

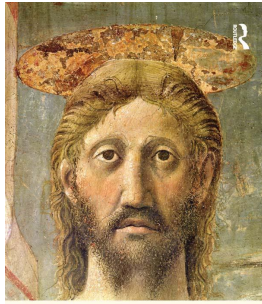
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18

NICHOLAS OF CUSA

Jasper Hopkins

The German prelate Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) belonged to a period of history that was rife with transitional cross-currents. Some scholars, such as C. Warren Hollister, call this period the Late Middle Ages; others, such as Paul O. Kristeller, refer to it simply as the Renaissance.¹ Furthermore, some intellectual historians who take soundings in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries claim to descry ripples of modern scientific enquiry as these issue forth from Theodoric of Freiburg's experiment of 1304, when, using glass balls, he ascertained that a rainbow results from light's passing through a medium whereby it is both reflected and refracted. And these same historians point to William Ockham's philosophical nominalism and to his doubts about the validity of natural theology. By contrast, other intellectual historians choose to emphasize the continuity of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with the past, as instanced by the unceasing ecclesiastical disputes and by the ongoing vigorous reactions to the incursions of Islam into the West. Nicholas himself is caught up in these historical cross-currents: in the flow towards modernity and towards new ways of conceptualizing, as well as in the ebb towards the past and towards traditional patterns of thought. While functioning in the Church as papal legate to Germany and as Bishop of Brixen in South Tyrol and as cardinal of St Peter in Chains in Rome, Nicholas nonetheless: (i) incorporated into his academic formation a time of study with the Italian Humanists in Padua (under whom he increased his knowledge of mathematics, astronomy and literature); (ii) journeyed to Constantinople with a Conciliar delegation (where he observed Islam at first-hand); (iii) wrote the dialogue *De staticis experimentis* (On experiments done with weight-scales); and (iv) espoused certain themes that

1. Primarily for heuristic reasons Hollister (1982) uses the following dates: 500–1050, Early Middle Ages; 1050–1300, High Middle Ages; 1300–1500, Late Middle Ages. Kristeller (1972: 110–55, esp. 111, 113) periodizes as follows: 500–1300/1350, Middle Ages; 1300/1350–1600, Renaissance.

are proleptic of later, more systematic philosophical frameworks (so that Ernst Cassirer labels him “the First Modern Thinker” [1927: 10]).

NO COMPARISON

One of the tenets that have been supposed to contribute to identifying Nicholas as a modern thinker is his strict adherence to the slogan ‘*Nulla proportio finiti ad infinitum est*’ (There is no comparative relation of the finite to the infinite). By accentuating this theme – by making it a keystone of his philosophy of religion – Nicholas insists that the human mind has no knowledge, other than metaphorical, of *what* God is. For the infinite God is not like anything that a finite mind can either perceive or imagine or conceive. So although a theist rightly confesses that God *exists* and is *one* and is *good*, still it is no less true that God is neither existent nor unitary nor good in any way that resembles either our knowledge or our conceptualization of these properties. Thus, to say that God is good (Matthew 19:17) has the same cognitive status as to say that God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29; Deuteronomy 4:24): that is, each of these statements is symbolical, or figurative. For we cannot know what God is, or is like, in and of himself. But we can and should, continues Nicholas, symbolize him in accordance with what we know to be perfections and in accordance with the teaching of Jesus, who spoke of God the Father as good, as perfect, as loving (Matthew 19:16, 5:48; John 14:21). So, as infinite, God is incomprehensible and beyond all description and attribution: even when we state that he is the creator of the world or the cause of the world, he is not creator or cause in any sense in which we either do understand, or can understand, the meaning of these words. Here Nicholas, by endorsing the *via negativa*, aligns himself with a tradition that runs through such diverse thinkers as Pseudo-Dionysius (see Vol. 1, Ch. 20) and Moses Maimonides, both of whom Nicholas mentions. In accordance with this tradition, we can rightly conceive only of what God is *not*: God is not *cause*, not *creator*, not *good*, not *existent*, not *being*, etc. But at this point Nicholas cautions us. For although God is not being, he is also not not-being; and although he is not good, he is also not not-good. He is beyond the entire distinction between being and not-being, between good and not-good and so on (*De Deo abscondito* [On the hidden God] 9, *De possest* [On actualized-possibility] 25).²

2. All references to Cusa’s texts (except for his sermons) are in terms of my translations and divisions in Nicholas of Cusa (2001). By permission of Arthur J. Banning Press these translations also now appear online at www.cla.umn.edu/jhopkins/ (accessed May 2009). References to the sermons are to vols XVII–XIX of the Latin texts in Nicholas of Cusa (1983–2007). Besides being influenced by the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, Nicholas is influenced by that of Eriugena. But whereas Eriugena (*De divisione naturae* [On the division of nature] II; *Patrologia Latina* [hereafter *PL*] 122:589B–C) states that God

Thus, Nicholas rejects Aquinas' claim that we have some imperfect, *analogical* knowledge of God: Aquinas' claim that there is some real resemblance between God and his creation, that there is some real (i.e. non-metaphorical) resemblance between, say, the human mind and the divine mind. Indeed, on Nicholas' view even a human person's rational-moral nature, in terms of which humanity is made in the image of God, does not constitute a real likeness. In this respect, then, Nicholas repudiates Aquinas' distinction between *proportio* (proportion, comparative relation) and *proportionalitas* (proportionality), a distinction that allows Aquinas to accept the slogan '*nulla proportio ...*' but without his altogether excluding analogical predication. As an example of a proportionality (which, as Aquinas says, is a similarity between proportions) he gives the following: the numbers six and eight are *proportionate* to each other in so far as each is a double. For just as six is the double of three, so eight is the double of four (Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de veritate* [A controversial issue concerning truth], q. 2, a. 3, r. 4). Thus, six is to three as eight is to four. Another example – one that we may borrow from Nietzsche (*see* Vol. 4, Ch. 18) – also illustrates a proportionality: as today's man is to the ape, so the superman (*Übermensch*), when he comes, will be to today's man. If we extend this proportionality, and place it, as extended, into a theistic context, we might say along Thomistic lines: as the superman's intelligence would be to man's, so is God's intelligence to the superman's. In any event, Nicholas, unlike Aquinas, denies that any kind of proportionality will yield an acceptable analogy between humanity and God. For as God infinitely exceeds all proportion, so he also infinitely exceeds all proportionality: exceeds, that is, all similarity between proportions. And, thus, as concerns *what* God is, Nicholas is content to embrace agnosticism.

LEARNED IGNORANCE

The foregoing agnosticism is accompanied by our knowledge that we are, and must be, ignorant of God's nature. This awareness of a knowledge that we do not have, and cannot have, is called by Nicholas 'learned ignorance' (*docta ignorantia*), where the word 'learned' indicates, primarily, that we have come to be instructed – by individuals such as Cusanus, Maimonides and Pseudo-Dionysius – that God

is unknown even to himself, Nicholas (*De docta ignorantia* [On learned ignorance] I, 26 (88)) maintains that God is known only to himself. More specifically: whereas Eriugena states (*PL* 122:590D) that God knows himself but does not know or understand *what* he is (because he is beyond *essence* and is not *something*), Nicholas emphasizes that God *understands* himself (*De principio* [On the beginning] 9, *Cribratio Alkorani* [A scrutiny of the Qu'ran] II, 6 (102)), is the Essence of essences (*De docta ignorantia* I, 17) – indeed, *is* his own quiddity, which is his knowledge (Sermon CCLVIII (14)) – and is the "definition" of himself *qua* Not-other (*De li non aliud* [On not-other] 18). See Beierwaltes (1987).

is unknowable, because he is infinite. Yet, in a secondary sense, the meaning of the word 'learned' is also to be construed in accordance with the meaning that is associated with the pronunciation 'learn-ed', where this pronunciation conveys the idea of erudition. Still, *docta ignorantia* is not an inflated erudition but is the kind of humble erudition characteristic of Socrates, who deemed himself to be wiser than others simply because he *knew that he was ignorant*, whereas others were pompously unaware of their own state of unknowing. Like Socrates, but in a theological context, Nicholas wants to say that someone who knows that he is ignorant of what God is is wiser, more learn-ed, than are others who do not have this knowledge.³

One of Nicholas' favourite metaphors for God is that of 'Light': God is inaccessible light, as the Scriptures say (1 Timothy 6:16). Nicholas compares that divine light to the light of the sun:

When our eye seeks to see the sun's light, which is the sun's face, it first looks at it in a veiled manner in the stars and in colors and in all participants in the sun's light. But when our eye strives to view the sun's light in an unveiled manner, it passes beyond all visible light, because all such light is less than the light it seeks. But since it seeks to see a light which it cannot see, it knows that as long as it sees something, this is not the thing it is seeking. Therefore, it must pass beyond all visible light. So if one has to pass beyond all light, the place into which he enters will have to be devoid of visible light; and so, for the eye, it will be darkness. Now, while he is amid that darkness, which is an obscuring mist: if he knows that he is within an obscuring mist, he knows that he has approached unto the face of the sun. For that obscuring mist arises in his eye as a result of the excellence of the light of the sun. Therefore, the more dense he knows the obscuring mist to be, the more truly he attains, within that mist, unto the invisible light.

I see, O Lord, that in this way and in no other the inaccessible light and beauty and splendor of Your Face can be approached unveiledly.

(De visione Dei [On the vision of God] 6 (22))

In propounding the doctrine of learned ignorance, then, Nicholas is endorsing a form of agnosticism that informs us of our necessary ignorance of God's nature as it is in and of itself. Even in the next life the redeemed shall have no such conceptual knowledge, he teaches. Nor do angels ever have it. For God is knowable only to himself. Yet, Nicholas' agnosticism concerns only God's nature, not God's existence. For one can know with reasonable certainty, thinks Nicholas,

3. With regard to Nicholas' use of '*docta*' in the sense of 'learn-ed', see *De possess* 41 and *Compendium* 1 (4) and 6 (18).

that God, who is the infinite source and sustainer of all things, exists. Nicholas offers no proofs, in the rigorous sense of 'proof'. Instead, he advances various sets of informal considerations that he regards as weighty enough to make it more reasonable to conclude that God exists than to judge otherwise (*De principio* 29). One such set of considerations, borrowed from Proclus, proceeds along the following lines:

If there were many beginnings, assuredly they would be alike in this one respect, viz., that they would be *beginnings*. Therefore, they would partake of the One. But, surely, that which is partaken of is prior to its participants. Therefore, there are not many beginnings but there is a single Beginning, prior to multitude. But if you were to say that the beginnings are plural apart from their partaking of the One, that statement would self-destruct. For, surely, these plural beginnings would be both *alike*, by virtue of their not partaking of the One, and *not alike*, by virtue of their not partaking of the One. (*De principio* 6)

In the foregoing reasoning Nicholas relies on a Neoplatonic framework, with its accompanying notion of participation. A cognate set of considerations is found in his dialogue *De genesi* (On the genesis [of all things]):

Nicholas: When we say that what is different is different, we affirm that what is different is the same as itself. For what is different can be different only through the Absolute Same, through which all that is is both the same as itself and other than another. But whatever is the same as itself and other than another is not the Absolute Same, which is neither the same as another nor different from another. For how could it befit the Absolute Same to be the same as another? Nor is [the Absolute Same] different. For how could difference befit the Absolute Same, which precedes all difference and otherness?

Conrad: I understand you to mean (1) that of all beings there is not one that is not the same as itself and other than another and (2) that, hence, the Absolute Same is no such being, although the Absolute Same is not *different* from anything that is both the same as itself and different from another.

Nicholas: You are conceiving correctly. For it is not the case that the Absolute Same, which we also call God, is numerable with anything else ... (*De genesi* I (146–7))

Here, again, Nicholas' reasoning occurs within a Neoplatonic metaphysical framework and is largely *a priori*. Instances of such *a priori* inferences of God's existence are to be found throughout his works: from the fact that there are *possible* occurrences, he infers that there is absolute possibility (*De apice theoriae*

[Concerning the loftiest level of contemplative reflection] 12–13), which he identifies with God; from the fact that there are truths, he infers that there is truth (Sermon CCIV (3)), which he identifies with God; from the fact that all that is seen is such as not to be the cause of itself, he infers that there must be something self-existent, which he identifies with God (*De possess* 3); and so on. But perhaps the best example of his *a priori* Neoplatonic reasoning about the existence of God (and about the symbolisms relevant to God's nature) has to do with his presupposition about *presupposition!* That is, he presupposes that “every question about God presupposes what is being asked about” (*De sapientia* [On wisdom] II (29)).

So when you are asked whether God exists, reply by stating what is presupposed, viz., that He exists, for *being* is presupposed by the question. Likewise, if someone asks what God is, then since this question presupposes that there is quiddity, you will reply that God is Absolute Quiddity. A similar point holds true in all cases. And there is no doubt about this point. For God is the Absolute Presupposition of all things that are in any way presupposed – even as in the case of every effect a cause is presupposed. (*De sapientia* II (30))⁴

But even when Nicholas elsewhere seeks to make *empirical*, rather than *a priori*, inferences to God's existence, he does so informally. It is obvious, for example, that he considers the world to show evidence of orderliness and teleology: traces that he regards as warranting the inference of a divine craftsman (*Apologia doctae ignorantiae* [A defence of learned ignorance; hereafter *Apologia*] 19). However, in spite of his alluding to this line of thinking, he nowhere develops it systematically.

Still, there is a difference between Nicholas' reasoning about God's existence and his reasoning about God's nature. With respect to the former, he uses expressions such as “there is no doubt that ...”. But with respect to the latter he indicates that he is *surmising*. Indeed, much of his tractate *De coniecturis* (On surmises) deals with his surmises about God's nature: surmises that make use of symbolical illustrations, some of which are mathematical. In these surmisings Nicholas seeks “to comprehend the Incomprehensible” (*De sapientia* I (11)). In other words, he seeks to discern more readily the fact of God's incomprehensibility and to rejoice in this fact. For just as one who finds a treasure so vast as to be uncountable rejoices more than does one who finds a countable treasure, so Nicholas rejoices over the fact that the God whom he has found is something that is greater than can be conceived. And he takes comfort in paradox: “The better we grasp the Inaccessible's greater distance from us, the closer we come to [this] Inaccessibility” (*Apologia* 13).

4. See also Nicholas of Cusa (2000: 52–60).

COINCIDENCE OF OPPOSITES

All of the foregoing points about learned ignorance are re-expressed by Nicholas when he enfolds them into the meaning of the phrase '*coincidentia oppositorum*'; for God is, as he says, the coincidence of opposites. In places, he refers to God as *beyond* the coincidence of opposites. But this latter wording is intended to signify no more than does the former wording: namely, that God incomprehensibly transcends every distinction between *this* and *that*, every differentiation into *this* or *that*. For God is altogether undifferentiated into one thing or another. He is not a being; we may symbolize him as Being itself, as the power that creates all beings and that sustains them in existence for as long as they exist. Learned ignorance has shown us that God escapes all properties, all determination. He is not *other* than any finite thing, since he does not enter into the domain of comparison with finite things. Hence, we may symbolically name him 'Not-Other'.

To illustrate the Plotinian point about God's (the One's) being beyond being (and beyond not-being), Nicholas describes a scenario that could not actually occur but that nonetheless can to some extent be envisaged. We are familiar, he supposes, with the fact that a top that spins very fast *appears to be* at rest. If the top were spinning at infinite speed, he tells us, it would *actually be* at rest. For at infinite speed any given point on it would come full circle instantaneously, that is, with no intervening interval of time. So the top would be both in motion and at rest. In applying the illustration, he tells us that contradictory predicates can figuratively be ascribed to God. For example, we may say that "the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth" (2 Chronicles 16:9); and we may equally well say "Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Or we may say that God is light in whom there is no darkness (1 John 1:5); but we may also say that he has "made darkness His secret place" (Psalms 18:11).

The doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum* teaches that in God all things are God; but it also teaches that in all things God is all things (without being any of these things). Nicholas once again resorts to illustrations in order to elucidate these tenets. God is in all things as an original is in the mirror-images of itself; yet, God is not any of these things, even as the original is not a mirror-image. All things are in God as an effect is in its cause; yet, in God these things *are* God, even as in its cause an effect *is* the cause. What Nicholas never asserts, unqualifiedly, is that God is all things. For to say that *in all things God is all things* is not the same as saying, simply, *God is all things*. Because many interpreters have not noticed that Nicholas distinguishes these two statements, they have sometimes wrongly identified him as a pantheist or, at least, as someone displaying pantheistic tendencies. However, no interpretation could be farther from the truth, for Nicholas makes it abundantly clear that (on his view) God alone is uncontracted (i.e. unrestricted, undelimited, undifferentiated, absolute), whereas all else is contracted (*De docta ignorantia* II, 9 (148 & 150)); indeed, the universe "falls short of eternity, as what is contracted falls short of what is absolute – the two being infinitely different"

(*De docta ignorantia* II, 8 (140)). So when Nicholas writes that God's being "is the complete being of all the things which either are or in any way can be" (*De possest* 67), and reiterates that the creator is all the things "which are possible to be" (*De possest* 73; cf. *De docta ignorantia* I, 5 (14)), he means that in God all things are God and that, similarly, in all things God is present as Sustainer,⁵ so that if God did not exist, finite beings would not exist (*De docta ignorantia* II, 3 (110)).

DESIRE FOR GOD⁶

Human beings, claims Nicholas, have an innate tendency towards seeking God. This tendency is encrypted into the rational image of God in humanity. Thus, a human being's desire for the good is, ultimately, a desire for God, who is the Good. "Although [each being] cannot comprehend That-which-it-desires-so-ardently, nevertheless it is not totally ignorant of it but knows most certainly that That-which-it-desires exists" (*De principio* 29). As Nicholas elsewhere writes: "You are Infinity itself, which alone I desire in every desire" (*De visione Dei* 16 (73)). The human heart, Nicholas instructs us, is restless, its hunger unsatisfied, until it finds repose and fullness in God (although, in its fullness, its desire for God does not cease but, rather, is intensified) (4 (13)). This Augustinian theme accords with Nicholas' further claim that no one can know himself unless he knows his cause, so that human self-knowledge depends on obtaining, through faith and commitment, a relationship of acquaintance with God. Not only does the human mind have an inborn tendency to seek God: it also has an innate *vis iudiciaria* – an innate power of rational judgement – that allows it to recognize the necessity of necessary truths and to discern the soundness of such moral maxims as the precept expressed by the Golden Rule. Each human being, by virtue of his or her rationality, has a concreated, inchoate sense of fairness that becomes more and more refined in the course of experience. At birth the mind has no concepts, not even the concept of God. But as human rationality develops and unfolds, through experience and growth, the innate power of judgement is stimulated to form *a priori* concepts such as the concept of number, the concept of fairness, the concepts of God, of good, of equality (*Compendium* 6 (17), 10 (34)).⁷ Hence, Nicholas does not hesitate to use the expression '*logica connata*' (concreated power

5. In the sun God is not the sun, and in the moon God is not the moon; rather, in them "He is that which is sun and moon without plurality and difference" (*De docta ignorantia* II, 4 (115)).

6. For this expression, see *De mente* (On mind) 15 (159).

7. Cf.: "The divine commandments are very terse and very well known to everyone and are common to all nations. Indeed, the light that shows us these commandments is created together with the rational soul." (*De pace fidei* 16 (59)).

of logic), thereby designating the tool by which philosophers (and others) pursue wisdom (*De venatione sapientiae* [On the pursuit of wisdom] 1 (5)).

ONE RELIGION

Partly on the basis of the presumed fact that each individual has a concreated tendency to seek God, so that *homo* is likewise *homo religiosus* (Sermon IV (6)), Nicholas pursues the question of whether there might be a set of religious beliefs to which individuals from different nations and traditions could be persuaded to subscribe, so that religious wars, hatreds and crusades would cease. In short, could there be *religio una in rituum varietate*: one religion amid a variety of rites? In *De pace fidei* (On peaceful unity of faith) he sets out to show how it is that Christianity is just such a religion; and he proceeds to furnish a series of rationales that he supposes will serve to persuade peoples from other nations that Christianity is compatible with – even inferable from – the basic beliefs that they already hold.

Let us take a single example of Nicholas' rationales: the example of how, presumably, it would be possible to persuade Jews and Muslims of the truth of God's triunity. At first glance, Nicholas' task seems to be not only formidable but also impossible. For no doctrine seems to be more at odds with these two religious traditions than is the Christian teaching that God is triune. Yet, Nicholas' account of learned ignorance and of the coincidence of opposites in God provides the needed opening. For as infinite, he says, God is "neither triune nor one nor any of those things that can be spoken of" (*De pace fidei* 7 (21)). Or, as he restates his point elsewhere: "Infinite goodness is not goodness but is Infinity. Infinite quantity is not quantity but is Infinity. And so on" (*De visione Dei* 13 (58)). So since Jews and Muslims do not disagree that God is infinite and is Infinity, they confess with Christians that God is not of a plural *nature*. And from this profession, thinks Nicholas, they can be led to see that in God threeness and oneness coincide, so that God is beyond any such *numerical* distinction. Nicholas next proceeds to the step of maintaining that God is *non-numerically* three and *non-numerically* one (*De visione Dei* 17 (77–8); *De pace fidei* 8 (23)), so that the ordinary concept of God's Oneness is infinitely distant from the true name of God (*De docta ignorantia* I, 24 (77)), who is ineffable. For in God plurality coincides with singularity, as could not happen if the plurality were numerical. Even Augustine, observes Nicholas, recognized that when you begin to number the Trinity, you depart from the truth (I, 19 (57)).⁸ And Nicholas is certainly aware of the fact that Plato distinguished Ideal numbers from arithmetical numbers, the former not being numerical (see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* M.6, M.8).

8. Augustine makes this point generally throughout his *De Trinitate* (On the Trinity).

So although in and of himself – as Infinity – God is not Father or Son or Holy Spirit, we may legitimately symbolize him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (*De docta ignorantia* I, 26 (87)). And this symbolism – once rightly understood to be a symbolism – will not scandalize either Jews or Muslims. Indeed, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah conveys to us God’s words: “Shall not I that make others to bring forth children, myself bring forth?” (Isaiah 66:9, Douay translation). So divine begottenness and sonship are not notions inherently foreign to Judaism. Similarly, Muslims speak of God’s having a word and a soul. But, notes Nicholas, whatever God *has* he *is*. So Muslims, too, speak of God in plural ways and do not deny non-numerical fecundity to be present in God. Thus, the one God’s trinity may be spoken of in various ways. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is Oneness, Equality-of-Oneness and the Union of Oneness and Equality-of-Oneness. He is Loving Love, Lovable Love and the Union of Loving Love and Lovable Love. He is the Absolute Possibility-of-being-made, the Absolute Power-to-make and the Absolute Union of both. And so on. (See Hopkins 2003.)

UNION WITH GOD

Even if God cannot be cognized, he can be encountered: encountered mystically. The force of the word ‘mystical’ usually serves to indicate that the divine–human encounter takes place beyond the senses, the imagination, the intellect, so that the one who encounters God is at that moment no longer conscious of himself as a self, is no longer even forming a concept of God. But unlike Pseudo-Dionysius and Hugh of Balma before him (see Hopkins 2002), Nicholas does not allow that the mystical approach to God is one that occurs blindly, so to speak, and beyond all conceptualization, be it only a conceptual befigurement. Nicholas himself sought to have a mystical encounter with God; but it was not granted to him, he confides (*De visione dei* 17 (80)). Still, as he theorizes about such an encounter, he supposes that during its occurrence one will experience rapture, together with a sense of being enveloped by love, and that one will be aware that he is encountering God. Nicholas steers clear both of Meister Eckhart’s assertion that in the mystical union the believer is “transubstantiated into God” and of Balma’s assertion that the mystic is “transformed into God”. For these notions are incompatible with Nicholas’ claim that *in unione mystica* the believer can and does cognitively distinguish himself from God.

Different from mystical union is the phenomenon that Nicholas refers to as deification (*deificatio*, *theosis*) or as sonship (*filiatio*). This notion derives from John 1:12: “But as many as received Him [i.e. Christ], to them gave He the power to become sons of God, even to them that believe on His name”. The idea here is that each believer in God becomes a son of God, even as Christ is *the* Son of God. Sonship begins in this lifetime with one’s conversion; but it becomes perfected only in the next lifetime. Nicholas’ use of the term ‘deification’ can be misleading,

as can his use of the term ‘absorbed’ in *De docta ignorantia*: “Be aware that as someone’s flesh is progressively and gradually mortified by faith, he progressively ascends to oneness with Christ, so that he is *absorbed into Christ* by a deep union – to the extent that this is possible on [this pilgrim’s] pathway” (III, 11 (252); emphasis added). Now, the absorption and deification here being spoken of are absorption and transformation not into *Christ* but into *Christ’s image* (III, 11 (253)). Such transformation is progressive, and it constitutes a *perfecting* of human nature rather than a *replacing* of human nature by the divine nature. Whereas if one experiences mystical union, he experiences it in this present lifetime, the perfection of sonship is found only in the future life. This perfection is an intellectual perfection in which God, although not attained as he is, nevertheless will be

seen, in the pureness of our intellectual spirit, without any bedarkening sensory image. And this vision is clear to the intellect and is ‘Face-to-face’. Since this mode of the manifestation of Absolute Truth is the ultimate, vital happiness of an intellect that is thus enjoying Truth, it is God, without whom the intellect cannot be happy.

(De filiatione Dei [On being a son of God] III (62))

So in himself God is not knowable by us; rather, we know only a participated mode of God, who himself is above all mode. In the perfection of sonship a believer’s intellect knows – both about God and about all things – as much as *it* can know, given that not all human intellects have the same range of knowledge. In sonship’s future state of perfection the intellect (says Nicholas) *is* in a certain sense God; for it will then have become transformed perfectly into God’s image.

FAITH AND REASON

Strong Cusan statements that de-emphasize the role of reason

Nicholas sometimes so accentuates the notion of faith that his doing so tends to downplay the role of reason. A prime example of this fact is found in his Sermon CCLXVIII (18), where he speaks of faith as vanquishing reason and where he goes as far as to assert: “it is necessary that reason die”. For when a believer believes that after death he will one day be resurrected and live forever afterwards, he believes a proposition that has no basis either in experience or in rational demonstration. Thus, when Abraham believed that if he sacrificed Isaac he would receive him again from the dead (according to Hebrews 11), he believed what (from a purely human point of view) amounts to an impossibility. Yet, judges Nicholas, with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26), so that all things are also possible for one who believes in God (Mark 9:23), since faith makes the impossible possible (Sermon CLXXXVI (21)). Two further Cusan statements seem also to minimize

reason's role in religion: (i) God "is apprehended only where persuasive considerations cease and faith appears" (*De docta ignorantia* III, 11 (245)), and (ii) "where reason founders ... faith bridges the gap" (Sermon IV (9)). Furthermore, "the Catholic faith teaches that God is believed in without proof and without evidentness" (Sermon IV (9)). Accordingly, true faith is *strong* faith: faith that dispels all doubt, faith that does not demand guarantees, faith that exalts the teachings of the Scriptures and of Christ above the teachings of the philosophers (Sermons CLXXXVI (9), CLXXXVII (16)).

Strong Cusan statements that emphasize the role of reason

On the other hand, Nicholas sometimes so accentuates the role of reason that reason seems indispensable to founding and buttressing faith. "The basis of faith", he writes, "is the fact that God exists" (Sermon IV (22)). And he gives *a priori* arguments to evidence God's existence, arguments such as those already examined and such as the following additional one:

Since whatever things the perceptible world contains are finite, they cannot exist of themselves. For the finite can exist in a way different from the way it does exist; and so, its *being* is not eternity, which cannot exist in a way other than it does. Nor is [the world's *being*] infinity or absolute necessity. And so, if that which is not eternity itself were to exist from itself, it would exist before it existed – [something impossible]. Thus, then, we come, necessarily, to a Beginning of all finite things – [a Beginning] which is infinite ..., etc.

(Sermon CLXXXVII (2))

Elsewhere, Nicholas reminds us that that which is altogether unknown cannot be loved (Sermon CCLXXXVI (8)),⁹ a reminder that implies some present 'knowledge by acquaintance', or, at least, a knowledge *that* God exists. Moreover, Nicholas speaks of faith as correlated with the faculty of intellect or of reason (Sermon IV (1)),¹⁰ so that where there is no intellect (as in infants and animals) there is no faith (Sermon CLXXXVI (11)), because there is no understanding. Indeed, "to believe is to think with assent" (Sermon CLXXXIX (19)),¹¹ a statement that implies the intelligibility of faith.

9. This point is borrowed from Augustine's *De Trinitate* 8.4.6 (PL 42:951).

10. This point is borrowed from Hugo of Strassburg's *Compendium theologiae veritatis* (A compendium of theological truth), book V, ch. 18. See S. *Bonaventurae opera omnia*, A. C. Peltier (ed.) (Paris: Vivès, 1866), vol. 8. (Peltier wrongly ascribes Hugo's work to Bonaventure.)

11. This point is taken from Augustine's *De praedestinatione sanctorum* (On the predestination of the saints) 2.5 (PL 44:963).

Strong Cusan statements that balance the roles of faith and reason

In spite of Nicholas' strong assertions that seem sometimes to emphasize the priority of faith over reason and at other times to emphasize the priority of reason over faith, his overall viewpoint balances the relationship between these two approaches to God. And his viewpoint implicitly distinguishes three different senses of 'faith': faith as the act-of-believing (we may call it *saving* faith); faith as the content of belief (we may call it *propositional* faith); and faith as a body of belief, as the extended content of belief (we may call it *systematic* faith). Saving faith involves trust (*fiducia*): the believer trusts God, entrusts his life to God, believes *in* God (rather than merely believing that God exists). Propositional faith has to do with assent to the truth of a religious doctrine on the basis of an authority, as when on the authority of the book of Genesis or of Moses or of Christ one believes that the world was *created* and is not eternal. Systematic faith is illustrated by the meaning of expressions such as 'the Jewish faith', 'the Catholic faith', 'the Muslim faith'. With regard to propositional and systematic faith, Nicholas uses the expression "to know by faith", or "the knowledge of faith" (Sermon CLXXXVI (4)). Thereby he suggests that doctrinal belief on the basis of an authority puts one into contact with truth, given that the authority is reliable. But knowledge by faith is different from knowledge in the ordinary sense, even as Job's exclamation "I know that my Redeemer liveth" (Job 19:25) differs from the empirical knowledge that (according to the account) was the product of Thomas' having been summoned to place his hand in the risen Christ's side and to place his finger into the imprint of the nails in Christ's hands (John 21:24–9).

The crux of Nicholas' doctrine of the relationship between faith and reason is the same as it was for Augustine and for Anselm. For Nicholas' doctrine is triangulated coordinately with the twofold motto "Unless you believe, you will not understand" (Isaiah 7:9, in the Old Latin Version)¹² and, tacitly, "Unless to some extent you understand, you cannot believe" (because to believe is to think with assent, and because one cannot assent to that which makes no sense to one at all). This balancing of faith and reason is in tune with the Apostle Peter's instruction to the believer to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). And it is in contrast to Søren Kierkegaard's later notions that "faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off" (Kierkegaard 1941: 78) and that the deepest faith is characterized as "belief by virtue of the absurd" (*ibid.*: *passim*) (see Vol. 4, Ch. 13, "Søren Kierkegaard").

12. We must keep in mind that Augustine prescribed not only 'Believe in order to understand' but also 'Understand in order to believe'. See Sermon 43 (7.9) (PL 38:258).

CONCLUSION

The historical challenge of Nicholas' philosophy of religion lies in our being careful neither to overemphasize nor to underemphasize its modernity. *One under-emphasizes the modernity* if one rests content with starkly contrasting it with such modern thinkers as Kierkegaard, in the way that we have just done. For one must also note the proleptic parallels with a thinker such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (see Vol. 3, Ch. 13), adumbrations of whom we discern in a bevy of Cusan doctrines: for example the Cusan doctrine of (i) the identity of indiscernibles (*De ludo globi* [The bowling game] I (6)); (ii) the concreated power of rational judgement; (iii) the maximal perfection of the universe (which is as perfect as it can be); (iv) the infinite divisibility (in principle) of matter; (v) the surmising character of empirical judgements; (vi) the endorsement of the principle of sufficient reason (*De sapientia* II (35); *De beryllo* [On (intellectual) eyeglasses] 51); (vii) the use of mathematics to elucidate theological doctrines; (viii) the recognition that in the domain of objects that admit of being greater and lesser, we never arrive at a maximum or a minimum; (ix) the view that at infinity maximum and minimum coincide; (x) the claim that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses – nothing except the intellect itself. On the other hand, *one overemphasizes the modernity* of Cusa's philosophy (and of his philosophy of religion, in particular) if one neglects to mention that the theme of *nulla proportio* is not new with him but is drawn from Hugo of Strassburg (*Compendium theologiae veritatis*, book I, chapter 16), even as the theme of learned ignorance is appropriated from Pseudo-Dionysius.

What is new with Nicholas is not so much the themes themselves as the systematization of the themes, together with an extended application of them. A modern-day comparison might be helpful. Sigmund Freud neither discovered the unconscious nor was the first to introduce the concept of the unconscious. Nicolai Hartmann formulated this concept decades before Freud. Yet, that which Freud accomplished – that which links his name forever to the concept of the unconscious – consists in his having expanded the concept into a theory and then having placed that theory into an even more general theory, namely, a theory of human personality. In a remarkably similar way, the reason that Nicholas of Cusa's name will be forever associated with the concepts of *docta ignorantia*, *nulla proportio* and *coincidentia oppositorum* is that this fifteenth-century philosopher-theologian coherently worked an expanded version of these notions into a more general scheme that situated his philosophy of religion at the threshold of modernity. He was poised to step across that threshold when he intoned: "How will You, [O God], give Yourself to me unless You also *give me to myself*?" (*De visione Dei* 7 (26)). And he peered farther into the already looming modernity when he spoke of God's Paradise as surrounded by a *wall of absurdity* (12 (50)) – that is, by the wall of the coincidence of creating with being created – and when he spoke, in Hegelian fashion, of God as the Being of being and the *Not-being of not-being*

(Proposition V of the propositions appended to *De li non aliud*). Surely, then, if Cusa's God is "beyond the coincidence of contradictories", he is also, in the words of Paul Tillich, 'the God beyond the God of theism'.

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On FAITH see also Chs 6, 12, 16; Vol. 1, Ch. 13; Vol. 3, Ch. 8; Vol. 4, Ch. 8, 10, 13; Vol. 5, Chs 7, 18. On KNOWLEDGE see also Ch. 11; Vol. 1, Ch. 6. On REASON see also Chs 10, 11, 12, 16; Vol. 3, Chs 8, 12, 16, 21; Vol. 4, Chs 4, 8.

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