

# Moment of Eternity

by Gerald Winslow

**The Sabbath was made for man. . .**

**Jesus**

In his book, *Toward an American Theology*, Herbert Richardson writes: “[K]eeping the Sabbath holy is nothing other than the way that a man lives to the glory of God. For Sabbath holiness and the glory of God are one and the same thing.”<sup>1</sup> Many of Richardson’s fellow theologians must have been at least mildly surprised. Why would one of America’s leading young theologians tie his search for an “American theology” to a discussion of the Sabbath? How could a symbol which is linked in many minds with legalistic Pharisees and Puritans hold any real value for modern theology?

Could such a symbol be made to live again?

If Richardson’s attempt is measured in terms of stimulating widespread interest in Sabbath theology, perhaps his endeavor will be considered misguided. But in this essay, I assume that Richardson was correct in calling

for more attention to the Sabbath.<sup>2</sup> My stance is undoubtedly informed by a biography. As one reared in the Seventh-day Adventist faith, I have never failed to observe the weekly Sabbath.

But the years have also provided opportunity to think analytically about the symbol. The repeated experience of Sabbath and critical reflection on the symbol have made the question posed by theologian and philosopher Paul Ricoeur exceedingly significant: “How can the immediacy of the symbol and the meditation of thought be held together?”<sup>3</sup> Can the symbol be subjected to searching analysis and still retain its potency in the lived experience of faith?

In seeking an answer, I have taken Ricoeur’s advice and looked for that analysis which allows the richness of the symbol to stand—an analysis which in Ricoeur’s words is “no longer reductive but restorative.”<sup>4</sup> To this end, I have sought aid from those who have thought deeply about the role of symbols in the spiritual life.

Much of importance may be said about the symbolic meaning of the Sabbath. But I have chosen only to emphasize the ways in which the Sabbath may vivify the human experience of duration through symbolic representation of the Beginning and Eternity under the sovereignty of God. Whatever else may

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be said about the Sabbath, it is a symbol which is uniquely well suited to help us see the depths of our existence in time, its beginning and continuance, in the light of Providence.

Scholars have argued about the origin of the Sabbath.<sup>5</sup> But what is of concern here is not the beginning of the Sabbath, but rather the Sabbath as a symbol of *the* Beginning. As Richardson says, “the origin of an idea may affect its relevance, but it never determines its truth.”<sup>6</sup> The truth about Sabbath commences with the words, “In the beginning, God. . . .” Embedded as it is in the Genesis creation story, the weekly cycle with its crowning day, the Sabbath, stands as a perpetual symbol-in-time for the work of creation. Without elaborate explanations, the story simply says: “So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in Creation.”<sup>7</sup>

In the earliest forms of the Sabbath literature, no reason is given for the Sabbath except that the sovereign God who has the power to create the world has also made the Sabbath. As one scholar has observed:

Early biblical law rarely gives reasons and theorizes even more rarely. It would not be in the normal range and character of the Bible to verbalize the idea of the sabbath. . . . But the importance of the sabbath and its frequent mention in the Bible have presented a challenge to rationalization since ancient times.<sup>8</sup>

The need for additional reasons apparently made it necessary for later biblical writers to surround the Sabbath with more explanatory statements. But in its most basic form, the keeping of the Sabbath symbolizes the acceptance of the sovereignty of God.

Kenneth Burke has stressed the fact that after the designation of the seventh day as the Sabbath, “God” becomes “Lord God” in the creation story.<sup>9</sup> The Creator is Ruler. Symbolically, the Sabbath places mankind under the order of this Sovereign. It comes at the beginning of the emphasis on God’s dominion. Burke says that the Sabbath is a “polar term.” That is, it stands in the story for *rest* after *work*. In this sense, it is in dialectical

opposition to the six days of labor. The Sabbath with its cessation thus becomes a moral “No.” It is implicitly negative because it is antithetical to the six days of creation.

In Burke’s analysis, the moral “No” is prior to and leads to the Idea of Nothing.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the moral negative drives toward the concept of the Divine, the One who is *no* particular *thing*. Just as a child initially learns the meaning of authority at least partly through hearing “No,” mankind accepts through cessation the sovereignty of that One who transcends all particular things. In somewhat the same vein, Rabbi Heschel writes:

Indeed the splendor of the day is expressed in terms of *abstentions*, just as the mystery of God is more adequately conveyed *via negationis*, in the categories of *negative theology* which claims that we can never say what He is, we can only say what He is not.<sup>11</sup>

The Sabbath is unmatched as a symbol capable of representing the *no-thingness* of God. “Thing,” says Heschel, “is a category that lies heavy on our minds, tyrannizing all our thoughts.”<sup>12</sup> But God is Spirit, not some thing. This is a lesson which materialists, both ancient and modern, have needed to learn. As Jack Provonsha says, “the ultimate sin against God is His ‘thingification.’”<sup>13</sup> God may be “thingified” just as certainly through the reification of symbols as through the deification of objects. Holy time, the experience of Sabbath, helps to preserve human beings from such idolatry. The Sabbath returns mankind to the realm of the spirit. As Heschel states, “The Sabbath preceded creation and the Sabbath completed creation; it is all of the spirit that the world can bear.”<sup>14</sup>

**I**t must be emphasized in this context that Sabbath came before the Fall, before the rulership of the Creator was challenged by transgression. Burke claims that disorder is implied in order. Thus, the order of a Sovereign symbolized by the Sabbath must sooner or later be rejected, saying “no” to the “No.” And the disorder in the transgression leads to death. It is true, of course, that dis-

obedience did lead to capital punishment for Sabbathbreakers.<sup>15</sup> But Burke must be reminded that in the narrative Sabbath is prior to sin and death. What is more, the story does not even hint that the order implied in Sabbath would lead inevitably to transgression. Nor is there any indication how many perfect Sabbaths passed before the Fall. In the *beginning* (before sin), mankind's first full day on the Edenic earth was the Sabbath.

Since sin, Sabbath has been a means of recapturing some measure of that Edenic experience. Mircea Eliade claims that "every ritual has a divine model, an archetype."<sup>16</sup>

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Later, he says: “The Judaeo-Christian Sabbath is also an *imitatio dei*. The Sabbath rest reproduces the primordial gesture of the Lord. . . .”<sup>17</sup> The periodic repetition of this archetypal act reveals the desire to return to the paradisiacal state. That Edenic situation was lost “once upon a time” and is lost again in each individual’s experience. The passage of time brings decay and destruction and guilt. But, as Eliade states elsewhere, “it is interesting to observe a certain continuity of human behavior in respect to Time, both down the ages and in various cultures. This behavior may be defined as follows: To cure the work of Time it is necessary to ‘go back’ and find the ‘beginning of the World.’”<sup>18</sup> This “journey” back to the Origin presents the opportunity for renewal and regeneration. One is placed in touch with the earliest roots of existence and another “birth” becomes possible.

This periodic rediscovery of the Beginning is not just for individuals. Religion is preeminently a social phenomenon. Even the most private religions are usually only variations of the communal faith of a group. So it is

with the Sabbath. It is more than a time for the individual to remember the Creator, for the Sabbath is a supremely social institution. Even the first Sabbath was not celebrated alone. Community, it seems, requires sacred times when the origins can be celebrated and the needs of the group can be represented in ritual. The Sabbath affords time for community. Rabbi Heschel quotes this ancient allegory:

After the work of creation was completed, the Seventh Day pleaded: Master of the universe, all that Thou hast created is in couples; to every day of the week Thou gavest a mate; only I was left alone. And God answered: The Community of Israel will be your mate.<sup>19</sup>

The Sabbath, then, requires memory — an imaginative recalling. “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, . . . for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day.”<sup>20</sup> Life for individuals and for communities has many beginnings. And yet, in a more important sense, life never begins but is always the gift of other life. In the experience of holiness, one may be reunited with both Creator and creation and thus with one’s community and with oneself. And one may sense anew the magnificence of the gift of life. “Man is made for Sabbath holiness,” writes Richardson. “His end is not in himself, but in the holiness of God which, through the Sabbath, is established in the world as the final joy of all created things.”<sup>21</sup>

The memory of the past seems sufficient reason to believe in the reality of the flow of time. With a celebrated illustration, Edmund Husserl demonstrates the impossibility of denying the “immanent time” of the flow of consciousness. He says, “The evidence that consciousness of a tonal process, a melody, exhibits a succession even as I hear it is such as to make every doubt or denial appear senseless.”<sup>22</sup> But how can this subjective experience of the flow of time be represented more adequately?

In western civilization, the passage of time is generally symbolized as moving in a single direction. Like an arrow which has been

shot, time is pictured as racing from the past through the present toward the future. Unlike the placid pool or endless cycles used to symbolize time in the East, time in the West is the demon which destroys all human efforts. "The feeling prevails," writes psychoanalyst Joost Meerloo, "that what humanity creates is always destroyed by time."<sup>23</sup> Time would probably matter little were it not for an awareness that life will end. The "melody" will not continue forever.

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"Fetalized man, wrenched too early from his mother's womb, lives with an inborn death verdict."<sup>24</sup> Given lives which seem to be consumed by time, humans seek the eternal. But even the eternal must be experienced *in* time. Stated with what may be the necessary *double-entendre*: for the time *being*, time remains.

Or does it? Is there no way to transcend the world of appearance and experience the realm of eternity? Van der Leeuw writes: "Duration, then, is the great stream flowing relentlessly on: but man, encountering Power, must halt. He then makes a section, a *tempus*; and he celebrates 'sacred time,' a festival. In this manner he shows that he declines the given as such, and seeks possibility."<sup>25</sup> The experience of eternity is made accessible for those who perceive that not all times are the same. But perhaps this experience requires a more "primitive" view of time.

Such a view of time may be seen in children. Jean Piaget, who has documented the development of the time concept in children, points out that in the child's "primitive" conception of time, "each action still has a time of its own, so that there are as many temporal series as there are schemes of action."<sup>26</sup> If, for

example, the young child works more rapidly or does more work, time is perceived as passing more rapidly. The young child may remember more vividly than the older child or adult, but the memories have their own special times.

Piaget's portrayal of the child's "primitive" time concept bears some interesting similarities to Gerhard von Rad's description of ancient Israel's understanding of time.<sup>27</sup> To be sure, Israel's God is the Lord of history Whose mighty acts follow one after the other. In this sense, Israel has a linear view of time. But von Rad claims that there is no single time line in the Hebrew chronicles; nor is there any *abstract* view of time. Rather, time is associated with events. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven . . ."<sup>28</sup>

For anyone who believes that all times are the same, the Sabbath is surely nonsense. But even to the modern mind, it seems, all times are not the same. Most people do celebrate birthdays, anniversaries and a few holidays. The seasons in America are marked by Labor and Memorial days. But such events often tend only to promote the objectification of time. That is, time is measured in numbered units. It is thought of in terms of marketable packets. And life can be "back-timed" from the threescore years and ten. In many respects, the lesson of numbering our days has been well learned. It cannot be denied, of course, that an objective notion of time does facilitate certain important tasks such as planning for the future. But objectified time, the time of punch clocks and prison sentences, often deprives one of the immediate moment — of savoring the eternal Now.

The Sabbath, sacred time, has the power to liberate one from the bondage of objective time. It is interesting to note that Norman O. Brown, in his discussion of repression, claims that "only repressed life is in time, and unrepressed life would be timeless or in eternity." Brown goes on to symbolize this experience as the "Sabbath of Eternity."<sup>29</sup> And borrowing Brown's phrase, Meerloo states: "Man's yearning for eternization, his longing to be beyond temporariness and beyond his confinement in time, leads to various symbolic actions whereby man tries to reach

beyond the beyond and to live life in an unrepressed way in the Sabbath of Eternity."<sup>30</sup>

The contexts in which these authors adopt the Sabbath symbolism is obviously quite removed from the original biblical imagery. Nevertheless, the appropriation of the Sabbath symbolism to represent unrepressed life demonstrates some of the potency of the symbol. Moreover, such an appropriation is certainly not "untrue" to the biblical Sabbath. Indeed, understanding the Sabbath as a "festival of freedom" or a celebration of liberty is entirely in harmony with the biblical presentation.<sup>31</sup>

**B**ut when is the time to experience eternity? In the commotion of modern society, in the confusion of mastering and obtaining the things of space, time relentlessly devours life. As one theologian has written, we have the "feeling that our existence is slipping ever more rapidly away from us into nothingness — and we can do nothing about it."<sup>32</sup> But the experience of eternity must somehow be associated with cessation. For this experience, symbols are essential. As van der Leeuw states, in myth and symbol is found the timeless "once upon a time." Time is allowed to "stand still" for a while. "This cessation of duration acquires the religious designation of eternity."<sup>33</sup>

Here is the spirit of Sabbath; in cessation, eternity is encountered. Time is no longer money or monuments. Time becomes possibility. As Heschel says: "The essence of the world to come is Sabbath eternal, and the seventh day in time is an example of eternity."<sup>34</sup>

Liberation from objectified time, liberation for Eternity, can never be fully accomplished, however, without altering attitudes toward death. Many reasons have been offered for the discontinuity between life and death as it is perceived in modern culture. But one factor which may deserve

more attention is simply the absence of genuine repose in the lives of many (perhaps most) people today. In the Bible, death is usually portrayed as a rest — a dreamless sleep.<sup>35</sup> But in the course of modern life such respite must seem a very remote symbol. Father Diez-Alegria, the Jesuit author whose recent book, *I Believe in Hope*, is creating considerable stir, makes the point which I think is important:

Death for me, seen from "this side" — that is to say, without stressing transcendent hope — presented itself in a very positive way as fitting into the category of "rest," of "sleep," of the "Sabbath pause." Modern activism, turning even one's vacation into a time of mad activity, has lost to a great extent this concept of "rest," which is so deeply biblical . . . .<sup>36</sup>

Rest after labor is the biblical view of death. And for those who know the Lord of the Sabbath, anticipation of the rest may be calm and even joyous in the deepest sense. The Sabbath permits a foretaste of that rest, and a preview of eternity for the time *being*. For the Sabbath points beyond death to the hope of eternity.

Today, the society which I know best suffers from a lack of sacred time. Observance of the weekly Sabbath continues to wane. "Thank God it's Friday" means little more than the promise of a weekend filled with new and frenzied activities. The yearly "sabbaths" of the American heritage have been converted to long weekends. (Who can even recall what they commemorate?) And the "sabbatical year" of the bicentennial was largely a time of grotesque self-congratulation rather than an opportunity to rediscover the founding principles of justice, to forgive debts, to restore the land and return it to its original owners.

An ancient symbol, the Sabbath, still has important lessons to teach us. In rediscovering the Sabbath, the time *being* may find resources for sustaining a community that experiences both Beginning and Eternity.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Herbert W. Richardson, *Toward an American Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 119.

2. For the most part, I am using the word "Sabbath" to refer to the seventh day of the week which,

according to the biblical account, was hallowed by God and given to humans as a day of rest and worship (Gen. 2:1-3). It should be noted, however, that the Sabbath symbolism in the Bible extends far beyond

the weekly Sabbath. Seven special sabbaths per year were designated as commemorative festivals (Lev. 23). Moreover, every seventh year was specified as a sabbatical year (Lev. 25:1-7). After seven sabbatical years, every fiftieth year, a special Year of Jubilee was celebrated (Lev. 25:8-12). Although the weekly Sabbath is the central concern of this essay, the more extensive symbolism of *holy time* as represented in these other "sabbaths" should also be kept in mind.

3. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 350.

4. *Ibid.*

5. As early as 1883, Wilhelm Lotz suggested that the Hebrew Sabbath (*šabbāt*) was borrowed from the taboo days of the Babylonians (*šabbattu*) which fell on the seventh, fourteenth and twenty-eighth days of the month. Wilhelm Lotz, *Questiones de Historia Sabbati* (Leipzig: J. C. Heinrichs, 1883). More recently, von Rad has agreed that the Sabbath probably did begin as some sort of taboo day. Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, Vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*, trans. by D. M. C. Stalker (New York: Harper Brothers, 1962), p. 16. But Andreasen has offered some telling arguments against this thesis and states: "The Old Testament does not understand the Sabbath as a taboo day even in the oldest stratum." Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, *The Old Testament Sabbath: A Traditional-Historical Investigation*, The Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, Number Seven (Missoula, Montana: University of Montana, 1972), p. 265.

In a short essay like this, it is impossible to discuss the traditional-historical criticisms of the biblical literature regarding Sabbath. Such a discussion has been provided with admirable clarity and thoroughness by Niels-Erik Andreasen in the work just cited. It is very important, of course, to know as much as is possible about what is "behind the text." But Andreasen comments near the end of his own analysis of the Sabbath literature: "The theological significance of these [Sabbath passages]. . . is largely untouched and remains to be explored" (p. 273). And as David Tracy has observed, the Christian theologian must also be concerned about the meaning "in front of the text." David Tracy, *A Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 77, 78.

6. Richardson, *Toward an American Theology*, p. 119.

7. Gen. 2:3.

8. Matitiahu Tsevat, "The Basic Meaning of the Biblical Sabbath," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 84 (1972), p. 454.

9. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), pp. 203-204. It may be that Burke ignores the distinction between the two creation stories. But it seems, for purposes of his "logological" analysis, he assumes that there is an underlying reason for the combined structure of the two accounts as we have them.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-23.

11. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Sabbath: Its

Meaning for Modern Man," in *The Earth Is the Lord's and the Sabbath* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 15.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

13. Jack Provonsha, *God Is with Us* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974), p. 34.

14. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, p. 21.

15. Ex. 31:14-16 and Num. 15:32-36.

16. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), p. 21.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

18. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 87, 88. See also Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), pp. 81ff.

19. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, p. 51.

20. Ex. 20:8 and 11.

21. Richardson, *Toward an American Theology*, p. 116.

22. Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, trans. by James S. Churchill (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 23.

23. Joost A. M. Meerloo, *Along the Fourth Dimension: Man's Sense of Time and History* (New York: The John Day Company, 1970), p. 10.

24. *Ibid.*

25. G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Vol. 2, trans. by J. E. Turner (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 385.

26. Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of Time*, trans. by A. J. Pomerans (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

27. Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, Vol. 2 of *Old Testament Theology*, trans. by D. M. G. Stalker (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), pp. 99, 100.

28. Eccl. 3:1.

29. Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press), pp. 93-95.

30. Meerloo, *Along the Fourth Dimension*, p. 55.

31. See for example, Hans Walter Wolff, "The Day of Rest in the Old Testament," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 13 (Sept. 1972). The author says: "The fundamental significance of the seventh day is therefore this: rest from our work is to remind us of the freedom we have already been given" (p. 500).

32. Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: A Study of the Christian Doctrine of Creation* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 289.

33. G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence*, II, 385.

34. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, p. 74.

35. I Kings 2:10; II Chron. 21:1; Eccl. 9:5,6; Matt. 9:24; I Cor. 15:51, 52; I Thess. 4:13-17.

36. José Maria Dies-Alegria, *I Believe in Hope* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 186.

The author wishes to express appreciation to Dr. Roy Branson for helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.