How theology can be made simpler

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Difficult theology

When we theologians interpret the great teachings of traditional Christianity — the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the two natures of Christ, for example — it often appears that our task is a very difficult one. What I mean is that when we think about the three-in-oneness of God we tend to presuppose that this three-in-oneness is a mathematical absurdity, and when we think about the two natures of Christ we almost instinctively presuppose that we are thinking about a self-contradictory nonsense. This is because whereas it is normal to say that 1 + 1 + 1 =3, we seem to be saying something that contradicts this when we say that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are God. Absurdly, we insist that 'these three are one'.[1] And whereas we know that squares cannot be circles, we seem to be saying something like this when we say that Jesus Christ is simultaneously God and man.[2] Such doctrines confront us as difficult riddles that need to be solved, problems that need to be cracked. We presuppose that Christian doctrine is, in one sense or another, intellectually outrageous; we think that it is essentially paradoxical, and we think that it provides a challenge to human reason. And because theology spends its time dealing with confusing and bewildering paradoxes it seems appropriate that theology itself is understood to be something that is very difficult to do.

The theologian then finds that he or she has to respond to these absurdities in one way or another. The task of explaining why something that seems absurd and illogical is not absurd and illogical is a hard one. Some theologians have found that they have had to reject traditional Christian doctrines precisely because they are understood to be inherently irrational; they are of the opinion that because a particular doctrine is absurd it is therefore also false. Others have taken delight in an outright revelry in theological paradox and illogicity for its own sake because they understand Christian doctrine to be primarily outrageous; like Tertullian they believe particular Christian doctrines precisely because they are absurd.[3] Please note, however, that those who reject a doctrine because it is absurd and those who accept a doctrine because it is absurd hold one thing in common: the mutual belief that Christian doctrine is riddled with the irrational.

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Let me suggest that there are two prevalent methods that can be used to deal with all this theological nonsense without becoming either absurd or not a Christian. The first hinges on a theologian's ability to redefine a key element of a doctrine so that it appears to make more sense. Models of the "social trinity" are an example of this because they hinge on the replacement of the sense of mathematical unity in the three-in-oneness of God with a sense of the social comm-unity of God. The result is that one ceases to understand God as Three Persons that are One, but as three individuals who share a common genus. Kenotic accounts of the Incarnation provide another example because they represent an attempt to redefine the "problem" of the two natures in such a way that one of the natures is negated, emptied-out or discarded in order to iron-out the supposed logical inconsistency of the doctrine. Both the "social trinity" and kenotic models of the Incarnation may make more sense by everyday standards of logic, but it is doubtful whether they are representative of Nicaea and Chalcedon. And again, please note that there would be no need for such redefinitions of doctrine if they were not presupposed to be crudely nonsensical in the first place.

The second tactic of dealing with supposed theological nonsense is to make use of Christian doctrine to challenge "everyday standards of logic". This may mean a good old Barthian *krisis* theology whereby Jesus Christ becomes the judge of human culture and what in English we call "common sense", or it may mean a more radical and post-modern critique of modernist assumptions about the existence of a universally recognised logic in the first place. Either way, this tactic represents a subtle shifting of the logical goal posts themselves so that Christian doctrine and not general logic is allowed to set the standards for what counts as reasonable thought. Thus logic is replaced by 'christologic'[4]: Christology is no longer seen in the light of human language and knowledge, but human language and knowledge are constructed in the light of Chalcedon.[5] The pre-requisite for doing theology is a passage from one standard of reasoning to another, an intellectual conversion or, to borrow Kuhn's now well worn phrase, a "paradigm shift".[6] Theologians thereby take possession of a shared standard of reasoning that they can use to talk to each other constructively about doctrine whilst remaining faithful to traditional doctrinal forms. The downside of this is the fact that Christian theologians can then produce arguments that only make sense to other Christian theologians who have made the same "paradigm shift" and no one else. Theology becomes an exclusive discourse, a closed circle of thought trapped in an intellectual ghetto that is only capable of internal reference.[7] This methodology is prevalent in contemporary theology, but

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please note once again that this method rests on the presupposition that key Christian doctrines are by normal standards nonsensical. If this were not presupposed, there would be no need to develop a unique form of reason that is specific to Christian doctrine alone.

I do not want to spend any more time on any of these solutions to the "problems" of theology here, but I do want to say something about the presupposition upon which they all rest. I have said that this presupposition is that the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and of the two natures of Christ are mathematical absurdities or self-contradictory nonsenses: they are difficult problems or challenges to logic that the theologian has to tackle one way or another to make any sense of them. What is it that makes the Holy Trinity and the two natures of Christ appear absurd in the first place? Answer: mathematics. We know that 1 is not equal to 3 and 3 is not equal to 1, and we know that 1 thing + another thing = 2 things. At the end of the day this is what makes the Holy Trinity and the two natures of Christ seem queer: they simply do not add up.

Underlying this presupposition is the idea that God is a quantity, a "something" that can be brought into relation with other "things" and therefore counted. Thus the "problem" of the two natures of Christ is constructed as one "thing" (Divinity) and another "thing" (humanity) being brought together, by way of a blatant contradiction in terms, in one person. Confusion arises because this means that Christ is God and man in the same way that other contradictions are contradictions, that is, in the same way as saying that 2 = 1 is a contradiction.

It is only necessary to briefly note here how this conceptualising of God as a "something" that may be quantified works its way into some of the common solutions offered to the "problems" of theology that it is responsible for. It is easy to imagine what *kenosis* might be like because we can think of God as a quantity of this or that — be it water from a jar or love from a heart — being poured out in an act of emptying. Further, we can imagine what the *perichoresis* of the Holy Trinity might be like because we have an idea of what *peri-chora* (dwelling in a room) is like, a kind of quantity filling in a space. We may also note here that this reciprocal motion of perpetual emptying out and filling in is the basic conception behind much systematic theology today, and remind ourselves that is dependent upon the notion that God is in some way like "things".[8]

Simple theology: lessons from Nicholas of Cusa

So much for conventional ways of constructing and solving theological problems. But it must be said that all this is largely unnecessary, for there is an alternative way of approaching theology that does not accept the presupposition that the Holy Trinity and the two natures of Christ are

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logical absurdities. Indeed, it challenges such a presupposition from the start. I want to describe this position with reference to Nicholas of Cusa. This theological position is not unique to him (Gregory of Nyssa, Denys the Areopagite, Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart are all in one way or another also representative of this way of constructing and answering theological questions),[9] but because Cusa provides a lively, mature, systematic and concentrated example of this theological approach I will concern myself chiefly with him alone here. Cusa (1401-1464) is not so well known to English speaking theologians as he is to many working on the Continent, and may need a brief introduction to some.[10] He is famous for being as active politically as he was intellectually — a reforming presence in medieval Catholicism, a busy administrator and papal vicar general in Rome from 1459. It is notable that he travelled on an ecumenical mission to the Holy Orthodox Church and that his experience of another form of Christianity had a deep impact on him. No cloistered monk or pampered prince of the Church, Cusa knew all about harsh political realities: after tussles with German rulers he survived an assassination attempt.[11] As a result Karl Jaspers has described him as 'the only one of the great philosophers to have led a busy life'.[12] He yet managed (somehow) to become one of the foremost scholars of his day[13] and to produce more than fifty works, twenty-five of which are significant works of philosophy, theology, and spirituality. He is best known for the magnificent *De docta ignorantia — On Learned Ignorance* — of 1440. This work of theology draws within its scope doctrine, mathematics, geometry, astronomy and ethics, and has even gained Cusa the reputation of knowing approximately everything relevant to the theological task in the fifteenth century, such was his mastery of these diverse subjects.[14]

As might be expected from the title, the content of *On Learned Ignorance* is deeply rooted in negative theology. Cusa takes it as his task to school the finite human mind so that it recognises its own limitations before the impenetrable mystery of the infinite God. In the first chapter, 'How Knowing Is Not Knowing',[15] Cusa quotes with approval Socrates' belief that he believed he knew nothing except that he did not know,[16] and equates this with Solomon's teaching that all things cannot be explained with words,[17] and with Job's insight that understanding lies hidden from the living.[18] In order to demonstrate the limitations of human knowledge, *On Learned Ignorance* introduces a series of seemingly intractable problems drawn from a variety of spheres of learning, including mathematics, geometry and astronomy, with the deliberate intent of humbling the reason. The general point is clear: if human reason is humbled before mathematics, then it must certainly be

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humbled before the Holy Trinity. However, Cusa never abandons reason, for it is reason itself that demonstrates its own limitations. Crucially, there is for Cusa no difference between the kind of reasoning appropriate to the spheres of mathematics or geometry or astronomy and the kind of reasoning appropriate to theology. He applies the same logic to both creation and Creator, and importantly this means that he can see no need for a special "exclusive" theological method extrinsic to general "mundane" philosophical method. In other words, this means that Cusa is not interested in developing a "christologic" specific to Christian doctrine alone as many of our contemporary theologians are.

Cusa argues that because God is beyond comprehension it is appropriate to say that God is infinite since the infinite escapes circumscription. Cusa realises that there is no reason why this concept of God that God has revealed should not operate in theological problems in any way different to the way the infinite operates in mathematical problems. This insight allows him to develop a tactic — a theological method — with which he can address theological issues, and the results are impressive. Any mathematician worth her salt will tell you that infinity is an anti-quantity. If you add infinity and infinity you do not get two infinities, for there is only ever one infinite, which is one because it is identical with itself. Indeed, nothing can be added or subtracted from infinity because infinity is not a number at all to which other numbers can be added or subtracted.[19] This is because whilst numbers are quantities, the infinite is not. Cusa reminds us that the infinite is not subject to more or less or greater or lesser.[20] The concept of God that God has revealed 'cannot, therefore, become number'.[21]

What happens to our understanding of doctrine when we accept that God is not an idol, but is infinite?

Cusa argues that the doctrine of the Trinity is not irrational or illogical because it is not a mathematical absurdity at all. He provides a geometrical example of why this is by likening the Trinity to a triangle of infinite proportions. A triangle of infinite proportions is, geometry shows, indeterminable from an infinite straight line because there is nowhere on any of the infinite sides of the triangle to place the angles of the triangle. The three Persons of the Trinity are one God as the infinite triangle is an infinite straight line; the infinite Trinity is a truth of theology just as the infinite triangle is a truth of geometry, that is, in accordance with reason.[22] Or, to provide an example of my own, the Trinity, because it is God, cannot be understood by analogy with the (incorrect) sum $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ because the three Persons of the Trinity are not "things" to which number applies.[23] Since the three Persons are infinite, the correct mathematical analogy for the Trinity is $\infty + \infty + \infty$

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= ∞. If God is infinite, the Trinity is not an absurdity; the Trinity agrees with mathematical reason. It is not illogical, absurd, or even paradoxical. Christian theologians should instinctively know this because Christians do not believe in idols.[24]

Likewise, the doctrine of the two natures of Christ is neither paradox nor absurdity. The union of the two natures is not a union of two "things" at all. It is a union of one finite quantifiable thing (Jesus of Nazareth) and the uncreated, infinite Second Person of the Trinity who is not a "thing" of any kind and cannot be numbered. Thus Cusa writes:

> It is erroneous to conceive of this union as a union in which different things are united. Absolute maximumness [the divine nature] is not other or different [to any "thing"]... It is also incorrect to conceive of this as if two things were once separate but are now united. Divinity does not have a different existence with respect to earlier and later, nor is it this rather than that ... Nor is the union of divinity and [humanity].. .one of parts united in a whole, for God cannot be a part.[25]

The union is not, therefore, a union of two "things" that are one whilst remaining unmixed and distinct. It is a union of one "thing" (Jesus of Nazareth) and the infinite Divine that is not a thing that can be added to other things. Rather than being represented by 1 + 1 = 1, the two natures should be represented as 1 (man) + 0 (nothing, not-a-thing, not "this" idol nor "that" idol) = 1. If God is not a thing (not an idol) because God creates things, then the union of the two natures in Christ (1 + 0 = 1) agrees with the rules of mathematics. Therefore, it cannot be a paradox to say that Christ is a union of God and man.[26] The doctrine of the two natures is not a contradiction, and should not (*pace* John Hick) be likened to nonsensical concepts like "square circles".[27]

Since the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation are not paradoxical absurdities, what about even more "problematic" doctrines? For example, what does Cusa make of the ascension? The creed confesses that Christ 'ascended to the right hand of the Father', and since the Father is infinite, and the universe finite, it is clear that the Father cannot strictly be said to be located in space in the same way that I am currently in a room in Sheffield. The right hand of the Father cannot be "this" or "that" because it cannot be part of creation and therefore 'with reference to place it is not apprehensible, describable, or definable'.[28] This means that location in space cannot be ascribed to Christ; Christ simply cannot be in place at all if he has ascended to the right hand of the infinite Father, and he cannot be located amongst "this" or "that" or "here" or "there". 'Therefore, we understand Christ to have ascended, above all place and all time, to an incorruptible mansion,

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beyond everything that can be spoken, for he ascended far above all the heavens so that he might fill all things'.[29] The description in Ephesians 1.21 of Christ's ascent being above every name that is named is understood by Cusa to indicate that the doctrine of the ascension always ends for those who have learnt ignorance in mystery and apophaticism. Where has Christ gone? We neither know nor can articulate, because we know that the Father is infinite, and if Christ has gone to him he has gone into a mystery. Learnt ignorance thereby outflanks all those critiques of the ascension that deny Christ has gone to the Father on the pretence of knowing where heaven is, what it is like, and what Christ must be like to dwell there. As far as Cusa would be concerned such critiques overstep the mark by hubristically claiming to know exactly what it is impossible to know. One can as little know what it means for Christ to have ascended to heaven (or how he got "there") as one can count infinity. Of course, this does not prove that the ascension "happened", and it may mean that the ascension remains highly improbable, but it does mean the confession that Christ ascended to the right hand of the Father cannot be subjected to formal logical critique.[30] The ascension cannot, therefore, be described as paradoxical. We simply do not know enough about the ascension to be able to say that it is absurd: to be in a position to do so we would either have to be in heaven already, or be gnostics (those who are not ignorant!). However unlikely it may be, and however contrary to experience, the ascension is not a formal paradox and is not illogical.[31]

The doctrine of the ascension is, then, located within the framework of apophatic theology. Cusa echoes this understanding of the doctrine in his interpretation of St Paul's ascent to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12. This passage is a favourite of Cusa's because St Paul here states that he received in heaven a revelation of unutterable utterances that he is incapable of repeating. Cusa equates these unutterable utterances with apophatic theology, and interprets the narrative of the ascent to mean that the closer one gets to God the more ignorant of God one becomes.

> Through faith we are rapt in simplicity so that, while in a body incorporeally, because in spirit, and in the world not in a worldly manner but celestially, we may incomprehensibly contemplate Christ above all reason and intelligence, in the third heaven of the simplest intellectuality. Therefore, we also see that because of the immensity of his excellence he cannot be comprehended. And this is that learned ignorance by which the very blessed Paul, as he ascended, saw that, when he was being lifted higher up to Christ, he was then ignorant of Christ, whom at one time he had known only.[32]

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St Paul's ascent is thus interpreted as a movement from knowledge to ignorance as he approaches God. Cusa has good reasons for saying this: after all, Christians are not joined to God by the intellect. Cusa believes that Christians are joined with God by faith, and he associates faith with ignorance: 'religion always conducts its worship by faith, which it more truly attains through learned ignorance'.[33] I think that Cusa is quite right to argue this: after all, if we knew God there would be no room for faith, which is a form of ignorance, an unverifiable hope for things that are not yet seen or known.

Problems with simple theology

Cusa shows how theology can become very simple and avoid having to set up its own internal logical rules whilst remaining faithful to traditional doctrines. All this is well and good, but there are certainly very important questions that we should raise about his method.

To start with there is a problem that concerns negative theology in general. Chief amongst the subjects of which Cusa learns he is ignorant is God, because God is truly infinite and uncircumscribed: 'God is unknowable either in this world or in the world to come... God is known to God alone'.[34] Now, since God is infinite and unknown we might ask how Cusa knows that he does not know about the unknown God in the first place. Cusa's answer is typically Thomist and therefore characteristic of Catholic orthodoxy: God has shown that God is unknown, and revealed that God is concealed — 'praise God for showing Godself to us as incomprehensible, who is over all things, blessed forever'.[35] It is, therefore, by God's own revelation that we know that God is completely unknown and beyond comprehension, and it is absolutely essential to recognise that this means that Cusa's theology is as strongly revelatory as any theology can be.[36]

Another potential problem is that, on a cursory reading of *On Learned Ignorance*, Cusa appears to be subject to the familiar Harnackian criticism that he has allowed Hellenistic philosophy to corrupt the pure and simple message of the Gospel. To be more specific, Cusa appears in many places to be unable to distinguish God from creation and this creates the impression that he is a pantheist, or more precisely a panentheist. He approves of the saying of Parmenides that 'God is the one for whom to be anything that is, is to be everything that is',[37] and adds in the following paragraph that God 'is the one most simple essence of the entire universe'.[38] Worse, in the second book of *On Learned Ignorance* we find the following:

> Because the creation was created through the being of the maximum and because, in the maximum, being, making, and creating are the

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> same, creating seems to be no different than God's being all things. If, therefore, God is all things and if this means creating, how can one understand the creation not to be eternal, since the being of God is eternal, indeed, is eternity itself'? ... Who, therefore, can understand that God is the form of being but not intermixed with creation?[39]

And later he states that 'God is, without diversity, in all things, for each thing is in each thing, and ... all things are in God, for all things are in all things'.[40]

Cusa seems to be saying that if God is infinite — the maximum being — then, being infinite, he must include within Godself all other beings. If this is true, then it follows that God is necessarily connected to the world, and the world dwells within God. This panentheistic belief certainly resembles the Plotinian notion of creation by emanation as opposed to the Christian belief in creation *ex nihilo*. This is a serious charge, because in this paper I have been trying to show that the understanding of God as infinite helps us to avoid a multitude of theological problems and develop a simpler approach to Christian doctrine. Is Cusa's method inextricably panentheist and therefore unallowable for truly Christian theology?

I think that it is worth saying here that Cusa is very probably a panentheist and that he means what he says when talks about the world participating in the eternal being of God. But there is also enough in his theology to combat the conclusion that he is therefore a very bad theologian and to allow us to rescue his method of learned ignorance from panentheism. His talk about God being infinite and the ramifications this has to the way we can construct theological problems can be considered separately from his understanding of creation. How can we maintain that God is infinite and reap the theological benefits of Cusa's method without succumbing to panentheism?

The idea that God cannot be quantified is entirely appropriate to God, of course, because quantification is an extension of our faculty to compare one thing with another as greater or lesser; God, however, is not any kind of "thing" in the world and so cannot admit quantification. This conclusion is reinforced by the insight learnt from the tradition of Christian apophaticism mediated by Meister Eckhart that God is not any nameable object at all. When Cusa argues in his *Dialogus de Deo abscondito — Dialogue on the Hidden God* — of 1444/5 that 'God cannot be called "this" rather than "that"', he is using Eckhartian language.[41] By this he means that God cannot be brought into the general framework of dialectical oppositions — differences — by which we name and know things. This is because God is not one thing amongst others. God, according to Christian theology, creates things and the differences between them. God, therefore, does not even fit into the framework of

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differences; God escapes the dialectic of being and the dialectic of naming and is therefore neither alike nor unlike anything,[42] being 'above all opposition'.[43] This is to say that we have no concept of God — God 'cannot be any of the things which we know or of which we have any concept'.[44] Since we have no concept of God, the most we can say of God is that God is God, and that we have no idea what this means.[45] Of course, if God could be conceived, that God would be a mere idol! God is a simple concept (a concept only in negative terms!) to which oppositions and contradictions do not apply. 'In God we must not conceive of distinction and indistinction, for example, as two contradictories, but we must conceive of them as antecedently existing in their own most simple beginning, where distinction is not other from indistinction'.[47]

The logical understanding of the mathematical operation of the infinite, apophaticism, and the metaphysical and theological understanding of God's dis-relatedness to creatures combine as elements in what Cusa describes as *coincidentia oppositorum* — the coincidence of opposites. Cusa argues that if the infinite is above distinction and escapes the dialectic then we should recognise that in the infinite all oppositions collapse; the infinite, that is, 'combines contradictories'.[49]

> You, Lord, tell me that just as in unity otherness is without otherness because it is unity, so in infinity contradiction is without contradiction because it is infinity. Infinity is simplicity itself of all that are spoken; contradiction does not exist without otherness. Yet in simplicity otherness exists without otherness because it is simplicity itself. For all that can be said of absolute simplicity coincides with it, because in absolute simplicity having is being. The opposition of opposites is an opposition without opposition, just as the end of finite things is an end without end. You are, therefore, O God, the opposition of opposites, because you are infinite, and because you are infinite, you are infinity itself. In infinity the opposition of opposites is without opposition.[49]

God is not a "thing" — a "this" or a "that" and so overcomes the *differences* that different sorts of "things", "this cheese as opposed to that" and "this time of day as opposed to that", fall foul of. The upshot of all this is that when God is not conceived of as an idol the presupposition found in much contemporary theology which causes so many "problems", namely the presupposition that God is a quantifiable "thing", cannot hold. And if this presupposition does not hold, then neither do any of the problems I described previously.

One last problem. Learned ignorance not only shows that the mysteries of religion are not opposed to reason; it also acknowledges that human reason and knowledge cannot grasp God, and that the

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Christian is joined to God through faith. This is an attractive package because, whilst acknowledging the importance of faith, the content of doctrine is shown to be by no means nonsensical or paradoxical by "normal" standards of reason. Of course, one may want to critique Cusa's theology by insisting that faith be irrational, and indeed there is a major stream of Christian theology that has worked its way into various traditions that seeks to maintain and sometimes even dogmatically assert that Christian doctrine is essentially paradoxical and contrary to "worldly reason". The cross that stands at the depths of the Gospel narratives has been seen by some as a paradox (although the New Testament never uses this language) that overthrows reason: it is 'foolishness to those who are perishing' (1 Cor. 1. 18).[50] Or, to take another example, St Paul can be interpreted as pleading anti-intellectualism in 1 Cor. 2.1-5 as he argues that faith is not built by plausible arguments but by the power of God. I want to say one significant thing in defence of Cusa at this point: yes, it is possible to argue that theology is essentially irrational; but irrationality can take many forms. There are many different ways of getting the sum 2 + 2 wrong. One can wrongly answer 2 + 2 = 1, or 2 + 2 = 3, or 2 + 2 = 5, or 2 + 2 = vacuum cleaner. But how is one to decide which of these irrational wrongs is the right wrong? If theology is irrational, is the correct irrationality the individualistic irrationality of Luther's paradoxes in the Heidelberg Disputation, or is it the irrationality of the (allegedly) Jesuit slogan "if the Church says black is white then black is white". Both positions are equally paradoxical, yet each developed in fundamental opposition to the other. Which of these paradoxical wrongs is the right wrong, that is, which of these paradoxes is the paradox that conforms to the supposed paradox of the cross? How does one tell if one has got one's absurdity in the right place?[51]

What should be realised is that there is a significant difference between blunt absurdity and Divine mystery. Cusa shows that mystery is not necessarily and essentially opposed to reason, and although *On Learned Ignorance* is a reasoned demonstration of the harmony of Christian doctrine and human logic, it is still one that relies upon the acceptance of the human limitation of ignorance. And in this sense it certainly cannot be said not to qualify as a type of "foolishness to the wise".[53] To learn ignorance and acknowledge that God is infinite is to acknowledge that 'God's foolishness is wiser than human reason, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength' (1 Cor. 1.25). For Cusa, we should note, our redemption lies in 'the ineffable mystery of the cross'. Thus 'our justification does not come from ourselves but from Christ ... Because we attain to him in this life by formed faith [*faith*

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worked by the Spirit of Christ because we are ignorant], we can be justified only by faith'.[54] Since his theology is concerned with ignorance from start to finish, it corresponds from start to finish with this meditation on the mystery of the cross.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Cusa is valuable today because he shows that there is nothing in Christian doctrine that is formally opposed to human reason. He shows us that theology does not rely on its own unique form of "Christologic", and need not be restricted to a ghetto of its own making. Christian doctrines can address the world, and the world can address Christian doctrine because they both inhabit the same logical sphere. This is something that theology needs to rediscover, as Maurice Wiles pointed out in a letter in *Theology* in 1991.

> No doubt it is true that 'liberals' are sometimes guilty of thinking that what seems to them a self-evidently cogent form of reasoning will do so to everyone else also, irrespective of time or place or social context. But there is a corresponding danger in an extreme 'post-liberal' outlook. Those who believe that the grammar of the language they use can only be learnt by a process of inculturation, will expect that those who do not share their views will misunderstand them, that is what their theory would lead them to expect. The theory becomes self-confirming. And it follows that it would be a waste of time for them to try to make themselves more intelligible— in fact perhaps even a betrayal rather than just a waste of time, since the attempt to do so would mean pretending one could pass over an impassable culture gap.[55]

Of course, in this paper I have not just shown that Christian doctrine is commensurate with logic. I have said something also about how Christian theology is driven into ghettos on the basis of a false presumption that God is an idol. We should remind ourselves that these theological ghettos are extensions of what Herbert McCabe has described as involving 'an antithesis of God and man... an antithesis which is not to be found in the New Testament'. Indeed, by insisting upon the antithesis of God and man, they depend upon a rejection of the Catholic idea that "grace perfects nature"'.[56] But grace does perfect nature, and God is pleased to dwell amongst us in this sinful world. Nothing in Christian doctrine is opposed to reason: perhaps we should expect nothing less of a God Who is God incarnate.

1 1 John 5.7 — the Johannine "comma" — is the source of this phrase. Its influence on contemporary trinitarian theology can be clearly seen in the title of D.S. Cunningham's *These Three Are One* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

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2 'For to say, without explanation, that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was also God is as devoid of meaning as to say that this circle drawn with a pencil on paper is also a square' J. Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p. 178.

3 Brunner is one twentieth century example: 'The logical absurdities of the doctrine of the Two Natures and of the Trinity express the inconceivable miracle of revelation. It would not be a divine revelation at all if it could be grasped by the mind, if it could be "perceived," if it could take its place among our other activities of thought and experience, and thus be established on these lines. Revelation in the New Testament sense cannot be anything other than illogical, since it breaks through the continuity of out thought, as indeed it breaks through the continuity of the human and natural sphere in general'. *The Mediator* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934), p. 278.

4 A word used by Douglas Farrow to contrast logic that is specifically Christian as opposed to other logics. See D. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia,* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 110 n. 91.

5 'We conclude then, that notions of human language about God... can be guided by the christology of Chalcedon. Approaching human language about God in the light of the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith will enable both the human and the divine and their relation, to be kept in view... christology can condition notions of human language about God' S.W. Need, *Human Language and Knowledge in the Light of Chalcedon* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 218. 'Christians can and should have their own ways of thinking about truth and about deciding what to believe. They need not take their truth claims on loan from some other intellectual or cultural quarter... a genuinely theological account of truth and epistemic justification needs to be robustly trinitarian. It ought to subject whatever ideas it may find useful to the formative discipline of the Christian community's convictions about the triune God' Bruce D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. xi–xii.

6 It needs to be said that theological appeals to Kuhn's philosophy of science are illegitimate. It is true that empirical science requires that any thesis must fit the observed facts in order to save the phenomena, and that presupposed standards of reason needs must take second place to subject matter. But that which is a legitimate method for empirical science is not therefore a legitimate method for theology. A scientist can justify his method by repeating an experiment and observing facts. But how could the incarnation be an observed fact? Doctrines are intellectual hypotheses because they represent something people believe without evidence, and to view them as similar to shifts in scientific paradigm is unhelpful. Whereas a paradigm-shifting scientist is getting the thesis to fit the facts, a paradigm-shifting theologian is merely getting the thesis to fit another thesis! See I.T. Ramsey's comparison of scientific and theological paradoxes in his *Christian Empiricism* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 102.

7 Milbank's essay 'The End of Dialogue' in G. D'Costa (ed), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* (Orbis Books, 1990) is a case in point. Theology enters the ghetto and closes the gates. It creates it own discourse that is completely self-referential, and therefore unable to be understood by anyone outside. In a review of this book G. Loughlin states (approvingly!) that Milbank 'cannot but be misunderstood by his opponents' (*Theology* vol. xciv July/August 1991 no. 760, p. 299). Milbank's comments on the back-cover of C. Pickstock's *After Writing* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) provide a worst-case

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scenario: 'outside the logic of the Mass, there can be no meaning.

8 A colleague of mine (who has since revised his views) once remarked to me that all one needed to remember when attempting to solve any theological problem is the simple rule that kenosis (be it that of Christ on the cross, the church inspired by Christ, or the work of God in creation, etc.) is always re-filled by perichoresis (be it of the Holy Spirit, the in-dwelling Christ, or re-creation, etc.). Of course, when I tried to shape systematic theology in this way I found that the precise points where emptying out stopped and filling in started in my theology often appeared to be rather indiscriminate, arbitrary and subject to my own individual whim. Thus I found that I could think about the theology of the cross in a Moltmannish way as the kenosis of Christ that is prevented from falling into utter Godlessness by the perichoretic witness of the Holy Spirit to the dead Christ, yet I could give little reason why the role played by the Holy Spirit should commence at one stage in the argument and not another. Does one allow Christ to be emptied out a little or a lot before Trinitarian theology is rescued by the presence of the Spirit? I was probably susceptible to ascribing a role to the Holy Spirit at whatever stage in the argument that I dare not think beyond. The cycle of kenosis-perichoresis is all very handy, probably very Hegelian, and has little to do with Nicaea and Chalcedon. For examples of Hegel's continuing role in theology see J. Milbank, 'The Second Difference' in *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 180–183.

9 This will be made evident from references I make in footnotes whilst describing Cusa's work.

10 Pannenberg credits him with a renewal of theological thought that, whilst remaining faithful to the tradition, can be described as Christian humanism (*Jesus — God and Man*, p. 203, p. 346). To Gadamer he is an important metaphysical revolutionary; see *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., p. 434–435. Even C.S. Lewis wrote a poem 'On a Theme from Nicholas of Cusa (*De Docta Ignorantia,* III. ix)', in *Poems* ed. W. Hooper (New York, 1964)p. 70. For further admirers, including Thomas Merton, Martin Buber and Hans Küng, see H.L. Bond's introduction to the translation of Cusa's works that I am using here: *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H.L. Bond (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 16.

11 Biographical details are to be found in H.L. Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* (ibid.), p. 3f.

12 Cited by M. Watanabe in his preface to H.L. Bond (ibid.), p. xv–xvi.

13 The more than three hundred manuscripts in his private library still remains the largest German private collection of that date.

14 'Today no single theologian can any longer know even approximately all the facts that are relevant for his theology. And supposing that he actually acquires them in a more or less dilettante way, he is even less able to order them and weigh them up methodologically and appropriately. Universal theological geniuses like Origen, Albertus Magnus, Nicholas of Cusa are not merely lacking; nowadays they are hardly conceivable' W. Kasper, *Theology and Church* (London: SCM Press, 1989), p. 2.

15 DDI 1.1.4. (DDI = *On Learned Ignorance*, trans. H.L. Bond (op. cit). p. 87–206).

16 Plato, *Apology* 23b.

17 Ecclesiastes 1.8.

18 Job 28.20–21.

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19 Cusa may have received this notion of the infinite from Nicole Oresme. See J.E. Murdoch, 'Infinity and Continuity' in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 570, n. 17; p. 15 n. 17.
20 DDI 1.5.13.
21 DDI 1.5.14.
22 DDI 1.14.37–39.
23 In a different context Denys Turner has provided a similar argument. 'God is not "one" in the sense that [*one thing*]... plus God equals two anything at all, even individuals. For, not being any kind of thing God is not and cannot be an *additional* anything. God is *absolutely* unique. There is not any collectivity to which God could be added as a further item ... God is not an individual. Nor, in turn, does that entail that God is a multiplicity. God is neither one thing nor three things, because God is not a thing'. D. Turner, *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 161–2.
24 I have argued the same case with reference to St Gregory of Nyssa's trinitarian theology — specifically his letter to Ablabius — in my 'Problems for the "Social Trinity": Counting God' in *Modern Believing*, vol. 41:3, July 2000, p. 3–10.
25 DDI 3.2.193.
26 Further, God is omnipresent, so one can hardly expect God not to be in the individual Jesus of Nazareth. 'Since, therefore, God is in all things in such a way that all are in God, it is clear that, without any change to God and in the equality of the being of all things, God exists in unity with... Jesus' (DDI 3.4.204). However, this raises the question of what it is that is special or unique about the relation of humanity and Divinity in Christ, for it remains improbable (*not illogical*) that this particular individual should be hypostatically united with the Word of God. Whereas both Thomas and Eckhart saw that there could be no logical bar on a repeat of the incarnation (how could there be?), neither could provide any necessary reason why this particular incarnation is unique. Thomas merely argues that once is probably enough times for God to be incarnate to effect salvation. Cusa, however, attempts to provide a more substantial argument. He takes the miracle stories in the Gospels as evidence that Christ was a perfect example of humanity, and since humanity is a fusion of the physical and intellectual spheres of creation, Christ is also the perfect individual in whom all of the perfections of creation are summed up. Since Christ is the perfect microcosm — the 'contracted Maximum' — it is more appropriate that he is united to God in a unique and perfect way. See DDI 3.2.190 — 3.4.207, and the discussion of Eckhart and the incarnation in D. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p. 165–166.
27 See note 2. The position represented by Cusa here has, of course, more recently been argued by Herbert McCabe in his review of *The Myth of God Incarnate* published in his *God Matters* (London: Chapman, 1987), p. 54–61.
28 DDI 3.8.231.
29 DDI 3.8.232.
30 This in itself is enough for theology to be content with since theology cannot prove such things at all. Theology is reflection upon the historical tradition — the memory of the church — through which we receive language about the ascension in the first place. On such theological method in general, see D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (London: SCM Press, 1981), *passim*.
31 Cusa's understanding of the ascension does not lack a cosmological element that we may feel necessary to explain how Christ is *physically* in heaven (the

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ascension is confessed by Christians to have been a physical ascent, after all), and his cosmology is commensurate with his ultimately apophatic account of the doctrine. For Cusa, of course, as for Aristotle, Origen, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas and Dante, the cosmos is finite, bounded by the sphere of fixed stars. If Christ has ascended above the highest heaven (Eph. 4.10), then he has ascended outside the universe, where there is no space. And since he has ascended to where there is no space, we cannot say that he got there by means of a journey through space. Further, since we now nothing about this realm outside the space of our universe, we cannot deny that Christ is there physically. Therefore, the doctrine that Christ has ascended physically to heaven corresponds to Cusa's ultimately apophatic account of it. And because Christ cannot be "located", Cusa is quite right to say that he is both the centre and the circumference of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmos in DDI 2.11. 156ff. (Naturally, we still hold today that the universe is finite, and so Cusa's doctrine in both its cosmological and apophatic dimensions remains viable today — see B. Lovell 'Creation' in *Theology* vol. lxxxiii, September 1980, no. 695, p. 359–364). Cusa (and, incidentally, everyone from Origen and Augustine to Aquinas and Scotus) therefore outflanks D. Farrow's recent argument that much of Christian theology has reduced the ascension to docetism. Note that Cusa is speaking not just of a *physical* ascension to the intellectual sphere, but indeed of a physical ascension above and beyond intellect itself. See D. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), passim.

32 DDI 3.11.245. The final allusion here is to 2 Cor. 5. 16: 'even though we once knew Christ... we know him no longer'. On Cusa's interpretation of Paul's ascent see also *De apice theoriae* 2: 'the apostle Paul, caught up to the third heaven ... does not comprehend the incomprehensible'. In another work, *de quaerendo Deum* 1.17, the 'vision of mysteries' that St Paul received in the third heaven is connected with the sermon on the unknown God in Acts 17. Cusa's interpretation of Acts 17 is ingenious: the unknown God that the Greeks worship is not made known by Paul; rather God is proclaimed as remaining unknown by Paul. The Christian should not think of God as anything imaginable because there is nothing in human thought similar to God.

33 DDI 1.26.86.

34 DDI 1.26.88.

35 DDI 1.26.89.

36 Thomas argues that the chief role of revelation is not to provide propositional knowledge about God *per se*, but to show that God is unknown. Thus the task of revelation is to demonstrate concealment, lest we fall foul of the idolatrous illusion that we can know propositions about God. 'In this life what God is is unknown to us [even] by graceful revelation; and so [by revelation] we are joined to God as to something unknown' *S. Th.* 1.12.12 ad 1. Revelation fulfils the task of showing that God is unknown because our natural knowledge of God is unable of showing this. If we knew God as we knew about triangles and stones we would not know that we do not know God.'That certain divine truths wholly surpass the capability of human reason, is most clearly evident ... Wherefore, if the human intellect comprehends the essence of [*God as if God were*] a particular thing, for instance a stone or a triangle, no truth about that thing will surpass the capability of human reason' *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.2. 'Again it is

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necessary for this truth to be proposed to man as an object of faith in order that he may have a truer knowledge of God. For then alone do we know God truly, when we believe that he is far above all that man can possibly think of God, because the divine essence surpasses man's natural knowledge... Hence by the fact that certain things about God are proposed to man, which surpass his reason, he is strengthened in his opinion that God is far above what he is able to think' *S.C.G.* 1.5.

What then of the propositions of faith we receive from the church? Basically, we talk about God because God has already been talked about (*pace* Jüngel. *God as the mystery of the World* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), p. 248). We receive the propositions of faith through the historical channel of the church. This is why theology is reflection upon the memory of the church through which Christ and the Holy Scriptures are mediated to us today as things we can know (and this does not deny that Christ is, as it were, unknowably mediated to people in other ways too). *S. Th.* 2a2ae. 6.1: 'The things of faith surpass our understanding and so become part of our knowledge only because God reveals them. For some, the prophets and Apostles, for example, this revelation comes from God immediately; for others [*i.e. us*], the things of faith are proposed by God sending preachers of the faith'.

37 DDI 1.23.71.

38 DD1 1.23.72.

39 DD1 2.2.101–102.

40 DD1 2.5.118.

41 *Deo abscondito* 9. (Trans Bond, op.cit., p. 209–213).

42 'From the fact that our language gives us no hold on the distinction between the created and the uncreated, it does not follow that there is no distinction. Language fails to mark the distinction not because there is none but because the gulf is too wide. It is because there cannot be anything to distinguish the created and the uncreated *as*, it is because there is no conceivable standard of comparison to measure the created and the uncreated against, that we cannot utter the contrast between them. the distinction is unutterably great'. D. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p. 161.

43 DDI 1.4.12.

44 DDI 1.12.33.

45 Since God escapes the dialectic it follows that it is impossible to say whether God exists or does not exist. The following is an extract from *de Deo abscondito*, 8–9:

> *CHRISTIAN:* I know that everything I know is not God and that everything I conceive is not like God, but rather God surpasses all these.
>
> *PAGAN:* Therefore, God is nothing.
>
> *CHRISTIAN:* God is not nothing, for this nothing has the name "nothing".
>
> *PAGAN:* If God is not nothing, then God is something.
>
> *CHRISTIAN*: God is not something, for something is not everything. But God is not something rather than everything.
>
> *PAGAN:* You affirm marvels — the God you worship is neither nothing nor something; no reason grasps this.
>
> *CHRISTIAN:* God is beyond nothing and beyond something, for nothing obeys God in order that something may come into being. And this is God's omnipotence, by which God surpasses

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> everything that is or is not, so that thus that which is not obeys God just as that which is obeys God. For God causes not-being to enter into being and being to enter into not-being. Therefore, God is nothing of those things that are under God and which God's omnipotence precedes. And, consequently, God cannot be called "this" rather than "that", since all things are from God.

This conclusion is representative of centuries of Christian theology. Its roots lie in the doctrine of creation from nothing that severed theology from Platonic ideas of emanation and onto-theology and thereby made it impossible to conceive of any necessary relationship between the being (?) of God and the being of the world. On the importance of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to orthodox theology in distinction to Neoplatonsim, see A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. xiii–xiv & p. 75–97. On uncertainty of the existence of God from Denys the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology* to Denys the Carthusian see D. Turner, 'Cupitt, the mystics and the "objectivity" of God' in C. Crowder (ed.), *God and Reality. Essays on Christian Non-Realism* (London: Mowbray, 1997), p. 114–126. On the non-existence of God in the thought of Thomas Aquinas (i.e. the doctrine of divine simplicity) see Brian Davies 'Classical Theism and the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity' in Davies (ed.), *Language, Meaning and God: Essays in Honour of Herbert McCabe OP*. (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), p. 51–71.

46 DD1 1.26.86.

47 DD1 1.19.57.

48 DD1 1.4.12.

49 *De visione Dei* 13.54. (Trans. H.L. Bond, *op. cit.*, p. 235–289).

50 'Some critics have said that he had no sense of sin, that he experienced no change of heart, and that he was scarcely aware of the problem of evil' preface, p. xvii. I suspect that a Lutheran theology of the cross lies behind such criticisms.

51 There is no pure tradition to which we can point and say all Christians have always and at all times believed these particular nonsenses and absurdities. Abelard demonstrated this in *Sic et Non*. Such irregularities in tradition have to be settled by careful disputation. Abelard introduced an unusual word to the West to describe this process of reasoning about God: he called it theology.

52 See I.T. Ramsey, 'Paradox in Religion' in *Christian Empiricism* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 98f.

53 1 Corinthians 1.19–25; 3.18–20.

54 DDI 3.6.220

55 M. Wiles, Letter to the Editors, *Theology* vol. xciv November/December 1991 no 762, p. 448. Wiles is reacting against Loughlin's statement recorded in note 7 above.

56 McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 61.

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