BOOK REVIEWS

ANANDITA N. BALSLEV and J.N. MOHANTY (Eds.), Religion and Time.

The editors explain that they were led to plan this book out of interest in the phenomenology of religion, which aims to explore the many modalities of religious consciousness, and out of the desire to foster inter-religious dialogue. In their introduction, they carefully distinguish between objective, subjective, and existential conceptions of time and, in doing so, remind the reader of the many difficult classical questions that stem from these conceptions.

Aside from the editors’ introduction, this anthology is made up of two parts. The first of these contains an essay by James G. Hart on the religious significance of Husserl’s phenomenology of time and an essay by Joan Stambaugh on Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s views of existential time, that is, time that belongs specifically to human beings, as against clock time and the time of the physicists. Kierkegaard focuses on the unfinished quality of human existence. Heidegger does not disagree but puts an overwhelming emphasis on the there that is openness to being.


The book does not make it easy to generalize on the subjects it deals with. On the contrary, a number of its essays make the point that we have been misled by familiar stereotypes. It is true, we are reminded, that Judaism emphasizes the uniqueness of historical events, but its cults, festivals, and rituals bear witness to belief in mythical and cyclical time. Islam, too, has an internal variety of conceptions of time, ranging from the “theologians’” atomism to the varying views of philosophers. It is no less misleading to characterize the many Hindu views of time in a single sweeping abstraction. And Buddhism, despite its emphasis on the minimal moment, causal process, and nirvana, proves far from uniform.

In the first of the essays on particular religions, Steensgard explores time in Judaism in its varied manifestations, mythical, cultic, and sacral,
historical, prophetic, eschatological, and apocalyptic, and medieval, modern, and contemporary. With respect to Christianity, Manchester sees time and Christian experience coming together in a distinctive view of revelation. He briefly studies the structure, intellectual content, historical origin, and uniqueness of "the foundational Christian experience of time" and ends by noting the problematic philosophical accomplishment of Hegel.

Goodman goes from the pre-Islamic poets and their censure and braving of time to the Quranic conception of time as "the precarious moral span of history suspended between judgment and creation." He explains how and why the practitioners of kalam understood being as absolutely dependent, untemporal, unextended, unconnected atoms sustained only (as in European Occasionalism) by God's power. The mutakallimun ("theologians") were at odds with the philosophers, heirs to the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian views of time, with all the distinctions and problems these views entailed. Goodman ends with an account of the positions of Maimonides and, especially, al-Ghazali, "the two most sophisticated defenders of the idea of an origin in time."

Writing of the Hindus, Balslev stresses the vastness of the Hindu consciousness of time and the Hindu play with various alternative conceptions: "The richness and the enormity of the material available for exploring the many-layered meaning that the theme of time has in this complex and highly articulate tradition, calls for a gigantic scholarly enterprise." Here, Balslev undertakes to examine and correct common clichés and to draw attention to the wide range of authentic traditional texts and sometimes radically different time-models.

In the last essay, Pande begins with the Buddhist adoption of the cosmic cycle and the ideas of karman and samsara. He recalls the early Buddhist division of questions into those that can be given a categorical answer following suitable analysis, those that can be answered after suitable cross-questioning the questioner and learning his real intention, and those to which there is no answer at all, at least no empirical or logical one, as the Madhyamikas emphasized. "In the spiritual vision of Buddha, time is encountered, not as the space-time in which physical bodies move, but as an aspect of subjective experience," which is composed of no more than a series of substanceless momentary states that succeed one another in accord with the law of dependent originating. Following a discussion of the contrasting views of the earlier Buddhist schools, Pande recalls the centuries of acute debate over the doctrine of momentariness among Buddhists and between Buddhists and Hindus. To the Buddhists, as he concludes, "freedom comes from disengagement from the Wheel of Time."