

Review of Theological Literature

A Selection from Theologische Literaturzeitung

Consultant Editors

ALEXANDER J.M. WEDDERBURN
BERNHARD LANG

Executive Editor

DAVID E. ORTON

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DIMENSIONS OF TIME

The ‘Time Structures of God, the World and Humanity’*

Reinhard Wunderlich (Bamberg)

The jazz trumpeter Miles Davis expressed the view that time is not the most important thing but the *only* thing. The unique way in which theology can be fundamentally focused on the topic of time is clear from the book under consideration, in its basic understandability and its exemplary interdisciplinarity.

The authors are two theologians and a physicist. The point of departure and conclusion of their deliberations is the experience of time. The present-day sense of time is marked by the “ambivalence of freewheeling actionism and exhausted lethargy”, and the experience of the present is being “sacrificed to a future sequence of experience, constantly falling over itself in its haste”. The goal of the authors’ considerations is that human being, “who can release himself in the present, put a stop to his restlessness and find peace” (3).

In method, they strive towards a theory-oriented perception which proceeds from a model of the human being which covers as many aspects of human life, and thereby the human experience of time, as possible—an open system. Their theoretical approach, which they see as a heuristic principle, proceeds from a tripolar time structure. Each person stands (a) in relation to himself, (b) in relation to the world and (c) in relation to religion. This produces the three poles of endogenous time, exogenous time and transcendental time.

In the immediate, inner experience of time (13–114: “Human time”), humans are determined by elementary biological rhythms, which however are overlaid by the conscious perception of time (13–27), so that in the course of human history a variety of synchronisms and asynchronisms can be described between natural time and I-time (113), leading to the observation that the “transcendental time” pole seems now to have completely disappeared. From a historical point of view, the authors recognise

* *Dimensionen der Zeit. Die Zeitstrukturen Gottes, der Welt und des Menschen*, Darmstadt: Primus 1998. Pp. vii + 199. Cased. DM 29.90. ISBN 3-89678-078-6.

three steps of consciousness: *mythic-cyclical* experience of time in ancient Egypt (27–40), in Mesopotamia (40–56) and finally among the Hebrews (56–67), who are the first to manifest the counter-current of “openness to time as a dimension and perspective of faith”; *rational-linear* time experiences which became socially binding at the latest with the invention of the clock, which underlie the natural sciences (115–41: “World time”) and more and more strongly release also an awareness for the viability of the progressive thought that is associated with it (106f.); and finally *mystic-holistic* time experiences from Plotinus to Schleiermacher, where in the end it must remain undecided whether it is a matter of experiences of being or experiences of self (10, 113).

With the categories of mystic, prophetic experience (prediction of future acts of God, where transcendental and anthropological factors merge; 11) and epiphanous time experience (the breaking-in of divine fullness of time and possibilities; 11), the authors penetrate the religious sphere, which however can only be understood through the effect of transcendence in each case: “God’s time” (142–69). As far as our western cultural circle is concerned, it is oriented to the life of a single person: Jesus of Nazareth in the tradition of the Hebrew awakening and in the vision of a “future of what is to come”, which creates the really “new” (cf. 172). “It is clear: the tripolar structure of transcendental, endogenous and exogenous time is found in Jesus in a dynamic—open to the future (!)—balance which is oriented to the liberation and salvation of humanity and of the whole of creation” (158).

In their systematic concluding considerations on “true time” (170–83), the authors lay emphasis on an embrace—required also from a scientific point of view—of the time modes of past, present and future. In the biblical understanding of faith a balance in the tripolar time structure thereby becomes evident which offers present supposed attempts to overcome time (mythic regression, rational-linear technocracy, mystic escape from the world; 180) an alternative that is necessary for survival: return to individual human time, synchronisation of natural and historical time, in the long term also of economic and ecological time, but especially openness towards “God’s time” as the “source of life” (183).

Alongside familiar exegetical and philosophical or religion-historical material, which is meaningfully brought into mutual relation, the book offers excellent lines of access to questions of scientific detail (together with their historical development) and beyond this a clear interdisciplinary aid to structuration, in the evidently never invalidated concern to speak *about* time—concerning which, Augustine of course admitted, “If I wanted to explain it to a stranger, I would not know how”.