram, ‘Time, the deer, is in the wood of Hallaig’), runs through not just space, but ontology, and thereby connects us all intergenerationally. It brings to life ancestral consciousness within each one of us. We are but the cutting edge of the wave of consciousness that is the moving image of ancestral time across the surface of eternity.

And climate change? We are facing a phenomenon of human development, indeed, of the evolution of life on Earth, that is, as the proffered Anthropocene era, nothing less than geological in its magnitude. Climate change confronts us with our destiny. I believe that this is a kairos, a special moment in time, not just for our generation, but for the evolution of consciousness as a whole. Climate change, as Stefan Skrimshire’s edited collection suggests, is an apocalypse not so much in the populist understanding of that term, but in its theological sense of an ontological unveiling. As such, the study of and engagement with climate change is central to the spiritual work of our times. It is both personal and transpersonal. “This is what is meant by returning to one’s destiny.”


[3] I am grateful to the Gaelic thinker, Catherine MacKinven, using the resources of the Highland Theological Seminary in Inverness, for help in researching this word’s semantic range.


[9] Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: the Gifford Lectures*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2010, pp. 216-224. Panikkarji avoids capitalising proper nouns, but does not here explain why. I have standardised his text to avoid distraction from the point being made and have also rejigged the ordering of ellipsed passages for streamlining.


1 Comment

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**Ancestral Time**

**Alastair McIntosh**

If I might add to my own piece, I was just doing some work with Pope Francis' recent apostolic exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium, and was struck by a line on p. 13: "... remembrance makes present to us 'a great cloud of witnesses' ... the believer is essentially 'one who remembers'." I'd be very interested to hear a Jesuit pope unpack that further in the context of anamnesis and apocatastasis.

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**Project News**

Lecture and Book Launch on 1 April, by Michael Northcott

Public Lecture on 6 Mar, 17:00-18:30 by Prof. Sigurd Bergmann, “The Legacy of Trinitarian Cosmology in the Anthropocene”

Eco-Congregation Annual Gathering