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Convergent Logos of Various Forms and Types of Mystics - Areopagitic Theognosy and Cusanian Coincidentia Oppositorum

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Abstract:

This research dwells on a comparative analysis of the various forms of Eastern and Western Christian mysticism. It focuses mainly on the influence of Saint Dionysus the Areopagite's mystical theology on the Renaissance cardinal Nicolaus Cusanus' theological-philosophical thought. This influence was first and foremost of Neo-platonic origin and it constituted an answer to the intemperance of the logical-dogmatic thought of medieval theology, the plenary expression of a type of Neo-Aristotelianism that often proved to be an incomplete knowledge pattern.

Keywords:

Logos, Nicolaus Cusanus, Saint Dionysus the Areopagite, Areopagitic Theognosy, Coincidentia Oppositorum

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The goal of a paper on the topic described in the title is the correct perception of the differences between the two thinkers, namely Pseudo-Dionysus and Nicolaus Cusanus. They established, on the one hand, a mystical theology specific to the Eastern spirituality, and, on the other hand, a religious philosophy proper to the Western Christian tradition.

Divine infinity and comprehension are approached in different manners by the two authors; however, particular Areopagitic influences may be detected in Cusanus' speculative thinking. This divine infinity is possible due to existence in the universe of several opposites that the human mind is able to comprehend thanks to the so-called *docta ignorantia*. According to Cusanus, this *docta ignorantia* emerges as a logical and epistemic method, which originates in the considerations related to the knowledge of the world expressed by authors such as Meister Eckhart, Heinrich Seuse, Bonaventura, Augustine and, of course, Dionysus the Areopagite. Cusanus' idea has Renaissance roots, as he tries to institute a science able to respond to the rigorous demands of scientific knowledge, and at the same time to be grounded on mystical experience outcomes. Cusanus' theory of knowledge thus focuses on the idea of a unity that the human mind, "contaminated" by otherness, must reach.

Cusanus, as a good Neo-platonic follower, replaces soul (*animus*) on the highest level of knowledge, above intellect (*intellectus*), reason (*ratio*) and, lastly, senses (*sensus*). Soul (*animus*) is able to provide ultimate knowledge, that is knowledge on the cause and origin of the world. Soul is the one that is able to fathom the mystery of the coincidence of opposites and to discover the mystery of the essence of God. Therefore, Nicholas of Cusa's idea of knowledge is idealist and at the same time it is a precursor of the modern mathematical knowledge.

Cusanus builds his knowledge of the world pattern bearing in mind the idea of spiritual mathematics. Spiritual mathematics leads man to the highest personal knowledge of the ultimate truths. Mathematical science is designed to make possible the fusion between human soul and the Soul of the World. Spiritual mathematics counteracts scholastic logic, which provided an incomplete knowledge of the world. The German thinker revives the mystical Pythagorean spirit of mathematics³. According to him, "mathematics assists us very greatly in apprehending various divine truths"⁴. Cusanus argues that getting to know God and the divine truths by means of mathematical numbers and symbols is a safe way, due to their undeniable reliability.

³ Cusanus himself invokes Pythagoras while he asks himself rhetorically if the latter was not actually "the first philosopher [who] both in name and in fact, considers all investigation of truth to be by means of numbers" (Cusanus, 2008, p.85).

⁴ This is actually the name of the 11th chapter of *De docta ignorantia*.

Cusanus' Logos is the outcome of a disclosed experience. And Cusanus' revelation of knowledge is that human intelligence is unable to have access to the ultimate truth. Therefore, Cusanus will not go all the way and establish a science based on observation and investigation, and instead he will choose the path of a Christian mysticism, of Neo-platonic origin. This kind of knowledge does not attempt to comprehend God by reason, as its final goal is the identification with the Creator in the sense of *theosis*. This process does not rely on the assumptions of reaching a Personal God, but an inner one. Cusanus considers the predominance of a positive thinking as limited. A personal knowledge of God is not possible through thinking techniques alone.

Inner knowledge is more valuable than exterior knowledge, based only on specific and discriminating assertions. According to Cusanus, the access to the Original Gist is possible both by knowledge and by ignorance. He argues that the theological truth is reluctant to its recording in either written or spoken forms. Therefore, getting to know God depends neither on "*knowing*", nor on "*not knowing*". This idea of an occult yet exact knowledge of the world is also to be found in the Areopagitic writings. The idea of knowledge is grounded on terms such as Wissen and Nicht-Wissen, just as the cataphatic and apophatic paths in Dionysus the Areopagite's theognosia. However, this knowledge of ignorance finds its roots in Socrates' epistemic postulate "*I know that I know nothing*". This meaning of the term nothing is abyssal and yet substantial. From this standpoint, both in Areopagitic theognosia and in Cusanus' coincidentia oppositorum, the Logos is not meant to explain, but to cast some light on mystery as such. This is actually the fundamental difference between Neo-Platonism and Neo-Aristotelianism, as Neo-Platonism attempts to exclude dogmatic knowledge, where the ego plays an essential role. Natural rationalism is thus put between brackets, as it is unable to account for the finiteness of knowledge. The purpose of mystic knowledge is not to distinguish true from false, as they are irrelevant for the achieving of theosis, that is of Deification. From this point of view, one may speak of the logos of the inner self, both in the Areopagite's and Cusanus' mysticism. Due to the inner logos, the image of the universe reflected in the two types of mysticism is an image in progress, like an expression that attempts to be self-explanatory. Therefore, considering Dionysus the Areopagite's writings as his starting point, Cusanus intends to achieve an epistemological paradigm of inwardness.

In Cusanus, the reproval of Aristotelianism includes also this aspect, as the path towards God should not pass only through dogmatic knowledge, but also through wisdom. The reconsideration of the presence of wisdom in the act of knowledge is obviously a Platonic topic. In Cusanus, the Logos is more than a simple act of natural knowledge, it is disclosed knowledge. Therefore, in his afterword to the edition in Romanian of the book *De Docta Ignorantia*, Andrei

Bereschi argues that "if in Aristotle the possibility of logos was related to the plus-sensation area of man, to his natural endowment that enables him to sense good, evil, etc., here (that is in Cusanus), the impossibility of logos is related to the migration of the natural premonition towards the event of revelation"⁵. This would also include a rejection of argumentative theology in favor of mystic theology and mystic philosophy.

The statement of the impossibility of squeezing God into a concept is the common grounds of both Dionysus' and Cusanus' mysticism. Cusanus, in his *De Docta Ignorantia*, focuses on the fact that Christian theology can only be based on experience, which places the living above dogma. Cusanus opposes intellectual realities to those originating in mystic empiricism.

As a true Areopagitic follower, the German philosopher and theologian argues that the true Christian theology is acategorical and under no circumstances categorial-dogmatic, like scholastic theology. Such theology is first and foremost practical, as the intellect has to be emptied of any natural categories before achieving the inward quietness and peace specific to divine knowledge. This knowledge quietness is the basic requirement that has to be met by man who wants to encounter God, whose desire is the Deification into Logos. From this point of view, Dionysus' theognosia and Cusanus' coincidentia oppositorum reveal two types of mysticism with extremely convergent cognitive teleologies. The assumption of the categorial impossibility of divine knowledge is a bridge resting on the pillars of Christian Neo-Platonism, between the Eastern and the Western medieval Christian theologies. The categorial incomprehensibility of God becomes in Cusanus a programmatic text, which will influence the whole Western thought tradition. The fascination for this mystery impenetrability will inhabit the writings of numerous Western thinkers, who will not actually and explicitly deny Aristotelianism.

On the border between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Cusanus establishes a spiritual knowledge paradigm and he will therefore attract a considerable number of exegeses from what we currently and brutally call, academically speaking, vulgar spiritualism. The exegeses of Cusanus' doctrine easily forget his important contribution to rational philosophy. Both Cusanus and especially Dionysus the Areopagite are the rightful precursors of methodic Cartesian doubt. The apophatic and the cataphatic paths, via negativa and via afirmativa, are nothing else than crossroads of the human mind. One should bear in mind here that Cusanus' doctrine will have substantial repercussions on modern German philosophy, as both Kantianism and Hegelianism find their roots in Cusanus' metaphysic rationalism.

⁵ Nicolaus Cusanus, *De Docta ignorantia*, Polirom Publishing, Iași 2008, p. 567.

Cusanus' doctrine, however, which is the result of the familiarity of the German theologian with the Areopagitic writings, had other spiritual echoes as well, and we refer here to the ancient Chinese thought and to some forms of vedantin mysticism. We may extend this influence to several Romanian philosophers as well, as they embraced and even enlarged upon Cusanus' theory of knowledge. For instance, Lucian Blaga, in his *Eon Dogmatic*, develops an antinomic theory expressed in three ways, that is dogmatic, dialectic and acategorial, respectively. Bearing them in mind, he creates an epistemological minus-knowledge model.

One may therefore notice that the different forms and types of mysticism – Dionysus the Areopagite's theognosia and Cusanus' coincidentia oppositorum – became important gnoseological models for later philosophers and also part of the considerable European Christian inheritance.

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