In an article published in 1991, Nicholas Rescher wrote:

Idealism, broadly speaking, is the doctrine that reality is somehow mind-correlative or mind-coordinated. However, the specifically conceptual idealism . . . stands in contrast to an ontological doctrine to the effect that mind somehow constitutes or produces the world’s matter. Instead, it maintains that an adequate descriptive characterization of physical (“material”) reality must make implicit reference to mental operations—that some commerce with mental characteristics and operations is involved in explanatory exposition of what is at issue “the real world.”

Rescher conceives the human reason as already shaped by inherited stances, assumptions, values, and received knowledge, at varying levels of attributed significance. In this context, notes the theologian Paul D. Murray, for Rescher “the rational thing to do is to take one’s situatedness seriously whilst continually opening it out to testing against what else there is and what else comes to light.” Consequently, Murray concludes,

Truth is something that we can legitimately assume ourselves to be articulating in part but which inevitably eludes us in toto and towards which, therefore, we need to understand ourselves as being orientated in the mode of aspiration rather than possession, or arrival. . . . Rescher’s thinking . . . evinces a commitment to acknowledging the pluralist reality of the world of difference in which we exist and the need to negotiate this appropriately.

The fact that Rescher “formulates and defends a form of idealism, in the tradition of Green, Bradley, Bosanquet, Royce, McTaggart”, brings him closer to a rich British idealist tradition, which is arguably most quintessentially represented by R. G. Collingwood. This framework of conceptual idealism outlined by Rescher some thirty years after Collingwood accommodates very well the latter’s previous dismissal of commonsense realism and his placing of Kantian transcendentalism and Hegelian immanentism under the auspices of the Christian concept of God.

The definition Collingwood gave to (naïve, or crude) realism—in his unpublished text “Realism and Idealism”—reads: “[For the realist,] the object makes no difference to the knowing, so that knowing . . . is a single absolutely . . . undifferentiated activity” and is based on the realist’s assumption that reality consists in “two radically self-contained worlds: the objective world of things known and the subjective world of cognitive activity,” whereas for Collingwood the mind itself is a compositum of cognitive activities and their object. Commonsense realism’s assumption that things exist “independently of our thought” or “mind” is criticized by the conceptual idealist thinkers—whose voices find an unifying echo in Collingwood’s analyses—for its failure to realize that the real condition for such a claim is the thought itself, so that the things considered as existing “outside our thought” or mind are in fact included in it once we think of them as being “external to our thought.” Similarly, the things which are claimed to exist independently of thought cannot otherwise be asserted as existent but by an act of thought. As a reputed commentator of Collingwood noted, the Oxford don saw every act of consciousness as a creative act of the mind, in which the mind exercises some degree of choice and has some goal in view.

As an inheritor of a powerful British idealist tradition, Collingwood was accompanied in the twentieth century by important fellow thinkers such as Henry Jones, Clement Charles Julian Webb, Alfred Ernest Taylor, and Michael Foster. At present, writes Stephen Toulmin,

Collingwood’s philosophical arguments speak to us more directly and forcefully than they did to his
Oxford contemporaries. The “realist” positions put forward by John Cook Wilson at Oxford, Ernst Mach in Vienna, and G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell at Cambridge... turned the philosophical clock back before Kant, and revived the earlier traditions of British empiricism. Collingwood was one of the first philosophers in England to see that this could not be done.

In his Metaphysics, Collingwood brings an argument in favor of the historical perspective that aims at consolidating the project of revised metaphysics, which, in its turn, could consolidate (from transcendental-epistemological point of view) the project of revised history. According to Guido Vanhesvijck, this difficult task of rehabilitating metaphysics was directed mainly against A. J. Ayer’s devastating attack against it:

Ayer showed the impossibility of metaphysics by indicating that metaphysical propositions are neither empirically verifiable nor analytic. Collingwood reacts by giving a transcendental-epistemological justification of metaphysics... [arguing that] metaphysics—the study of being—is only possible as a description of absolute presuppositions that change historically.

Collingwood himself described the metaphysician’s business as “a kind of history [for] the propositions which he asserts are historical propositions describing what ‘we’ do in ‘our’ ordinary thinking: the method of verifying them is accordingly the historical method.”

Yet, “the question whether... a given proposition P is asserted or denied has nothing to do with the question whether it is true.”

Although historicity was considered by Collingwood a fundamental characteristic of the mind, its life, to him history is not the synonym of metaphysics but its method; even if metaphysics remains essentially the science of being, it is also the true science of becoming.

However, Collingwood was aware that unqualified realism is untenable; he rejected Kant’s attempt to ground metaphysics on an “ontology of appearances” and on the one and only transcendental subjectivity, for, to him, it seemed impossible to ground a universally valid knowledge only on the cognitive structure of the knowing subject. As a consequence, “the question which arises is... whether or not—from the assumption of that fragmented transcendental subjectivity—cognitive relativism will have the last word and eternal validity will have to be denied to philosophical questions.”

In relation to the question of truth, the “reformed” (that is, “historical”) metaphysician knows that the truth is not to be found on the empirical, verifiable level, nor on that of analysis of concepts. Only through description of historically changing absolute presuppositions can the mystery of reality be spoken of; in this, rationality shows both its possibilities, and its boundaries; for pure being cannot be studied independently of thinking. That was Collingwood’s objection against the commonsense realism. The metaphysician’s “truth” can be understood as an a priori idea or an abstract entity. As such, it “transcends every one of its temporary expressions, and does not exist by itself, but every historical expression realizes certain possibilities which inhere in it.”

The a priori idea of “truth” is for Collingwood metaphysical truth.

Collingwood attributes the same a priori character to the absolute presuppositions, indicating the existence of an a priori element in his historicism, which Leon Rubinoff characterizes as transcendent. Rubinoff compares Collingwood’s metaphysics to Husserl’s phenomenology and argues that both thinkers recognized the historicity of thought and both were attempting to unveil the transcendental structures of mind.

Along similar lines, Rescher stresses the active role of thinking:

Our [idealism] is a conceptual idealism in holding that nature, as we standardly conceive it, is conceived by us in terms of reference to the characteristically mental processes like imagining, supposing, and the like. On this view, what the mind “makes” is not nature itself, but the mode-and-manner-determining categories in terms of which we conceive it... The constitutive role of the
mind, therefore, is to be thought of in “neither ontological nor causal terms, but in conceptual ones.”

On the other hand, as Evandro Agazzi convincingly observed, idealism itself can become naïve when its correct claim that no discrepancy can be assumed between reality and thought is driven to the extreme of claiming total identity between them. Although opposed to commonsense realism, this naivety shares with its adversary a common root consisting in an “epistemological dualism” originating in modern philosophy. According to this view, what we know are our representations, our sensory impressions, our “ideas,” not the things as they are in themselves, so that we have to look both for a guarantee for the real existence of things and for their accurate representation performed at the level of our internal “ideas.” And, Agazzi concludes, the impossibility of solving this problem was clearly emphasized by Kant, who demonstrated that, in fact, “the problem is insoluble because it is a pseudo-problem. Of course, we have neither evidence, nor arguments for claiming that what we actually know are rather our ideas than the things in themselves within our ideas.”

Thus, this “fantasy”—in which things are conceived as situated “beyond” appearances and outside our thoughts—compelled philosophers who shared it, “to assume the impossible task of ‘reaching’ the things through surpassing the very limits of our thought. What Berkeley tried to do has been accomplished by the German classic transcendental Idealism—especially by Fichte and Hegel—and by the ‘absolute Idealism’ of Giovanni Gentile.” These efforts led to an ambivalent result: “on the one hand, they brilliantly managed to eliminate any kind of dualism or difference between reality and thought, and, on the other hand, they denied, in a reductionistic manner, any difference between reality and thought, reducing in fact all reality to thought.”

In his Inaugural Dissertation, Kant exhibits this progressive building of the critical idea that reaches a level comparable to that attained by the Critique of Pure Reason as regards the theory of sensibility; but, on the other hand, it leaves a number of dogmatic residues present in the theory of intellect which, in the context of his own approach—undertaken in “Lectures on the Ontological Proof of the Existence of God”—Collingwood signals. In this respect, Joseph Felser, an insightful analyst of Collingwood’s philosophy of religion, wrote:

[Kant’s failure to eliminate the] dogmatic residues . . . of Platonism [is determined by the fact that] he preserved features of the Platonic realism . . . asserting the objective reality not of concept but of the unknowable transcendental source of the sensory input: things-in-themselves, the noumenal realm.

Collingwood employs Kant’s “revised explanation of the nature of the mind”—especially its unity—and its implications in the “re-casting of religion,” and in a philosophical grounding of God’s immanence:

Kant . . . comes to the conclusion that . . . the Platonic theory . . . could not explain the objective realities which it postulated: it merely told you that they were there. It could not explain how you came to know them: it merely said that you always had known them. But this dogmatic treatment of the problems was no solution. . . . Kant conceived the idea of interconnecting the objects of a priori knowledge into an organized whole, each member accounted for and deduced from the others: and further, in order to show how mind could know them all, he proposed to show that they were nothing more nor less than the expression of the mind’s own nature. The things about which we have a priori knowledge are thus . . . simply the ways in which the mind itself exists and works. If therefore God is pre-eminently subjective—not a thing existing independently of our own mind, but the organization of that mind itself . . . [which, according to Kant] is not your mind or my mind, but always the mind in general, of which the so-called individual mind is only an arbitrary separated fragment. Consequently Kant’s God is not to be equated with the empirical individual: you or me . . . but with mind in general.
What also appears as relevant with respect to the context of Kant’s influence upon Collingwood’s conceptual-idealistic interpretation of religious experience and its relation with philosophical knowledge—as self-knowledge of the mind—that is, the relation between theistic transcendentalism and philosophical immanentism—is the Kantian analysis of the relation between criticism and metaphysics. As Collingwood himself put it, all his effort to articulate the old Platonic transcendentalism with immanentism—as the distinctive sign of the critical and anti-“realist” tendencies of modern philosophy—is aimed at settling the foundation of a new, and more comprehensive, theology which should reunite the two unilateral perspectives, thus making them complete each other; for “the real nature of God is no nearer to transcendence alone than it is to immanence alone.”

In a number of his writings, Kant seems to identify metaphysics with criticism itself. This idea essentially is echoed by Collingwood’s assertion that philosophy is not only the critical attitude in general, but criticism specifically directed inward; self-criticism is the mark of rationality. “It is true,” the English philosopher writes, “that philosophy does not arise in vacuo: but its relation to its presuppositions is not dogmatic, but critical.” In its turn, science as knowledge of the parts is grounded on a priori principles, that is, on presuppositions which implicitly assume the unity of the world (and hence, of the mind).

According to the Oxford don, Kant did not regard God as an object of knowledge because God cannot be circumscribed to the a priori forms of sensibility and thus cannot be subsumed under an organizing concept, which means that he cannot be properly, that is, “scientifically,” known. And given that, by (his theistic) definition, God exists outside the horizon of the a priori forms of sensibility, namely, space and time, no concept derived from our phenomenal experience is applicable to him, and therefore God thus conceived should necessarily belong to the realm of the unknown and unknowable—in terms of Wissenschaft, as conceived by Kant—noumena. And, precisely because of their agnostic consequences, Collingwood interprets these accounts as indirectly suggesting that for Kant, “the God whose existence we can prove is God immanent in the world of our experience, not a [wholly] transcendent God standing out of all possible relation to human life.”

This implication of Kant’s analysis of knowledge represents a precious opening towards [the necessity of] regard[ing] . . . God as the absolute spiritual reality not outside nor yet behind, but rather in and of the phenomenal world. So the existence of God became equivalent no longer to the empirical reality of a certain person different from you and me, and called God, but to the unity, signifi-
cance, and spirituality of the universe.”

Furthermore, in consonance with Kant’s account on the relation between common knowledge and philosophical knowledge (that is, criticism), Collingwood suggests that, however precarious its theoretical knowledge would be, religious consciousness contains in nuce all basic truths required by human science and practice. This does not mean that it possesses an explicit knowledge of these indispensable principles. That is why philosophical research—designed to explicate what the religious consciousness owns only implicitly—is necessary. Basically, philosophy does not offer religious consciousness something new, brought from without, but only reveals, in a Socratic manner, its own content, its own principles. Therefore, the aims of critical philosophy are rather hermeneutic and explanatory than dogmatic-prescriptive: it interprets and explains the implications of human faith, but does not claim to offer grounding or a behavioral regulator for religious life. Philosophy investigates the possibility of religious grounds, that is, the a priori conditions they depend upon. To this extent, despite all particularities mentioned above, when applied to religious consciousness philosophy preserves its distinctive character, as critical philosophy. As far as we are concerned, these accounts
are—mutatis mutandis, of course—quite similar to those made by Kant with respect to the relation between philosophy and morality. In his Essay on Metaphysics, Collingwood applies these principles to his theory of absolute presuppositions:

[Metaphysics] arises out of the mere pursuit of knowledge. That pursuit, which we call science, is an attempt to think in a systematic and orderly manner. This involves disentangling the presuppositions which neither stand in need of justification nor can in fact be justified; and a person who made this discovery is already a metaphysician.  

A civilization, wrote Collingwood in the same work, is based upon the predominance of the belief that truth is the ultimate aim and that, as a result, systematic thinking, both theoretical and practical, is considered as the most valuable asset. In accordance with this belief in truth, religion is seen as a devotional pursuit towards truth, in which God is considered as the truth itself and the believer as a searcher for truth.

In its turn, Kant’s Critique of Judgment proposes a certain solution to the basic problem of the relation between the ontological order of the world and the axiological order, basically moral—which for Kant means practical—of our own life. Kant seems to have significantly helped Collingwood in arguing that mind’s awareness of God cannot be understood if it is not regarded as a function of the whole mind or when it is abstracted from the individual’s practical relationship to the object of his attention: “for it is in this context that the awareness of the object originally and typically arises. . . . [Thus,] the intellectual element is inextricably embedded within, and must therefore be regarded as a function of, praxis.”

According to Collingwood, Kant’s realism and his conception of transcendence was even more radical than Plato’s; for whereas Plato had arbitrarily postulated the reality of unknowable entities (with which human minds are, at some point, directly acquainted) in order to explain our knowledge of appearances, Kant postulated the reality of unknowable transcendental objects in order to do the same. But this doesn’t mean that Kant didn’t play a crucial role in the construction of a less contradictory Weltanschauung embedded in religion; moreover, in Collingwood’s view, the only way out from the “common-sense realism” presupposed by the theistic consciousness is “the idealistic conception of the world which was at best adumbrated by Kant and Hegel.”

According to the Oxford don, Kant did not regard God as an object of knowledge because God cannot be circumscribed to the a priori forms of sensibility and thus cannot be subsumed under an organizing concept, which means that he cannot be properly, that is, “scientifically,” known. He drew a parallel between God and Kant’s noumen:

Kant never for a moment thought that the thing in itself was unknowable in the sense in which his critics understand this statement. The words wissen, Wissenschaft in Kant have the same kind of special or restricted significance that the word “science” has in ordinary modern English. Science is not the same as knowledge in general; it is a special kind or form of knowledge whose proper object is nature. . . . Kant has not given us a theory of knowledge in the modern sense of the term . . . and when he said that we could think the thing in itself though we could not know it, he meant that we had knowledge of it but not scientific knowledge.  

According to Collingwood, there are two “sides” of interpreters who more or less deliberately ignore either the first “half” of the picture, or the second. One of the sides is that of the theologians, whose error consists in their exclusive emphasis on God’s transcendence and in their “tendency . . . to forget the immanent aspect of God’s nature;” the other side is that of the modern philosophers, whose “God” is mistakenly claimed as having nothing to do with the “God of Abraham” but being immanently grounded in the conscious recognition of God as a symbol for the unity of the mind. This does not mean, says Collingwood, that
modern philosophy is . . . irreligious or un-Christian; for it is engaged in expressing a side of Christianity which received too little attention for the first eighteen or nineteen centuries. . . . That it is not recognized as religious . . . can only be . . . the consequence of the fact that the Platonist transcendence in Christianity has begun to warp it away from its own immanentism.

What is mostly needed, for the sake of Christian religion, is not its suppression by this philosophy, but its accordance with the philosophical image of a God conceived as the unity, significance, and spirituality of the Universe; for

the God of Christianity is the absolute, perfect creative spirit: only to be properly conceived under both the categories of transcendence—invoking personality and separation from the world—and immanence—invoking self-expression and spiritual life in the world’s actual phenomenal history: the synthesis of these two categories being effected in the doctrine of incarnation. Already it was remarked by Augustine that the doctrine of God transcendent was Platonic, but that the conception of God incarnate was found nowhere but in Christianity.

At this point, one may say that the Christian synthesis attained through the doctrine of incarnation is at bottom (even if only for a minority of genuinely religious people) a matter of revelation and can ignore all philosophical legitimating pursuits. This would be considered by Collingwood a mistake; and what he presumably learns from Kant with respect to this particular matter is, according to Joseph Felser, precisely that one cannot talk about revelation apart from the act of receiving—that is, hearing and encountering—and that whatever is revealed is essentially molded by the receiving medium, and cannot be characterized apart from such subjective factors as the beliefs, desires, prejudices, problems, language, etc. of the recipients.

In Collingwood’s view, the Kantian revision of knowledge based on the distinction between the a priori and empirical forms of knowledge, still impregnated with “common-sense realism” was substantially corrected by Hegel. Hegel denied this distinction and identified the “nature” of mind with the process of its historical development under the form given by the transformation exercised by the progressive self-consciousness of mind upon the forms and content of its experience. As regards the consequences of this general view for religion, Hegel’s claim that der absolute Geist “makes its own nature” by subjectively realizing itself implies, according to Collingwood, that “God, who is in fact nothing but the nature of mind] is thus conceived as immanent in the world of phenomena.” In other words, if viewed exclusively from the perspective suggested by these philosophers “God” turns out to be a figurative way of expressing the philosophical principle of the unity of the mind. And since the rejection of the “common-sense realism” requires the abolition of the ontological distinction between thought and object, that is, between mind and world, it follows that, with the help of Hegel, the “God of the Philosophers” will represent only the symbol for the rational intelligibility, or unity, of the world.

Following Hegel, Collingwood denied the necessity to thought, claimed by Kant, of postulating the existence of an unknowable noumenal realm or transcendental object. Similarly, Hegel has rejected the separateness of the Christian God postulated by most of the Christian theologians, who mistakenly conceive him only as an “objective God, remaining absolutely separate from the subjective consciousness and thus being an external object, just like the sun, the sky, etc.,” an object of consciousness, possessing the permanent characteristic of being something else, something external. In opposition to this perspective, “the concept of the absolute religion” can be stated in such a way that what really matters “is not this external [object], but religion itself, that is, the unity of this representation which we call God, with the subject.”

The role of these ideas in determining Collingwood’s resorting to philosophical immanentism is obvious, and I will not appeal
to new quotations from his writings as examples. But he was also committed to a Christianity which already in “Lectures on the Ontological Proof of the Existence of God” takes the form of his own interpretation of the Christian doctrine, even though the Hegelian pattern appears to be the only source for his “trinitary” interpretation of the history of mind:

The name God ought never to have been usurped for the purely transcendent deity or absolute pre-Kantian thought. At worst, the metaphysic of the pre-Kantian age deserved the appellation De Patre: and by the same title the post-Kantian metaphysics ought to be called De Spiritu Sancto. The synthesis of these into a metaphysic De Filio is still in the future.42

In conclusion, the most faithful and efficient means towards this end is the “new conceptual idealism,” that was best “adumbrated by Kant and Hegel,” and whose aim the unveiling of ultimate truth has, pace Collingwood, never been fully worked out by the inquiring mind and will never be. Along similar lines, Rescher sees the constitutive role of the mind as having to be thought of in “neither ontological nor causal terms, but in conceptual ones.”43

Truth is something that we can legitimately assume ourselves to be articulating in part but which inevitably eludes us as a whole and towards which, therefore, we need to understand ourselves as being orientated in the mode of aspiration rather than possession. The conceptual idealist’s pursuit is an assumed recursive, expansive, self-critical engagement with the challenge of fresh understanding. But the truth he is perpetually aiming at, writes Collingwood, is the content of an a priori idea, an “abstract identity”44 which transcends all its temporary expressions, and does not exist by itself, but in its partial embodiments in historical (i.e., contextual), theoretical, and practical “descriptions” ultimately resulted from mental conceptualizing and signifying operations.

NOTES

8. Ibid., xiv.
11. Ibid., 43.
13. Cf. Lobonț, Nouă metafizică engleză, 137.
15. Ibid., iv.
16. Ibid., vii–viii.
17. Ibid., vii.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 27, italics added.
27. Ibid., 69.
28. Ibid., 78, italics added.
30. Ibid., 133.
35. Ibid., 27.
36. Ibid., 25.
40. Hegel, Prelegeri de filozofie a religiei, 407.
41. Ibid.
43. Rescher, Conceptual Idealism, 3, 97.