

“Varieties of Spiritual Sense: Cusanus and John Smith”

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Abstract

This paper offers a window into the theologies of Cusanus and the Cambridge Platonist John Smith (1618-52) by illuminating their contrasting appropriations of Origen’s concept of the spiritual senses. Both early modern Neo-Platonists of sorts, they evince many common concerns even while a definitive link between them remains elusive. This traditional notion in mystical theology is essential to a proper account of Christian experience not adequately addressed by the scholasticism of their times. While both use the language of spiritual sensation throughout their extant works, their understandings thereof are markedly different. Each appropriated and reformulated the spiritual senses to meet their intellectual and religious contexts. Cusa attempted what has been called a synthesis of Aristotelian and Origenist aesthetics while Smith’s Reformed Neo-Platonism led him to reject peripatetic philosophy outright. For Cusanus, spiritual sensation is a fundamentally apophatic process whereby we come to “see that we do not see” which points back to the sacramental practices and eschatological hope of the Catholic Church. For Smith, spiritual sensation is a direct and personal kataphatic process whereby we leave unfitting modes of perception behind in exchange for the divine intellect within us. For the Cardinal, ordinary sense perception, including contemplating images, is central. But this sacramental showing includes hiddenness within itself. For this reason spiritual sensation supplies a mediated “foretaste” of things only fully revealed in the eschatological future. Smith, on the other hand, allows little to no positive role for ordinary sense perception. Instead, he emphasizes that spiritual sensation is an intellectual matter more or less achievable in this life. Both sought to reform the Origenist tradition for their own situations sure that contemplation of the divine is more tasted than calculated.

Introduction¹

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