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Human Liberty as Participation in the Divine in the Work of Nicholas Cusanus

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1. Introduction

There are reasons to suggest that the voyage to Constantinople in 1437-38 was the decisive moment in the intellectual life of Nicholas Cusanus. The learning and spirituality he met in Constantinople made a lasting impression on him,[1] and his later emphasis on the principle of learned ignorance was in his own view caused by a personal experience while at sea[2] on the return voyage from Constantinople. He thus learned to approach infinity in a way that let him know "incomprehensible things incomprehensibly",[3] and considered this as a knowledge that would let the human intellect rise to the level of "simplicity where contradictories coincide".[4] This issued in a lifelong exploration of the relation between the human and divine that was characteristically different from much of the prevailing late medieval understanding of the condition and content of this relationship.

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1 See H. Lawrence Bond, "Nicholas of Cusa from Constantinople to "learned ignorance" : the historical matrix for the formation of the De docta ignorantia", in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the church.*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki, (Leiden, 1996), 135-163.

2 Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, "Cusanus at sea: the topicality of illuminative discourse", *Journal of Religion* 71 (1991), 180-210 argues that the reference to the sea is metaphorical.

3 " . . . ad hoc ductus sum, ut incomprehensibilia incomprehensibiliter amplecterer in docta ignorantia per transcensum veritatum incorruptibilium humaniter scibilium" (*De docta ignorantia* III, Ep., 263). My English translations from Cusanus' works are indebted to the suggestions in Nicolaus Cusanus, *Complete philosophical and theological treatises*, Jasper Hopkins trans., 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001) without necessarily following them exactly.

4 "Debet . . . nostri humani ingenii conatus esse, ut ad illam se elevet simplicitatem, ubi contradictoria coincidunt" (*De docta ignorantia* III, Ep., 264).

In what follows, I will try get a better understanding of this central aspect of the thought of Cusanus by investigating it in the context of the soteriology and anthropology of late medieval Scholasticism. The version of Thomism renewed at the Council of Trent as the doctrinal foundation of the Roman Catholic Church inevitably led its doctrines to be domintated by assumptions at some variance with the basic suppositions of the 15th century Cardinal. The modern dialogue with the Greeks both in a Roman Catholic and a Protestant context, has, however, reopened the field in a way that probably would have held considerable appeal for Nicholas Cusanus as one of the true ecumenists of his time. A better understanding of his thought could then possibly also contribute to the contemporary debate among the Churches concerning some of its most central issues.

2. Soteriology and anthropology in Scholasticism

In his *Summa Theologiae* Thomas Aquinas tries to strike a balance between the emphasis on the unknown as maintained by Dionysian Platonism and the rationality of Aristotelianism. He thus considers the existence of God as rationally defensible and explorable, e.g., through the idea of causation (*Summa Theologiae* Ia.2,3); still, predicates of the divine based on human experience are not considered as directly applicable. Quoting Dionysius,[5] Thomas maintains that experience-based predicates are applicable in the way that we can be said to resemble God, but not in the way that he, who is outside all genera and therefore beyond comparison, can be said to resemble us (Ia.4,3). Thomas thus agrees with Dionysius that God always exceeds human knowledge (Ia.12,1), but still considers the predicates of the divine as at least indirectely applicable based on the fact that they after all refer to what is caused by God (Ia.13,1).

There is a similar attempt at balancing different approaches in Thomas' understanding of grace and salvation. He may consider salvation as participation in the divine in a way that emphasizes its surpassing the naturally possible (Ia2ae.112,1).[6] At the same time, he can also consider

5 The quotation is from The Divine Names IX,7 (PG 3,916A), but it suggests a considerably stronger emphasis on paradoxical negativity in Dionysius ("similar to the extent that they share what cannot be shared") than it does in Thomas' application. This is a good example of what Gregory P. Rocca, "Aquinas on God-Talk : Hovering over the Abyss", *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), 641-661, 645, calls Thomas' domesticated version of Dionysius.

6 "Donum autem gratiae excedit omnem facultatem naturae creatae, cum nihil aliud sit quam quaedam participatio divinae naturae".

salvation as dependent on the action of free choice moved by God (Ia2ae.112,2)[7] in a way that seemingly lets him describe the work of the human and the divine as taking place within a common frame of reference. As the work of free choice, this preparation naturally implies an idea of human merit, but as the work of God as mover, it does not (Ia2ae.112,3). Thomas thus constantly oscillates between an understanding of the relation between the human and the divine that is established through the category of cause and effect and therefore considered as rationally explorable and potentially meritorious, and an understanding of salvation as human participation in the divine in a way that surpasses the humanly possible both concerning understanding and realization.[8]

Duns Scotus did not find this construction convincing. He rejected the epistemological asymmetry in the relation between the human and the divine, arguing that experience-based concepts (which he considered as the only acceptable concepts) are relevant for all phenomena in the same way if relevant at all. According to Duns Scotus, being is thus a predicate that pertains to God and all there is in basically the same way, and he considers the existence of God as unambiguously defensible by reason alone in a way that Thomas does not.[9] As for any positive identification of what God is, however, both Duns Scotus and William Ockham adhere to a strict division between the human and the divine; made similar through the univocal application of the concept of being, God and humans still differ as individuals. Any idea of participation and necessity with regard to salvation thus appears as irrelevant, and the perichoretic union of the human and the divine that is essential for the traditional dogma of the person of Christ is thus lost as the central point of orientation for thought and life.[10] The relative independence of the human from the divine led to

7 ". . . actus liberi arbitrii moti a Deo."

8 On the oscillation in Thomas between Platonic participation and Aristotelian causation, see further Louis Dupré, "The dissolution of the union of nature and grace at the dawn of the modern age", in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton, (Minneapolis, 1988), 95-121, 99-100.

9 For a presentation of Scotus' natural theology, see Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 17-123.

10 Cf. Alister E. McGrath, "Homo assumptus : a study in the christology of the via moderna, with particular reference to William of Ockham", *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 60 (1984), 283-297, 297: "The theology of the via moderna is most emphatically not Christocentric!" According to Steven Ozment, "Mysticism, Nominalism and Dissent", in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko

stronger emphasis on merit and preparation, but as God is ultimately not determined by anything humans do or do not do, salvation is after all dependent on nothing but a divine "fiat" that is not related to either faith or merit.[11] With this double emphasis on individuality and omnipotence nature has lost its "transcendental moorings" and is "left to chart its own course."[12] Apparently, we are already at the threshold of modernity.

The driving force behind the Lutheran reformation could be seen as Luther's reaction against the understanding of human independence of his Ockhamist University teachers, as Luther himself came to the conclusion that we for our salvation are onesidedly dependent on the grace of God.[13] What God does and what humans do can thus neither be seen as taking place on the same level ontologically nor in complete indepence from each other. Redefining its doctrine at the Council of Trent after the split caused by the criticism of the Reformers was considered unbridgable, the Roman Catholic Church, however, basically tried to sketch a middle ground between Thomism and Ockhamism. Following Thomas in emphasizing the necessity of a divine initiative, the Council still considered salvation as dependent on human cooperation, and followed the *via moderna* in rejecting the idea of an assurance of salvation, thus also explicitly rejecting the Lutheran emphasis on trust as the essential element in a restored relationship between humans and God. Eternal life is in this way considered as both gift and merit; one is saved by grace, but not without one's own contribution through penitence and good works.[14]

A. Oberman, (Leiden, 1974), 67-92, 80, for Ockham the relation between God and human never moves beyond the level of the contingent and covenental.

[11] On Scotus' doctrine of justification, see further Werner Dettloff, "Duns Scotus/Scotismus I", in TRE 9, ed. (Berlin, New York, 1982), 218-231, 227-228, and Martin Anton Schmidt, "Dogma und Lehre im Abendland II: Die Zeit der Scholastik", in *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte*, ed. Carl Andresen, (Göttingen, 1989), 567-754, 696-697.

[12] Dupré, "The dissolution of the union of nature and grace", 102. The argument is developed more in detail in Louis Dupré, *Passage to modernity: an essay in the hermeneutics of nature and culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 167-220, according to which the most important attempts at reestablishing the lost unity are those undertaken by Nicholas of Cusa, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin and Cornelius Jansen.

[13] See Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's theology: its historical and systematic development*, Roy A. Harrisville trans. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 18-20 and 85-95.

[14] See Bengt Hägglund, *History of theology* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 286-287. This idea of conditional grace was heavily criticized by Luther as an obvious

Nicholas Cusanus lived in a time where both the Thomist and Ockhamist positions were well defined. How did his emphasis on the incomprehensibility of the divine inform his approach to these issues? How should his position be characterized in relation to those of his contemporaries? Taking my starting point from the work that followed his voyage experience as its immediate exploration, *De docta ignorantia* (1440), I will in addition look at how his position is presented in later works like *De visione Dei* (1453), *De possest* (1460) and *De venatione sapientiae* (1462), thus also taking into consideration a possible development of Cusanus' thought from his earlier to his later works.[15]

3. Human perfection as participation in the divine according to *De docta ignorantia*

Cusanus starts his reflections from the observation that we learn by comparing, the implication of which is that infinity is unknown, as it can never be compared and escapes all proportionality (I,1,3).[16] An exploration of the maximality of ignorance thus presents itself as a particularly interesting topic, and as Cusanus undertakes it, it is divided in three different parts. First is explored absolute maximality as freed from all relation and contractedness (book I), i.e., infinity itself. Then maximality is investigated as the entity through which everything is what it is, i.e., as it appears in contracted form as the universe (book II). Finally, the investigation approaches the one maximum where the contracted maximum is realized most perfectly, i.e., where it is united with the absolute maximum. This leads to a discussion of the doctrine of Christ and its relevance for the understanding and realization of true humanity (book

contradiction, see, e.g., Ragnar Skottene, *Grace and gift: an analysis of a central motif in Martin Luther's Rationis Latomianae Confutatio* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 76-91.

[15] The main investigation of Cusanus from the perspective of the development of his thought, is Kurt Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues : Geschichte einer Entwicklung : Vorlesungen zur Einführung in seine Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1998); he is, however, not primarily concerned with Cusanus' understanding of the relation between the human and the divine.

[16] "Omnis igitur inquisitio in comparativa proportione . . . existit. Propter quod infinitum ut infinitum, cum omnem proportionem aufugiat, ignotum est" (I,1,3). On the epistemological method of *De docta ignorantia*, see further Ulrich Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens: Eine Untersuchung zur Schrift "De docta ignorantia" des Nikolaus Von Kues* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1991), 30-42.

III) (I,2,5-7). One could thus consider *De docta ignorantia* as an investigation of the condition of understanding and of Christ as the key to its realization.[17]

As understanding rests on comparing, absolute maximality can never be grasped through senses, reason and intellect, and is thus necessarily beyond all we can conceive. The negativity and limitation of any human approach to the divine is therefore emphasized by Cusanus in a way that is considerably more one-sided than in the work of Thomas Aquinas.[18] He agrees with Thomas that absolute maximum is the condition of existence, but considers this as a logical relationship, not one of cause and effect in an empirical sense (I,6,15). A cosmological proof is thus incompatible with Cusanus' discussion of the maximum beyond sense and reason, which necessarily presupposes a metaphorical use of concepts like "cause" and "caused" as far as God is concerned,[19] the implication being that God can never be considered in parallel with created beings.[20]

For Cusanus, it is therefore the idea of participation that is the basic tool for exploring the relationship between Creator and creation.[21] For all his

17 On the centrality of Christology for Cusanus, see Erwin Metzke, "Nicolaus von Cues und Martin Luther", in *Coincidentia oppositorum: Gesammelte Studien zur Philosophiegeschichte*, ed. (Witten, 1961), 205-241, 230, who considers the Christology of *De docta ignorantia* as "der Schlüssel für das Verständnis des inneren Gesamtfüges des Cusanischen Hauptwerkes". A similar view is represented by H. Lawrence Bond, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Reconstruction of Christology: The Centrality of Christology in the Coincidence of Opposites", in *Contemporary Reflections on the Medieval Christian Tradition*, ed. G.H. Shriver, (Duham, N.C., 1974), 81-94; P. Christoph Schönborn, "'De docta ignorantia' als christozentrischer Entwurf", in *Nikolaus von Kues: Einführung in sein philosophisches Denkens*, ed. Klaus Jacobi, (Freiburg/München, 1979), 138-156; Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens*, 50-55; Peter Casarella, "His name is Jesus : negative theology and Christology in two writings of Nicholas of Cusa from 1440", in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the church*, ed. (Leiden, 1996), 281-307, 290.

18 Thomas' doctrine of *analogia entis* therefore does not make sense to Cusanus. For rejections of an attempt to prove otherwise, see Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens*, 96, and Nancy J Hudson, *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa* (Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 56-65.

19 Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens*, 113.

20 Cf. Albert Dahm, *Die Soteriologie des Nikolaus von Kues: ihre Entwicklung von frühen Predigten bis zum Jahr 1445* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1997), 90: "Als das umfassend Eine-Größte steht es nicht auf der Ebene der Seienden."

21 On Nicholas' understanding of participation, see further Michael Thomas, *Der Teilhabegedanke in den Schriften und Predigten des Nikolaus von Kues* (1430-1450) (Münster: Aschendorff, 1996), and Hudson, Becoming God, 81-84.

emphasis on difference, his perspective is thus about as far as possible removed from the via moderna-interpretation of difference as separation. On the contrary, Cusanus explores the relationship between God and world through the concepts of contraction and complication, emphasizing that through participation, God is contracted (unfolded, explicated, related) as all there is, himself being the complication (enfolding) of everything.[22] Though God is essentially unknown, there is thus still nothing that can escape his providence. What we do, its opposite and no action at all are all complicated (enfolded) in the divine providence (I,22,67). This leads Cusanus to the conclusion that in God all possibilites are actually present (I,22,68).[23] Divine providence is thus inescapable and immutable, and as related to it, everything has necessity (I,22,69).

The one relationship that defines all there is, is this relationship to the unknown. The realm of learned ignorance in this way extends to the created world; understood from its relationship with the unknown, even dependent being is thus essentially unintelligible (II,2,99-110). [24] Unknowability thus remains when uncontracted maximality is considered in its contracted form as the world.[25] What is both possible and necessary, though, is to explore created entities in their relation to the unknown. The implication of Cusanus' emphasis on participation is thus a rejection of an ontology of substance in favour of a metaphysics of relations,[26] whereby

22 Thomas, *Der Teilhabegedanke*, 57-63.

23 As far as infinity is concerned, the difference between the possible and the real is not relevant. See Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens*, 103.

24 Hudson, *Becoming God*, 94-97.

25 Cf. Clyde Lee Miller, *Reading Cusanus: metaphor and dialectic in a conjectural universe* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 34: ". . . the precise quiddity or definiton of . . . form or essence remains impenetrable for human minds." That the ontology of Nicholas thus implies a rejection of "Philosophie der Washeiten" is also emphasized by Klaus Jacobi, "Ontologie aus dem Geist "belehrten Nichtwissens"", in *Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Klaus Jacobi, (Freiburg/München, 1979), 27-55.

26 According to Ferdinand Edward Cranz, "Cusanus, Luther and the mystical tradition", in *Pursuit of holiness in late medieval and Renaissance religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman, (Leiden, 1974), 93-102, 100, this elimination of "substantial definitions" is a result of the interaction between humanist nominalism and the tradition of mysticism.

the inner relationships in God[27] gains a new importance as the foundation of all relationality.[28]

In book III of *De docta ignorantia*, Cusanus deepens this understanding of participation by pondering the question of what the maximal realization of contracted maximality would be if such a thing were to exist (III,2,190).[29] This contracted maximum would then exist as the final goal of the nature of that contraction, enfolding its complete perfection (III,2,191). [30] As contracted, it would not be God; as perfect, it could not be merely contracted. It could thus only be conceived as a maximality of union in which the respective natures were still preserved.[31] This implies that it would have to be conceived as a union of Creator and creature without confusion and composition beyond all understanding (III,2,194).[32] Cusanus' reflections are here obviously informed by the Christology of the Council of Chalcedon, [33] which thus appears as the main manifestation of the coincidence of the opposites in the thought of Cusanus.[34]

This contracted maximum would have to be human, as it is the human nature that is elevated above the other works of God by being both intellectual and sensible; it is a microcosm that enfolds all things within

27 Cf. Cusanus' exploration of the Trinity through the concepts of oneness, equality and union (I,7-9).

28 Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens*, 115.

29 ". . . si maximum contractum ad speciem actu subsistens dabile esset, quod tunc ipsum secundum datam contractionis speciem omnia actu esset, quae in potentia generis aut species illius esse possent."

30 "Hoc tale maximum contractum supra omnem naturam contractionis illius terminus finalis existens, in se complicans omnium eius perfectionem".

31 As maintained by Casarella, "His name is Jesus", 289, a mixture of the finite with the infinite would not represent perfection, as finitude then would limit maximality.

32 "Oprtet enim ipsum tale ita deum esse mente concipere ut sit creatura, ita creaturam ut sit et creator, creatorem et creaturam absque confusione et compositione. . . Supra omnem igitur intellectum haec unio foret."

33 On the Chalcedonian structure of the Christology of *De docta ignorantia*, see further Schönborn, "'De docta ignorantia' als christozentrischer Entwurf", 155; Offermann, Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens, 55 and 157.

34 For a defence of the principle of coincidentia oppositorum as ultimately founded on Christology, see Bond, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Reconstruction of Christology", 86.

itself [35] and thus the only possible candidate for this kind of union (III,3,198).[36] For Cusanus, the realization of this hypothetical union is Jesus. He is the one who came to restore everything as the "image of the invisible God and the firstborn of all creation"[37] (III,4,203). According to the biblical witnesses, humanity was in him united to the Word of God in such a way that humanity cannot exist in plenitude other than in the divine person of the Son (III,4,204).[38] The possibility of the fulfilment of the human quest for knowledge–the starting point of *De docta ignorantia*–therefore rests in Christ.[39]

The full realization of human participation in the divine is thus given with the perichoretic unity of God and man in Christ.[40] This implies that for Cusanus, Christ is the examplar and ideal of what it is to be human.[41]

35 "Humana vero natura est illa, quae est supra omnia dei opera elevata . . ., intellectualem et sensibilem naturam complicans ac universa intra se constringens, ut microcosmos aut parvus mundus a veteribus rationabiliter vocitur."

36 On Cusanus' understanding of human nature as microcosm, see further Wilhelm Dupré, "Der Mensch als Mikrokosmos im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues", in *Menschenbild des Nikolaus von Kues und der Christlich Humanismus: Festgabe für Rudolf Haubst*, ed. Martin Bodewig, Josef Schmitz, and Reinhold Weier, (Mainz, 1978), 68-87; Miller, *Metaphor and dialectic*, 58-60. The epistemological implication is that the human understanding of the world is rooted in the understanding of the human as the image of God; see Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens*, 156.

37 Col 1:15. Cusanus quotes Col 1:15-20 in full as particularly relevant to his Christology. On the importance of this passage for his Christology, see further Dahm, *Die Soteriologie des Nikolaus von Kues*, 109.

38 ". . . postquam humanitas in summo gradu et omni plenitudine esse non potuit nisi in divina filii persona."

39 "Jesus Christus ist so wirklich Ziel des Denkens. Ihn erkennt das Denken als die Wahrheit, auf die es zustrebt." So Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens*, 55; there is a similar perspective in Thomas, *Der Teilhabegedanke*, 113-117.

40 Cf. Hudson, *Becoming God*, 152: "The hypostatic union [Jesus] is programmatic for the ascent of the human intellect to God."

41 According to Bernard McGinn, "Maximum Contractum et Absolutum: The Motive for the Incarnation in Nicholas of Cusanus and his Predecessors", in *Nicholas of Cusa and his Age: Intellect and Spirituality*, ed. Thomas M. Izbicki and Christopher M. Bellitto, (Leiden, Boston, Köln, 2002), 151-175, 151-175, Cusanus thus gives a Christocentric interpretation of creation that differs both from the view that the incarnation was necessitated by the fall (so Augustine, Anselm and Thomas) and the view that the incarnation was predestined independent of the fall (Duns Scotus). Cusanus' predecessors in this respect are Maximus Confessor, John Scottus Eriugena, Hildegard von Bingen and Meister Eckhart.

Human reason can on its own, i.e., through its participation in the intellectual nature temper the passions that draw humans from God (III,6,216). Complete control of the passions, however, has only been achieved by Jesus. Through its union with divine nature in Christ, then, human nature was completely delivered from the desires. Christ's death on the cross Cusanus thus considers as the extinction, satisfaction and purgation for all carnal desire of the human nature.[42] For Cusanus, there is thus a close relation between Christ as the realization of intelligibility and the manifestation of what it truly is to be human.[43]

This union between Christ and the believer is established through what Cusanus called formed faith. Through this union, the individual receives from Christ what he merited through his suffering, but according to the difference of faith formed in love in those who are one with Christ (III,6,219).[44] Cusanus is here clearly presenting a doctrine of deification, but in a way that seemingly lets him retain an idea of gradation according to the merit of the believer. He emphasizes, though, that our justification is not from ourselves, but from Christ; he is the fullness, and when we attain to him by formed faith, we are justified by faith itself.[45] There is thus no

42 ". . . hominis Christi crucis mors omnium carnalium desideriorum humanae naturae extinctio, satisfactio atque purgatio fuit." On Cusanus' understanding on the soteriological significance of the death and resurrection of Christ in *De docta ignorantia*, see further H. Meinhardt, "Das Geheimnis des Todes under der Auferstehung Jesu nach Cusanus", in *Unsterblichkeit und Eschatologie im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Klaus Kremer and Klaus Reinhardt, Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft (Trier, 1996), 71-82, and Dahm, *Die Soteriologie des Nikolaus von Kues*, 127-144. Cusanus thereby basically follows the tradition (particularly Augustine), possibly with an emphasis "daß zugleich mit der Tilgung der Sünde auch die menschliche Natur ihre Heilung erfährt" (Dahm, *Die Soteriologie des Nikolaus von Kues*, 128).

43 Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens*, 167-174, thus emphasizes that the union of the human with the divine in Christ implies that we have to rethink what it is to be human.

44 "Nam hoc agit maximitas humanae naturae, ut in quodlibet homine sibi per formatam fidem adhaerenti Christus sit ipse idem homo unione perfectissima, cuiuslibet numero salvo. . . quidquid Christus Iesus passione sua meruit, illi meruerunt, qui unum sunt cum ipso, salva differentia graduum meriti secundum differentiam graduum unionis cuiusque cum ipso per fidem caritate formatam."

45 "Non est igitur iustificatio nostra ex nobis, sed ex Christo. Qui cum sit omnis plenitudo, in ipso omnia consequimur, si ipsum habuerimus. Qui cum in hac vita per fidem formatam attingamus, non aliter quam ipsa fide iustificari poterimus".

doubt that the ineffable mystery of the cross by Cusanus is considered as our redemption (III,6,220).[46]

For Cusanus, faith is not only the foundation of justification, it is also the beginning of understanding, as all first principles are grasped by faith alone.[47] Faith thus enfolds what is understandable, and understanding unfolds faith;[48] faith and reason thus mutually dependent.[49] Truth itself is Jesus (III,11,244), in whom all treasures of wisdom are hidden (Col 2:3); he is the foundation of understanding to the extent that without him one can do nothing (John 15:5).[50] This faith is a gift of God, and it is given to the small and humble in this world (III,12,25).

The ascent of learned ignorance is therefore an ascent unto the mountain that is Christ. The ascent starts in an intellectual mist, but is still guided by the faith that on this mountain, one is separated from those who live sensually (III,11,246). Continuing the ascent, one leaps beyond all perceptible things to the realm of the ineffable and invisible, where Jesus, the goal of all things, is heard incomprehensibly (III,11,247). Faith is then pure, maximal and formed by love. On the way toward the goal, faith will not have reached this maximal level (III,11,248); still, there is immense power in it, as the believer commands with the power of the Word of God with whom he is maximally united by faith as much as there is faith in him (III,11,249).[51]

Cusanus thus repeatedly combines an emphasis on faith as the manifestation of the power and grace of God with what seems as an

46 As maintained by Dahm, *Die Soteriologie des Nikolaus von Kues* and Walter Andreas Euler, "Does Nicholas Cusanus have a theology of the cross?" *Journal of Religion* 80 (2000), 405-420, there is therefore no reason to question the centrality of the cross in the thought of Cusanus.

47 "Maiores nostri omnes concordanter asserunt fidem initium esse intellectus. In omni enim facultate quaedam praesupponunter ut principia prima, quae sola fide apprehenduntur, ex quibus intelligentia tractandorum elicitur."

48 "Fides igitur est in se complicans omne intelligibile. Intellectus autem est fidei explicatio."

49 For a defence of this way of reading Cusanus, see Jasper Hopkins, *Glaube und Vernunft im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues*: *Prolegomena zu einem Umriss seiner Auffassung* (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1996).

50 Offermann, *Christus - Wahrheit des Denkens*, 175: ". . . die Tatsache, daß Jesus Christus die Wahrheit des Menschen ist, ist für Nikolaus von Kues ein . . . erstes Prinzip, auf dem allein die wahre Vernufterkenntnis basiert."

51 ". . . cum ipse in virtute verbi dei, cum quo – quantum in se est – maxime per fidem unitur, imperet; cui nihil resistere potest."

allusion to the Scholastic and Semipelagian condition that this is realized as far as faith formed in love is found in the believer. Still, his approach cannot be adequately interpreted according to the idea of faith as *fides informis* formed by love understood as a human merit.[52] This position was developed within the *via moderna* and is based on its understanding of the human and the divine as separate, though similar entities, thus letting God and the human appear in cooperating similarity when the potentiality of humanity is realized. The Cusan emphasis on participation as unfolded in the shift from an ontology of substance to a metaphysics of relation issuing in a doctrine of salvation as deification is, however, clearly different from this emphasis on separatedness in similarity, and God and human can no longer be seen as completing each other's work within a common framework of cause and effect.[53] The idea of formed faith is in this way combined with an emphasis on the theocentricity of salvation that lets the idea of human merit appear as next to meaningless, and the perspective is opened in the direction of an understanding of salvation by faith as divine gift realized through the union with Christ and manifested in a life of divine love as the realization of what it is to be human.

This seems to be the basics of the understanding of the relation between the human and the divine in *De docta ignorantia*. It presents Cusanus' position as closely related to a strong emphasis on participation and unknowability that connects him with earlier traditions in a way that seems quite unique among the late medieval theologians. His experience of Constantinople seems indeed to have set him off from his contemporaries. Did he retain this emphasis, or is his position somewhat modified in his later works?

4. Finding oneself in the gaze of God according to *De visione Dei*

The subject of *De visione Dei* is to explore how one is seen by God and how one through this divine vision realizes one's own existence: "Ideo ego sum, quia tu me respicis." The goodness of God in this way necessarily communicates itself to everyone capable of receiving it, and this capability

52 See Hägglund, *History of theology*, 190 and 200.

53 On the duality of causation implied in the understanding of true humanity as the realization of its theocentricity, see further Regine Kather, "Human identity and its relation to finite and infinite being," in *Åbo 2008* (2008), 4.

is achieved through likeness with God (*De visione Dei* IV,10).[54] The part of humans through which one is an image of the omnipotence of God, is free will; through the appropriate exercise of free will one will thus grow in conformity to the divine foundation of one's existence.[55] But the strict theocentricity of the thought of Cusanus will not even let such an affirmation of the importance of free will slide in the direction of Semipelagianism, as the realization of its potential is always carried by the loving care of the divine gaze.[56] Because human liberty is interpreted as the manifestation of humanity as created in the image of God, its realization is nothing but the embrace of the loving vision of God.

Through this loving gaze, the unknown God gives himself to be seen by those upon whom his gaze rests.[57] This gaze of God is never turned away. Our separation from God is therefore not caused by his averting his eye from us, but from our turning away and toward something other that is preferred to God. This immovability of the mercy of God always allows for our turning back to him, thus again making it possible to receive his grace.[58] The logical question of how to combine the priority of the omnipresent mercy of God with the fact that not all return to receive it, is not touched by Cusanus in this context. Given the basic presupposition of the unknowability of the divine, it may not be at all solveable within the frame of Cusanus' thought.[59] If that is the case, Cusanus even in this respect differs from Thomas Aquinas, who understands divine providence and

54 In *De visione Dei*, the paragraph numbering in Nicolaus Cusanus, Opera omnia, ed. Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften (Hamburg: Meiner, 1932ff), vol. VI and Cusanus, *Complete philosophical and theological treatises* differ; I follow the one in *Opera omnia*.

55 "Et haec vis, quem a te habeo, in qua virtutis omnipotentiae tuae vivam imaginem teneo, est libera voluntas, per quam possum aut ampliare aut restringere capacitatem gratiae tuae" (IV,11).

56 ". . . quia tu me continua visione amplecteris, quando amorem meum ad te solum converto, quia tu, qui caritas es, ad me solum es conversus" (V,13).

57 "Videndo me das te a me videri, qui es deus absconditus. Nemo te videre potest, nisi in quantum tu das, ut videaris" (V,13).

58 "Si me non respicis oculo gratiae, causa est mea, quia divisus sum a te per aversionem et conversionem ad aliud, quod tibi praefero. Non tamen adhuc avertis te penitus, sed misericordia tua sequitur me, an aliquando velim reverti ad te, ut sim capax gratiae tuae" (V,14).

59 As emphasized by Miller, *Metaphor and dialectic*, 160, any description of God's connection with the created implies the simultaneous validity of contradictory judgements.

predestination as limited by divine foreknowledge, thus letting human liberty limit the priority of the divine in a way that Cusanus does not.[60]

Our understanding of the vision of God may also be deepened through a reflection on sensible phenomena. Cusanus therefore asks his reader to consider a tree, seeking to understand its beginning ("principium"). Before it became a tree, it existed potentially as a seed (VII,22). Cusanus proceeds to a reflection on the potentiality of the seeds of all trees, and from there to the absolute power of this potentiality. To grasp this absoluteness, one must pass beyond everything that can be conceived and enter into the ignorance where there are no seeds and no power at all,[61] i.e., one must try to get an idea of simple, undifferentiated potentiality. This is the beginning or *principium* that gives to each seed the power through which it enfolds as a tree potentially and actually, and even which, beyond this, as unspecified beginning in itself has everything that is unfolded as the world. In its absoluteness, this beginning is identical with God in his unknowability; in God, the tree is thus God as the truth and exemplar of itself.[62] In this adoption of the idea of exemplarism, Cusanus thus rejects the traditional Neoplatonic idea that there is a level of different ideas between God and the world from which God created the world;[63] for Cusanus, there are only God and the world, and all exemplars of the existing things are reduced to the one Exemplar in God.[64] One is thus led to see the face of God as the face of all nature and the art and knowledge of everything knowable.[65]

60 See, e.g., Harry J. McSorley, *Luthers Lehre vom unfreien Willen nach seiner Hauptschrift De Servo Arbitrio im Lichte der biblischen und kirchlichen Tradition* (München: Max Huebner Verlag, 1967), 135-176.

61 ". . . necesse est me transilire omnem seminalem virtutem, quae sciri et concipi potest, et subintrare ignorantiam illam, in que nihil penitus maneat virtutis et vigoris seminalis" (V,23).

62 "Et ita arbor est in te deo meo tu ipse, deus meus, et in te est veritas et exemplar sui ipsius. Similiter et semen arboris in te est veritas et exemplar sui ipsius, et arboris et seminis tu, deus, est veritas et exemplar" (VII,24).

63 According to Cranz, "Cusanus, Luther and the mystical tradition", 100, this rejection of hierarchy is already implied in the rejection of an ontology of substance; cf. note above.

64 Cf. the discussion of exemplarism in *De Docta Ignorantia* II,148-150 and the reflections on this discussion in Miller, *Metaphor and dialectic*, 44-45.

65 "O deus, quorsum me perduxisti, ut videam faciem tuam absolutum esse faciem naturalem omnis naturae, . . . esse artem et scientiam omnis scibilis" (VII,24).

This is, however, an exploration of the relation between the unknowable absolute and everything. One is thus not dependent on approaching this relation through a reflection on trees, one may as well start with oneself and approach absolute beginning in this way. Drawing near to God from this angle, one will rest in the proper relationship to the unknown by realizing one's own potentiality as created in the image of God. God thus tells us to be ourselves and he will be ours: "Sis tu tuus et ego ero tuus" (VII,25). This realization of what one is as the manifestation of the true relationship with God is the goal of human liberty; one must freely choose oneself to have God as one's own.[66] God thus reestablishes the relationship with his most excellent creation by waiting for our choosing to be our own,[67] something that in Cusanus' view is clearly related to the fact that he in *De visione Dei* considers human liberty as the most important manifestation of humanity as created in the image of God.[68]

But this goal will never be realized without God teaching us.[69] The key is therefore to let the senses obey reason and let reason be taught by the word of God, which enlightens us as the reason of all reasons.[70] In this way, one can be one's own in liberty, i.e., without being a slave of sin and thus belonging to God and seeing his face as the realization of salvation.[71]

It is therefore God alone who is able ("solus potens", VII,26) to establish the hope of salvation in the soul. As is everything created, human nature is rooted in God, and one will therefore never come to oneself without realizing this relationship as essential. Differing from everything else,

66 ". . . posuisti in libertate mea, ut sim, si voluero, mei ipsius. Hinc nisi sim mei ipsius, tu non es meus. Necessitares enim libertatem, cum tu non possis esse meus, nisi et ego sim mei ipsius" (VII,25). This is emphasized also in the comment on this passage in Miller, *Metaphor and dialectic*, 157.

67 "Et quia hoc posuisti in libertate mea, non me necessitas, sed exspectas, ut ego eligam mei ipsius esse" (VII,25).

68 Cf. the similar emphasis in Klaus Reinhardt, "Das Streben des Geistes nach Selbstbestätigung, Ruhm und Ehre in der Sicht des Nikolaus von Kues," in *Åbo Conference* (2008), 9-10, and Kather, "Human identity and its relation to finite and infinite being," 3-4.

69 "Quomodo autem ero mei ipsius, nisi tu, domine, docueris me?" (VII,26).

70 "Hoc autem tu me doces, ut sensus oboediat rationi et ratio dominetur. Quando igitur sensus servit rationi, sum mei ipsius. Sed non habet ratio, unde dirigatur, nisi per te, domine, qui es verbum et ratio rationum" (VII,26).

71 "Unde nunc video, si audiero verbum tuum, quod in me loqui non cessat et continue lucet in ratione, ero mei ipsius, liber et non servus peccati, et tu eris meus et dabis mihi videre faciem tuam, et tunc salvus ero" (VII,26).

however, humans are as close to God as to receive liberty, which essentially is a predicate of the divine, as their own main characteristic. The realization of true humanity can therefore never be forced, but is dependent on humans discovering the voice of God as the truth of all truths and therefore also as the path toward true liberty as the reestablishment of one's own essentiality. Cusanus may even consider this voice of God as the means by which nothing is called into being (X,40), though he does not explicitly consider the relationship of the humans with God in this particular perspective.

In the second half of *De visione Dei*, this understanding of the relationship between God and humans is unfolded through the doctrines of Trinity and incarnation. The closest thinkable union ("nexus") is that of sonship ("filiatio"); the sonship of the Son of God is thus the enfolding of all sonships (XVIII,82). As such, he is the reason and exemplar by which God the Father governs all things (XIX,84); one thus only understands the Father through the Son and by being united with God through him (XIX,85). In Christ, the human nature is attracted to the divine in a maximal unity ("unio").[72] This unity differs from the unity of the Trinity by being a unity of the finite with what is infinite; as the exemplar of sonship it is a maximal union, but not unqualifiedly so (XX,87).[73] By seeing the attracting infinite nature in the attracted finite nature of the Son, humans are drawn to God (XX,88); therefore, no one can come to the Father unless one in this way is drawn by the Father (XXI,93).[74] The reason is that a direct participation in divine nature in its absolute simplicity is impossible; the union beyond all understanding of the infinite with the finite in the person of Christ is therefore the precondition for deification in humans (XXIII,101).

72 As emphasized by Walter Andreas Euler, "'Oboedire est vivere': Obedience and Freedom According to the Brixen Sermons of Nicholas of Cusa," in (Åbo, 2008), it is thus in the humanity of Christ one has the true model of what it is to be truly human, as this is manifested above all in complete obedience to God.

73 Louis Dupré, "The mystical theology of Cusanus' 'De visione Dei'", in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki, (Leiden, New York, Köln, 1996), 205-220, 219 interprets this reservation as the expression of a tendency toward Nestorianism. But as maintained, e.g., by Miller, *Metaphor and dialectic*, 176, the (incomprehensible) unity of the divine and human in Christ is still essential.

74 Quotation from John 6:44. As observed by Miller, *Metaphor and dialectic*, 177, the *coincidentia oppositorum* of the unity of divine and human in Christ is thus extended to humans.

This union of Creator and creation, however, represents contradictories that offend those who merely consider themselves wise; it is therefore only what Cusanus calls the small believers ("parvuli creduli") who grasp this revelation (XXI,91). The intellect must by faith subject itself to the word of God and listen to the inner doctrine of the supreme teacher,[75] which basically consists of two elements, faith and love (XXIV,113).[76] The intellect approaches the word through faith, and through love it is united with it.[77] The intellect finds the word of God within itself, but will still have to obtain it through prayer as the means by which the word augments faith by communicating its own light.[78] Cusanus thus again refers to the doctrine of exemplarism as the foundation of the understanding of deification as both the reestablishment of true humanity and therefore "intra intellectum", and given from outside, and therefore dependent on the illumination of the intellect by its attaining to the word of God in prayer. And the consummation of this union rests in the realization of divine love in and through the human.

The interpretation of the death and resurrection of Christ in *De visione Dei* closely parallels the one in *De docta ignorantia*; the inseparable union with absolute life carried Christ through death (XXIII,104) and thus established immortality as a possibility for all humanity (XXIII,106).[79] This establishment of love and immortality as the goal of humanity holds a considerable attraction; naturally, one should therefore hasten into the joy of the Lord. But one is inevitably held back by the empty delight of the sensible world; the utter dependence on the power of God to unite us with him therefore remains as the last word: "Trahe me, domine, quia nemo pervenire poterit ad te nisi a te tractus" (XXV,119).

The main emphases from *De docta ignorantia* thus clearly remain. The Christological foundation of the understanding of the relationship between the human and divine remains the same, as does the understanding of the

75 "Oportet autem omnem intellectum per fidem verbo dei se subiecere et attentissme internam illam summi magistri doctrinam audire, et audiendo, quid in eo loquatur dominus, perficietur" (XXIV,113).

76 "Duo tantum docuisti, Christe salvator, fidem et dilectionem" (ibid.).

77 "Per fidem accedit intellectus ad verbum, per dilectionem unitur ei" (ibid.).

78 "Verbum autem dei intra ipsum [intellectum] est, et non est opus, ut quaerat extra se, quia intus reperiet et accedere poterit per fidem. Et ut proprius accedere possit, poterit precibus obtinere. Nam verbum adaugebit fidem per communicationem luminis sui" (ibid.).

79 Cf. *De docta ignorantia* III,8,228.

realization of this fellowship through faith and love. But particularly concerning two aspects of the relationship, Cusanus' understanding seems to have evolved beyond the level of the former work. He now gives a considerably more profound exploration of the dialectics of human liberty, emphasizing both its reality as liberation from any kind of coercion and slavery both in relation to God and sin, and at the same time underlining its theocentricity as the realization of the human nature as created in the image of God.[80] One is thus dependent on God for realizing one's own liberty. And he deepens this perspective even further by applying the doctrine of exemplarism, i.e., the idea that all that exists, has its beginning in God, on the exploration of the relation between God and human in a way that is not seen in the former work. This enables him to combine an appeal to self-understanding as the proper way of approaching God ("Sis tu tuus et ego ero tuus") with an equally strong emphasis on the understanding of an adequate relationship with God as pure gift: "Trahe me, domine, quia nemo pervenire poterit . . .". The new exploration of the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* implies that the idea of a meritorious human contribution, which in *De docta ignorantia* is alluded to, but never developed, has now disappeared.[81] When the realization of true humanity is considered as the reestablishment of what was originally given, there simply is no place for such a concept.

The paradoxes of the relationship are thus the same, but it seems fair to conclude that their implications are better understood in *De visione Dei.* Are these perspectives even further developed in Cusanus' latest works?

5. Divine gift and descending wisdom in *De possest* and *De venatione sapientiae*

The basic idea of *De possest* is to explore the implication of the understanding of God as the absolute actualization of all possibility (*De possest* 14).[82] This naturally leads to an emphasis of the relationship with

80 To emphasize the difference between *De docta ignorantia* and *De visione Dei* to the extent that one can only find "die einseitige Allmacht Gottes" in the former (so Kazuhiko Yamaki, "Die doppelte Struktur der Subjektivität im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues," in (Åbo, 2008), 4), may, however, be somewhat onesided.

81 When used at all, even the concept of merit is now interpreted theocentrically: " . . . qui per te [Ihesum] et tua revelatione ipsum [patrem] videre merebitur" (XXI,93).

82 Cf. the anticipation of this idea in *De docta ignorantia* I,22,68.

God as actualized by him, thus emphasizing the understanding of the fellowship as gift.[83] The spirit of Christ thus is the illuminating power of the one who is born blind, letting him acquire faith and see God.[84] Reflecting further on the story in John 9 of the blind man who did not understand how he was healed, Cusanus is explicit that the precise understanding of how illumination from Christ comes about always escapes us: "Neque dici potest quomodo hoc fiat" (32). Cusanus therefore concentrates on the negative aspects of salvation in a way that gives his words an emphasis that, had they been written some years later, probably would have been considered as a quite unambiguous sign of Lutheranism: One must despair of oneself and turn to Christ, clinging to the promise of Christ by sure faith, believing that one will not be cast away. Christ will then surely manifest himself to the believer[85] and make him his dwelling place with the Father, so that God can be seen.[86]

It is the doctrine of Christ that he thus provides what nature denies[87] in him who with unwavering faith receives Christ as the word of God so that he, believing with the faith in which Christ is present, can do all things by

83 "Nisi [deus] posse videri deducatur in actum per ipsum qui est actualitas omnis potentiae per sui ipsius ostensionem, non videbitur" (31).

84 "Est enim [spiritus Christi] virtus illuminativa nati caeci, qui per fidem visum acquirit" (32).

85 In *De Possest* 36, the manifestation of the Father through the word is even referred to the omnipotence of the word of the Almighty, who speaks and it is done (Ps 33:9; Vulgata 32:9).

86 "Postquam enim homo est desperatus de se ipso, ita quod se tamquam infirmum et penitus impotentem ad desiderati apprehensionem certus est, convertit se ad amatum suum, induba fide promissioni Christi inhaerens, et pulsat oratione devotissima, credens non posse derelinqui, si non cessaverit pulsare Christum, qui suis nihil negat. Indubie assequetur quaesitum. Apparebit enim Christus dei verbum et manefestabit se illi et cum patre suo ad ipsum veniet et mansionem faciet, ut videri possit" (ibid.). The seeing refers to Rom 1,20, which is the main biblical text of this work (*De possest* 2).

87 The idea of nature denying what unites humans with God surely emphasizes the understanding of unification as gift, but may be at variance with Cusanus' understanding of salvation as the reestablishment of human nature as created in the image of God. It should probably be considered as an example of Cusanus not always being quite consistent in his terminology. In *De Possest* 36, we even have the idea that Christ elevates our spirit above the nature; these are, however, the words of Abbot John, and may not precisely reflect Cusanus' own understanding.

means of the word that dwells in him through faith.[88] But even when stating the gift-aspect as onesidedly as this, Cusanus will not let go of the dialectics of paradoxality; to see God is a gift, but it still requires the desire for it to be perfected till it reaches the level of loving God with one's whole heart. Such a person also loves Christ as the Son of God, and Christ dwells in him through faith (35).

In *De venatione sapientiae* Cusanus summarizes his life's intellectual endeavour through the metaphor of hunting for wisdom in ten different fields which all are central concepts from his earlier works: *Docta ignorantia, possest, non aliud, lux, laus, unitas, aequalitas, nexus, terminus* and *ordo*. Of particular interest as further explorations of the relationship of humans to God are the fields of *laus, nexus* and *ordo*. All created things naturally praise God (*De venatione sapientiae* XIX,54), through whom they are what they are. And with a quotation from Dionysius, Cusanus asserts that the key to the realization of this praise is the understanding of what is participation of what emanates from the unknown source of being, as divine matters in their own beginning are intellectually unattainable.[89] Idolatry, i.e., giving divine praise to a creature, is therefore sheer irrationality ("insania . . . caecae et seductae mentis," XIX,54).

As a microcosm composed of intelligence, human nature and a body, humans are particularly well suited for praising God (XX,56). But since they thus also have free choice, they may cease from praising him. If they do, however, they are reproached by their own nature and therefore inexcusable.[90] But when one uses free choice to praise what is properly praiseworthy, the whole human being itself becomes praiseworthy through the adequate cooperation of nature and choice.[91] Even in this work, then, Cusanus through the concept of participation strongly emphasizes that the realization of the proper relationship to God at the same time is the

88 "Illa est . . . Christi doctrina, ipsum . . . omnia implere quae natura negat in eo, qui ipsum ut verbum dei indubitata fide recipit, ut credens in ea fide, in qua est Christus, potens sit ad omnia medio verbi in eo per fidem habitantis" (33).

89 "Nam attestante Dionysio divina sola participatione noscuntur. Quomodo enim 'in suo principio et sua sede sint', nullus intellectus attingit" (*De venatione sapientiae* XVIII,52).

90 "Ex quo certum est hominem, qui habet liberum arbitrium, quando a laudibus dei cessat et dei verbum non audit, quod in ipso et conscientia eius loquitur nec vult intelligere et oboedire, ut bene agat, inexcusabilis est, cum a propria natura reprehendatur" (XIX,54).

91 "Si [laudabilia] eliguntur, totus homo tam ex naturalibus quam arbitrii electione laudabilis perfecte deum laudat" (XX,58).

realization of true humanity. The idea that the gift of the divine is at variance with what is naturally human that was alluded to in *De possest*, has again disappeared.

This understanding of participation is deepened through Cusanus' analysis of the relevance of the Trinitarian concepts of oneness, equality and union[92] for the understanding even of what is created. Since all existing things are what they are from the eternal Trinity, they imitate the Trinity. Oneness limits existing things by setting their limits, equality is the form of what is thus restricted,[93] and union is the loving bond that lets each existing thing appear as itself.[94] Love is thus something most natural, and this loving spirit of union pervades all things, particularly the intellectual nature, which is in itself spiritual, as the union of its oneness and being (or equality) is intellectual. This intellectual union cannot fail, as understanding is nourished by immortal wisdom.[95] The union (love) of the intellectual nature is thus inclined to wisdom and adapts the intellectual nature to what it loves by nature. For the spirit of wisdom descends in the spirit of the intellect as what is desired in what desires according to the fervor of the desire, and transforms the spirit of the intellect unto itself.[96] According to Cusanus, there are few philosophers who have recognized this, wont as they are to fail concerning the understanding of the "principium . . . conexionis" (XXV,73).

For a biblically informed thinker as Cusanus, wisdom obviously has a Christological significance,[97] and the descent of wisdom should thus be understood as an allusion to the incarnation. This passage thus strongly emphasizes the idea of deification through union with Christ as the way to truth and knowledge. The element of encouragement and exhortation is not lost; union is realized according to the fervor of the desire. But because the

92 Cf. *De docta ignorantia* I,7-9.

93 Unequal participation in equality is thus for Cusanus the reason for the difference of things (XXIII,70).

94 "Unitas est fluxibilitatis constrictio, aequalitas uniti et constricti formatio, nexus utriusque amorosa conexio" (XXIV,72).

95 "Nexus vero amoris intellectualis non potest deficere nec exspirare, cum intelligere pascatur immortali sapientia" (XXV,73).

96 "Spiritus igitur sapientiae in spiritum intellectus, ut desideratum in desiderans, secundum fervorem desiderii descendit et convertit spiritum intelligentiae ad se" (ibid.).

97 Explicitly so, e.g., in XV,45 and XXXII,96.

foundation of everything is the understanding of the existence of all there is, including and particularly the human intellect, as participation in the Triune God, the union with the divine as the realization of the natural should be considered as the particular emphasis of this passage. And as Cusanus sees it, thinkers who tend to emphasize separation to the extent that union and participation are lost, will never get the point.

The order of the universe is the first and most precise image of the eternal and incorruptible wisdom. The microcosm of the human being unites the sensible and the intelligible (XXXII,95). And when we die, our mortal nature can rise to the level of the immortal spirit through the power of the word of God as incarnated in Christ. The humanity of Christ is thus not only, as with all other humans, a union of a temporal (sensible) and a perpetual (intellectual) nature, but it is humanity as assumed by God the Creator and thus by eternal immortality. In the conformity to Christ, which is achieved through faith and love,[98] even mortal humans will thus attain immortality, which is the order of regeneration (XXXII,96). In this way Cusanus recapitulates his main emphasis in a way that is philosophically less ambitious, but more explicitly theological.

The pattern established by the interpretation of *De visione Dei* thus repeats itself in Cusanus' later works. The basic thought structures from *De docta ignorantia* are intact, but they are deepened and developed in new directions. In *De possest*, it is particularly the understanding of the proper relationship with God as gift that is emphasized, resulting in an understanding of the human contribution as mainly consisting in despair on one's own behalf. In *De venatione sapientiae*, the understanding of the Trinity is lifted almost directly from *De docta ignorantia*, but given a new application quite similar to the way in which the doctrine of exemplarism was used in *De visione Dei*. In *De venatione sapientiae*, Cusanus finds a Trinitarian structure in all creation, particularly in the human intellect, with the consequence that the descent of divine wisdom through the incarnation is seen as essential for humans to realize what they are. They are thus united with immortality as established through the death and resurrection of Christ, which in this way enables a manifestation of true humanity beyond what is humanly possible. Even concerning the goal of the relationship between God and humans, the paradoxality of the regeneration of the natural through the divine gift that surpasses it, is thus retained.

98 ". . . si ipsi mediatori nostro conformes fuerimus, quod fide fit et amore"(XXXII,96).

6. Some concluding reflections

In relation to the alternatives of late medieval and 16th century Scholasticism, the Thomist combination of Platonist participation and Aristotelian rationality and causation, the Scotist idea of similarity in separation and the Tridentine compromise of the two, it is particularly the *via moderna* doctrine of the separation of the human and the divine that obviously is at odds with the emphasis of Cusanus. Admittedly, the difference and incompatibility between the Creator and creation is the very foundation from which Cusanus works. But as this in his view implies that the unknown is the foundation of all there is, the emphasis on the unknowability of the divine is interpreted in a way that still lets him look for the connectedness of everything through the idea of participation of creation in the divine. This connects him with the tradition that through the work of Dionysius also influenced Thomas Aquinas, thus letting the two share some basic elements in the understanding of both God and the world. But one does not in Cusanus find the Thomist tendency to weaken the paradoxality of the relationship between God and the human through the concepts of cause and merit. On the contrary, Cusanus' dependence on the idea of the coincidence of opposites implies that he rejects the idea of salvation as the result of God and humans cooperating within a common framework of cause and effect. This is then replaced by an appeal to human liberty understood exclusively as divine gift, its realization therefore consisting in nothing but participation of humans in the divine. For this reason Cusanus can understand the contribution of the human part as the renunciation of sin as difference, thus letting the concept of merit gradually disappear from his way of thinking.

In doing so, Cusanus in many respects comes quite close to some of the basic tenets in the thought of Martin Luther. They share a similar emphasis on the unknowability of the divine,[99] and they both reject the interpretation of divine presence in substantial categories for an emphasis on personal relationship.[100] The understanding of the realization of true humanity through the union with Christ based on appropriation of Chalcedonian two

99 See Reinhold Weier, *Das Thema vom verborgenen Gott von Nikolaus von Kues zu Martin Luther* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1967).

100 Cranz, "Cusanus, Luther and the mystical tradition", 101.

nature Christology is obviously a strong connecting factor,[101] as is the emphasis on the realization of this union through the human despair of oneself, particularly as maintained in *De possest*. Common to both is also the understanding that the theocentricity of true humanity necessarily issues in an emphasis on the dialectics of human liberty.[102] There are also parallels in the understanding of faith as created by the word of God from nothing, even if this is considerably more important for Luther's approach than it is for Cusanus'.[103] In Luther's thought, there is also an understanding of all there is as already contained in the providence of God that may not be far removed from the Cusan understanding of God as the actuality of all potentiality.[104] What one will not find, however, in the works of Cusanus is an application of this understanding of divine providence to the understanding of the salvation of the individual. There is therefore in the thought of Cusanus no parallel to Luther's integration even of the biblical doctrine of election in this perspective.[105]

By his emphasis on the realization of humanity through participation in the divine Cusanus was able to explore the relationship between God and humans in a way that lets God appear as the determining part of the relationship without nullifying the idea of human liberty. He thus not only presents a perspective that is quite unique among the other late medieval and early modern approaches; he has also given an important contribution

101 Both are underlined in Metzke, "Nicolaus von Cues und Martin Luther". On Luther's Christology, see further Johann Anselm Steiger, "The communicatio idiomatum as the axle and motor of Luther's theology", *Lutheran Quarterly* (2000), 125-158.

102 Cf. the discussion of Luther's approach in Knut Alfsvåg, "God's fellow workers: The understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine in Maximus Confessor and Martin Luther." *Studia theologica* (2008), 175-193.

103 Cf. the emphasis on "Promissio als befreiende und gewissmachende Sprachhandlung" in Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie: eine Vergegenwärtigung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 46-53. Cusanus refers to this perspective in De visione Dei X,40.

104 Cf. the following statement from Luther's *De servo arbitrio:* "Omnia quae facimus . . . etsi nobis uidentur mutabiliter et contingenter fieri, reuera tamen fiunt necessario et immutabiliter, se Dei uoluntatem spectes" (Martin Luther, D. *Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Bühlau, 1883-1990), 18,615,31-33). This seems to be quite close to what is maintained in De docta ignorantia I,22,69.

105 Cf. Weier, *Das Thema vom verborgenen Gott von Nikolaus von Kues zu Martin Luther*, 195: "Er [Cusanus] har das Problem der Prädestination nur gleichsam in Einkleidung behandelt."

to the understanding of a problem that is still fundamental both within philosophy, theology and ecumenical debate.

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PART II

4

„IDIOTA DE MENTE": Cusanus' Position in the Debate between Aristotelianism and Platonism

Agnieszka Kijewska

1. Historians of philosophy, who are fond of classifications and divisions, still debate the question, whether Nicholas of Cusa should be regarded as the last great thinker of the Middle Ages (as he is in Etienne Gilson's *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*), or rather should we look upon him as belonging to the time of the Renaissance. This controversy goes back to his own day: at that time Italian humanists harboured many prejudices with regard to the "barbarian" ways and manner of speech characteristic of *Germania*[1], on the other hand Cusanus himself used to stress his national identity and in the preface to his *De concordantia catholica* spoke openly about his Latin and his style, which were, in the eyes of the humanists, far from polished and elegant[2]. Of course, there is much irony in such self-depreciation, which is, however, indicative of an outstanding trait of Cusanus' attitude, namely his insistence on looking for true speculative depth even in superficial debates and controversies, always

1 Cf. M. de Certeau, *The Gaze. Nicholas of Cusa*, „Diacritics" Fall 1987, p. 4 f.

2 Cf. Nicolai de Cusa, *De concordantia catholica. Liber primus*, praef. 2, ed. G. Kallen, *Opera omnia* XIV/1, Hamburgi 1964, p. 2-3: "...verum et eloquio et stilo et forma litterarum antiqua videmus omnes delectari, maxime quidem Italos, qui non satiantur dissertissimo, ut natura Latini sunt, huius generis litterali eloquio, sed primorum vestigia petentes Graecis litteris maximum etiam studium impendunt. Nos vero Alemanni, etiamsi non longe aliis ingenio minores ex discrepanti stellarum situ essemus effecti, tamen in ipso suavissimo eloquii usu aliis plerumque non nostro cedimus vitio, cum non nisi labore maximo tamquam resistenti naturae vim facientes. Latinum recte fari valeamus".