



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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THE ORTHODOX CLOCK AND THE MAP OF THE WORLD

An interview with Juliana Bibas

The following intriguing yet rarely discussed theme of time is based on Juliana Bibas' 2004 thesis on the Byzantine Orthodox ideas of time as expressed in the physical space of Hagia Sophia, the "Great Church" of Constantinople. After receiving her M.A. in European History at the University of Texas at Arlington and beginning a Ph.D. in Soviet History, Juliana's academic studies are on hold while she makes her home in Philadelphia with her husband Stephanos and their two sons, ages 3 and 8 months. Nevertheless, her creative energy continues: you can find Juliana's first novel, *Deliverance*, on lulu.com, and her creative artwork on her blog at <http://a-stamp-a-day.blogspot.com>.

RTE: Juliana, what is the Orthodox conception of time and how did you become interested in this?

JULIANA: I've always been fascinated by maps, particularly medieval maps, which have no geographic correlation to reality. Medieval maps tell a story about how the world was perceived to be, and somewhere along the way, that got me thinking about time. The maps that most captured my interest were drawn in the West in the centuries leading up to the Crusades, and I started wondering about how medieval people viewed the world and experienced time, and that led me to wonder how the Byzantines (and by extension the Orthodox) may have thought about time differently. After my experience of



Medieval Hereford Mappa Mundi. One of the oldest extant maps of the world, with Christ above the world and Jerusalem at its center. Inside the sphere is earthly and temporal; outside, the heavenly bodies.

living in Russia, where memory and the perception of time is quite different from in the West, I thought there had to be some ontological difference between modern Western and Eastern ideas of time. I started reading the Fathers of the Orthodox Church and discovered that time is perceived very differently in the East, and the theological basis for that perception is a fundamental part of the Orthodox Church.

In short, the Orthodox perception of time is that of a sphere, in which all human time is contained. The horizontal quality of time that we moderns are most familiar with moves through the sphere, but is still contained within



Juliana Bibas with son Maxim.

the sphere. Eternity is that which is outside the sphere, and that is where God is, and is the place our souls try to reach in the process of striving for theosis. The post-modern mind has a hard time comprehending this concept because our perception of time is hectic and we think that every moment must be utilized in a productive manner. We have the sense that time is running out and see our days as a series of never-ending bottles that we must fill in productive ways.¹ Because we are so tied to the sphere of time, it is difficult to transcend it and reach God, but this is where ritual steps

in to help us discover the sacred time and space of eternity. If we think of time as a flowing stream, eternity is what stands still, on the banks, while human temporality moves on. Sacred time can be found only in ritual because ritual touches a deep level, below the temporal, and allows the soul to step out of time.

The ritual of the liturgy in the Orthodox Church fills this role for Christian communities, as it has done for more than two thousand years, but our modern sensibilities do not always understand time in the way that the Church intended. Our modern sense of time is driven mostly by the present. It was not always this way; before Einstein, Newton and Galileo, the world was or-

dered according to fixed principles, supported by theology and the science of the day.¹

RTE: What ideas about time did pre-modern peoples have? When did we lose it?

JULIANA: While the pre-modern ideas of time and space have largely disappeared from Western and industrialized societies, there are still parts of the world even today that do not subscribe to the modern sense of time. In non-Western parts of the world, time as measured by clocks is approximate, and in the case of some aboriginal people, the past and future are simply “not now.”ⁱⁱ Before the advent of mechanized clocks—and the resultant schedules, PDAs and day planners—the movement of the sun and, in Christian countries, the daily cycles of prayer ordered the days.² Months and years were prescribed by both the festal cycle of the Church, and the seasons for planting and harvest.ⁱⁱⁱ From the New Testament onward, even the ancient Greek word for time, Chronos, was supplanted by a new word, Kairos, best translated as “right time,” which refers to sacred, liturgical time. Kairos is the critical and decisive time for the Orthodox Christian, the time of liturgy, the framework of salvation within the Body of Christ.^{vi} Kairos, then, is the sense of time as perceived in the Orthodox era.

RTE: How did the early Church and the Byzantine Christians in particular look at time? What “caught you” as you studied the Byzantine idea of time, and what have we lost in parting from that world-view?

¹ Our modern ideas about time were influenced first by late medieval Aristotelian thought and, in the 20th century, Einstein’s theory of relativity. Stephen Hawking’s theories about the nature of time and the universe build on Einstein to remove certainty about time and space from the modern mind. “When most people believed in an essentially static and unchanging universe, the question of whether or not it had a beginning was really one of metaphysics or theology....But in 1929, Edwin Hubble made the landmark observation that wherever you look, distant galaxies are moving rapidly away from us. In other words, the universe is expanding.... This discovery finally brought the question of the beginning of the universe into the realm of science.” Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), p. 8. Since Newton’s laws of motion ended any ideas about absolute position in space, and Einstein’s theory of relativity ended any ideas about absolute time, there can now be no certain order of the universe, particularly as regards time and space in our post-modern world, Hawking, pp. 7-9, 33, 143, 152.

² Before the Great Schism of 1054, both the Eastern and Western Christian Churches followed a fairly uniform practice of daily prayers at the first, third, sixth and ninth hours of the day. See also Archbishop Chrysostomos’ and Bishop Auxentios’ book, *The Roman West and the Orthodox East* (Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, CA, 1997) for additional information about the differences between Eastern and Western Christianity, particularly in approaching both the study of the past and the past itself, which is related inherently to the different understandings of time.

JULIANA: Throughout the history of the Byzantine Empire, and particularly in the early years, the Christian Church was the mainstay of the culture, and the spokesmen for that culture were inevitably theologians. The purpose of a theologian, then as now, is to enunciate the nature of God, as well as the path of salvation through God. Such was the case for Maximos the Confessor, a Christian theologian who lived in the 6th and 7th centuries, following the completion of the Great Church in Constantinople, Hagia Sophia. Maximos' writings on the nature of the Incarnation and on the liturgy as performed in Hagia Sophia survive today. Maximos' primary focus in his writings is to affirm the nature of Christ and to emphasize the unity of the Church. His writings also reflect the Orthodox view of time.

Maximos' theology is something of a synthesis of the Greek and Hebrew ideas about God and time, reflecting the dual heritage in Christianity. The Greeks looked primarily at the eternity of God; the Hebrew thinkers were more concerned with God's Providence.^v Maximos' focus on the role and nature of the Incarnation indicate Hebrew influence. Likewise his emphasis on the nature and role of the Church both on earth and in heaven demonstrate a preoccupation with the eternal aspect of God. For Maximos, history is two things: Incarnation and theosis.

Though Maximos does not say so explicitly, his writings demonstrate the Orthodox mindset regarding time. The Orthodox Christian lived his life with a singular objective—salvation—and as such, lived with an eye always turned toward eternity, that reality which is on the level of the soul, the Eternal NOW.³ What this means is that everything that has gone before, everything that is happening at the present moment and everything that will happen is happening NOW. If God is outside time, as Maximos states,^{vi} then at the level of the divine, all time is contained within a sphere. While the Incarnation was an historical event on a linear time scale, the Incarnation remains bound to time and also outside it.^{vii} The Hellenistic writers understood that time was not a flat geometric entity,^{viii} and linear time, from the New Testa-

³ It is dangerous to make sweeping generalities in any historical study, particularly a society about which little is known of the common people. On the other hand, however, Maximos' writings are for the public, and the *Mystagogia* was written specifically for the common people, so it is fair to say that Maximos' underlying assumptions, such as time, would be representative of the population on the whole. It is acknowledged among Orthodox scholars that the world of the spirit played an enormous role in society. John Julius Norwich's book, *A Short History of Byzantium* (Vintage, 1997), details many of the theological issues and debates that were discussed in the market squares, at times leading to major societal splits. The issues being argued seem like ridiculous theological minutia to the modern mind, but for the Orthodox, the nature of Christ's humanity and divinity, and other such theological matters taken for granted in the post-Nicene world of Christianity, were of utmost importance.



Antique clock symbolizing a shift away from time being ordered by the seasons and spiritual hours of the day to calculation by a rigid and mechanistic timepiece.



ment era onward into the Byzantine Empire, was understood not as having a progressive nature, as modern post-Enlightenment thinkers would have it. The purpose of forward-moving time was that this finite world would forever progress forward, and eventually shape an earthly paradise based on man's own achievement. Instead, time was understood to be linear in the sense that it has a genesis and is moving toward a definite end—"ever onward and upward."^{x1}

RTE: I would imagine that the two natures of Christ, his divine and human natures, partake of both time and eternity? How does earthly time and eternity work out here?

JULIANA: To explain the nature of time through the Incarnation, a general description of the sphere of time is necessary. To put it allegorically, if time is contained within a sphere, like an eye, for example, then all linear perceptions of time must pass through the pupil; in this case, the Incarnation. The eye contains the fullness of time (all that has gone before, all that is happening at this moment, and all that will come to pass). Christ is both in the eye and outside it at the same time. "He is fully present in space and time and yet remains present with the Father. He was certainly 'outside' all things in respect of His essence, but 'in' all things in respect of His power."^x Much like the inverse perspective of an icon, the eye of time sees God in front, but is able to do so only by looking through the lens of Christ-God in the Incarnation. Christ is in human time as the Incarnation, but also remains outside it in the form of the triune Godhead. Most importantly, the Incarnation reveals that linear time is overcome, as all things have come to pass and are contained within.

The eternal attribute of man is the image of God within him, and it is this spark that drives the soul to seek theosis, or complete communion and unity with the Divine Godhead. The nature of the Divine working perfectly in man is best expressed in the Incarnation, a goal to which each Christian is called to aspire in his journey to salvation.

RTE: How does that sense of time work for the human person, since we are both a spiritual soul and a material body?

Opposite: World map from a medieval psalter illustrating the encapsulation of time within the sphere. Christ is clearly outside the sphere, surrounded by the heavenly hosts.

JULIANA: In essence, just as the Trinity pervades all of creation, so also the soul completely encompasses the body. What is critical to the understanding of time, however, is the idea that God is both in and out of time, and man, being created of God, is also in and out of time. The most vivid pictorial rendering of this idea can be found in various books of hours, or medieval prayer books, in which an anatomical-zodiacal figure plays a central part in the illuminations. The body is most acutely aware of human time, as it is subject to the ravages of age, as well as being subject to the seasonal changes brought about by the cycles of time. This is not to suggest the medieval Augustinian dichotomy of body-soul; rather it is to say that on the temporal level, the body is more fettered to the physical world than the soul. The passions of the body are to be struggled against, but the body is not inherently evil, as later interpretations of Augustine would have it. The soul has the possibility of reaching the Divine within the body, and in doing so, reaching outside of temporal time. This is accomplished in part by contemplating eternity and the Incarnation.⁴ In the ascent of Christ, the border between time and eternity is breached. “Jesus Christ is the place of contact and communication between God and man in a real movement within physical existence, involving interaction between God and nature, divine and human agency.”^{XI} Without this point of contact, man would forever be alienated from God. To put it more succinctly, “man is made God by divinization and God is made man by hominization.”^{XII} Without the spatial interval, there is likewise no time, which indicates that the soul is no longer in time, but rather in eternity. In this sense, all time may be said to be contained within the sphere.

RTE: So how are we to understand the end of time? When does time end? Does it end?

JULIANA: By its very nature, at least in Christian understanding, time must, at some point, end. In describing the end of human time, Maximos affirms the central role of God in that process. The Incarnation becomes the ultimate transcendence of time and space, going beyond both the body and soul.

If we imagine the Incarnation in geometric terms and return to the analogy of the eye, the pupil is attached to the optic nerve, which is what allows the

⁴ Contemplation in the Eastern Christian Church has as its model the hesychastic tradition of monasticism, best enunciated by St. John Climacus, or St. John of the Ladder. He viewed the soul’s journey to God as rungs of a ladder, and wrote a lengthy exposition of each rung of the ladder, called *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

eye to see beyond the lens, and if Christ in the Incarnation has become the pupil, He sees both within the eye and without, beyond the containment of time to eternity.⁵ Moreover, the Incarnation is a moment in time, but Christ’s divinity also places Him in the realm of eternity; therefore complete theosis, or deification, only happens outside the sphere of time, in eternity.^{XIII} It must be remembered that according to the declaration of the Ecumenical Councils, and particularly affirmed in the Nicene Creed, Christ was fully God and fully man while on earth. To put it another way, Christ was fully in the flow of human time, and also fully outside human time, in the realm of eternity.

What makes this concept difficult to understand is the fact that humans are unable to reach into eternity without the assistance of Christ. All things must pass through the pupil of the eye of time in order to see beyond it. Maximos, in writing about movement, expresses this idea in part by noting that movement is both linear and circular or spiral, simple and complex, and that movement is subsequent to being. This applies to the Incarnation in that nothing can be moved or brought into being without the Creator. Man is fundamentally unable to reach God on his own, and therefore, in the Incarnation, time and eternity are reconciled, as man can reach God only through the Incarnation.

At the same time, however, human time is still encapsulated for the body, and the soul contained therein does not fully attain eternity while subject to the movement of time within the sphere. Until time ends, the body and the soul will be subject to the sphere of time.



Nave of Hagia Sophia. The convex dome raises the eye heavenward. The original Pantocrator icon in the dome would have suggested that Christ is outside the sphere of the world and of time.

⁵ This runs somewhat counter to von Balthasar’s assertion that man is the midpoint of a polar universe, or the axis upon which the universe turns, and also by implication, time (Von Balthasar, p. 175). According to Maximos’ theology, this idea is true only in the sense that the Incarnation is the perfection of man and is the center of the cosmos.



What is important to remember about spherical time is that it contains every soul that has been, is, or will be. The role of the Incarnation within time is both temporal and eternal, perfecting the work of creation. To put it simply, while God is outside the created order, at the same time God is manifested in the image of the creation, nowhere more perfectly expressed than in the Incarnation. At the same time, however, the human experience of time has an element of the eternal, as the Creator makes each human in His own image. God gives each human a soul that has His spark and the desire to seek Him.

RTE: You've also done work on time and the Liturgy. How do those two fit together?

JULIANA: Where Maximos' sense of time in the sphere becomes most acute is in his descriptions of the Divine Liturgy in Hagia Sophia, the Great Church of Constantinople. The Divine Liturgy is where the Orthodox Christian celebrates "the ultimate truths of [the Church's] faith about God, about creation, and about humanity in a complex interaction of words, symbols, art, music and ceremonial activities that are invested with practical and symbolic significance and efficacy."^{xiv} Maximos emphasizes the separation between the spiritual and physical worlds, suggesting that time is only bound to the physical world. At the same time, however, the timelessness of eternity lies beyond the containment of the physical and metaphysical aspects of creation. In the building of the Church, where the physical meets the spiritual, "The altar is the point at which God comes down and rests, and thus it symbolizes the mind, where in his contemplation contact occurs between man and God."^{xv}

In Maximos' idea of the containment of all time, the dead and living are equal in God's sight, and all creation begins and ends with God. The Church of God, which participates in the Liturgy, contains the entire array of creation. Even in the canons of the church, a unity of spirit is emphasized, as each priest and each altar can take part in only one Liturgy per day, affirming the reality of one universal, transcendent church, with the Lamb of Life offered "on behalf of all and for all."^{xvi} In conveying the same divine aspect of God through the Liturgy, which is the same at all times and places, Maximos conferred an equality, which does not distinguish between the world of the living and the realm of the dead.^{xvii} Maximos stresses finite time with an eye to the possibility of being removed from it in salvation. Man must endure

Opposite: Partial view of central dome, Hagia Sophia.

finite time, however, and the Church is uniquely able to bridge the gap between human time and eternity.

RTE: And how about icons and time?

JULIANA: In the Church, in order to bridge the gap of time and eternity, icons are used to remind man of the soul's journey for salvation and the work he must accomplish along the way. The icons visibly remind the Orthodox Christian of the invisible reality present at all times. In Eastern Christian theology, the Church is an icon of the Holy Trinity of God and is both visible and invisible. As such, the Church "stands at a point of intersection between the Present Age and the Age to come, and lives in both Ages at once."^{xviii} In other words, the present seamlessly flows into the invisible realm of being.

RTE: Does that relate to the church building as well?

JULIANA: The physical space of the Church is an image of the cosmos, in the same way that an icon is the image of a person or event—the reality is present through the window of the icon and just as the church is divided between the sanctuary and nave, so also is time divided in the universe between that which is seen and unseen. It is important to keep in mind that the invisible world does not necessarily mean the realm of eternity and relates more to the things and people of the past, which are still present in the sphere of time. At the same time, however, there is an element of eternity in the invisible, as the angelic hosts and the Holy Spirit, which are clearly a part of the eternal realm, are also said to be present in the church building, particularly during a Liturgy.^{xix} In this way, the building of the Church demonstrates both aspects of human time, the linear and containment within the sphere, as well as incorporating elements of eternity. Just as the soul is both physically present and eternally aware, the church building demonstrates these two realities. The liturgy, then, is the primary vehicle used in bridging the gap between time and eternity.

RTE: And how does the liturgy act as that bridge?

JULIANA: The liturgy is a glimpse into the timelessness of eternity.^{xx} After the first part of the Liturgy, called the Liturgy of the Word, has commenced, the Liturgy of the Faithful continues with the Great Entrance of the holy sacraments (of bread and wine). The Word of spiritual contemplation visits the faithful like a High Priest from heaven, shutting out the visible world

and cutting off their thoughts from nature. The procession of the sacraments removes the thoughts which still incline towards the earth. Then the mind turns to a vision of spiritual things, after shutting out the sight and sound of words and objects.^{xxi} The belief of the Orthodox Church is that God is invisibly present in all things, and at all times, but when the Liturgy is in progress, most particularly, the Holy Spirit is there in a "distinctly special way."^{xxii} Not only is the Holy Spirit invisibly present in the Liturgy (and indeed, at all times), so also are the saints present, making intercessory prayers for the faithful present in the physical world. The Liturgy reminds the faithful of the salvation story, of the fall, of God's saving grace through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the coming judgment, as well as the process of salvation that is even now occurring. The final hymn of the liturgy is the "final and supreme immersion of the creature in the abyss of the unsearchable simplicity of God."^{xxiii} The tangible reality of the Church building corresponds to the invisible realm of the soul, which, while having the spark of the divine and the ability to reach beyond time to eternity, is still bound to the sphere of time, however fluid that sense of time may be. As such, in Orthodox thought, the realm of the spirit was always present, and the Orthodox Christian was always particularly aware of its presence. This is the reality in which Orthodox Christians have always lived—a fluid sense of time, contained within a sphere—that does not distinguish between past, present or future. Time is not a series of empty bottles that we must fill, as our modern minds would have it, but is rather a continuous flow, containing the past, present and future, as well as the awareness of the reality of the Eternal NOW.

The liturgy becomes the point of contact between temporal time and eternity, between Creator and creation. The soul moves through physical space and time, housed in the body, in the moments of the Liturgy, and in its contemplation of God, in its prayer, its praise, and, most crucially, in its sacramental communion, reaches beyond into eternity. The body becomes a temple for the soul, and as the body moves through the space of a Church in the liturgy so too the soul moves through the space of the body in its ascent to God. The Church exists to bridge the gap between time and eternity, as Christ is the head of the Church. The Church contains all that has been or will be and the invisible and visible world. The Church comprises all the faithful who have gone to their rest but still exist in eternity and all those currently living in the temporal, as well as the faithful who will be. The Church belongs to the realm of the Eternal NOW, where God sees everything at a

glance, where all its members are present at all times and in all places and exist in perfect harmony and communion with their Creator.

While imperfectly demonstrated in the Liturgy, the reality behind the veil of time is still evident to the soul actively pursuing God. The Liturgy exists as a tool to assist the soul, as do the external adornments of the Church, such as icons and incense. These things are a means to assist the soul's journey to God. The soul may reach the point of contemplation where the external adornments are no longer necessary,⁶ as happens with those canonized as saints by the Church. The saints of the Church remain eternally present at all times, in their communion with God, and can help the soul along its way. The Holy Spirit, the angels, cherubim, and seraphim are always present in eternity and also in the Liturgy, which bridges time and eternity, as God comes down to rest on the altar in Christ's redeeming sacrifice. The Incarnation is eternally present in the Liturgy, and is the hinge upon which salvation turns. By governing the lives of the faithful through the regular tripartite cycle of services the Orthodox Church reminds her members of the soul's responsibility in working out its salvation, and ascending to God through the Incarnation of Christ. The Orthodox Christian should attempt to live at the level of the soul, where all things are eternally present, where time is a fluid entity, contained within a sphere that Christ has overcome.

RTE: I'd like to end with this question. We've all had the experience in Church of suddenly feeling that we are connected to heaven and that time doesn't matter—or a long service just speeds by. How do we understand these experiences?

JULIANA: That experience of timelessness in a service, or of the flow of time seeming to stop during a long service is the experience of time in the Eternal NOW. Our bodies are tethered to the realm of time contained within the sphere, but at times, our souls are able to transcend the sphere and reach out to God beyond. This is a glimpse of the theosis that we are striving for along the path to salvation. The reason these experiences are so fleeting is that our bodies and souls remain trapped by sins and passions and are not yet fully redeemed. As Orthodox Christians, we should try to experience that timelessness at all times, putting away the cares of this world. ✦

⁶ This does not mean that a person can reach a point where the sacraments are no longer necessary. The sacraments are considered part of the journey of salvation, and are more than the external tools designed to assist the soul; participation in the sacraments are crucial to the soul's journey to theosis. Many hermit saints forsook seclusion at the end of their lives to receive Holy Communion. St. Mary of Egypt is a good example.

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