“Only Through Time
Time is Conquered”

A Theological Reflection

Through Christ and in Christ,
the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful.
Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us.

*gaudium et spes* 1

Time is a notoriously difficult subject. 2 It has come to be expected that every writer who seeks to consider theologically the thorny epistemological, metaphysical, and moral issues bound up with time will at some point crack open her copy of *Confessions* and turn the yellowed pages to the passage—coming not insignificantly on the heels of the death of Monica—where the young Augustine doggedly pursued the question of time as few others. She will perhaps find solace in reading the exasperation of such a great mind: “What is time?” he asks. “We surely know what we mean when we speak of it. We also know what is meant when we hear someone else talking about it. What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know.” 3

Despite the considerable difficulty of discussing time, it is a maddeningly unavoidable topic. Time cannot be set aside and left for the
experts the way neurobiology or ancient Semitic epigraphy can; it is not a discrete subject easily partitioned and examined, for it suffuses all aspects of human existence. What follows is a theological reflection on time. Though I am heavily indebted to the work of certain theologians, this article is not an exposition of any individual’s thought, but is instead an exploration that turns to the Christian theological tradition for guidance and inspiration. I consider two aspects of the problem of time, both of which find their answer in the doctrine of Christ. In the first part of this article, I seek to describe the problem presented by finite time, particularly in its relation to infinite time (which is nothing other than infinity itself). Beginning with a description of the problem, I then offer a survey of the inadequacy of some of the possible answers before turning to the answer offered in Christ’s temporality. In the second part of the article, I consider the particular theological problem of the possibility of redemption in light of suffering and evil within historical time, turning once again to Christ’s temporality for an answer.

I. Finite Time and Infinite Time

a. The Problem: Dasein ist Sein zum Tod

Human beings are born into—or, rather, under—finitude. As young children, when we come to recognize our conscious selves for the first time, we understand our selves as placed, and therefore limited, within the world. That is, we start with a sense—however vague and inchoate—that the world is independent of us. As we slowly awaken to the unrelenting ubiquity of time, this first truth becomes a catalyst for two concomitant truths: that there was a time before we existed and that there will be a time after our death; the world was here before us and it will persist after us. This last truth—the inevitability of our own death—connected logically to the first two, takes most humans several years to recognize. Even then, it is not the brute force of the logic of finitude that awakens us to our own mortality, but almost always the felt experience of death, whether
the death of a grandmother or the death of a dog or beetle. As children we do not sit contemplating abstractly that every thing that has a beginning must therefore have an ending, inferring that therefore we, who had a beginning, must also have an ending. No, instead, it is in our experience of death in the particular—of that beetle or that grandparent—reflexively applied to ourselves that we come to see and know that we too will die; most work hard to hide that knowledge under an avalanche of distraction. This is what we mean by finite time; our being-in-the-world is not unlike a snapshot of a baseball pitch—poised between the pitcher’s extended arm and the catcher’s waiting glove—we are hurled into existence (Geworfenheit) on a trajectory toward our own end.

Human life as Sein zum Tod, while famously contemplated by Heidegger as by few others, has been long understood as the condition of humanity (one need only read Psalm 90 or the book of Job). This ancient knowledge is expressed in evocative imagery by Bede, recounting the words of an unnamed advisor to the seventh-century King Edwin of Northumbria:

>This is how the present life of human beings on earth seems to me, O King, in comparison to that time which is unknown to us. It is as though you were sitting at dinner with your caldormen and thegns in wintertime, with a good fire burning in the midst to warm the hall, but outside the storms of winter rain or snow are raging, when a sparrow flies swiftly through the room. As soon as it comes in through one door, it quickly goes out through another. Just for the time it is inside, it is safe from the wintry tempest, but after the briefest period of calm has passed in a moment, it soon slips out of your sight, coming out of winter and returning unto winter again. So this life of human beings appears for a short while; but of what comes after, or what went before, we know nothing at all.

The totality of every human life—all our memories, expectations, and wishes—is bound to that sparrow’s fleeting respite from the
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wintery storm. We call this respite time. But since it is a respite of sorts, though we are bound by it, we cannot know it apart from the darkness of what comes before and after, namely, the infinite (understood minimally here in its most basic lexical meaning: privation of finitude). Thus, as soon as we seek to make sense of our lives we are confronted with the impossible task of considering what is by nature mysterious and inscrutable.

This is the problem posed by finite time. There is only silence behind us and before us. Pascal’s cry is not irrational, but thoroughly sober: “Le silence éternel des ces espaces infinis m’effraie—The silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.”

Nature is not a kindly mother, cradling us in the security of her warm bosom; nature is a twofold infinity of space and time that engulfs us in silence and darkness.

b. Answering the Problem

How are humans to respond to this bleak picture of creaturely existence? The first and certainly most ancient answer is to dodge the question by relativizing our deaths, resolving them in some cosmic cycle, often a cycle that itself tends toward death. According to the ancient Vedic tradition, “Everything here is in the hold of death, everything is subject to death.”

Either through the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul, the stories of eternal recurrence, cosmic rebirth, or the uncertain hope of ceasing to be an individual through total absorption into Brahman, the ancients from the Upanishads to Heraclitus to Plato sought to escape the problem of finite time. Death was not straightforwardly denied by these, but its pungency tamed, its finality rescinded. It was transformed into a simple bar of rest within the score of the cosmos, perfectly in sync with everything before and after, leading ultimately to the great cosmic signe de reprise. As evocative and powerful as these systems of thought are capable of being, in sidestepping the problem of finite time they consign humanity to lives of confirmed desperation, bound to eternally reenact a play, consoling themselves that at least they are able occasionally to take on different roles. In incorporating death into
the eternal rhythm of the universe, the unrepeatability—the unique personality, hopes, and desires—of each individual human person is denied any ultimate significance.

One sees then the attraction of the Promethean myth.\(^{11}\) Prometheus thought it cruel that the gods had cursed humankind with the sure knowledge of the day of their impending death, written on the calendar like an upcoming appointment, leaving them resigned to embrace the absurd predictability of finite mortality. So he gave humankind the most precious gift: ignorance. He replaced their innate knowledge of their doomed destiny with blind hope and aspirations to reach far beyond what they were capable. However, despite his ill-considered donation of divine fire to humanity, Prometheus does not actually change the ontological situation of humanity; humanity is left waiting for an appointment, though they have mercifully forgotten it until, that is, the inevitable knock at the door. At its most basic level, then, the Promethean myth is simply an etiology for humanity’s utterly unwarranted striving toward infinity despite being consigned to an inexorable and depressing end. Though it remains unachievable, the goal of humanity’s blind hope—the end of their striving—is the infinite. Infinity here is understood as ceaseless extension, the final erasure of the horizon that conditions human existence. With such strictures removed, humans now long to stretch forth indefinitely, becoming like the gods.

With this reading of the Promethean myth in mind, it should not come as a surprise to see it invoked by Hans Urs von Balthasar in his diagnosis of the habits of modern thought, particularly German idealism and its most influential figure, Hegel. In the first volume of his *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*, Balthasar tells the story of the Promethean principle, which in the modern period was loosed from the chains that had been imposed upon it by the patristic-medieval Christian synthesis of philosophy and theology.\(^{12}\) Transcendence—the pillar of a Christian vision of reality—collapsed in the modern period, leaving a void quickly filled by a newly deified progress. Finite being ceased to be understood as a gift conditioned by the
unconditioned Giver, transformed instead into a battlefield where being must assert itself and fend off the darkness which advances on all sides. Hegel’s uniting of historical (i.e., human) time with being is the definitive move here that eclipses the Christian infinite, already rendered unrecognizable by Descartes and Kant. History for Hegel is the becoming of Being. The infinite, rather than being the ground of being, is for Hegel the accumulation of being, bounded by nothing extrinsic to itself, but is itself a kind of binding.\textsuperscript{13} The process at work in the continual reorganization and realization of finite reality is what infinity means for Hegel; there is no wintry tempest in the darkness outside—the doors to King Edwin’s hall have been forever shut. Marx’s historical materialism is the unsurprising and perhaps inevitable epilogue to Hegel’s tale.

It is not hard to see the justification for Franz Rosenzweig’s invective against modern Western philosophy, especially German Idealism, for its forgetfulness of death. A Jewish mind steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, replete as they are with protests of humankind’s brutish and cruel lot in life, can find no answer or solace in the assurances of Hegel that everything happens for a reason. Hegel ignores the consciousness of each individual, and with it the terror of actual being-in-the-world that is always and everywhere singularly individual, focusing instead on the coming-to-be consciousness of the Absolute, which does little to comfort any who are aware of humanity’s true situation. Rosenzweig writes,

\begin{quote}
Let man creep like a worm into the folds of the naked earth before the fast-approaching volleys of a blind death from which there is no appeal; let him sense there, forcibly, inexorably, what he otherwise never senses: that his I would be but an It if it died; let him therefore cry his very I out with every cry that is still in his throat against Him from whom there is no appeal, from whom such unthinkable annihilation threatens—for all this dire necessity philosophy has only its vacuous smile. With index finger outstretched, it directs the creature, whose limbs are quivering with terror for its this-
worldly existence, to a Beyond of which it doesn’t care to know anything at all. This is the problem facing humankind. The whole modern tradition of epochal sweeping human visions of history culminating in some future synthesis does not answer it, for such visions are incapable of addressing humanity in any way other than as a member of a total species. But death is not a problem for humanity as a species; it is a problem for you; it is a problem for me. As Balthasar writes, “A philosophy of the future, which takes account of the whole ethos of man in the time to come when he himself will have gone, can address man only as a member of a species and not as a person. The problem of how the individual person can incorporate into his finite time any notion of mankind’s future ultimately demands a Christological answer.”

Nietzsche perceived that the immanentized transcendence of the modern Promethean myths were doomed to collapse due to their own internal inconsistencies (one does not get around death by piling corpses, no matter how impressive the heights achieved). He recognized the crisis like no other of his generation (except perhaps Kierkegaard). The problem presented by the experience of finitude remained unanswered by the smoke and mirrors of Hegel and his inheritors—“All idealism is mendacity in the face of what is necessary.” Nietzsche proposed a new answer (in actuality an ancient answer); he supplanted the Promethean “idea” with the Dionysian “life.” In contrast to modern thought that had proceeded through the denial of the horizon that binds all finite creatures, Nietzsche embraced that horizon. The problem of finite existence is answered through the individual will to accept one’s limits and embrace the immanent as the ultimate.

Nietzsche knew well that Leibniz’s question could not be unasked. No one can escape it—why is there something rather than nothing? He knew also that the only possible answers to that question are mythic. His eventual advocacy of pagan eternal recurrence was not
the slipping of a once-brilliant mind into obscurity, but was a clear-eyed and rational choice given the necessity of the mythic. And there is a kind of obdurate solace that is undeniable in Nietzsche; fate is secure, and can even be loved and lovely: *amor fati ego fatum*. To return once more to King Edwin’s hall, Nietzsche urges us to embrace the respite of the warmth, to enjoy the firelit hall, not wishing anything to be any other way, even though we know that the wintery tempest rages on outside.

c. The Christian Infinite as Answer

Neither the Promethean nor the Dionysian responses to the problem of finite time are able to offer compelling consolation to those terrified by the silence of the infinite space that encloses us. The undomesticated infinite remains as a cosmic minus sign before these proposals; it cannot be collapsed into the finite; it cannot be ultimately set aside. The Christian infinite stands in contrast to these, for it does not ignore the transient nature of individual human existence, either through the Promethean gaze into the future or the Dionysian embrace of the present. The doctrine of the Incarnation, when fully developed, reveals the true nature of the infinite, not as an empty space that hems humanity in behind and before, but as the fullness of divine act. Only in the Christian “myth” of the Incarnation is the radically transcendent nature of God’s infinite time revealed—and precisely for this same reason the radically immanent, for God’s infinity and creaturely finitude are not in competition. Apart from this not only do we not understand God, but we do not understand ourselves. Outside of the light of the love of God expressed in the Incarnation, Balthasar writes, “man remains an incomprehensible and contradictory hieroglyph. Cross and Resurrection, understood as the love and the glory of God, bleeding to death and forsaken, render man decipherable.”

In the Incarnation, God reveals himself as truly transcendent, infinitely, qualitatively different from all finite being. The nature of this truth became gradually clearer as Christology developed into its
more mature form in post-Nicene Christianity. Perhaps this seems unexpected, given that the Incarnation depicts a God who is indeed able to be depicted, who is finite to the extent that the person of Jesus Christ is God and was a visible human man. But it is precisely in this apparent contradiction between infinite divinity and finite humanity that the Church Fathers worked out the full extent of God’s transcendence—\textit{creatio ex nihilo} receives its full articulation only as a working out of Incarnation. If God is understood as the uncreated source of all being and at the same time understood to be Jesus of Nazareth, then God’s infinity is shown to be of a totally different kind than ceaseless continuance; there is no competition between the Logos’s historical existence in Jesus and creation’s dependence upon the Logos, for the Christian infinite is not the opposite of the finite, but is the heart and source of all finite being.

Christ’s two natures are therefore not dialectically related, with his person forming some kind of grotesque synthesis. They do not compete for some discrete portion of his person, nor do they play a psychological tug-of-war over the totality of it, as Kazantzakis’s Christ does.\textsuperscript{20} Rather, the natures are in total harmony, having a real similarity, but a similarity within and under an ever-greater dissimilarity, as the Fourth Lateran Council recognized.\textsuperscript{21} The fact of Christ’s two natures preserves—indeed, one could go so far as to say that it \textit{establishes}—the distinction between Creator and creation even while revealing the fundamental link between them, as Maximus the Confessor writes: “It was fitting for the Creator of the universe, who by the economy of his incarnation became what by nature he was not, to preserve without change both what he himself was by nature and what he became in his incarnation.”\textsuperscript{22}

Given this understanding of God’s transcendence, it is clear that time is not a problem for God. It is a problem for humanity. Were God’s infinity only a quantitative ever-more to humanity’s time, then time would be as problematic for God as it is for us; God would be an unimaginably large being, but still a being, defined by death, even if by an everlasting evasion of death. But God is wholly life and light;
death is unreality for God. God’s infinity, then, is not a response to or even a negation of death, but is fully life without any remainder. In the Incarnation, God revealed his infinite time (which is nothing other than God as actus purus): the eternally present reality of God speaking God to God through which all life and reality springs forth into being. While the earliest strata of Christian teaching do not articulate this with absolute clarity, it is nothing other than the logically working out of the Christocentric cosmology that permeates the New Testament (creation as “in” “for” “to” “by” Christ). Creation is not an event within historical time, but is the foundation of historical time itself, yet it is paradoxically, proleptically dependent upon a contingent event seen within the midst of time: the Incarnation. The birth of Jesus Christ then does not really belong to a time, but is the fullness of all time, revealing the nature of time and creation. The Incarnation does not “happen” at a time, but eternally occurs as the Logos is placed and “thickened” (to use the evocative language of Gregory of Nazianzus and later Maximus) in the logoi of all creation.

The Christian infinite is thus an answer to the problem of human existence as being toward death. God is revealed to be transcendent, the source and ground of all finite being, who therefore cannot “be” at a distance from his creation, but is himself the principle at the heart of it. God’s transcendence was not muted in the immanence of the flesh of Jesus Christ, but was revealed to be so infinitely other than fleeting finite being that there is no competition between them. In Christ we see God’s infinity as that place where the principium contradictionis does not hold. Nicholas of Cusa understood this and spoke of God as the “simplicity where contradictories coincide,” making it clear that God does not forsake, abandon, or destroy finite creation, but fulfills it in the infinitely more of himself: “You do not read one thing in eternity and another with those who read in time, but the same; you do both, in the same way, because you are not changeable but are fixed eternity. However, because eternity does not forsake time, it seems to be moved with time, although in eternity motion
This divine “more than time” is the only answer to the impending death that haunts the dark corners of all human consciousness. If God is understood as the source, end, and sustaining heart of all creation, then there is not a wintry tempest outside of King Edwin’s hall, but only the never-ending song of perichoretic love. Maximus understands this when he reflects on the telos of all human nature joining in this song in his Mystagogy:

The triple exclamation of holiness which all the faithful people proclaim in the divine hymn represents the union and the equality of honor to be manifested in the future with the incorporeal and intelligent powers. In this state human nature, in harmony with the powers on high through the identity of an inflexible eternal movement around God, will be taught to sing and to proclaim holy with a triple holiness the single Godhead in three Persons.

The Christian infinite is then a moment of enlightenment, a discovery of the harmony by which reality subsists, in the words of Fredrick Buechner’s fictionalized medieval hermit, Godric, “What’s lost is nothing to what’s found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.”

A brief excursus seems necessary here, for the natural question to follow this reflection is: why is there finite time at all? Revelation disrupts the hard-won but precarious peace that humanity had established with the cosmos. After one enters into the world of Revelation, Rosenzweig writes, “this same image of the ancient world, where one felt well before, this Platonic and Aristotelian cosmos suddenly became a world where one no longer feels at home, a disquieting world [unheimelige, unheimliche Welt].” When juxtaposed with the infinite, the world of finite time seems strange and needless, not even a pale imitation of God’s abundant life. But if finite time comes about as a result of God’s gratuitous act of creation, then in its purity it must be a kind of image of God, revealing something of the divine nature. What might the fleeting vicissitudes of finite time
reveal of the impassible and uncreated Creator? One possibility is that God’s nature as pure act, movement, and surprise is seen in the drama of finite time. If God is indeed pure act, pure event, then there is one thing that is impossible for him: routine. Thus, part of the answer to the mystery of why there is finite time at all seems to be that God providentially built change into reality as a sign of his eternal newness.\textsuperscript{28}

Returning to the picture of humanity with which we began, humanity lost in the infinite empty spaces, encased by nonbeing, we see now that the Christian myth of the Incarnation is anything but an evasion of death, an opiate or salve for the masses. It is, finally, the only myth capable of entering into vital dialogue with the dialectic of idealism and the \textit{Lebensphilosophie} of the Dionysian, without bracketing some aspect of the richness of human experience through either an obscuring of the individual or a reconciliation to what is inherently irreconcilable: death. Christ as myth, Balthasar writes, “can enter into a vital dialogue with the mystical final sense of German idealism and \textit{Lebensphilosophie}, he can identify himself as that concrete reality, which these periods long for in their deepest desires.”\textsuperscript{29}

Thus, far from being a mere rebuttal and rejection of all modern thought, Balthasar’s \textit{Apokalypse} actually brings modern thought to its fulfillment in Christianity. At the conclusion of the final volume of the ambitious project, Balthasar alludes to an image of the Promethean myth—the finite reaching for the absolute—and the Dionysian myth—finitude’s embracing of its self-limitation—as the two beams of the cross, one stretched vertically to heaven in an effort to transcend and one stretched horizontally within the finite frame. As God-man, Christ unites and harmonizes these two forms, and in so doing gives the world its form. He writes, “Christ gives the world its form and its law, through his \textit{living} in the cross, it is this that the cross expresses graphically. Therefore, it is also here that ‘Prometheus Bound’ and ‘Dionysus Crucified’ find their enlightenment.”\textsuperscript{30}
II. The Memory of God and the Catastrophe of History

a. Posing the Problem:

irdisch gewesen zu sein, scheint nicht widerrufbar

Human identity is bound to time. There is no identity without continuity of consciousness through time in memory, experience, and expectation. Although no person is simply a passive product of what has happened to him or her, all people are shaped in significant ways by past events and relationships. One cannot excise the memories of childhood or the names and stories of past friends while maintaining one’s identity. Each human life is characterized by a fleeting unrepeatability; we live only once and only in one direction, as Rilke’s penultimate Duino Elegy memorably captures:

Us, the most fleeting ones. Once
each, only one time. One time and no more. And we too
once. Never again. But to have been this
once, though only once:
to have been earthly seems irreversible.  

To have been earthly seems irreversible. The past has happened and it seems that it cannot be undone. This time-bound nature of human identity poses a particularly vexing theological problem: how can time-bound humans be redeemed? This question is deeper than first appears—indeed it is perhaps the strongest argument against Christian belief (which is not to say that it is unanswerable). In one corner of his sprawling Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin asks it in a particularly forceful way by considering whether history is complete or incomplete in itself. It must be incomplete, he first posits, for the great sufferings and injustices that fill history are completed and incapable of being undone. The only possible consolation to this deeply tragic picture is that those who have established their “justice” through the enactment of every kind of horrifying evil must suffer recompense. History is incomplete because it is awaiting the Final Judgment—though since such a judgment has no power to undo
what has been done it can provide little solace to those who are presently perishing. Benjamin quotes a letter of Max Horkheimer, who wrote to this effect saying,

The determination of incompleteness is idealistic if completeness is not comprised within it. Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain. . . . If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the Last Judgment. . . . Perhaps, with regard to incompleteness, there is a difference between the positive and the negative, so that only the injustice, the horror, the sufferings of the past are irreparable. The justice practiced, the joys, the works, have a different relation to time, for their positive character is largely negated by the transience of things. This holds first and foremost for individual existence, in which it is not the happiness but the unhappiness that is sealed by death.32

One sees how Horkheimer is moving beyond the Hegelian resolution in some universal historical future, a move which leaves each individual event and life insignificant, but in so doing the image of history left for him is quite dismal. Perhaps this is an accurate picture of what history is. Perhaps a clear-eyed look at the past sufferings in history is incapable of being answered or resolved in any way, hanging as an eternal and irresolvable question before all theological and philosophical systems, or perhaps a theological answer can be posited in hope.

b. Answering the Problem

Logically speaking, there appear to be three possible answers to the troubling finality of historical happening; all of them appear unsatisfying, though for different reasons. First, one could suggest that some future divinely enacted reconciliation among victims, victimizers, and God will undo the horrors endured by the victims in history. The Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis*, while never exalted to the status of a dogma, has a continual persistence in the Christian tradition. One
of the reasons for this is undoubtedly its ability to resolve the great injustices of history in the love and activity of God through the outworking of the Incarnation. Yet, despite its attractiveness, it seems to sacrifice justice for the sake of peace and reconciliation. Such is the basis of Ivan’s famous rebellion against God in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*; Ivan rejects the faith of his younger brother Alyosha for its lack of ultimate justice and judgment. He recounts not the untold suffering of those who have died at the hands of untamed nature, but those who have experienced horrifying abuse at the hands of their fellow humans. The most disturbing account, drawn directly from the newspapers of Dostoevsky’s own day, is the story of a five-year-old girl, forced by her parents to sit in a freezing outhouse in the cold Russian night, excrement forced into her mouth and smeared all over her face, as punishment for wetting the bed. This small child, weeping in the darkness—how can this child’s suffering be allowed to happen? Even if God were capable of building a future in which this daughter and her parents could be reconciled, what right has he to push aside that little girl’s tears to establish it? Thus, out of a sincere love of humanity and justice, Ivan rejects God’s offered reconciliation. No person has posed so starkly the problem of suffering and redemption as the Christian Dostoevsky’s atheist Ivan.  

If a future reconciliation cannot finally make right what history has made wrong, then perhaps the answer could be found elsewhere in time. Perhaps God can wipe away the memories of past indignities and infirmities, dispensing with memory’s persistence. This would seem to solve the problem straightforwardly enough. If no suffering in history is allowed to continue into eternity through the mechanism of memory, then there does not seem to be the same need for a universal reconciliation in light of past wrongs, for those wrongs, having been forgotten, in a certain sense are no longer true. However, this option also fails to answer Ivan Karamazov’s criticism, for the little girl’s tears streaming down her dirty face in the night fall into nothingness; and if those tears fall into nothingness, the girl falls as well. Unjust suffering is not wrong primarily because it breaks
some moral code of the universe, but because it destroys a human person by introducing her to the hellish world of anguish, branding her from that point evermore as victim. To erase the pain inflicted upon the victim does not redeem the victim, but destroys her. If human identity is created by the complex interplay of social interaction and individual consciousness through continuity in memory, then the memory of past suffering cannot be dispensed with without at the same time fundamentally transforming that person into something other than who she is.

If the answer to suffering in history cannot be found in some future reconciliation nor in some divine undoing of the past then perhaps it lies in God’s time, neither past nor future. That is, perhaps the nature of divine infinity can answer the problem of suffering in linear time. God’s time is so qualitatively different from human time that the finality of historical happening is lost within the infinity of his *apatheia*. This is indeed true; if we are drawn out of historical time into infinite time, then the knotty problems posed by suffering, change, and happening turn liquid before God’s infinite dynamic exchange. This is an attractive image. One can easily see why many religions and traditions speak about losing oneself in the ocean of infinite being; the only real redemption possible, given the brutish character of historical existence, is a total escape from it. Even if the price paid is the loss of self, such price is demanded by the pearl of salvation. This escapist picture is by no means limited to the religion of the Vedas: one sees it in the gospel of the “alien God” preached by Marcion and Valentinus and even periodically in the Christian tradition (Meister Eckhart can seem at times to advocate a version of it). Despite its logical inscrutability and persuasive power, it is still a somewhat disturbing picture that cannot but result in the conclusion that contingent creation full of suffering is either an absolute necessity or else a tragic mistake. A truly Christian proclamation of redemption for those who suffer and die in time cannot be a call to be dissolved into the vastness of divine infinity; such would not be a participation in divine nature, but an absorption into it.
c. The Memory of God

Walter Benjamin is not satisfied with Horkheimer’s bleak picture of historical existence as incomplete until recompense comes for the victims, themselves locked in the finality of their victimhood, but he has also learned from Rosenzweig that Hegel’s resolution is nothing but an unsatisfying evasion, so he advocates no return to such Idealism. The move that he makes in response to Horkheimer’s assertion of the finality of suffering has the beginnings of a Christian answer. Benjamin writes,

“... what has happened is not set in stone, immutable once and for all, but is opened and capable of being recast through the creative act of remembrance. This can only be done theologically since the very act of remembrance presupposes that the world is not sealed in on itself (if it were the past could be captured or deduced in a way not unlike how the atomic weight of an element is calculated), but is permeable and open-ended. Through remembrance past wounds can be opened, allowing for healing and reconciliation; the final period of a life prematurely ended can be transformed into a comma leading to new possibilities. If the story of history is not complete, then neither is the past. As long as there is time, there is remembrance, which can make alive that which was dead.

But remembrance can only get one so far, for by its nature it operates within finite time, taking advantage of time’s incompleteness. At some point in our reflection, history itself—the stubborn
intractability of happening and suffering—must give way to that which is not time. Benjamin names this problem (but is unable to answer it) in perhaps the most famous section from one of his last works, *Theses on the Concept of History*, where he describes the image of the “Angel of History,” inspired by a painting he carried with him entitled “Angelus Novus.” The painting educes Benjamin to consider the whole of history, seen from the vantage point of the future:

> This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.³⁶

Remembrance can operate with creative fervor in history, recasting past wrongs in a new light, but such recasting cannot go on forever, and the single catastrophe of history continues to grow. Creative remembrance is an immanent answer to the problem of suffering; it stands silent before the transcendent totality of the whole.

Benjamin’s theological interpretation of remembrance is not enough to answer the problem of suffering, for it leaves us ultimately motionless before a mountain of death, paralyzed to do anything but sing a blind hymn about dry bones. If Benjamin’s interpretation of remembrance is incorporated into a Christian vision, however, then it can shine a new light. If the act of remembering of the past, recasting suffering and opening up new possibilities is not the act of finite humans, but the act of an infinite God, then the possibilities opened must be as boundless as that infinity. That is, if it is the infinite and impassible God who remembers the past, then the past is not closed and can never be closed.
The Christian tradition has long held that the most persisting and infecting temptation is that of arrogating divinity into humanity (“Eat and you shall be like gods”). The sufferings in history inflicted upon the weak and the innocent are nothing other than this perennial sin enacted: reaching beyond the pure gratuity of being to assert violently my will upon reality through murder. Rowan Williams fittingly calls this the “apocalyptic delusion”—the belief that we can assume the divine role of acting permanently in history by stamping out the life of another. Though we do not have the powers of creation, we assert the power to destroy and so claim dominion over reality. However, the concept of God’s memory of the past of victims undoes this arrogation of final activity, giving new life into that which has been dead. The Incarnation demonstrates that God remembers as one who suffers as a victim in history, not as a cosmic umpire inactively observing history unfold from a considerable distance. God is very near to the victims of history, going so far as to locate himself there, so that his memory enfolds their memory. In Christ, God identifies himself as pure victim without a shred of guilt or violence in him, and receiving into himself the extremity of humanity’s expulsive violence. Thus, God’s “memory” is not other than the victim’s memory, and this remembering is a literal re-membering, a making whole of what was broken, a giving again of what was taken; God redeems the past by taking it into himself and raising it in his resurrection. Williams writes,

God’s “memory” is the victim’s memory: yet because the life of God is a life without worldly limits, worldly constraints on its possibilities, the memory of suffering here is—we might say—embedded in an inexhaustible life. God receives the victim’s pain into an infinite selfhood and self-presence; and so when he returns to us the memory of what has been done, it is as a memory inseparably bound to a reality which guarantees the hope of healing because its resources and possibilities cannot be exhausted or extinguished by the world’s destructiveness. 37
Christ’s defeat of death through resurrection cleanses us of the presumption that the death we deal is final, that the suffering of history cannot be undone, that the only ultimate act in history is that act performed by the executioner. Instead, he shows us that divinity is not the power or prerogative to judge and destroy, but is a well-spring of infinite creative love, and this is a divinity we are invited to arrogate to ourselves. Humanity acts with apocalyptic finality only when humanity imitates God in love. Love cannot be undone even by death, but death can, and indeed is, undone by love. The Christian answer to the problem of suffering in history is nothing other than the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection, of God’s revelation of himself as infinite and infinitely merciful, infinitely loving, and infinitely life. “Before God,” writes St. Isaac of Nineveh, “all the sin of the flesh is but a handful of sand thrown into the immense sea.”38 The abyss of infinity that hems us in behind and before, into which the souls of the victims are so tragically cast by the violent, is not an abyss of darkness, but an abyss of love. George MacDonald aptly summarized not only the Christian response to the suffering of history, but indeed the whole Gospel, when he wrote, “Nothing is inexorable but love.”39

Notes

1. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.22. I would like to thank Alex Giltner, David Hart, and Grant Kaplan for their comments on a draft of this article. I am also grateful to Theological Horizons for awarding the Goodwin Prize to an earlier version of this article. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.


4. It is beyond ambitious to try to consider comprehensively such complexities in so few pages, which is why I have titled this article a “reflection”; it is an opened-ended consideration of how the Christian Gospel might affect our understanding of time.

5. Gerard Manley Hopkins captures this with a poignancy few others are capable of achieving in his poem “Spring and Fall,” which addresses a young girl, Margaret, who
mourns the falling of leaves from trees. Hopkins concludes by answering his own question, "It is the blight man was born for,/It is Margaret you mourn for." Gerard Manley Hopkins, Poems and Prose (New York: Penguin, 1984), 50.

6. For example, Heidegger writes with characteristic insight into humanity’s ontological state and to our reaction to that state:

   Being-towards-the-end does not first arise through some attitude which occasionally emerges, nor does it arise as such an attitude; it belongs essentially to Dasein’s thrownness, which reveals itself in a state-of-mind (mood) in one way or another. . . . Factically, there are many who, proximally and for the most part, do not know about death; but this must not be passed off as a ground for proving that Being-towards-death does not belong to Dasein “universally.” It only proves that proximally and for the most part Dasein covers up its ownmost Being-towards-death, fleeing in the face of it.


   But those who clearly perceive these truths will be able to admire the grandeur and power of nature in this double infinity that surrounds us on all sides, and to learn by this marvelous consideration to know themselves, in regarding themselves thus placed between infinitude and a negation of extension, between an infinitude and a negation of number, between an infinitude and a negation of movement, between an infinitude and a negation of time. From which we may learn to estimate ourselves at our true value, and to form reflections which will be worth more than all the rest of geometry itself.


18. Nietzsche writes,

> Today everyone allows himself to express his dearest wish and thoughts: so I, too, want to say what I wish from myself today and what thought first crossed my heart—what thought shall be the reason, warrant, and sweetness of the rest of my life! I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them—thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let *looking away* be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a *Yes-sayer*!

21. “*Inter Creatorem et creaturam non potest tanta similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda.*” “Between the Creator and the creature so great a likeness cannot be noted without the necessity of noting a greater dissimilarity between them.” Heinrich Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2002), 171 (no. 433).

28. Balthasar makes this same point, writing that “God built change and surprise into finite time, then, in order to make it an image of the infinite time that is his.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Finite Time Within Eternal Time,” in *Explorations in Theology* vol 5: *Man is Created*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2014), 55.


34. This answer is posited in Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).


