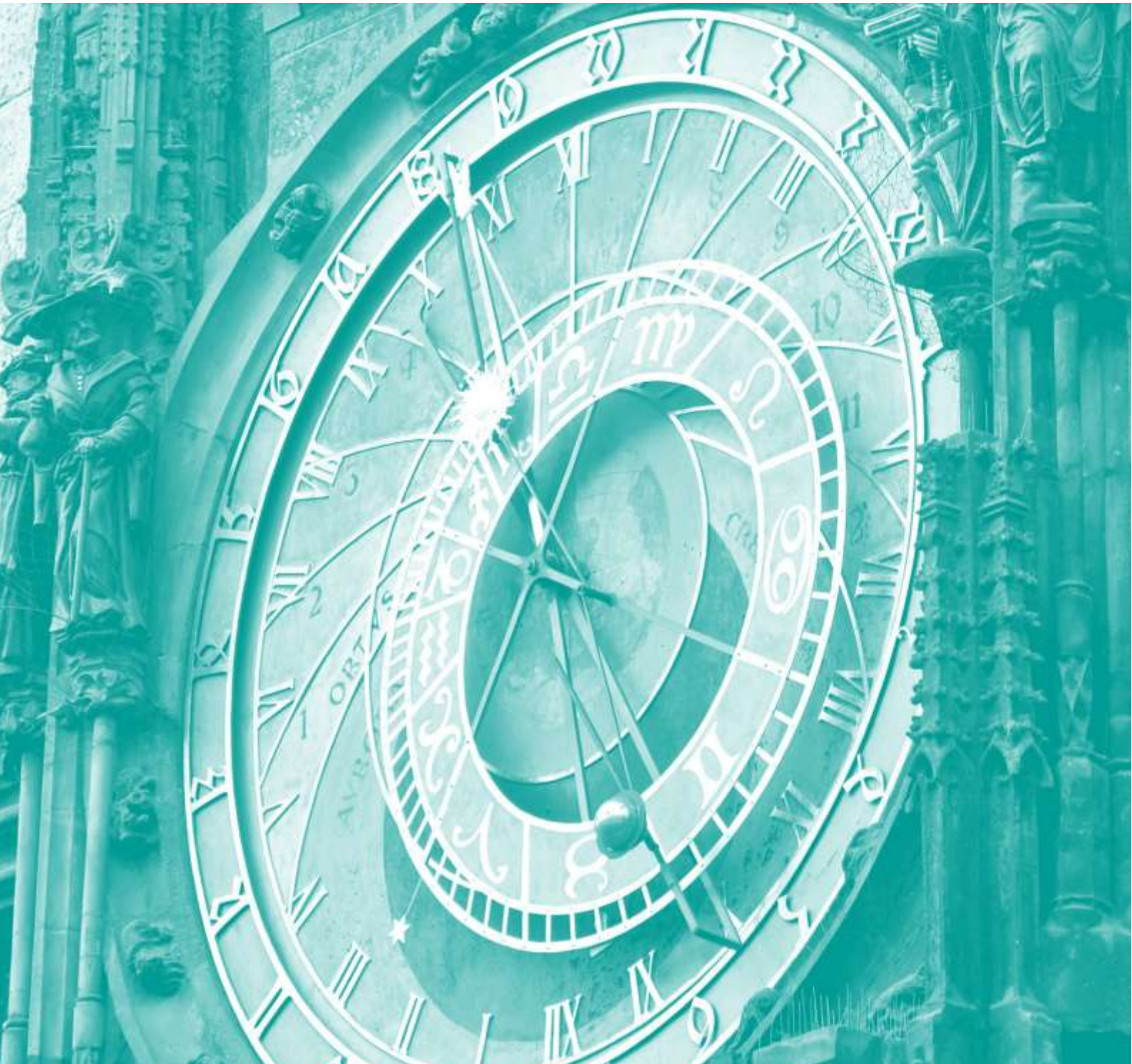
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE | Cambridge Interfaith Programme

Student symposium | 23 June 2025

Temporality and religion: bound and unbound in time



Note

This copy of the programme is offered as a record of the event. It omits abstracts and other details from those that were not able to present on the day. It also omits the details of one presentation at the presenter's request.

August 2025

Overview

There will be four sessions, with breaks for refreshments (provided) and lunch (provided for speakers). Sessions 2 and 3 each feature three parallel panels. The day concludes with a set of lightning talks.

Venues

All venues are inside the Faculty of Divinity, on Sidgwick Site. The welcome desk will be situated outside the Selwyn Room, near the main entrance.

Refreshments will be available in the Selwyn Room (ground floor).

Core sessions will be in the Lightfoot Room (first floor). Parallel sessions will also use Rooms 2 and 4 (both on the lower ground floor).

Weather permitting, the Faculty garden will be available for use during lunch & break times.

There is a choice of stairs and lift service between floors and accessible WCs on all levels.

Please take time to look at the poster submission from Tasnim Ali, Sacred spaces in secular settings: a critical study of Islamic prayer rooms in British universities, which will be displayed outside the Selwyn Room throughout the day.

Schedule

09:15 Welcome — Divinity entrance

Name badges and other information will be available to collect from 09:15.

09:30 Session 1 — Lightfoot Room

Philosophy 1: Bound and unbound in time

Diffractive mysticism: entangled temporality in Ibn ʿArabī and Karen Barad | Sahar ElAsad

Theological compatibilism and branching time | Marcus Ackermann

Does God have time for us? Reflections on the origin, impact, and potential theological challenges of divine timelessness | Elise Harboldt

11:00 Break time

11:30 Session 2: Parallel panels — Venues tba

Choose from papers on literature, modernity, or ritual.

Literature 1: Disrupting temporalities

Time and trauma in Toni Morrison's Beloved | Madeleine Jenkins

Does the sun move in a devotional poem? Time and celestial sanctification in John Donne's "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward" | Anika Goddard

Modernity 1: Fashioning temporal solidarities

Neo-traditionalism and its conception of the past and present | Ferhat Kafali

A critical exploration of constructions of Sikh identity (1873–1950) in the light of Hindu religious nationalism | Inderpreet Kaur Pejatta

A time of fellowship: time and the organising of a Pan-Buddhist world after Europe | Andi Schubert

Ritual 1: Rhythm, ritual, and echoes of timelessness

Time in Sufi traditions | Luke Wilkinson

Crossing the immemorial: the metaphysics of recognition in Babette's Feast | Michael Wilcher

Echoes of the afterlife: Froberger's Meditations and the phenomenology of devotional time | Edward Campbell-Rowntree

13:00 Lunch

14:00 Session 3: Parallel panels Venues tba

Choose from papers on literature, modernity, or ritual.

Literature 2: Redemption and eternity

Surprised by the Present. One man's approach to redeeming the time(s): time, temporality and ethics in the works of CS Lewis | Siân Morris

The fall of a sparrow: literary excursions on a theology of estrangement and repentance | Ben Hewitson

Keeping time: form as redemption for tragic time in Eliot's Four Quartets | Amy Galliford

Modernity 2: Christian encounter: modernity, the secular and the state

Christian patriotism and statal immortality in 19th century Pan-African political theology | Apeike Umolu

Belief wound up and unwound in time: on the temporality of second naïveté | Matthias Teeuwen

Ritual 2: Sacred time, sacred space

The moon, Makkah and Stonehenge: making meaning of pilgrimage sites | Imad Ahmed

À la recherche du temps propice: searching for auspicious time through Feng shui | Xiangshu Li

Transtemporal empathy: memory, architecture, and sacred space | Katherine Graham

15:30 Break time

15:45 Session 4

Lightning talks

LDS reception: effective-delay and restoration chronology | Jono Lethaby

Islamic time and Hui Muslim life in northeast China (former Manchuria) | Jeri Jiarui Wu

Cultivating Barakah: Sufi land practices and everyday devotion in southern Spain | Reem Fatthelbab

Philosophy 2: Cycles: futures and returns

Would the Messiah speak the language of Eden? Beginning and end of time in Jewish philosophies of language | Lola Graziani

17:15 Close

In this document:

Abstracts

Abstracts are alphabetised according to presenters' names.

Most presentations will be in the form of a 15-minute paper. Alternatives (lightning talks and poster) are clearly indicated.

Amy Galliford	Keeping time: form as redemption for tragic time in Eliot's Four Quartets If eternity is truly eternal, then it must be happening now. Yet, any belief in such a notion is compromised by the binding realities of temporality, in which the successive experience of time as contingent and irreversible entails tragic effects. Our experience of time is the culprit of endless anguish: persistent loss, constant estrangement, our ignorance of the future and the irreversibility of the past. Beginning with the conception of time as distension from Augustine's Confessions and a brief examination of its implications, this paper will explore the question of how time is to be redeemed through an analysis of T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets, with primary reference to 'Burnt Norton'. While time is recognisably the force behind much of life's anguish, it also functions as the substance of its own redemption, offering us a medium for participation in eternity. Only in and with time can personal history, musical rhythm and words themselves exist and carry the meaning that redeems the time they take. It is not despite but through our temporality that we participate in the eternity that is eternally present. As we draw distended time into narrative and form, we illuminate a point of intersection between time and eternity reflecting that of the Incarnation. The redemptive capacity of form emerges through both the poetry and the poetics of Four Quartets, as Eliot himself enacts the ideas his poetry explores, redeeming time for himself and his reader – not by escaping it, but by keeping it.
Andi Schubert	A time of fellowship: time and the organising of a Pan-Buddhist world after Europe The work of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, a pan-Buddhist organisation that germinated in Ceylon/ Sri Lanka in the mid-20th Century has rarely received much attention in conversations about Pan-Buddhist movements around the world. Time was a crucial part of the organisation's efforts to imagine and build fellowship across a pan-Buddhist world that was grappling with the end of the Second World War, the growing pressure of the Cold War, and the continuing push for decolonisation in Buddhist countries around the world. The marking of the 2,500th anniversary in the Theravada tradition in countries like Sri Lanka alongside a 15th Century millennial prophecy from Ceylon of a great Buddhist revival that would coincide with it was the driving force of this imagination. However, this also required negotiation with other Buddhist traditions that did not share the same calendar even as efforts were made to build a sense of fellowship across these doctrinal and contextual differences. In other words, time was not a common denominator across these Buddhist contexts. While recognising these differences however, the leading figures of the movement such as Prof Gunapala Malalasekera, the founder and first President, sought to use time as a way of building bridges across the Buddhist world. This included many ultimately futile attempts to harmonise Buddhist

	calendars around Vesak/ Visakha, the establishment of a simultaneous hour of meditation that Buddhists around the world could participate in, and the significant work done to organise celebrations of the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti across the Buddhist world in 1956. Using archival work in Sri Lanka and the UK, I explore the negotiations to make time a basis for pan-Buddhist fellowship in this moment of global transition.
Anika Goddard	Does the sun move in a devotional poem? Time and celestial sanctification in John Donne's "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward" My paper will use John Donne's 'Good Friday, 1613: Riding Westward' to explore how the conceit of a meditative poem changes when it is read in time or out of it. It will engage with seventeenth-century New Astronomy to suggest that what Donne does in 'Good Friday, 1613' is to use his speaker's relation to the sun's ecliptic to place the tensions between the old geocentric and new heliocentric astronomical systems in dialogue. This will be its academic argument, but its wider demonstration will be on what the skill of close poetic analysis can offer to theology. With some groundwork reference to Louis Martz' The Poetry of Meditation and the Ignatian influence on Donne's work, the paper will examine the relationship between Donne and the rising sun, which doubles as a Christ-figure. The focus of my close reading will be on the final six lines in which Donne, riding with his back to the sun, asks God to 'burne off my rusts, and my deformitie' before he himself will consent to 'turn my face'. 'Good Friday, 1613' plays with the problem of agency and salvation through its solar imagery. Donne's schema requires the sun/son to stand still in the sky until the salvific process is worked out and he consents to turn, fulfilling the promise of 1 Corinthians 13.12 ('then we shall see face to face'). However, if time were to move, the westward-riding Donne would end up facing the sun whether he consented to or no when evening came. Does God chase us down, or do we have to turn towards him? The salvific theology of 'Good Friday, 1613' entirely depends on whether we read it in or out of time.
Apeike Umolu	Christian patriotism and statal immortality in 19th century Pan-African political theology The promise of eternal life is the central tenet of Christianity. At the level of the individual, the soul is both divinely sanctioned by creation, and sanctifiable by salvation. A sanctioned and sanctified soul is promised eternal life. As such, the promise of personal immortality is meant as an instigator to the personal moral conduct and flourishing in the temporal realm that will secure salvation, leading to immortality in the spiritual realm. But Christ's famous instruction to give unto Caesar what is Caesar's acknowledges the state as something Christians must reconcile with. What then of the moral conduct and flourishing of the state? How are we to ensure these in order to facilitate the moral conduct and flourishing of citizens? This has long been an important concern for political theologians. In the Pan-African intellectual tradition,

	the idea of statal immortality emerged in 19th century theorisations of “Christian patriotism”. Focused on the work of churchmen Alexander Crummell and Edward Blyden, this paper will explore how both of them, in different ways, read a promise of statal immortality in Christianity, seeing this promise as an instigator to a patriotic conduct among citizens that would ensure the moral conduct and flourishing of the state. The paper will read their political theology within the context of their commitment to African liberation, key to which was their commitment to the development of the Black American republic of Liberia in West Africa. The paper will further consider the extent to which their ideas on statal immortality are able to respond to secular commitments to finitude by philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau in On the Social Contract (1862), where he rejects the idea of statal immortality, and Martin Hägglund in This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom (2019), where he rejects the idea that the promise of immortality is an instigator to moral conduct and flourishing in the temporal realm.
Ben Hewitson	The fall of a sparrow: literary excursions on a theology of estrangement and repentance Can we change? To repent implies estrangement from my former self, affirming that my transgression belongs to the past, and it is therefore alienable from me. But this raises difficulties regarding temporality. To what extent am I continuous with that self, how much of my former transgression is stitched into the fabric of my current selfhood? The Cambridge theologian and philosopher Donald Mackinnon argued that the language of repentance cannot be a ‘bubble on the surface of things’; repentance must mean I am a free moral agent. Mackinnon also recognised, however, that this cannot mean the freedom of an intact, sovereign subject, impervious to harm. If that were the case, as Rowan Williams has suggested, there could be no room for real, incontrovertible loss, since the subject would always retain the freedom to be whomever they wanted, regardless of the burden of historical, embodied limit. I want to explore how these difficulties, if not resolved, might be confronted with honesty, alongside a handful of literary and theological texts. We are illuminated here as much by failures of repentance as by success. Graham Greene’s novel, The End of the Affair, for instance, offers resources for considering how God’s grace may work alongside an impenitent soul, resulting in the protagonist of that novel becoming more and more a well of joy for his neighbour, even as he falls into despair. I believe that literary examples are especially pertinent on the topic of change and repentance, for their capacity to contain paradox and irresolution. It will be my conclusion that repentance is unfinished business, so long as the Body of Christ has not finished the business of history. This suggests, though our attempts at reconciliation are precarious, there is never a point at which we cannot go on.

Edward Campbell-Rowntree	Echoes of the afterlife: Froberger's Meditations and the phenomenology of devotional time In this talk, I explore the phenomenology of time in seventeenth-century France a musical 'meditation' for harpsichord by Johann Jakob Froberger (1616-1667), the Memento mori Froberger. I explore how this piece relates to thanatological meditation, a practice that was widely encouraged across a vast corpus of Catholic devotional literature, most notably in the fifth meditation of St François de Sales' Introduction à la vie dévote (1608), which encouraged readers to engage in a proleptic simulation of their death by imagining a grand farewell to the mundane world, the eventual decay and burial of their own bodies, and the ultimate destination of their soul. In considering how Froberger's compositions—and, crucially, their sounding enactment in performance—created a temporal space that may have allowed listeners to reflect on their own mortality, the nature of eternity, and the realm of the afterlife, I aim to demonstrate some of the ways in which music can provide a potent model for theorising the experience of temporality.
Elise Harboldt	Does God have time for us? Reflections on the origin, impact, and potential theological challenges of divine timelessness "Your years do not come and go, whereas ours both come and go…Your today does not give way to tomorrow, nor does it follow yesterday. Your today is eternity." This statement in Confessions highlights Augustine's belief in divine timelessness, a core commitment in traditional classical theism. Divine timelessness, in its strict form, does not merely refer to God's eternal nature, but supposes that since God cannot change (divine immutability), God does not relate to creation successively, or within time. Consequently, God does not experience emotional changes in response to the actions or experiences of created beings (divine impassibility) or modify divine actions in response to the actions of others. Although most influential within classical Christian theism, divine timelessness has also made some inroads into Jewish and Islamic thought. While proponents of divine timelessness argue that this characteristic is essential to God's power and perfection, a variety of scholars have strongly criticised the notion, claiming it is the result of philosophical presuppositions being inappropriately read into both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. These scholars claim that divine timelessness has significantly distorted a variety of theological beliefs, including God's response to human suffering, the nature of divine judgment, the mechanics of prayer, etc. One common criticism is that a God who does not operate successively in time would necessarily be detached and impersonal. Nelson Pike states that a timeless God "could not respond to needs, overtures, delights, or antagonisms of human beings." Similarly, Roger Olson views divine timelessness as "alien to any religion that values an interactive God." This paper will briefly discuss recent criticisms of divine timelessness, highlight some potential theological and relational differences between a

	temporal or timeless God, and discuss how these contrasting ideas may influence the lived emotional experiences of those who hold them.
Ferhat Kafali	Neo-traditionalism and its conception of the past and present Neo-traditionalism is gaining increasing visibility and resonance, particularly among Muslim communities in the West. This orientation is characterised by a distinctive temporal imagination: it constructs a specifically interpreted and coherent vision of the pre-modern Islamic past—understood as tradition—while offering a sustained critique of the present, framed through the lens of modernity. Rather than rejecting the modern world outright, neo-traditionalists seek to reintroduce selected elements of the sacred past into contemporary life, cultivating a synthesis that adapts inherited values to present conditions. This synthesis is guided by a selective and hierarchical temporal logic: the past is imagined as spiritually integrated and metaphysically ordered; the present, by contrast, is perceived as fragmented, disenchanted, and morally unstable; and the future is envisioned as a reconfiguration of the past—not a full restoration, but a meaningful recovery of its guiding principles. The presentation explores how neo-traditionalism defines and operationalises the categories of tradition and modernity, what kind of future it envisions, and how this synthesis is enacted in practice—whether through spiritual retreats in symbolically charged spaces, pedagogical models rooted in classical transmission, or particular social, moral, and political attitudes. I argue that these practices rest on interpretative constructions of both past and present, aimed at stabilising religious identity and authority in an age marked by epistemic uncertainty and cultural dislocation.
Imad Ahmed	The moon, Makkah and Stonehenge: making meaning of pilgrimage sites This presentation will look briefly at an aspect of Imad's research into the Islamic calendar. It will begin briefly with an introduction to the Kaba and the Islamic calendar, and show how archaeoastronomical research have shown that both sacred time and sacred space is coded into the design of the Kaba through astronomical alignments related to the Islamic calendar. Interestingly, it seems that Stonehenge has a similar astronomical alignment to the Kaba; Imad will briefly share some of his anthropological research about how Muslims have responded to a “pilgrimage” to Stonehenge.
Inderpreet Kaur Pejatta	A critical exploration of constructions of Sikh identity (1873–1950) in the light of Hindu religious nationalism What does it mean to be religious, to be a ‘Hindu’ or a ‘Sikh’? This paper explores the temporality of religious identity by tracing how Hindu religious nationalism shaped the evolving construction of Sikh identity from 1873 through post-independence India in 1950. Focusing on a critical historical moment marked by colonial disruption and religious reform, the paper examines the interplay between key groups such as the Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha, Singh Sabha, Chief Khalsa Diwan, and the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). These organisations, often in competition or negotiation with one another,

	responded to the pressures of British rule, communal politics, and internal reformist agendas, each seeking to define authentic religious belonging. By drawing on both primary and secondary literature, this study argues that temporality—understood here as both historical sequence and experiential time—was central to the articulation of Sikh religious identity. The Sikh qaum (global community) strategically mobilised historical memory, sacred time, and institutional power to carve out a distinct and autonomous religious space. This redefinition of what it meant to be 'Sikh' was not merely reactive but anticipatory, grounded in visions of sovereignty, authenticity, and permanence amid rapidly shifting political realities. Through this lens, the paper contributes to broader conversations on how temporal frameworks structure inter-religious dynamics, nationalist formations, and the ongoing negotiation of religious selfhood. Keywords: Temporality, Religious Identity, Sikh Nationalism, Hindu Nationalism, Singh Sabha, SGPC, Hindu Mahasabha, Colonial India, Chief Khalsa Diwan
Jeri Jiarui Wu	Islamic time and Hui Muslim life in Northeast China (former Manchuria) This paper explores how Islamic conceptions of time – linear, cyclical, eschatological – are lived, negotiated, and transformed in the context of Hui Muslim communities in Northeast China. The centre of the research is Jilin, though many families trace their roots to other northeastern cities, having moved to Jilin over the past few decades for work, religious networks, or marriage. In Islamic theology, time is sacred and morally charged: it unfolds linearly from Creation toward the Day of Judgment, yet is punctuated by cyclical rituals such as daily prayers, Friday congregations, Ramadan fasts, and the lunar calendar. Time is not inert. It is divine trust (amanah), moral accountability, and embodied rhythm. I examine how these temporalities persist under conditions of secular governance, surveillance, and marginal visibility. Drawing on Guangtian Ha's The Sound of Salvation (2021), I consider how Qur'anic recitation and devotional sound practices recalibrate time – creating affective, suspended moments of divine intimacy that challenge the homogenous time of the nation-state. In Manchuria, a region that experienced Japanese occupation, once thrived as an industrial centre, but was left economically marginal as resources were redirected to coastal cities. Islamic time is not monumental, but quietly enduring. Far from being frozen in "museum time," Hui Muslim life in Manchuria reveals a form of sacred time lived in the interstices of political pressure and devotional continuity. Through sound, memory, and repetition, Muslims in this region continue to inhabit a temporal world where eternity echoes through the everyday.
Jonathan Lethaby	LDS reception: effective-delay and restoration chronology Reception history often requires a linear timeline, receptions must follow texts. However the 19th Century Restoration in the LDS tradition causes considerable chronological disruption to a text's Wirkungsgeschichte. In

	this lightning talk, a new conceptual tool of "effective-delay" is introduced to describe this.
Katherine Graham	Transtemporal empathy: memory, architecture, and sacred space This paper develops the concept of “transtemporal empathy,” which refers to an empathetic connection with historical and future figures and events. In other words, it is empathy that transcends time. Drawing on literature from various disciplines and architectural theory, this paper argues that the built environment can play a role in cultivating transtemporal empathy. An analysis of memorial architecture is employed to illustrate the phenomenon of transtemporal empathy; memorials are physical manifestations of historical events and thus serve as examples of how shared remembrance can be incorporated into the built environment. This paper aims to stimulate further research questions regarding the social necessity of memorials, the potential application of transtemporal empathy as a pedagogical tool, and the religious significance of empathy.
Lola Graziani	Would the Messiah speak the language of Eden? Beginning and end of time in Jewish philosophies of language In my paper, I would like to explore the concept of cyclical time in linguistic theories developed by medieval Jewish grammarians and philosophers of language. In their theories on perfect language, both grammarians and philosophers displayed some form of implicit or explicit language ideology. An important aspect of these ideologies is a remarkably common reference to distant times, such as the biblical stories of Adam’s naming of the animals and the confusion of tongues at Babel, or to distant places, such as speakers living in isolated desert communities. These themes are striking as they situate an imagined perfect language distant from the current place and age. I hope like to explore whether this can be considered the result of a specifically Jewish concept of time, with an understanding of history as cyclical, and the return to a perfect, paradisiac state at the end of times. I would like to ask whether medieval Jewish experiences of diaspora and hope for the messianic age have given rise to these theories, or whether they were rather influenced by contemporary Muslim and Christian philosophies of language. This gives rise to further questions, which I would hope to address, such as the role of the grammarian and philosopher in his effort to uncover the perfect language, the use of language in bringing about the messianic age, its nature and function in the World to Come, the relation of edenic and messianic languages to mystical concepts such as devequt, and the implications these would have on a Jewish understanding of history: would the Messiah speak the language of Eden?

Luke Wilkinson	Time in Sufi traditions Exploring breath, prayer, and time in several key scholars of the Sufi tradition (Bastami etc).
Madeleine Jenkins	Time and trauma in Toni Morrison's Beloved How does time become complicated by traumatic experience? How can time be reconceived in the aftermath of trauma? These are questions that Toni Morrison addresses, through the lens of Black enslavement in the 19th century, throughout her Pulitzer Prize winning novel Beloved. Morrison shows how traumatic experience disrupts the regular rhythms of time, merging the past and the present in a way that is captured by her disorienting literary form. At the same time, she points to nature as providing an undercurrent of constancy. As natural imagery is woven throughout the novel, it becomes a revelation of rhythmic stability which prevents disorientation from having the final word. Interpreted within the framework of Shelly Rambo's trauma theology, nature becomes a revelation of that which 'remains' throughout both life and death. Drawing attention to the role of nature in Beloved highlights the significance of time in meaningful theological responses to trauma, setting a precedent for future engagement with this subject.
Marcus Ackermann	Theological compatibilism and branching time In logic and metaphysics, branching time is a formal framework that represents temporal reality in a tree-like fashion (with a single "trunk" towards the fixed past, and multiple "branches" towards the open future). Since its inception by Arthur Prior in the 1960s, there has been a venerable tradition of utilizing it to investigate the supposed compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom - it has been put to work, for example, in attempts to formalize the compatibilist views of (amongst others) Anselm, Ockham, Leibniz, or de Molina. In this talk, two major points are made. Firstly, I show that past attempts at formalizing such views systematically fail on grounds of either descriptive inadequacy or formal inadequacy. The former charge applies to branching time models that do not contain a representation of the actual future. Such models, I argue, are unable to make sense of the fact that God foreknows what will actually happen. The latter charge applies to branching time models that do contain a representation of the actual future, a so-called Thin Red Line (TRL). Such models, I argue, are (in their current form) unable to give a formally sound account of the future tense operator. Secondly, I present a hybrid framework that overcomes both these worries. It is a hybrid in the sense that it combines the formal semantics of the non-TRL framework with the model of the TRL framework. Here, the former guarantees formal adequacy, and the latter ensures descriptive adequacy. Finally, I comment on why I think this hybrid model has so far been shunned.

Matthias Teeuwen	Belief wound up and unwound in time: on the temporality of second naïveté For some students of theology, Ricoeur's notion of second naïveté comes closest to describing their spiritual and intellectual transformations in the course of their studies. While historical and biblical criticism and comparative philosophy of religion have unravelled the immediacy and taken-for-grantedness of first naïveté, second naïveté offers the promise of suspending disbelief. The hermeneutical circle of faith and suspicion raises an interesting question about the temporality of belief: can belief once lost be regained? Based on ethnographic fieldwork among students of Reformed academic theology in the Netherlands, I reflect on the way the arc of the hermeneutical circle is mirrored in their narratives and personal experiences. I ask what kind of temporality is established in the rhythms of faith and suspicion in the course of studying theology. I argue that second naïveté is part of an operation on time that allows people to negotiate the conditions of modernity and what Walter Benjamin calls secular time.
Michael Wilcher	Crossing the immemorial: the metaphysics of recognition in Babette's Feast How do our representations of the immemorial, the “first time of knowledge,” shape the way we recognize things in time? Isak Dinesen’s novella Babette’s Feast begins by opposing the natural world of time with heavenly eternity. It opens with a view of the sublime and historically real Berlevaag Fjord and the nearby town of the same name, home to a pious Protestant sect who hold temporal nature as “but a kind of illusion” in opposition to “the New Jerusalem toward which they were longing.” However, the sect is thrown into discord upon the passing of their leader, the Dean—further exacerbated when the Dean’s daughters allow Babette, their French maid to cook them a “real French dinner” in memory of the Dean’s 100th birthday. During the banquet, one member—under the influence of champagne comically misidentified as “lemonade”—recalls a “strange happening” that occurred on the fjord: the long-deceased Dean once walked across its frozen surface at Christmastime. "And this was a thing," concludes the storyteller, "which had not happened within the memory of man!" It happens, rather, beyond memory, in the immemorial. Soon after this recollection, the climactic recognition scene in which “our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite,” Dinesen’s narrator further notes that “time itself had merged into eternity.” Upon re-reading the story in light of this recognition scene, the symbolic register at its heart is made clearer: the opposition between time and eternity, heaven and earth, is itself a “illusion.” In this paper, I seek to reflect on Babette’s Feast as a performance of recognition in light of what Jean-Louis Chrétien calls the immemorial, a past that is “absolute, non-empirical, always already forgotten—[but which] is nonetheless that which opens me to the truth of being.”

Reem Fatthelbab	Cultivating Barakah: Sufi land practices and everyday devotion in Southern Spain This lightning talk draws from ethnographic fieldwork with Sufi Muslim converts in southern Spain who root their spiritual practice in rural, land-based life. While the broader study examines devotional labor, ethical self-formation, and the material politics of barakah (blessing), this presentation foregrounds one thread within that work: how time is felt, shaped, and unsettled through daily acts of cultivation and care. In spaces like La Fonda and Azahara, practitioners do not separate olive farming, cooking, or building from religious life. Instead, faith is lived through repetitive, embodied engagements with the land—pruning trees, pressing oil, sharing seasonal meals. These slow, often improvised routines cultivate what might be called devotional time: a temporal orientation grounded not in linear progress, but in rhythm, patience, and attunement to both seasonal and spiritual cycles. This mode of time is deeply relational, extending barakah across human and more-than-human forms—goats, soil, clay, and ancient olive trees. Drawing on thinkers such as Charles Hirschkind and Tim Ingold, the paper explores how such practices enact a form of temporal reclamation, particularly in the context of Andalusia's layered histories of rupture and erasure. Here, time is not only remembered or resisted—it is inhabited and remade through ordinary, devotional gestures. Though not the central analytic of the thesis, attention to time reveals how Sufi ecological practice can unsettle dominant framings of religious temporality—offering, instead, a vision of ethical life cultivated through the quiet, recursive labor of staying with the land.
Sahar ElAsad	Diffractive mysticism: entangled temporality in Ibn ʿArabī & Karen Barad This paper brings Ibn Arabi's metaphysical vision of time into conversation with Karen Barad's quantum philosophy to explore non-linear, entangled understandings of temporality in religious and philosophical thought. For Ibn Arabi, time is not a neutral progression but a living, sacred reality. Each moment (waqt) is a site of divine self-disclosure, a threshold between presence and absence, being and non-being. His concept of tajaddud al-khalq fil-anfās, the continual renewal of creation with every breath, disrupts static notions of time and instead presents a cosmology in which existence is constantly reconstituted through divine will. Time, in this mystical tradition, is profoundly relational, embodied, and oriented toward unveiling the Real (al-Ḥaqq). Karen Barad's theory of time as entangled and diffractive resonates with this cosmology. Drawing from quantum physics and feminist theory, Barad rejects linear causality in favor of intra-action, where the past and future are not behind or ahead but materially enfolded into the present. Temporality, in Barad's framework, is emergent, iterative, and inseparable from the ethical and material conditions of the world.

	By reading Ibn Arabi and Barad alongside one another, this paper develops a conception of time that is devotional and material, intimate and expansive. Both thinkers challenge the secular, progressive chronologies that dominate modern thought, inviting instead a mode of attention to time as a site of continual becoming and revelation. This comparative reading offers a way to think temporality beyond the binaries of religious and scientific, premodern and postmodern, by illuminating how moments can be lived not as steps on a timeline, but as thresholds of possibility.
Siân Morris	Surprised by the Present. One man's approach to redeeming the time(s): Time, temporality and ethics in the works of CS Lewis The relationship between temporality and ethics has been the subject of some discussion in recent scholarship, though one that remains under-explored. "Surprised by the Present. One man's approach to Redeeming the Time(s)" looks at this specifically through the lens of C.S. Lewis, one of the most widely read popular religious authors of recent times. It seeks to grapple with such questions as: What does it mean to be 'faithful' in a finite and time-bound world? Is what sense is our world time-bound, and what even is faithfulness anyway? The paper explores bigger questions of eternality and if there is any possibility of engaging with such a thing, should such a state exist, and if so, are there any ethical imperatives that are implicit in that, alongside 'smaller' ones of day-to-day life and religious practice as a means of engaging with these questions, with the aid of a number of his novels, essays, and longer writings. It argues that faithfulness, as seen by C.S. Lewis, is inherently bound up with a multi-layered approach to time, and temporality as a general concept, and specifically, how members of both the laity, and the vocational professions, meet their 'present' and how they construct their 'present', in the light of an eternal perspective.
Tasnim Khanom Ali	Sacred spaces in secular settings: a critical study of Islamic prayer rooms in British universities This poster examines how UK universities structure time in ways that marginalise Muslim students' religious practices. Despite commitments to equality, Islamic worship, rooted in sacred rhythms, often clashes with secular, productivity-driven academic schedules. Drawing on Decolonial Theory, the presentation explores how Christian legacies, secular bureaucracies, and post-9/11 securitisation frame Muslim faith expression as both inconvenient and suspicious. Focusing on prayer rooms, it shows how institutional concerns over radicalisation, especially under the Prevent Duty, create a chilling effect on faith-based organising. By analysing the exclusion of Islamic temporalities, such as prayer, fasting and religious gatherings, the paper argues that British universities privilege secular time while pathologising sacred time. It contributes to the wider literature in Critical Muslim Studies and Critical Race Theory by highlighting how time and space are central to anti-Muslim racism, thereby calling for a deeper rethinking of religious pluralism in UK higher education.

Xiangshu Li	À la recherche du temps propice: searching for auspicious time through Feng shui I will present on fengshui, or Chinese geomancy, as a means of governing the temporal and spatial aspects of human life. According to fengshui, human activities should follow a regime of choosing auspicious times and places in order to live in harmony with the natural environment. I aim to examine how the insistence on obeying the temporal laws of fengshui, which originated in religious practices, continue to exert a powerful influence on the everyday lives of people living in East Asian societies.

About this event

The 2025 Student Symposium is convened by a team of postgraduate students: Arwa Al Qassim (Education PhD), Ferhat Kafali (Divinity MPhil), Imad Ahmed (Divinity PhD), and Luke Wilkinson (Divinity PhD).

All the student convenors are also members of the Cambridge Interfaith Research Forum, the principal sponsor of this event.

Cambridge Interfaith Research Forum

The Cambridge Interfaith Research Forum was established in 2022, to increase opportunities for Cambridge researchers of all levels to exchange learning and collaborate around the broad topic of religious studies, including inter-religious topics. The Forum is co-convened by Professor Esra Özyürek (Academic Director of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme) and Dr Iona Hine (Cambridge Interfaith Programme Manager).

For further information about the Research Forum, its work, benefits and membership, please visit www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/research-forum.

Find us

The Faculty of Divinity is located on Sidgwick Site, behind the Faculty of Music, next to the History Building, and near the garden entrance to Selwyn College.

View an interactive map at map.cam.ac.uk.

About the featured image: The cover shows a monochrome detail from a photograph of the astronomical clock in Prague. The original full colour photograph was taken by Andrea Piacquadio in 2018 and shared via pexels.com.