 CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

TIME AND HISTORY IN CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY, ESPECIALLY AUGUSTINE*

We write: “Anno Domini 1951.” This means that we measure time from a center. This center determines the time that follows it, and the time which preceded it strove toward this center. Our historical numbering of the years tacitly presupposes a caesura between the era before the birth of Christ and the era which came after it. Our history is oriented toward a center.

It is true that for some years certain circles have been trying to repress this fact. They speak with a special pathos of the year so-and-so “before our time reckoning.” This term is hard to understand and suggests certain innocent Socratic questions. Is there, for example, any such a thing as “after our time reckoning”? What will happen “after our time reckoning”? Or will nothing at all happen in the vacuum “after our time reckoning,” a vacuum that will drop out of time so entirely as to lose all connection with tradition? Do these circles perhaps altogether deny the Western tradition that is so utterly saturated with history?

It must be admitted that their reluctance to speak of a center of history is understandable, for obviously such a term also implies the central fact of the Christian religion; it implies that past, present, and future are to be understood in terms of this center, that the world as history converges toward this point in a mysterious systolè and diverges from it in an equally mysterious diastolè. How has this come about? How was it possible that the belief in a universal history, a belief which, as we read in the Book of Daniel, was the dream of a Nebuchadnezzar in the year 168 “before our time reckoning,” should have become the basic presupposition of Western people?

The New Testament conception of time is wholly naïve: as in Judaism and to some extent in Parseeism, a distinction is made between the present aeon, which extends up to the second coming of Christ, and the future aeon. Thus the history of Salvation becomes a movement from the beginning in paradise to the end in the New Jerusalem.

In this historical unfolding the religious vision discovers the workings of an *oikonomia*, a divine plan of Salvation. (It is characteristic that in the later Christian idiom *oikonomia* signifies “Incarnation” as well as “plan of Salvation,” and finally comes to designate the inner unfolding of God into the Trinity, because historically neither the inner life of the Godhead nor the *oikonomia* can be understood except from the perspective of the Incarnation.) And when man is placed in this *oikonomia*, he experiences his *kairos*—that is to say, a tension and a meaning enter into his inherently profane and aimless life “time,” because it becomes related to the plan of Salvation and is thus in direct relation to God.

Nowhere is what the New Testament means by *kairos* better expressed than in the passage from the Gospel of St. John (7:3ff.) (in this respect a truly classic passage) in which Jesus says to his unbelieving brethren: “My *kairos* [to go up to Jerusalem] is not yet come, but your *kairos* is alway ready” (verse 6). This means: For you there is no *kairos* in the historical, New Testament sense; there are no times appointed and specially singled out by God in his omnipotence with a view to his plan of salvation. For the others there exists only the profane usage of the word *kairos*: everything depends merely on the human decision as to whether a *kairos* is favorable or not. They can go up to Jerusalem at any time. But not so Christ, for he stands in the very midst of the divine plan of salvation, whose *kairoi* are exactly determined by God.¹

To a certain degree this sense of time was determined by eschatology. The great discovery of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer was the significance of the expectation of the end for the teachings of Jesus, for beyond any doubt the first Christians expected and hoped that the kingdom of God would soon be manifested on earth. In the New Testament man stands in a process which draws its meaning and virtue from an invisible end; mankind, and the cosmos as well, has an *eschaton*, a *telos*, an end which draws events toward it like a magnet. How new this was is shown by a comparison with the Greeks. In his book *In the Grip of the Past*,² Bernhard A. van Groningen describes how the Greeks lived in the past and were fascinated by the repetition of the past; so much so that for them the future had no dimension of its own.
