



## RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHIES OF TIME

JAVAID AHMAD LONE (ALIAS JAVAID ANWAR)

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Kashmir, India



**JAVAID AHMAD LONE**

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### ABSTRACT

*Time* has always perplexed humanity in one or the other way. What is eternal and what is temporal? Where from we began and what will be our end? These are the questioned which almost all the religions and philosophies of the world have tried to grapple with. Science is still wrestling with this giant-concept and has got stuck within the conceptions of “singularity” and “the big-bang”. Saint Paul says that what is visible is temporal and what is invisible is eternal. According to Islam God Himself is Time. For all Abrahamic religions there will be a definite end; temporality will doom giving way to the eternity. While in the great Indian religions i.e. Buddhism and Hinduism, time is cyclical and divided into *kalas* or *yugas*. There may be certain discrepancies in the concept of time among world religions but there are many similarities too. All of them have a firm faith in an idyllic beginning and a belief in a fatal and disastrous end; be it *kalayuga*, *qayamat* or the day of doom. In my paper I shall compare the concept of time in different world religions and try to reach a harmonious conclusion. As this study will be incomplete without the scientific version of this bewildering entity, I shall also try to tackle the question in the light of science.

**Key words:** Time, spirituality, eternity, temporality, singularity.

From the very beginning of the human civilization the concept of time, along with other questions regarding the nature of things and existence itself, seems to have perplexed man. There may have been various reasons behind the emergence of this concept but the main proponent and protagonist of the genesis of time is the curiosity of human mind. It is perhaps this peculiarity of human mind which tends to place events in a well-mannered and chronological form. For this we place events in and around other landmark events. Thus we place a particular year, say 2013 approximately after 2012 years of Christ's nativity. We place Monday after Sunday, a day between sunrise and sunset, and a night between the opposite parenthetical events bracketing the day. These are simple things to understand until and unless we do not try to go in minute details to know the essentiality of time. We can even question the linearity or sequence of time. Would it be too childish to say, why do things occur one after the

other and why not altogether and all of a sudden, or why not randomly than in an ordered way? Yes, it would be too hard for most of us because our human minds are conditioned in such a way that we perceive time as a forward moving 'entity'. We call this unidirectional movement of time as *the arrow of time*. It moves from past to future through the controversial duration of time we live or happen in, called the present. Because it is related to our minds; we call it *the psychological arrow on time*. Most of us happen to believe in one or the other religion. And a religion tries to answer our existential questions. For example, what are we? Where we came from? Where we go to? What is life and what is death?

Every religion stands on its acquired or revealed philosophical foundations of cosmological and temporal order. The ancient Indian religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, believe in cyclic time. While the Abrahamic religions, Judaism,

Christianity, and Islam believes in the linearity of time.

In Indian religions time is considered cyclic, which is based on our daily experiences. We know that day and night follow each other in a cyclic way. Same is the case with seasons and years. But these small 'cyclic' durations are not felt by Hindus and Buddhists only. It is same for every human being on earth. It is the concept of *yugas* and *kalas* or eons and epochs, which are much longer than the ordinary and commonly felt small cycles of time. Each *mahayuga* or great cycle of time is said to be consisting of four *yugas*, namely *kritayuga*, *treat yuga*, *dvaparayuga*, and *kali yuga*.

Their duration varies. Kritayuga the first in the series has the longest duration on years and kali yuga, which is the last and the current has a duration of only 432,000 years." (Jayaram)

After *kaliyuga* the whole world is said to be destroyed and after a long duration once more created. In this way one more cycle or *mahayuga* of time is to begin. This is not the only reason that time is to be thought as cyclic in Indian mythology. As I have earlier mentioned, man sees everything according to his own or personal point of view. Thus it is human life which according to religion does not die and the death of body is not the death of life. We call this sort of life as soul. As there is the concept of transmigration in Indian religions, the life or soul of a particular person is said to be recycled to some other being according to the scale of his or her *karma*.

In Buddhism there has been a long debate on the nature of time. Early Buddhists presented a relativistic and empirical concept of time. An ordinary person is supposed to be overwhelmed by time, whereas some others are able to bring it under their control. In the second phase of Buddhism after Buddha known as the period of *Abhidharma*, time was not seen as empirical but it became an 'absolutic conception'. "With the development of scholasticism after the passing away of the Buddha, this empiricist philosophy of time and temporality changed completely. Unbridled speculation of *Abhidharma* led to the development of many theories which are more metaphysical than empirical." (Kaluphana 185). In the third phase

Nagaarjuna, the great Mahayana Buddhism thinker, completely negated the existence of time on the grounds of "transcendentalist [ic] criticism of phenomenal reality." (ibid 188). Buddhism, too believes in the transmigration of souls and the cycle of birth and rebirth. The Semitic or Abrahamic religions too believe in souls but not in the system of transmigration of souls. These religions do not have any intricate philosophies of time. They believe that time was created along with other things by God Himself and it will end up along with every other thing on the day of doom. There is an area of timelessness or eternity before and after the line of worldly time. In Indian religions the life of human beings and the whole of the cosmos have the same cyclic nature. Both follow the same cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. In the Semitic or Abrahamic religions the life of a human being as well as the whole of the universe seems to follow the same linear path; birth, death and eternity. In one case if the human "existence is an endless cyclic drama" then the other is "a three-act play consisting of birth, death and immortality." ( Jackson ). According to Buddhism "the beginning is inconceivable, yet it is possible to see periods of evolution and dissolution following one another.' (Kaluphana 181). Same is case with Hinduism where Brahma creates and Shiva destroys and the process repeats itself in each *mahayuga*. (Jayaram). The present age has been widely regarded as the 'age of science'. In fact, science seems to be playing a major role in our daily lives and we begin to believe in science. There has also emerged a fallacy of getting scientific accreditation by religions. It is an irony that the same ecclesiastical authorities who censored Galileo Galilei now organize scientific conferences on cosmology. (Hawking 122). Whatever be the case, science is still grappling with the concept of time. Though, it seems to reach a conclusion that it was the Big Bang which kick started the functioning of everything. Thus time too is said to be the product of Big Bang, and it is believed to end up with an imaginary Big Crunch along with everything. Man who is never content with the partiality of any process and always craves for fulfillment cannot take death as the caesura of being. The worldly life has to face death which is a natural process and thus also thought as a part of the benign religious

scheme. Man has to be taught by all world religions to seek ultimate spiritual bliss here and here after. Philosopher W. H. Sheldon writes in this regard that

The thought of an eternal process toward a goal never reached, is of the very essence of self-contradiction, and would be as disheartening in practice as it is paradoxical for thought. That is perhaps why working religion [here Christianity] has postulated a definite sphere of fulfillment (called Heaven) which the good man shall reach at a definite moment of his experience." (153).

Whatever be the differences about the concept of time among the religions, which I think is not a difference other than the cyclic and linear nature of it. Almost all of them share many common beliefs and experiences.

Time has always been seen by religions as a restricting entity related to a preplanned organization of events known as fate or destiny. Nobody is able to break free from the shackles of time except that person who performs certain ceremonial purifying rituals or life-long activities prescribed by religious authorities. In Indian religions the cycle of birth and rebirth is fundamentally thought as menace from which an individual soul, *atman* gradually escapes and merges with the Universal Soul, *Brahman*. How much time this process of merger between the two souls take, depends on the *karma* (the nature and quantity of worldly activities) of the individual being. It is believed that "with each 'incarnation' the soul is purged by one's '*Karma*' until finally it merges with 'God,' who is the 'Soul of Souls'." (Jackson) In Buddhism, this has been said in too clear and practical terms by lord Buddha. The process of escape is named here as the attainment of the salvation *ornirvana*. One who achieves salvation is free from the process of being and the cycle of birth and rebirth. "He who has overcome the process of becoming also overcomes time, because there is no time apart from the process of becoming." (Kalupahana 183).

According to Christianity humans suffer due to their 'original sin', the sin, which was perhaps committed by Eve when she tasted the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. This sin was not

individual but tribal in nature committed by the mother of a whole tribe. Therefore it needed a tribal lord (the tribe here means the whole of human tribe) to sacrifice himself for the whole of tribe. According to St. Paul Jehovah set a redemptive system for the purification of human race. "But when the fullness of time was come, god sent forth his son..." (*The King James Bible*, Gal. 4:4). Christians believe that at the end of the world Jesus Christ will return and "[T]hen [cometh] the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God..." (*The King James Bible*, 1 Cor. 15:24), which will signal the end of the time, universe, earthly suffering, physical death, as well as the opportunity of salvation. (Jackson).

Islam characterizes time according to a transcendent monotheism which promises paradise and threatens eternal damnation. Thus a person has to be loyal to the commandments of God at each and every moment of his/her life and never to be ignorant of *zikr*, or recollection of God. In Islam there is neither the Aristotelian view of time as an 'accident of motion', nor is it the Plotinian 'stream of consciousness of a thinking mind'. (Bowering 59). It rather matches the view of Democritus, who sees time as a composition of minute particles or instants. "In every instant, God is creating the world anew; there are no intermediate causes. God can be thought of as continually creating the universe from nothing." (Ibid 59-60). As in Hinduism *atman* merges with *Brahman* due to one's individual *karma*, a Muslim Sufi enters into an ecstatic moment due to his *zikr* or meditational practice. The Sufi is able to raise himself above from the linearity of time, thus he is able to see events taking place both in the past and the future. The most beloved moment where sufi wants to reach in that moment of time "when all the human beings heard and understood God's self-revelation for the first time at the very birth of creation." (Bowering 61).

It is clear that all religions teach us to rise above the level of ordinary and momentary time and to merge with the endless and beginningless world of cosmic time. Those who live in the momentary time have been called in Sufi language *ibn-al-waqt* or sons of their moments.

Those who believed in science also believed in an absolute time up to the beginning of the last

century. Aristotle as well as Newton believed in absolute time. Absolute time means that time is same for everyone irrespective of one's speed and space. Albert Einstein revolutionized the whole concept of time when he presented his theory of relativity. Scientists proved his predictions true when they found that time runs slower near the 'massive body like earth'. (Hawking 35). This can be exemplified by the 'twins paradox'. If one of them is sent for a long trip in a spaceship moving nearly as fast as light, at the time of his return he would be much younger than his brother who stayed on earth. (Hawking 36). The theory of relativity indicates the validity of the notion of time presented by different religions, for which the effect of time can not only be slowed down but time itself can also be defeated.

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