

Time and Historically Conscious Communities

We have been using the terms "time" and "temporality" and have implied that without change there would be no perception of time. In the late eighteenth century Kant made it clear that neither space nor time were entities but were indispensable ways ("forms" of intuition) by which humans *think* about their world. We experience ourselves and other persons and things as having a certain duration, as coexisting, or as occurring in succession -- being before and after. This is the basis for our twentieth century view of time as well, but we are not so sure as to precisely what is universal about temporal awareness. Certainly there are many ways in which temporal relationships can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively. But the time it takes to communicate, for example, may defy measurement. The *experience* of duration can vary greatly as can our ability or desire to recollect. There is evidence to show the influence of illness, drugs or different attitudes upon the perception of the passage of time and of ourselves as temporal beings.

The discussion which follows will illustrate the fact that there is a great deal of cultural variation in how human temporality is perceived and hence how the temporal process is thought to manifest significant meaning. The consideration of three different groups -- Africans, Hindu, and Western Christian -- will demonstrate that the tradition of a community is a vital unit of historical investigation. It will be noticed that all three heritages include the notions of past, present and future, but the way in which their relationship is understood is radically different. These happen to be three traditions where the metaphysical base for understanding the temporal is religious, but historians could obviously concentrate on other social institutions central to the communities being studied and seek out determinate presuppositions -- including those of time and significance -- as these appear in the sources of the given tradition. One can also follow a given tradition under sharply different conditions and notice the metaphorical shifts or more radical revisions in temporal understanding. My three case studies suggest what is happening with the impact of modern influences. Whatever the approach, the point remains. It is an important part of the work of an intellectual historian to discover and communicate precisely what are the controlling assumptions, the conceptual-set of ideas, which are part of the historical consciousness of a specific community in a given time and space.

An African Tribal View of Time

John S. Mbiti, who was raised in Kenya and taught philosophy at Makerere University in Uganda before the advent of that nation's recent tragic dictatorship, has written extensively on the African conception of temporality. For all the diversity that can be found among the hundreds of tribal people, he holds that they share a deeply religious approach to nature and man. All events have their focus toward the past rather than, as