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Time: What We Really Believe In
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We believe some things that go so deep into our soul and shape our lives so totally that we are not even aware of them. These beliefs are so accepted and so widespread that questioning them would be as unthinkable as questioning the difference between down and up.

Belief is often associated with religion, but these remarks do not refer to religious dogmas, whether Christianity's focus on Jesus' offer of salvation, or conservative views that marriage is between a man and a woman, a belief held across many religions.

No, I refer to something even more fundamental, namely, our belief in time and the way it is organized. Every day is divided into 24 hours, each hour consists of 60 minutes and each minute comprises 60 seconds. Every country in the world organizes time this way, not just those in the Americas and Europe.

All of us use timepieces, such as alarm clocks and watches. Our cell phones display the time on their main screens. Time is the same everywhere, tied into a system of time-keeping that provides the correct time for any location around the world. True, there are local differences, but those differences are defined in terms of the one international system of time.

Furthermore, we organize the activities of our lives on this system of time. We wake up, go to school or work, have meals, watch TV and travel according to this pervasive organization of time. So, from shared international time down to the everyday lives of each of us, we all assume and participate in the same belief in time.

It was not always this way.

Early medieval Europe practiced a notion of time passed down for centuries. Monasteries took the lead in tracking the passage of time and marking it. The "hour" indicated a time for offering prayer, for monks to gather and worship God.

But, the "hour" did not consist of 60 minutes; it was not even a fixed length of time. Nor was a "day."

The term "day" referred to daylight, and was divided into quarters by three "hours:" the third, sixth and ninth hours.

As the length of the day lengthened and shortened, so did the length of the hours. Around the Mediterranean Sea, which is fairly close to the equator, this did not cause much change. But in Europe, the further north one went, the more the hour's length changed as the seasons passed. The daily passage of time was thus measured by nature, but the purpose of measurement was for prayer.

In the early Middle Ages, clocks as we know them had not yet been invented. Elaborate mechanisms using water or sand rang bells at the key hours to gather the faithful to prayer. There were no clock faces. Time measurement was heard, not seen.

The mechanical clock measuring equal amounts of time was apparently invented in the 13th century. The profession of clock maker is known by the end of the 1200s, and public clocks with faces and hands were installed on the towers of European city halls in the 14th century.

Such cities became a cacophony of bells, with the monasteries and churches ringing the old nature-based time and the city halls ringing the new time of equal measurement. Today, we say "o'clock," as in three o'clock, which is a shortening of the phrase "of the clock." It was said to indicate which measurement of time one was using, that is, the new "clock time" rather than the Church's time.

Why did equal hours and equal measurement of time become so pervasive? Because of employment and loans. Employers needed a consistent length of hour to know how much their employees worked and so how much to pay them. Banks and money-lenders needed dependable and equal measurements of time to determine the length of a loan and, thus, work out how much interest should be charged.

In the end, the needs of industry and finance for equal measurement of time overcame the church's nature-based time-keeping for prayer. Eventually, the church adopted the business world's concept of time and, so, it became the fundamental and unquestioned way we organize our lives.

Note: This column draws on the research in Jo Ellen Barnett's book, "Time's Pendulum" (1998).