

DECEMBER 2024 NEWSLETTER 1

Dear All

My newsletters were always meant to hopefully inspire, point out, call for a discussion, reflection and an interaction, rather than a unilateral delivery on different subjects.

I am thrilled when I receive your responses, comments whether approving or even disapproving some of my stances from the newsletter which I carefully try not to appear categorical in any way.

Such was the last one from November wherein I talked about our dependence if not obsession with the linear time as opposed to Kairos or Time beyond Time. All responses were affirmative as people are well aware of the role the linear time plays in our lives. I am grateful for all of them, and will single out one that is powerful, coming from a priest:

“Your comments are too true. Our problem is that we are enslaved and encompassed by time – a human creation; but God is outside of time, indeed He IS time.

This is a concept we can never fully grasp, at least this side of grave anyhow”.

Then, an extraordinary text came from Dr John Boulton encompassing various issues and introducing us into the little known world of Indigenous concepts of Time and Eternity. I was elated with it and hasten to share it with you all. Please remember that you are in no obligation to respond to any of my newsletters but your feedback or comments, or above all, the contributions such as this one are encouraged and most welcome. As we all know, indifference is a deep black, meaningless hole.

Michael Galovic

December 2024

Icons: a portal to Eternity

The arrow of time, and its relentless unidirectional haste, blinds us to the presence of coeval time, in which beings cohabit eternity. One way to glimpse that is to look to those who inhabit the past. The historian of Late Antiquity, Peter Brown, describes how he began to see time past as “a distant world, ruled by its own values and committed to its own sense of time and beauty”, or as a sunken treasure ship at the bottom of the sea, viewed through clear water. He tells of the moment when he realised that our ancestors in the pre-modern world had a different understanding of time when he saw the Emperor Constantine depicted as a mediaeval king in a

15th-century stained-glass window in Trier, Germany – the past comfortably juxtaposed with the present through art.¹

These examples illustrate how we now understand time as linear (non-coeval). This understanding emerged as humanity gradually diverged from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle around 12-15,000 years ago; as agriculture led to greater population density in villages and cities, coeval time made no sense for everyday life.

In contrast, the icons of the Eastern Orthodox church date back to the 3rd century A.D. (Common Era). They provide us not only with a

¹ Peter Brown. 2023. *Journeys of the Mind. A Life in History.* Princeton University Press.



vibrant and tangible link to the past and the theological maelstrom of Late Antiquity, but also with a portal we can share with our ancestors to connect to the divine through meditation and awe.

In Confessions (9.10.24) Augustine recalls such a glimpse of coeval time. This was during a time of heightened anxiety as he and his mother Monnica, in her final days, took lodgings in Rome's seaport of Ostia whilst waiting for a ship to take them home to Numidia. While seated at an open window looking out onto a peaceful garden, (*a locus amoenus* that can be found there today), their "minds were drawn by an ardent feeling towards Being itself..... [in which] there is no past and future but only Being, which is eternal ... and while we spoke and considered it with longing, we touched it – just barely – for a single beat of the heart".²

Although now each of us see ourselves at the tip of the arrow of time, with younger generations following in our footsteps, we learn from Aboriginal people that in reality we follow in the footsteps of our ancestors. Anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner used the term "everywhen" to define the collapse of time between now and the original state of the Creator Beings. He also used "abidingness" to define the way Aboriginal people

see their life within this concept, accepting their place in its cycle."

Early missionaries, steeped in theology yet sympathetic to the rich tapestry of Aboriginal culture and seeking insight into the meaning of Aboriginal rituals, saw clear parallels between these and the Christian ritual of the eucharist. In this ritual, a sacred symbol became a touchstone of eternal time. Contemporary social anthropologists have revisited this concept of ritual, suggesting that it is an example of "eternal time being allowed to touch on earthly things" and that it "evokes a concept of time that allows for past events to intersect with the present".³ Perhaps that is as close as we can get to understanding Aboriginal ritual on totemic belonging, even though few churchgoers would apprehend this concept.

Concepts from Aboriginal cosmology also provide us with a way to understand coeval time. At Hermannsburg Mission, T.G.H. Strehlow, fluent in Arrernte, translated "God" as "*altjira*" a word similar in meaning to the Christian conception of God's time and coming nearest to the idea of "eternal". Further south at the Presbyterian mission of Ernabella, in the far north of South Australia, the Pitjantjatjara word "*tjukurrpa*" was used to express "eternal" or "uncreated time", but also for "gospel". The word "*tjukurnga*" was

² Kate Cooper. 2023. *Queens of a Fallen World. The lost women of Augustine's Confessions.* Basic Books. Pp203-04

³ A. McGrath, J. Troy, L. Rademaker. 2023. "Time and Eternity: Aboriginal Missions and Conversations about Temporality" in: *Everywhen. Australia and the language of Deep Time.* Univ Nebraska Press.



Artists at Papunya Dec.1973.

translated as Logos (the Word), or “In the Beginning”. Now these arcane concepts are glossed as “Dreamtime”; and however inadequate a transliteration, it hints at coeval time.

Meanwhile, “In the middle of 1971, a sophisticated visual language was revealed at Papunya in the form of a nine-metre mural on the Papunya School that articulated the travels of the Honey Ant. Painted by a group of senior men this moment motivated the contemporary articulation of Tjukurrpa onto permanent materials. In late 1972 the Western Desert artists formed Papunya Tula Artists to support them in their endeavours ...”⁴

Fifty years ago, I was privileged to see the earliest paintings of the Papunya Tula art movement, as

shown in the photographs. From then it was used by Aboriginal people as a medium to communicate with non-Aboriginal people and convey some sense of the traditional sacred stories from the parallel time of “Everywhen”.

This insight from Aboriginal cosmology and ritual offers a way of understanding how icons fit within the construct of coeval time. Like desert artworks, they act as portals to the sacred events of deep time, allowing us to glimpse the ineffable. As we gaze, we become present with the icon's subject, its creator, and the deeper eternity in which we all abide.

Dr John Boulton. AM.
November 2024

⁴ Araluen Art Centre <https://araluenartscentre.nt.gov.au/exhibitions/my-country>