

James K. A. Smith
talks about eternity
and temporality with
Sarah Meyrick

IN THE opening chapter of *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the past, facing the future, living faithfully now*, James K. A. Smith writes that his new book is “an invitation to the spiritual adventure we call ‘time’”.

“Knowing *when* we are” changes everything; the trouble is that many Christians suffer from “spiritual dyschronometria”, a lack of awareness of what time it is. We fail to recognise how much we are the products of a past, and this leads to naïvety about our present, and to becoming fixated on “end times”.

What we need is a renewed “temporal awareness”, he argues. “Spiritual time-keeping is fundamentally a matter of awakening to our embeddedness in history and attending to our temporality — both individually and collectively.”

Just don’t expect tips on time management: “The hope of this book is to occasion an awakening, a dawning awareness of what it means to be the sorts of creatures who dwell in the flux of time’s flow, who swim in the river of history,” he writes. He offers the reader a blend of philosophy and poetry, memoir and theology, interleaved with meditations from Ecclesiastes.

By day, Dr Smith, 52, is a professor of philosophy at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Better known in the United States than the UK, he is an award-winning author of a dozen books and a highly regarded speaker. (The Archbishop of Canterbury is a fan: he praises the new book for its “distilled wisdom, the broad philosophical engagement, the connecting of Scripture, tradition, and culture”.)

Dr Smith, who attends a Christian Reformed church, has written extensively on Christian subjects (he has a particular passion for St Augustine). What is the link with his day job? “I am a Christian who is also a philosopher,” he says. “I think probably about 15 years ago, I realised that my particular calling as a Christian philosopher was to try to be a translator, to translate philosophy for the Church.”

Philosophy, he believes, is about how to live, rather than how to solve puzzles. “I think there are such treasures of introspection in the philosophical tradition that really do contribute to spiritual awareness and



The author James K. A. Smith



Out of time, out of mind

spiritual intentionality.” He sees his role as “outreach scholarship”.

Since we’re discussing temporality, why has he written this book now? He refers to insights he had in therapy a decade ago. “It was such an experience of reckoning with the past, to discern the now in order to live into a different future. In many ways that personal experience was a spiritual experience. I think new spiritual insights emerged for me because of that . . . and it took me back to [seeing] some philosophical insights with new eyes.”

The other reason is that “we’re all wondering what time it is” right now. “There’s an unsettledness in our societies, in which we are trying to determine just *when* we are and therefore what we should be doing. It feels like a lot has been up-ended. The pandemic was part of that experience, but I also think that certain forces were unleashed [beforehand] that have had us asking ourselves, ‘Where have we come from? Where are we going?’ So that’s why the book operates on both a personal level and a collective social level.”

A word that appears early in the book is “nowhen”, which refers to the philosophical concept of the “view from nowhere”. Professor Smith explains: “People who imagine that they have a ‘view from nowhere’ work with this illusion, as if they see the world without context and without location and they sort of float above everything.”

Many Christians think that they have “a view from nowhen”, he says. “They operate under a kind of illusion that their standpoint is not historically conditioned, not indebted to a past, as if God kind of skyhooks them out of history. It’s as if they’ve been teleported to eternality [*sic*], and they’re above the flux and flow of history. I don’t know how common that is in here in the UK, but it’s a common sort of popular folk Christianity in the States.

“And I think it’s not just mistaken. I think it’s dangerous, because

it becomes very naïve about the dynamics of history, the particularities of a cultural moment in which we find ourselves.”

Why do Christians make that mistake? “There are forms of Christianity that are kind of driven by an ‘end times’ fixation, for whom redemption, salvation, is really about escaping creation. I think also there can be forms of Christianity that are very nostalgic. And so they actually prefer to imagine that they are not affected by history. . . . And I think that mostly feeds into confirmation bias, because they don’t want to be unsettled by the history that they have buried.”

Is that because we live in unsettled times? “I’m not sure if it’s a symptom or cause, and maybe there’s a feedback loop that characterises this, but I think that in some ways nostalgia contributes to the disruption and the erosion of cultural institutions that we experience right now. On the other hand, I think that cultural erosion makes us very prone to nostalgia, because we’d like to imagine a time when it was less unsettled.”

Nostalgia raises the question of where Christians find their home. “We are not called to be a people whose necks are always crooked backward, as if home was Egypt. And I do think that there are forms of Christianity for whom they think they are primarily recovering an Eden, rather than living towards a new kingdom that is coming. But I would say it’s really about Christians re-embracing eschatology, rather than just remembering the sort of creation dynamic.”

The book is full of memorable phrases. “Christian timekeeping is like a dance on a tightrope: on the one hand, we are called to inhabit time in a way that stretches us, to be aware of so much more than now . . . on the other hand, we always live in the present. . . . The trick is to live fully present to the moment without being defined by the *Zeitgeist*.”

Or: “Deeper histories live in us.

Every heart is a crypt and a hope chest handed down.” And: “An eschatological life is one animated by the cadences of two hopeful exhortations: ‘Lift up your hearts!’ and ‘Be not afraid.’”

The book is posited as a wake-up call. What might readers do differently? “What I’m hoping is that

someone could walk away from the book with a new posture. Maybe they don’t have a new position or new formula, but they now walk with an awareness of both their indebtedness to a past and the dynamism of a creaturely life, expecting

Continued overleaf

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