

**THREE IDEAS OF GOD OR THE ABSOLUTE  
IN MODERN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY**

---

**James E. McNeill**

1944

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA  
LIBRARY

**A Thesis submitted to the Graduate Studies' Committee  
of the General Faculty Council in Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

104	VI.	Bibliography
94.	V.	Comparison of the three ideas and conclusion.
63.	IV.	A. Beth Prince-Battison's idea of the Absolute.
31.	III.	Sir Henry Jones' idea of the Absolute.
9.	II.	Edward Sorbiner Ames' idea of the Absolute.
1.	I.	Introduction

Page

CONTENTS

## SYNOPSIS

Page

### I. Introduction.

1.

The task of modern philosophy has been to give a clear and systematic exposition of the central truths of religion. Hume dealt a death blow to Medieval Absolutism. Kant opened way for the Utilitarianism of Mill and others. Utilitarianism led way to the contemporary Humanistic conception of God. Haydon and Fawcett as contemporary representatives of this school.

### II. Edward Scribner Ames' Idea of the Absolute.

9.

Ames' view of the Absolute falls within Humanistic school of thought. He accepts Kant's definition of Religion. Volition is given priority in self-conscious life. Identifies religion with the social consciousness of the group. God is what he does stipulates the emergence of absolute attitudes and judgements in practical situations. The Absolute is progressive. It is finite. It is identical with the group spirit or will of the people.

### III. Sir Henry Jones' Idea of the Absolute.

31.

Insists that evidence based on religious experience has equal validity with that based on scientific fact. Love is given priority in religious consciousness. Religious faith is the supreme hypothesis. World of nature is real, only as man comprehends its meaning. Evil is taken up into good and morality and religion are thus reconciled. The Divine immanence in every element of the Universe gives finite beings reality. The Absolute is personal. The function of love in unifying differences is supreme. Love is the very essence of the Godhead.

### IV. A. Seth Fringle-Pattison's Idea of the Absolute.

63.

The Universe is the expression of a transcendent Greatness and Goodness. Man being organic to nature is the organ through which the Universe beholds and enjoys itself. The process of knowing involves every faculty of the self-conscious life. Existence of finite centres is the open secret of the Absolute life. God is at once the immanent creative principle and the transcendent perfect whole. God is thus the sustaining and containing life of all the worlds.

V. Comparison of the three Ideas and Conclusion.

Failure of Ames to show differences between the Group Spirit and traditional Idea of God noted. Agreement with Bradley, that, to make the moral point of view absolute as Ames must do is to have broken with every considerable religion. Jones minimizes reason and offers no satisfactory explanation of the nature of intuition. Jones' conclusion that God is the perfect in process attained by verbal victory. Pringle-Pattison's view approved as meeting the nature of experience i.e. as a unity within its threefold aspects. We may know the nature of the Absolute in outline only but not in detail.

CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

It is safe to say that no principle in Philosophy has come under fire of modern criticism as has the principle of God as the Absolute. "No one", says Ralph Barton Perry, "has taken the name of the Lord his God in vain so frequently and so unconcernedly as the Philosopher. While philosophers dispute, believers witness with dismay the apparent dissolution, not only of God, but of immortality, freedom, marriage and democracy as well."<sup>1</sup>

Inheriting a divine urge from the Dialogues of Plato, modern Philosophy beginning with the naive rationalism of Descartes has never ceased its effort to achieve an enlightened and systematic exposition of the central ideas of religion - the soul, evil, redemption, the future life, and - key to all - the idea of God.

It was Hume, building on the empiricism of Bacon and Locke, who dealt the death blow to Medieval Absolutism. The most persuasive argument for the existence of God was from design in nature; but the evidence, he points out, is not conclusive. Nature is by no means clearly a system of order. It shows many imperfections, compromises the ideal of Goodness by pain and evil, and suggests several other possibilities besides that of being the work of an all-powerful and beneficent Creator. The

1. Present Philosophical Tendencies, p.22.

world might be the work of a limited deity, of one who arrived at the present results by many trials; or of one who was young and inexperienced; or of one who had become superannuated and left his work unfinished. In any case Hume maintained the observed facts do not warrant any rational and demonstrative conclusion that the universe is the work of an infallible deity such as the Absolute must be. Hume claimed that if we were convinced beforehand of the existence of an almighty intelligence of perfect wisdom and goodness, the narrow limits of human intelligence might easily suggest that many of the present phenomena indicative of inconsistency might be at present eternally beyond its grasp. But supposing that man, as is really the case, is not antecedently convinced of a supreme intelligence, benevolent and powerful, but is left to gather such belief from appearances of things, this entirely alters the case. Man will never find any reason for such conclusion. He may be fully convinced of the narrow limits of his understanding, but this will not help him in forming an inference concerning the goodness of superior powers, since he must form that inference from what he knows, not from what he is ignorant of; "further the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to good above evil than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy."

The one theistic principle admitted by Hume is that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote anal-

...to human intelligence. However it is perfectly obvious  
to the most casual observer that a principle which "affords  
no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of  
any action or forbearance" is one that no atheist will lose  
any sleep over. Indeed it is quite evident that Hume has cast  
aside the scholastic conception of a static and unchanging  
Deity but has no positive idea of God to replace it.  
It was left to Immanuel Kant to gather up the shreds of  
shattered idealism and cement them into a new philosophy of  
authority. Although by proof of what he calls "synthetic"  
judgments, Kant clearly shows the inadequacy of Hume's theories  
of the unrelatedness of the arguments of human reason, in the  
end he is in essential agreement with Hume that the old logical  
processes of reason as employed by St. Thomas are inadequate to  
prove theoretically the existence of God, just as they are  
equally inadequate to prove his non-existence.  
On the other hand, Kant found proof for the existence of  
Freedom, God and Immortality in a practical idealism based not  
merely upon man's knowledge of the universe about him, but up-  
on his knowledge of the universe within himself, engendered in  
the Good will eternally in search of the highest Good. Thus  
Kant, in endeavouring to make up for his apparent agnosticism  
in the Critique of Pure Reason, led the way to a more subtle  
attack on the idea of the Absolute than that of Hume. This  
attack is being given expression today in current humanistic  
philosophy. For to abandon the universe without, for the