New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12185

Time Meets Eternity: The Incarnation's Significance for History and Culture

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Introduction: A Poetic Image

"Time itself had merged into eternity."[1] This line from the short story, "Babette's Feast," by Isak Dinesen, describes succinctly the power of the Christian faith to shape life on earth. Dinesen's story presents the austere life of members of a Lutheran sect in their small Norwegian village: "Its members renounced all the pleasures of this world, for the earth and all that it held to them was but a kind of illusion, and the true reality was the New Jerusalem toward which they were longing."[2] Their renouncing of the pleasures of this life was unexpectedly interrupted by a feast prepared by a French, Catholic woman, Babette, who provides the occasion for the guests to realize that "grace is infinite."[3] Yet, this infinity pours itself upon the characters in and through their finiteness, offering them a glimpse of "the universe as it really is."[4] They experience the realization of what was surrendered, lost, or unachievable in time through the outpouring of grace, occasioned by the sacramental embodiment of this grace in the context of a human meal.

This story powerfully introduces the Christian understanding of the way in which eternity enters into history and culture. This poetic image, then, will be our starting point for a theological reflection on the way in which the temporal is shaped and formed by the eternal. The poetic image, however, must give way to God's own expression or revelation of himself in time, especially in the Incarnation. The incarnational reality of the eternal God entering the world must be the center of any understanding of how time and the world are shaped by eternity. The entrance of God into history, also, is continued in the Church and its role in shaping earthly culture. And yet, questions

[1] Isak Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," in *Anecdotes of Destiny* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 61.
[2] Ibid., p. 23.
[3] Ibid., p. 60.
[4] Ibid., p. 62.

and objections emerge over how exactly time is related to eternity. Did not Jesus seek to point us beyond the world toward eternity, stating that his kingdom was not of this world (Jn 18:36)? Were we not cautioned against the temptation to create a lasting city on the earth (Heb 13:14)? What then are the limits and real possibilities for the instantiation of the Gospel into the world? Is the merging of time into eternity simply an extravagant poetic image? This essay will present a theological reflection on the relation of time and eternity, answering objections against too closely relating them, by drawing upon interpretations of Scripture, the Incarnation impact upon history, and the magisterial teaching of the Church.

Objections

David Bentley Hart has recently issued a challenge to too readily accepting the permeation of history and culture by the Christian faith. Hart starts off his essay, "No Enduring City," with the right parameters: "For, if indeed God became incarnate within history in order to reconcile time to eternity, then it only stands to reason that the event of Christ should be one that never ceases to unfold in time, with discernable consequences and in substantial forms."[5] He then continues: "Yet the actual historical record of Christian society hardly encourages confidence . . . with innumerable institutional betrayals of the Gospel."[6] I think Hart provides a helpful contribution in demonstrating the limits of Christian culture and the ability of history to be shaped by eternity. Time remains simply time with all its limits, even if it penetrated by the divine.

The problem, however, consists in Hart's overemphasis of the Gospel's subversiveness. He emphasizes that in line with the fact that Jesus's Kingdom is not of this world (a key theme that I will return to below) the Gospel contains "a very real and irreducible element of sheer contrariness towards the most respectable of human institutions."[7] This is because "the Gospel is . . . something essentially subversive of the accustomed orders of human power, preeminence, law, social prudence, religion, and government."[8] Hart seems only reluctantly to acknowledge the culture-building aspect of the Gospel, and in the end rather sees it more as culturally destabilizing. He argues that "the pattern established by Christ" draws "out of the economies of society and culture, and into the immediacy of

[5] David Bentley Hart, "No Enduring City," *First Things* (Aug/Sep 2013): pp. 45-51, at p. 45.

[6] Ibid., pp. 45-46.

[7] Ibid., p. 46.

[8] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that event," an event which leads to "the impulse to rebellion" toward institutionalization.[9]

Although Hart admits that Christianity can form culture, he also insists that this culture is necessarily "unstable" and "encumber[s] the faith with a weight of historical and cultural expectation often incompatible with the Gospel."[10] In the end, he conjectures that "perhaps [the Gospel's] presence in human history should always be shatteringly angelic."[11] This assertion seems to undermines his previous statements that the Gospel can form culture. What is at stake is whether the Gospel truly and abidingly can permeate the temporal or rather must lie simply beyond the world, as something angelic. Hence, Hart presents a challenge to traditional notion that culture is an appropriate vehicle for embodying the Gospel within history.

Remi Brague also questions the extent to which we can relate the Gospel to culture and civilization. First, positively, he states that "the idea of creation by a good God has as consequence the following thesis on the nature and the dignity of the sensible: sensible realities are, in themselves, good. . . . European culture carries the stamp of what one might call . . . the sanctity of the sensible."[12] And yet, Brague also speaks of the limits of the instantiation of Christianity in Western culture:

> To speak of the Christian heritage of Europe bothers me. And for even greater reason, speaking of "Christian civilization." Christianity was founded by people who could not have cared less about "Christian civilization." What interested them was Christ, and the reverberations of his coming on the whole of human existence. Christians believed in Christ, not in Christianity itself; they were Christians, not "Christianists."[13]

In spite of this hesitation, Brague has much to contribute to a proper understanding of Europe and Christianity's role within it. He understands the importance of the Incarnation for a theological understanding of history and culture, stating that "Christianity makes the history of God pass through the history of man."[14]

[9] Ibid., p. 48; p. 49.

[10] Ibid., p. 50.

[11] Ibid., p. 51.

[12] Remi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), p. 171.

[13] Remi Brague, *The Legend of the Middle Ages: Philosophical Explorations of Medieval Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 21-2. See also, *Eccentric Culture*, pp. 43-4; Gianni Valente, "Christians and 'Christianists,'" *30 Days* 10 (2004), http://www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_5332_l3.htm, which is an interview with Brague.

[14] Brague, *Eccentric Culture*, p. 171.

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However, I question Brague's refusal to recognize the importance of Christian civilization for Christians. He gives the example of Gregory the Great as someone fixed solely on eternity, and thus not interested in culture building: "Now, he believed that the end of the world was very near, an end that to his mind would remove the space in which any 'Christian civilization' might establish itself."[15] Yet, Gregory spent his early career in government, most notably as Prefect of Rome, and wrote not simply of the enteral, but of the need to govern and lead, within his famous *Pastoral Rule*. Gregory's great insight is that it is precisely the man who has withdrawn his spirit from the spirit of the world, who can lead and govern well within the world: "Whence, for a ruler to be able to infuse what may profit inwardly, it is necessary for him, with blameless consideration, to provide also for outward things."[16] This is precisely what Gregory did, enabling him to be one of the founders of medieval Christian culture.

Finally, in Lorenzo Albacete we see a similar challenge to the effort to create a Christian culture:

> We cannot place our hopes on the creation of a "Christian culture," and even less on going back to an idyllic past where Christianity maintained cultural hegemony. Such historical developments are not for us to design or plan. We do not know and will never know the "time plan" which the Father has for human history. Instead, we must place our hope not on cultural proposals but on the event of Christ, on something that has already happened.[17]

I certainly agree with Albacete that the Christ event is our only hope and that we should not look to the creation of culture as an end in itself. The question, however, pertains to the issue of "design or plan." Does Christ have a design or plan for culture, which would make Christian culture a goal, even if it is a secondary one? To answer this question, and the others raised by the Hart and Brague, we need first to examine the relation of time and eternity, and from there we can proceed more precisely to the effect that Christ and Christian faith have upon our understanding of culture and history.

[15] Ibid., p. 144.

[16] St. Gregory the Great, "Pastoral Rule," trans. James Barmby, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 12, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895), II. 7.

[17] Lorenzo Albacete, "The Key to the Christian Life," *Traces: Communion and Liberation International Magazine* 4 (April 2003). I would point the reader to Albacete's earlier piece, "The Method to Cultivate Life," *Traces* 2 (Feb 2003), for a more balanced approach to culture.

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Matthew Lamb on Time and Eternity

Fr. Matthew Lamb provides important clarity on the relation of time and eternity. Lamb asserts that "the Infinite does not negate but creates the finite, Spiritual does not negate but creates the material, the Eternal does negate but creates the temporal."[18] He contrasts this understanding with "the opposition and dualism between divine eternity and time that both classical and modern philosophers have erected."[19] Typifying this dualism is Rousseau, whose *Confessions*, in particular, leads the way to the view that restricts reality "to what can be dated and placed" with the result that "humans" become "locked into our own individuality."[20] Following the Enlightenment, it has become typical to hold to a complete separation and isolation between time and eternity, with the limits of time governing and guiding a secularized culture.

Lamb looks back to an earlier *Confessions*, that of Augustine, which puts forward a more profound understanding: "History is not movement but conscious conversation and communion. History is most profoundly prayer."[21] This insight is based on the understanding that "the eternal is no apersonal permanence; the eternal is inter-personal presence."[22] Eternity is no abstract concept or far removed reality, but is grounded in the personal reality of God. Following from this understanding of eternity, "the reality of history is glimpsed in human presence. The reality of history is known in an ongoing conversation, a dialogue down through the ages, in which the time-span embraces all of humankind."[23] The human person is not sectioned off from eternity in a time-bound individualism, but, rather, is ordered toward the eternal through the inter-personal conversion of prayer in the divine presence.[24]

This profound understanding of time and eternity lays the foundation for an equally profound grounding of human culture. If the person's place in time must be understood in terms of dialogue with the eternal, culture must be understood as rooted in the nature that

[18] Matthew L. Lamb, *Eternity, Time, and the Life of Wisdom* (Ave Maria: FL, Sapientia Press, 2007), p. 115.

[19] Ibid., p. 9.

[20] Ibid., p. 3.

[21] Ibid., p. 2.

[22] Ibid., p. 52.

[23] Ibid., p. 7.

[24] "Eternity does not denigrate time, but creates time in order, through intelligent creatures, to invite a return. Augustine presents God as 'totum esse praesens,' the fullness of Being as Presence freely creating, sustaining, and redeeming the universe and all of human history in the Triune Presence" (Matthew L. Lamb, "Temporality and History: Reflections from St. Augustine and Bernard Lonergan," *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): pp. 815-50, at p. 829.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

makes this dialogue possible: "Studying the reflections of an Augustine or an Aquinas on the nature of the human mind and its operations, if the study is sapiential, enables one to discover the related and recurrent operations of one's own rational soul and mind. This is precisely why concern for culture requires more, not less, attention to nature as normative."[25] Rooting culture in human nature does not confine it to history and time, because this nature is rooted in the natural law, which "is not constituted by human cultures or human traditions; it is constituted by the Eternal Law who is God, who alone can create."[26] Culture should not closed in on itself, but rather support the meeting of time in eternity in dialogue with God.

We could say that culture ultimately comes from God, through his creation of human nature, and is ordered back toward God, in sustaining human life in its relation to eternity. Turning to St. Ambrose, Lamb shows us how profoundly the eternal has broken forth into time: "Ambrose indicates how the eternal God not only creates all time, but also redeems time through his covenant with Israel now, in the fullness of time, in the Incarnate Word, who as true God and true man bestows the fullness of beatitude and grace by embracing the whole of humankind in his ascension through suffering into eternal glory."[27] Revelation shows us that God has shaped time in the life of his chosen people, Israel, and then most fully in his own entrance into time in the Incarnation.

The Shaping of Culture in Scripture

Following Lamb's insights, I now turn to the question of the relation of time and eternity as revealed in the historical *narratio* of Scripture and the reality of the Incarnation. We return to the question raised by the objections: exactly how much can we recognize the shaping of history and culture by the eternal? I will first look at two Scripture scholars, N.T. Wright and C. Kavin Rowe, for insights from the Old and New Testaments before turning to the Incarnation.

First, N.T. Wright's *After You Believe*, although problematic at some points (especially in relation to happiness),[28] provides helpful insight in relation to the problem of the division of time and eternity.

[25] Matthew L. Lamb, "Nature Is Normative for Culture," *Nova et Vetera* 3 (2005): pp. 153-162, at p. 156.

[26] Ibid., p. 161.

[27] Lamb, "Temporality and History," p. 830.

[28] For instance: "To begin with, you have to grasp the fact that Christian virtue isn't about *you*—your happiness, your fulfillment, your self-realization. It's about God and God's kingdom" (N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HaperOne, 2010), p. 70. I do not dispute Wright's theo-centric focus, but rather the false dichotomy that is placed between this focus and that of happiness.

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He does not focus on philosophical concept, but rather on many Christians' notion that keeps eternity as a goal outside of time. Wright criticizes such a view as it does not "generate a vision of the present life," which could anticipate eternity on earth.[29] In separating time and eternity, Christians reflect with confusion on their temporal lives and ask the question, "what am I here for?"[30] The answer, for Wright, is found in the "royal and priestly vocation of all human beings ... to stand at the interface between God and his creation, bringing God's wise and generous order to the world and giving articulate voice to creation's glad and grateful praise to its maker."[31] Man as interface between God and creation shows us that time and eternity are meant to be bridged in human life.

This vision is embodied in the bookends of Scripture: in Genesis, where man and woman are invited to a "glad and free collaboration" with God, and Revelation where "that sovereignty, that dominion, that wise stewardship" of Genesis will be completely fulfilled.[32] The foundational passage for humanity's cultural mission is found in Genesis 1:26-28: "And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (RSV, Catholic edition). Wright comments on this passage, inferring that creation "was designed as a *project*, created in order to go somewhere. The creator has a future in mind for it; and Human—this strange creature, full of mystery and glory—is the means by which the creator is going to take his project forward."[33] It should be noted that this culture-forming task, of subduing and cultivating the earth, is tied in Genesis to the fact that man is made in the image of God. This draws us back to Lamb's insight on the role of human nature as rational as foundational for culture.

Wright sees the ultimate fulfillment of this project of creation in the new heavens and new earth in Revelation 21:2. The role of humanity in this new creation will fulfill the initial vocation that can only be partially fulfilled after the Fall. Wright sees this vision throughout Revelation (1:5-6; 3:21; 5:9-10), but most fully in 20:6: "Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him." Only in the renewal of all things will the soul be able to exercise the royal priesthood over creation fully, though this sharing of the kingship of Christ should be anticipated

29 Ibid., p. 69.
30 Ibid., p. 2. This is also the title of the first chapter.
31 Ibid., p. 81.
32 Ibid., p. 76; 78.
33 Ibid., p. 74.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

here and now. Wright notes how this happens in that "the original vision for creation . . . had been recaptured and restored through Jesus's inauguration of God's sovereign rule."[34]

C. Kavin Rowe's *World Upside Down*, a commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, shows us in more detail how the inauguration of God's rule was embodied in the establishment of the Church. One of Rowe's fundamental claims is that "the book of Acts narrates the formation of a new culture."[35] Acts is "a culture forming narrative," which "entails a necessary challenge to constitutive patterns of pagan life. Embracing the theological vision of the Christian gospel simultaneously creates a new cultural reality."[36] This new cultural reality is described as a "pattern of life," one which ultimately embodies the "pattern of Jesus's own life."[37] Jesus's teaching turns the world upside down, precisely because the pattern of life that he introduces overturns all competing claims for primacy in history and culture.

In both his Gospel and Acts, Luke clearly portrays Christ as a king, and rejects the impulse to place that kingship beyond the world. "Yet, against every Gnosticizing impulse, the vision in Acts is of a kingdom that is every bit as much a human presence as it is a divine work. That is, the kingdom of which Jesus is King is not simply 'spiritual' but also material and social, which is to say that it takes up space in public."[38] Rowe continues to show how Christ shapes history and culture, by determining "theologically the practical outworking of life," especially through a Lordship embodied in "humble service."[39] This service is not private or individual, but, rather, we see that "Christian mission . . . actively socializes the salvific reality that attends Jesus's universal Lordship."[40] Rowe helps us to see how Christ's kingdom fundamentally exists in and through his followers, who accept his lordship in that kingdom by living a life that conforms to that of the king. The essence of Christian culture entails embracing and living the pattern of Christ.

Although we see grounds for objections in the limits of the Fall and in that Christ has turned the world upside down, nonetheless, we see from these two exegetes that God does not simply draw us beyond the world. From the very beginning of creation, God has a plan to shape and guide history, to form a way of life or culture. Christ has inaugurated this most fully in his kingdom, which though

[34] Ibid., p. 77.

[35] C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 140.

[36] Ibid., p. 4.

[37] Ibid., p. 102; p. 173.

[38] Ibid., p. 101.

[39] Ibid., p. 114.

[40] Ibid., p. 124.

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it is not of this world essentially, does exist in the world. *Dei Verbum* makes this clear by stating that "Christ established the kingdom of God on earth" (§17). We see Christ's kingdom on earth especially in the Church, as Augustine makes clear: "The Church is already now the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven."[41] Pope Benedict XVI also indicates that we must see the foundation of the Kingdom "through Jesus's presence and action," by which "God has here and now entered actively into history."[42] Further, he says that "to pray for the Kingdom of God is to say to Jesus: Let us be yours, Lord! Pervade us, live in us. . . . so that in you everything may be subordinated to God."[43] The salvific Christ event is precisely what enables eternity to penetrate into time and to shape it. Although it will always be a frail and imperfect embodiment, we cannot simply call it angelic. Christian faith must take on flesh in the world, both privately and publicly, which is ultimately founded upon Christ's own taking on of flesh in the world.

The Incarnation as the Center of History

The shaping of time by eternity finds it central point in the manifestation of the Word in history. *Gaudium et Spes* confirms this reality:

> [The Church] likewise holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history. The Church also maintains that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, Who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever Gaudium et Spes (1965:§10).

Christ is not only the goal of history, but he takes "history up into Himself . . . summarizing it" (Ibid., §38). Pope Benedict, before his election, may have stated the relation of time and eternity in the Incarnation most clearly:

> Christ is himself the bridge between time and eternity. At first it seems as if there can be no connection between the 'always' of eternity and the 'flowing away' of time. But now the eternal One himself has taken time to himself. In the Son, time co-exists with eternity. . . . In the

[41] St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XX, 9. See also *Lumen Gentium* §3: "To carry out the will of the Father, Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of heaven on earth and revealed to us the mystery of that kingdom. By His obedience He brought about redemption. The Church, or, in other words, the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly through the power of God in the world."

[42] Josef Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, *From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. 60.

[43] Ibid., p. 147.

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> Word Incarnate, who remains man forever, the presence of eternity with time becomes bodily and concrete.[44]

The problem of the relation of time and eternity finds its solution in Christ.

This understanding of history, centered and fulfilled in the Incarnation, is presented very clearly in the thought of Christopher Dawson. In studying history, Dawson claims we are not only studying "a natural process," but "we are also studying a theological mystery—the life of Christ in history—the progressive penetration of humanity by divine revelation, the extension of the Incarnation in the life of the Church."[45] The Incarnation captures within itself the fullness of history, as both ordered toward it and enfolding in light of it. This vision of history is "not a secondary element," for Dawson, but "lies at the very heart of Christianity and forms an integral part of the Christian faith."[46] The Christian view of history entails a "belief in the intervention of God in the life of mankind by direct action," especially in the Incarnation, "the centre of history."[47] To see the Incarnation as the center of history "involves a revolutionary reversal and transposition of historical values and judgments."[48] In fact, it entails a "vision of history *sub specie aeternitatis*, an interpretation of time in terms of eternity and of human events in light of divine revelation."[49] We have come back to our central theme: in Christ's Incarnation, we see the fullest entrance of eternity into time, which fundamentally changes our understanding of history.

The Incarnation is not simply one event among many in the course of time. Rather, Dawson notes that "it is a new creation—the introduction of a new spiritual principle which gradually leavens and transforms human nature into something new. The history of the human race hinges on this unique divine event which gives spiritual unity to the whole historical process."[50] Dawson outlines this process in three stages: the preparation of the Old Covenant, the center, in which the Incarnation becomes embodied in the Church, and end, the final and complete establishment of the Kingdom at the consummation of the world. The center of this process is the foundation,

[44] Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 92.

[45] Christopher Dawson, *The Formation of Christendom* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), p. 38.

[46] Christopher Dawson, "The Christian View of History," in *Christianity and European Culture: Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson*, ed. Gerald Russello (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), p. 214.

[47] Ibid., pp. 215-16.

[48] Ibid., p. 217.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., p. 216.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

because "the Christian interpretation of history depends on the continuation and extension of the Incarnation in the life of the Church."[51] Dawson explains this further:

> As the Christian faith in Christ is faith in a real historical person, not an abstract ideal, so the Catholic faith in the church is faith in a real historical society. . . . Hence . . . it is necessary [for the Catholic] to be incorporated as a cell in the living organism of the divine society and to enter into communion with the historic reality of the sacred tradition. . . . a member of a historic society and a spiritual civilization . . . which influences his life and thought consciously and unconsciously in a thousand different ways."[52]

Here we see how the Christian understanding of history is a living reality, which shapes and forms the Christian into the reality of Christ. In short, the life of Christ continuing in history is the basis for Christian culture's role in shaping and influencing the Christian life.

We can also look back to the beginning to see how the Incarnation recapitulates the foundations of history in creation. Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* manifests that creation and humanity are themselves sacramental in the sense that they physically manifest spiritual truths.

> Thus, in this dimension, a primordial sacrament is constituted, understood as a sign that transmits effectively in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden in God from time immemorial. . . . The sacrament, as a visible sign, is constituted with man, as a body, by means of his visible masculinity and femininity. The body, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden since time immemorial in God, and thus be a sign of it.
>
> So in man created in the image of God there was revealed, in a way, the very sacramentality of creation, the sacramentality of the world. Man, in fact, by means of his corporality, his masculinity and femininity, becomes a visible sign of the economy of truth and love, which has its source in God himself and which was revealed already in the mystery of creation.[53]

The body is an outward sign and sacrament of the soul, which is the highest instance of the sacramentality of the world as a sign of God, of the eternal in time. Christ's Incarnation, in turn, is the highest

[51] Christopher Dawson, "The Kingdom of God in History," in *Christianity and European Culture*, p. 210.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Pope John Paul II, "Man Enters the World as a Subject of Truth and Love," General Audience (Feb. 20, 1980), §§4-5.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

realization of this sacramental truth of humanity, which in his new creation heightens this truth and embodies it within his Church.

As the Incarnation recapitulates the past, especially our creation as sacramental beings, so it propels us through time to anticipate the end or consummation of history. The Mass, in particular, is the place where time literally meets eternity, where the eternal one is met and joined in time. Within the Mass, the Church "pours out [grace] upon her children when she raises them from temporal things to give them a foretaste of the joys of eternity."[54] The *Catechism* speaks of this in terms of the kingdom: "The Kingdom of God has been coming since the Last Supper and, in the Eucharist, it is in our midst. the kingdom will come in glory when Christ hands it over to his Father."[55] Indeed, the Eucharist is one of the primary ways in which the Church continues the Incarnation: "The Church knows that the Lord comes even now in his Eucharist and that he is there in our midst. . . . There is no surer pledge or dearer sign of this great hope in the new heavens and new earth 'in which righteousness dwells,' (2 Pet 3:13) than the Eucharist."[56] We are now able to recognize the reality to which our poetic image, with which we began this reflection, directs us. "Time itself had merged with eternity." This occurs during the meal and sacrifice of the Mass as Christ continues his Incarnation in the Church.

Answers to the Objections from the Magisterium

After having presented the importance of culture in Scripture, and the role of the Incarnation in understanding history, I will now turn to the magisterial teaching of the Church to provide a direct answer to the objections that were laid out above. First, we see the relation of time and eternity in *Spe Salvi*. Pope Benedict XVI makes an important point, agreeing with a central claim of Hart, that "the kingdom of good will never be definitively established in this world. Anyone who promises the better world that is guaranteed to last forever is making a false promise; he is overlooking human freedom."[57] This truth, however, cannot be used as an excuse to limit the power of the Gospel to transform the world: "Christianity, faced with the successes of science in progressively structuring the world, has to a large extent restricted its attention to the individual and his salvation. In so doing it has limited the horizon of its hope and has failed to recognize

[54] A Benedictine Monk, *The Sacred Liturgy* (London: St. Austin Press, 1999), p. 31.
[55] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2816.
[56] Ibid., §§1404-05.
[57] Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (2007), §24.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sufficiently the greatness of its task."[58] Its task is not primarily to build an earthly kingdom, but rather to make God's kingdom present on earth through love: "God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us."[59] Benedict seeks to free us from a false hope of earthly progress, but also to inspire to change the world through love.

Benedict, in the end, shows us how Hart is both right and wrong. The Gospel intrinsically changes the world, not by putting its hope in human structures, but by changing these structures by transforming the hearts of those within those structures:

> Even if external structures remained unaltered, this changed society from within. When the *Letter to the Hebrews* says that Christians here on earth do not have a permanent homeland, but seek one which lies in the future (cf. *Heb* 11:13-16; *Phil* 3:20), this does not mean for one moment that they live only for the future: present society is recognized by Christians as an exile; they belong to a new society which is the goal of their common pilgrimage and which is anticipated in the course of that pilgrimage.[60]

The promise of earthly society and culture is not the goal or end of the Christian life, but this does not free the Christian from the responsibility of working toward earthly goods. In fact, Christians can and should be able to achieve these goods to a higher extent, because of their anticipation of the fullest good of eternity: "Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a 'not yet.' The fact that this future exists changes the present; the present is touched by the future reality, and thus the things of the future spill over into those of the present and those of the present into those of the future."[61] Once again, Benedict strikes the right balance, reminding us that "certainly we cannot 'build' the Kingdom of God by our own efforts," but "we can open ourselves and the world and allow God to enter."[62] Eternity shapes time as we open ourselves to God in conversion and the conversation of prayer.

What about the objection of Brague that Christians should not be concerned about building Christian civilization? *Gaudium et Spes*

[58] Ibid., §25.
[59] Ibid., §31.
[60] Ibid., §4.
[61] Ibid., §7.
[62] Ibid., §35. He continues: "We can free our life and the world from the poisons and contaminations that could destroy the present and the future. We can uncover the sources of creation and keep them unsullied, and in this way we can make a right use of creation, which comes to us as a gift, according to its intrinsic requirements and ultimate purpose."

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

makes it clear that Church does have a mission specifically toward culture, stating that one's spiritual duty "in no way decreases, rather it increases, the importance of their obligation to work with all men in the building of a more human world."[63] The ultimate theological reason for this obligation toward the world is found in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*: "Christ's redemptive work, while essentially concerned with the salvation of men, includes also the renewal of the whole temporal order. Hence the mission of the Church is not only to bring the message and grace of Christ to men but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel" (§5). In terms of culture, Pope John Paul II states that "the Gospel is itself a leavening agent for culture to the extent that it reaches man in his manner of thinking, behaving, working, enjoying himself, that is, as it reaches him in his cultural specificity."[64] The mission of the Church to transform the world, to be a cultural leaven, is clearly demonstrated in history and confirmed by the magisterial teaching of the Church.

In relation to Albecete, we can see John Paul somewhat confirming his thought, but also strongly insisting on the need to build culture. On the first point, it is indicative that John Paul calls the civilization that we are meant to construct, a civilization of love: "The Church respects all cultures and imposes on no one her faith in Jesus Christ, but she invites all people of good will to promote a true civilization of love, founded on the evangelical values of brotherhood, justice, and dignity for all."[65] This could be seen as an effort to minimize the effort of restoration of a specifically Christian culture by appealing to values that all can share. However, John Paul also clearly teaches that it is the power of the Gospel that can create this new civilization: "Be convinced of this: the strength of the Gospel is capable of transforming the cultures of our times by its leaven of justice and of charity in truth and solidarity. Faith which becomes culture is the source of hope."[66] This new culture is specifically faith becoming a culture. It is a Christian culture, even if it is meant to include all people of good will.

The ultimate reason why we need a Christian culture according to John Paul is that "the synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith.... A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received,

[63] *Gaudium et Spes*, §57. The document further states that man "carries out the design of God manifested at the beginning of time, that he should subdue the earth, perfect creation and develop himself. At the same time he obeys the commandment of Christ that he place himself at the service of his brethren" (ibid.).

[64] Pope John Paul II, "The Church and Culture," (Jan. 13, 1983), §10.

[65] Pope John Paul II, "Evangelizing Today's Cultures," (Jan. 15, 1985), §3.

[66] Ibid., §7.

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nor thoroughly thought through, nor faithfully lived out."[67] Although we should be cautious, as Benedict says, about putting our hope in human institutions, this does not mean that we do not need a Christian culture, because faith must be lived out consistently in order to be true to itself. Culture is truly a defining factor in the life of faith:

> The cultural atmosphere in which a human being lives has a great influence upon his or her way of thinking and, thus, of acting. Therefore, a division between faith and culture is more than a small impediment to evangelization, while a culture penetrated with the Christian spirit is an instrument that favors the spreading of the Good News.[68]

It is for this reason why John Paul spoke the importance "of creating a new culture of love and of hope inspired by the truth that frees us in Christ Jesus," which he saw as "the priority for the new evangelization"[69] The creation of a Christian culture is not only in accord with the Gospel, it is a pressing need of our time.

Conclusion

"Time itself had merged into eternity." I hope that this saying, rather than simply serving as a poetic image, has become a phrase with deep theological significance. We have noted that despite some hesitation, expressed in three objections, Scripture and the magisterial teaching of the Church both clearly indicate that Christ's Incarnation in time is meant to continue in the life of Christians and to be brought forth into the world for the transformation of culture. Time is meant to be open to eternity, to be shaped and formed by it, so that the transformation of earthly life in the present, and the conversation with God begun in it, may bear fruit for eternity.

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[67] Pope John Paul II, "Letter Establishing the Pontifical Council for Culture" (May 20, 1982).

[68] Pope John Paul II, *Sapientia Christiana* (1979), foreword. He also stated that "the spiritual void that threatens society is above all a cultural void" ("Letting the Gospel Take Root in Every Culture," [January 10, 1992], §3).

[69] Pope John Paul II, "Letting the Gospel Take Root in Every Culture,"§10.

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