Reimagining God and Time

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The Christian God is thought of as all-powerful. Yet He is not the only concept that we attribute omnipotence to. Another is time. Time heals all wounds. Time kills us all slowly. Our time is the most valuable possession we have to give. Time is thought of as an insurmountable barrier, something that we can never hope to overpower. But can God overpower time? When the two forces interact, what happens? What is the relationship between God and time? To many traditional Christian theologians, God is outside of time, unaffected by its power. The theory of time that allows this is called stasis theory. In the last few centuries, however, the process theory has challenged the stasis theory, picturing God as in time, as we are. I will examine arguments for and against both theories, and then defend what I argue is a superior theory—an eastern idea that has not been widely acknowledged in western thought: God is neither in nor out of time. Time is a part of God, who is the Ultimate Reality.

It is necessary in a work on God and time to define what is meant by God and what is meant by time. In this essay, God will be defined as the traditional Christian God is often defined: omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient, and, most importantly in this context, eternal.

Time is much more difficult to define. According to David Ray Griffin:

"there is considerable consensus, even among writers who disagree radically about
the ultimate significance of time so understood, that time as experienced involves at

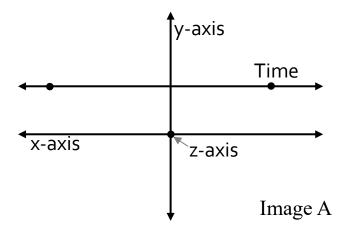
least the following characteristics: (1) a one-way direction that is in principle irreversible, (2) categorical differences between past, present, and future, and (3) constant becoming" (1 Griffin).

Griffin brings out the three most important features of time in this quote. First, time is a one-way street—one cannot go backwards. Next, the labels used to show where an event occurred in comparison to one's "now" are past, present, and future. Finally, time involves change. The passage of time is noted by the way the world moves, alters, and shifts. Beyond these features there is disagreement.

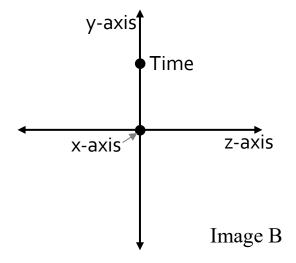
In this essay, I am going to use Alan Padgett's definition of time as "a series of durations. A duration is a period of time, bounded by instants. Instants, in turn, are durationless "points" of time" (3 Padgett). If you consider time as a line, a segment on that line is a duration, while a point is an instant. During a duration, objects move and change, atoms shift, electrons orbit the nucleus, etc. A point is when we consider just a moment of that sequence, as if we have frozen everything and nothing, not even atoms and electrons, are moving. Depending on your view of time, the line representing time may be an immensely long segment with a beginning (creation) and an end (when the world ends), or it may be a line without beginning or end, going on forever in either direction. This linear view of time is, of course, contested because some philosophers question whether we can visualize time through any image, but for the sake of this paper, I assume Padgett's definition.

There are two views as to how God perceives time, assuming that God perceives in a way comparable to humans. Either He sees it as a line which stretches in two directions,

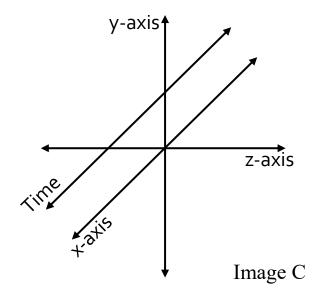
or He sees it as a point. The first view is easy to understand. Consider the following image of a line on a Cartesian coordinate system, labeled image A. As you see, it looks like a two-directional line.



Now look at image B. It is the same line, but you are seeing it differently, coming towards you and going away from you. It looks like a point, and you see it all at once at that point. This is done by simply rotating the graph.



To make this perspective clearer, image C is the same graph with just a slight rotation from image B.



The way this image relates to God and time is that some imagine God to be looking at the line from our angle, the angle of image A, where all occurs in the past, present, or future. In this way, God is temporal like we are (experiencing some sort of time, even if what seems to be an hour to us may not be quite so short or long to Him), and this theory is known as process theory (also as A-theory, or the tensed view). "Process" refers to the movement of something from being future to being present to being past. What truly exists in process theory is what is present, what is now. This means that using tensed words, which refer to something occurring in the past, present, or future, are valuable and meaningful. According to this logic, when an event occurred, occurs, or will occur is important, and God should be able to differentiate. However, some see God and time differently. If we are seeing time in the manner of image A, God could still be seeing time in the manner of image B, where all

moments seems to occur at once. This interpretation is known as stasis theory (B-theory, or tenseless theory), and in it, God is non-temporal. In this view, tensed words are only relevant to us, and are not pertinent to God.

"Since the tense of words depends upon the experience of process, the stasis theory asserts that things and events *exist tenselessly*, that is, they deny that existence itself is "tensed." This is not the same as saying that a tenselessly existing object "always" exists, for that would be to hold that the object exists at every date" (6 Padgett).

As humans experience change and movement in a linear fashion, we see events as tensed. God, however, would see all occurrences at once, so tensed words would not apply to God's experience. Events would still be noted to occur at different dates, but every date would be seen and comprehended at once.

Throughout history, the way the Christian God has been viewed (as temporal or non temporal) has changed. The evidence for this comes from a variety of texts, including sacred, philosophical, and theological texts. The most prominent of the sacred texts are the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. Philosophers who have covered the topic range from ancient Greek thinkers, such as Parmenides (510-450 BCE), to later thinkers, such as Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947 CE). Books on the subject are still being published today. This wealth of documents allows us to track much of the thinking on God and time, and, though some of the pertinent Greek thinkers lived prior to its compilation, it makes the most sense to begin analyzing the historical record with the Hebrew Bible.

We do not know exactly what the early Jews thought about their God and His relation to time, but evidence in the Hebrew Bible seems to suggest that process theory was favored. This conclusion can be drawn from examining the word "ôlām" and its use.

According to Alan Padgett, "ôlām" is often translated as eternal. It is used to describe the Jewish temple, the earth, singing, and slavery, but it is the word also used to describe God's eternality. The meaning of "ôlām" seems to be "for a long time" or "long duration" and not "timeless." Certain theologians, working off of Catholic dogma and making use of Catholic philosophical authorities, such as Boethius and Thomas of Aquinas, try to assert that it means non-temporal. This Catholic-based meaning, however, is unsupported by scholars of Hebrew and is considered inaccurate. Instead, in verses from Psalm 90 and in second Isaiah, which are often used by theologians trying to assert Catholic dogma, what is implied is an everlasting God who has always existed and will always exist, not a timeless one where time simply does not apply.

In regard to the Christian New Testament, the idea of a timeless God is still absent. Eternal life and a timeless age are referred to, but even that would be temporal, as they would both have a marked beginning, even if there is no end. An interesting verse that some reference is Malachi 3:6, which states that, "I, Yahweh, do not change."

Changelessness is a characteristic of non-temporal existence. Yet the context of the passage makes clear that this unchanging nature refers to moral changelessness, not complete changelessness. Padgett writes, "the verses which speak of a "changeless God," when taken in context, teach that God is morally changeless: that his character is reliable and the same from age to age" (34 Padgett). This deity is not the immutable God referred to by certain

Catholic theologians that is used to argue for non-temporal existence. This being is a God that can change over time in other categories, though not in any moral sense. Another verse used on occasion is Psalm 90, where we find the verse "for a thousand years in Your eyes are like yesterday when it passes, or a watch of the night." (Psalm 90:4) Yet the passage does not imply a non-temporal existence either. Instead, the passage implies that God sees time differently, but still temporally. For God, what seems a vast span of time to us due to our short lifespan is relatively short to Him, as He is eternal.

Overall, the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament do not offer detailed explanations of the relation of God and time. Alan Padgett posits, "the Biblical authors were not interested in philosophical speculation about eternity, and thus the intellectual context for discussing this matter may simply not have existed at that time" (36 Padgett). Yet another group was interested in this matter and had the intellectual context: the Greeks.

The earliest reference to time and a God-like entity in Greek thought comes from Parmenides (510-450 BCE). Parmenides wrote a poem titled "The Way of Truth" that detailed the existence of "Being" or "Being Itself," which scholars such as Alan Padgett find comparable to God. Analyzing Parmenides's concept of Being, Padgett writes the following:

"None will doubt that Parmenides means to teach that Being is unchanging...So with respect to the relationship between Being and time, Parmenides could be teaching one of three opinions, similar to our three definitions for "eternal."

- 1. Being is unchanging and exists in time, forever.
- 2. Being is unchanging and timeless, having its own unchanging duration.

3. Being is unchanging and timeless and non-durational." (39 Padgett)

It is clear to scholars that Parmenides likely did not teach (1), as particular quotes seem to lean towards the timeless idea expressed in (2) and (3). However, as the word "chronos" in Greek, which is what Parmenides used to refer to time, refers to a sort of time that can be measured and quantitatively assessed, (3) is unlikely, too. These considerations leave us with (2) and provide a glimpse into what seems to be the early idea of non-temporal existence.

Influenced by Parmenides, Plato "also taught a timeless but durational notion of eternity" (41 Padgett). Plato, who posited a world of Forms, seemed to believe that such a world would have durational time, but not measurable time. Later, when Christian thinkers began examining Platonic thought, Plato's ideas, according to Alan Padgett, would be

"declared to be "a type of revelation."" In fact, Plato's ideas would be given preference over the ideas expressed biblically: "We thus have the ludicrous situation of a Bible dictionary article defining a term in knowing contradiction to the actual usage of the Bible, and preferring instead the meaning supposedly found in the "revelation" given to Plato!" (35 Padgett).

Plato's most famous student, Aristotle (384 BCE-322 BCE), seemed to regard "eternal" as meaning everlasting in most of his work. Padgett notes that "he does write in one place of timeless things, which are "not contained by time, nor is their being measured by time, which indicates that they are not in time"... A timeless thing, then, has no temporal measure..., nor does it change... This is all Aristotle seems to clearly say about timeless being" (42 Padgett).

Plutarch (ca 45-125 CE), a Middle Platonist, began applying Plato's idea of timelessness to God. According to Padgett:

"Plutarch denies that words involving time can be applied to God, since God is in eternity which is changeless and timeless. Thus God exists at no time.

...Significantly, Plutarch goes on to say: "he [God] has completed 'always' in a single now, and that which really is in this manner only 'is,' without having come into being, without being in the future, without having begun, and without being due to end"" (42 Padgett).

The idea of God completing all time in a "single now" became extraordinarily important; it defined how philosophers and theologians that advocate for the stasis theory would describe the relationship between God and time. This theory is the basis for the graphs introduced earlier in this paper. Though we may see time as a line with a clear past, present, and future, God may see it all occurring at once. Plutarch noting that temporal language cannot be used to describe God is also important and would be continued by church fathers such as Origen (ca 185-254 CE).

Plotinus (ca 205-270), another Christian theologian and philosopher, wrote an influential work on absolute timelessness, expanding on the idea of time occurring in a "single now." According to Plotinus, God is timeless and without duration because of God's immutability. If God cannot change, and time is full of change, then God cannot be temporal. Augustine (354-430 CE) would continue with these ideas, elaborating to say that the Word of God is "not subject to time" (44 Padgett). This would make sense, as the Word

of God being inserted by a timeless being into our world would be as timeless as the being presenting it.

One of the most important Catholic thinkers on God and time is Boethius (480-525 CE). Boethius wrote,

"God is eternal; in this judgment all rational beings agree. Let us, then, consider what eternity is... Now, eternity is the possession of endless life whole and perfect at a single moment. What this is becomes more clear and manifest from a comparison with things temporal. For whatever lives in time is a present proceeding from the past to the future, and there is nothing set in time which can embrace the whole space of its life together... Accordingly, that which includes and possesses the whole fullness of unending life at once, from which nothing future is absent, from which nothing past has escaped, this is rightly called eternal." (Boethius)

In this quote, Boethius defines eternity and temporality. Temporality is referred to as that which differentiates between past, present, and future. Eternity to Boethius would be that which does not differentiate between past, present, and future, simply understanding all of time at once. As God is eternal, he must have the comprehension of every occurrence throughout all of time.

For a while, most interpretations of time were rather similar in substance, but a somewhat new perspective came when Anselm (1033-1109) in the 11th century defended a new perspective. Anselm believed that God is the greatest conceivable being, and according to him, that means that time and space cannot limit God. Due to this, God must be outside of time's power. Instead, according to Anselm, God "exists neither yesterday nor today nor

tomorrow but are absolutely outside all time...For nothing contains You, but You contain all things" (48 Padgett). Anselm did not mean that God simply is not involved in the world, but rather that God's existence cannot be limited to one point in time. Instead God contains the world, and as the world includes time, God must contain time as well, existing through all of it at once.

After Anselm, the next contribution was made by one of the most foundational Christian thinkers: Thomas of Aquinas (1225-1274 CE). Aquinas focused on God's simplicity. Simplicity to Aquinas meant that since God could not be composed of multiple parts, God cannot move or change because multiple parts are required in order for something to move or change. While similar to Plotinus' conception of time, Aquinas combines the thought of Anselm, Augustine, and Boethius in order to defend the idea that God lives all of time in a single moment.

John Duns Scotus (ca 1265-1308 CE) was the first medieval thinker to challenge this long tradition of endorsing stasis theory, the idea that all time could be experienced at once. According to Scotus, as quoted by Padgett:

"Whatever is present is actual; if the future is actual in eternity, then things which are future are already actual, and it is impossible for God to act newly in order to create new things when the future arrives. In other words, some new future things are by definition new; they cannot, therefore, already exist in the divine present if they are new in the future" (51 Padgett).

Scotus notes that nothing would ever be new for God if the stasis theory (according to which terms such as "past," "present," and "future" do not apply to God) were correct, and,

that would require one thing to happen after another, and that would be a change, which would make God's actions temporal. Scotus concludes that the past is not the same as the present, and that neither past nor present is the future, and this must be the truth to God as well. So God, who could still be outside of time, would not see the world as occurring all at once, but rather in a past-present-future, linear perspective.

For about 400 years, no progress would be made regarding the relation of God and time. John Duns Scotus may have questioned the tradition of stasis theory, but no more notable thinkers would follow through with those ideas, instead accepting stasis theory as a given.

Georg Hegel (1770-1831 CE) would spark interest in the topic of God and time again and begin a shift. Hegel would completely reject the conception of an immutable and timeless God and inspire the thinker Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947 CE) to begin a new type of theology, which would be named Process Theology after the idea of process theory, the challenger to stasis theory.

What I think makes this history very important is that when one notes the amount of Christian thought based on polytheistic Greek thought versus the amount based on monotheistic Jewish thought, there is an overabundance of Greek thought and not of Jewish. It seems strange that a religion where the Messiah was a Jew and spoke in Jewish terms would use Greek thought over Jewish thought. Perhaps Plato was given a revelation by God, as the Catholics seem to believe. However, it is also possible that Christianity

strayed from a more defensible understanding of God when they brought in and followed thought from outside the Jewish culture, and stasis theory should be deemed heresy.

Today, there are many philosophical and scientific arguments for and against both God being in time. In this essay, only six will be covered. They are as follows: (1) God is simple and immutable, proving God is outside of time; (2) the Theory of Relativity, proving stasis theory and that God is outside of time; (3) the Theory of Relativity is philosophically flawed, supporting process theory and that God must be temporal; (4) God must be a person, proving God's temporality; (5) God has a relationship with the world, proving God's temporality; and (6) God knows everything, proving God's temporality.

Two of the traditional characteristics of God that support atemporality are simplicity and immutability. If either is true, then God cannot be temporal. Simplicity means that God is not made of multiple parts, instead being one unified self, but that's not all. According to William Lane Craig:

"[Simplicity] implies not merely that God does not have parts, but that He does not possess even distinct attributes. In some mysterious way His omnipotence is His goodness, for example. He stands in no relations whatsoever. Thus, He does not literally love, know, or cause His creatures. He is not really composed of three distinct persons, a claim notoriously difficult to reconcile with the doctrine of the Trinity" (30 Craig).

If God is not related to anything, it is hardly possible for God to be related to time in any way, shape, or form. Thus, God is atemporal. If God is immutable, then similar results are produced. As Craig wrote:

"Like simplicity, the immutability affirmed by the medieval theologians is a radical concept: utter immobility. God cannot change in *any* respect. He never thinks successive thoughts, He never performs successive actions, He never undergoes even the most trivial alteration" (30 Craig).

As change is one of the ways we define time's passage, something that never changes, never thinks, never has moving parts, would be outside of time. A God that is changeless would, therefore, be outside of time. Those that embrace process theory have removed both simplicity and immutability from their definition of God (which some argue is impossible) because of these two arguments, which isn't much of a problem because neither of these doctrines have any scriptural support according to Craig (31).

The most convincing argument that stasis theorists present is Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. The Special Theory of Relativity introduces the idea that we all see time differently depending upon our location and speed. For instance, something occurring in my future may seem to be in the past for you, and this causes us to not be able to truly tell what is simultaneous. According to William Lane Craig:

"What impact does STR (Special Theory of Relativity) have on the nature of divine eternity? Well, if God is in time, then the obvious question raised by STR is: *Whose time is He in*? For according to Einstein, there is no unique, universal time and so no unique, worldwide "now." Once none of the infinitely many inertial frames is privileged or preferred, no hypothetical observer can justifiably claim that his "now" is the real or true "now" (43 Craig).

If there is no universal time for God to see things in, then a temporal God would have to be in a "now" different than all the "nows" of other beings in order not to privilege one, and then God wouldn't have omniscience because He wouldn't know what was going on in each individual "now." Also, if God is not spatially defined, then God's "now" would be confused because every bit of space has its own "now." God's very consciousness would have to be split up, one per each "now," which would ruin the idea that God is one being. Because of this well-proved theory, many believe God must be outside of time.

The Special Theory of Relativity is not without critique. Process theorists aren't so sure about it. William Lane Craig notes that "Einstein's theory, far from *disproving* the existence of absolute space, actually *presupposes* its nonexistence" (48 Craig). Absolute space was a Newtonian idea. It supposes that God is everywhere in space. This belief is important because if one supposes God is everywhere and bases their theory of time upon that, then Einstein's theory goes out the window. As Craig explains, "What relativity theory did, in effect, was simply to remove God from the picture and to substitute in His place a finite observer" (47 Craig). If a God who is everywhere exists, then the idea of time being limited by one's spatial position and velocity would be applicable to humans but not to God. God could still have a perfect view in which there is easily visible simultaneity, even if we cannot see in such a way. In fact, a theorem known as Bell's theorem seems to contradict and challenge Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. Instead, it points back to Newtonian physics with aether and absolute simultaneity, because it suggests that something may exist that travels faster than light. This theorem arguably invalidates

Einstein's and can therefore allow a process theorist to put aside the Special Theory of Relativity in favor of a God-based absolute time.

Even if William Lane Craig's critique seems problematic, other philosophers, such as Alan Padgett, have similar problems with Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity:

"There are, in fact, four different opinions in this matter, all based on results from Special Relativity. Let us refer to ontologically real simultaneity as "genuine" simultaneity. The first view is, then, that the only genuine simultaneity is simultaneity in the same place. There is thus no genuine simultaneity at a distance. Second, one can argue that there is one particular way of calculating simultaneity that is to be preferred in each frame, known as "standard simultaneity." The third view is that simultaneity is a convention. Fourth, one can develop a "cosmic time," in which there is a truly basic or proper frame in which events are genuinely simultaneous" (90 Padgett).

Padgett notes that there are four ways to react to Einstein's theory. The first, which is that the only things we can ever know to be simultaneous must occur in the same place, requires that nothing happen outside of our frame of view that can be discoverable as simultaneous. That seems preposterous. The second view, which is that each person's individual simultaneity can be calculated, is a bit incoherent. The third says that we don't know what is simultaneous, and we can never know what is real at any given moment. For all three of these views, Padgett points out the following:

"The basic mistake is made in assuming the *sufficiency of the Special Theory of Relativity for ontology*, in particular for the theory of time...The gravamen of this

chapter is, a simple move from the mathematical perspective to the material perspective will lead to incoherence with our fundamental intuitions about the world in which we act and live" (92 Padgett).

If we attempt to use the Special Theory of Relativity to understand time, as is done in the first three views, then there will be incoherence. We must begin with what we know based on the material world, not based on mathematics. The fourth view, which involves picking a time as the norm and calculating everyone else's time based upon it, should sound similar to William Lane Craig's idea of using God's time as the absolute time; Padgett does not agree that Newtonian physics should be endorsed but does believe that the Special Theory of Relativity is simply not developed enough yet to base a theory of time upon. Again, this critique allows for process theorists to have simultaneity through one standard time that all else is based upon.

Process theorists also critique stasis theory because process theorists will sometimes insist that God cannot achieve personhood without being in time. However, stasis theorists have been able to push back against this idea, pointing out that a timeless God could possibly possess the required characteristics of personhood. According to William Lane Craig, "a timeless, divine person can be a self-conscious, rational individual endowed with freedom of the will and engaged in interpersonal relations. All this has been said, however, in abstraction from the reality of a temporal universe. Given that such a universe exists, it remains to be seen whether God can remain untouched by its temporality" (86 Craig). So the big answer to this question is that we do not know if an individual can be a "person" outside of time yet still have contact with a temporal world. I would argue that the instant

there is interaction with a temporal being, the "timeless" being would be stepping into time and lose its timelessness. Others would argue that God's design of the world may be so perfect that he does not have to interact with it after its formation, but then there is the question of Jesus. If God were to become human (in Jesus, for example), then He would be temporal because Jesus lived in a temporal world. This would force God to have interactions in time which occur consecutively in order, and that would make God's presence temporal, with a past, present, and future.

God's relationship to the world is another factor that process theorists will use to prove God is in time. As William Lane Craig points out, "Either God existed prior to creation or He did not" (86 Craig). This poses a conundrum to stasis theorists. After all, "prior" implies time, so God would be temporal if he existed "prior" to creation. If He existed but did not exist *before* creation, then that leaves two options: either He becomes temporal with creation, or He remains timeless. If He remains timeless because time is of this world and not of His and He sees all occurring at once, then He can stay timeless. Yet just creating the world means God has done an action (creating, sustaining, acting with, etc.), and so has changed. If an individual changes, then there is time because one existed prior to and after the change, and this supports process theory. Some stasis theorists such as Thomas of Aquinas attempted to deny that God has to be related temporally to the world, but that has been unsuccessful.

The last notion to consider in this paper concerns God's omniscience. There are two kinds of facts: tensed facts, which one must be related to time to understand, and tenseless facts, which do not require such a relation. According to William Lane Craig:

"a being which only knew all tenseless facts about the world, including which events *occur* at any date and time, would still be completely in the dark about tensed facts. He would have no idea at all of what is now going on in the universe, of which events are past and which are future. On the other hand, any being which *does* know tensed facts cannot be timeless, for his knowledge must be in constant flux, as the tensed facts known by him change" (99 Craig).

This argument is one of the more successful for process theorists. If one must be in time to know tensed facts, then God must be in time to know everything. As tensed facts are constantly turning from future to present to past, the knowledge of an omniscient God would be constantly changing as well. If God's knowledge is changing, then so is God, so God must be temporal.

You may have noticed that neither process theorists nor stasis theorists have definitively defended their respective positions. This has prompted some, like Padgett, to attempt to insist that God is both in and out of time. Craig disagrees vehemently:

"Often laymen, anxious to affirm both God's transcendence (His existing beyond the world) and His immanence (His presence in the world), assert that God is both timeless and temporal. But in the absence of some sort of model or exploration of how this can be the case, this assertion is flatly self-contradictory and so cannot be true" (15 Craig).

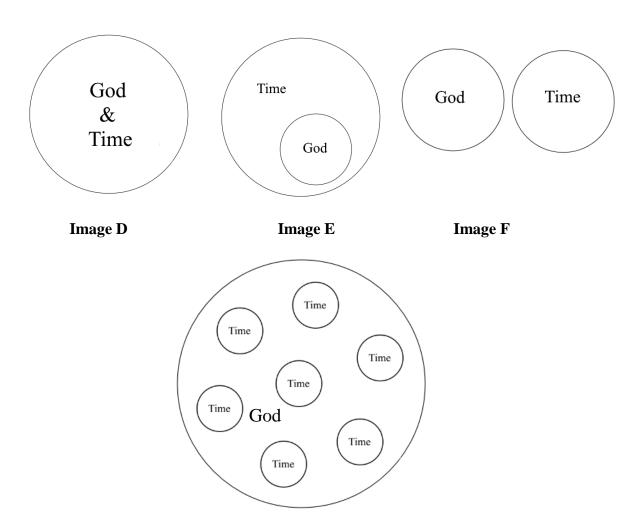
Craig thinks that if something has contact with the temporal, it becomes temporal, so God can only be one or the other. I think that Padgett may be onto something, however, by

suggesting that God is both in time and timeless. I think we may need to find a third category that isn't simply "in time" and isn't "out of time".

What if time is in God, in a way? In monistic Asian religions, we are all part of an Ultimate Reality, which includes all existing worlds and all that is in them, as well as souls that have made it to a kind of bliss state outside of those worlds. What if time is universe specific, but all is held in one atmosphere, the Ultimate Reality, which would then envelop and include time, but not necessarily be ruled by time? Instead, this Ultimate Reality simply exists in both a temporal and atemporal way. Pluralists, like Bruce G. Epperly and John Hick, believe that the Ultimate Reality is synonymous with God in some ways. What if we attach this pluralist thinking to the view of time and God? God would contain everything, be able to do anything with what He contains and therefore be in multiple times at once when He interacts with different universes, know everything inside of Him, etc. Time would be real to God, but it would not limit God. This seems to solve a lot of problems that theologians and philosophers have been arguing over and allows for pluralism, too.

My solution allows for an all-powerful, all-knowing, connected-with-our-reality God and for stasis theory and process theory to be involved. If we switch to an Ultimate Reality kind of God, it even allows for disconnected, temporal universes to be connected with God, who is still timeless in some ways Himself, but can still intervene where he envelops each world. Consider the following pictures. The first, image D, is the stasis theory idea. God is separate from the temporal world. The next two (images E and F, respectively) are process theory worlds, which picture God in the temporal world or picture time as a trait of God. My idea is the fourth, image G. God contains worlds that have

temporality of their own kinds, ruled by their own laws of physics and nature. Which would you like to believe we live in?



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