

Slade, Kara. *The Fullness of Time: Jesus Christ, Science, and Modernity*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021. pp.ix-xii, 156. \$21.00 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-5326-8937-6.

The Corpus Clock, a five-foot-wide public clock unveiled by Stephen Hawking on the Feast of the Holy Cross in 2008, sits outside Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. The 24-carat gold-plated steel disc keeps time with flashing LED lights that flicker erratically across three concentric rings, indicating the passing of seconds, minutes, and hours. Atop the disc, a metal monster that looks like a demonic grasshopper “walks” across the gears. This Chronophage—“time eater”—appears to devour each second as it flashes by. “Basically, I view time as not on your side,” the clock’s inventor John Taylor explained. He meant for the Chronophage, chomping away time outside the college named after the Body of Christ, to be “terrifying.”

Kara Slade could hardly open her case against scientific modernity with a more striking image—or a more fitting metaphor. She describes the eerie Cambridge street corner as the place “where two narratives of time collide”: the “secular liturgies” of the science-worshipping twenty-first century, which confess that time is a “threat” and death final (2), and a Christian faith that maintains God created the world and “embraced, redeemed, and liberated human existence in time” through Christ’s incarnation (3). This clash is the central tension that *The Fullness of Time* sets out to explore. A former NASA engineer now serving as associate rector of Trinity Church, Princeton, and canon theologian in the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey, Slade is certainly up to the task.

The book probes, in Slade’s words, “how scientific modernity shapes our assumptions about time” and what “pressing dogmatic and moral implications” those assumptions create for “the proclamation and witness of the church in the late capitalist West” (3). Slade’s central argument is that over the last few centuries, over-rationalized, over-lionized scientific authority has abetted racial and colonial oppression while substantiating certain views that oppose a Christ-centered idea of how humans should understand the past, live in the present, and imagine the future. Slade finds a counterattack against Chronophage in the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard and the systematic theology of Karl Barth, whom she reads from a perspective situated squarely within the Anglican tradition. These thinkers, for Slade, can help us recon-

114 conceptualize time not as raw material “to be seized, instrumentalized, or evaluated from a distance,” but as a gift that comes in the Word made flesh to reveal human sin “even as it overwhelms that sin in freedom and grace” (121). In Slade’s view, this new awareness would transform modern time from a stage of “agonism and violence” into one of “love and redemption” (5).

Slade organizes her argument into four broad-ranging chapters, each of which sets Kierkegaard and Barth against a different set of antagonists representing a different way that scientific authority abuses time.

The first chapter (“Beginnings”) argues against “Big History” partisans like David Christian, who attempt to turn *homo sapiens* into *homo scientificus* by insisting that we ground human identity in neo-Darwinian, millenia-long history. The second chapter (“Endings”) critiques various partisans of progress, ranging from techno-futurists Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin, to conservatives William Strauss, Neil Howe, and Steve Bannon, to theologians Charles Kingsley, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—all of whom, in Slade’s view, to one degree or another take the kingdom of God into their own hands. The third chapter (“Between”) alleges that social critics like Charles Murray and Peter Kiernan use a strategy of “temporal distancing and denial of coevalness” to marginalize certain racial and political groups on account of their “backwards” views (97). The final chapter (“Beyond”) critiques biologists E. O. Wilson, Ernst Haeckel, and others who allege that scientific authority can step outside of time, into a kind of neutral Darwinian perspective “transparent to reason,” from which they can “manage” populations as undifferentiated groups rather than as individuals (102). One occasionally feels as if Slade has reserved space for politically progressive critiques that could have been better spent discussing what hard natural sciences reveal about time that might work against the scientific attitudes she targets. Nevertheless, the range of arguments Slade engages is impressive, even if *longue durée* historian Noah Yuval Harai and prominent integralist critics of liberal progress are strangely omitted from the discussion.

Against these views, Slade marshals a suite of arguments from Kierkegaard and Barth’s major works, most notably *Philosophical Fragments*, *Either/Or*, and *Church Dogmatics*. She relies heavily on a few key ideas: time is a gift from God rather than simply raw material; time becomes meaningful not through scientific assessment, but through

the lived experiences in which each person finds herself faced with the “momentous decision” (29) to either believe or reject the crucified and risen Christ, who “encounters us and demands a response” (37); this Christ, per Barth, “is the same yesterday, today, and forever” and therefore demands that we reorder secular constructs of time around Him, not the other way around (34). The general thrust of Kierkegaard and Barths’ arguments, as mediated through Slade, is to reorient scientific time around the experiences, dignity, and ultimate redemption of the individual, who must decide in the time she is given either to reject Christ or submit her own drive for knowledge and power under Christ’s will.

Slade’s attacks against the limitations of scientific time are largely convincing. Her appeal to Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love* to reject “temporal distancing” and embrace our neighbors, for example, is moving (91), as is her argument from Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* that a concept of a totality cannot “elide the individual to which God is in loving relationship” (124). Even so, Slade could have perhaps engaged her sources more critically. Does the Gospel of John, for one example, support Kierkegaard’s “emphatic rejection of preferential love,” that is, the act of showing greater love for particular persons than for humankind in general (91)? Jesus’s preferential treatment of the disciple who leans against his breast at the Last Supper might suggest otherwise, as John Henry Newman, a contemporary of Kierkegaard, argued in one of his parochial sermons. And what does Barth make of preferential love? Rarely do we hear critical interplay between Slade’s protagonists, which might have illuminated the more contestable nuances of the claims she often takes at face-value but nonetheless play an important part in her argument.

Perhaps more worrying, however, are the rare occasions in which Slade’s treatment of Kierkegaard and Barth hints at a false dichotomy between the claims of science and those of revealed religion, the very dichotomy that both her biography and her book, taken as a whole, successfully undermine. Slade’s strong emphasis on Kierkegaardian individual experience is helpful only insofar as it does not erode, or at worst exclude, the recognition of the unity of truth revealed by nature and that revealed by Christ. Some of Slade’s claims—for example, when she says in the conclusion that “Scientific knowledge is real, but God is more real than that” (127)—might be rhetorically effective in context, but they also risk overemphasizing an individualistic Protestantism at

116 the cost of the ecumenical Christian tradition that attempts to marry revelation with secular findings in natural law, philosophy, and natural science. The choice between personal conversion experiences and Christian versions of “Big History,” in other words, should not be an either/or. Slade does not argue that it is, but *The Fullness of Time* could benefit from a more extended discussion of what a potential synthesis of these extremes would look like.

As it stands, Slade’s work is an illuminating, if not definitive, step forward in thinking through a Christian response to important concerns about *longue durée* history, progress, and scientism that too often exclude Christianity from the conversation altogether. *The Fullness of Time* will be most useful to normative theologians and philosophers working on these topics, but the questions Slade raises and the answers she presents will be thought-provoking for scholars in any field. Perhaps most of all, the book is a welcome encouragement to academically-minded Christian laypeople who want to engage in these debates while recognizing that the redemption of modern time, in a fittingly Kierkegaardian mode, is meant to be not only discussed, but also “taught, and preached, and lived” (129).

LAUREN SPOHN
DPhil, History
University of Oxford