

Describe the shift from Church Time to Merchant's time in medieval Europe

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20171076

Our perception of time today is as a resource. We look at it as a secular framework to fit our various activities and tasks in, a finely divided quantum that can be used to maximize utility for ourselves; a. It is a rather modern take. We only need to go back to western Europe in the early to mid middle ages to see a different perspective of time as theological - beginning with God, and dominated by Him¹. The difference in perspectives on time begs the existence of a transitional period, and such a major switch in people's time perception cannot have been an easy, or a quick one. We attempt to study this.

The Church's role in Medieval Europe, and "Church Time"

The role of the Church in the life of the medieval person cannot be understated. In all matters religious or otherwise the Church had immense power over all, from the lowly peasant to the King of a state. The practices of the Church were the practices of the people, and thereon the time of the Church became the time of the people as well. For the Bible (or other Abrahamic religions) time was theological - it begins as Divine consequence, and continues till the Day of Judgement. All time is naturally connected with divine action. Particularly when considering the New Testament perspective of time having a focal point in history (the Birth of Christ), and the end of Time (the Resurrection of Christ) having already been set in progress but requiring the actions of all for its completion², it is not hard to see how time is "God's", and not something belonging to any individual to be used for profit. It is a deep-rooted intermingling of God and time, and this allows us to begin to get here the full sense of the statement that "time ultimately carried the Christian toward God".³ Time in the long term was an entirely theological idea, a vessel carrying people towards their preordained roles by divinity, and within the events of individual day to day activity not many had the need for more accuracy than the Church bells gonged out - but this was to change with, among others, the arrival of the Merchant class.

Perception of time as a necessity of labour

As our purpose is the analysis of change of "time", it serves us well to examine the accounting of time in regular day-to-day activity. The measurement of time was "commonly related to

¹ "Church time and merchant time in the Middle Ages - Jacques Le Goff"

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/053901847000900411>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2019.

² "Church time and merchant time in the Middle Ages - SAGE Journals."

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/053901847000900411>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2019.

³ "Studies in human time : Poulet, Georges : Free Download, Borrow" 5 Aug. 2014,

<https://archive.org/details/studiesinhumanti00poul>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2019.

familiar processes in the cycle of work or of domestic chores"⁴. Within the rising and falling of the sun, how people divided their day came down to the quantum their professions required them to keep - a system that E. P. Thompson has called "task orientation": ideating time through the perception of labour. Task orientation, as Thompson notes, is correlated with a lack of distinction between "work" and "life".

"Social intercourse and labour are intermingled - the working-day lengthens or contracts according to the task - and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and 'passing the time of day'".

It is a system that is still commonplace in many villages of rural India, and it allows us a glimpse into societal structure as it may have been. One must imagine this completely functional in situations where monetary profit is not a priority but service to a God is, and labour is for oneself. But complexities arise when labour is hired. Thompson brings up the point that,

"The entire family economy ... within it there may be a division of labour, and allocation of roles, and the discipline of an employer-employed relationship... even here time is beginning to become money, the employer's money. As soon as actual hands are employed the shift from task-orientation to timed labour is marked."⁵

And in the conception of "time is money", we see the contradictions that are to arise with men of business attempting to operate on Church time, where time is God's and not meant for usury. If nothing else, it is clear that as economic systems change, so does perception of time.

The need for Merchant Time, and its creep towards widespread usage

Continuing the idea of time as a consequence of labour, we note the aforementioned shift from "task-orientation to timed labour". While at least initially bound by the constraints of meteorological time, with expansion of business networks and monetary gain, a merchant dealing in the purchase and sale of goods for profit employing persons to accomplish his tasks needed on the surface more precise measurements of time than was provided by the Church. This led to the introduction of "merchant time", in its physical representation a communal clock in the area where trade occurs.

The representation paints us a picture, one of the life by Church making way for a society more reliant on modern economic and political structures - and thus, one less guided by the concept of "church time". As the church strengthened its missionary activities, it too began to switch over.

The Conflict between Merchant and Church Time

The question remains of the transitional period between the church and merchant times. To quote Thompson, "It is commonplace that the years between 1300 and 1650 saw within the intellectual culture of Western Europe important changes in the apprehension of time"⁵. So what happened in the 350 odd years where both systems of time ran parallel? Le Goff thinks

⁴ "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." 6 Jan. 2014, <https://www.sv.uio.no/sai/english/research/projects/anthropos-and-the-material/Intranet/economic-practices/reading-group/texts/thompson-time-work-discipline-and-industrial-capitalism.pdf>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2019.

both existed functionally at the same time: "For the Christian merchant, [the Church's time] was essentially a second horizon of his existence ... contact between the two horizons was merely exterior... Natural time, professional time, and supernatural time were essentially distinct, and at particular points, contingently similar". We need not go to le Goff for this, for again, it is an observation to be made in various sections in our own country. Where conflicts of the pre-existing and the new arise, both are observed in separate spheres of influence, until one prevails.