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## *Time and Eternity, Bible and Koran*<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction: Philosophical Discussions of Religion*

Philosophy has been vital for religions. When 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christians brought their classical philosophical training to bear in re-expressing Christian beliefs, philosophy was not only the challenge to justify the creed rationally. It was also the chance to demonstrate that Christianity's significance is universal.<sup>2</sup> And when 8<sup>th</sup> century Islam encountered philosophy—again, in the classical occidental tradition—the challenge became equally constructive.<sup>3</sup>

Philosophy has proved vital for religions. But what about the inverse? Which role can religion play for philosophy?

1. If philosophy is a rational reflection about everything, religion in its manifold forms should come into philosopher's consideration as yet another element of reality. Religion should be an *object* of philosophy just like language, art, science and politics. And in fact religion is a traditional and well established object of philosophy. Let me just adduce three aspects:

a. religious vocabulary and views have been objects of philosophical reflection, refutation and refinement already in the extant fragments of the pre-Socratic philosophers;

b. the word "philosophy of religion" has become current in the later days of the Age of Enlightenment. The first German occurrence is by a Jesuit, a certain Father SIGISMUND VON STORCHENAU. In 1773 he anonymously published his eight volume opus

<sup>1</sup> Felix Körner is a member of the Ankara Jesuit Community. He cooperates with Muslim theologians at Ankara University's Divinity Faculty and has studied the influence of hermeneutical philosophy on Turkish theology (Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology. Rethinking Islam*, Würzburg 2004). Some Turkish theologians acquired philosophical proficiency at Middle East Technical University, Ankara (cf.: <http://www.metu.edu.tr/home/www41/index1.htm>). Körner has recently offered its Department of Philosophy to teach a course on philosophy of religion or philosophical anthropology. In response, he was first invited to give a talk on a subject of his choice to the faculty and graduate students. He decided to argue that propositions from religious traditions can be valuable solutions to philosophical problems and took the concepts of time and eternity as an example. In that he was influenced by the Wolfhart Pannenberg's work. We present both the lecture Körner gave on September 27, 2004 and his reflection on the lecture's effects.

<sup>2</sup> On the Greek Apologists cf. e.g. Wolfhart Pannenberg, „Die Aufnahme des philosophischen Gottesbegriffs als dogmatisches Problem der frühchristlichen Theologie“, *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie*, [vol. 1] Göttingen 1967, pp. 296–346, p. 308.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, vol. 1, Berlin 1991, p. 51.

*Philosophie der Religion*, an apologetic work in the scholastic vein of Catholic natural theology. One year later the word “*philosophie de la religion*” appears in France.<sup>4</sup>

c. “philosophy of religion” is a frequent title of philosophical text books and lecture courses, and an academic institute like the Center for Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame University counts no less than 17 professors staff.

2. But beyond this object relation, which role can religion play for philosophy? Religion can also be a *dialogue partner* of philosophy. More precisely, philosophers can take religious ideas seriously as alternative models, formulations and solutions to questions they are asking anyway. Religious traditions may offer exciting answers. Of course the philosopher will test their validity very critically. But I will try to demonstrate that there were in fact philosophically relevant discussions going on in religion, long before religion went to the schools of philosophy. Therefore I deliberately chose an ambiguous subtitle to this lecture: Philosophical discussions of religion. Let us not only discuss religion philosophically as we might discuss an optical delusion. Let us try to see where religious ideas are themselves contributions to philosophical discussions.

## *Time and Eternity*

### *I. Models of Time and Being*

#### *A. Mythical Time*

A typical view of time and being reoccurs in many religious traditions. It has been termed “mythical”.<sup>5</sup> A mythical world view poses a *foundational primeval time*. Then, before all times, the foundational acts of super-human beings established the institutions which are the basis of the contemporary natural and social, professional and political life. The Ancient Egyptian but especially Babylonian and Greek religions provide material, and so do most other traditions of the world. Myths recount for example the origin of the world or of royal dominions. According to mythical views, it was in that foundational time that divine revelation happened.

What is the concept of time involved in mythical models? One might think of a sharp separation between a far-away *then* and a resulting *now*. But such a view is the outcome of an abstract consideration of myths as texts. If one considers myths as part of the life of a society, one typically finds that the foundational time is regularly re-enacted. This re-enacting takes place in a *cult*. The cult is not people’s retrieval of ancient times, let alone mere remembrance. In the cult, the institutional event of old is realising itself now. The begetting of the earth or the enthronisation is happening in the present celebration. Since the cult is repeated rhythmically, the mythical concept of time has been characterised as *cyclical*. The mythical concept of being—the manner of answering the question about just anything ‘what is it?’—is *de initio*, coming from the beginning.

#### *B. Philosophical time*

PLATO’s *Timaios* offers this view (37d). Here is an object. It is within time. It is therefore changing. What it really is can therefore not be seen when looking at it now or

<sup>4</sup> W. Jaeschke, „Religionsphilosophie“, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 8, Basel 1992, cols. 748–763, col. 748.

<sup>5</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, 1926, cf. Friedrich Beißer, „Mythos. Systematisch-theologisch“, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 23, Berlin 1994, pp. 650–661, p. 653.

later. It is only an instance of the unchanging idea. This X is only an instance of X-ness. The idea is eternal. And 'eternal' means 'unchangingly the same'. 'What is it?' is answered *de idea*. ARISTOTLE's views on time and being differ from his teacher's. But the substance/accidence scheme (in his *Metaphysics* vii) has a similar implication as Plato's in that the question 'What is it?' leads him to an unchanging *ousía* which the philosophical analysis has to uncover. And the analysis has to get beyond that which is changing. His concept of being is *de essentia*. These models describe what human beings often do when they try to find out about the reality of something. The models have influenced our way of operating, but they also seem to be derived from what we are doing anyway. The Bible provides a different model, and it is the potential of this model which we will explore here in some detail.

### C. Biblical time

The Bible is a collection of writings, its earliest elements dating back till possibly the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C., its youngest parts being written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. The Bible does not offer a unified theory on anything. It is a library rather than a book. What is now in the Bible comes from different authors in different times, cultures, situations, it comes in different languages and literary forms. The Bible is extremely diverse. But diversity will play a decisive role in our argument.

What is the Biblical idea of time? Clearly the mythical model can be rediscovered in Biblical texts. But in the Bible another model of understanding time is at work, too. It was the religious scholar of Rumanian origin MIRCEA ELIADE, who observed that the Biblical idea of time is unique. As opposed to the mythical view of divine revelation at the beginning, only to be re-enacted in time, the Bible sees history as the divine epiphany, that is the revelation of who God is.<sup>6</sup> This can be demonstrated by the so-call words of demonstration (Erweisworte): "Thus you can see that I am God", referring to an action of God in history. The German Old Testament scholar GERHARD VON RAD called it one of Israel's greatest achievements to see their own experience and people as a part of ongoing history.<sup>7</sup> Let us follow up this discovery chronologically through the Bible in order to understand its relevance and to see its development. Thus, in historical perspective, we will be able to see a series of discoveries on time and being.

#### 1. Historical writings

We can make out four elements in the view of time within Israel's historical writings.

a. The earliest layers of the Old Testament present the circumstances of the succession to the throne of king David (d. 962 B.C.?). (2 Sam) It is a story full of suspense. Again and again, the outcome is open. This is the first element to be noted here: what happens, happens not by pre-destined necessity, not in an ever-repetitive rhythm, but is "history" in the sense of contingent. 'Contingent' is used here for that which is, but not of necessity. The course of events can be called history if and only if the outcome of each and all events is open.

<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Der Mythos von der ewigen Wiederkehr* (German translation 1953), p. 152, quoted after Wolfhart Pannenberg, „Zeit und Ewigkeit in Israel und im Christentum“, *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie*, vol. 2, Göttingen 1981, pp. 188–206, p. 191.

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 2, München 1969, p. 117.

**b.** But the Biblical alternative to the *de initio* view of time is not: if no pre-determined order, then pointless arbitrary meaninglessness. Therefore the idea of a divine revelation is not abandoned. But its place is moved. *In* the events of the successions to the throne, God is acting. Revelation is an ongoing process, and it is going on in reality through time: Everything becomes what it really is *de historia* – out of history.

**c.** Another very early text in the Bible has been called the “Historical creed”. It is to be recited when the first fruits of the new harvest are handed over to the priest at Thanksgiving.

“My father was a homeless Aramean.

He went to Egypt, lived there as a foreigner in a small group  
and became a great, powerful and plentiful people.

The Egyptians treated us badly, afflicted us and laid upon us slavish labour.

We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers,

the Lord heard our crying and saw our affliction, our labour and our oppression.

The Lord lead us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm,  
with great shock and with signs and wonders.

He has brought us to this place and has given us this land,  
a land that flows with milk and honey.

And now behold, I have brought the first fruits of the land  
which you, Lord, have given me.” (Dtn 26:5–10)

This text can help us to see the two other elements of the idea of time as history in this early phase of Biblical writing. What is happening is history in the sense of purposeful. God had an aim with this course of events.

**d.** And finally: The text is obviously cultic. A sacred act is being performed and commented upon. The mythical model of involving the presence is in fact at work again. But, as we have now seen, Israel has historicised it. The foundational time took place when “my father” lived. Thus is the relevant moment of revelation moved from pre-time to time, and “we” are in the middle of all that. This glorious history of salvation is taking place “now”. “We” are a part of God’s history.

## 2. Prophetic writings

With Israel’s glorious certainty to be in the middle of God’s own story—the salvific history—nothing could go wrong, one may think. But it did go wrong. The holy institutions of temple and people proved to be no safety guarantee. The unbelievable disaster happens in 578 B.C.: The sacred city is conquered by the Babylonians, the temple is destroyed and the population—at least the elite—is exiled in Babylon. Is this not the final refutation of the reality of God? Israel’s specific belief is that God acts in history. If God can act, he would certainly save his people from that disaster. But the disaster has happened. Ergo can he not act and he is not real. It is this painful theological problem that the so-called “writing prophets” have to tackle. If the apparent refutation came from Israel’s specific belief, the refutation’s refutation also had to originate in Israel’s own structure of belief. It is these prophets’ achievement to have reconciled a totally new and disastrous situation with the belief in God who acts in history. To solve the problem, men like Isaiah did not weaken God’s ability to act historically. Rather, they laid open that Israel had until now not been radical enough in its belief in divine history. As long as you take your confidence from a past event, you are, structurally, still semi-mythical. Because your orientation in time is still towards the past. This back-

ward orientation can be shown even etymologically. The glorious foundational time of old, the great past, is called “*qādām*” in Hebrew. But ‘*qādām*’ originally means ‘front side’. The same seems to be the case with Turkish ‘*önce*’ and English ‘before’. ‘Before’ us (in front of us) is the past. We are facing the beginning. But now prophetic pronouncements like these can be heard:

“Do not remember what was before,  
the things past (*qādām*-ish things) do not mind!  
Behold, now I make something new.  
It is already appearing, do you not notice it?” (Is 43:18–19)

Four elements of the prophetic view of time can be marked out. It is only at superficial consideration that they seem to be a replacement of ideas of the earlier writings. In fact they do not replace but radicalise the historical view.

- a. The orientation is taking a 180° turn to the future. The *de initio* has become a *de futuro*, it is future events that decide what things really are.
- b. It is from the future that Israel is to expect salvation. The concept of hope becomes central for belief.
- c. The events are thus *given* bit by bit from the future.
- d. Older ascriptions of the meaning of it all can be corrected. The purpose of individual events and the whole course of history can be understood anew according to new events.

### 3. Apocalyptic literature

A great turn in the whole history of the Ancient Near East is the Babylonians’ defeat by the Persians. Their ethnic and religious politics differs strongly from their Assyrian and Babylonian predecessors. The technique of exiling a people’s elite in order to cut off its identity is no longer practiced. The Persian empire rests on a principle of pluriformity in cult and therefore realises a certain tolerance. Consequently the Persian King Cyrus encourages exiled Israel in 539 to return to their home country and to rebuild their temple. The religious freedom however did not hold for long. Later Persian leaders tried to get control of Israel’s cult. In 333 the Greeks’ reign began in the ancient world, and Israel felt a constant pressure to adapt itself to the unified world culture of Hellenism. Under this pressure a new type of literature came into being, called apocalypticism, its typical genre being reports of visions. Some apocalypses have come into the Old Testament, notably in the book of Daniel. “Daniel” is a pseudepigraphical ascription. Apocalyptic authors always hide themselves behind famous figures of Israel’s past, like Ezra or Enoch.

Four typical traits of apocalyptic literature should be noted.

- a. The visions often concern the *future* of history. This does not surprise us any more, since it follows from the prophetic change of perspective. But now the future view includes the final future. The *de futuro* perspective has become an understanding *de fine*.
- b. The visionary recounts he was brought into heavens. There he saw the future events already *present* with God.
- c. Likewise, he may see during his heavenly visions events of the *past* present.
- d. The visions are in *universal* perspective. That is to say, the visionary, although an Israelite, envisions the history of the great empires and all of humanity.

This is rather confusing. The apocalyptic way of speaking is clearly open to the criticism that the future cannot at the same time be present! If we analyse apocalypticism more deeply, we will be able to resolve this contradiction. Apocalyptic texts reveal four important developments of the Biblical notion of time and being.

**a.** When trying to see God's course of action, the visionary realises he has to widen his perspective towards the totality of events. He thus says, the individual events belong together in one complete order.

**b.** And he thus says that understanding can only take place in the context of the whole. Indeed, 'the meaning of X' has thus been redefined as the role of X in the context of the totality of events.

**c.** The course of events is not completed yet because the end of history has not yet arrived. The apocalyptic visionary does not give up the ideas of his historical and prophetic predecessors. He is in their vein. For him, too, all events are contingent. Therefore he will not understand the totality of events as a predefined order. Only in an ecstatic state of mind is he granted a glimpse of the whole of history as it "will have" happened.<sup>8</sup> The mode of access to the whole cannot abolish the openness of the course of history. Its temporal status is anticipation, its epistemological status is hypothesis. Here, the concept of eternity comes into play. The visionary sees the whole of history present with God. That is eternity in the apocalyptic outlook. Eternity is thus no timeless changeless sameness, not the contrary, origin and ever-hidden truth of temporal changes. Eternity is, rather, the mode in which all the temporally separated moments of past and future are present together. Earlier passages of the Bible had no fully fledged concept of eternity yet. What is often translated by "eternity" ('olâm) is in fact only very long duration. But with apocalyptic literature we now meet an idea of eternity worth consideration.

**d.** There is a tendency in apocalyptic worldviews to overcome borders. Ethnic borders in universal visions; creational, spatial and temporal borders in heavenly journeys and in the identity change of the visionary who writes under the name of a man like Daniel. This tendency is probably caused by the apocalyptic concept of eternity—all moments of time present in one. Time is then seen as the mode of separation of the moments. This separation can be overcome by the experience of the unifying presence of eternity.

#### 4. New Testament

As the last stop on our Biblical tour, Jesus's view of time and eternity should be analysed as coming from this development of Israel.

Let me summarise Jesus's temporal conception in one sentence: You can experience eternity in this moment by accepting the Kingdom of God.

The sentence calls for explanation on three sides:

**a.** Israel's 'historic' insight was that history is a contingent yet purposeful series of events. Therefore, the most important word for 'time' in the Hebrew Bible is '*êt*'. Quite empathically the Jewish Greek translation of it is mostly not *chrónos*—with its association of duration. Rather, '*êt*' is almost always translated as *kairós*. *Kairós* is the critical moment, the decisive instance. Jesus uses this idea of the moment which can

<sup>8</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, „Zeit und Ewigkeit in Israel und im Christentum“, p. 200.

turn the course of history. Jesus's conception of time starts from this presupposition: Encountering Jesus means encountering the decisive decision. Concerning what?

**b.** Concerning the divinity of God. God is not imposing his power. He lets people act freely. The course of events will be brought together to a meaningful whole only after the events have taken place. God's power is not totally obvious now. The preaching of Jesus centres on the idea that one can already now orient one's life towards the future when God's reality will be completely revealed. This is what we have called in the summary sentence "accepting the Kingdom of God".

**c.** This acceptance is so to speak a jumping out of the present time into eternity. This is not to say, Jesus is inviting people to escape reality. The present is, rather, transcended to the vision of the whole as the context for each moment. Eternity is not a place different from time but the unity of all now temporally separated moments of time.

By this explanation of the summary of Jesus's preaching we have at the same time explained why Jesus's concept of time and eternity is a reception of the three Old Testament models we uncovered.

Jesus's concept of the decisive moment—*kairós*—follows from Israel's historical writings with their concept of history as open.

Jesus's orientation towards God's completed reign is the prophetic turn from *qädäm* to future.

And Jesus's idea of an interpenetration of time and eternity in the new lifestyle of the Kingdom of God is apocalyptic.

## II. Results

I would like to point out where I see the relevance of this conceptualisation of time and eternity for philosophy. I see one element of interest for the historian of philosophy; two elements of interest for the philosopher of religion; and three elements of interest for the systematic philosopher.

### a. History of Philosophy

*The origin of "universal history"*. 120 years ago WILHELM DILTHEY already detected that the tendency to take the whole of history into account originated in Biblical tradition. But for him CLEMENS OF ALEXANDRIA's and AUGUSTIN's thought of the education of humanity was at the origin of this all-encompassing perspective. With the deepening of Old Testament scholarship in the last half century, we can now see that an interest in history as one whole originated already in the Bible itself.<sup>9</sup>

### b. Philosophy of Religion

*Religion and tradition*. To some students of religion it may be surprising that the Biblical prophets come to expect the decisive revelatory event from the future, that—in other words—religion does not define itself from tradition. In fact, the tradition coming from the past has thus become a preliminary experience. Thus past events have a normative but no definitive role. Also in Islam elements of such a future orientation can be discovered. For example the Koran's earliest preaching is apocalyptically speaking about the future, as criterion for past and presence.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie. Ihr Verhältnis im Lichte ihrer gemeinsamen Geschichte*, Göttingen 1996, p. 119.

*Faith as hypothesis.* We were able to characterise the epistemological status of faith statements as hypotheses. They speak about the future, which will be known only later. Claims of the reality of God are claims about the outcome of everything.

*c. Systematic Philosophy*

*Determinism or meaninglessness.* You may want to see human actions as fully determined.—I wonder whether that squares with your own experience. On the other hand, if you do not want to hold a deterministic position you might worry whether liberty of action leads necessarily into meaninglessness of the whole. The Biblical concept of history as God's integrating people's free acts into one good whole seems to me to be a consistent way out of this dilemma.

*Time and Eternity.* If the view of eternity as simultaneous presence of all temporal moments is accepted, time can be characterised as the mode of separation of individual instances. In this mode of separation the future is unknown. Therefore it is particular to this mode that decisions have to be taken.

*Time and being.* Meaning is the role something plays in the context of the whole. But the whole does not exist yet. If we are speaking ascribing a certain meaning to something we are anticipating the story of everything. Equally, if you try to answer the question "What is it?" only from the data you have so far you are missing that everything can become a meaningful element in the whole and perhaps quite different from what one sees now. Therefore, every concept is a hypothetical anticipation implying a view of the totality of events. Since we have no absolutely certain access to this totally yet, our knowledge of what things really are will in time always be controversial.

*Reflection*

One reason for addressing in my first philosophical lecture in a Muslim country the biblical conception of time and eternity is the potential I see in this conception for a rethinking of Islam. Modern Muslim thought is rich and lively. But the fundamental temporal orientation is consistently toward the past.

**a.** This is true of 'immediatist' approaches to the Koran. Historical contextualisation of the Koranic text then and now is excluded as unnecessary tampering with a clear revelation. The temporal model at its basis is: what was revealed to be valid in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia is in exactly the same way valid today. It is these immediatist readings of the Koran that should terminologically speaking be named "fundamentalist".<sup>10</sup>

**b.** A wealth of modern approaches are text-historicising. The Koranic message must, according to these approaches, be abstracted from its 'then-setting' and needs to be re-expressed in every era.<sup>11</sup>

**c.** A recent Turkish approach may be called '*umma*-historicising'. Rather than a text, the Koran's first believers should be the paradigm. Their interaction with revelation is exemplary and in need of transposition into every new condition.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A immediatist which offered quality expositions is Sayyid Qutb.

<sup>11</sup> Famous exponents—with important variations—are Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abû Zayd. Cf. Rotraud Wielandt, „Exegesis of the Qur'ân: Early Modern and Contemporary“, Jane D. MacAuliffe (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ân*, vol. 2, Leiden 2002, pp. 124–142.

<sup>12</sup> This is the position of Ömer Özsoy of Ankara University. „Kur'an hitabının tarihselliği ve tarihsel hitabın özgün anlamı sorunu“, Ömer Özsoy, *Kur'an ve tarihsellik yazıları*, Ankara 2004, pp. 53–66.



d. Even more recent is the suggestion of what could be named a 'traditionalising' approach. Rather than a return to the Koran, a return to Muslim tradition as normative source is advocated.<sup>13</sup>

All these models, modern or post-modern as they may be, see the revelatory event in the past. When we use the turn of the Biblical prophets towards the future as a backdrop we might ask whether Islam is necessarily backward oriented?<sup>14</sup>

There is a past-centeredness already in the many Koranic verses.

a. The Koran claims to be purify religion through a return to Abraham's belief and practice.

b. The Koran presents Muhammad to be in line with older prophets.

c. The Koran advocates continuity with existing value systems.

But in the light of what can be uncovered as the Biblical turn towards the future, Muslims could find an analogous orientation in the Koran. These point might be considered:

a. The Koran's earliest passages announce God's imminent judgement and thus pose a future event to be the criterion of past and presence.

b. Later, the Koran declares events of its own contemporary history—viz., the Muslims' military successes—to be proofs of God's reality. Thus the Koran makes the move from *de initio* to *de historia*, which implies an upgrading of the presence.

c. The Koran endorses the Biblical revelation. Therefore, someone who tries to be faithful to the Koran should be able to accept the Biblical openness towards the future as a part of that revelation.

I had expected the discussion after my talk to draw lines towards possible developments of Muslim thinking. But the questions and comments demonstrated that religion is for many philosophers at Middle East Technical University a non-subject or at least cannot be taken seriously. ("Religion is dogma; one cannot discuss it.") The questions were interesting and the atmosphere was welcoming. But I did not have the impression that my point that religion has something philosophical to say was taken. On the other hand, many of philosophy's opportunities in Turkey for inspiring a rethinking of Islam are not yet seen, although some philosophers of the Department have already become influential teachers of the best Turkish theologians. These two constipations may be related: religion has nothing to say to philosophy; and philosophy has nothing to say to theology.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Mehmet Paçacı, also of Ankara University, in his latest hermeneutical article. „Çağdaş Dönemde Kur'an'a ve Tefsire Ne Oldu?“, *islâmiyât* 6 (2003) 4, pp. 85–104.

<sup>14</sup> A detailed discussion can be found in Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics* (cf. above, footnote 1), pp. 175–177.

<sup>15</sup> A week after my talk, the head of department, Prof. Dr. Ahmet Inam, invited me to teach a course at the university next semester: not in philosophy of religion, but in philosophical anthropology.