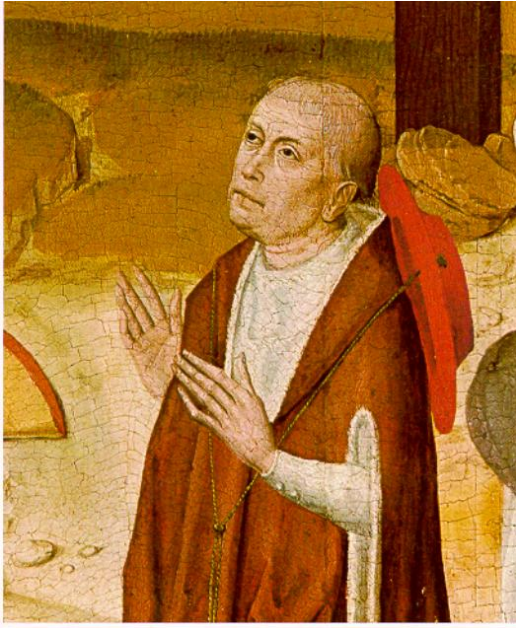


The Florentine Renaissance: Nicholas of Cusa

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« *Prima veritas est mensura omnis veritatis* »

Nicholas of Cusa

1. Introduction

Nicholas of Cusa (NC) (1401-1464) is one of the most prominent neo-platonic philosophers of the Renaissance. Son of a rich merchant, he studied liberal arts and canon law in Heidelberg (1416), Padua (1417-1423) and Cologne (1425-1426). His time in Padua let him breathe the free air of Italian *quattrocento*. There he first met some of his later friends who would become influential men of Church, politics and science: *Guiliano Cesarini* (1398-1444), bishop, diplomat and military leader from Rome, *Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli* (1397-1482), mathematician and medicine doctor from Florence, etc. They opened to him the Renaissance world of Florence, Rome and Venice with its interest to the Greek and

Roman antique culture and humanism.

NC was a passionate collector of philosophical books. His private library (donated after his death to the foundation at NC's birthplace Bernkastel-Kues) of (copies of) primary sources and ancient manuscripts was considerable in size¹. NC also had an extensive knowledge of the philosophy and works of Pre-Socratics, Plato and Neo-Platonism, which were known at that time. Numerous references in his books witness this fact². For instance, the dialogs of Phaedo, Timaeus and Parmenides of Elia, interpreted by Proklus, were of great importance to NC and influenced his thinking³.

2. Platonism from antique world till Renaissance

Researchers see NC to continue the antique tradition of *Plato* (428-348 BC) → *Plotinus* (204-270) → *Porphyry* (234-305) → *St. Augustine* (354-430) → *Proklus* (412-485) → *Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite* (5th-6th c.). During the Middle Ages, the classical Greek and Latin philosophy (eliminated by the dogmatic Christianity in Europe) continued to exist in the Muslim lands of the Middle East, Africa and Spain. The European neo-platonic tradition survived in its elements mainly in the works of St. Augustine. Although the medieval Christian philosophy adhered to the teachings of Aristotle, thinkers such as *Johannes Scotus Eriugena* (815 – 877) (who translated fragments of works of Pseudo-Dionysius into Latin) continued to develop neo-platonic thoughts of theophany (unfolding of God in the Universe) and influenced later philosophers including NC. During the period of scholastics, the School of Chartres (11th-12th c.) and the Dominican School of Cologne (founded 1248 as Studium Generale) starting with *Albert the Great* (1200-1280) revived the neo-platonic tradition creating the chain of followers, e.g. *Dietrich of Freiberg* (1240/1245-1318/1320) → *Meister Eckhart* (1260-1328) → *Nicholas of Strasburg* (?- after 1331) → *Berthold of Moosburg* (?- after 1361) → *Heymericus de Campo* (1395-1460). Heymericus was the professor of NC during his studies at the University of Cologne. He may also made NC acquainted with the writings of Albert the Great, Meister Eckhart as well as Majorcan philosopher *Raymond Lull*⁴ (1232-1315) who influenced a lot the NC's vision of the world. Short before the Councils of Ferrara and Florence (1437-1438) NC met the Greek philosopher *Plethon* (1355/1360-1452) who served as a counsellor of the Byzantine Emperor. It was Plethon who gave an essential

¹ Bianca Concetta: *Nicolo Cusano e la sua biblioteca*; in: E. Canone: *Bibliothecae selectae da Cusano*, Leopardi, Florence, 1993, pp. 1 – 11

² See e.g. [CUS], 2,4,6, 24, etc.

³ See [FLA2], pp. 11f, 20

⁴ See [COL] and [SPO].

impulse to the birth of neo-platonic Academy in Florence under the rule of *Cosimo de' Medici* (1389-1464). Cosimo initiated the translation of complete Plato's works into Latin (by *Marsilio Ficino* (1433-1499)). NC must have benefited much from conversations with Plethon (during their joint trip from Constantinople to Venice) sharing the ideas of religious tolerance and the union of all religions as well as the neo-platonic view of God and creation.

3. Keynote ideas

As a neo-Platonist, NC supports the doctrine of unfolding of God (the One) in the world of forms. Here he follows mainly Plato and Proklus. In his book "*De theologia Platonis*", Proklus describes four levels of being: the One, the intellect, the soul and the body. They constitute the Whole because they are united by the One. The One is the principle, cause and finality of all other levels. Proklus characterizes these four levels in terms of unity and multiplicity: The One as the simplest One, the intellect as the One-Plurality (*multa Unum*), the soul as the One and Plurality (*unum et multa*) and the body as Plurality and the One (*multa et unum*). In other words, the consequent levels have less and less to share with the One, although the One descends to the lowest regions. This scheme is addressed by NC in "*De docta ignorantia*" and completely adopted in "*De coniecturis*".

Plato's idealism finds its due reflection in the philosophy of NC⁵. The influence of Plato's numerology is documented several times in NC's works. In three of his books ("*De docta ignorantia*", "*Idiota de mente*", "*De ludo globi*") he commits to the concept of numerology and refers to Pythagoras and Plato:

*"Number encompasses all things related comparatively. Therefore, number, which is a necessary condition of comparative relation, is present not only in quantity but also in all things which in any manner whatsoever can agree or differ substantially or accidentally. Perhaps for this reason Pythagoras deemed all things to be constituted and understood through the power of numbers"*⁶.

*"No knowledge of anything can be had except through distinguishing, philosophized by means of number. I do not think that anyone else has attained a more reasonable mode of philosophizing. Because Plato imitated this mode, he is rightly held to be great."*⁷

The philosophical thoughts of NC have multiple origins that are sometimes hard to distinguish. Let us trace just few of them with regard to NC's ideas of *coincidence of the opposites* and *religious tolerance*.

3.1 Coincidentia oppositorum

NC proclaims that God is the coincidence of the opposites, of minimum and maximum. This concept has its origins in the philosophy of Proklus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Eriugena, Albert the Great, Lull and Heymericus de Campo. In the sequel, we analyse just some of these origins.

Following Dionysius, NC regards the God as the Unity detached of all opposites (*non-aliud*)⁸. He is the first cause that is in stillness and movement at the same time, and at the same time He is neither still nor moving. This contradictory sentence is to be dissolved by NC via the coincidence of poles in God. A similar idea (inspired by Albert's comments on works of Dionysius) already appeared in Heymericus' writing "*Compendium Divinorum*". It concerned the coincidence of cause and effect (goal) in God and at the same time God being the centre where both happen to coincide.

NC sees the *intellect* as an instrument to look to the Divine via the opposites. He distinguishes it clearly from the mind, *ratio*⁹. While logical terms and their consistency are important in the world of ratio, thinking in distinctions and antagonisms is of no use in the world of intellect. The coincidence of

⁵ Compare e.g. "*Verum est autem quod deus omnium in se habet exemplaria. Exemplaria autem rationes sunt. Nominant autem theologi exemplaria seu ideas dei voluntatem ...*" [CUS], 17, p. 21.

⁶ Nicolas of Cusa: *De Docta Ignorantia*, Book I, 1, no. 3; in: J. Hopkins: *On learned ignorance (De Docta Ignorantia)* by Nicolas of Cusa, The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 5

⁷ Nicolas of Cusa: *De Ludo Globi Opera Omnia*, Vol. IX, no. 109; in: J. Hopkins: *De Ludo Globi (On Bowling Game)* by Nicolas of Cusa, The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis, 2000, p. 1241f

⁸ "*Oppositio oppositorum est oppositio sine oppositione*", in: Nicolai de Cusa, *De visione Dei*, § 53-54, *Opera omnia*, vol. VI, Heidelberg–Hamburg 2000, p. 63.

⁹ „*Sunt autem tres modi cognoscitivi, scilicet sensibilis, intellectualis et intelligentialis...*" [CUS], 5, p. 7

opposites is the lens (*beryll* spectacles in “*De beryllo*”) through which we can look beyond the polarities in direction to the One. The real comprehension of the Divine, however, even exceeds the intellect¹⁰. It is the result of the vision of God. In his book “*De visione dei*” NC describes the path to this vision which is inspired by Proklus. Proklus stated that the ascent of the man to God (the One) is possible, though not by means of intellect, via the stairs of concentration, meditation and contemplation, which ultimately leads to the union of the Man with the Divine. The inner ascent of thought, reflection and purification by virtues are necessary steps on the path. The vision of God (*Epopteia*) however is something hyper-rational which is achievable only through contemplation.

3.2 Union of religions

The sources of NC’s religious tolerance can be traced back to Proklus and Lull¹¹. NC stated in “*De pace fidei*” that all religions and Christian churches of his time are different approaches to the unique God: “*the unique religion in various rites*¹²”. This is a logical consequence of his coincidence of the opposites.

Proklus associates the One and the Good with the religious tradition (in his “*Theologia Platonis*”). During the process of emanation of God into forms, each level of being, and every element within this level, is penetrated by the One, which is thinkable as a certain god. Therefore Proklus was initiated into the pagan mysteries. He celebrated himself religious feasts of different religions. In “*De pace fidei*”, NC deduces from this the idea of the union of all religions. He says that every religion has a certain access to the truth, but all this partial knowledge is united only in Christianity. Thus, Judaism has recognized God as an Absolute, released of all sensual perception. The pagans however had perceived God in its various visual creations. Hence, they give him different names according to his different functions. This only seems to be polytheism. In Christianity, both can be found: The transcendence of God and also the divine aspect of all perceptible, for Jesus Christ united in himself Man and God. The worship of the plurality of deities in polytheism means implicitly the One, and therefore does not need to be abolished. As a conclusion, the harmony between religions is possible not only in the sense of mutual tolerance, but also of mutual enrichment.

4. Philosophical legacy

Sharply criticised by many of his contemporaries for his novelty which went far beyond the traditional scholastic way of thinking, NC influenced prominent Italian humanists of 15th c. such as *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (1463 – 1494) and Marsilio Ficino. Via his philosophical theory of cognition, he endorsed the development of empirical science of 17th -18th cc. Thus, he was a predecessor of *Nicolaus Copernicus* (1473 – 1543) and *Giordano Bruno* (1548-1600) stating that the Earth can not be the centre of the Universe (as the Universe has no centre at all) and that the Universe is infinite possibly containing lots of suns and planets that might be inhabited by living creatures. He asserted (before *Galileo Galilei* (1564-1642)) that the Earth should be moving. He also understood that the shape of the Earth can not be ideally spherical. Bruno adsorbed and popularised the ideas of *coincidentia* making them available to German Idealists of the 19th Century such as *F. W. Schelling* (1775-1854) und *G. W. Hegel* (1770-1831). The innovative thoughts of NC exerted influence on astronomer *Johannes Kepler* (1571-1630), the poet of the Enlightenment *Gotthold Lessing* (1729 - 1781) and modern German philosopher *Hans-Georg Gadamer* (1900–2002).

5. Literature

[COL] Eusebio Colomer S. J. „Nikolaus von Kues und Raimund Llull“, de Gruyter & Co., Berlin, 1961.
[CUS] Nicolaus de Cusa. „Über den Beryll: lateinisch-deutsch“. Felix Mainer Verlag, Hamburg, 2002.
[FLA1] Kurt Flasch „Nikolaus von Kues in seiner Zeit. Ein Essay“, Reclam, Stuttgart, 2004.
[FLA2] Kurt Flasch „Nicolaus Cusanus“, Verlag C.H. Beck, 3. Auflage, 2007.

¹⁰ Cf. [CUS], 6, p.7: „ ... *homine esse rerum mensuram. Nam cum sensu mensurat sensibilia, cum intellectu intelligibilia, et quae sunt supra intelligibilia in excessu attingit*“.

¹¹ See [SPO] for the analysis of reception of ideas of Lull by NC. Here we concentrate only on the reception of Proklus.

¹² “*una religio in rituum varetate*”. See [COL], p. 115-118.

[SPO] Evgeny Spodarev "Nicholas of Cusa and Raymond Lull: Comparison", 2011, http://www.uni-ulm.de/fileadmin/website_uni_ulm/mawi.inst.110/mitarbeiter/spodarev/publications/Cusanus-Lullus_final1.pdf