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## [What is Ancestral Time? Returning to One's Destiny](#)

March 7, 2014/[1 Comment](#)/in [Uncategorized](#) /by [Alastair McIntosh](#)

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 18<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>[3]</sup> – 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.”<sup>[4]</sup> *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.”<sup>[5]</sup>

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:<sup>[6]</sup>

*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.”<sup>[7]</sup>

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 pointing 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, Tír na nÓg beyond the setting sun pronounce, 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 me 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.<sup>[11]</sup> 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.<sup>[12]</sup> 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."

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[1] Full discussion in my *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*, Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2008, pp. 196-7.

[2] *Timaeus*, 37.

[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.

[4] Vladimir Kharlamov (ed.), *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*, Vol. 2, James Clarke & Co, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 16 & 93.

[5] Paul Evdokimov, *In the World, of the Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary, NY, 2001, p. 30 (and 201).

[6] Anastasios, Archbishop of Tirana, Durres and All Albania, *Anamnesis*, 1998,  
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/1998-harare/together-on-the-way-official->

[report-of-the-eighth-assembly/together-on-the-way-2-the-theme-turn-to-god-rejoice-in-hope/22-anamnesis.](#)

[7] George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* Faber, London, 1989.

[8] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1963, XVI, p. 72.

[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.

[10] John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland*, Celtic Studies Publications Inc, Andover & Aberystwyth, 1999; *The Voyage of Bran*, tr. Kuno Meyer, Medieval Irish Series, Ontario, 2000, [http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/bran\\_meyer.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/bran_meyer.pdf)

[11] Sorley MacLean, *Hallaig* (Gaelic and English), <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/hallaig>

[12] Stefan Skrimshire (ed.), *Future Ethics: Climate Change and the Apocalyptic Imagination*, Continuum, London, 2010.

1 Comment

Ancestral Time

 Alastair McIntosh ▾

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**Alastair McIntosh** • 3 days ago

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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