

Nicholas of Cusa and Raymond Lull: Comparison

Evgeny Spodarev

1. Introduction

The first acquaintance of Nicholas of Cusa (NC) (1401-1464) with the writings of the Majorcan philosopher and theologian Raymond Lull (RL) (1232-1315) may have dated back to the time of the studies of the former in Padua (1417-1423) and/or in Cologne (1425-1426).

NC's professor at the University of Cologne, Heimeric van den Velde¹, was well known for his sympathy for the ideas of RL, especially his *ars magna*². A little later NC used the library and connections of the charterhouse of Vauvert near Paris to study the writings of RL. Since 1428 he started collecting them (partially buying or making copies/excerpts) which culminated into one of the world largest private collections (68 writings, many of them containing margin notes of NC) currently in the library of Berncastell-Kues, the birth place of NC. Doing so, he preserved some of them from annihilation by the churches theological faculty of Sorbonne in their campaign to abolish RL's heritage. This persecution is certainly the reason why NC used citations and ideas of RL in his own works mostly without mentioning their origin. The excerpts and margin notes of NC, referencing the works of RL help the researchers to understand the relation between these two thinkers in more depth³.

2. Common ideas

Researchers of NC put both him and RL into the same chain⁴ of neoplatonic tradition⁵:
Plato → Plotinus → Porphyry → St. Augustine → Proklus → Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

2.1 Faith and knowledge

Both NC and RL supported the thesis of Augustine and Anselm of Canterbury: "I believe that I may understand⁶" which formulates the dominance of the faith over the knowledge in the sense that "Faith is the light of intellect⁷" (RL) or "Faith being the beginning of intellect⁸" (NC)⁹. For NC and RL philosophy is metaphysics from above: "The first truth is the measure of all truth¹⁰" (NC). Equally, NC and RL had no interest in seeking for the proofs of the existence of God¹¹ which was the main stream theology since the time of Thomas Aquinas.

2.2 Geometria intellectualis

The use of mathematics and especially of contemplative geometrical reasoning in the works of NC can be definitely traced back to similar features in the writings of RL, in particular in "*De quadratura et triangulatura circuli*"¹². Both RL and NC see mathematics as a plane of existence in which the contradictions of the visible real world (*geometria sensibilis* of NC) can be resolved, in terms of NC, using *visio intellectualis*. This leads to NC's *geometria intellectualis*, in which a chord and an arc of the infinite circle as well as an infinite triangle and a circle may coincide. NC's "*De docta ignorantia*" and "*De beryllo*"¹³ include many examples of such mathematics.

2.3 Ecumenical thoughts and union of religions

RL was a passionate devotee of the peaceful dialogue of world religions. In his "*Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*"¹⁴ he proclaims that no faith is better than the other. Nevertheless, RL dedicated his life to trying to convert non-Christians into Christianity, which should be the culmination of the peaceful dialogue between the religions. NC went further in his "*De pace fidei*" and stated that all religions (as well as all Christian churches of his time) are different but equally valid approaches to the unique God: "the unique religion in various rites¹⁵". This is a logical consequence of his *coincidentia oppositorum*¹⁶.

2.4 Coincidentia oppositorum and mystics

For RL, opposites can be overcome only within God or approaching God in a mystical act of divine love. Here RL uses the language of Sufis as in “*The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*”¹⁷. NC resolves it in a different way, proclaiming that God is the coincidence of the opposites, of minimum and maximum. But even here the ideas of RL (in particular, his teachings of circular identity of basic dignities of God) played a decisive role in building the *circular theology*¹⁸ of NC. After RL, NC states¹⁹ that the so called dignities of God which are all superlative qualities such as *unitas unissima, magnitudo maxima, veritas verissima*, etc., are identical to God and between each other in it (*unum et idem*).²⁰ Hence they can be exchanged in a circular way²¹ as on the wheel-chart A of RL’s *ars magna* (see appendix). This is the highest essence of God.

2.5 Trinity and correlatives

NC has borrowed his consideration of trinity and unity of God mainly from RL. According to RL, the principle of trinity expresses itself in the use of the so-called *correlatives*, which are three forms of the same verb, for example, loving-beloved-love²². The correlatives have been used by NC many times in his works, see [COL], pp.59, 89-96 for examples.

2.6 Cosmology and incarnation of God

NC follows RL, stating the creation of the world by God as an image/reflection of his own dignities. This goes well in accordance with the neoplatonic tradition of the creation through the three-fold solar logos. After RL, NC uses the correlative-like trinities of notions in his cosmology: *materia-forma-connexio, mens-notitia-amor, fecunditas-proles-amor*²³, etc. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the necessary culmination and completion of all creation process. In “*De docta ignorantia*” NC explains that Jesus was a necessary mediator between the infinite God and finite creation. Otherwise there would be a gap in between, which can not be natural²⁴.

2.7 Intellectual ascent and descent

Both RL and NC use similar methods of intellectual ascent to (and descent from) God²⁵. In his conception (see “*Ars inventiva*”), RL names two transcendental points, through which ascent happens: one ascends from the world of sensually perceptible objects or phenomena (here things are *good*; *basic* form of adjectives) to the plane of rationally perceptible objects (first transcendental point; the world of *better* things, *comparative* form of adjectives). But as God can not be understood by our mind one needs the second ascent to the spiritual realm which is God (second transcendental point; the realm of *best* properties, *superlative* form of adjectives). This second ascent is mystical. NC develops a similar method in “*De docta ignorantia*”: one passes from the realm of *sensus* and *imaginatio* (represented by a finite real line segment) to the realm of *ratio* (an ideal infinite line which is at the same time an infinite triangle, a circle and a ball) and finally to the contemplation of the infinite unity of God (by means of *intellectus*). Here we see the difference between the two methods: RL did not distinguish between ratio (practical mind) and intellectus (nous), so he meant ratio of NC in the first step and the mystical way in the last step.

2.8 Cognition and exploration of the world

Motivated by RL’s *ars generalis sciendi*, NC develops the method of cognition (possible only within some bounds given in “*De docta ignorantia*”) in his work “*De coniecturis*”. He named his method *ars generalis coniecturandi*²⁶ in which he describes a way of making conjectures, illustrated by wheel charts and symbols that much resemble those of RL²⁷ (as e.g. shown in appendix). This is the way of comparison based on the principles *differentia – concordantia* of RL and his logic.

3. Summary

It is sometimes difficult to trace the source of ideas of NC back to the original philosopher. So the ascent-descent method (§ 2.7) can be found in a different form in the heritage of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. One can come across the religious tolerance (§ 2.3) in Proklus, for example. The concept

¹ (lat.) Heymericus de Campo (1395-1460)

² For the analysis of the influence of RL on Heimeric see [COL], pp. 9-39

³ See [COL], pp. 47-67; [ROT].

⁴ This chain should be understood in chronological (and not in ancestral) sense.

⁵ [COL], p. 73-74.

⁶ (lat.) "Credo ut intelligam". The full citation is "*Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam. Nam et hoc credo, quia, nisi credidero, non intelligam.*" (Anselm of Canterbury) Translation: "Nor do I seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand. For this, too, I believe, that, unless I first believe, I shall not understand."

⁷ A better word here is *nous* (gr.) or *Vernunft* (germ.) as opposed to the practical mind, *Verstand* (germ.)

⁸ (lat.) "Fidem esse initium intellectus". [COL], p. 75.

⁹ [COL], p. 75.

¹⁰ (lat.) "Prima veritas est mensura omnis veritatis", [COL], p. 75.

¹¹ [COL] p. 76: NC declares (in "*De coniecturis*") each question about the existence of God to be nonsense since it presumes the existence of the subject of the question.

¹² See [COL], pp. 114-115. Colomer refers here to J. E. Hofmann "Ramon Lulls Kreisquadratur", HSB 1942; Einleitung zu: Die mathematischen Schriften des Nikolaus von Kues, S. IX-LII.

¹³ [CUS], pp. 11,25,41,75.

¹⁴ (span.) *Libre del gentil e los tres savis*. Similar ideas of RL can be found in his works "Liber de quinque sapientibus", "Liber de sancto spiritu", "Liber tartari et christiani".

¹⁵ (lat.) "una religio in rituum varetate". See [COL], p. 115-118 for a detailed discussion.

¹⁶ (lat.) coincidentia oppositorum

¹⁷ (span.) *Libre de Amic e Amat*.

¹⁸ (lat.) theologia circularis

¹⁹ In many works of NC: "De venatione sapientiae", "Idiota de sapientiae", "De visione Dei", "Compendium theologicum".

²⁰ See [COL], pp. 55-56, 88-89 for more details and the following citation: "For God is infinite, there is not more or less in it, hence it is the highest equality, hence all attributes are equal in God" („Quia Deus est infinitus, in eo non est maius et minus, ergo summa aequalitas, ergo omnia attributa sunt aequalia in Deo“, RL, "Liber de ente quod simpliciter per se est existens et agens")

²¹ "The whole theology is like a circle in which everything is identical." ("Tota theologia est ut circulus ille, in quod omnia unum." (NC, "Compendium theologicum")

²² (lat.) amans-amatum-amare .

²³ (lat.) matter-form-connection, spirit-cognition (gnosis)-love, fecundity- infant-love. See [COL], pp. 102-106 for more details.

²⁴ See [COL], pp. 106-109.

²⁵ See [COL], pp. 76, 79-81.

²⁶ (lat.) the general art of conjecturing

²⁷ See [COL], pp. 82-84 for more details.