

THE EXPERIENCE OF TEMPORALITY ACCORDING TO ST SOPHRONY

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Time coextends with Creation, which is not yet completed. Each of us has been granted his allotted time—brief, but enough to find salvation. Time is the ‘locus’ of our encounter with the Creator. What defines our actions is the purpose we have set in our life. Our perfection identifies with perfection of the hypostatic principle that we have as creatures ‘in the image and likeness’ of God. The Creator’s work is fulfilled in time, in the perspective of eternal life. Likewise, man’s work in time should be fulfilled in the perspective of eternal life. Through prayer we see God and we are in communion with him.

Many efforts have been made to investigate the notion of time and attempts have been made to formulate some definition of it. There are also those who have cast doubts on the existence of time. St Sophrony considered it important to explore this mysterious concept of time and he settled on a formulation of a certain definition which, while not describing its nature, does interpret its functionality and points to its theological and anthropological significance.

According to St Sophrony, time is the ‘locus’ of our encounter with the Creator. Time is the process of the implementation of God’s plan for creation... Creation has not yet been completed... Each of us has been granted ‘his allotted “time”—brief, but enough to find salvation’.¹

St Sophrony notes that, in our own day and age, ‘The very feeling of time takes on a strange character—now tediously slow, now apparently non-existent, in the absence of any intelligent purpose’.² If we recollect, however, that our proper attitude to time is the same as our proper attitude to life, it becomes clear that neither of the two feelings of time just mentioned justifies us in our life. The proper attitude to time, as the proper attitude to life itself, is of capital importance for us. This attitude, however, presupposes the concomitant determination of the purpose of human life.

If we are not to feel the passage of time as tediously slow, we have to exercise within it some creative task which has meaning and purpose. ‘The aim that we give

¹ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *On Prayer*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1996), 16.

² *Ibid.*, 90.

to our life permeates all our activities. If, for example, we are seeking first of all to gain money, everything that we do will be determined by that aim.³ 'The life of the world is organised so as to accommodate certain human passions, and spiritual life is pushed into the sidelines. We should reverse this order, and put spiritual life at the heart of our life.'⁴

If people progress through time working on the fulfilment of some purpose, they add value to the time of their life and invest in it their efforts and labours, in order to fulfil their desired goal. In this way, time is not taken as being tediously slow, but rather is considered pleasant and creative. When the fulfilment of the purpose sinks into oblivion, however, and the pointlessness it represents is revealed, then there emerges a bitter sense of disappointment and despair in the soul.

Each person experiences the time of their life in a particularly personal way and on different levels. So it is that, apart from the objectivized external time of the mechanical clock, there is, above all, the biological time of an internal clock, which operates in a cyclical fashion and regulates the motions and functions of the bodily organs. There is another internal biological clock that regulates sleep and awareness, as well as others that regulate the temperature of the body, the functioning of the heart and respiration, and so on. Moreover, our biological time is different in childhood, in adolescence, in maturity, and in old age.

The clearest sense of the difference in the experience of time is to be felt on the psychological level. Here, psychological conditions and ambivalences affect the experience of the passage of time in a variety of ways, with each person creating a concomitant variety of divisions and equivocations in their life. Where the experience of time takes on its most astonishing form, however, is on the spiritual level. In fact, on this level, it is possible for fragmented psychological time to be unified and for temporality itself to be transcended. The past and the future, which exist in our soul as remembrance and expectation, are united in the present and open up to eternity and infinity.

Christ addresses us through the present of our earthly life and summons us to the prospect of eternity. Correspondingly, the aim of the Christian life is the assimilation of this present life into the prospect of divine eternity. From this point of view, every effort we make within the duration of this earthly life is invested in eternity. Indeed, in a curious way, the experience of worldly vainglory itself is transformed into a spring-board for eternity. In this way, in the charismatic condition of the *memento mori* 'the negative character of this occurrence is transposed to a positive experience of the resurrection of the soul'.⁵

³ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Words of Life*, trans. from French Sister Magdalen (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2015), 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

⁵ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *We Shall See Him as He Is*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2004), 201.

Seeing time as ‘a locus of encounter with the Creator and as a process of implementing God’s plan for creation, which has not yet been completed’, it is natural for us to see people’s creativity as a factor in collaboration with our Creator aimed at our own completion and that of the world. But just as the task of the Creator is implemented within time and has the prospect of eternity, so our own task must take place within time and have the prospect of eternity.

On the level of temporality, our creativity has either been limited to the immediate, through the processing of natural features and achieved through our natural powers and abilities, or it extends into the transcendent, where our natural powers and abilities are, however, deficient.⁶ We are unable to create *ex nihilo* something that does not exist in our nature. As a result, our creativity in this instance is possible only as co-ordination and collaboration with uncreated divine energy. This is also expressed in Christ’s saying, ‘Without me you can do nothing’.⁷

Our creative energy, which is, by nature, itself created, opens itself to divine energy, which is by nature uncreated, and extends through it into the realm of the transcendent. We work together with God and our temporality is contiguous with divine eternity. In this way, time, which is experienced as the ‘locus’ of our encounter with God, is not restricted to the transitory, nor is it trapped in the immediate, but exposes itself to eternity and infinity. Our creative energy is coordinated with the creative energy of God and creates lasting fruits. St Sophrony writes: ‘Our birth and then our development on earth is nothing other than a creative process during the course of which we acquire being to the degree available to us in the hope that knowledge only half gained here will be completed beyond the boundaries of this form of our existence’.⁸ The spiritual development of the life of Christians on earth is realized at the specific tempo which is suited to their person. For all of us, however, the goal is the same and is summarized by Christ: ‘Therefore be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect’.⁹

According to St Sophrony, our perfection is to be identified with the perfection of the hypostatic principle that is within us as a seed. Just as there is the hypostatic principle of divinity, so there is the hypostatic principle of humanity. ‘The personal Principle in Divine Being is its *ontological kernel*. It is He Who verily lives’.¹⁰ In the human being, who is an image of God, the hypostatic principle is ‘hidden man of the heart’,¹¹ who assumes the infinite. Within the limits of earthly reality, says St

⁶ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς* [The Mystery of Christian Life] (Ἱερὰ Μονὴ Τιμίου Προδρόμου: Ἑσσεξ Ἀγγλίας, 2020), 174–5.

⁷ Jn 15:5.

⁸ Archim. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 156.

⁹ Cf. Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, passim and I Cor. 12:4–11.

¹⁰ Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 231.

¹¹ I Peter 3:4. Cf. Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 192.

Sophrony, 'the hypostatic spirit is destined to overcome the limit of time and break away from the constraints of space'.¹²

St Sophrony says that,

When it becomes aware of itself, our spirit surpasses that mode of existence, which is perceived through the senses. There is no such duration of time that it can be satisfied with; and there are no such expanses that do not confine it. We were fashioned with the innate desire to break away from the tight coils of material existence, to overcome time and space, to acquire knowledge of 'Him Who Is'.¹³ Our spirit will know no rest until this thirst is slaked: to understand everything regarding our destination and that of the whole of creation.¹⁴ Our hypostatic spirit is able to encompass 'the whole fulness of Divine and human being'.¹⁵

The hypostatic principle was implanted within us when we were created in 'the image and likeness of God'.¹⁶ People who are made in the 'image' of God are also made for life 'after His likeness'.¹⁷ This life is not part and parcel of our human nature, but we are able to share it by God's grace. And this participation has an ascetic character. It occurs through our cooperation, which is realized in the world during the time of our earthly life.

'When the hypostasis emerges in him, man, who is usually confined within the limits of his individuality, now perceives that he is led into Divine eternity and for him Time comes to an end'.¹⁸ This emergence is achieved by elevation from the transitory to the eternal. And this elevation, which liberates us from constraints of time is achieved through spiritual struggles and unceasing prayer, particularly the Jesus Prayer, which can be practiced at any time, in any place. 'Praying the Name of Jesus Christ, we place ourselves before the absolute fulness of both the Uncreated First-Being and created being' and 'Succeeding in the Jesus Prayer means attaining eternal life'.¹⁹ This prayer which is anchored in the revelation of the Personal God, is radically different from Buddhist yoga and transcendental meditation, which give

¹² Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Ὁψόμεθα τὸν Θεὸν καθὼς ἐστὶ* [We Shall See Him as He Is] (Ἱερὰ Μονὴ Τιμίου Προδρόμου: Ἑσσεξ Ἀγγλίας, 2010), 292.

¹³ Exod. 3:14.

¹⁴ Archim. Sophrony, *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 350.

¹⁵ Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 197.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 225.

¹⁷ Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991), 147.

¹⁸ Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Ὁ ἅγιος Σιλουανὸς ὁ Ἀθωνίτης* [Saint Silouan the Athonite] (Ἱ. Μ. Τιμίου Προδρόμου: Ἑσσεξ Ἀγγλίας, 2020), 139.

¹⁹ Archim. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 138 and 150.

the feeling of an exit from time and place, diverting our mind towards an abstract, supra-personal absolute.²⁰

As something created 'in the image and likeness' of the eternal God, the human mind has the opportunity to transcend time and space and to be drawn towards eternity and infinity. Moreover, light 'is natural to it since it was made in the image of Him Who is Light unoriginate'.²¹ But when we as people manage to approach conditions of transcendency over time and space, or to acquire experiences of bright visions simply through ascetic efforts, we run the risk of assuming that the natural light of the created mind is actually the uncreated light. We understand the transcendence of created immediacy as entry into ontological eternity, directed by Luciferism. In this way, it is distanced from the authentically existing eternity, which, in the final analysis, is God Himself.²²

Transcendence of created immediacy and entry into ontological eternity are not achieved only through our own intense efforts, but also with God's assistance

we try to stand before God with the whole of our being. Invocation of the Name of God the Saviour, uttered in the fear of God, together with a constant effort to live in accordance with the commandments, little by little leads to a blessed fusion of all our powers, disintegrated by the Fall. We must never seek to hurry in our ascetic striving. It is essential to discard the idea of achieving the maximum in the shortest possible time. God does not force us but neither can we compel Him to anything whatsoever.²³

This struggle is interwoven with unceasing prayer which is 'energy of an especial order. It is the fusing of two actions—ours, the creature's, and that of the uncreated Divine. As such, it is both in the body and outside the body; even outside this world of space and time'.²⁴ Finally, this prayer culminates in pure prayer, which is achieved after the unification of fragmented psychological time and temporality itself. In this way people transcend all earthly categories: '[They are] not old, not young; "neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free"; neither rich nor poor, learned nor ignorant. And "neither male nor female". He is "a new Creature" in Jesus Christ'.²⁵

Modern culture is trapped in temporality. Any extension of it into eternity was rejected by unrestrained activism and attachment to worldly well-being, based entirely on people's physical strengths and abilities and is pursued through the satisfaction of our real or imagined material needs. Our spirit is laid low on the horizontal plane of transience and is indifferent to any elevation towards eternity. Time

²⁰ See *ibid.*, 139.

²¹ Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 174.

²² *Ibid.*, 174.

²³ Archim. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 143–4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁵ Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 91. Cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; 3:26–28.

is overshadowed with secularity and secularity shrinks into satisfying the needs of everyday life. Hope of heavenly well-being is replaced by earthly monotony, and investigations into eternity give way to the pursuits of temporality.

In an effort to liberate themselves from the tedious and repulsive state of the secular and post-secular Christian world of the West, and ignorant of the tradition of the Orthodox East, people have resorted to exploring the practices of the religions of the Far East. In this way, they isolate themselves from the core of humanity, are indifferent to the tragic universal condition, withdraw into their individuality, and surrender to impersonal transcendence.

Our creative energy is truly realized and really contributes to our perfection when it is linked to and coordinated with the uncreated energy of God, which is transmitted to us when we observe his commandments. God's commandments are not impersonal directives, but rather they provide us with eternal life.²⁶ And the observation of the commandments, in accordance with the divine will, instructs us with the prospect of eternity. Typical of this is the request formulated in the St Sophrony's morning prayer: 'I beseech Thee: Establish me in the path of Thy commandments and to my last breath let me not stray from the light of Thine ordinances, that Thy commandments may become the sole law of my being on this earth and all eternity'.²⁷

When the light of the divine commandments enters our indivisible evanescent yet also eternal existence, our experience of eternity is intensified and the whole order of our life is altered.²⁸ Love for God adapts the being of man to the divine Being. And love for neighbor comprehends (*συγχωρεῖ*) the neighbor in man's new being. In this way, space is abolished as a factor of separation between people and it is instead offered as a locus for the development of hypostatic eternity.²⁹

But time, too, as a locus of encounter with the Creator and as process for the implementation of God's plan for our perfection, surrenders itself to eternity. Whatever is achieved in time is preserved in eternity. And whatever is preserved in eternity has its beginnings in temporality. Moreover, what is lost in time, is lost in eternity. We experience temporality in the world, while participating in eternity. Eternity is not something that comes after temporality, nor does temporality exist without eternity. Our eternity is grounded in our temporality. And our temporality finds its completion in eternity.

²⁶ 'And I know that his commandment is eternal life.' Jn 12:50 (see Greek text).

²⁷ 'Prayer at Daybreak' in Archim. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 181.

²⁸ See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Οικοδομώντας τὸν ναὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ μέσα μας καὶ στοὺς ἀδελφούς μας* [Building the Temple of God within Us and Our Fellows] (Ιερὰ Μονὴ Τιμίου Προδρόμου: Ἑσσεξ Ἀγγλίας, 2014), vol. 3, 145.

²⁹ Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Οικοδομώντας τὸν ναὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ μέσα μας καὶ στοὺς ἀδελφούς μας* [Building the Temple of God within Us and Our Fellows] (Ιερὰ Μονὴ Τιμίου Προδρόμου: Ἑσσεξ Ἀγγλίας, 2013), vol. 2, 169.

St Sophrony told his monastic community that, during our earthly life, 'we do not reach the Absolute, but we explore it. This is precisely what our daily work consists of. If we have such a pattern in our life, then every day will be for us an increase and a preparation for eternal life in God and with God'.³⁰ Every concern of the faithful within temporality must be placed within the prospect of eternity. But to do this in the modern world, which is systematically forgetful of eternity, requires superhuman efforts.

According to St Sophrony, there is no other path to worthiness for the faithful than unceasing prayer and work. This is why he urges: 'Transform all that you have to do into prayer. You are opening a door; ask the Lord to open unto you the door of repentance, *metanoia*. You are laying bricks; remind yourself that unless God Himself builds the house you are labouring in vain, nothing will stand'.³¹

'In the heart of the Christian, opposite aspects coexist: our created principle and the uncreated power of God, self-emptying and omnipotence, humiliation and glory, time and eternity, pain and joy of extreme tension that may be overwhelming for our nature'.³² The created principle is joined with the uncreated power of God, self-emptying attracts divine omnipotence, self-abasement prepares for glory, time flows into eternity, and pain leads to joy. And this intensity, extreme for human nature, is the 'violence' with which the 'taking of the kingdom of heaven'³³ is achieved, the in-breathing of the uncreated.

But as St Sophrony notes, 'Not many souls have the courage to step off the path trodden by the vast majority in this fallen world, to live according to Christ's commandments. Unquestioning belief in the Divinity of Jesus naturally generates spiritual courage'.³⁴ So it is only to a few that it is given to experience liberation of the spirit from material bonds and from the conditions of time and space.³⁵ This does not in the least diminish the inconceivable majesty of the horizons of human freedom, which open up without discrimination to all the faithful. And the shortest path to their acquisition is humility, which, in accordance with some spiritual causality, attracts the uncreated grace of the Holy Spirit.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 317.

³¹ Archim. Sophrony, *Words of Life*, 55.

³² Archim. Sophrony, *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 376.

³³ See Matt. 11:12

³⁴ Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 68.

³⁵ Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *His Life Is Mine*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 40.