

On learned ignorance: the worship and knowledge of God

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“Christians of great sanctity,” Katherine Sonderegger observes, have honoured a form of learned ignorance as a path to the knowledge of God. That path can seem like a cognitive maze, actually, and the phrase itself is a conundrum: *learned* ignorance? Was Professor Sonderegger’s tongue in her cheek when she said of this path,

long stretches of Judaic and Christian theology have reserved a place of honor for this form of “learned ignorance”—a conviction that we might know something of God’s actions towards us, joined with a rigorous skepticism about the Divine Essence and Nature . . . God cannot be known in this way; God cannot be named properly in these dogmas or encountered graciously in prayer: skepticism in this form we might say knows a great deal.¹

As recipients of Sonderegger’s lecture in written rather than spoken form, we can only surmise that she may have glanced up from her notes to raise an eyebrow at this point. A sceptical way that *knows* a great deal? Yet she respectfully frames these concerns about learned ignorance and

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certainly does not disregard this form of knowing. Rather, it is one among the carefully employed counterpoints in this rich exploration of what Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah, "I stand in the presence of God, and bring you glad tidings," might teach us about God, and the prospect and manner of creaturely knowledge of God.

To whom might we turn to give flesh to Sonderegger's comment about "learned ignorance"? Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) comes immediately to mind. The title of his most famous work is, in fact, *De docta ignorantia* (*On learned ignorance*, 1440–42). Furthermore, the relationship of worship to the knowledge of God appears of interest and a source of wonder for Sonderegger, and that same interrelation of worship and knowledge are near to Cusa's heart. His *De docta ignorantia*, *De venatione sapientiae* (*On the pursuit of wisdom*, 1462–63) and *De visione Dei* (*On the vision of God*, 1453) all display the conviction that wonder and praise are the creaturely foundation for the knowledge of God. It was Thomas Aquinas who called the science of praise the highest form of science.² Thus, Nicholas was standing on the shoulders of Thomas in writing that "the most wise science consists in the praise of God, who fashioned all things from out of His praises and for the sake of His praise."³ An exploration of Nicholas may prove a worthy complement to our engagement with Katherine Sonderegger's stimulating lecture, and its reflections on the worship and knowledge of the Invisible God.

Cusa lived in that extraordinary in-between time that was the close of the Middle Ages and the dawn of what came to be known as Modernity, when the unity of worship and knowledge begins to break apart. Cusa strived to save that interrelation and his life's work has been remembered as "one of the most sophisticated attempts to recover the medieval unity of faith and reason, wisdom and science."⁴ For he would wish to teach us that we do not offer something our wonder and our praise because we first *know* it to be good. Rather, we know something to be good because it has first drawn our wonder and our praise. Put another way, the logic of knowing follows the logic of worship; a doxological foundation for the knowledge of God. Herein lies a pre-emptive Renaissance counterpoint to those who will later locate the foundation for knowledge of God in human freedom and subjectivity, for example Kant and Hegel, or in divine revelation, most notably Karl Barth.⁵

Securing a correct perspective: art, philosophy, and theology

We should begin by noting an intriguing thread that runs between the emergence of the concept of a single correct perspective in Renaissance art, to the search for a sure foundation for knowledge in Enlightenment philosophy, and then to innovations in modern theology that were designed to secure its own epistemic foundation, especially in the doctrine of revelation. This thread also laces Cusa into its garment, and leads us to why he has become, once again, a figure of interest for contemporary theology.

That an artist would set, as he or she painted, an implied single correct perspective for those viewing their work was a Renaissance novelty that came to have a profound impact on art, then also philosophy and theology. Compare the well-ordered linearity of Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, painted in the late fifteenth century, with the naïve perspective of Duccio di Buoninsgna's work of the same name, painted in the early fourteenth century. They make plain the contrast between the controlling presence of linear perspective and art prior to the application of geometry and mathematics—of science—to brushstrokes and canvas. Cusa was personally acquainted with Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), the priest and architect who established the theoretical foundation for this innovation in artistic visual perspective. Alberti's theories were taken up by Rene Descartes (1596–1650) in his *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry and Meteorology* (1637). Descartes took art's new single correct perspective and replaced it at the controlling centre with a *single questioning mind*. The foundations of epistemic perspective, if we may put it that way, were being relocated. The reality of the existence of the world, once secured through its relation to the mystery of God, is now to be secured (or not) by its relation to the actuality of the thinking human subject. Distinguishing rigorous knowledge (*scientia*) and lesser grades of conviction (*persuasio*), Descartes famously defined knowledge in terms of doubt. "I distinguish the two as follows: there is *conviction* when there remains some reason which might lead us to doubt, but *knowledge* is conviction based on a reason so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger reason."⁶ Descartes' analytics based on doubt launched continental philosophers on a consuming quest for rational certainty. Knowledge was true, after Descartes, if it was founded on analysis that was *beyond doubt*; on convictions that could "never be shaken by any stronger reason."

The new epistemological agenda triggered by Descartes had its impact on Christian theology. Questions about whether and how knowledge of God

may be obtained, and the credibility of the church's teachings in answer to those questions, became the focus of forensic and unrelenting attention during Modernity.⁷ Precisely how we know what we think we know about God came under the spotlight, along with the content of that increasingly challenged knowledge. The doctrine of revelation came to be employed as the key in securing the church's claim to speak knowledgeably of God; the bedrock of the church's ability to supply authentic content when it spoke of God. Changes emerged in the way the concept of revelation was used by theologians as a consequence of Modernity's challenge to its entire project. In particular, the modern ascendance of the concept of God's self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth, without reserve, developed as the sure foundation and measure of all true knowledge of God.

The first wave of innovation in the use of the doctrine of revelation owes its origin to Rene Descartes' proposal, in which he was following Francisco Suarez (1548–1617), that the assent of faith be made subordinate to the intelligibility of faith.⁸ This led theologians of early Modernity to construe their task as proving the possibility of revelation to an acceptable standard of intelligibility. It was here that revelation began its reign over Modern theology as the primary means of securing Christian teaching's authority. The logic was this: if the fact of revelation could be secured, especially if this were achieved in partnership with a compelling philosophical method of the day, then the intelligibility of the Christian faith itself could be secured. Faith would have a rational foundation; a fixed point, *beyond doubt*. Revelation was the cornerstone, providing a convincing foundation upon which a theology satisfactory to the modern mind could be constructed. Liberal protestant theology began to flourish in Europe.

The second stage in the elevation of the doctrine of revelation arrived in the wake of Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). The "Age of Reason" was running out of steam by the end of the eighteenth century.⁹ Systematic doubt, proposed by Descartes as a method for establishing rational certainty, had in fact given rise to the opposite of certainty: skepticism. Kant took the emerging skepticism seriously and breathed new life into the Modern project by proposing that Descartes was only half way there. Knowledge is obtained, Kant argued, only in part by our doubting mind acting as a filter for data taken in by our senses from the world around us. The process is more complex than that. Kant proposed that our mind is in fact *an active participant* in that sorting, and in forming knowledge from the data of the

world. The mind does not simply capture truths that are waiting “out there” to be found.¹⁰ The mind participates in establishing truth.

The impact of this second wave of innovation in modern epistemology on the doctrine of revelation is exemplified by the challenges put to it by Karl Barth’s theology.¹¹ Barth argued that the truth of revelation is not secured by modern philosophical method, nor does the search for trustworthy revelation lead us to a collection of analytically filtered data about God via an empirical method (*a la* Descartes). Rather, for Barth, the search for truth leads to a person. Better still, the person comes to us; and the person is God’s self.¹² Knowledge of God can be established on nothing other than God’s self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth.¹³ In a telling manoeuvre away from Kant’s investment in the knowledge-forming function of the human mind, Barth argued that Jesus was not only the method of God’s revelation but also its content and subject.¹⁴ Barth’s formulation is well known: God is the Revealer, and that which is Revealed, and is also the means of the Revealing. The creature has no agency other than that provided by the Creator. Barth argued that a reliance on historical-critical techniques or modern philosophies to establish the authority of revelation, from which conclusions are then drawn about the nature and activity of God, left theology hollow of its intended content. In an otherwise unusual convergence, Barth was of one mind with Ludwig Feuerbach’s diagnosis of the problem here: so many words about God were merely words about man. Barth’s demolition of the liberal school is well known and proved decisive for its decline.¹⁵ He became a giant of protestant theology and his fashioning of the concept of God’s self-revelation became highly influential for generations of theologians.

Even though Barth delivered a heavy blow to the momentum of theology formed in response to modern philosophy, he also reinforced the estranging dualisms of Modernity within Protestant Christian theology: faith, revelation, and theology in the one column, so to speak, and divided from reason, knowledge, and philosophy in the other. There is now growing interest in theological perspectives that might overcome those dualisms but that were lost during Modernity; that might wind back the breach between faith and reason, worship and knowledge, science and praise. Thus, Modernity’s eclipse and the postmodern recovery of perspectives trampled by the Cartesian rush, is the context in which there has been a revival of interest in Nicholas of Cusa and his learned ignorance.

Cusa on the knowledge of God

In 1453, the monks at St Quirin's monastery in Tegernsee addressed a question to their bishop, Nicholas of Cusa: How may we know God? They had studied his *On Learned Ignorance*. Among its central ideas is Cusa's signature application of the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*. If we grasp this idea, that the knowledge of God comes as the coincidence of opposites, we grasp much about Cusa's mind and this conundrum named learned ignorance.

The principles of reason call on us to distinguish between opposites. A red light is not a green light, a circle is not a square, a liquid is not a solid, and so on. In this way, we delineate between one thing and another to define and, thereby, know what it is. To *de-fine* is "to make finite," to discriminate between one thing and another by comparing, distinguishing, and defining, in order to provide precise knowledge regarding what a particular thing *is* (and what it is *not*). Yet this method of distinguishing in order to define is precisely why reason breaks down in the course of an attempt to attain knowledge of that which transcends all limits, that which cannot be "made finite"; namely, that which is infinite. Fundamental to Cusa's understanding of God is God's absolute infinity.¹⁶ Knowledge of God may be attained only when we apprehend that God, Being beyond definition, is encountered only as we transcend finite limitations. Thus, for Cusa, it is only as we transcend knowledge as distinction and definition that we may begin to perceive the God who is, in Sonderegger's words, "Mystery and Hiddenness". Then, and only then, have we begun to perceive the path to the knowledge of God.

And when—beyond that rational capacity and beyond every most lofty intellectual ascent as well—I come to that which is unknown to every intellect and which every intellect judges to be very far removed from the truth, *there* You are present, my God, You who are Absolute Necessity.¹⁷

Although we can never *de-fine* God using the principles of reason, Cusa, nonetheless, believed that we may know God. His embrace of the knowledge of God as *coincidentia oppositorum* does not mean that he failed to respect reason. Rather, he believed he understood the limits of reason, and sought to limit over-confidence in its application when the knowledge being sought was knowledge of God.¹⁸ Acknowledging our inability to

comprehend God does not denote a lack of enlightenment. On the contrary, it is a sign of wisdom, namely, the wisdom Cusa called *learned ignorance*.¹⁹

In her reading of Gabriel's encounter with Zechariah in the Temple in Luke 1, with its "remarkable interweaving of sight and sound in this angelic proclamation," Katherine Sonderegger speaks of what may be learned from its notes of "whispering and wonder":

We are to learn from this, I think, that the Lord God Himself can be present within the world of the creature; He and his messenger, His word, have Presence within our realm. And perhaps more wonderful still, we creatures can stand in the presence of Almighty God . . . Now I do not want to begin here with the assumption that the Incorporeality or Invisibility of God is being set aside in Holy Scripture. I think something quite like the opposite is being taught instead. God is Mystery and Hiddenness, Immateriality and Uniqueness: this is bedrock confession of the One God. But this Utterly Unique Lord draws near to us, Scripture tells us, and does so under the categories and strictures of creaturely intuition, the forms of space and time.

Here we, with Sonderegger, are striving after what is hidden from the wise yet revealed to the humble: that the invisible God draws near to us. Cusa spent a lifetime in this quest, striving to understand how the Hidden One may be seen—how Mystery may be known. We noted earlier that the Tegernsee monks had posed a question to Cusa: How may we know God?²⁰ To guide them, Cusa announced to their abbot, Caspar Ayndorffer, that he would send the brothers a text, which he called his "little book on the icon". It is known today as *On the Vision of God* and has been described as his "literary and spiritual masterwork".²¹ Along with the text, Cusa sent a large painting that he described as a "figure of the all-seeing," a figure from which there emanated a gaze so all-encompassing that it appeared to follow all of its viewers at the same time.²² Cusa asked the monks to set the all-seeing face against a wall and form a semi-circle around it. "Hang this icon somewhere, e.g., on the north wall" Cusa wrote, "and you brothers stand around it, at a short distance from it, and observe it."²³ Cusa then instructed the monks to undertake an exercise that unfolded in three distinct phases. His experiment into how we may know God begins.

1. The monks were asked to look upon the face in silence while standing motionless in a semi-circle formation. In this first phase, Cusa hoped that each participant would perceive 'how diligently [the gaze] is concerned for each one, as if it were concerned for no one else, but only for him who experiences that he is seen.'²⁴ 'To the brother who is situated in the east it will seem that the face is looking toward the east; to the brother in the south, that the face is looking toward the south; to the brother in the west, that is it looking westward.'²⁵
2. Next, the monks were asked to walk from west to east, and back again, still holding their silence, while keeping their eyes fixed at all times upon the gaze of the face. In that second phase, Cusa hoped that each participant would perceive that the gaze never leaves him, for 'the icon's gaze proceeds continually with him' and 'does not desert him' even while he is moving.²⁶ "Next, let the brother who was in the east situate himself in the west, and he will experience the [icon's] gaze as fixed on him in the west, just as it previously was in the east."²⁷
3. Finally, in the third and final phase of the exercise, the monks were asked to break their silence and speak to one another of their experience. In this third phase, Cusa hoped that the monks would discover that which is most extraordinary of all, namely, that the gaze had followed each one of them simultaneously and had never left any one of them, even those walking in contrary directions. "And so, through the disclosure of the respondent [each monk] will come to know that the face does not desert anyone who is moving—not even those who are moving in opposite directions."²⁸

It is the third phase of the exercise that reveals Cusa's hand. Whereas each monk could see, while standing or moving silently from side to side, that the gaze was always resting upon him, the insight that the gaze was simultaneously resting upon them all is dependent on listening to those

who stand in a different place; it is dependent on a herald.²⁹ Johannes Hoff has observed of the interrelation of witness and trust in Cusa's exercise that:

Our visual perception is always linked to a specific perspective: I can never see directly from my perspective what another might see from hers. That my perception is "subjective" might appear to be the most evident common knowledge in our post-modern world. But how did I learn to know that I cannot see what other individuals see?³⁰

Now we begin to perceive the deceptively simple yet profound wisdom of Cusa's exercise, in which seeing is an analogy for knowing. By listening to those who speak from a different place, each participant begins to understand that there are things invisible to them that are yet visible to others. In fact, our very awareness of the possibility and presence of the Invisible comes only through listening to those who stand elsewhere.

If I am looking at someone who reveals to me that she is seeing something that I cannot see from my perspective, I am starting to perceive that there is something *invisible* to me. Cusa's conviction that the invisible is visible is related to this experience. I am familiar with the reality of the Invisible since I have learned to listen to other people.³¹

An abiding astonishment

Professor Sonderegger has written in her extraordinary *Doctrine of God* that "[t]he *presence* of the One God takes place in the Mode and form of *invisibility*: when He is disclosed, He is not seen. When He draws near in great power, he gives rise to the agency of His servants, who act as His heralds."³² While the path of the sceptic may not equip us well to perceive this Presence, the path of learned ignorance acknowledges we may catch a glimpse of the One who is "Mystery and Hiddenness" and, further, that when God does draw near, we will *know* by placing our trust in a Herald.

Zechariah said the angel, "How will I know this is so?" . . . The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." (Luke 1: 18–20).

Our ability to speak knowledgably of God arises, Cusa believed, from our participation in a cosmic liturgy.³³ To this One we are drawn in wonder and praise, with all the saints, and toward a trusting knowledge of that Invisible Presence.

Endnotes

- 1 Katherine Sonderegger, "The God we worship; the worship we owe God" a paper delivered to the 16th Edinburgh Conference in Reformed Theology, September 2015, 1.
- 2 David B. Burrell and Isabelle Moulin, "Albert, Aquinas, and Dionysius," in *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 103–119.
- 3 Nicholas of Cusa, *De venatione sapientiae*, c. 18 n. 53. *sapidissimam scientiam consistere in laude dei, quae omnia ex suis laudibus as sui laudem constituit.*
- 4 Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 2.
- 5 Johannes Hoff, "The Rise and Fall of the Kantian Paradigm of Modern Theology," in *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism*, ed. Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler (London: SCM, 2010), 167–96.
- 6 John Cottingham and Robert Stoothoff, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 147. Emphasis added.
- 7 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 285.
- 8 I am indebted for these observations to the unpublished 2013 Bonaventure Lecture at the University of Nottingham delivered by Johannes Hoff.
- 9 Hendrikus Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 18–19.
- 10 William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 249–250.
- 11 Hendrikus Berkhof, "The import of 'The unabrogable subjectivity of God in His revelation' in Barth," in *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 213–219.

- 12 Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 65.
- 13 For example, Jesus is “the Guarantor” of the truth (CD IV/1, 137) and “the true Witness” who “attests this truth as he attests himself” (CD IV/3, 440).
- 14 John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2004), 57–60; John Thompson, “On the Trinity,” in *Theology Beyond Christendom* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 13.
- 15 Geoffrey Bromily, “The abiding significance of Karl Barth,” in *Theology Beyond Christendom*, ed. John Thompson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 331–50; John Webster, *Barth*, 14–15.
- 16 “The concept of *infinitas absoluta* is the primary perspective of all Cusanus’ decisions attempting to express God’s being as an absolute.” David Monaco, *Nicholas of Cusa: Trinity, Freedom and Dialogue* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2016), 121.
- 17 Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei*, chapter 9, paragraph 38.
- 18 M. Fuhrer, “The consolation of contemplation in Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei*,” in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church: Essays in Memory of Chandler McCuskey Brooks for the American Cusanus Society*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 240.
- 19 Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 9–11, 20–21; Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 27–32.
- 20 K. Meredith Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in the 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2014), 138; Bernard McGinn, “Seeing and not seeing: Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei* in the History of Western Mysticism” in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter J. Casarella (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 50.
- 21 Joshua Hollmann, *The Religious Concordance: Nicholas of Cusa and Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 191; Donald Duclow, “Life and Work,” in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*, ed. Christopher M. Belitto, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 43.
- 22 For the following I am drawing on Hoff’s examination of Cusa’s selection of the painting and, more broadly, his fascinating discussion of Cusa’s connection to developments in Renaissance art and architecture. Hoff, *Analogical*, 27–29 and 60–92.

- 23 Cusa, *De visione Dei*, Preface, paragraph 3.
- 24 Cusa, *De visione Dei*, Preface, paragraph 4.
- 25 Cusa, *De visione Dei*, Preface, paragraph 3.
- 26 Cusa, *De visione Dei*, Preface, paragraph 4.
- 27 Cusa, *De visione Dei*, Preface, paragraph 3.
- 28 Cusa, *De visione Dei*, Preface, paragraph 4.
- 29 Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 30.
- 30 Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 30 and 31 (emphasis in the original).
- 31 Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 31.
- 32 Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 74.
- 33 Nancy J. Hudson, *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 26–35.