

*TIME, CREATION  
AND WORLD-ORDER*

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## CONTENTS

-11-

Nicolas of Cusa (1401-64)  
DIALOGUS DE DEO ABSCONDITO

-15-

David Park (Williamstown, MA, US)  
WHAT IS TIME?

-23-

André Mercier † (Bern, Suisse)  
GOD, WORLD AND TIME

-36-

Lawrence Fagg (St Stephens, VA, US)  
IDEAS OF TIME AND COSMIC ORIGIN

-48-

Ludwik Kostro (Gdansk, PO)  
RELATIVISTIC SPACE-TIME  
INTERPRETED AS A NEW ETHER  
The View of Albert Einstein

-62-

Alexei V. Nesteruk (Southampton, UK)  
TEMPORAL IRREVERSIBILITY  
Three Modern Views

-87-

Thomas E. Phipps jr (Urbana, IL, US)  
TIME IRREVERSIBILITY  
An Agenda for Physics

-100-

John Randolph Lucas (Oxford, UK)  
A NOTE ON TIME AND TENSE

-107-

William Lane Craig (Marietta, GA, US)  
THE PRESENTNESS OF EXPERIENCE

-121-

Niels Viggo Hansen (Aarhus, DK)  
MODERN PHYSICS  
AND THE PASSAGE OF TIME

-139-

**-139-**

**Per F.V. Hasle (Aarhus, DK)**  
**THE PROBLEM OF PREDESTINATION**  
**A prelude to A.N. Prior's Tense Logic**

**-160-**

**Peter Øhrstrøm (Aalborg, DK)**  
**THE CONTINGENCY OF THE FUTURE**  
**A Discussion of a Medieval Analysis**

**-171-**

**Lars Bo Gundersen (St Andrews, UK)**  
**FUTURE SPACE BATTLES**  
**AND BRANCHING TIME**

**-181-**

**Anindita Niyogi Balslev (Aarhus, DK)**  
**TIME AND 'ANADI SAMBARA'**  
**Indian Views in a Context of Cultural Exchange**

**-190-**

**Christian Link (Bochum, D)**  
**GOD AND TIME**  
**Theological Approaches to the Problem of Time**

**-206-**

**Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh, UK)**  
**CREATION,**  
**CONTINGENT WORLD-ORDER AND TIME**  
**A Theologico-Scientific Approach**

**-237-**

**Mogens Wegener (Aarhus, DK)**  
**TOWARDS A NEW METAPHYSICS**  
**OF TIME AND CREATION**

**APPENDICES**

**-260-**

**Dale Tuggy (Providence, RI, US)**  
**A SHORT TEXT OF LAVENHAM**

**-265-**

**Arthur Norman Prior (1914-69)**  
**SOME FREETHINKING ABOUT TIME**

**-270-**

**INDEX**

## PREFACE

This series of papers derives mainly from a symposium arranged May 1996 by the Center for Cultural Research, the Department of Philosophy, the Department for History of Ideas, and the Theological Faculty, all at Aarhus University, and the Department for Communication, Aalborg University.

The symposium, devoted to the theme made explicit by the title of the book and dedicated to the memory of Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, theologian and cosmologist, gathered a number of specialists from all over the world: India, the United States, Russia, Switzerland, Scotland, the Netherlands, and Danmark. All agreed that the meeting had been successful and the discussion inspiring. Its outcome is the present collection of papers.

It should be mentioned that the contributors came from such diverse fields as logics, physics, philosophy, and theology. Some of us are members of *International Society for the Study of Time*, of which David Park was formerly president. André Mercier†, initiator of *GRG*, co-founder of *CERN*, and former secretary general of *FISP*, was a famous physicist who later turned whole-heartedly to metaphysics. Tom Torrance is a very eminent theologian. Our circle was later extended with the inclusion of papers written by invited persons who could not attend the meeting; one of these is J.R. Lucas, former president of the *British Society for the Philosophy of Science*.

Originally it was intended to provide each of the papers with some 'Editor's Comments', to be followed by the 'Author's Response'. This plan, whose implementation delayed the publication considerably, eventually had to be given up due to unforeseen complications. I offer my sincere apologies to those authors who responded in vain.

M.W.

*GRG* = *Gravitation et Relativité Générale*  
*CERN* = *Centre Energetique du Recherche Nucleaire*  
*FISP* = *Fédération Internationale des Societés Philosophiques*

## INTRODUCTION

Although this is not the proper occasion for a genuine jubilee, it has been decided to dedicate the symposium to the memory of Nicolas of Cusa (1401-64): theologian, philosopher and cosmologist, Catholic cardinal with ecumenical engagement, a pious believer who yet inspired the revolutionary teachings of Giordano Bruno, the prophet of infinity and freedom, burned at the stake for heresy in 1600 A.D.

We celebrate Nicolas by reprinting his little dialogue entitled:

*De Deo Abscondito* (cf. Isaiah 45.15)

(On the Hidden God, or, freely: On the God who plays hide and seek)

Herein we witness a fictitious conversation between a Christian and a heathen, expressing the ecumenical attitude of Nicolas. The work, however, is not specifically Christian in its teaching: there is no invocation of the Holy Trinity, nor is any mention made of the Incarnation of God as Son of Man. But the dialectic reasoning of the master, bearing the name of Christian and seeking to explain in words that very Truth which remains unfathomable and inexpressible - God - leads us with the firm yet frolic steps of a ballet-dancer up towards the peak of pure reason from where we can forebode that Divine Greatness which, in his major work, is called *Coincidentia Oppositorum* and, in still another, *Non Aliud* - both ideas which are akin, if not identical, to the Absolute Paradox of Søren Kierkegaard.

Nicolas is not very precise regarding time. In his main treatise:

*De Docta Ignorantia* (On the learned, or enlightened, ignorance)

he follows Plato by depicting time as a moving image of Eternity which is interpreted as simple undivided Oneness. In itself time is nothing but an ordering of the present. This present infolds both past and future, just as past and future unfolds the present. The point seems to be that the present, which is itself of variable duration, includes both the past as a having-been-present and the future as a going-to-become-present.

Oneness, by transcending time, comprises the changeable in an unchanging way. The Divine Providence thus encompasses everything which has happened, is happening, and will ever happen, perceiving what is possible in time as being actualised of eternity. The universe itself, like everything created, had a beginning, though not in time, and may thus be termed eternal in the sense that there was no time before the universe. Eternity, not time, reigned ahead of the creation of heaven and earth; time and world first emanated together - and still emanate - from their only source: Eternity.

The main work of Nicolas has three parts.

Part One treats of God as that Oneness which is the Coincidentia Oppositorum, being both the Absolute Maximum and the Absolute Minimum. This idea is elaborated by means of geometric analogies which in important respects anticipate insights peculiar to much later invented systems of non-Euclidean geometry. We may interpret the idea by characterising God as the Actual, or Absolute, Infinite. The created universe, by contrast, is the merely Potential, or Contracted, Infinite.

Part Two treats of the World as that Wholeness which is the Unity of the infinitely many, both a Contracted Maximum and a Contracted Minimum. To describe the second idea Nicolas uses another geometric analogy, namely that of a sphere which has its center everywhere and its periphery nowhere. This idea stems from the Hermetian writings where it is applied to God; but Nicolas, who probably knows it from the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (5.8) of St. Bonaventure, brings it to bear on the created universe.

By this ingenious move he gains a metaphor of astonishing depth and strength which contains in its germ the basic principle of modern cosmology: the phrase "center everywhere", originally signifying the Ubiquity of God, now claims the formal equivalence of all so-called fundamental observers, whereas "periphery nowhere", originally signifying the Infinity of God, now claims the structural invariance of the universe to all fundamental observers. The metaphor can also be interpreted as an expression of the idea of Cosmic Isotropy which characterises all the standard-models of modern cosmology. But Nicolas did not stop here. Rejecting both a geocentric and a heliocentric world, his intuition of an astrocentric universe of limited or potential infinity leads him to suggest that the stars are heavenly bodies similar to the sun, that no heavenly body can constitute a perfect sphere because perfection is a prerogative of the highest, or divine, nature and that innumerable globes are populated with living conscious beings like ourselves.

Part Three elucidates Man before the Fall as a Created God, the Unity of Creator and Creation, Absolute and Contracted Greatness, whereas Man after the Fall is exposed as a nature corrupt and stained, depending for its salvation on that Mercy of God which is obtainable solely through faith in the Divine Mediator, Christ. Anticipating the crucial doctrine of Martin Luther, Nicolas expressly wrote: '*Humanitas in Christo Iesu omnes omnium hominum defectus adimplevit ... Non est iustificatio nostra ex nobis, sed ex Christo ... quem cum in hac vita per fidem formatam attingamus, non aliter quam ipse fide iustificari poterimus.*' (DDI, iii.6)

Nicolas was evidently inspired by Meister Johann Eckhart whose mystical doctrines are reminiscent of Hinduism and Buddhism, though, of course, there is no question of any direct influence. According to Eckhart:

'The eye whereby God beholds me is the same as that whereby I behold God: it is all one eye, one sight, and one love'. He also said: 'If God could separate from Truth, I would follow Truth and skip God'. These words, which might be chosen as a maxim for the entire development of science in modern times - the very *motto* of modernity - need an addition, however. What Eckhart meant to state was in the end nothing but a simple *assumptio ex impossibile*. In fact, as he added: 'God cannot separate from Truth, for God is Truth!'

With this homage to Nicolas, and to spirits kindred to his, we want to indicate that science is not the only source of truth, and that religion need not hamper reason. Both lessons are important in an age still intoxicated by the prejudices of positivism. If knowledge could ever eradicate religious belief it would have done so long ago. The warfare of science against religion may turn out to be the most spectacular instance in history of an unsuccessful attempt at falsification; this insight is an urgent warning against all premature judgment, as well as a fascinating inspiration to a renewed search for open dialogue and intellectual synthesis.

M.W.

## NICOLAS OF CUSA

### *DIALOGUS DE DEO ABSCONDITO*

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE,  
ONE OF WHICH IS A PAGAN AND THE OTHER A CHRISTIAN,  
ON THE GOD WHO HIDES HIMSELF

(editor's translation)

**Pagan:** I see how you kneel, full of awe, and how tears of love flow from the depths of your heart without any sign of falsity! Please tell me: Who are you?

**Christian:** I am a Christian.

P: Whom do you worship?

C: God!

P: Who is the God you worship?

C: That I don't know.

P: But how can you seriously worship something you don't know?

C: I worship him precisely because I don't know him.

P: How strange to see a man affected by something he does not know.

C: Yet stranger if he could be affected by something he meant to know.

P: But why?

C: Because his knowledge of that which he thinks to know is less worth than his knowledge of that of which he knows he is ignorant!

P: Please, explain that to me!

C: One must be crazy if one thinks to know something that cannot be known!

P: In my opinion you must be even more crazy to say nothing can be known!

C: By knowledge I understand: the full grasp of Truth. If someone professes knowledge he thereby claims for himself a full grasp of Truth.

P: And I believe you are right.

C: But how can Truth be grasped except by itself? For you don't grasp Truth if grasping differs from grasped so that the first is earlier and the latter later.

P: I don't understand why Truth can only be grasped by itself.

C: Do you think it can be grasped in any other way, by something else?

P: Yes!

C: Then you err, for nothing can be true without Truth itself, just as nothing can be circle without circularity and nobody can be man without humanity. So you find nothing true outside Truth, whether it be in or by something else. P: How, then, can I know what a man is, or a stone, or anything else of all that which I know so well?

C: Truly, you know nothing of all this - you only opine that you know! For if I asked you about the very nature of that which you believe that you know, then you would be obliged to admit that you could never express the truth of any man, or even the truth of a stone. The fact that you know that a man is not a stone is not based on a true knowledge of both man and stone and the difference between the two, but only on their accidental properties and their various appearances and operations which you, separating one from the other, give different designations. However, all these various designations depend only on the separating motion of thought.

P: Now, is Truth one, or is it a plurality?

C: There is no Truth except one, for there is no Unity except one, and Truth coincides with Unity, since it is true that Unity is one. And just as there is in number no unity except one, so among the many there is no truth except one. Therefore one who knows nothing of unity will know nothing about number, just as one who knows nothing of the unitary Truth is unable to know anything at all. And albeit someone believes to know something truly, he may easily find out that all what he believes to know can be known even more



truly. The visible, for instance, could always be perceived more truly, by a clearer sight, than it is now seen by you; also you never see the visible as it is in truth; and for audition and all the other senses the same holds true. Hence, as all that which is known is never known as truly as it could be, but otherwise and by something else - for Truth can never be known by anything other than itself - so he must be out of his mind who believes to know something truly and yet ignores Truth. Do we not consider that one to be crazy who is blind and yet pretends to distinguish unperceived colours?

P: What man, then, has knowledge if nothing can be known?

C: Only he has knowledge who knows his own ignorance, and only he honours Truth who knows that without Truth he knows nothing, neither to be, nor to live, nor to understand.

P: Maybe that makes you worship: your desire to be in Truth?

C: Precisely! I worship God - not that one whom you pagans falsely invoke and believe to know, but the only true God who verily is the unfathomable Truth itself.

P: I entreat you, brother: Since you invoke that God who is Truth, and we do not want to invoke a god who is not truly God, what difference is between us?

C: There are many, indeed; but the greatest and most important is that we invoke the absolute, simple, eternal and unfathomable Truth itself, whereas you do not invoke it as it is in itself, but as it is in its effects, that is, not as absolute Unity, but as the unity of number and plurality. In this you err, for that Truth which is God cannot be communicated to anything else.

P: I beseech you, brother: Be my guide, that I may grasp how you know God. Please tell me: What do you know of the God whom you worship?

C: I know that all I know is not God, and that everything I grasp is unlike God, since He excels everything.

P: Hence God is nothing!

C: He is not nothing, since such nothing bears the name of nothing.

P: If he is not nothing, he must be something!

C: He is not something, since something is not everything; but God is not rather something than everything.

P: How strange: You claim that the God you invoke is neither nothing nor something. No human reason can comprehend that!

C: God transcends both nothing and something! Does not nothing obey his command so that something is made? In this is God's omnipotence clearly manifested! By his very power God transcends everything, both that which is and that which is not, and in the same way everything obeys his command - that which is, and that which is not. Thus he is nothing of that which is subordinate to him and to which his power is prior, for he makes being arise

from not-being, just as he makes being expire into not-being. Therefore he should not be called this rather than that, since he is the source of everything.

P: Can he be called by any name at all?

C: Truly, all names are inadequate. He whose greatness is inscrutable is for that very reason also inexpressible.

P: So he is inexpressible?

C: He is not inexpressible. Rather he is expressible above all, since he is the cause of all that which can be named. How could he lack a name - he who gives a name to everything?

P: Then he is both expressible and inexpressible!

C: No, God is not the root of contradiction, for he is the very root of that simplicity which is prior to everything else! Therefore you cannot call him both expressible and inexpressible.

P: But what will you then say about him?

C: He can neither be named nor be unnamed, nor can he both be named and unnamed; but nothing that can be said, whether by conjunction or disjunction, by unanimity or disagreement, can ever express his exalted infinity which as the ultimate source of everything transcends all that can be thought.

P: So God cannot even be said to be?

C: You are right!

P: So he is nothing, after all!

C: Neither is he nothing, nor is he not, nor is he and is not, for he is the source and well-spring of all the principles of being and not-being!

P: So God is the source of all the principles of being and not-being?

C: No!

P: But you just said so!

C: I spoke truth when I said so, and I am speaking truth when I now deny it, for if there are any principles of being and not-being at all, then God is prior. But the principle of not-being is not not-being, but being. Hence not-being is in need of a principle in order to be what it is, namely not-being, and without such principle it would not even not-be.

P: Is God not Truth?

C: No, for he is prior to all truth!

P: Is he something other than Truth?

C: No, for he has no share in otherness, and he infinitely surpasses all that which we name as truth.

P: You nevertheless call God by the name of God!

C: Yes, indeed!

P: You then speak truly or falsely, I suppose?

C: Nothing of the two! For we do not speak truly when we say that his name is Truth, neither do we speak falsely, for it is not false that his name is Truth. Neither do we speak both truth and falsity at the same time, for the simplicity of God is prior to all that which either can or cannot be called by any name.

P: Why do you call him God, when you do not know his true name?

C: This we do for the analogy which this name bears to his perfection.

P: Please, explain that to me!

C: The very name 'God' (Lat. *deus*) is derived from Greek *θεωρῶ*, I see. The reason is that God is to us what vision is to colour, for colour can only be perceived by vision. Now the very center of vision lacks all colour in order that the various colours may be equally well perceived; but vision itself, lacking all colour, is not on a par with colour. Hence, with respect to colour, vision seems to be closer to nothing than to something. Beyond its own region colour has no share in being, as it implies all being to be within its own region, and vision does not belong to that; therefore vision, having no colour, is inexpressible in the region of colour, since the name of no colour can be applied to it. Nevertheless it is vision that gives to every colour its peculiar name. Thus all naming in the region of colour depends on vision, and yet we have seen how the name of the source of all names is closer to nothing than to something. So God is to all as vision to the visible.

P: I agree with what you have just said, and now I clearly grasp why neither God, nor his name, is to be found in the region of created things. I also grasp why nothing is comparable to God and why He, not having the appearance of a creature, can never be found in the region of created things, but surpasses everything that we can grasp. Likewise I grasp that all naming is a composing and that in the region of all composition we do not find what is simple, since the composite is not of itself, but stems from what is prior to composition. And though the composite is what it is through simplicity, yet this simplicity, being non-composite, must remain unknown in the region of the composite. Praise be to God, who is hidden to the eyes of worldly wisdom!

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