

PJC BOOK REVIEW 31

**William Gallois, *Time, Religion and History*
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although the message is unchanged.*

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Thought-provoking, ambitious, immensely learned, as well as sometimes abstruse, inconclusive and outright annoying – this original study is aimed at global historians and should be read by all who are interested in the cultural variety of attitudes to time. Moreover, readers should prepare for a surprise. It is rare to get so much theology in a history primer. But this book is not about the lived time-cultures or annual timetables of worship/faith that are associated with the world's different religions. Instead, it is a comparative survey of the temporal concepts within the time-theologies of (in turn) Judaism, Christianity, Australian dreamtime, Islam, and Buddhism.

Why other faiths are omitted is not really explained; but those surveyed offer sufficient diversity in themselves to make the emphatic point that humans do not have one simple explanation of temporality.

All these theological traditions are discussed even-handedly, with intricate findings along the way. Every religious tradition is revealed as

containing multitudes within its intellectual ambit. Thus a degree of ambiguity and scope for variant readings appears to be a prime qualification for a major religion to achieve a world-wide following.

Reading between the lines, the reader might further guess that Gallois' personal sympathies lie with Zen Buddhism. He does not seek, however, to advocate one temporal concept over another. Instead, Gallois seeks to demonstrate the plentitude within human thought-systems, looking at differences within religions, and, upon occasions, cross-links between different religions.

On the basis of this plurality, he further argues that history-writing, being so closely related to ideas of Time, should be pluralised accordingly. Hence this study is ultimately a contribution to global historiology – the emergent subject that focuses not upon traditional historiography but instead upon the theories, concepts, and approaches that combine to underpin the discipline of history.

In this field, Gallois is interestingly positioned. He is not a postmodernist faint-heart who doubts whether the past can be accessed by later generations. Gallois is committed to the study of history and wants to improve it. On the other hand, he is a thorough-going relativist. He begins his study with a credo: 'The argument of this book is that we live in different times' (p. 1). And the enemies that he is combating throughout are not those zealous religious sectaries, who are gridlocked into one spiritual message, but the obdurate historians in the West, who (allegedly) persist in privileging their ideas of time and their linear histories, over all others.

Gallois wants to induce a bit more cultural humility. So he invites his readers to consider, for example, how a Buddhist interpreter of *no-time* might provide a human history of the world or how the dream-time of the Australian indigenous people might be used to do the same.

Alas, Gallois does not himself give any hints as to how these alternatives might be done. Yet he writes enough to suggest that the answer will be profoundly different. He wants historians to think of Time, and all beings in Time, as transient and fluid. Hence Gallois writes: ‘If, therefore, we take Buddhist cosmology and ideas about selfhood seriously there are many aspects of history and biography – as they are empirically understood – that need to be abandoned’ (p. 219). So the improvements that he seeks are to be radical ones.

One alternative methodology might be visual and spatial rather than conveyed in linear words: for example, a Zen Buddhist garden encapsulating thoughts about temporality and timelessness; or an indigenous Australian visit to a spirit-place. These visualisations offer different modes of access to Space-Time (or Time-Space as I and some others prefer).

But why should such expressions preclude or undermine written histories as well, as developed in many cultures around the world? Indeed, having read Gallois, I felt impelled to cry, not *what about the workers?* but, *what about common humanity?* He seems so intent on differences that he makes light of the convergences and congruences that he also detects.

In fact, the study of history is an example of a discipline that is shared internationally and is not just owned separately or operated exclusively by ‘the West’. Words, narratives and research techniques are great human resources that are not confined to one segment of the globe. So there is a genuine possibility of human history, and not just segmented varieties. And in support of that ecumenical view, which otherwise Gallois might dismiss as mere liberal sentimentality, the evidence comes from his own multi-cultural endeavour, penned and published in the heartlands of ‘the West’ but not myopically framed within linear visions

of human progress, as the old (and never universal) stereotype might suggest.

A final point returns to the related question of Time. Theorists of ‘difference’ are fond of citing Einstein and relativity, clinched by a modish reference to chaos theory. It seems that disorder prevails. Yet chaos theory does not mean that everything is chaotic. On the contrary, it strives to explain patterns and regularities within apparently inchoate sequences. Even more crucially, relativity theory does not mean that there are no constants. Within Einstein’s famous equation $E=mc^2$, the notation c (Latin *celeritas* = speed) is a cosmic ‘given’, being the speed of light in a vacuum, measured at just under 300,000 kilometers per second. And even within the microscopic turbulence of sub-atomic particles as studied in quantum physics, there is a tiny invariant element (h), known as Planck’s constant after the scientist who discovered it.

How to analyse commonalty and divergence – the order within the disorder, as well as the disorder within the order – remains a great challenge for scientists and historians alike, as part of a global human endeavour on the part of the species that ‘thinks long’. In history, Time studies are now becoming an important component of the quest – to which William Gallois’ ambitious study now finely contributes.