

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF JOSIAH ROYCE'S PHILOSOPHICAL
INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIANITY, *THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIANITY*.¹

In 1912 Josiah Royce (1855-1916) delivered sixteen lectures to the University of Oxford at Manchester College entitled *The Problem of Christianity (PC)* in which he offered a philosophical interpretation of Christianity.² Although many aspects of the *PC* owe a great deal to his earlier philosophy its ideas are self-contained and Royce certainly considered that the book could be understood without any previous reading of his *Philosophy of Loyalty*, or his *Bross Lectures*.³

The basic thesis of the *PC* is firstly, that Christianity's essence was contained in the historical self-expression of the early Christian community (*ECC*) in so far as it saw itself as representative of the "being" called Christ; secondly that this historical assertion finds universal expression in the "being" which Royce calls the "Beloved Community" (*BC*); and thirdly, that just as the *ECC* had understood salvation was to be achieved through loyalty to Christ, the true, universal, way for humanity to achieve salvation was through loyalty to the universal *BC*.

Royce thought that the essence of Christianity as expressed by the *ECC* was to be found in three leading ideas: "The idea of the spiritual community in union with which man is to win salvation, the idea of the hopeless and guilty burden of the individual when unaided by divine grace, and the idea of atonement."⁴ These, he believed, could be verified without recourse to anything other than the "human and empirical" situation and, that they remained true ideas for both the historical *ECC* and the universal *BC*. Royce's explication of this essence and its empirical historical verification occupied his first eight lectures comprising Volume One of the *PC*. The remaining eight lectures addressed the "technically metaphysical to which these ideas give rise"⁵ as he attempted to show that the *ECC*'s self-understanding was true in that it expressed, through its empirically derived leading ideas, what had genuine universal significance.

Royce's discussion in the *PC* of the essential and leading in Christianity depended upon two pivotal ideas. The first was that he believed both individuals and communities to be wholly dependent upon the processes of interpretation⁶ and the

¹ Royce, J., *The Problem of Christianity*, New York, 1913. Citations from this book take the form of a roman numeral expressing the volume followed by an arabic numeral denoting the page number (except where the page occurs in the preface in which case the number is expressed in lowercase roman numerals).

² A work almost completely been neglected since the First World War. This conflict at the time seriously damaged any work, such as the *PC*, which suggested that humanity could be morally progressive. Consequently there has been very little other secondary literature on the *PC* other than the works cited in this paper.

³ *Philosophy of Loyalty*, New York, 1908. *Bross Lectures - The Sources of Religious Insight*, Edinburgh, 1912. The *PC* can be understood on its own terms because the work introduces some important new ideas into his thinking most notably the use of the idea of the "Beloved Community" in place of the "Absolute." The extent of the change can be gauged by Timothy Sprigge's comment that he "find[s] it rather a puzzle as to how it [the *PC*] relates to his earlier metaphysics" (personal communication) and that Peter Fuss believed that in *PC* Royce in fact abandoned his absolutism entirely (Fuss, P., *The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, Harvard, 1965 p. 262).

⁴ I.44

⁵ I. xxxv

⁶ In this he readily admits a certain debt to the work of Charles Peirce.

time-process, and that the problem of Christianity as an historical religion, far from being simply a contemporary and localized phenomenon, displayed in fact a universal life-problem. The second was that for Royce a community was not simply a collection of individuals with a common aim but was itself “an individual.” Clendenning points out that, although Royce only introduced this idea as “a fair working hypothesis it is a postulate upon which the entire book depends.”⁷ In Christian terms Royce thought the truth of this postulate was displayed by the *ECC*’s creation of a corporate entity, “the body of Christ, or the body of which the now divinely exalted Christ is the head.”⁸ The conjunction of these ideas brought Royce to the conclusion that the true (and therefore universal) explanation of the *ECC*’s self-understanding of the being of Christ was to be found through “an interpretation of the nature of communities.”⁹

The first section of this paper presents a brief overview of these basic elements as they appear in Royce’s philosophical interpretation of Christianity;¹⁰ it does not follow his own order of presentation but seeks instead to give the reader of this paper a sense of how the empirical and metaphysical aspects of his thought interrelate. The second section briefly addresses the practical outcome of Royce’s endeavour expressed in his two final maxims. The final section considers how the chief difficulty of the *PC* (that a creedal Christian would have the greatest difficulty in accepting Royce’s conclusions as a legitimate understanding of Christianity) may be overcome.

Royce introduces his discussion of interpretation, time-processes, and community by asking: “In what sense can the modern man consistently be, in creed, a Christian?”¹¹ Consistent because the “modern man” knows something of present day philosophical and scientific enquiries whose conclusions about the world seem not to accord with historical Christian ones. This, in essence, is the problem of Christianity.

Royce thought that the term “modern man . . . condensed into a word the hypothesis, the postulate, that the human race has been subject to some more or less coherent process of education.”¹² He argued that this interpretative *process* operated in the same way for the “modern man” looking back and trying to understand historical Christianity coherently in the light of their ‘modern knowledge,’ as it did for any other Christian, in any historical period, who had tried to understand the teaching of the *ECC* coherently in the light of their own ‘modern knowledge.’ Crucially Royce argued that this process was also true of the foundation of Christianity itself for Paul and the *ECC* had always considered Jesus’ life and teaching in the light of later knowledge, e.g. Christ’s suffering and resurrection. Therefore, from the outset, the *ECC* recognized it understood Jesus’ life in a way not even the first disciples had been able to. Consequently Royce argued that, “historically speaking, Christianity has never appeared simply as the religion taught by the Master”¹³ and that “the Christian community . . . together with its spirit, is the true founder of Christianity.”¹⁴

⁷ Clendenning, J., *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce*, ***, 1999, p. 347

⁸ I.92

⁹ II.339

¹⁰ As the *PC* runs to some 150,000 words only these essential and leading ideas can be presented in a paper of this nature.

¹¹ I.14

¹² I.17-18. Gotthold Lessing used a similar phrase - “the education of the human race.”

¹³ I.25

¹⁴ II.338

Christianity had always been an interpretation of Jesus and his religion in the light of later doctrines concerning his mission, God, humanity, and humanity's salvation. This continuous interpretative process through history Royce thought was the *only* way in which it has ever been possible to appropriate and retain the essence of Christianity.

However the *ECC*'s initial interpretation was by no means perfect and complete. Indeed, in Royce's view, no temporal interpretation can ever be perfect and final because continuous and endless interpretation forms the very nature of reality; for him the *only* real order was the temporal order. As Fuss notes "the real is progressively determined by the interpretative Community. And that activity takes place radically in time. The Community requires for the achievement of its goals a lengthy social process, a history, and an open future."¹⁵ The Christian Church's own behaviour has many times demonstrated that it has had this open future even if it has often gone unacknowledged. The example used by Royce to illustrate this was that one of the essential truths for the *ECC* was a belief that Christ would shortly return and inaugurate the promised Kingdom of Heaven on earth. As time passed and the expected event did not occur the *ECC* eventually found themselves facing a serious problem. They were forced to ask themselves whether this doctrine was in fact essential or whether it could be reinterpreted in more symbolic terms? The *ECC*, therefore, from the very start was required to ask the same question Royce posed to the "modern man" at the head of this section. In order continually to remain true to what *was* essential about Christianity, the *ECC* had *always* engaged in the process of re-interpretation in order that it remain coherent and consistent in the light of new knowledge:

The Church learned, namely, to defend what it viewed as the essential faith of the apostles concerning the end of the world, only by declaring henceforth that the apostles either were not permitted truthfully to grasp this essential faith concerning the last things, or else did not mean what they said, but used figures of speech.¹⁶

Throughout the *PC* Royce was concerned to point the reader to the historical and empirical "fact" that continuous interpretations of Jesus' nature and of his mission had "always existed ever since there was any Christian religion at all."¹⁷

Having stated these initial views Royce moved to a discussion what he saw as the essential and leading ideas of Christianity,- ideas supplemented and expanded upon the original teaching of the Jesus about the Kingdom of Heaven. For Royce they were the temporal expression, par excellence, of the highest goal humanity could aim for which, in the *PC* became the universal *BC*. Royce thought that interpretation and the time-process allowed him to develop a view of community which was not only concerned with the "transient interests of us mortals" but also "whatever is largest and most lasting in the universe." Because Royce thought this was possible he was able to state clearly that "the doctrine of the community will prove to be a doctrine about the being and manifestation of God."¹⁸ In Royce's mind the *BC* was, in some fashion analogous to God; it is to this community, in which humanity's salvation is found, that we turn first.

¹⁵ Fuss, P., *The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, Harvard, 1965 p. 259

¹⁶ II.355

¹⁷ I.25

¹⁸ II.11

THE SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

The apparent paradox of any community is that unless it “it is both one and many, it is no community at all.”¹⁹ Its oneness is always threatened by the many, for the processes within communities which enabled educated and encouraged individual self-awareness continually created tensions within and estrangement from the whole. This was for Royce an empirical and human problem universally true for all humanity, having “a broad psychological basis in the social nature of mankind.”²⁰ Royce’s discussion of the “hopeless and guilty burden of the individual” and “atonement” (which will be discussed in succeeding sections) are born directly out of his tension,- a tension which could only be overcome within the context of a genuine, universal, spiritual community.

For all these inherent difficulties, Royce thought the *ECC*’s great insight was a recognition that an embryonic solution to this universally true life problem was to be found in Jesus’ life and teaching that only in and through community (the Kingdom of Heaven) can humanity achieve genuine fulfilment or “salvation.” For the *ECC* “what was merely hinted at in the parables now became explicit.”²¹ This unfolding interpretation of Christ’s life and teaching eventually led them to propose that the Kingdom would be realized in some way in and through the life of the Church *itself* and the *ECC* began to see itself as an individual being - the “body of Christ.” The *ECC* had recognized that such a community was vaster, more stable, and of greater worth, than any individual. Additionally it functioned as a temporal, earthly and visible precursor of the far greater awaited Kingdom of Heaven - this Kingdom in Royce’s view of course also takes on the quality of an “individual.” The main difference between the tangible “body of Christ” represented by the *ECC*, and the Kingdom of Heaven, however, was that the latter remained “itself a mystery,- soon to be revealed.”²² Despite the invisibility of this coming community the *ECC* never doubted its reality, believing that all those who loved Christ “with love undying”²³ would there find true and complete salvation. Royce importantly noted that to be a genuine member of the *ECC* an individual was required to “love Christ,” that is to say the community which had become itself “the body of Christ.” In Royce’s interpretation this Christian love took on the form of Loyalty and he thought this was Paul’s “simple but vast transformation of Christian love.”²⁴ Royce also argued that Paul developed this into a doctrine that “salvation [itself] comes through loyalty.”²⁵ The concept of Loyalty (for Royce always and only freely given) was a key element in his interpretation of Christianity and the spiritual community; in the *PC* he describes it as follows:

¹⁹ II.17

²⁰ I.113-114

²¹ I.50

²² I.199. Throughout the *PC* there are a number of intriguing references such as this which seems to suggest Jesus had important knowledge of the processes of interpretation which shaped the institution built in his name. Royce does not expand further on what he meant by this but it is an aspect of his work that clearly requires further research.

²³ Eph. 6²⁴

²⁴ I.98

²⁵ I.158

[It is] the willing and thoroughgoing devotion of a self to a cause, when the cause is something which unites any selves in one, and which is therefore the interest of a community. For a loyal human being the interest of the community to which he belongs is superior to every merely individual interest of his own. He actively devotes himself to this cause.²⁶

Unfortunately, as we have already discussed, the longed for coming judgement and the initiation of the ideal Kingdom of Heaven, essential to the *ECC*'s solution's success, failed to occur as expected and so became the chief reason for the "problem of Christianity." Royce thought that this could be overcome by seeing the Christian solution not as final but instead as, "thus far at least, man's most impressive vision of salvation, and his principal glimpse of the homeland of the spirit."²⁷ Royce's attempt to develop and retain this vision of the "homeland" in the contemporary world had two stages.

The first stage retained the concept of a saving community (which he called the *BC*) in which, as history unfolds and countless and unending interpretations occur, a loyal individual's life becomes part of one endlessly redemptive story/community in which the burdens of human existence are relieved and given meaning. This Christian concept was combined with his belief as an Absolute Idealist that the real is, in some way a "vast cosmic Mind"²⁸ and led him to the following definition of the genuine universal community:

. . . if, in ideal, we aim to conceive the divine nature, how better can we conceive it than in the form of the Community of interpretation, and above all in the form of the Interpreter, who interprets all to all, and each individual to the world, and the world of spirits to each individual.

In such an interpreter, and in his community, the problem of the One and the Many would find its ideally complete expression and solution. The abstract conceptions and the mystical intuitions would be at once transcended, and illumined, and yet retained and kept clear and distinct, in and through the life of the one who, as interpreter, was at once servant to all and chief among all, expressing his will through all, yet, in his interpretations, regarding and loving the will of the least of these his brethren. In him the Community, the Individual, and the Absolute would be completely expressed, reconciled, and distinguished.²⁹

Royce believed that this philosophical interpretation of Christian community said something "regarding the sense in which there really is an universal community" and as such "express[ed] what the Christian idea means."³⁰

Royce's second stage attempted to interpret the apparently failed idea that "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" in a manner which harmonized it with what he saw as the necessary process of endlessly unfolding historical time. The Kingdom of Heaven became in Royce's mind something never achieved in any one moment of time and which is *always* at hand. The reason for this was that he thought true unity (required by the universal *BC*) could only be achieved through continuous process of interpretation which allowed mediation "between mutually contrasting or estranged ideas."³¹

²⁶ I.68-69. C.f. chap. 1 of his *Philosophy of Loyalty*, New York, 1908

²⁷ I.11

²⁸ C.f. Sprigge, T., *The Absolute Idealism of Josiah Royce*, in *The Philosophers' Magazine*, Winter 1997, pp. 32-33

²⁹ II.219-220

³⁰ I.116

³¹ II.286

Our doctrine of the world as community, of the social life of the universe endlessly revealing the divine,- never wholly at any one time, but in the world's process, expresses in the form of metaphysics of the community what you grasped through an intuition of faith. . . . this unity of the spirit, this consciousness of reconciliation, this triumph over the universal death whereof every event in time furnishes an illustration, this occurs in our world of interpretation, not at any one moment of time, but through an insight into the meaning of all that occurs in time. We do not declare, in our metaphysical doctrine, that the divine consciousness is timeless. We declare that the whole order of time, the process of the spirit, is interpreted, and so interpreted that, when viewed in the light of its goal, the whole world is reconciled to its own purposes. The endless tragedies of its sequence are not only interpreted step by step through deeds of charity and of atonement, but, as it were (I speak now wholly in a figure), 'in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,' the whole of time, with all its tragedies, is, by the interpreter of the universe, reconciled to its own ideal. And in this final union of temporal sequence, of the goal that is never attained in time, and of the divine spirit through whom the world is reconciled to itself and to its own purpose, the real community, the true interpretation, the divine interpreter, the plan of salvation,- these are expressed.³²

THE HOPELESS & GUILTY BURDEN OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Royce thought this burden arose, because each individual's moral self ("the natural conscience"³³) was built in community which, as we have seen, is a milieu effected by the problems of the one and the many. Royce believed that, because there "are so many of us" and we "naturally differ so much from one another," this tension was the "primary state of any new social enterprise"³⁴ with each of those myriad tensions seeming evil to us. Encountering such evil in all its enterprises individuals and historical communities of course long to find relief from this burden. The greatest difficulty, however, is that this knowledge of good and evil is *itself* founded upon "upon the chaos" of [the many and varied] social contrasts:

My conscience grows out of this chaos, - grows as my reason grows, through the effort to get harmony into this chaos. However reasonable I become, however high the grade of the conscientious ideals to which, through the struggle to win harmony, I finally attain, all of my own conscientious life is psychologically built upon the lowly foundations thus furnished by the troubled social life, that, together with my fellows, I must lead.³⁵

The burden is seemingly inescapable as "individualism and collectivism are tendencies, each of which, as our social order grows, intensifies the other."³⁶ One solution attempted by societies is to try and provide this relief by forming codes and laws which structure our relationships and interactions with other individuals and/or societies. Yet this same process of law making also simply increases the tensions already discussed and once again there is found no hope of ultimate relief,- "salvation." For although such cultivation bred civilized conduct it also bred "conscious independence of spirit and deep inner opposition to all mere external authority."³⁷ Royce thought this human and empirical problem was being addressed

³² II.377-379

³³ I.140

³⁴ I.138

³⁵ I.137

³⁶ I.152

³⁷ I.144

by the ECC in Paul's Letter to the Romans where, in chapter seven law, sin, and the resultant inner conflict are discussed. Paul knew and experienced the dilemma intimately and passionately:

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead.³⁸

Paul's cry of moral and spiritual despair is that of someone who has recognized the depth and weight of the burden,- "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Paul's solution was to invoke the name of Christ: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"³⁹ He believed that he knew the person of Christ which, in Royce's interpretation of Christianity, was the very community of the *ECC* itself to which the individual must loyally bind themselves if they are to find salvation. But Royce insists, apart from this expression of Paul's and the *ECC*'s religious faith, the "perfectly human truth" remained that loyalty (the love of a community conceived as a person on a level superior to that of any human individual) and the devotion of the self to the cause of the community was :

. . . the only cure for the natural warfare of the collective and of the individual will, - a warfare which no moral cultivation without loyalty can ever end, but which all cultivation, apart from such devoted and transforming love of the community, only inflames and increases.⁴⁰

It can be seen that for Royce these first two essential and leading ideas of Christianity illustrate and illuminate each other. They show that no individual human being can be relieved of their burden and able to find salvation "except through ceasing to be a *mere* individual."⁴¹ However, although loyalty to community offered the beginnings of a solution to this burden of the lone individual a developed concept of atonement was required to fulfil the promise of salvation. It was this concept that Royce saw as being the "function in which the life of the community culminates."⁴²

ATONEMENT

The Christian idea of atonement arose, Royce thought from the most fundamental of motives; "if there were no Christianity and no Christians in the world, the idea of atonement would have to be invented, before the higher levels of our moral existence could be fairly understood."⁴³ His statement reveals that he thought there existed an independent higher level of morality which could only be truly understood and attained by us (as moral agents and individual centres of consciousness) through the progressive strivings of humanity - i.e. through interpretation and the time-process. During his discussion of atonement this becomes explicit when he asks, that since the

³⁸ Rom. 7⁷⁻⁸ (RSV)

³⁹ Rom. 7²⁵ (RSV)

⁴⁰ I.159

⁴¹ I.xxiv-xxv

⁴² I.xxi

⁴³ I.271

community *finds* no reconciliation in the face of the difficulties caused by “the one and the many,” could it instead *create* one?⁴⁴

In a world peopled by free moral agents there inevitably arises the possibility that a wilful sin against a moral code (any moral code) may be committed. Once committed, the act of breaching this code (the sinful act) becomes an historical and therefore irrevocable deed. Royce firstly suggests what are for him two unsatisfactory ways to overcome the committing of such a deed. The first would be the simple forgetting of the sin but this fails to address the “irrevocable deed” which, itself, remains untouched, un-transformed, un-interpreted, and un-forgiven. Neither did the idea of penal atonement work for Royce because, although it may satisfy some angry God it left the sinner still able to say, “I was my own destroyer and will be my own hereafter.”⁴⁵ In both these cases the individual who seeks relief from their sin is always returned to a recognition that that which the moral code said should not be done, was done and, although an individual may be truly repentant of this sinful deed, there arose the problem of exactly how to find true forgiveness and how adequately to atone for the deed. Royce thought that:

. . . no good deeds of the traitor’s future will ever so atone for his one act of treason, that he will become clear of just that treason, and of what he finds to be its guilt. He had his moral universe; and his one act of treason did the most to destroy that world and to wreck his own relation to its meaning. His irrevocable deed is, for his moral consciousness, its own endless penalty.⁴⁶

It becomes clear to the individual that alone they cannot wipe out such a deed and that they require a forgiveness lying outside of their own power. Royce believed that Christianity had properly recognized that true forgiveness and atonement could, therefore, only be found in something “external” to the mere individual. This insight could be expressed in two theses:

First: ‘By no deed of his own, unaided by the supernatural consequences of the work of Christ, can the wilful sinner win forgiveness. Second: The penalty of unforgiving sin is the endless second death.’⁴⁷

These theses, however, did not arise directly from the teaching of Jesus in the parables which presented no complete view of the essence of Christian doctrine of wilful sin; indeed Royce did not “believe that they were intended by the master to do so.”⁴⁸ Instead he thought the *ECC*’s own interpretation of this teaching gave rise to the two theses. All he thinks can be said of Jesus’ own teaching, as it appears in the New Testament, is that “the voluntary good deed is one which, whatever its outward expression may be, carries with it the whole heart of love,⁴⁹ both to God and the neighbour”⁵⁰ and each wilful deed that is not so informed is sin. Sin is disloyalty to and alienation from the Kingdom of Heaven and God; as we have seen elsewhere, Royce thought that such a failure to be loyal to this Kingdom meant the individual

⁴⁴ I.304

⁴⁵ I.285

⁴⁶ I.280

⁴⁷ I.235

⁴⁸ I.239

⁴⁹ This “whole-heartedness” Royce thought could be called faith.

⁵⁰ I.229

found only the inescapable moral burden and guilt we have just discussed. The later Christian community, struggling to understand the full implications of Jesus' incomplete teaching and their own intuitive understanding of the need for atonement, naturally took the reports of Jesus' own authority to forgive sin very seriously. However, with the crucifixion and his passing from earthly life exactly how Christ saved from sin became for them extremely problematic. Despite this "*that* he saved from sin, and that he somehow did so through what he won for men by his death, became the central constituent of the later Christian tradition."⁵¹

Royce believed that, although Christianity had glimpsed the solution in the atoning supernatural acts of Christ, there was still to be expressed a further interpretation; an interpretation which gave to the "irrevocable deed" a new value so that it was possible to say, "not 'It is undone;' but 'I am henceforth in some measure, in some genuine fashion, morally reconciled to the fact that I did this evil.'"⁵² He expressed this solution in the following postulate which, although he thought it was the highest form of human spirituality, was also one which could not be "proved by the study of mankind as they are:"

No baseness or cruelty of treason so deep or so tragic shall enter our human world, but that loyal love shall be able in due time to oppose to just that deed of treason its fitting deed of atonement.⁵³

Both Christianity's and Royce's concepts of atonement and interpretation clearly require the processes of time in order to function and expressed the belief that somehow it allowed "every problem . . . in the course of the endless ages, its solution, to every antithesis its resolution, to every estrangement its reconciliation, to every tragedy the atoning triumph which interprets its evil."⁵⁴ However, these same endless processes of time and interpretation which allowed the idea of atonement to develop in the first place create in their turn, not just the "problem of Christianity," but the "problem of the universe."⁵⁵ For, in seeking the goal of atonement, the whole of creation is bound to the pursuit of that which it can never reach and which causes the "naturally tragic estrangement of this world from its goal."⁵⁶

Royce believed that it was possible to find the solution to the "problem of the universe" in the same place he found that to "the problem of Christianity" - in the all-embracing self-interpreting "Beloved Community." There he thought would be found the salvation of the world, where every individual is wholly interpreted and reconciled and atonement is finally and fully achieved. The whole order of time and its processes being reconciled with its goal and ideal.

A PRACTICAL DOCTRINE OF LIFE

Having presented this very brief overview of Royce's interpretation of Christianity it is important to note one further important aspect of Royce's argument in the *PC*.

⁵¹ I.231

⁵² I.281

⁵³ I.322

⁵⁴ I.374

⁵⁵ I.375

⁵⁶ I.375

Although much in this work is undoubtedly metaphysical the results of his enquiry not only allowed “modern man” a “new aspect of philosophical idealism” but also to encounter a “*practical doctrine of life*”⁵⁷ consistent with both the essence of Christianity, and modern knowledge. He thought that this practical doctrine could be summed up in two maxims:

1. Simplify your traditional Christology, in order thereby to enrich its spirit. The religion of loyalty has shown us the way to this end . . . the literal and practical fact has always been this, that in some fashion and degree those who have believed in the being whom they called Christ, were united in a community of the faithful, were in love with that community, were hopefully and practically devoted to the cause of the still invisible, but perfectly real and divine Universal Community, and were saved by the faith and by the life they thus expressed. The name of Christ has always been, for the Christian believers, the symbol of the Spirit in whom the faithful - that is to say the loyal - always are and have been one.⁵⁸
2. Look forward to the human and visible triumph of no form of the Christian Church.

Although superficially both of these practical maxims look like an attempt radically to overturn present forms of Christianity Royce makes it clear that he had *no* interest in forming one more new church or sect and he clearly expresses his belief that no one need abandon their own tradition for, in “their heart of hearts, they know [what their] tradition has always symbolized.”⁵⁹ One further practical and simple maxim arose from this belief, that individual Christians could remain where they were and, “*Hold fast by that faith.*”⁶⁰ Royce hoped that his work simply presented a further interpretation of Christianity for the Church to consider and thereby aid it in its continuous task of preserving its true essence. Royce’s overall desire was to encourage humanity itself actively create the ideal universal community “by helping to make the work of religion not only as catholic as is already the true spirit of loyalty, but as inventive of new social arts, as progressive as is now natural science.”⁶¹ This was no abstract desire on Royce’s part for he thought it vital that if own and future ages were to find genuine salvation, they had to protect and enact the ideas which “historically speaking, the Christian church first discovered.”⁶²

Whatever may hereafter be the fortunes of Christian institutions, or of Christian traditions, the religion of loyalty, the doctrine of the otherwise hopelessly lost individual through devotion to the life of the otherwise hopelessly lost individual through devotion to the life of the genuinely real and Universal Community, *must survive, and must direct the future both of religion and of mankind, if man is to be saved at all.*⁶³

⁵⁷ II.422 (italics mine)

⁵⁸ II.424-426

⁵⁹ II.427

⁶⁰ II.428

⁶¹ II.431 Royce thought that “The very existence of natural science . . . is an illustration of our thesis that the universe is endlessly engaged in the spiritual task of interpreting its own life” (II.418).

⁶² I.xx

⁶³ *Problem* Vol. I p. xix (italics mine)

Ultimately he believed his practical interpretation of the Christian doctrine of Life would, at the last, be to live according to a creed “at once human, divine, and practical, and religious, and universal.”⁶⁴

The chief criticism of the *PC* is undoubtedly that a creedal Christian would have the greatest difficulty in accepting Royce’s interpretation and practical conclusions outlined above where Christ’s historical rôle is considerably diminished and the final vision of the Kingdom of Heaven (the *BC*) no longer resembled a Christian conclusion or indeed that of “any other special religion.”⁶⁵ However, the difficulties for the creedal Christian are considerably reduced if Royce’s conclusions can be shown to arise out of a correct interpretation of the essential and leading in Christianity.

Firstly Royce is undoubtedly correct to state that Christianity has been, historically speaking a continuous sequence of interpretations; the present day Christian Church shows the results of this by being a body clearly connected with, but quite different from, the *ECC*. Throughout this process of change the Church has always had to ascertain what was in fact essential and leading and discard that which had been shown to be merely transient. As we saw this process was visible in the *ECC*’s reassessment of their belief that Christ’s imminent return and the inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven was a necessary aspect of their faith. Other similar examples abound continuing to the present day - one can point, for example, to the many attempts in the past century to redefine Trinitarian and Christological formulas in the light of humanity’s contemporary situation.

Secondly it is clear that Christianity is essentially a narrative about sin, atonement, and eventual salvation found within a community believed to be universal. Royce’s interpretation does not distort the course of this narrative because he believed that it accurately pointed the way to the correct solution of the problem of the Universe in which is found genuine universal salvation.

Thirdly, Royce’s argument offers Christianity a way to achieve genuine universality whilst also enabling it to retain as unique, what it believes to be key defining events occurring within the time-process. For the creedal Christian Christ’s life was an event “once for all” (ἀπαξ),⁶⁶ a single occurrence excluding any other similar occurrence. Royce maintains this by stressing that the historical process is the only real order and by seeing events occurring within it as “irrevocable” and unique. Christianity’s discovery of certain universal principles (now named after them) was a “once for all” first discovery - they found principles which need never be discovered by humanity again. In this sense they remain forever uniquely Christian.

Although the first two points would find some support amongst creedal Christians the third could easily be seen by many to hold onto the uniqueness of Christianity’s historical revelation far too loosely and vaguely. The modern evangelical moral theologian Oliver O’Donovan, for example, wishes to make it clear that “Christian universalism must . . . make the distinction between that point in history which confers destiny and purpose on the whole and that whole which has destiny and purpose conferred on it.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ II.429

⁶⁵ II. 432

⁶⁶ Heb. 9²⁶ and Romans 6¹⁰

⁶⁷ O’Donovan, O., *Resurrection and Moral Order – An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, Leicester, 1986, pp. 66

Royce does not make the kind of distinction required by O'Donovan but Royce does undoubtedly make one. Although it is correct to say that Royce's philosophy does not allow that a single event in history can *confer* destiny and purpose upon the whole (for Royce there can be no such isolated and distinct single events imposed on history from "outside"), an event occurring within *a continuous process* of interpretation can be seen to have been more than normally decisive and turn out to advance humanity's understanding at a rate far greater would normally be expected. The example he uses is of some of the great scientific hypotheses which, although antecedently improbable, if eventually proven, made gains in knowledge which outstripped the usual incremental gains of the statistical sciences.⁶⁸ Royce thought that such great leaps in understanding were only possible if humanity were in some way "fitted" to interpret the world around it. Royce thought the "hypothesis" of Christ as a community developed by the *ECC* was just such a vital hermeneutic key to humanity's understanding of the nature of reality. A single event/hypothesis *can*, therefore, prove to have been a uniquely important hermeneutic key which hastened humanity's *discovery* that the whole has *always* had destiny and purpose.

If this argument is accepted then the success of Royce's argument ultimately depends on the progress of a related project which is to ascertain whether there does in fact exist (as Cudworth and Kant attempted to show) some kind of eternal and immutable morality - for this is the destiny and purpose of Royce's universal *BC* to which historical Christianity pointed and from which his whole argument seeks to draw its power.

To conclude, it is possible to argue that Royce's interpretation, although long ignored by philosophers and theologians, has even greater value today than it did when he wrote it. Our own age has recognized its global nature especially through the great improvements in communications technology. In this global context, Royce's interpretation could provide a valuable hermeneutic tool allowing Christianity to offer to the whole of humanity its essential, universal insights in a fashion which encourages true and deep relationships with other faith traditions and world religions. Royce's interpretation of Christianity would allow it to join fully in the attempt to create a genuine global moral community - an action which could be seen as wholly consistent with Christianity's own ever unfolding historical self-understanding.

Humanity has also learned to recognize that as a temporal and finite community we belong to a vast cosmos and are not, as traditional theology had thought, centrally placed and significant. With this simple viewpoint forever gone Royce's reinterpretation of Christianity would also allow it to see that there is the possibility of a genuine intimate and significant relationship with this "immeasurably vast cosmic process"⁶⁹ which once again remains consistent with the historical essence of its faith.

This concluding overview may still not persuade a creedal Christian to see Royce's interpretation as correct but it should at least help show that it was and remains a legitimate one worthy of further reconsideration.

⁶⁸ II.394-420

⁶⁹ II.9

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