

DINO BUZZETTI

NICHOLAS OF KUES AND THE *EICONA DEI*

1. One of Nicholas of Kues' major works, the *De coniecturis*, makes direct reference, just at the beginning, to the notion of *Imago Dei*:

It must be the case that conjectures originate from our minds, just as the real world originates from the infinite divine reason. For when, as best it can, the human mind, which is a lofty likeness of God, participates in the fruitfulness of the creating nature, it produces from itself, in its capacity of being an image of the omnipotent form, rational entities, which are made in the likeness of real entities. Consequently, the human mind is the form of a conjectural world, just as the divine mind is the form of the real world. Therefore, just as that absolute divine entity is all that which there is essentially in each existing thing, so too the human mind in its unity is the entity of its own conjectures.¹

All that pertains to the divine mind affects in a similar way the human mind, that is made in its likeness. So just as the divine mind is the intellectual principle (*intellectuale principium*)² of real things, the human mind, that is made in the likeness of the divine one, is the constitutive principle of rational entities, that are likenesses or notions of real things. Thus, just as the existence of things depends on the divine mind, their knowledge depends on our mind, since for a thing to be known, is to be a likeness or an image of

¹ «Coniecturas a mente nostra, uti realis mundus a divina infinita ratione, prodire oportet. Dum enim humana mens, alta Dei similitudo, fecunditatem creatricis naturae, ut potest, participat, ex se ipsa, ut imagine omnipotentis formae, in realium entium similitudine rationalia exserit. Coniecturalis itaque mundi humana mens forma exstitit uti realis divina. Quapropter ut absoluta illa divina entitas est omne id quod est in quolibet quod est, ita et mentis humanae unitas est coniecturarum suarum entitas», *De Coniecturis*, I.1, 5.3-10; in *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia*, Academia Litterarum Heidelbergensis 1972, hereafter cited as 'h', vol. III, 7-8.

² *Ibid.*, I.1, 5.11; h. III, 8.

itself present in the mind. In the third book of the *Idiota*, the *De mente*, the very same idea of *mens nostra divinae mentis imago*³ is expressed in a more concise and straightforward way:

just as God is the absolute entity, that is the enfolding of all entities, so our mind is an image, of that infinite entity, that is the enfolding of all images,⁴
and just as
the conceiving of the divine mind originates the production of things, the conceiving of our mind originates the notion of things.⁵

But what does it mean to be an image of God? If to be an image is to be known, and our mind is an image conceived and known by God, what we are is what God knows that we are. It is the way God knows us that determines the way we actually are. So to know what it means for us to be an image of God, is for us to know how God knows us and sees us. The question, as referred to us, is not a purely speculative one, it has also practical implications; and so has the answer, that is to be found in another of Nicholas of Kues' treatises, the *De visione Dei*.

Cusanus sent his treatise on the vision of God to the Benedictine monks at Tegernsee, in answer to a question on the nature of mystical ascent. Just at the opening, in the preface, he refers to a portrait of someone whose face is painted in such a way «that it seems to behold everything around it»; he takes into account an «image of the all-seeing» that is to say, that he calls «the icon of God».⁶ And he sent a picture of this kind to the Tegernsee monks, so that by watching it they could realise the «easiness» of mystical theology «by way of experiment».⁷ For, he says, «regardless of the place

³ *Idiota de mente*, VI, 95.19; h V, 142.

⁴ «Sicut Deus est entitas absoluta, quae est omnium entium complicatio, sic mens nostra est illius entitatis infinitae imago, quae est omnium imaginum complicatio», *ibid.*, III, 73.2-4; h V, 110-111.

⁵ «Conceptio divinae mentis est rerum productio; conceptio nostrae mentis est rerum notio», *ibid.*, III, 72.6-7; h V, 109.

⁶ «Sed inter humana opera non repperi imaginem omnia videntis proposito nostro convenientiorem, ita quod facies subtili arte pictoria ita se habeat, quasi cuncta circumspiciat [...] caritati vestrae mitto tabellam figuram cuncta videntis tenentem, quam eiconam dei appello», *De visione Dei*, Praefatio, 2.3-13; h VI, 5.

⁷ «Pandam nunc quae vobis dilectissimis fratribus ante promiseram circa facilitatem mysticae theologiae [...]. Conabor autem simplicissimo atque communissimo modo vos experimentaliter in sacratissimam obscuritatem manuducere», *ibid.*, [Dedicatio], 1.4-13; h VI, 3-4.

from which each of you looks at it, each will have the impression that he alone is being looked at by it» and «marvel at how it is possible that the face behold each and every one of you at once». And, he goes on, if someone moves «while fixing his sight upon the icon», he «will find that the icon's look proceeds continually with him», and «marvel that it moves keeping unmoved»; and if others do the same at the same time, and keep looking at «the unmovable face», they will see that «it moves towards one place just as it moves at the same time towards all other places» and that «it looks at one movement just as it looks at the same time at all other movements».⁸ A picture of this kind is then an image of the all-embracing sight of God and «there can be nothing obvious about the icon-of-God's sight, that would not be even truer of God's true sight».⁹ An investigation on the vision of God can therefore shed substantial light on the true import of the notion of *Imago Dei* in Cusanus' thought.

2. Cusanus entertains a relational notion of the vision of God. It is possible to conceive of vision only as a relationship between the one who sees and the one who is seen:

O Lord [...] what is ur seeing, other than your being seen by me?
 And conversely,
 To see you is not other than that you see the one who sees you.

The vision of God is not only God's vision, but also what we, as humans, can attain as a vision of his nature: «as you see me», Lord, «you give yourself to be seen by me». From a purely notional point of view, the idea of the vision of God totally conforms to the structural pattern of participation as conceived of in the Platonic tradition. The idea of the vision

⁸ «Hanc aliquo in loco [...] affigētis [...] intuebitisque ipsam, et quisque vestrum experietur, ex quocumque loco eandem inspexerit, se quasi solum per eam videri [...]. Primum igitur admirabimini, quomodo hoc fieri possit, quod omnes et singulos simul respiciat [...]. Et si figendo obtutum in eiconam ambulabit de occasu ad orientem, comperiet continue visum eiconae secum pergere [...] admirabitur, quomodo immobiliter moveatur [...]. Experietur igitur immobilem faciem moveri [...] ita ad unum locum quod etiam ad omnia simul, et ita ad unum respicere motum, quod ad omnes simul», *ibid.*, Praefatio, 3.1-4.5, h VI, 5-6.

⁹ «Primo loco [...] censeo nihil posse apparere circa visum eiconae dei, quin verius sit in vero visu dei», *ibid.*, I, 5.3.4, h VI, 10.

of God is essentially the notion of a participation relationship. It is the notion of a relation, conceived of as the perfect overlapping and coincidence of two correlative dispositions, possessed by two interrelated entities belonging to different ontological levels. Linguistically, then, the expression “the vision of God” can be interpreted according to both a subjective and an objective understanding of the genitive form, both as “God’s sight” and as “our sight of God”. The way God sees us and the way we see God coincide, as a form or disposition; but these dispositions respectively belong to the one or the other of the two entities that are related, God and a human being. This makes an ontological difference between the two forms, because of the ontological disparity between God and us. Our sight is limited and, as Cusanus says, «no one can see you», Lord, «except in so far as you grant that you be seen»;¹⁰ therefore, all we can know about God’s sight depends on how much our own vision can participate in his own vision.

Cusanus’ conception of the vision of God has then far reaching implications on his notion of the *Imago Dei*. Basically, it implies that our being an *Imago Dei* depends on how much we succeed in seeing and knowing how God sees and knows us, and consequently on how much we see the truth about our own nature. Being an image of God is not an accomplished and permanent state, but it is an ongoing process, that aims at acquiring an ever-new and satisfactory condition, that has yet to be achieved. The state of being an image of God is something we have to strive for continually and that we can never fully accomplish. As it has been said, «what we are facing here is a dynamical outlook of spiritual life».¹¹

All that seems very much to originate in the hidden and unknowable nature of God, so that all we can know about God is what he makes to us. We do not know him, but only our way of being related to him. In the case here under scrutiny, what God’s vision makes to us, is what he lets us see of his nature, that in itself is utterly unknowable: «In seeing me, you who are *deus absconditus* give yourself to be seen by me».¹² Accordingly,

¹⁰ «Quid aliud, domine, est videre tuum, quando me pietatis oculo respicis, quam a me videri? Videndo me das te a me videri, qui es deus absconditus. Nemo te videre potest, nisi in quantum tu das, ut videaris. Nec est aliud te videre, quam quod tu videas videntem te», *ibid.*, V, 13.10-14, h VI, 17.

¹¹ J.-M. COUNET, *Le sommet de la contemplation chez Nicolas de Cues*, in A. DIERKENS -B. BEYER DE RYKE (éd.), *Mystique: La passion de l’Un, de l’Antiquité à nos jours*, Bruxelles 2005 (Problèmes d’histoire des religions, 15), 141-49, 146.

¹² See above, note 10.

God's vision or look is the way he makes himself visible to us, or what he looks to us. As Cusanus expressly says, «your look, O Lord, is your face». But God's «true face» is «the exemplar and truth of all faces» and «precedes every formable face»; in his «invisible truth», it is the «absolute form, which is the face of all faces», whereas conversely «all faces are images of [God's] face». Therefore,

every face that can look upon your face sees nothing that is other than itself or different from itself, because it sees its own truth,

so that

whoever looks unto you with a loving face will find only your face looking lovingly upon him [...] whoever looks angrily unto you will find your face likewise to display anger.

So, the way we see God's face depends on our own attitude and disposition: whoever looks lovingly upon him will see a loving face and «the greater his endeavor to look more lovingly unto [God], the more loving he will likewise find [God's] Face to be».¹³

3. There is something paradoxical in being an image of God. To be an image is to participate in God's nature, which is something, on the other hand, that is utterly «imparticipable (*imparticipabilis*)».¹⁴ There is an ontological difference between the two related entities, God on the one side and human beings on the other. So, the identity between seeing and being seen is not an absolute one and the symmetry of the relation breaks on account of the ontological disparity. God is immutable, whereas we are mutable. God's face looks changed to us because we have changed and in

¹³ «Sed video non oculis carneis, [...] sed mentalibus et intellectualibus oculis veritatem faciei tuae invisibilem [...] Quae quidem facies tua vera [...] est absoluta forma, quae et facies facierum [...] Sic igitur deprehendo vultum tuum, domine, antecedere omnem faciem formabilem et esse exemplar ac veritatem omnium facierum et omnes facies esse imagines faciei tuae incontractibilis et imparticipabilis [...] Visus tuus, domine, est facies tua. Qui igitur amorosa facie te intuetur, non reperiet nisi faciem tuam se amore intuentem, et quanto studebit te amorosius inspicere, tanto reperiet similiter faciem tuam amorosiosem; qui te indignanter inspicit, reperiet similiter faciem tuam talem; qui te laete intuetur, sic reperiet laetam tuam faciem, quemadmodum est ipsius te videntis», *De visione Dei*, VI, 17.7-19.11.; h VI, 20-21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 18.10-11; h VI, 21.

God's face we see the truth of our change. We are an image of God, but God looks like the image we are, because he truly sees us such as we are and is the truth of the image we are.

Thus it is we, who make us the image we are. The face God shows us is the true sight of ourselves. What we see of God is what he makes us see of ourselves. By seeing God's face we actually know ourselves:

When you, my God, [...] receive the form of each one who looks unto you, you elevate me, so that I discern that the one who looks unto you does not bestow form upon you; rather, he beholds himself in you, because he receives from you that which he is.

However, what he sees in God, as in a «living mirror of eternity», and what he takes as «the image of his own form», is not «an image but is the truth, of which he himself, the beholder, is the image».¹⁵ And when «I see that if I change», also «[God's] face seems to be changed», that happens «because I am changed». But «my face», the face I see as God's face, «is a true face», because God, «who [is] the truth, [has] given it to me». And

my face is an image, because it is not the truth itself, but is the image of the absolute truth. Therefore, in what I conceive of about myself, I intertwine the truth with the image of my face, and in seeing it, I see that the image coincides with the truth of my face, so that in as much as it is an image, in so much it is true.

What is then to be an image of the truth itself? an image of God, or *Imago Dei*? It is approaching the truth through the truth of our face. And this, as we have said, has important practical implications. Cusanus himself dwells on the practical consequences of his notion of the vision of God:

[...] in you, O God, being created coincides with creating. And the likeness which seems to be created by me is indeed the truth which creates me, so that

¹⁵ «Quando igitur tu, Deus meus [...] recipis formam cuiuslibet te intuentis, tunc me elevas, ut videam, quomodo intuens te non dat tibi formam, sed in te intuetur se, quia a te recipit id, quod est. Et ita id, quod videris ab intuente recipere, hoc donas, quasi sis speculum aeternitatis vivum [...] In quod speculum dum quis respicit [...] iudicat formam, quam videt in speculo illo, esse figuram formae suae [...] licet contrarium illius sit verum, quia id, quod videt in illo aeternitatis speculo, non est figura, sed veritas, cuius ipse videns est figura», *ibid.*, XV, 63.1-11; h VI, 53.

in this way, at least, I apprehend how much I ought to get closer to you, since, in you, being loved coincides with loving. For if in you who are my likeness I ought to love myself, then I am exceedingly bound to do so when I see that you love me as your creature and image.¹⁶

To be an image of God is then a way to love one's own likeness in God and the more one would see him or herself as made in his likeness, the more he or she would feel to be loved as his image. Therefore, the idea of being created as an image of God implies an effort to unite with him as the absolute truth. But

who could conceive of this unique, most true, and most adequate exemplar of all faces? that which is the exemplar of each and every face and, yet, so perfectly the exemplar of each that, as it were, it is not the exemplar of any other. He would have to pass beyond all the forms and figures of all formable faces. And how could he conceive it to be a face, when he would transcend all faces [...] ?¹⁷

Thus, «whoever persists in seeing your face», O Lord, «as long as he conceives of something, he is far removed from your face».¹⁸ For, indeed,

¹⁶ «Et coincidit in te, deus, creari cum creare. Similitudo enim, quae videtur creari a me, est veritas, quae creat me, ut sic saltem capiam, quantum tibi astringi debeam, cum in te amari coincidat cum amare. Si ego enim me in te similitudine mea diligere debeo, et tunc maxime ad hoc constringor, quando video te me diligere ut creaturam et imaginem tuam», *ibid.*, XV, 66.4-9; h VI, 54-55.

¹⁷ «Nam [...] video, quomodo ad mutationem meam videtur visus eiconae tuae mutatus et facies tua videtur mutata, quia ego mutatus [...] Domine Deus [...] facies mea vera est facies, quia tu eam mihi dedisti, qui es veritas. Est et facies mea imago, quia non est ipsa veritas, sed veritatis absolutae imago. Complico igitur in conceptu meo veritatem et imaginem faciei meae, et video in ea coincidere imaginem cum veritate faciali, ita quod quantum imago, in tantum vera», *ibid.*, XV, 64.2-13; h VI, 53.

¹⁸ «Quis hoc unicum exemplar verissimum et adaequatissimum omnium facierum ita omnium quod et singulorum et ita perfectissime cuiuslibet quasi nullius alterius concipere posset? Oporteret illum omnium formabilium facierum formas transilire et omnes figuras. Et quomodo conciperet faciem, quando transcenderet omnes facies et omnes omnium facierum similitudines et figuras et omnes conceptus, qui de facie fieri possunt [...] Qui igitur ad videndum faciem tuam pergit, quamdiu aliquid concipit, longe a facie tua abest», *ibid.*, VI, 20.1-10; h VI, 22.

in every face the face of all faces is to be seen veiled and in enigma. But it cannot be seen unveiled, until, beyond all faces, one enters in a secret and hidden silence, where the science and the notion of a face are reduced to nothing. For this obscuring mist, haze, darkness, or ignorance into which the one seeking your face plunges [...] reveals that your face is there, above everything beveiling.¹⁹

The paradoxical nature of the notion of *Imago Dei* affects also its practical implications. The condition of being an image of God is an ongoing process driven by a compelling force to strive for an aim that can never be reached, but which is at the same time an endeavor that cannot be eschewed.

4. Being an image of God, then, depends on us and the process of realising oneself as *Imago Dei* is clearly a process of mystical ascent that culminates in 'learned ignorance'. What we have to do with here, again, is not a habit or a permanent condition that can be achieved once and for all, but it is the living experience of the unknowability of God that can be reached at the end of a mystical elevation. Since «rational human nature can unite with divine nature»,²⁰ such an ascent is a rise towards uniting with God. And «that transference from the shadowy traces of mere representations to the union with infinite reason» is nothing other than reaching the condition of *filiatio Dei*,²¹ for it is the union with that «first mirror of truth, that can also be called God's word (*verbum*), logos, or son», in which our «intellectual mirror obtains sonship».²²

Such an ascent proceeds by stages. Nicholas of Kues describes them in his treatise *De visione Dei*. «Your sight, O Lord», Cusanus maintains,

¹⁹ «In omnibus faciebus videtur facies facierum velate et in aenigmate. Revelate autem non videtur, quamdiu super omnes facies non intratur in quoddam secretum et occultum silentium, ubi nihil est de scientia et conceptu faciei. Haec enim caligo, nebula, tenebra seu ignorantia [...] revelat ibi esse faciem supra omnia velamenta», *ibid.*, VI, 21.1-8; h VI, 22-23.

²⁰ «Et sic video humanam rationalem naturam [...] divinae naturae [...] unibilem», *ibid.*, XVIII, 82.1-2, h VI, 65.

²¹ «Poteris enim quadam intuitione occulta praegustare nihil aliud filiationem esse quam translationem illam de umbrosis vestigiis simulacrorum ad unionem cum ipsa infinita ratione», *De filiatione dei*, III, 68.8-11, h IV, 50.

²² «In speculo igitur illo primo veritatis, quod et verbum, logos seu filius Dei dici potest, adipiscitur intellectuale speculum filiationem», *ibid.*, III, 67.13-15, 49-50.

«is Your essence». So, uniting with God, is uniting with his absolute vision, and since God «behold[s] each and every one at once», we cannot but wonder, at first, «how in [his] visual power the universal coincides with the singular». Cusanus solution distinguishes between different entities: single individuals, each possessing its own particular characters; their «contracted» or limited «specific form», that is «simple and single» in all of them, even if it «is not to be found outside» them and «does not desert» them; and finally the «uncontracted» or unlimited form, that is the «exemplar and idea» of the contracted one. The uncontracted form, in its turn, «can never desert» the contracted one, and it acts as «its form, or its truth». This last form is God himself, the «absolute form», the «form of forms» that «gives being» to all specific forms. The specific form is the form of all the individuals of that species, and the absolute and unlimited form is the form of all contracted and limited specific forms. So, God is «the sole most simple infinite exemplar», the «truest and most adequate exemplar of each and every thing that can take a form».²³

Accordingly, God's visual power is such that he can «see each and every thing at once», but we cannot. And «I experience clearly» that it is so, Cusanus says, for when I give a sermon «I speak at one and the same time to each individual present in the church» and «my one face is seen by each one» of them.²⁴ But «if I were to see just as I am seeable, I would not be a creature», whereas «if you, O God, were not to see just as you are seeable, you would not be God almighty». For indeed

²³ «Admiror, domine, postquam tu simul omnes et singulos respicis [...] quomodo coincidat in virtute tua visiva universale cum singulari [...]. Visus tuus, domine, est essentia tua [...]. Si igitur ad humanitatem, quae est simplex et una in omnibus hominibus, respexero, reperio ipsam in omnibus et singulis hominibus [...] non deserit homines humanitas [...] haec natura humanitatis [...] est contracta et non reperitur extra homines [...] humanitas incontracta, quae est exemplar et idea istius contractae naturae et quae est ut forma et veritas istius formae humanitatis contractae [...] humanitatem contractam in individuis numquam deserere potest; est enim forma dans esse ipsi naturae formali [...]. Forma igitur illa, quae dat esse speciei, est absoluta forma; et tu es illa, Deus, qui es formator caeli et terrae et omnium. Et quia tu es absolutum exemplar et simplicissimum, non es compositus ex pluribus exemplaribus, sed es unum exemplar simplicissimum infinitum, ita quod omnium et singulorum, quae formari possunt, es verissimum et adaequatissimum exemplar», *De visione Dei*, IX, 32.4-34.11, h VI, 31-33.

²⁴ «Tunc clare experior, quod tu simul omnia vides et singula, quia ego simul et semel, dum praedico, ecclesiae loquor congregatae et singulis in ecclesia existentibus [...]. Videtur itaque facies mea unica per singulos et sermo simplex meus integre a singulis auditur», *ibid.*, X, 38.8-39.5, h VI, 35-36.

you are seeable by all creatures, and you see all creatures. Because in that you see all creatures you are seen by all creatures. For otherwise creatures could not exist, since they exist by means of your seeing. But if they were not to see you, who see them, they would not receive being from you. The being of a creature is, alike, your seeing and your being seen.²⁵

Therefore, it is God that can enable us to experience his own sight and see us fully as *Imago Dei*. We cannot, unless he enables us: «O Lord [...] no one can approach unto you, because you are unapproachable. Therefore, no one will apprehend you unless you give yourself to him».²⁶ But «how will you give yourself to me unless you also give me to myself»? It is again a Platonic motive, that of the “interior man”, handed down by Plotinus and Augustine,²⁷ that Cusanus revives here:

²⁵ «Si ego viderem, sicut visibilis sum, non essem creatura, et si tu, deus, non videres, sicut visibilis es, non esses deus omnipotens. Ab omnibus creaturis es visibilis et omnes vides; in eo enim, quod omnes vides, videris ab omnibus. Aliter enim esse non possunt creaturae, quia visione tua sunt; quod si te non viderent videntem, a te non caperent esse. Esse creaturae est videre tuum pariter et videri», *ibid.*, X, 40.6-12, h VI, 36.

²⁶ «Nemo potest te accedere, quia inaccessibilis. Nemo igitur te capiet, nisi tu te dones ei [...] Immo quomodo dabis tu te mihi, si etiam me ipsum non dederis mihi?», *ibid.*, VII, 25.4-12, h VI, 26.

²⁷ «Plotinus uses the expression «the interior man» and refers it to Plato: «These three principles [the three primal hypostases] are to be found also within us [...] I am speaking of what lies beyond what is perceivable through the senses [...] I mean the corresponding realities in man, what Plato calls the Interior Man (τριτὰ ταῦτα [...] χρῆ νομίζειν καὶ παρ' ἡμῖν ταῦτα εἶναι. Λέγω δὲ [...] ἐπὶ τοῖς αἰσθητῶν ἔξω [...] οὕτω καὶ τὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, οἷον λέγει Πλάτων τὸν εἶσω ἄνθρωπον)», PLOTINUS, *Enneades*, V.1.10, 5-10; cf. PLATO, *Respublica*, 589 A.7-B.1. See also: «God is not exterior to any being, said he [Plato]. He is in all beings but they don't know it. They flee far from Him, or rather from themselves (Οὐδενός φησὶν ἔστιν ἔξω, ἀλλὰ πᾶσι σύνεστιν οὐκ εἰδόσι. Φεύγουσι γὰρ αὐτοὶ αὐτοῦ ἔξω, μᾶλλον δὲ αὐτῶν ἔξω)», *Id.*, *Enneades*, VI.9.7, 28-30; cf. PLATO, *Parmenides*, E.3-4. «The Plotinian formulas are found almost unchanged in Augustine's writings», G.G. STROUMSA, *Barbarian philosophy: The religious revolution of early Christianity*, Tübingen 1999, 91; «They incline to get out of themselves, abandoning their intimate being, while God is more interior to them than themselves (*exterior enim conantur ire, et interiora sua deserunt, quibus interior est Deus*)», AUGUSTINUS, *De trinitate*, 8.7.11; «You were within me, and I was outside myself, and I was looking for You outside [...]. You were with me, and I was not with you (*intus eras et ego foris, et ibi te quaerebam [...] mecum eras, et tecum non eram*)», *Id.*, *Confessiones*, 10.27; «Do not go abroad. Return to yourself. In the interior man dwells truth (*Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas*)», *Id.*, *De vera religione*, 39.72.

And while I am quietly reflecting in this manner, you, O Lord, answer me in my heart with the words: "Be your own and I will be yours." O Lord [...] you have placed within my freedom my being my own if I will to. Hence, unless I am my own you are not mine. Otherwise, you would be coercing my freedom, since you can be mine only if I too am mine. And because you have placed this matter within my freedom, you do not coerce me; rather, you await my choosing to be my own. This matter is up to me, then, not up to you, O Lord [...].²⁸

God leaves it to us to realise ourselves as *Imago Dei*. God gives himself to us and we can unite with him only if we engage ourselves in this endeavour. The elevation to God consists in knowing ourselves as *Imago Dei*.

5. How can filiation, the union with infinite reason, be realised? Cusanus, as we have seen, takes into account the affective dimension of the mystical experience: «How could the human soul, attain her end», O Lord, «unless you were lovable, so that thus, by loving you who are lovable, she could attain unto a most happy union»?²⁹ Since «you offer yourself to him who looks unto you» as if «you conformed yourself to him» by letting him see your face as his face, «the more he will love you, the more you will appear to be like him». The reason is simple, namely that «we cannot hate ourselves». ³⁰ Apparently, then, the relation that we, as *Imago Dei*, have to God is such that we cannot deal with God, but by dealing with ourselves.

²⁸ «Et cum sic in silentio contemplationis quiesco, tu, domine, intra praecordia mea respondes dicens: Sis tu tuus et ego ero tuus. O domine [...] posuisti in libertate mea, ut sim, si voluero, mei ipsius. Hinc nisi sim mei ipsius, tu non es meus. Necessitates enim libertatem, cum tu non possis esse meus, nisi et ego sim mei ipsius. Et quia hoc posuisti in libertate mea, non me necessitas, sed exspectas, ut ego eligam mei ipsius esse. Per me igitur stat, non per te, domine», *De visione Dei*, VII, 25.12-26.1, h VI, 26-27.

²⁹ «Sed quomodo posset attingere finem suum sponsa tua, deus meus, anima humana, nisi tu fores diligibilis, ut sic te diligibilem diligendo ad nexum ac unionem felicissimam pertingere posset?», *ibid.*, XVIII, 80.21-24, h VI, 64.

³⁰ «Offers te intuenti te, quasi recipias ab eo esse, et confirmas te ei, ut eo plus te diligit, quo appares magis similis ei. Non enim possumus odire nos ipsos», *ibid.*, XV, 65.12-14, h VI, 54.

According to Cusanus, though, the affective and the intellectual dimensions of the mystical ascent coincide: «cognition coincides with love».³¹ Not only can the human soul unite with God by loving him, but just as well «the created intellect can unite with [God], because he is intelligible truth». Thus, we can see

that rational human nature is uniteable only to [God's] understandable and lovable divine nature and that a man who receives his receivable God, passes over into a union which, because of its closeness, can be given the name filiation.³²

Filiation, then, is the union with God's understandable nature, but this is not the final stage of mystical ascent. At the beginning of his treatise *De filiatione dei*, Cusanus states: «to put it briefly, I consider filiation as nothing other than deification, which in Greek is called “theosis”»; and he adds that «“theosis” is the ultimate state of perfection, which is called both knowledge of God and of his Word (*verbum*), and also intuitive vision».³³

In the Greek tradition, Alexander of Aphrodisias already «says that man becomes like god (divinizes himself) whenever his material» or individual «intelligence becomes transformed (γίνεται) into the productive intelligence», the divine one according to the Neoplatonists, for he «more than once uses the word “likening” (in the transitive sense: ὁμοίωσις)», so that «one has the impression that we here have the Peripatetic version of the Platonic concept ὁμοίωσις θεῶν».³⁴ Cusanus view looks very much alike: «filiation is achieved in the intellect [...] when the intellect itself becomes God», since «it finds itself to be similar to him»³⁵ and «that means, for the

³¹ «In dilectione coincidit cognitio», *Letter 4*, in E. VANSTEENBERGHE, *Autour de la docte ignorance: Une controverse sur la théologie mystique au XV^e siècle*, Münster i.W. 1915, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, 14.2-4, 111.

³² «Quare tu, Deus meus, quoniam es veritas intelligibilis, tibi uniri potest intellectus creatus. Et sic video humanam rationalem naturam tuae divinae naturae intelligibili et amabili tantum unibilem et quod homo te deum receptibilem capiens transit in nexum, qui ob sui strictitudinem filiationis nomen sortiri potest», *ibid.*, XVIII, 81.17-82.4, 65.

³³ «Ego autem, ut in summa dicam, non aliud filiationem dei quam deificationem, quae et theosis graecae dicitur, aestimandum iudico. Theosim vero tu ipse nosti ultimitatem perfectionis existere, quae et notitia dei et verbi seu visio intuitiva vocatur», *De filiatione dei*, I, 52.2-5, h IV, 39-40.

³⁴ PH. MERLAN, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the soul in the Neoplatonic and Neoplatonic tradition*, The Hague 1963, 16.

³⁵ «Quietatur igitur studium vitae et perfectionis atque omnis motus intellectus, quando se comperit [...] similem illi. Est enim tunc in ipso ipsa dei filiatio, quando [...] ipse est deus», *De filiatione dei*, II, 58.6-12, h IV, 44.

intellect, that it apprehends itself in truth» and that «it understands that nothing can be outside itself, but that in it all things are it».³⁶

The stage of achieved filiation, the stage of union with God's intellect, is a stage in which self-reflexivity is also achieved. And it is so both in the affective and in the intellectual dimensions:

Hence, in you, who are love, what loves is not one thing, what is lovable another thing, and the connection between the one and the other a third thing; rather, they are that very same thing that you are, my God. Therefore, because in you what is lovable coincides with what is loving, and being loved coincides with loving, the connection of this coincidence is an essential union.³⁷

The act and the object of God's love are thus the same, and they both are the same as their identity relation, for they are all God himself. Thus, by uniting with God's love we unite with ourselves. Just as uniting with God's intellect we unite with ourselves, for God is at once «intellect that intelligizes, intellect that is intelligible, and the connection of them both»;³⁸ here again the act and the object of God's intelligizing are the same, and the same as their connecting relation, so that likewise by uniting with God's intellect we unite with ourselves.

Cusanus position is very reminiscent of Neoplatonic noetics. In Plotinus, self-reflection implies self-knowledge and only the union with divine intellect ensures actual self-knowledge:

we know ourselves [...] by our becoming identical with the Intelligence (νοῦς). And so [...] thinking of oneself is no longer thinking of oneself as man, but as a being that has become completely different and has snatched himself up into the higher world, drawing up only the better part of his soul.³⁹

³⁶ «Et hoc quidem est se ipsum in veritate apprehendere [...] ut nihil extra se esse posse intelligat sed omnia in ipso ipse», *ibid.*, III 64.10-12, h IV, 48.

³⁷ «Hinc in te amore non est aliud amans et aliud amabile et aliud utriusque nexus, sed idem tu ipse, Deus meus. Quia igitur in te coincidit amabile cum amante et amari cum amare, tunc nexus coincidentiae est nexus essentialis», *De visione Dei*, XVII, 72.13-16, h VI, 59.

³⁸ «Quia es intellectus intelligens et intellectus intelligibilis et utriusque nexus», *ibid.*, XVIII, 81.4-5, h VI, 64.

³⁹ PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, V.3.4, 4-13: «Καὶ γινώσκομεν δὲ αὐτοὺς [...] ἢ καὶ ἐκεῖνο γινόμενοι, ὡς [...] κάκεινφ ἑαυτὸν νοεῖν αὐτὸ οὐχ ὡς ἄνθρωπον ἔτι, ἀλλὰ παντελῶς ἄλλον γενόμενον καὶ συναρπάσαντα ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὸ ἄνω μόνον ἐφέλκοντα τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἄμεινον».

Here and in other passages of this kind, Plotinus explains how even we (in whom as a rule only ordinary self-knowledge takes place, in which knower and that which knower and that which is known still differ) can attain to true self-knowledge: Ἔστι δὴ νοῦς τις αὐτὸς γεγωνός, ὅτε τὰ ἄλλα ἀφείκται ἐαυτοῦ τούτῳ καὶ τοῦτον βλέπει, αὐτῷ δὲ ἑαυτόν. [*Enn.*, V.3.4, 28-29: we have really become νοῦς when, letting all the rest which belongs to us go, through it we see it, and just by seeing it we see ourselves.] Man becomes transformed into the νοῦς, when he through the νοῦς sees the νοῦς and by that νοῦς whom he sees when he becomes νοῦς, he acquires full and true self-knowledge. When I become that which is self-knowledge I know myself.⁴⁰

To unite with God's intellect and to realise oneself as *Imago Dei* is to attain true and actual self-knowledge.

6. But this, as we have said, is not the final stage of mystical elevation. When I realise that «from a sole concept so many different things ensue»⁴¹ and that «whatever is predicated of absolute simplicity coincides with absolute simplicity»,⁴² in that moment «I begin to realise»⁴³ that God «can be seen on the other side of the coincidence of contradictories, but not at all on this side»,⁴⁴ for God is «the oppositeness of opposites» and «the oppositeness of opposites is oppositeness without oppositeness».⁴⁵

Cusanus clearly realises that there is something beyond a mode of thought that presupposes a duality, a distinction between subject and object, and regards what it entertains as the object of itself as a subject. This kind of objectivising thought is proper to the intellect, and «from the point of view of the intellect's judgment there cannot be anything outside the heaven of truth». But «this mode of manifestation of the absolute truth» is «objectivised truth», truth as it is inspected «in the pureness of our intellectual spirit, without any deceiving and enigmatic sensory image». This way of seeing the truth «is, to the intellect, clear

⁴⁰ MERLAN, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness...*, 80-81.

⁴¹ «Quomodo tot sunt diversa ex unico conceptu?», *De visione Dei*, X, 41.6, h VI, 37.

⁴² «Omnia enim, quae dicuntur de absoluta simplicitate, coincidunt cum ipsa, quia ibi habere est esse», *ibid.*, XIII, 54.5-6, h VI, 46.

⁴³ «Unde [...] te, domine, videre incipio», *ibid.*, X, 40.1-2, h VI, 36.

⁴⁴ «Ultra igitur coincidentiam contradictoriorum videri poteris et nequaquam citra», *ibid.*, IX, 37.10-12, h VI, 35.

⁴⁵ «Oppositio oppositorum est oppositio sine oppositione [...] Es igitur tu, Deus, oppositio oppositorum», *ibid.*, XIII, 54.7-9, h VI, 46.

vision and face to face vision», but «if one looks very carefully» he will see that «that truth which is God himself [...] as it exists in something different from itself, can be grasped only in a different way». Thus, as objectivised by the intellect,

truth is not God, as he triumphs in himself, but it is a mode of God, through which he exists as communicable to the intellect in eternal life. For as he triumphs in himself God is neither intelligible nor knowable, nor is he truth or life, nor does he exist; rather, he precedes everything intelligible as the one, the most simple principle.⁴⁶

God then is to be reached beyond the coincidence of opposites, which is described by Cusanus in a vivid and powerful way:

I have found a place, where you will be found unveiled, that is surrounded by the coincidence of contradictories. And this is the wall of paradise, wherein you dwell. The gate of this wall is guarded by a most lofty rational spirit; unless this spirit is vanquished the entrance will not be accessible.⁴⁷

It is definitely an indication to go past the strictures of purely intellectual knowledge and its limitations. For

an intelligible object that is known by the intellect does not fully satisfy the intellect; and neither does an intelligible object that is not at all known by the intellect. Rather, the intellect can be fully satisfied only by an intelligible

⁴⁶ «Arbitror te satis intellexisse veritatem in alio non nisi aliter posse comprehendi [...] tunc Deus, etsi non uti ipse est attingitur, intuebitur tamen sine omni aenigmatico phantasmate in puritate spiritus intellectualis, et haec ipsi intellectui clara est atque facialis visio [...]. Volo quidem, ut attendas quomodo quietatio omnis intellectualis motus est veritas obiectalis, extra quam quidem regionem veritatis nullum intellectuale vestigium reperitur, neque iudicio ipsius intellectus quidquam esse potest extra caelum veritatis. Sed si, uti in aliis nostris libellis enotavimus, subtilissime advertis, tunc veritas ipsa non est Deus, ut in se triumphat, sed est modus quidem Dei, quo intellectui in aeterna vita communicabilis existit. Nam Deus in se triumphans nec est intelligibilis aut scibilis, nec est veritas nec vita, nec est, sed omne intelligibile antecedit ut unum simplicissimum principium», *De filiatione Dei*, III, 62.4-63.9, h IV, 47-48.

⁴⁷ «Et repperi locum in quo revelate reperieris, cinctum contradictoriorum coincidentia. Et iste est murus paradisi, in quo habitas, cuius portam custodit spiritus altissimus rationis, qui nisi vincatur, non patebit ingressus», *De visione Dei*, IX, 37.7-10, h VI, 35.

object which it knows to be so intelligible that this object can never fully be understood.⁴⁸

In the twilight of this conflation of absolute truth and utter incomprehensibility we can discern the further and final stage of mystical ascent: «at the door of the coincidence of opposites, guarded by the angel stationed at the entrance of paradise, I begin to see you, O Lord».⁴⁹ Hence,

I experience the necessity for me to enter into obscuring mist and to admit the coincidence of opposites, beyond all capacity of reason, and to seek truth where impossibility appears [...] And the darker and more impossible that obscuring haze of impossibility is known to be, the more truly the necessity shines forth and the less veiledly it draws near and turns up.⁵⁰

Mystical ascent leads then to the actual experience of «learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*)» that is so central in Cusanus thought.⁵¹

7. Many significant consequences in Cusanus thought and his practical pursuits as a Church reformer depend on the experience of the unknowability of God. All his efforts towards a proclaimed *concordantia* of opinions and rites are grounded in this basic awareness and personal insight. To recall but one well-known example, we may refer to his *De pace fidei*, where he writes:

Therefore you, who are the giver of life and being, you are the one who looks sought in different ways in different rites, and called by different names, for in your own reality you remain unknowable and ineffable for all of them.⁵²

⁴⁸ «Intelligibile enim, quod cognoscit, non satiat nec intelligibile satiat, quod penitus non cognoscit, sed intelligibile, quod cognoscit adeo intelligibile, quod numquam possit ad plenum intelligi, hoc solum satiare potest», *ibid.*, XVI, 70.6-9, h VI, 57-58.

⁴⁹ «Unde in ostio coincidentiae oppositorum, quod angelus custodit in ingressu paradisi constitutus, te, domine, videre incipio», *ibid.*, X, 40.1-2, h VI, 36.

⁵⁰ «Unde experior, quomodo necesse est me intrare caliginem et admittere coincidentiam oppositorum super omnem capacitatem rationis et quaerere ibi veritatem, ubi occurrit impossibilitas [...]. Et quanto impossibilitas illa caliginosa cognoscitur magis obscura et impossibilis, tanto verius necessitas relucet et minus velate adest et appropinquat», *ibid.*, IX, 36.1-9, h VI, 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, XIII, 52.10, h VI, 45.

⁵² «Tu ergo, qui es dator vitae et esse, es ille qui in diversis ritibus differenter quaeri videris et in diversis nominibus nominaris, quoniam uti es manes omnibus incognitus et ineffabilis», *De pace fidei*, I, 5.6-9, R. KLIBANSKY - H. BASCOUR OSB (eds.), London 1956, 6, 14-17.

God, unknown and unknowable as it is, is by necessity one, so «one is what all those who practise theology and philosophy try to express in different ways»;⁵³ for «if you look carefully, in all things you will find his power and modes», since «it is one that which is all in every thing, that participates in it in its own way».⁵⁴ So there cannot be but «one religion in the variety of rites».⁵⁵ The diversity of the rites shows the diversity of the attempts to get closer to him, who is inaccessible. Until we unite with him, what we see in God is only our own face. A rite is a quest that seeks (*quaerit*) to see his truth. And in a quite similar vein, it has authoritatively been maintained that with respect to the life of the Church one can regard a «council as an event in quest of the Gospel».⁵⁶

But all that has to be left to further and more reasoned considerations.

⁵³ «Unum est, quod omnes theologizantes aut philosophantes in varietate modorum exprimere conantur», *De filiatione dei*, V, 83.1-3, h IV, 59.

⁵⁴ «In omnibus igitur, si attendis, vim et eius reperis modum. Unum est igitur, quod in omnibus est omnia, quae id ipsum modo suo participant», *ibid.*, V, 82.1-3, h IV, p. 58; cf. PROCLUS, *Elementatio theologica*, 103.1: «All things are in all things, but in each according to its proper nature» (Πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν, οἰκείως δὲ ἐν ἐκάστῳ).

⁵⁵ «Religio una in rituum varietate», *De pace fidei*, I, 6.2-3, KLIBANSKY - BASCOUR (eds.), 7, 10-11.

⁵⁶ G. ALBERIGO, *Sinodo come liturgia?*, «Cristianesimo nella storia» 28 (2007) 1, 1-40, 39.

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Foundations and Objections
within the Discourse on Human Dignity

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