

The fullness of time: Reflections on the millennium: Living in God's time

by [William Schweiker](#) in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

As we approach the turning of the calendar to the year 2000, there is likely to be intense speculation among some Christian groups about the end times. Many will be inspired by the Book of Revelation to look for particular signs of the end.

Readers of the Christian Century are not likely to hold expectations tied closely to the calendar or to the details of Revelation. Nevertheless, embedded in all Christian belief is a conviction about the last things. Christians confess in the creed that "Christ will come again in glory," and we believe that history is headed toward a consummation in God's ultimate purposes. Furthermore, biblical scholars in this century have repeatedly reminded us that eschatological expectation was central to Jesus' proclamation and that of the early church.

In light of all this, the Century asked several theologians to offer a brief account of their understanding of the last things and the difference it makes for Christian existence. Articles in this series, which begins with the following piece by William Schweiker, will appear occasionally in the coming weeks.

Y2K, Heaven's Gate, millennial countdown, the newly dubbed millennial generation, hopes and fears about the return of Christ, an endless flow of trinkets and souvenirs—in cultures shaped by Christianity one sees many ways to ponder the end of things and many ways to describe the passing of a millennium. The passing of this millennium reveals conflicting but interwoven strands of our civilization.

One strand pictures time as full: Time is a creature of God, and, if we believe the Nicene Creed, the locus for hope in the life of the world to come. Eschatological beliefs, whether about final judgment or universal redemption, express the fullness of time.

The other strand, which is also deep in modern Western cultures, sees time as empty: Time is a space to be filled by human power. The idea that time is empty has

worked its way deeper and deeper into Western life over the past thousand years. Time is seen as an open arena, an untapped resource, in which human beings through actions and policies fashion meaningful and valuable existence. Time is a form of experience—like a box or a field needing cultivation—that we give content.

Our obsession with history and narrative betrays this perception of time—history is cultivated time, the tale of actions that make life meaningful. More recently, we have become fascinated with dividing time into shorter and shorter periods (an age, a century, a decade—who, after all, wants to be retro-'80s now?). We work and live and love at a frantic pace; speed is of the essence, because the last thing we should do is to "waste time."

The Renaissance thinker Giovanni Pico della Mirandola sounded a theme that has gained wide acceptance through the work of 20th-century existentialist and postmodernist thinkers. In his "Oration on the Dignity of Man," Pico has God pronounce that "man" is not constrained by nature, but is "maker and molder" of himself. Human freedom is the capacity to morph, to change one's form and life at will. We talk of identity-construction; we contemplate genetic manipulation. This power of self-fashioning gives meaning to life, to time. In this perspective, everything is collapsed into the moment of activity. Memory gives way to anticipation; technical thinking trumps mediation; immediate pleasure and pain, not honor or shame, are sought or avoided at all cost.

The spread of this perception of time during the past millennium is remarkable. Compare Romanesque and Gothic architecture, in which a structure enfolds within itself an entire symbolic universe, with the eclecticism of postmodernism, which offers a willful confusion of past styles in a compression of time and space. Think of Gregorian chant—subtle modulations of tone in a common time—then the birth of counterpoint, and now the latest in hip hop or atonal music. The perception that time is empty makes the context of life (Big Bang to Cosmic Crunch) central, because there is no content, no purpose, to existence. We are to find meaning by making meaning.

This sensibility has, then, a double edge. On the one hand, we are free to overcome, to transform, all that destroys or demeans life. On the other hand, life is suspended over a void of meaninglessness, lost in an endless sea of cosmic entropy, that evokes dread and unending labor. This condition explains why hope is a major theme in contemporary life. Hope is the human protest against the meaninglessness

etched into our present lot. Hope is a goad to change.

Biblically construed, time is not empty. It has been created by God. Like all creatures, it is endowed with the divine presence and also with independent complex purposes. Time, according to Genesis, participates in the fecundity of God's creative action: the "days" are filled with modalities (light, dark), creatures (fishes, creeping things), domains (heaven, earth), and creators of culture (man, woman). As scholars note, etched into biblical time is the priority of rest, Sabbath. God's salvific action also permeates time, not only in the Exodus, Christ's resurrection and a cloud of witnesses, but mundanely too. The rain falls on the just and the unjust and in doing so testifies to how God deals with the enemy; God provides the necessities of life to evoke conversion, renewal. Time is not a box in which things "happen," it is a participant in God's way with the world.

This way of thinking about time is embedded in the creeds, which express Christians' hope in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the coming world. One trusts in the richness of God's activity and the myriad forms it takes. The center of life is the celebration of the goodness of creation, the divine life, and the salvation event of new creation in Christ.

When time is understood to be full, then memory and commemoration, not meaning making, are basic. The act of commemoration links past and future amid present joy. Christians celebrate the Eucharist; Jews relive the Exodus. And the purpose of human life is love: you shall love the Lord with you whole heart and mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself.

The sensibility that time is full is also two-edged. Human beings exist amid a teeming and glorious arena of life. We dwell in the theater of God's glory, as John Calvin put it. The real danger of life is not meaninglessness but judgment for unfaithfulness to God. The Romanesque and Gothic churches had scenes of salvation and damnation etched into their portals. Entering and leaving the symbolic space meant passing through judgment. The job of life was to conform existence to God's will. The great joy of life was to learn that God is gracious, loving to sinners. One lived commemoratively in that present or one faced chaos—literally "empty space."

This double sensibility—joy in creation and dread of judgment—continues to find expression in our time. New Age thought, creation spirituality, Christian

apocalypticism and talk of the "White Throne Judgment," the yearning for Christ's return—all bespeak in different ways the view that time is full of life and our faithfulness is in question. From this perspective, we do not create meaning and goodness; there is a moral order—in the splendor of nature or the fabric of relations—that can and ought to guide our lives. The new millennium confronts us with conflicting perceptions of time: time as chaotic (empty space), waiting for us to tame and fill it; time as full, the place of commemoration. The interweaving of these outlooks is part of the very structure of Western consciousness. It propels our inventiveness and our destructiveness. This interweaving is in good measure why we value freedom and yet also have a persistent sense that we should be stewards of earth's bounty.

Given this ambiguity in Western Christian experience, there have been throughout the past millennium those who have wanted to pry apart perspectives on time. We see that agenda even today. For some, Christians are resident aliens telling the story of God's actions and enfolding the "world" into the biblical narrative. Only as a people of commemoration are Christians living truthfully. Others, especially those whose lives have been demeaned by the order of things, rightly celebrate our creative capacities. If traditional conceptions of the divine do not help orient life, then let us imaginatively construct images and ideas of a God who sustains our hope and advances human dignity as well as helps protect this good earth.

Empty time, full time; hope, commemoration; anxiety over meaninglessness, distress about judgment; celebration of creation, exuberance in self-creation; utopianism, apocalypticism; Christian identity, liberation in all its forms. These are the contrasting eschatological moods that collide in our culture, in our churches and in our personal lives.

The task for the new millennium is to transcend the war between these sensibilities. We need to render productive, not destructive, the ideas about time that have shaped our civilization. The unending conflict between "Christ" and "culture" that is manifest in perceptions of time has exhausted itself. The oddity of chastising "modernity" as if we can or should simply escape time and retreat into the Christian tribe must stop; the naïve glorification of power and human creativity without limits has to end. The focus of religious concern ought to be the maker of heaven and earth and not our ecclesial identities or self-made images.

We need a humane and yet religious sensibility, a vibrant and realistic Christian faith dedicated to celebrating both God's power among us and human dignity and care for this fragile earth. Holding such a faith means that we learn to treasure and to respond rightly to the wily creature called "time."

We live best as creative stewards of time. That is the way we can participate in our humanly unique way in God's creative activity and thus continue life on our endangered planet.

For Christians, the possibility of such a life is founded in a sense of gratitude and responsibility: gratitude for our creaturely lot, even given its pain and sorrow, as unique beings who are part of time's fullness manifest in Christ; responsibility for the fearsome and growing power we now wield to shape or end the future of life in this world. Gratitude for and responsibility to life is the shape grace takes as we pass through the portals to the new millennium.