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Volume 58, numéro 3, octobre 2002

La question de Dieu

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/000627ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/000627ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Armour, L. (2002). The Idealist Philosophers' God. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 58(3), 443–455. <https://doi.org/10.7202/000627ar>

Résumé de l'article

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THE IDEALIST PHILOSOPHERS' GOD

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RÉSUMÉ : On tente de démontrer ici que les idées de Ralph Cudworth permettent de développer un concept philosophique de Dieu qui répond à plusieurs des perplexités de notre temps. L'association de l'amour et du réel ultime s'avère chez Cudworth une idée philosophique viable. Il y a lieu de se demander si la seule philosophie de la religion idéaliste réussie ne serait pas celle qui accorde la primauté au bien, et si ce n'est sa manifestation concrète comme amour qui seule puisse rendre intelligible le concept de Dieu, comme on le voit aujourd'hui dans l'œuvre de Jean-Luc Marion.

ABSTRACT : This paper argues that there are still clues in the ideas of Ralph Cudworth that enable us to develop a philosophical concept of God capable of addressing many of the perplexities of our own time. The association of love with the ultimately real emerges in Cudworth as a viable philosophical idea. It is argued further that the only successful idealist philosophy of religion is one which makes goodness paramount, and that only its concrete manifestation as love can make the notion of God intelligible, as can be seen today in the works of Jean-Luc Marion.

THE ABSOLUTE, THE CHOICES

The idea of God seems to fit naturally into idealist metaphysics. The notion that reality is a coherent, rational order permeated by intelligence and goodness — the central idea which links the many kinds of idealism — suggests at once, though it does not entail, precisely the kind of intelligence which is central, in various forms, to most, though not all, of the major world religions.¹ In Western Philosophy, indeed, it was a crisis both in philosophy and in religion about the idea of God that precipitated the Platonic proto-idealism of Ralph Cudworth in the Seventeenth Century and the subjective idealism of Bishop Berkeley in the Eighteenth. By the end of that century an arguably deeper crisis led to Hegelian idealism, and through the nineteenth century the crisis deepened and the idealist idea of God continued to develop.

Three crises gave an intellectual twist to the idea of God and threatened to justify Blaise Pascal's fears that the philosopher's God would prove useless or worse. The first was the shift of the sciences away from descriptions based on perceptions of the

1. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam see this intelligence as personal. In Hinduism it is super-personal and in Daoism and the Neo-Confucian philosophies in China it takes the form of a dominant rational order. Of the "major" religions only perhaps Buddhism rejects such an idea though the popular Pure Land Buddhism in China embraces it.

ordinary world and toward mathematical constructions based on reason. The second was growing distrust of the evidence of our own lives created by the disparity between the richness of scientific knowledge and the poverty of humanistic studies which failed to generate knowledge which met commonly acceptable standards. The third, after the excitement of the Reformation, was the rapid ossification of religious life and its domination by a variety of bureaucracies. All of them suggested the need for a God whose nature and works could be expressed through reason, order, and moral rules.

In this paper I shall argue that there are still clues in the ideas of Ralph Cudworth that enable us to develop a philosophical concept of God capable of addressing many of the perplexities of our own time. The association of love with the ultimately real — a deep strand in Christian theology from the beginning — emerges in Cudworth as a viable philosophical idea. It was acknowledged by Edward Caird² at the peak of the Anglo-American idealist tradition and developed further by George Holmes Howison.³ Caird, however, saw it as a profound puzzle, and there are uncertainties in Howison's position as well. In the end I shall argue that the only successful idealist philosophy of religion is one which makes goodness paramount, and it is only in its concrete manifestation as love that the notion of God can be made intelligible. One may well come to the same conclusion by other routes. In France in recent years Jean-Luc Marion, working in a very different contemporary tradition though with some of the same origins, has also argued that love is the only clue to the metaphysical understanding of God, and I shall offer some comparisons with his work as we go along.

The heart of the original crisis was the development of a science that envisaged an essentially mechanical universe — one governed by strict laws expressible by invariant mathematical formula, and composed of material objects whose natures excluded the properties of mind. The author of the clearest picture of this universe was surely Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes admitted God to his universe, but Hobbes' God was a deposed monarch allowed to live on in Hobbes' writings mainly to make them respectable. Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz all struggled to find a place for God. In Descartes' late writings and letters, the infinite, love, and an ethics of generosity become ever more important. But there was still a certain awkwardness about the very intellectual God whom Pascal found useless. Leibniz's God was simply the being who made the first choice among possible worlds — the God who guaranteed that this was the best of all possible worlds — and Spinoza's God, on a superficial reading, seemed to be not only the only true substance but reality itself. He was everything in the world and therefore just another name for the world itself. More careful reading, as I have argued,⁴ enables us to distinguish the eternal world of God

2. Henry JONES and J.H. MUIRHEAD, ed., *Life & Philosophy of Edward Caird*, Glasgow, Macle hose, 1921, and Bristol, Thoemmes, 1991.

3. *Essays in Philosophy*, second edition, London, Macmillan, 1905, p. 248-260.

4. Leslie ARMOUR, *Being and Idea. Developments of Some Themes in Spinoza and Hegel*, Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1992.

and God's ideas from their expressions in the space-time world, and the truth may be in Spinoza, but his God is not a being to whom one can imagine lighting a candle in Church or addressing for emotional rather than rational comfort in a time of crisis.

The reason for such seemingly rather arid intellectualisms is that the successful philosophies of the period were generally intended primarily as devices to give support to the growing natural sciences and to show how religious ideas might be adapted to them at a time when the sciences had cast doubt on the common-sense world. Emotions were usually feared as distractions, but our emotions are not mere whims. In the absence of a credible belief in something that can meet our emotional needs, we are apt to create our sources of comfort — the thousand-year Reich, the Vanguard Party, or the consumer society that replaces concerns over love and death with the desire for a garage and a kitchen full of gadgets. In attacking Descartes, Pascal was drawing on our sense of being incomplete and needing something to restore our completeness.⁵

Perhaps nothing that can be rationally justified is or could be forthcoming by way of an answer. But the idealist philosophers have never been willing to accept that, and what they have to say is at least worth hearing. I shall argue that they may well be right.

The first near-solution appears in the philosophy of Ralph Cudworth. Cudworth speculates that the doctrine that God is love might be literally true, and he says that the true sense of the divine love is only given “if by it be meant, eternal, self-originated, intellectual Love, or essential and substantial goodness, that having an infinite, overflowing fullness and fecundity dispenses itself uninvadously, according to the best wisdom, sweetly governs all, without any force or violence, and reconciles the whole world into harmony.” He adds “love in some rightly qualified sense, is God”.⁶ The suggestion — I am not sure that we can call it an argument — supposes something extremely important and I suspect necessarily true: Whatever is most real is also what is most valuable. The difference between what hangs in the Louvre or looks out at us from the National Gallery in London and most advertising poster art is that most advertising poster art tries to persuade us that something attractive but superficial is what we want and it tries to subvert us into some thoughtless act which will be to the advertiser's advantage. Serious art probes deeper even though one can find much, say in the Tate Modern Gallery, that seems to probe below the level of meaning to an ultimately meaningless chaos. In our own lives, the one experience that we would never abandon is the experience of love. What would be most valuable in the universe — if it could exist — would be an infinite mind capable of love or else, as

5. Pascal did not always give credit where credit was due. The Jesuit Pierre LE MOYNE insisted (*Les Peintures Morales*, Paris, Sebastien Cramoisy, 1640-1643), that “l'Académie” and “le Parnasse” must be brought together again. In the eleventh of his *Lettres Provinciales* (Cologne, Pierre de la Vallée, 1657), PASCAL spoke of the “esprit de bouffonnerie, d'impiété, et d'hérésie” of Fathers Le Moyne and Garasse. (See p. 202 of the Nouvel Office d'Édition version, 1964.)

6. *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, London, Richard Royston, 1678, p. 123 (the page number is misprinted as 117 in the British Library copy); John HARRISON, ed., London, Thomas Tegg, 1845, vol. 1, p. 179.

Cudworth hints, an infinite love that manifests itself through a knowing and knowable mind. For among the things of the world, minds are surely the most valuable. Indeed it is unlikely that there could be value without minds. It would be absurd to lock the Mona Lisa away so that no one could ever see it on the ground that that way it would be preserved. For its value comes to be expressed through a knowing mind. Out of this one may catch a glimpse of the reality of a loving God, and such a loving God can indeed be the God of a sensible and civilised religion. But there is rocky road from such initial intuitions to an acceptable “philosophers’ God.” And one must first follow it far enough to understand the failures and appraise the chances of success.

There are many sorts of idealists, yet they would all agree that the universe is comprehensible, that it is accessible to reason, and that both intelligence and goodness play a major role in it. From Plato onwards they have all edged toward or explicitly held the doctrine that what is ultimately real is an “idea” capable of expression not just in the world but *as* a world. Idealists who have taken religion seriously have usually understood this as the meaning of the Fourth Gospel : “In the beginning was the word, and the word was God”.

Yet necessarily the meanings and roles of the word “God” and all the associated concepts have played a major part in idealist debates. In philosophy written in English from the period of Cudworth, Berkeley, and John Norris through the post-Hegelian idealists at Oxford and Cambridge and on to the American personalists, the British idealist physicists, the followers of William Temple, R.G. Collingwood and beyond, the dispute has been about the primacy of the elements — whether or not the ultimately real is a principle, a person, a society of persons, or an Absolute which is not quite any of them. In French philosophy the issue was central to the idealist disputes led by Léon Brunschvicg on one side and René Le Senne on the other in the 1930s. In Germany, post-Hegelian idealism rarely lost sight of the topic.

The extreme left Hegelians, including Marx, struggled to abolish the concept and some philosophers later on — Franz Rosenzweig⁷ who returned to his native Judaism and Martin Foss⁸ who, though born a Jew was attracted by a very latitudinarian Protestant Christianity, saw in it a way of reviving and humanizing existing religions.

It would be hard to locate Rosenzweig or Foss along traditional religious lines. (Rosenzweig thought, like Hegel, that Christianity was “the historical religion” but, unlike Hegel, thought that Judaism was the “eternal religion”. Foss, having escaped Nazi Germany, was fascinated by the Quakers who urged everyone to look for an illuminating “inner light”, though unlike many of them he always saw the need for a rational framework within which the inner light might become intelligible. Some idealists, like William Temple,⁹ have been orthodox Christians (or at least as ortho-

7. See *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Berlin, Schocken, 1930.

8. See *Abstraktion und Wirklichkeit*, Bern, Franke, 1959 ; *Logic and Existence*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1962.

9. See especially *Nature, Man and God*, London, Macmillan, 1931. It is important to notice that Temple argued that the idealist philosophers’ God was fine as far as it went but that it could not solve the problem

dox as an Archbishop of Canterbury can become) ; some, like the American personalists, have been theists suspected of heresy. Borden Parker Bowne was the last Methodist philosopher actually tried for heresy.¹⁰ John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart claimed to be an atheist¹¹ though his community of timeless loving spirits appears to be an expansion of the Trinity. The “absolutists” — F.H. Bradley¹² and Bernard Bosanquet¹³ — were chary of God, though T.H. Green who started the movement at Oxford was clearly a theist.¹⁴ In France, René Le Senne¹⁵ saw idealist philosophy as the saving of Christianity while Léon Brunschvicg, at heart a Kantian rationalist, was suspicious of all attempts to make philosophy minister to religion.¹⁶

They would all have agreed, though, that the logical work traditionally done by the concept of God required a being who was absolute. God, if there is such a being, cannot be relative to anything else. If there is no God, there must be another Absolute. God is the being who exists absolutely or not at all and, if at all, then as something beyond all categories or as the manifestation of the most perfect categories. The issue is very often over the question of whether whatever is absolute in this sense is a specific and determinate entity and whether such a being must, or even could, be God.

One should therefore begin with the idea of the Absolute. Why should there be an Absolute and can there really be an “idea” of the Absolute ? What forms could it take ? And what, then, is its possible relation to God ?

THE OPTIONS¹⁷

There seem to be at least eight basic ideas about the Absolute. I will suggest some philosophers whose views approximate to the various alternatives. The short summaries are at best approximations, but they will serve to identify the issues.

Four of the options are variants of monism. What one might call the “supreme Absolutist” thesis is that there is one reality, the eternal consciousness. It is in some

of evil. For that one needs revelation. This opens a whole new subject, but see my “Evil and the Transformation of Time”, *Science et Esprit*, 54 (January-April 2002), p. 5-25.

10. For accounts, see Francis John MCCONNELL, *Borden Parker Bowne. His Life and His Philosophy*, New York, Abingdon, 1929 ; and George Washington WILSON, *Methodist Theology vs. Methodist Theologians*, Cincinnati, Jennings and Pye, 1904.
11. He is quite clear about this in *Some Dogmas of Religion*, London, Edward Arnold, 1906.
12. Bradley reacted quite strongly to his clergyman father's evangelical Anglicanism. See the references to his metaphysics in the notes that follow.
13. Bosanquet hoped that churches would remain — but as museums. For his metaphysical views, see notes that follow.
14. See A.C. BRADLEY, ed., *Prolegomena to Ethics*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1883.
15. See *Destinée personnelle*, Paris, Flammarion, 1951.
16. See *La Raison et la religion*, Paris, F. Alcan, 1939.
17. This section of this paper overlaps significantly with a paper for the Oxford T.H. Green conference (2002) entitled “Green's Idealism and the Metaphysics of Ethics”. This section is an expanded version, but some related issues about idealism and metaphysics are dealt with at greater length in other sections of that paper.

sense all-knowing and includes all awareness. One thinks of F.H. Bradley in these terms, but one must be careful.¹⁸ Everything that we can speak of is a partial approximation to this reality. Indeed, we really cannot speak of such an Absolute at all, for to ascribe any property to it is necessarily to exclude some other property and so to falsify it. What we can do in our own lives and thought is to approximate to it as best we can. Generally, the larger and more coherent the system of thought, the closer it comes to reality. But such an Absolute is in some sense infinite, and “closer” must mean “in kind, in structure, and in quality” and not “in quantity”. Individual minds like ours are expressions of the real in so far as they have the capacity to grasp the system and are internally coherent, but they do not have any ultimate reality of their own. This theory might seem to have obvious religious implications as well as social and political consequences, but on reflection it does not. The Absolute so conceived is certainly not the Judeo-Christian God, though such a God might be an expression of it, himself or herself not quite perfectly real, but as perfectly real as anything describable can be. Such an Absolute does not in any sense create, much less judge or forgive. As for the politics of Bradley’s theory, communities may or may not approximate more to the real than individuals, for individual minds can grasp any system that can be expressed through a community. It is not as if each mind adds something to the real, for there is nothing to add to the real. On some views, the unity of our experience and our inability to divide it into discrete parts is a clue to this unity, but on others the unity of our immediate experience is quite different in kind and cannot even provide evidence for the existence of the Absolute.

It seems unlikely on such a view that the distant approximations to reality we know best — people like us — are actually immortal, though there is no reason to suppose that they should not exist beyond the limits of a single life. Perhaps if one wants to make religious use of Bradley’s work, one can indeed associate his Absolute with the Neo-Platonist One — especially as it appears transformed into a notion of God in the writings of Nicolas of Cusa or in Descartes’ notion of the infinite that transcends all categories. Such notions continue to have a powerful attraction in quite different traditions, as we can see in the writings of Jean-Luc Marion.¹⁹ Marion, in fact, works from a foundation in Descartes with a long tradition clearly in view and his notion of what surpasses all the categories is love understood as the gift of God — something one might think to be a long way from Bradley’s pithy Absolute.

Bradley’s notion of the Absolute works from the claim that the Absolute must be a perfect unity — originally from his argument that the idea of relation is a logically contradictory notion, but in his later writings from his analyses of experience which suggest that all the distinctions we make by way of trying to identify distinct entities in experience fail, for each distinction is relative to an infinity of others and, in any case, reality always appears as a unity. The result is that all the subtle distinctions on

18. F.H. Bradley held many elements of this view, but there are subtleties in his account of relations, in his theory of universals, in the notion of finite centres of experience, and in his remarks about God. See especially *Appearance and Reality, An Essay in Metaphysics*, Oxford, the Clarendon Press, 1893, Second Edition (with appendix) 1908, ninth impression (corrected), 1930.

19. See, for instance, MARION’s *Dieu sans l’être*, Second Edition, Paris, PUF, 1991.

which claims like Marion's depend — especially the idea of a category which transcends all other categories — are finally impossible to make. However much Bradley himself scoffed, one can sense a religion meaning behind what he says, but it is a dangerous religion which anyone can bend to his or her own tastes and inner light.

What we might call the Cantorian infinitist view is close to the Absolutist view, but significantly different. On the Cantorian view what is ultimately real is the infinite, an infinite which, like the Absolute of the first theory, exceeds the limits of any concept we can think of or construct. But it is not another thing and not the ultimate reality. Indeed its components, like Cantor's ordinals, are not a set. The class of such objects exceeds any defining property. Rather, reality consists of the *expressions* of this infinite. The expressions of it are individuals, more or less coherent and more or less capable of expressing reality through themselves. In terms of Judeo-Christian theology such a reality is the divine love. (Emmanuel Lévinas, who insists that its basis is in ethics and that it must not be supposed to be an entity of any sort, associates it with a Jewish tradition.)²⁰ Such an infinite would be nothing if it were not expressed, for literally it has no property beyond its expressions. It is thus necessarily individuated, but each individuation is seen to be less than the infinite and must find its way back to unity again. In this case the priority of the community is fairly obvious, and so perhaps is the religious interpretation of the doctrine. It can only be thought of as an "agent" in the special and restricted sense that it is the source of activity and even the source of moral agency in the individuals of the world. Its components are infinite and unchanging only as real possibilities. All actual knowledge and all specific actions are the work of individual agents. Logic and mathematics give us a better insight into this reality than experience, but the deficiencies of experience give us clues about what is needed. Human agents may be more or less perfect, and a Christian reading of this doctrine might make the second person of the Trinity one such agent.²¹ Insofar as states, corporations and colleges cannot actually love anyone, they would all be less real than the individual, and the communities involved would entail a kind of mutualism. This is much more straightforwardly a development of the Cusanist-Cartesian tradition and could well be held by someone who adopted much of Marion's text. It was, indeed, the basis of much of Josiah Royce's work.²²

Thirdly, there is the kind of absolutism which makes of the Absolute essentially a system of knowledge. This Absolute is the logical completeness of our present attempts at knowing. This is perhaps the truth that Josiah Royce thought necessary to account for error, though he later moved to a Cantorian Absolute, or the system of knowledge envisaged by the later work of Bernard Bosanquet. But such an Absolute seems to be real only in the sense that all the integers are real, though if so it would

20. There are many discussions of this relation in *Hors sujet*, Paris, Fata Morgana, 1987.

21. This would not involve the heresy of "subordinationism", for the second person of the Trinity would be the full expression of the divine love, and the third person would be the principle of love in the world. But it wouldn't be exactly the orthodox doctrine, either.

22. See *The World and the Individual*, London and New York, Macmillan, Vol. II, 1901, p. 473-588.

not be the Absolute as really envisaged by either Royce or Bosanquet.²³ Consciousness does not seem to form an intelligible feature of it. An Absolute like this seems to be neutral in politics and religion. It might be that knowledge is most effectively revealed by competing individuals, and that any one of many religions which claim insight into the ultimate nature of knowledge and which claim it somehow to be something which exists beyond the limits of time can be true on such a theory. Augustine said that God is truth, and St. Paul that the truth would make us free, but the truth they had in mind seems unlikely to have been this one.

The fourth kind of monistic absolutism is the sort which makes ideas, as such, the ultimate reality. The Platonic idea of the good is the classic example. Everything real is to be understood as informed and ordered by this idea. Reaching it is a matter of going beyond the senses, sometimes of denying their efficacy in knowledge and of showing that all reality is unified. Such a good is objective and universal, and such theories tell against utilitarianism, hedonism, and all moral theories that calculate advantage. Knowledge of the good is something available to those who can rise above the senses, put themselves at the service of an objective good, and master the intricacies of the whole universe. Though all absolutist theories presuppose or involve elements of an ability to grasp truths that are beyond the ordinary and may be read in ways that make them to some extent vulnerable to elitist readings, the Platonic theory is most likely to be read as elitist when it depends on special skills and insights. The notion that reality is the divine love and that knowledge is a matter of mutual or communal striving is surely least elitist and if read with care not elitist at all. But the more abstract view often called “Platonic” has little room for the Christian God, though Plato could accommodate a demiurge without difficulty. Personifying the good changes the theory into one of the others. Politically, such theories are vulnerable to Sir Karl Popper’s attacks — the claim that, roughly, everything that is good has to be ordered under a single good and those who know most of this good are most fit to rule.²⁴ But Iris Murdoch’s version of it is more humanistic, less given to absolute certainties as a result perhaps of reflection on the ways that such an idea can figure in human life.²⁵ Literally nothing can be added to such a good, though, of course, individual agents can discover heretofore hidden implications of it. Iris Murdoch wanted to rest with the good and argued that there was no ground for introducing a concept of God. But in so far as the good is efficacious in the world it becomes much like God and, indeed, St. Thomas speaks of “the sun of Plato” and once says “in our religion we call this God”.²⁶ But it makes once more for an austere, rational-

23. BOSANQUET’S best account is in *The Meeting of Extremes in Contemporary Philosophy*, London, Macmillan, 1921. Both he and Royce at times held views somewhat like this, though their accounts of both the Absolute and individuals were sometimes ambivalent, and they developed over time with Royce, in the end, moving toward the Cantorian infinite.

24. See POPPER, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 Vol., London, Routledge, 1945. But even if all this is true it does not quite follow that such theories are totalitarian or oppressive, only that disputes are to be settled by argument rather than by ballot. The problem is about who decides who has won the argument. Many countries have supreme courts with this function, and not all are dictatorships.

25. See *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London, Penguin, 1993.

26. *Summa Theologica*, I, 79, 4-5.

ist, intellectualist religion on which Pascal poured scorn. Perhaps though it makes for a noble religion for brave men and women.

There are also at least four pluralistic “personalist” views. The one closest to the monist view is the dual subject theory.²⁷ On this view there are two subjects to the experiences of each of us. One is the eternal consciousness which shares in everyone’s experiences. Such a consciousness must contain both the totality of knowable things and the plurality of perspectives on it held by the individuals who compose reality. It will undergo change in respect of what it shares but it will have a complete knowledge of things as they are apart from the variety of perspectives, i.e. a knowledge of the objectively shared elements of experience. This view, though denied by T.H. Green, does seem to lead to moral and political views not so different from Green’s modest social democracy, for it gives us a meaning for self-realisation — coming to share as perfectly as possible the eternal consciousness — and it does suggest that we would have to co-operate in order to share fully in that consciousness. In religion, one can hold this view together with Christianity and, indeed, since the eternal consciousness is shared with us but is beyond our immediate grasp, one can develop a theory of revelation to go with it.²⁸

Close to this is what Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison called the *primus inter pares* view²⁹. The eternal consciousness is a self like us but fully developed. It is not different in kind and it co-operates with us. The moral and political results seem to be much like those of the dual consciousness theory, but religiously it is rather different. There is no being who can “lord it over us.”³⁰ In Christian terms there can be a second and third person of the Trinity but no first person.

What seems almost a minor adjustment to this picture brings us to the thesis that the Absolute is essentially a community. It manifests itself in and through us and really has no other existence. This strengthens the communitarian political theory and distances us further from Orthodox Christianity.³¹

Finally there is, of course, the radical pluralist view : Reality simply consists of individuals. They are inter-related, and they make for a real community, but the

27. This was, I think, held by Andrew SETH PRINGLE-PATTISON in *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1917, but specifically denied by T.H. GREEN in *Prolegomena to Ethics*.

28. William Temple’s philosophy looks rather like this though his Absolute may in other ways be closer to Bosanquet’s. See again perhaps *Christus Veritas*, London, Macmillan, 1924. But as I said in an earlier footnote Temple insisted on supplementing the idealist philosophers’ God with revelation.

29. See Andrew SETH PRINGLE-PATTISON, *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy*.

30. See George Holmes HOWISON, *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays Illustrating the Metaphysical Theory of Personal Idealism*, New York, London and Macmillan, 1905. Howison held this view explicitly, but he gave it a special twist. His community of real selves approximates specifically to Kant’s “Kingdom of Ends”. But this only underlines tendencies which are anyhow in the theory.

31. This notion can be found in the writings of John WATSON though he struggles rather to make it appear acceptable to Christians. See *Christianity and Idealism*, New York and London, Macmillan, 1897.

community itself has no divine status. This view is politically ambiguous. Individuals predominate but the community is real. Religiously it is explicitly atheist.³²

MAKING A CHOICE

How shall we choose between them? The central problem is to get a consistent and coherent account of the Absolute.

Idealists like T.H. Green tended to insist that the Absolute is eternal and unchanging but also to speak of it as somehow an agent whose activities explain the direction of the observable in time. This suggests that, if the Absolute is to have any explanatory value in the long run, its proponents must face up to a major difficulty.

The Absolute cannot “explain” the world if it comes into the world or goes out of it. For then it could not explain what preceded or followed it and thus could not do the work of the “philosopher’s God”. If the Absolute changes there is a question of whether or not it is the same Absolute and how such a change can be explained without introducing a new agency. Yet if the Absolute is not an agent it cannot explain the fact that the world does change.

There have been ingenious solutions. Samuel Alexander postulated a deity who would emerge only in the future and then only to be replaced by an endless succession of still higher manifestations.³³ If one could believe in causality determined by an as-yet non-existent future, one could reconcile the eternal and the temporal, for the ultimate deity, being always in the future could in fact never change. Teilhard de Chardin adapted the same idea to what was taken to be the Christian notion of progress, though his deity, unlike Alexander’s, would finally arrive at a distant Omega point.³⁴ But, having done so, it is possible that Teilhard queered his own pitch, for his God also seems both to change and to be eternal. Alexander’s deity perhaps satisfied only the most austere minds and seems close to being no God at all.

If one wants a robust deity who can provide the explanations and comforts of the traditional Christian God and still meet the demands of the idealist philosophers, only the Cantorian theory seems possible. The infinite so conceived is immune to change in a curious way. Whatever is added to it or subtracted from it, it remains the same. The infinite is a collection at least as great as the integers and indeed the Cantorian definition of the infinite has it that such a collection is infinite if and only if it has a sub set equal to the whole. The integers — 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 — are one example. If we take only the even numbers 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, we can put them in a one to one correspondence with the whole. One can take away half of them and still have the same number. So if the eternal consciousness is like this, we can add the experiences

32. This was certainly McTAGGART’s claim in *The Nature of Existence*, Cambridge, The University Press, 1921, 1927. Yet McTaggart’s selves approximate rather closely to something like the Christian Trinity rendered democratic and all inclusive.

33. *Space, Time and Deity*, London, Macmillan, 2 Vol., 1920.

34. See *Le phénomène humain*, Paris, Seuil, 1955 ; and *Le milieu divin*, Paris, Seuil, 1957.

of any number of finite centres of experience and the whole will remain the same. Yet such an infinite is in a special sense an agent. It is nothing apart from its expressions in the world, and it must express itself in the world to be anything. Without expression, its description thus contains a contradiction. Its expressions therefore follow from its nature. We can only grasp its nature by the understanding co-operation of several of its members, just as we can only understand the integers by seeing them in their ordering and in their inter-relations.

But such analogies will not work without adding some content. Thinking of the infinite as the traditional “love of God” provides such a content, one which gives substance to a philosophy like that of Green and the other British idealists. And it may be that it is only by understanding this infinite as the love of God that such a theory will work as an explication of Green’s philosophy. The infinite has to be individuated. Love requires more than one agent and serves to bring these agents together again in the way that Green desires.

GOD AS LOVE

It is useful, first, to turn to Edward Caird. In the middle of a long correspondence with Mary Sarah Talbot — it went on from 1882 to 1905 — Caird laid out the heart of his perplexities.

The greatest of all difficulties [...] is just what you point out, viz. the union of the conception of God as a self-determining principle manifested in a *development* which includes nature and man, with the conception of Him, as in a sense eternally complete in Himself [...]. A clearer conception of the idea that “God is love” going beyond Himself to be Himself, would probably contain the solution of such difficulties, if one could get it realised and stated.³⁵

That is, the Absolute is only intelligible if it “goes beyond itself” and manifests itself in the world. The love which is the ultimate reality cannot be another thing in the world, for then it would require explanation, but if it is to be the Absolute the idealist philosophers wanted, it must explain the world in a way that unites it and provides the unity and intelligibility which the idealist philosophers have always demanded. It has to be beyond being but expressible in the world in a way that makes us understand the world’s development.

Behind such ideas is a long tradition of Neoplatonism, the negative theology, the dialectic of Nicolas of Cusa, and the Cartesian infinite that surpasses all distinctions. The same idea, as I suggested, emerges from the same roots expressed in quite a different tradition in the writings of Jean-Luc Marion. The cover of the second edition of his *Dieu sans l’être* bears the words “Seul l’amour n’a pas à être. Et Dieu aime sans l’être.”³⁶ The idea is not confined to the Christian tradition. Father

35. *Life & Philosophy of Edward Caird*, p. 185.

36. “Only love does not have to be. And God loves without being” (*Dieu sans l’être*, Paris, PUF, 1991 [originally Fayard, 1982]). The quotation appears on p. 195 of the 1991 edition. This theme is developed in a recent book *De Surcroît*, Paris, PUF, 2001, see especially p. 152-153.

Copleston noted it in a Muslim mystical tradition, for instance.³⁷ Father Copleston's account of Mullah Sadra, notes what is obvious : Love requires a plurality, but demands a reunion. One may find similar views in much Hindu writing, for instance in the essays of K.C. Bhattacharyya.³⁸ Its perfect form might be the unity of the Trinity and if so, this is surely the great strength of Christianity.

Perhaps one could summarise the situation this way : The Absolute of the idealists was always a combination of two notions, the Platonic form of the good and the ontological instantiation of the principle of sufficient reason. That is to say, it had to be absolute in two senses. It had to be something that was not relative to anything else and it had to be the principle of explanation for the world.

The form of the good is distant and abstract, and the way in which it shapes the world is rather difficult to come to grips with even in the recent axiarchistic systems of A.C. Ewing and John Leslie.³⁹ The principle of sufficient reason works in some possible worlds and not in others, and it seems to require a deterministic universe in which things happen always according to predetermined laws. The attempt to get the Absolute into the world baffled even Hegel who had to say that the Absolute "leaps freely" into the world.⁴⁰

But if one takes the good to be the highest expression of the Absolute in the world it become understandable as love. If one understands that it can find expression only as a process of separation and reunion one can understand the world as a struggle to reach the ultimate reality and as a process which permits individual action.

John Leslie's most recent book — *Infinite Minds* — insists indeed that an explicable universe must be a systematic unity in which a strong form of determinism is necessary. But if one thinks of the Absolute as love it is possible to have an organic determinism, that is one in which what determines what happens is the action of agents who act according to their natures. Such a world will have a background order in which the law-like world described by our sciences makes orderly action possible. But it will also be peopled with agents.

God, if he or she exists, will appear in such a world as the highest expression that such a love can take, and the unity of creation, moral life, and a developing principle of history will appear as something like the Christian Trinity. Caird's puzzle about the reconciliation of an eternal principle and development then dissolves. God develops with the world but is also beyond the world. The ultimate reality does not change. Its expression does.

37. Frederick COPLESTON, *Religion and the One*, New York, Crossroads, 1982, p. 108-109.

38. George Bosworth BURCH and Robert E. CARTER, ed., *The Search for the Absolute in Neo-Vedanta*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1976.

39. A.C. EWING, *Value and Reality*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1973 ; John LESLIE, *Value and Existence*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1979 ; and *Infinite Minds. A Philosophical Cosmology*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2001. For a discussion of this issue see Leslie ARMOUR, "Values, God, and the Problem of Why There is Anything at All," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, New Series, 1, 2 (1987), p. 147-162.

40. *Wissenschaft der Logik*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, Vol. II, p. 505 ; *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, p. 197. See the discussions in my *Being and Idea*, p. XI-XII.

Something more needs to be said about the concept of love. The love that is intended is certainly not the love that Hegel speaks of — the “love [that] is seeing the intuition of oneself in the other”⁴¹ — but its dialectical opposite. Love is seeing one’s fulfillment in the development of the other. That is what is implied in the notion that love is both what separates and what unites — and the way reality exhibits the good.

If Caird had worked out his puzzle I think he might have found an idealist philosophers’ God that would have met Pascal’s challenge.

41. *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, ed. by Georg LASSON, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 3 Vol. in 2, 1929, 1974, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 2, III, p. 57.