**Anne Conway on Time, the Trinity and Eschatology**

**Jonathan Head**

Keele University

**Abstract**

This paper considers the conception of the Triune God, soteriology and eschatology in Anne Conway’s metaphysics. After outlining some of the key features of her thought, including her account of a timeless God who is nevertheless intimately present in creation, I will argue that her conception of the Trinity offers a distinctive role for Christ and the Holy Spirit to play in her philosophical system. I also propose an interpretation of Conway’s eschatology, in which time is understood as grounded in a never-ending soteriological process of the overall movement of creatures towards perfection and a state of spirituality.

**Introduction**

Despite growing interest in her work, the precise details of Anne Conway’s metaphysical system, found in her *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (*Principles*), are still quite unclear, not in the least her views on time, the Trinity, soteriology and eschatology. This paper will attempt to rectify this by reconstructing some of the philosophical and theological commitments found in the *Principles*, including her soteriology and approach to the Trinity, and in drawing out their implications for our understanding of her wider philosophical system[[1]](#endnote-1).

In the first major section of the paper, I will focus upon the nature of God in Conway’s system, with a particular view to an understanding of God’s creative action and His triune nature. I first argue that Conway’s God stands outside of time, though is immediately present in all creatures within time[[2]](#endnote-2). A review of the relevant passages shows that they are consistent with a traditional view of a timeless God who is in time insofar as he continually preserves the existence of creation. I also discuss the role of ‘Christ the mediator’ in Conway’s system, in relation to potential Neoplatonic influence. I will argue that Conway’s conception of the triune God is caught between subordinationism and modalism, due to the desire to mediate both Neoplatonic and Kabbalist influences, as well as to offer a universalist message in the *Principles*.

Given the metaphysical standing accorded to God in Conway’s system, I will then, in the following section of the paper, consider what this might mean for her metaphysics of time, which she identifies with the motion of creatures. I argue that in the context of Conway’s system, time and cognate notions such as change need to be interpreted with reference to God’s sustaining activity and his wider soteriological plan with regards to creation, and that we should bear in mind the context of Conway’s theory of substances. Spirit and matter are to be understood as a single kind of substance (‘creature’), alongside two others – God and Christ. The three kinds of substance are distinct due to the kind of change they can go through; whilst God is unchangeable, Christ can change but only towards perfection, and creatures can change both towards and away from perfection. Although creatures can become less perfect, ultimately all things tend towards perfection and thus all eventually become more spiritual over the course of eternity. With these metaphysical assumptions on the part of Conway, I will argue that we can understand time as grounded in the soteriological process of the overall movement of creatures towards perfection and the divine. Going back to the original identification of time with the successive motion or operation of creatures, we can understand what it would be for time to cease for Conway. It would be the end not only of change on the level of created beings, but also the end of the soteriological process in the created universe. However, due to Conway’s assertion that the soteriological progress never ends, the only kind of timelessness that a being can accede to is a ‘relative timelessness’, where one has become united with the moral development of Christ. I conclude with some brief reflections upon Conway’s eschatology, and the intertwining of philosophy and theology that we find in the *Principles*.

**The triune God in the *Principles***

Conway begins the *Principles* by outlining her views regarding God and the relation between the divine and creation. One of her first major claims is that God is timeless: “In God there is no time, change, arrangement, or division of parts. For he is wholly and universally one himself and within himself… And since there is no time in him nor any mutability, there can exit in him no new knowledge or will at all, but his will and knowledge are eternal and without time or beyond time” (9)[[3]](#endnote-3). Conway even goes as far as to deny that God has any passions, in order to maintain divine timelessness, “[for] every passion is temporal, having its beginning and end in time” (Ibid*.*). Time is, in fact for Conway, defined in relation to events within creation, “nothing but the motion or change of creatures from one condition or state to another” (51), and so is utterly foreign to the divine existence in itself, “since in God there is no successive motion or operation… there are no times in God or his eternity” (14).

God’s timelessness, though, does not entail that he is utterly remote from his creatures, in the manner of a deistic God who created the world and leaves it to operate mechanistically, with no further divine intervention or interest. Conway states that God is “present in everything most closely and intimately in the highest degree” (9), through divine on-going, sustaining creative action: “All creatures simply are and exist only because God wishes them to, since his will is infinitely powerful and his command… is alone capable of giving existence to creatures” (12). The emphasis is put on God’s sustaining activity (rather than on an initial creation) due to Conway’s argument that time, within the context of creation, is infinite, and such there is no beginning of time at which God ‘began’ creating, however we might like to understand that. Conway argues that God has an essential timeless attribute of being a creator, and thus, as “the infinite foundation and ocean of goodness, charity, and bounty… it necessarily follows that he gave being to creatures from time everlasting or from time without number” (13). As such, God’s creative activity, in Conway’s metaphysics, is understood primarily[[4]](#endnote-4) as a sustaining activity of infinite duration. It is through this activity of sustenance that we can understand a timeless, immutable God as nevertheless entirely present in creation. So, in Conway’s system, we have both an infinite God and an infinite creation in terms of time, though with the term ‘infinite’ understood differently in each case: “[The] eternity of creatures is nothing other is nothing other than an infinity of times in which they were and always will be without end. Nevertheless, this infinity of time is not equal to the infinite eternity of God since the divine eternity has no times in it and nothing in it can be said to be past or future, but it is always and wholly present” (13-14). Thus, have an everlasting created universe of infinite duration, and an eternal God beyond duration.

Of course, the very question of a timeless God is one that is still very controversial, though there is evidence that key Christian theologians such as Augustine, Boethius, Anselm and Aquinas all affirmed the timelessness of God. As DeWeese has noted, it is clear that Neoplatonic influence may have had an impact here, particularly in relation to “the concept of divine simplicity, immutability, and eternity” (2004, 158). Given that we can similarly discern Neoplatonic influence in the *Principles*, it is unsurprising that we also discover a timeless God here. Conway will have been introduced to Neoplatonic ideas early on in her philosophical development through her famous correspondence with Henry More, who, as Coudert notes, proposed “his personal kind of Kabbalism, which had more in common with Neoplatonic thought than with the Kabbala proper” (1975, 645). It is clear that Conway adopted these Platonic ideas to the extent that More writes to her in 1660, “your Ladiship is so good a Platonist as not to deny that famous maxim of their Schoole: *Animus cuiusque is est quisque* [The mind is the true self]” (Nicolson and Hutton 1992, 144), which we find combined with Kabbalist notions in the *Principles*.

With regard to the development of Christian thought, one of the most influential Neoplatonists is Plotinus, who sees God’s creative activity as an emanation, which, as Gerson notes, is to be understood as a sustaining principle beyond time: “It is not intended to indicate either a temporal process or the unpacking of a potentially complex unity. Rather, the derivation [of the creative principle] was understood in terms of atemporal ontological dependence” (2014, Section 2)[[5]](#endnote-5). On the Neoplatonic emanationist model, the atemporality of the divine also involves the eternity of creation itself, that is, creation is understood to have existed for an infinite duration of time. It is a necessary aspect of the creative principle that it creates, insofar as its creative force cannot be contained within itself but must be emanated into different, inferior levels of being. As a corollary, creation has always been happening and will always happen: hence, we have a created universe of infinite duration. Again, we see this reflected in the *Principles*, where Conway affirms infinite time within the created universe.

A further salient aspect of Neoplatonic thought is related to the question of the sense in which God can be affirmed as being within time and the created universe. Though, as I have already mentioned, God’s emanation results in inferior levels of being, nevertheless nothing is lost in terms of the presence of the divine, even though that which is produced by the creative principle cannot be identical to it, and so as there can only be one perfect entity, any created thing cannot be perfect. As Whittaker in his discussion of Plotinus emphasises, “There is no disremption of the higher principle [through the process of emanation]. God and mind do not disperse themselves in individual souls and in natural things, though these are nowhere cut off from their causes” (1961, 55), and so the One is transcendent and entirely present through all things. In the Neoplatonic view of creation, then, we have two key ideas running alongside each other, namely, the emanation of being from the atemporally existing divine into differing, imperfect levels of being, as well as the absolute presence of the divine in all created beings. Such ideas are to be found in Conway’s *Principles*, and due to the fact that they have had a major influence upon the development of Christian thought, they can be seen as largely consonant with a standard monotheist view regarding the creation of the universe and God’s presence within it.

It is at this point, however, that we need to consider Conway’s approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, and it is here, I suggest, that she decisively begins to forge her own path in the *Principles*. Again, we can look to Neoplatonic thought for potential inspiration, alongside the generally accepted Kabbalist influence, which we shall go on to consider. Going back to the emanationist model of creation, we can see it having a further impact upon Christian thought with regard to understanding the Trinity. There are two general perspectives upon the Trinity, through which, amongst other things, we can attempt to understand the relation between the Persons of the Trinity, namely, the immanent and economic models.

Speaking generally, the immanent Trinity is the Trinity viewed from a purely ontological perspective, whilst the economic Trinity is understood as the way in which the triune God is revealed to us through revelation (so, it has more of an epistemological aspect than the former)[[6]](#endnote-6). The Neoplatonic model of the divine emanating into lower, more imperfect degrees of being can be seen as suggesting a potentially problematic view (from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy) of the immanent Trinity, namely subordinationism. Christian orthodoxy maintains that the Persons of the Trinity are consubstiantial, and thus from the ontological perspective of the immanent Trinity, one Person cannot be understood as subordinate to another. If we were approaching the question of the Trinity from a Neoplatonic perspective, though, it would perhaps seem natural to adopt a subordinationist view, with the Father being the ultimate atemporal ground of being, and the Son and Spirit emanating from this supreme creative principle, with the implication that these two Persons are ontologically subordinate (in fact, they would be lacking in perfection). Yandell describes this way of “applying Plotinian philosophy to Christian theology” as beginning with “The One [who] is the highest being of all which is the source of the Intellect. The Father, as the One, begetting the Son (the Intellect) would require that the Father be, by nature, the cause of the Son, and the Son be the second highest being” (2009, 157). Yandell makes clear that this approach to the Trinity fundamentally strays from the orthodox understanding of this doctrine: “Whatever begetting is, [from an orthodox perspective] the Son being begotten is not the Son’s being ‘made’ or ‘created’ or having a lesser nature than that of the Father. Ontological Subordination is no account of the Christian Trinity. For a Christian, there aren’t degrees of being God” (Ibid.). Thus, if the Neoplatonic influence on the *Principles* extends to Conway’s understanding of the Trinity, it seems that this would make it likely that is in on this question that she begins to step away from the standard Christian approach, and this is in fact the case.

So what does Conway say about the Trinity in the *Principles*? To begin explicating this, we need to go back to her understanding of time and change. For Conway, change takes place on two parallel levels, spirit/matter and perfection/imperfection, and the kind of change you can go through depends on the kind of substance you are. As part of her rejection of Cartesianism and Hobbesian materialism, Conway argues against a strict ontological separation between spirit/mind and matter/body in a form of dualism and any form of monism, by stating that spirit and body lie on a continuum, with inverse degrees of corporeality and spirituality: “[The] crasser [body] becomes, the more it is removed from the condition of spirit. Consequently, the distinct between spirit and body is only modal and incremental, not essential and substantial (40)”, “Nor is there any difference between body and spirit,… except that body is the grosser part and the spirit the more subtle… [Truly] there is no body anywhere which does not have motion and consequently life or spirit” (51). God lies at one end of this infinite continuum, with all the beings of creation towards the other end, all of whom are able to change their mode of existence such that they can become more spirit or more matter:

There are many degrees of this so that any thing can approach or recede more or less from the condition of a body or spirit. Moreover, because spirit of the more excellent of the two in the true and natural order of things, the more spiritual a certain creature becomes…, the closer it comes to God, who…. is the highest spirit. Thus, a body is always able to become more and more spiritual to infinity since God, who is the first and highest spirit, is infinite and does not and cannot partake of the least corporeality (42).

As part of her argument for this position, she states that it would against the dignity of God to suppose him creating a kind of dead matter that is utterly unlike spirit: “[Since] God is infinitely good and communicates his goodness to all his creatures in infinite ways,… how can any dead thing proceed from him or be created by him, such as mere body or matter, according to the hypothesis of those who affirm that matter cannot be changed into any degree of life or perception?” (44-45), “The communicable attributes [to created beings] are that God is spirit, light, life, that he is good, holy, just, wise, etc. Among these communicable attributes there are none which are not alive and life itself” (45)[[7]](#endnote-7). Due to the fact that all creatures are created by a loving, all-good God, then it must be true that there is something of the divine (the spiritual) in all things, and so there could not be any such thing as dead matter (“a vain fiction and Chimera, and an impossible thing” (46)) in such a created universe. Though there are further arguments that Conway puts, the main point is clear, namely, that all creatures as an admixture of spirit and matter stand on a continuum, some more spiritual, and thus closer to the divine, than others.

Further filling out the details of Conway’s metaphysics, there are three fundamental kinds of substance according to this view, namely, God, Christ and the substance of creatures. To explicate the essential difference between them, Conway begins by reiterating the immutability of God, “as sacred Scripture and our understanding, which has been placed in our minds by God, shows us” (24). If further proof of God’s immutability is required, she argues that God, as the highest good, could neither change away or towards perfection: if he became less perfect, he would no longer be the highest good, and he could only become more perfect by sharing in the “virtue and influence” (Ibid.) of an even higher being, which there could not be. Given that God is essentially immutable, then, the way in which we can distinguish that substance from other kinds is through the question of whether or not they can change, and our everyday experience indeed shows us that all things in creation can change. As such, change is not only key to Conway in terms of being able to characterise time, but also insofar as it is the way in which we can distinguish different kinds of substance, between God and creation.

Further to this, the change that creatures can undergo is linked by Conway to a scheme of divine justice that encompasses all beings in the created universe. Conway discusses the divine punishment meted out to a human being “who has so greatly degraded himself by his own willful wrongdoing” of being compelled by God “to bear the same image in his body as in that spirit into which he has internally transformed himself” (36). So, the potential change that a creature can undergo is not just construed as a possible transfer from more spirit to more matter (or vice versa), but also as a function of divine reward and punishment, reflecting the moral inner progress of the being concerned. However, Conway is also committed to the view that there is an overall progress of creatures towards perfection, even though some backsliding does occur, and this forms part of her understanding of the scheme of divine justice: “Just as all the punishments inflicted by God on his creatures are in proportion to their sins, so they tend, even the worse, to their good and to their restoration and they are so medicinal as to cure these sickly creatures and restore them to a better condition that they previous enjoyed” (38), and “[at] this time every sin will have its own punishment and every creature will feel pain and chastisement, which will return that creature to the pristine state of goodness in which it was created and from which it can never fall again because, through its great punishment, it has acquired a greater perfection and strength” (42). The system of divine punishment and reward, Conway argues, is set up such that it guarantees an overall movement towards spirit and perfection[[8]](#endnote-8).

Due to God’s perfect wisdom and goodness, divine punishments are carried out with a view to their cleansing properties, helping to bring about a more perfect state for the creature in the long-term. Conway particularly focuses upon the restorative power of pain and suffering through which “whatever grossness or crassness is contracted by the spirit or body is diminished; and so the spirit imprisoned in such grossness or crassness is set free and becomes more spiritual” (43). We are, therefore, left with an optimistic view of divine justice and moral development, insofar as all creatures will eventually tend towards perfection and union with the divine, even though they may fall short, and may have to suffer (maybe even considerably), along the way[[9]](#endnote-9).

If we then wish to distinguish between Christ and creatures, we need to go back to the two directions of change, toward matter and imperfection, and toward spirit and perfection. Conway argues that whilst creatures have “the intrinsic power of changing [themselves] either for good or bad”, Christ has “the power of moving only from one good to another” (Ibid*.*), that is, Christ can undergo change, but only in the direction of spirit and perfection. In order to distinguish Christ from creatures thoroughly, Conway points towards Christ’s nature as being unable to “degenerate” like those of creatures and “change from good into bad”, which ensures that “creatures could not be equal to Christ nor of the same nature”, in the same way that, due to his mutability, Christ “can never become the Father” (22). It due to the fact that Christ can only become more perfect that he is “of a greater and more excellent nature than all remaining creatures. On account of his excellence he is rightly called the son of God” (24). The most we, as creatures, can hope for is to “be like him” (22), but we are ultimately not able to *become* him. Summing up, Conway states that: “[There] are three kinds of being. The first [God] is altogether immutable. The second [Christ] can only change toward the good, so that which is good is by its very nature can become better. The third kind [creatures] is that which, although it was good by its very nature, is nevertheless able to change from good to good and as well as from good to evil” (24). So, in Conway’s metaphysical system, we have three fundamental types of substance, distinguishable by the kind of change they can undergo. There is the atemporal substance of God, which undergoes no change, the substance of Christ, which can change but only ever towards perfection, and the substance of creatures, who can change both towards and away from perfection, but have an overall tendency towards perfection. The question of mutability, or not, in the case of God, is key to the distinction between atemporal God and creation in time, with Christ in the middle, both “[sharing] in the immutability of God and the mutability of the creatures… [thus sharing] eternity (which belongs to God) and time (which belongs to creatures)” (26). It is in this metaphysical context that we must approach the Trinity in Conway’s system, which we shall now consider.

It is clear from very early in the text of the *Principles* that the interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity is very important for Conway, and plays into a wider, universalist project that she shares with van Helmont, who not only acted as her physician in later years, but also as an intellectual partner[[10]](#endnote-10). Two sections of the first chapter are intended to “show how the Trinity could be conceived in God according to Scripture” (9), and the topic of the Trinity (particularly in relation to the role of the Son) continues to recur throughout. A first important aspect of Conway’s construal of the Trinity is revealed when she states that her interpretation is intended such that “Jews, Turks, or other peoples would not be offended, if these words, ‘three distinct persons’, which are not in Scripture and have no reasonable sense are omitted” (Ibid.). We thus have our first indication that Conway is not afraid to challenge core Christian teaching in light of her desire to pursue a universalist agenda, in which the similarities between different religious belief systems (of course, given the historical context, Conway had only monotheist belief systems in mind) are the focus, rather than the differences. Indeed, it seems Conway is happy to challenge Christian teaching in order to make it more palatable to Jews and pagans, who may happily convert to Christianity if some of the more controversial elements of the religion (and this would certainly include the traditional understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity) are jettisoned. As Coudert notes (1975, 636), this universalist project is part of the reason for the interest that Conway and van Helmont had in the texts of the Jewish Kabbala, which they hoped could simultaneously confirm what they saw as the fundamental truths of Christianity whilst opening up a way in for believers of other traditions. Therefore, we should not be surprised if we find, in the *Principles*, such a construal of the Trinity[[11]](#endnote-11).

Conway goes on to explicate her understanding of the Trinity through the Kabbalist notion of the *Adam Kadmon*, which she links with the Christian notion of Christ, which, we have already seen, in the context of her metaphysical system is a substance distinguishable from creatures in that it can undergo change, but only towards perfection. Conway speaks of this substance as “[The] natural medium between [God and creature], through which the extremes are united. It is therefore the most fitting and appropriate mediator, for it partakes of one extreme because it is mutable in respect to going from good to a greater degree of good and of the other extreme because it is entirely incapable of changing from good to bad” (24-25). Christ is clearly intended here, then, to act as a kind of ontological and moral middle ground between God and creatures (a being of “a lesser nature than God and yet of a greater and more excellent nature than all remaining creatures” (24)), though the specific status as ‘mediator’ that Christ (or *Adam Kadmon*) is supposed to undertake in Conway’s system is not immediately clear. Conway states that he “comes into existence by generation or emanation from God rather than by creation strictly speaking, although according to a broader meaning and use of this word he can be said to have been created or formed” (25), and that he is “immediately present is all… creatures so that he may bless and benefit them” (26).

However, Conway’s conception of the Trinity is further complicated by a passage in which she focuses on the Logos as “the image or the word [of God,] existing within himself, which in substance or essence is one and the same with him” (10). Instead of Christ as mediator between God and the world, indeed as an intermediate substance between God and the world, we have shifted on to the notion of Christ as the Word, an archetype in line with which creatures are created, and of one substance with God. In addition to the Logos, we also have the notion of a Holy Spirit, “which comes from him and which is in terms of substance or essence nevertheless one with him, through which creatures receive their essence and activity” (Ibid*.*). In contrast to the apparent subordinationist view connected with the *Adam Kadmon*, Conway is now pursuing a seemingly opposed view of the Trinity, where the Son and Spirit are equated with God’s wisdom and will, respectively. Indeed, Conway seems to have moved from a subordinationist Trinity to a form of modalism, in which some of the Persons are understood merely as aspects of the Father, rather than as distinct individuals in their own right, which is confirmed when she states, “wisdom and will in God are not entities or substances distinct from him but, in fact, distinct modes or properties of one and the same substance” (Ibid.). Going back to Conway’s universalism, it is clear that she envisages such a view as making the Trinity more amenable to followers of other religions, particularly the monotheisms of Judaism and Islam, partly by advocating the end of the phrase, “three distinct persons”, which “has no reasonable sense in itself, and is found nowhere in Scripture” (Ibid.).

Conway expands upon her understanding of Christ later on, where she writes: “Jesus Christ signifies the whole Christ, who is God and man. As God he is called *logos ousios*, or the essential word of the father. As man, he is the *logos proforikos*, or the word which is uttered and revealed, the perfect and substantial image of God’s word, which is eternally in God and perpetually united to him so that it is his vehicle and organ, just like the body in respect to the soul” (21). So, why have these apparently two conflicting views of Christ and the Trinity alongside each other in the *Principles*? Hutton points out that it is probably from her reading of the Kabbalist Philo that she constructs this dual role for Christ in her metaphysical system:

Philo differentiates between the *logos* as eternal archetype and the *logos* as first created being, between the *logos* as only begotten son and as first-born son of God… For Philo, the hierarchy of *logos* functions was part of a descending hierarchy of being unfolding from the one (monad or beginning), through to the world of ideas, and thence to the sensible world… Anne Conway too understood the *logos* as a mediator between God and the world, as the *logos* *prophorikos*, the outgoing word of God (2004, 159-160).

It appears that the synthesis of Kabbalism and Neoplatonism here in relation to the role of Christ involves both subordinationist and modalist tendencies, even if Conway’s account of logos as mediator and as the Word can be made consistent. As Hutton argues, “Conway owes more to kabbalism than to Christian theology for her conception of Middle Nature/Christ” (Ibid., 172), and it certainly seems that her conception of Christ would be obviously unacceptable to a Christian who wishes to follow the traditional accounts of Christ and the Trinity. As we have seen in this section, then, a more traditional concept of the timelessness of God, with intimate presence in all beings through His sustaining activity, soon gives way in the *Principles* to a theory of substance and the Trinity that are problematic from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy. In the following section, now that we have already considered some of the key features of Conway’s metaphysics in some detail, I will argue Conway’s challenge to the Christian tradition is not limited to her conception of the Triune God, as we proceed to examine more thoroughly her soteriology (including the soteriological role played by Christ) and eschatology.

**Time, Soteriology and Eschatology in the *Principles***

In the *Principles*, Conway provides an account of the soteriological role played by Christ that in turn sheds light upon her eschatology and understanding of time. We have already seen that Christ, in the context of Conway’s metaphysical system, acts as a mediator between the atemporal God and created beings within the universe, and this extends to time, insofar as “he can be said to share eternity (which belongs to God) and time (which belongs to creatures)” (26). The idea that Christ both partakes of atemporal eternity and of time is certainly a potentially difficult one to understand: whilst Christ exists in time in the sense that “all the things that God created outside of himself” (Ibid.) are in time, nevertheless the soteriological role played by Christ means that this is not the end of the story. Conway states that we can consider the soteriological movement of Christ and creatures towards spirit from a new perspective, leaving the more metaphysically focused notion of time we have been operating with, and instead adopting the “ordinary sense of the word, [namely] a successive increase or decrease of things during which they grow for a certain period and then decline until they die or change into another state” (Ibid.). According to this different sense of time, “once can say that neither this mediating being nor any creature perfectly united to God is subject to time and its laws” (Ibid.). Such a state, I argue, is perhaps best understood as a kind of relative timelessness, in contrast to the strict timelessness of God, in that Christ and creatures still undergo change, even when united with each other in the process of becoming more spirit:

[Christ] is like a most powerful and efficacious balm, through which all things are preserved from decline and death, and whatever is joined and united with him is always new, lively, and growing… [He] may raise the souls of men above time and corruption up to himself, in whom they receive blessing and in whom they grow by degrees in goodness, virtue, and holiness forever (26-27).

We can, therefore, find in Conway’s system a kind of eschatology, in which creatures can become ‘united’ with Christ to the extent that they can achieve a kind of relative timelessness, though they are still strictly subject to time and the mutability that is the essence of their substance.

To further explicate this state, Conway writes that, “those who achieve a perfect union with Christ are raised to a region of perfect tranquillity, where nothing is seen or felt to move or be moved” (27)[[12]](#endnote-12). However, this is not to say that such creatures are no longer moving or changing, “[for] although the strongest and swiftest motions exist there, nevertheless because they move so uniformly, equally, and harmoniously, without any resistance or disturbance they appear completely at rest” (Ibid.). Thus, Conway seems to envisage a possible state where creatures, though still potentially capable of becoming less perfect and more material, can nevertheless become like Christ and other, more purified, creatures in joining a sustained movement towards perfection. There is no end to such a process of becoming more perfect, and so this is the limit of soteriology and eschatology that we can discover in the *Principles*. Whilst we, as creatures, can unite with Christ and attain a kind of relative timelessness, strictly, time and the history of the universe, characterised by an on-going process of change overall towards perfection, will never cease.

Through the foregoing examination of the *Principles*, we can see that Conway’s understanding of time, as one of the fundamental building-blocks of the created universe, is not a secular metaphysical account; crucially, to be fully understood, it must be viewed in the context of a wider soteriological scheme. As such, Conway’s metaphysics is imbued with religious significance, with philosophy and theology intrinsically intertwined. Key metaphysical components of her system, such as her tripartite view of fundamental substances and the possibility of change, are configured so as to reveal a foundational providential plan for creation: a world of created beings, guided by an intermediary substance, ‘Christ’, who is immune to the possibility of sin at an imperfect level of being, slowly but inexorably moving towards a morally perfected world of spirits, which is the eschatological end-point of Conway’s system. Time, for Conway, is precisely this soteriological process, and not merely the space in which events occur. In line with her syncretic approach, then, philosophy and theology form the completed whole of Conway’s philosophy, both disciplines pointing towards the wider picture of the infinite development of the universe, correlatives in terms of both spirit and moral development.

As before, Conway’s blending of time with soteriological considerations has a further impact upon her relation to traditional Christian thought. We noted earlier that Conway holds that time is infinite in the sense that the created universe has existed and will continue to exist for an infinite duration of time. Relating back to soteriology, this has the implication that the soteriological process of creatures inexorably becoming more perfect, transitioning from a more material state to a more spiritual one, also has infinite duration. The narrative of creatures becoming more spirit and thus closer to God in perfection is one that is never-ending, insofar as “this progression and ascension cannot reach God, who is the supreme Being and whose nature infinitely surpasses every creature, even one brought to the highest level” (65). As such, there is no sense, in Conway’s system, of an eschatological end-point, a final event of history in which all are judged and the Kingdom of God is established for all eternity, in whatever way you wish to understand that. The *Principles* proposes a picture of the universe in which history never ends, with creatures slowly becoming closer to God and yet never truly becoming at one with the divine. The goodness of God is boundless, “the infinite fountain and ocean of goodness, charity, and bounty” (13), and, for Conway, this shows that history and the soteriological process itself will never end, with God eternally creating more, so that more can become close to the divine. Such a view, again, shows Conway willing to decisively move away from a traditional Christian view of soteriology and eschatology.

Further to this, the process of increasing in perfection is available to all creatures, insofar as they are all fundamentally constituted by the same substance. Moral growth, then, unlike the traditional Christian view, is not restricted to human beings alone; rather, all creation, in whatever form, is able to grow in perfection, become more spirit and thus closer to God. Such anti-anthropomorphic tendencies in Conway are intensified by her claim that “an infinity of worlds or creatures was made by God… Thus it clearly follows that his creatures are infinite and created in an infinite number of ways” (16). Not only is salvation not restricted to human beings, it is available to an infinite number of kinds of creature, all of whom have equal standing and access to the process of becoming closer to God. Such a universalist eschatology is in keeping with Conway’s willingness to open up Christianity to all, as not only desiring to accommodate those of other belief-systems through a reinterpretation of key Christian doctrine, but as even allowing salvation for all of creation.

**Conclusion**

This paper has considered various issues in relation to the details of Conway’s metaphysical system, as outlined in the *Principles*, and her relation to influences from Neoplatonism, Kabbalism and the Christian tradition. Reconstructing a clear view of Conway’s philosophy is not easy given the lack of source material and the mysteries surrounding her intellectual development and provenance of the *Principles*, yet it is undoubtedly a fascinating synthesis of Christian, Neoplatonic and Kabbalist influences, revealing a thinker who is not afraid to construct a system which would have been very controversial for the time, not in the least at the points, outlined above, where she decisively challenges Christian orthodoxy.

Conway’s eschatology reveals a picture of the universe that is universalist and optimistic, insofar as all created beings will ultimately be able to unite with Christ on the infinite journey towards moral perfection. As such, it may be amenable to later thinkers, such as John Hick, who seek to find an eschatological account which is more universalist, less anthropocentric, and transcends one particular religious belief-system. As I hope to have shown, though, her approach to the Trinity and the question of salvation, grounded in her theory of substance and change, will always be problematic for the Christian believer, and almost certainly would have always been a major barrier to widespread influence in the realm of Christian thought, even if the *Principles* had garnered more intellectual attention in the centuries following its original publication.

**Works Cited**

Conway, Anne. 1996. *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Allison P. Coudert and Taylor Corse. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coudert, Allison. 1975. “A Cambridge Platonist’s Kabbalist Nightmare.” *Journal of the History* *of Ideas* 36.4, 633-652.

DeWeese, G.J. 2004. *God and the Nature of Time*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Gerson, Lloyd. 2014. “Plotinus”. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Summer 2014 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta. URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/plotinus/>.

Hutton, Sarah. 2004. *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, Seung Goo. 2009. “The Relationship between the Ontological Trinity and the Economic Trinity.” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3, 90-107.

Nicolson, M.H. and Sarah Hutton. 1992. *The Conway Letters*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Thomas, Emily. 2017. “Time, space, and process in Anne Conway.” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (early access), DOI: 10.1080/09608788.2017.1302408.

Whittaker, Thomas. 1961. *The Neo-Platonists: a study in the history of Hellenism*. Hildesheim: Olms.

Yandell, Keith. 2009. “How Many Times Does Three Go Into One?” In *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, eds. Thomas McCall and Michael Rea. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1. It is worth noting that any attempt at constructing an account of Conway’s metaphysical system has certain substantial obstacles that should make us proceed with caution. The first obstacle is related to our source material for Conway’s philosophy, namely, extant correspondence and the *Principles*. Much of the correspondence from Anne Conway is missing, presumably never to be recovered (of the nearly three hundred letters collected in *The Conway Letters* (Nicholson and Hutton, 1992)), only thirty-eight are in fact written by her), and thus we have to often speculate as to what she has said on the basis of extant correspondence to her. The provenance of the *Principles* is also an issue, insofar as we do not have the original notebooks on which the text is based, and thus we are not sure of specific details of the writing of the book and the extent to which some editing may have taken place, probably by her friend and physician van Helmont (on whom more later). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas (2017) has recently proposed a reading of Conway that holds God to be holenmerically present, that is, wholly present in each part of the universe, in connection with the claim that the *Principles* evinces the influence of Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist, on the question of the time. The arguments presented here do not rest upon a particular interpretation of Conway in this regard, and thus I will not explore Thomas’ excellent discussion here. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Unattributed references are to Conway (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It should be noted that God’s sustaining activity does not exhaust his creative activity, according to Conway, who argues that the divine “not only gives to [created things] form and figure, but also essence, life, body, and whatever good they have” (9), and as such is no mere ground of being. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Conway’s account of creation is not entirely Neoplatonic due to the fact that in her system, as we have seen, creation is not limited to sustaining all created beings in existence, and is not blind in the sense suggested by the Neoplatonic creative model of heat emanating from a fire; there is some sense of purpose behind the creative activity of Conway’s God. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The classic understanding of the interaction between ontology and epistemology found in the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity has been helpfully summed up by Lee: “The economic Trinity is the ground of cognition for the [immanent] Trinity, and the [immanent] Trinity is the ground of being for the economic Trinity” (2009, 92). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Mutability, on the other hand, is, for Conway, a ‘differentiating attribute’, alongside hardness, shape, and motion. Such attributes are “the essential differences or various attributes by which creatures, as such, are distinguished from God” (45). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Later on, Conway reiterates such an overall movement towards spirituality in more secular terms: “[Nature] always works toward the greater perfection of subtlety and spirituality since this is the most natural property of every operation and motion… These spirits, whether good or bad, always advance to a greater subtlety or spirituality” (61-62). This is just one of numerous examples of Conway’s willingness to frame the same phenomenon from two different perspectives, a secular approach intertwined with a religious one. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. We can see here the beginnings of Conway’s eschatology, which I shall consider in more detail in the following section. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Hutton (2004, 145-153) provides what is perhaps the most comprehensive survey of the complex relationship between van Helmont and Conway. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. However, Conway is clearly concerned to appeal to Christian readers: for example, when defending her view that “everything has life and is truly alive in some degree” (62), she makes numerous references to the New Testament. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Such beings also enter into a progressively more loving relationship with God, in that “those creatures which are most like God love him more and are more loved by him” (47). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)