

***Grasping the Divine essence: Cusanus (1401-1464) and Wenck (†1460)***  
***Captant l'essència divina: Cusanus (1401-1464) i Wenck (†1460)***  
***La comprensión de la esencia divina: Cusanus (1401-1464) y Wenck (†1460)***  
***Comprendendo a essência divina: Cusanus (1401-1464) e Wenck (†1460)***

Marica COSTIGLIOLO<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In this aim, I analyse some theories of *De docta ignorantia* (1440) of Nicholas of Cusa, criticized by Johannes Wenck. Some interesting themes emerge from the dispute between Cusanus and Wenck: for example, on the threshold of modernity the way thinkers use concepts and words to define transcendence, time, difference. Through this dispute, the end of the Middle Ages appears as a rich intellectual period and a harbinger of continuous insights and new interpretations.

**Keywords:** Transcendence – Difference – Dialogue – Nicholas of Cusa.

**Resumen:** En esta investigación analizo algunas teorías del *De docta ignorantia* (1440) de Nicolás de Cusa, criticadas por Johannes Wenck. De la disputa entre Cusan y Wenck surgen algunos temas interesantes: por ejemplo, en el umbral de la modernidad, el modo en que los pensadores utilizan conceptos y palabras para definir la trascendencia, el tiempo, la diferencia. A través de esta disputa, el final de la Edad Media aparece como un período intelectual rico y un presagio de intuiciones continuas y nuevas interpretaciones.

**Palabras clave:** Transcendencia – Diferencia – Diálogo – Nicolás de Cusa.

ENVIADO: 21.09.2024  
ACEPTADO: 13.10.2024

\*\*\*

---

<sup>1</sup> Senior Researcher at [Associazione culturale la prima radice](http://www.associazioneculturalelaprimaradice.it), Italy. E-mail: [marica.costigliolo@gmail.com](mailto:marica.costigliolo@gmail.com).



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

## I. *De ignota litteratura*

When in 1440 Nicholas of Cusa wrote *De docta ignorantia*, his work was unfavourably received by Johannes Wenck, a theologian who taught at the University of Heidelberg.<sup>2</sup> Johannes Wenck confuted the theses expressed in *De docta ignorantia* in his essay *De ignota litteratura*.

Wenck was born at Herrenberg at the end of 14<sup>th</sup> century. After having studied in Paris, where he achieved the qualification of Master of Arts, he attended the University of Heidelberg, where he obtained a degree in theology, and was appointed Chancellor three times (1435, 1444, 1451). As a delegate at the Council of Basel, he had sided against Pope Eugenius' position, and later, against Nicholas of Cusa himself, who had definitely broken with the conciliar movement in 1438. In *Apologia de docta ignorantia*<sup>3</sup>, Nicholas writes that Wenck, who had been his teacher at Heidelberg, continued to persist in the conciliar cause despite the failure of the movement.

From a theological point of view, Wenck opposed Meister Eckhart's teachings, and in philosophy he was a supporter of Thomism and of its rediscovery and adhesion to the Aristotelian philosophy, but he was also interested in the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius. He wrote also a commentary on the treatise *Hierarchia celestialis*. *De ignota litteratura* was written few years after *De docta ignorantia*, and according to the dating given by Rudolf Haubst<sup>4</sup>, it should have been written between 26 March 1442 and summer 1443.

Wenck aims at dismantling Cusanus' theses, especially those concerning equality.<sup>5</sup> According to Cusanus, a thing becomes more similar or more equal to another to infinity. This corollary, Wenck argues, undermines the distinction between being and

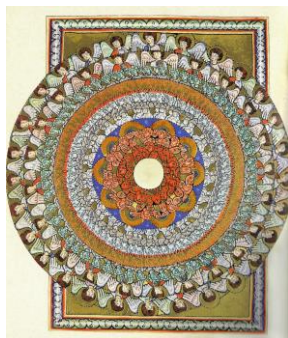
---

<sup>2</sup> *Mirabilia Journal* dedicated one of its volumes to Nicholas of Cusa: COSTA, Ricardo da; SANTOS, Bento Silva (orgs.). *Mirabilia Journal* 19 (2014/2): [Nicholas of Cusa in Dialogue](#).

<sup>3</sup> *Apologia de docta ignorantia*, in Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera omnia*, book IV.

<sup>4</sup> R. Haubst, *Die Wege der Christologische Manuductio*, in MFCG, 16 (1984).

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Wenck, *De ignota litteratura*, 27; 29, 32. 28; 1,2.



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

gender, as according to Aristotle's categories, equality is based on quantity, similarity and quality, which establish themselves as well-delimited characteristics of the entity. Wenck's argumentation proceeds taking Aristotle's work as reference, from which he draws to confute Nicholas' work. Using several references to the Holy Scriptures, Wenck has a quite polemical reaction towards the first corollary of the third thesis of *De docta ignorantia*<sup>6</sup>, according to which all the opposites harmoniously coincide in the *Maximum*, which represents all that can be.

Wenck dwells upon two other corollaries drawn from *De docta ignorantia*<sup>7</sup>, and in this case, too, he frequently uses the verb *tollere*<sup>8</sup> ("removing") referring to the destructive action systematically carried out by Cusanus towards the theological and philosophical tradition, as in his opinion, Nicholas of Cusa destroys the very foundations of the Christological doctrine.<sup>9</sup> Wenck's final comment affirms that Cusa's theories are dangerous from a theological, an ecclesiological and, in general, from a cognitive point of view.<sup>10</sup>

The main characteristic of Cusanus' philosophy, which is inspired by Dionysius the Areopagite, consists in assuming there is an actual relation among the human being, God, and universe. Man, indeed, cannot intellectually grasp the divine essence, despite his endless attempts to attain the ultimate truth.

Through the arithmetical and geometrical illustrations of his "learned ignorance" doctrine, Cusanus argues that the human mind is inescapably grounded, in its way to knowledge, in the finite world. Though the mind longs for knowing God, it is limited by the finite universe. Therefore, it is necessary to resort to dogmatic statements to define the divine nature.

---

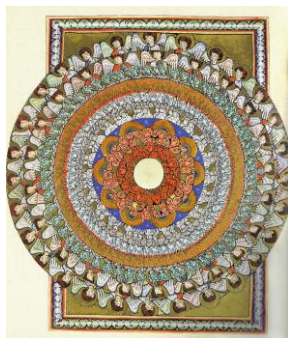
<sup>6</sup> Ivi, I, 4, 11: 13-15; 12: 1-5.

<sup>7</sup> *De docta ignorantia* III, 2 (191: 8-11; 194: 5-6; 193: 2-3) e *De docta ignorantia* III, 9 (233: 11-12; 233: 12-13, 17-18).

<sup>8</sup> *De ignota litteratura*, 29; 15-19, p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> *De ignota litteratura*, 37; 31. 35; 38; 1-10, p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> *De ignota litteratura*, 41; 7-10.



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Trascendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

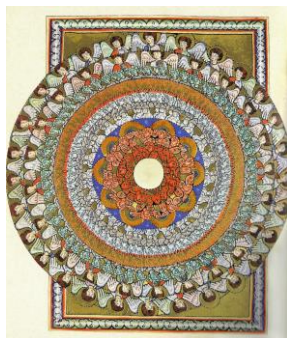
In a textual communication analysis, the action carried out by Cusanus as regards the exposition of his theory of learned ignorance could be summarized, according to Assman's theory on knowledge transmission, as a hypolepsis of the canon, an increase and a modification of the canon, and in this case, of the non-contradiction principle, which is not destroyed, as Wenck charges, but is instead reaffirmed basing on the influences of mystic theology.

Through a conceptual increase of Aristotle's principle, Cusanus comes to a modification of the cognitive process, which leads him to achieve a pluralistic and perspective vision of truth, a vision that will be at the base of the interreligious dialogue of *De pace fidei*.

## II. Understanding Trascendence

Wenck's criticism towards Cusanus concerning his denial of the non-contradiction principle is scarcely grounded, since we can ascertain that this principle is actually at the origin of the theory of the *coincidentia*. Starting in fact from the effectiveness of the Aristotelian principle in the logical sphere, Cusanus affirms its insufficiency in the speculative sphere. Which implications does the theory of knowledge, as Nicholas formulates it, involve in the sphere of religion? This elaborate cognitive theory has an enormous influence on religious dialogue. If it is possible to affirm that the absolute, God, is the coincidence of the opposites, any definition of the absolute is clearly insufficient for embracing its essence.

Negative theology, which inspires to Dionysius' writings, has, according to Nicholas, an essential characteristic: it does not allow to fall down into idolatry. Affirmative theology attributes names to the divine being according to a merely rational proceeding (*analogia entis*) and, since the absolute is in every thing, it may lead to a dangerous pantheism. On the contrary, thanks to negative theology, we do not run this risk, as the only way we have at our disposal for achieving some understanding of the absolute consists in denying the possibility to know it through the rational and logic categories. The accusation made by Wenck to Cusa's alleged pantheism is therefore groundless,



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

because Nicholas considers pantheism the first obstacle to be overcome for founding the theory of the *docta ignorantia*.

If reason proceeds in a discursive way to approach truth, it means that knowledge is achieved by degrees: consequently, different theories on unity can be legitimized within a discourse. Religious dialogue becomes then possible, because the relativization of rational knowledge offers the opportunity to have different ways to approach the problem of the absolute.<sup>11</sup> Cusanus continues his argumentation stating that unity generates equality, and this means that endless relations can be found in the world. The world is an intertwining of correspondences, because it reflects God's model, which includes connection, equality and unity. Unity is the identity in which the perfection of equality and the perfection of unity coexist.<sup>12</sup>

Chapter III, Book III, is a synthesis of Cusa's thought on the contraction of the human essence into the figure of Christ: the human nature is a mean nature compared to all the others existing in the universe. In its contraction, it can summarize all the natures towering above, as angels or intelligences, and those below it, as the animal and the vegetable kingdoms. The divine person, the Son, can join the human nature, which being a microcosm, sums up the whole created world: it is an event we can pre-represent in a future scenario, in which the human essence and the divine essence would coexist in the same form.<sup>13</sup>

In Chapter XXVI, Book I, the Author expresses in what "learned ignorance" consists: it is a method through which we can understand the divine truth.<sup>14</sup> Though it is impossible for man to judge whether a name can be attributed to God or not, yet he can have an idea of what God cannot be. In this perspective, religious culture, the different kinds of worship, and faith intertwine at a discursive level. For Cusanus, the

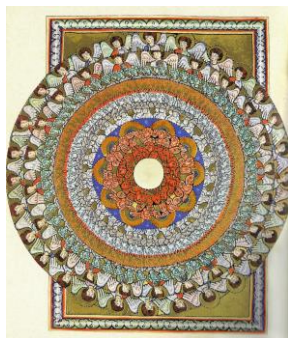
---

<sup>11</sup> *De docta ignorantia*, II; VI; 8-13.

<sup>12</sup> *De docta ignorantia*, I; VIII; 1-3; 13-16.

<sup>13</sup> *De docta ignorantia*, III; III.

<sup>14</sup> *De docta ignorantia*, I; XXVI.



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

problem of the human being consists in having the inborn desire to know the truth but in always having the frustration of not having access to it. Learned ignorance is the first step that can lead man to become fully aware of this impossibility, and therefore, paradoxically, to a first knowledge of truth.

Another fundamental concept is developed by Cusanus, who will systematically use it in *De Pace Fidei*: the *praesuppositio*. A *praesuppositio* is much more than a premise, it is a “methodical transcendence.” A *praesuppositio* can be considered an important part of the *manuductio*, a text interpretation process analyzed by Rudolf Haubst in his essay *Die Wege der christologischen manuduction*.<sup>15</sup> Haubst identifies just in *De docta ignorantia* the primary theological and philosophical conceptual nucleus that has led to the creation of the *manuductio* method used by Nicholas of Cusa.

The *manuductio* (guidance) process allows intellectual understanding to be guided step by step through the logical-rational discourse, even if a person who wants to understand the sense of things in depth must elevate the intellect over the power of words and not remain fixed to their immediately understandable meaning.<sup>16</sup>

### III. A Relevant quarrel

In his *Apologia*<sup>17</sup>, Nicholas pretends to be a pupil who asks some questions to his teacher, who is the author of *De docta ignorantia* and must shield himself from Wenck's accusations of being a destroyer of traditions, theology and knowledge.

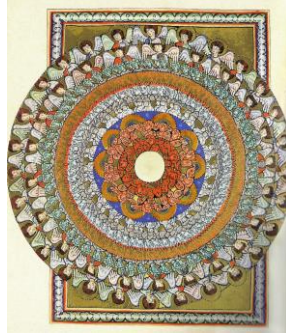
Johannes Wenck charges Nicholas of being a heretic, because the teachings expressed in *De docta ignorantia* undermine the foundations of theology, since they do not sufficiently stress the difference between divine being and creatures. In Wenck's opinion, Nicholas' error is strictly connected with the theories of Meister Eckhart and

---

<sup>15</sup> R. Haubst, *Die Wege der christologischen manuductio*, in MFCG, Trier.

<sup>16</sup> *De docta ignorantia*; I; II; 12-17.

<sup>17</sup> *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*; 2; 1-5.



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

his disciples, because, though these theologians believe to follow and continue a traditional perspective, their theories can completely upset the tradition of thought and lead their followers to disbelief and to a sort of insanity.<sup>18</sup> Nicholas charges his opponent of being driven by a private grudge depending on the different positions they had adopted during the Council of Basel.<sup>19</sup>

In 1449, the year in which the *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* was written, Nicholas had completely detached himself from his previous conciliarist theories, as declared in the aforementioned excerpt. Nicholas defines himself an advocate of truth and of the Pope's party, in spite of those who, as Wenck, continue to remain on the opposite front.

The two philosophers belonged to opposite political factions. Wenck supported the conciliarist cause, while Nicholas had embraced the Pope's cause. These opposite positions may have triggered Wenck's attack to Nicholas. Secondly, Wenck associated Nicholas of Cusa to the heretics who followed Meister Eckhart. In the third place, Wenck wanted to uphold the scientific nature of philosophy and theology against the *analogia entis* proceeding.

Wenck's lack of understanding of *De docta ignorantia* depends on the great complexity of Cusa's work, which makes it unsuitable for a public of *indoctorum* (unlearned persons). Referring to the hermetic tradition, Nicholas argues that the most complex and noble theories should not be communicated to those who are not able to understand them, to those who, owing to their *ligatis mentibus* (tied minds) bound to an inveterate habit, cannot understand the concealed meaning of the speculative theories. Quoting Jerome, who in turn quotes Philo of Alexandria, Cusanus writes that man makes use of logic in a way that is very similar to the way in which a hunting dog makes use of its instinct for searching a prey. As reason operates only through the

---

<sup>18</sup> J. M. Counet, *The Meaning of Apology and Reconciliation for an Apophantic Theology*, in I. Bocken, *Conflict and Reconciliation, Perspectives on Nicolas of Cusa*, Brill, Leiden 2004.

<sup>19</sup> *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*; 8; 14-24.



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

non-contradiction principle, it excludes therefore anything opposite or contradictory.<sup>20</sup>

Nicholas' work in itself is neither revolutionary nor destructive, as Wenck contends, but on the contrary, it follows faithfully a tradition that goes back to the Scriptures and to Greek philosophy. Cusa is a thinker who constantly refers to the tradition he belongs to. The *topos* of a break between intellectuals and people, between scholars and unlearned persons, is often recurring in Nicholas' works.<sup>21</sup> He is perfectly aware of the privilege granted to scholars, who can spend their time looking for truth, in spite of those who are obliged to work hard.

Wenck cries scandal because *De docta ignorantia* destroys any possibility to know, and what is even worse, does not set limits to the action of knowing and learning, as it considers the cognitive activity unlimited. The charge made to Cusanus of being a destroyer consists in *tollere omnem discursum*, that is to say, in preventing that reason proceeds in its cognitive path, because Nicholas denies, in Wenck's opinion, the effectiveness of the non-contradiction principle every human knowledge process is grounded on. Nicholas replies, quoting Al-Ghazali<sup>22</sup>, that human knowledge is a comparative process. Understanding means comparing what is unknown and uncertain with what is known and measurable. All what man does or thinks should be always brought back to this relation.

Quite significantly, Cusanus does not speak for himself, but delegates his apology to one of his disciples.<sup>23</sup> This kind of formulation closely reminds Plato's dialogues, in which both the opponents' and the master's (Socrates) theses are expounded, and Plato is in fact the disciple of his master. It is no accident that, at the beginning of this work,

---

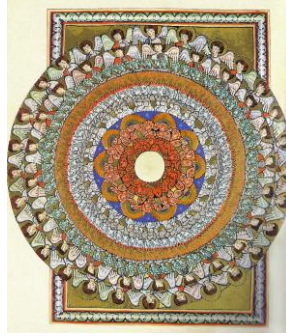
<sup>20</sup> *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, 9; 15-19.

<sup>21</sup> To be found also in *De pace fidei*, I; I.

<sup>22</sup> *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, 21; 1-11.

<sup>23</sup> J. M. Counet, *op. cit.*, p. 196. Counet writes that he wants to show that Nicholas, when he wrote the *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*, was not simply intentioned to reply to the charges, but "to adopt an attitude detached from this quarrel, analysing it in its profound significance and thereby providing the possibility of overcoming the conflict and attaining reconciliation."





Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

Nicholas affirms the Socratic superiority compared to the Athenians'.<sup>24</sup> However, the *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* does not include the character of Wenck, whose theories are expounded by Nicholas' pupil. In *De Pace Fidei*, for instance, the dialogue develops between the interlocutors, who expound their opinions on religious matters. This formulation may be justified by the fact that Nicholas wants to keep the whole dialogue within a deeply irenic climate, and therefore the dialectic quarrel is not constructed basing on two opposite theses.<sup>25</sup>

The opponent's position is presented as incomprehension of learned ignorance, and consequently, as a departure depending on Wenck's scarce qualification and culture. Furthermore, Cusanus believes there is another motivation, which is not worth worrying about: the general condition of learned men, the so-called wise men, the scholars. Just as Socrates was sentenced to death because his contemporaries had not understood his doctrine, Cusanus' work is faced with groundless charges, which have not been carefully developed in the light of "truth".<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

After having made a synthesis of the different theological theories (those who "pore over Aristotle," the students of the Dionysian mysticism), Nicholas begins commenting Wenck's text, which introduces learned literature as an instrument aimed at fighting learned ignorance. To deny the contraposition of the two theories made by his opponent, Nicholas exalts mystic theology in opposition with *scientia*, which develops through an *exercitio ad confligendum* (conflict exercise), and is therefore far away from the peace a speculative activity can offer. Learned ignorance does not concern the discursive reason, but rather the intellectual activity, and is inspired by God himself. For this reason, Wenck cannot understand Cusanus' text, because he proceeds in a rational manner to understand something that does not pertain to the sphere of

---

<sup>24</sup> *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*; 3; 1-4.

<sup>25</sup> J. M. Counet, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>26</sup> *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*; 7; 1-10.



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

reason.

This position further strengthens what Nicholas had previously written about the incomprehensibility of the theories concerning learned ignorance for those who do not have appropriate intellectual instruments at their disposal. His doctrine is based on the works of many early thinkers, Dionysius, in particular, but also Augustine, Plato and Al-Ghazali.<sup>27</sup>

The opposition to Aristotle's metaphysics, derived from the Dionysian school, places Nicholas on the wake of Eckhart and the German mystic theology. Nicholas supports the positions of negative theology, and it is not surprising that he makes use of Al-Ghazali's works, which, due to a partial translation (1145), had been completely misinterpreted. Al-Ghazali was not a philosopher. On the contrary, he was an "opponent" of philosophy he considered heretical because of its rationalistic formulation, and incompatible with the spirituality of the Islamic religion. Nicholas makes use of Al-Ghazali's theory to prove that his learned ignorance is by far superior in comparison with the speculation of the Aristotelian school. We can already find in the text of *De docta ignorantia* several theoretical traces of the religious issues the author would have dealt with, some time later, in *De pace fidei*.

Rafael Ramon Guerrero<sup>28</sup> believes that, starting from the text of *De docta ignorantia*, it is possible to analyze the relations of Cusa's thought with the ideas expressed by Islam, especially by the Mu'tazilite school of thought.

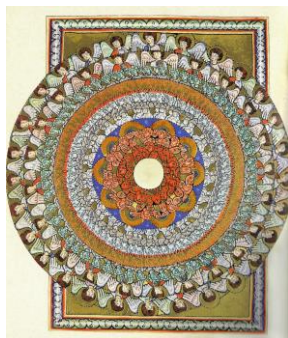
The theologians who belonged to this school maintained that no affirmative attributes, but instead only negative attributes can be applied to God.<sup>29</sup> Aimed at preserving a

---

<sup>27</sup> About Al-Ghazali see M. Campanini, *Al-Ghazali*, Torino, Utet, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> R. R. Guerrero, *Docta ignorantia en el neoplatonismo árabe*, in C. D'Amico, J. Machetta, *El problema del conocimiento en Nicolás de Cusa*, pp. 67-84.

<sup>29</sup> See on Mu'thazilah's school : C. Boumarane, *Le Problème de la liberté humaine dans le pensée musulman (Solution Mu'tazilite)*, Vrin, Paris, 1978. R. Caspar, *Traité de Théologie musulmane- histoire de la Pensée religieuse*



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

radical monotheism, these theologians interpreted only *via remotionis* (by denial) God's attributes and denied those attributes as something separate from the divine essence. They supported God's uniqueness and the absence of any distinction in the divine essence. The theologian Abu-l-Hasan al As' ari (d. 935) expounded the Mu'tazilite doctrine affirming that the followers of this school of thought cannot give any attribute to God, who in no way can be represented through an idea or an image.

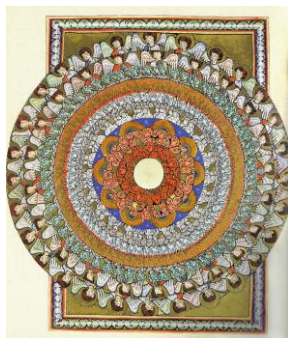
According to this theory, the human language is incapable to properly express anything about God, because God, insofar as he transcends the intellect, cannot be known by the human mind. Therefore, it is necessary to purify and remove (*tanzih*) all imperfect aspects of creation. This method, called *tanzih*, or denial of the divine attributes, implies acceptance of the negative theology characterizing Neo-Platonism, according to which the One is ineffable and nothing can be said about him. Most likely, the Muslim theology was the first to formulate, within the Arab world, the Neo-Platonic problem of the inexpressibility of the One, and to pave the way to the reception of Proclus' and Plotinus' works. Plato was the first philosopher who affirmed in his dialogue *Parmenides* that the One<sup>30</sup> cannot be subject to any kind of definition because no attribute can be applied to it.

This complex network of affinities points out how difficult it was, in the Middle Ages, to separate the Muslim culture from the Christian culture, as their definite separation took place only during the Renaissance. In writing *Docta ignorantia*, Cusanus analyzed in depth the medieval knowledge he had learned, and went as far as questioning its theoretical assumptions, thus incurring in the anger of his contemporaries. He continued to study the Arab philosophy and culture over time up to formulate a theory,

---

*musulmane*, PISAI, Roma, 1987. G. F. Hourani., *Divine Justice and Human Reason in Mu'tazilite Ethical Theology*, Malibu, Undena Publications, 1985.

<sup>30</sup> Plotinus further developed this theory in his *Enneads*, and so did Proclus. Another philosopher Cusanus inspires to is the Pseudo-Dionysius. Thanks to the impressive and gigantic undertaking of the translation into Arab of the Greek texts, which was carried out mostly in Baghdad, Arab-speaking scholars could have a large part of the philosophical and scientific knowledge produced by Greece in the classical and the Hellenistic age at their disposal.



Humberto Schubert COELHO (org.). *Mirabilia Journal* 39 (2024/2)  
*The Kingdom of the Spirit. The Transcendent, from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*  
*El Regne de l'Esperit. El Transcendent, del Món Antic al Renaixement*  
*El Reino del Espíritu. Lo Trascendente, del Mundo Antiguo al Renacimiento*  
*O Reino do Espírito. O Transcendente, do Mundo Antigo ao Renascimento*

Jun-Dic 2024  
ISSN 1676-5818

which in *De pace fidei* is summarized in the famous syntagm *una religio in rituum varietate* (a single religion in a variety of rites).

\*\*\*

## Sources

NICCOLÒ CUSANO. *Opere filosofiche, teologiche e matematiche*. Milano: Bompiani, 2017.

## Bibliography

BOCKEN, I. *Conflict and Reconciliation, Perspectives on Nicolas of Cusa*. Brill, 2004.

CASARELLA, P. *Cusanus: the Legacy of Learned Ignorance*. CUA Press, 2006.

COSTA, Ricardo da; SANTOS, Bento Silva (orgs.). [\*Mirabilia Journal\* 19 \(2014/2\): Nicholas of Cusa in Dialogue](#).

COSTIGLIOLO, M. *Western Perception of Islam. The work of Nicholas of Cusa*. Wipf and Stock, 2017.

DEMICHELIS, M. *Il pensiero mu'tazilita. Ragione e fede tra Basra e Baghdad nei primi secoli dell'Islam*. Paris/Torino: Harmattan, 2011.

DUCLOW, D. *Engaging Eriugena, Eckhart and Cusanus*. Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2023.

HARRIES, K. *Infinity and Perspective*. Cambridge: MA, MIT Press, 2001.

HOPKINS, J. *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and an Appraisal of De ignota litteratura and Apologia doctae ignorantiae*. Banning Press 1981.

MACHETTA, J.; D'AMICO Claudia. *El problema del conocimiento en Nicolàs de Cusa: genealogia y proyeccion*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2005.