

## Article

# Doxological (Im)Purity? Nicholas of Cusa's 'Art of Praising' and Liturgical Thinking in 21st Century

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**Abstract:** It is noteworthy that the thinking of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) has recurred again and again among prominent recent theologians who, critical of Modern rationality, have brought back to the fore the importance of liturgical praxis. Often, however, the mystical theology of Nicholas of Cusa had been presented during the Twentieth Century primarily as an unfinished precursor to Modern subject-philosophy in the line of Kant. In this contribution, I will consider this striking change of perspective against the background of recent debates concerning the role of liturgy not only for theology, but also for philosophy. Does Cusa's 'art of praising' offer a way out of the dilemmas facing liturgical thought?

**Keywords:** mystical theology; liturgy; radical orthodoxy; contemplation and action

## 1. Doxological Impurity (Andrew Prevot): Liturgy, Theology, and Modernity

In the perspective of the Modern, Cartesian view of science, liturgy and prayer are practices that are accomplished outside the realm of rationality (see Benke 2003). At best, they are expressions of a subjective preference that can be shared, just as one can take joy in elevated poetry or an exciting card game together with friends.<sup>1</sup> As ritual acts, these practices can still be studied with objective standards, but these standards are by no means derived from liturgical, contemplative practice. When one considers that *contemplatio* itself—as a Latin variant of the Greek *theoria*—was still understood as the highest ideal of science until the Early Modern Era, then it seems that from that time onward, profound changes have nonetheless taken place, which have to do with the view, growing in the Early Modern Era, that the objective measure of all things and of all actions, which was classically expressed with the idea of God, withdraws from all forms of human thought. More to the point—when one understands something, it can no longer be divine. The meaning of contemplative practices was relegated to the realm of subjectivity, or as was the case with Kant and Hegel, was given a supporting but contingent function in and for ethical action. For Hegel, it is still true that in the contemplative life as it took shape in monasteries, he saw a disturbing remnant of the medieval conception of society in the Modern State as the highest expression of Christian freedom. Remarkably, theology largely kept up with these developments during the Modern Era. Even in the times of the revival (or reconstruction) of Thomistic thought from the late 19th century onward, theology was, nevertheless, primarily concerned with a conceptual critique of Kantian subjectivism in which the distinction between the natural and the supernatural was to create a safe conceptual haven in which theological truths could be unfolded outside of scientific criticism. But even in the later influential theologies of the 20th century in which Neothomistic schematism was left behind (Rahner, Metz), the Modern subject-object schema remained in place, and was even seen as the model with which theology had to relate, albeit critically. The theological strategy for reconciling with Modern culture was to reconstruct theological truths also within the framework of the Kantian-Cartesian subject. Whether this strategy was successful, or whether it did not rather contribute to evaporating theological



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questions into secular perspectives, is a question that does not need to be answered here. Undoubtedly it is this question that has been a major driver of more recent developments in Anglo-Saxon theology, particularly since 1991, when the British theologian John Milbank, with his book *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*, distanced himself from this strategy and put the question of liturgical, contemplative practices back on the agenda, and in doing so also initiated a new strategy that has since become known as Radical Orthodoxy. In this theological tradition, the already mentioned reduction of contemplative practices to subjective acts became the occasion for a more fundamental critique from within theology of the one-sided development of Modern rationality. Thinkers such as Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock and Johannes Hoff saw in the subjective reduction of liturgical life, and the logic given by it, precisely a problem for the Modern narrative that was not limited to science, but also founded the political narrative of an atomistic liberalism. More recently, Johannes Hoff, in particular, saw himself challenged to develop a broader cultural critique from this renewed attention to the original meaning of contemplative liturgical practices. In it, he criticized the increasing omnipotence of a technocratic logic that threatens to destroy the spiritual living space of contemporary man (See Hoff 2021). A similar strategy can be found with the African American theologian Andrew Prevot, whose book *Thinking Prayer* takes as its starting point the “doxological” practice as a critical measure of mainstream thinking. This doxological practice—that is, contemplation—is what brings to light the exclusionary mechanisms that are given with Modern rationality and its illusory neutrality (See Prevot 2015).

This renewed attention to the liturgy did not come out of the blue. It has a history that had already begun in the heyday of Neo-Thomist oriented theology, and could be seen as a reaction to it. In particular, the Liturgical Movement that emerged from the Benedictine world at the end of the 19th century was carried by the insight that it is precisely the liturgical, contemplative life that is the living center of the Christian life. It was there that the ultimate measure was to be found of theological thought, which with its Neothomistic abstractions had finally surrendered to the corset of Kantian thought. As a result, theology—from this liturgical perspective—could no longer respond to the challenges of Modern society: the unease about the increasing omnipotence of technology and of capital. Philosophers and theologians such as Romano Guardini, Alois Dempf, Erich Przywara and Henri de Lubac found inspiration for their theological reflection in the Liturgical Movement. However different the elaboration of their reflection on the central significance of liturgical life for theological content, common was certainly the critique of the abstract concept of Modern subjectivity and an eye toward concrete praxis as the site of theology.

However, attention only to what Prevot calls the *doxological* dimension is not enough to make the critical and liberating power of theology manifest. Much of Prevot’s description of praying thinking consists in the analysis of the pitfalls with which the emphasis on liturgical life is associated. For example, Prevot does see in the existential-phenomenological thinking of Heidegger the ‘doxological’ potential, insofar as the latter emphasizes the original meaning of life space. Ultimately, however, Heidegger also reverts to modern thinking insofar as he fixes and objectifies that life-space, thus coming dangerously close to the German myth that ultimately also underpinned National Socialism.<sup>2</sup> Prevot speaks in this context of *doxological impurity*—the reduction of doxology to a fixed objective truth. However, even in the heyday of the Liturgical Movement—the interwar period—there were critical voices pointing to the temptation of a fixed understanding of liturgical life as a safe anchor against a culture adrift. For example, in a striking 1919 article commenting on developments in the Liturgical Movement, the Dutch philosopher and historian of mysticism Titus Brandsma (1881–1942) pointed out the danger of limiting liturgy to its fixed and external forms (see Brandsma 1919). After all, liturgy is only about external forms, insofar as they open the space for inner prayer—a distinction Brandsma derives from the Carmelite thinker Teresa of Avila. In Brandsma’s view, the liturgical space is precisely not separate from the secular space but is connected to it and forms a dynamic unity with

it. The restriction of liturgy to its defined forms, on the other hand, involves an objective recording of the divine that becomes an object, in which one believes or does not believe: in Prevot's terms: *doxological impurity*. The question of *doxological impurity* is also central to the work of Henri de Lubac SJ (1896–1991). In his work *Corpus mysticum. L'Eucharist et l'église au Moyen Age* from 1944, the theologian and historian Lubac describes how the crisis of the Modern Age with its dualism of nature and supernature, with its separation of body and spirit as well, had its historical origin in the reduction of the *Corpus mysticum* to the object of the Eucharist, and this already from the 11th century with the rationalist Berengarius of Tours (see Hemming 2009). Because of this allusion, liturgical life as the actual center of the church, as a dynamic relationship between the human and the divine, increasingly disappeared into the background. Thus, the dynamic relationship itself between nature and grace was also undermined (see Alpers 2014), and from there the path was paved to a world in which the controlling subject reduces the world to a makeable object and contemplation becomes, at best, a technique for psychic well-being<sup>3</sup>.

Against this background, however, the question arises in what way liturgical-contemplative practice can show a way out of the closed world of the Modern subject? How can we find out what can be called *doxological purity*? Prevot himself already makes the necessary suggestions for this, inspired by the Ignatian logic of the *discernment of the spirits* (see Prevot 2015, pp. 218–79). Indeed, in interpreting the liturgy, it is a matter of avoiding two extremes, each of which has led to a one-sided reduction of doxology in the Modern Era. On the one hand, there is the formalism of the liturgy which is concerned only with the external, recorded words or gestures that are clearly delineated. On the other hand, there is the idea that in the end it is only the *content* of the liturgy that matters, and connected to this is that, in fact, the whole of life is liturgy.<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the subject-object logic of the Modern Era, when the liturgy is everywhere, it is also nowhere. Then, however, the liturgy is again reduced to a kind of abstract entity in which the subject disappears.

## 2. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) and Modernity

Prevot's strategy is to discern liturgical practices in practices of everyday life, especially those practices in which people resist (sometimes hidden) cultural oppression (see Prevot 2015, p. 280 and further). Here, I want to contribute to the reconstruction of a liturgical logic that escapes the aforementioned dilemma in which liturgy appears either as a particular private object or as an abstract universal entity. I will follow, however, a somewhat different strategy. In order to find a criterion by which it becomes possible to reformulate Prevot's *doxological impurity*, I refer to an author who, precisely on the threshold of the Modern Age<sup>5</sup>, developed a *science of praise—scientia laudis*. This is Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) I am referring to, whose work is in constant conversation with the mystical theology of Dionysius Areopagita, precisely at a time when the foundations of Dionysius' worldview were under fundamental criticism. In doing so, it is no coincidence that Nicholas's work has attracted notable and renewed interest in circles of the already mentioned *Radical Orthodoxy*. The 15th century philosopher and theologian had fallen into oblivion in the course of the Modern Era, but was rediscovered in the course of the 20th century in circles of Neo-Cantianism. In the process, Nicholas of Cusa was seen as a notable precursor to Kant's critical philosophy (Cassirer 1927; Jacobi 1969; Bocken and Theorie 2013). This line of interpretation was undoubtedly far too one-sided and did not do justice to the historical significance of Nicholas of Cusa. Authors such as John Milbank, Johannes Hoff, and Graham Ward, however, freed Nicholas of Cusa from the ideological debate over whether he was a Medieval or a Modern thinker. John Hoff, in particular, made an important contribution in this regard by understanding Nicholas of Cusa from his own merits. A notable role in this development has certainly also been played by the work of the French historian of spirituality Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) who, from the background of his debate with Henri de Lubac on the crisis of the *corpus mysticum*, rediscovered the work of Nicholas of Cusa and put it on the agenda.

### 3. The Double Meaning of Dionysius Areopagita

The question central to the remainder of this article, then, is that of whether Cusa's design of a *scientia laudis* can contribute to a realistic understanding of liturgy beyond Prevot's *doxological impurity*. Looking at the work of Nicholas of Cusa opens up the possibility of seeing how the theological interest in liturgy in the 20th century in fact connects with the mystical theology of Dionysius Areopagita, which is centered on participation in the Celestial liturgy. Historically, there are two aspects that are important in highlighting Cusanus' creative interpretation of Dionysius. There is, first of all, the fact that Dionysius is the only author who is present throughout Cusanus's oeuvre as an interlocutor—and increasingly so. Then there is the striking fact that Cusanus—along with Lorenzo Valla and later Erasmus—certainly contributed to the *unmasking* of Dionysius, who throughout the Middle Ages was seen as a biblical authority, as the Dionysius who was among the hearers of Paul on the Areopagus. Unlike Valla, Cusanus does not bother to back up his doubt with evidence. From a remark in his *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (“Apology of learned ignorance”), it is clear that Cusanus knows the score. But for him, this in no way undermines the authority and legitimacy of Dionysius' oeuvre—rather the opposite. For Cusanus, it does not matter whether Dionysius heard Paul himself or not—even without this historical contingency, for him Dionysius is the greatest of all God seekers, and for substantive reasons.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, it is no surprise that Michel de Certeau, the great historian of mysticism in the Modern Era, began in later years, increasingly, to turn his gaze to this remarkable thinker of the 15th century. In his *La fable mystique*, Certeau describes, above all, the profound crisis that mystical theology (*corpus mysticum*) went through from the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era. The nominalist critique of the status of general concepts broke, or at least undermined, the connection between the human and the divine in participation in the Celestial liturgy. The mystics of the 16th and 17th centuries, whom Certeau describes, primarily cry out their melancholy—the melancholy about the absence of God in the human world. At first glance—and in many of Certeau's interpretations this aspect is also in the foreground—mysticism from the Modern Era onwards is a form of *Trauerarbeit*. At the same time, however, Certeau shows that even the melancholy mystics of the 16th and 17th centuries once again see the now unmasked Dionysius—along with Teresa of Avila—as their great example. What Aristotle was to philosophy and Augustine to theology, Dionysius seemed to be to the modern discourse of mysticism. The question of why this is so is only partially answered by Certeau. This answer is largely centered on negative theology, the ignorance that is also central to the thinking of Cusanus, as a reader of Dionysius. However, the register of ignorance stands in Cusanus's work in relation to another register, which begins to come to the fore particularly in the later work of the 15th century thinker, notably his design of an art of praise. This can be understood, as we shall see, as a reinterpretation of Dionysius's hymnology, adapted to the changed socio-cultural constellations in which Cusanus lives: the emerging urban culture and the reform movement of the *Devotio moderna* active within it that translates contemplative-monastic ideals into the lives of city dwellers—including the craftsman and the market vendor, the interlocutors staged by Cusanus in his books on the *Idiota (layman)*.<sup>7</sup> Cusa describes how he came to discover that “wisdom calls in streets and alleys” (*clamavit in plateis*)<sup>8</sup>. Himself strongly influenced by the practical piety of the *Devotio moderna*, Cusa repositions the *theoria* of *contemplatio* from the standpoint of everyday life in the city. It is, one might say, the moment when the *theoria* leaves the monastic cell and begins to move into praxis, in the sense of theory always reorienting itself in respect to actual occasions and practices—such as political conditions, or liturgical and doxological practices.

### 4. Nicholas of Cusa on Dionysius Areopagita—Still an Authority

As a Renaissance thinker, Cusanus generally reluctantly appeals to authorities<sup>9</sup>. In his book *Idiota de sapientia* (“The Layman on Wisdom”), he sees the layman as one who should think for himself and “not be tied down like a colt to the manger of transmitted texts”.<sup>10</sup> For Dionysius, however, Cusanus seems to make an exception. Already in his earliest

writings<sup>11</sup>, Dionysius is present in the Cardinal's oeuvre. But the influence of Dionysius increases exponentially after 1453, the year in which the collector Cusanus gets hold of the commentary on the *Corpus Dionysiacum* of Albertus Magnus (See [Duclow 1990](#)).

His intensified study of Dionysius also seems to mark a turning point, or at least a stylistic break, in Cusanus' philosophical quest (see [Hoff 2014](#)). The epistemological reservation with respect to the absolute—the premise that there is the finite knowing and the infinite truth non-commensurable—is not abandoned, but seems more to be the presuppositional starting point for the search for categories and standards that, precisely in the experience of not-knowing, already articulate the experience of the divine in this life. It is precisely on this historical fault line between a classical hierarchical model of society and science oriented towards a God-willed hierarchical order and an emerging modern subject who becomes the measure of the ordering of the world, that Cusanus begins to wrestle with the interpretation of the work of Dionysius: the wrestling with Dionysius as the authority for the legitimacy of the divine hierarchy and as the master of ignorance (see [Duclow 2006](#)). In *De concordantia catholica* (1431–1435), his most political writing from the time of the Council of Basel, Cusa attempts to reconcile the ecclesiastical model of Dionysius, as the *corpus mysticum*, with the experience of chaos and conflict that had arisen in the church as a result of the debate over the place of authority (see [Bocken 2019](#)). Here Cusanus seeks a reinterpretation of the connection between hierarchy and nonknowledge as found in Dionysius, now against the background of the practical search for agreement in the concrete situation of his time. In later writings, such as *De docta ignorantia* (1441) and *De visione Dei* (1453), Nicholas of Cusa thematizes the same tension between the experience of not-knowing and the real ordering of reality. This tension was expressed in the Late Middle Ages, not only in socio-political relations but as the basis for the influential nominalist criticism in theology and philosophy. This was dominated by the inaccessibility to the human mind of divine standards. God cannot be subject to the reasonable standards of the human mind. Thus, even the most general concepts are designed by the human mind and say nothing about the actual ordering of reality. In several of his works, Cusanus takes issue with this criticism (see [Bocken 2013](#)). In the experience and discovery of not-knowing in the praxis of knowing itself, truth, as the measure of a real ordering, is not only presupposed but also accessible in praxis. The human mind is always connected to the ordering of reality, and the fact that we can know—in 'learned ignorance'—that we cannot know that ordering, is the confirmation for that connection (see [Duclow 2006](#); [Bocken 2005](#)). This critique of the critique of nominalism is closely related to the way in which Cusanus continues to set himself apart—and increasingly so after 1453—from Dionysius, and connects the aspect of not-knowing with the aspect of metaphysical ordering (See [Ziebart 2019](#)). His struggle with the texts of Dionysius involves a search for the belonging of both poles. This comes to a culmination at the very end of Cusa's life.

##### 5. Nicholas of Cusa on 'Non-Aliud'—The Naming of God

Cusanus seems well aware that the ambivalence that emerges in the work of Dionysius is consistent with this movement of knowing from not knowing. But in what way is not immediately clear to him. There seems to be another split between the Dionysius who guides hierarchical scholastic thought and the modern Dionysius who, as Certeau has shown, would come to be regarded as the main authority of the modern critique of theology in mysticism.

This is particularly clear in *De li non-aliud* or *On the Not Other*, a work written by Cusanus in Rome around 1461 in which Dionysius plays a central role. The book, as is often the case with Cusanus, has a high experimental content. He describes a conversation between four participants, that is, Cusanus and three younger intellectuals whom Cusanus met during his Roman period and who see him as an older teacher. The younger ones bombard Cusanus with questions because they sense that he is on to something again in his spiritual quest. Although he is tired from all this searching and spiritual experimentation, Cusanus is eager to speak to his young friends, although he stresses right at the beginning

of the book that above all they must not take anything from him without thinking it through to the end themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Here Cusanus expresses how he wants to deal with authority. It is good to read texts or speak with older, more experienced and learned people, but this should never be used as a pretext for not thinking for oneself. Dealing with authorities only makes sense when they present questions, paradoxes, or dilemmas that the seeker must resolve for himself and in his own way. This form of cusanic pedagogy also played a role in the early works of the then himself still young Cusanus, as when he said in *On Learned Ignorance* that he wanted to understand Anaxagoras better than Anaxagoras understood himself.<sup>13</sup>

Although Dionysius is more or less present in almost all of Cusanus' works, he seems to come to the fore in *On the Not Other*. The way in which this occurs is striking. For Dionysius is not only presented in an interpretation, as one would expect with an authority, but he is represented literally in extensive passages of text. Just about the entire 14th chapter of the book includes a rich anthology of texts by Dionysius that Cusanus derives from what he considered to be the best Latin translation available at the time. It speaks for the critical humanist Cusanus that he is very aware of the fact that different translations always say something different and that, therefore, the Latin texts quoted can by no means be interpreted unambiguously.<sup>14</sup> The reader must keep his critical mind and read Cusanus with the awareness that it may say something else. Reading is, and remains, a matter of trial and correction, as Cusanus—as a collector and reader of manuscripts—realizes all too well.

Between the lines of the introductory text that precedes the anthology there seems to be a hint of uncertainty. For it seems that Cusanus assumes here that he himself is incapable of rendering the dynamics of Dionysian thought. What Dionysius is about can, for the time being, only be represented in words of Dionysius himself. Cusanus sees the need to bring up Dionysius here, but has to rely on the words—the translated words—of Dionysius himself to do so. In other words: Cusanus is not quite finished with Dionysius.

In order to properly understand what is happening here, we must return to the staging of the conversation, in which Dionysius plays an important role right from the start. Cusanus' interlocutors, who themselves appear to be primarily readers of Proclus, note that he has been immersed in the work of Dionysius for quite some time. They even note that the reading of Dionysius makes the aging Cusanus young and youthful again. He seems to return to questions that have preoccupied him since his earliest years, especially those about the coincidence of opposites and of not-knowing. It is at the repeated questioning of his interlocutors that Cusanus promises to explain why he is so intrigued by Dionysius. The conversation does not produce a completed theory of mystical theology, but it brings to mind thinking *in statu nascendi*, not coincidentally in a conversation between friends (See Borsche 2004).

It is necessary—says Cusanus at the beginning of the dialogue—to read the great theologians and philosophers again and again, for there are always things we have overlooked before. No author is more important in this regard than Dionysius. This is so, says Cusanus, because Dionysius understood like no other that not only is God not nameable, but He is also not unnameable. If God were unnameable, then He would be opposed to the nameable—so that He is actually named anyway. Therefore, God is also called that which is in no way nameable.<sup>15</sup> The nameability, respectively unnameability, of God is not only the central theme of *On the Non-other*, but also a theme that had preoccupied Cusanus since his earliest works.

The reading of Dionysius seems to take Cusanus a step further in this work. It is the theme that binds Cusanus and Dionysius, and in the view of Cusanus they also agree in that we should not get off too easily regarding the question of the validity of divine names. After all, to say that God is unnameable is itself a name of God. In a certain sense, one cannot escape mentioning God, and the least one can do is to take account of this.

The anthology in the 14th chapter of *On the Non-Other* includes various aspects of Dionysius' thinking that all have to do with naming God. Designing names of what is

unnameable in order to express and praise this unnameable divine, this is what theologians do according to Cusanus according to Dionysius in *On Divine Names*. This is also what Cusanus tries to do in *On the Non-Other*. Here he, himself, experiments with this new god name, “the not-other”, which, although not found in Dionysius, comes to the surface, as it were, in thinking about Dionysius’ thinking about divine names. “The non-other” seems a kind of hermeneutic key that enables the reader to understand and act on the stakes of Dionysius’ paradoxical arguments about divine names.

This is why “the not-other” is a better God name. This is not so because it better expresses that to which the names ultimately refer, for all names name God and so there can be no name that stands definitively above it, except one that thematizes the naming itself (See Bader 2006). No name can justify the claim to better express God precisely because there are always other names that reflect aspects that are not articulated in that one name. However, it is possible for there to be names that focus the spiritual gaze on naming and prompt reflection on what is actually happening in human naming. This includes the creation of new names, an ability of the human mind through which Cusanus is intrigued. In his later years, Cusanus frequently experiments with the limits of language by devising divine names that thematize the limits of speech, and thereby the possibilities of that speech. In designing new divine names, it becomes vividly apparent that naming is a process that is never complete, and that names do not simply name what they name. On the one hand, the name and the named never coincide because the uniqueness of a name consists in naming something of which that name is the name. On the other hand, it is also not possible to name this “something” of which it is the name without using another name to which the same thing applies (Bocken 2013). Something that is named can always be named differently— and better. However, this does not mean that one should refrain from naming; rather the contrary. Only by naming something does it become clear that what is being named could be named in a better way.

## 6. The Struggle with Dionysius and the Divine Names

As already mentioned, this form of argument does not come out of the blue for Cusanus in *On the Non-Other*. Already, in his earlier *On Learned Ignorance* from 1441, Cusanus had assumed that God is not mentioned by any name because in fact all names mention God.

In *On Learned Ignorance*, this Hermes Trismegistus-inspired thought had arisen because Cusanus had delved into the idea of the “maximum”: God is the greatest, as Anselmus had already made clear. However, because human knowing is comparative in nature and always establishes relationships, that maximum eludes any knowing.<sup>16</sup> Thus the thought maximum differs from the real maximum. Therefore, this thought maximum cannot be the greatest, because in comparative knowing it always has something outside of it. When we think the greatest, we no longer think it precisely because we think it and thus relate it again to something else outside the maximum. This situation is not tragic. For we know that the greatest we think is not the greatest self after all. Precisely because we know the reason for our non-knowing, we nevertheless understand something of the real maximum and our relationship to it.

More and more Cusanus becomes aware that this paradoxical relationship of not-knowing applies not only to the notion of maximum, as if it were a metaphysical key of thought where being and thinking meet. At the end of the first book of *On Learned Ignorance*, he talks about how, in fact, every name is a god name. But a name becomes a god name only when it is used in such a way as to show by itself that it does not coincide with what is being called<sup>17</sup>.

In a work created a few years after *On Learned Ignorance*, *The Layman on the Mind*, Cusanus compares speaking of the absolute to the activity of a painter who tries to paint painting as such and, therefore, himself. Even if a painter were to succeed in this, his attempt would already have failed because he may be able to paint all possible paintings, but still not this one painting that he is now making. Yet this is no reason not to try again.

Cusanus believes well in the Platonic tradition of thought, that the very task of the painter is not to paint the reality outside the painting, but to paint the painting itself. That task is therefore fundamentally impossible.<sup>18</sup>

But—as Cusanus shows in *The Layman on Mind*—this impossibility can be shown because a “living image” is an image that shows by itself that it does not portray what it portrays.<sup>19</sup> An image that depicts the natural reality outside the painting and not this paradoxical image relationship, Cusanus calls a “dead image”. We can come to the understanding of the impossibility of the task only by making the attempt. It is therefore of no use to stop making images, as the skeptic would do.<sup>20</sup> Then, on the contrary, one establishes the images. Only those who make new images and accept and show the failure are confronted with the impossibility and, in this confrontation, are called upon to make more new images. The failure of the image is a property of the image that connects the image with the depicted: this is the paradoxical insight at which Nicholas of Cusa always ends up. Only when we see that an image fails do we see its relation to the truth depicted. This is true of any image, no matter how one-dimensional or superficial, but there is always the possibility of actively seeking this failure, as the artists accomplish, including the great Flemish painters of his time admired by Nicholas (see [Bocken 2012](#)).

This succeeding failure also forms the background of Cusa’s thinking about divine names. Any name can be a divine name, but it is only really so when it is so named that it becomes clear that it does not express what it actually expresses. There is an unbridgeable differentiation between every name and that which is named. When we would attempt to name what is named in a name, we must appeal to another name. Cusa, however, is not primarily interested in this infinite regression. He is much more concerned with the ability that enables man to see through this process “suddenly”.<sup>21</sup>

So, what about the “*non-aliud*”, the “non-other”, in which Cusa summarizes his spiritual conversation with Dionysius? It seems very likely that Cusa is less interested in the referent of the divine names than in the human ability to produce new divine names. This is understandable because, according to Cusanus, God can be called by any name—the reason He is unnameable, and can never be called as He should be called. In fact, creating new divine names is nothing more than seeing unexpected possibilities within the language being spoken, which focus the mind’s attention on the naming itself<sup>22</sup>.

The name “the non-other” better expresses what Dionysius and the other Platonists mean by “the One”, according to Nicholas of Cusa.<sup>23</sup> “The One” is also a name, but it still suggests an opposition to that which is other than the One. That which is denoted by “the One” is still beyond the one versus the non-one. “The non-other”, like “the One”, is a divine name and is, in Cusa’s view, a good candidate for expressing what Dionysius means. Actually, Dionysius means this too, Cusa says, because he is very well aware that the divine origin cannot possibly be opposed to anything else and must be thought of before any affirmation and negation. Dionysius was also aware that it is impossible for the human mind to think beyond affirmation and negation. For human thought, every affirmation of something is always the negation of something else.

However, for the *non-other*, it is true that it is nothing but the *non-other*. In fact, this is true of everything that exists: even the earth is nothing but the earth, the moon is nothing but the moon, and even the other is nothing but the other. So, what does Cusanus mean by this? His point is that human understanding of reality is always a process of relations. Humans think relationally; our understanding of something is always involved in an infinite network of relations. An affirmation of something is always a negation of an infinite number of other things that help determine this something. The human mind is also always involved in this network of relations. The human mind cannot but think the determination of something in relation to other things. The one is always distinguished from the non-one. Therefore, the very definition of something is that it is “nothing but itself”.

Cusanus goes a step further here. Even the not-other is always thought of comparatively by the human mind, namely as that which is opposed to the other. But the least that can be said about the divine name “the non-other” is that it points out by itself that

the actual non-other is still beyond the opposition between the other and the non-other. While we cannot think of the non-other as it should be thought, the name “the non-other” indicates to us that we can be aware of this impossibility. It is a name that keeps the human mind awake, as it were, so that we cannot dwell on the contradictions (Duclow 1972).

It is a sign that points out that we can never call that which Dionysius designates by the One other than by names, so that there always and irrevocably remains a difference between the name and the thing named. This difference always implies a connectedness between the name and that which is named. “The not-other” is therefore a special divine name, namely a divine name that opens up the space of play between the name and that which is named. It is an illusion that we can ever call the divine without a name, although in fact we should. This realization calls for its own praxis of naming God, a praxis that balances between knowing and not-knowing.

The Dionysius quotations in the anthology of chapter 14 of *On the Non-Other* show what Cusanus is concerned with, namely, the involvement of the spiritual in the concrete, sensuous life, and thus the orientation toward the origin in knowing. It is in the praxis marked by sensuousness that the naming of divine names takes place, by the sensuous means of praxis.<sup>24</sup> Even if God does not coincide with any name or image, it is an illusion to think that we can name or represent God without a name or image. Quite along the lines of Dionysius, Cusanus says that the divine names articulated by man participate in, or are part of, the divine reality, and thus are not names imposed from without on a reality that is, in itself, nameless.

What exactly this “participation” means is thus not yet said. In a certain sense, reflection on the names only makes clear what participation might actually be. For Cusanus, participation is not a purely theoretical matter but a matter of praxis. This, in Cusanus’s view, is also the case with Dionysius, insofar as all that is in the great hymn movement participates in the divine. More than Dionysius, Cusa has an eye for the permanent possibility that this hymnic event, in which divine names are mentioned and attributed to God, can become entangled in contradictions. This is the consequence of Cusanus’ explicit criticism of Dionysius when he seems to conceive of “the One” as the ultimate key of this process, as if this were the ontological ground of all names to which all names refer.

This is exactly what Cusanus wants to avoid, understanding Dionysius better than Dionysius understood himself (See Casarella 2008). Cusa’s experiment with the new divine name of “the not-other” is about designing a name that does not so much better express what is expressed in other divine names, but shows that the divine as actually pronounced is present in speech itself through paradoxes such as those that become visible in “the not-other”.

Just as a living painting is able, through small shifts and reflections, to show that it does not coincide with the reality to which it refers, so a living divine name evokes the differentiation between the name being named and that which is actually being named. Cusa is concerned with a praxis of divine names, that is, the naming of names to God, none of which can be definitive. “The One” cannot be, and is ultimately part of, this network of the name and the named and is connected to the praxis of naming. Reflection on the names of God is deeply connected with the praxis of naming—marked by bodily and sensory reality. It is fundamentally impossible that we can ever reflect on these would-be divine names in a position outside of this praxis.

## 7. The Praise of God as the Key to Human Life

Dionysius has a deep understanding of what is going on with divine names, but in the end, in Cusa’s eyes, he sticks with “the One”. Again, this criticism is not a reason to leave Dionysius behind, but quite the contrary. Rather, it is reason to understand Dionysius better than he understood himself.<sup>25</sup> The criticism is reason to take Dionysius’ thinking further. When Cusanus refers back to the words of Dionysius in the 14th chapter of *On the Non-Other* they must be read in this context.

However, it also seems that Cusanus is then left with questions that have to do with the “hymnic praxis” of naming God and the inaccessibility of the divine. That the questions with which Cusanus struggles here have to do with this point of praxis and theory is clear from the fact that, throughout the work, Cusa concentrates on the differentiation between general ideas and concrete experience between which there is an unbridgeable differentiation. This differentiation, in Cusa’s own eyes, belongs to concrete experience, just as in the experience of something warm, “warmth” is also experienced.<sup>26</sup> Here something of a critique of Dionysius seems to emerge which boils down to the fact that—in the eyes of Cusanus—even the One itself is, again, a divine name. This critique becomes the starting point for a reflection on the relationship between theory and praxis, which is touched upon in *On the Non-Other* but not yet explored to the end<sup>27</sup>.

In a work probably written shortly after *On the Non-Other*, *On the Hunt for Wisdom*, this changes. As Hans-Gerhard Senger rightly points out, it is only in this late work of Cusanus, presumably his very last, that he arrives at a new systematic design on the basis of Dionysius, introduced under the title “*scientia laudis*”, “the science of praise” (See Senger 2002). In this philosophy of praise, Cusanus revisits his entire search for God once more from the standpoint of a critical discussion with Dionysius.<sup>28</sup> It is the relationship between theory and praxis that is defined against the background of the praise of God.

In *On the Hunt for Wisdom*, written a few months before his death, Cusanus wants to look back once more at his own philosophical and theological quest, which he describes as a hunt for wisdom. As the body craves earthly food, so the mind hunts for spiritual food, with the difference that the mind can never be satiated. Like a hunting dog, Cusanus searched for edible chunks that would allow him to continue his search.

It is noteworthy that Cusanus here describes ten “hunting grounds”, areas that he explored in the course of his life and in which he went in search of the wisdom that is God. For Cusa, philosophical-theological thinking is a praxis that must be realized over and over again. Never does one possess the truth; always it must be thought and sought anew, and in the different hunting grounds it always appears differently. Most of the fields that Cusanus describes concern the familiar and recurrent themes of his works, such as knowing from not-knowing (ignorantia), unity (unitas), the “can-is”, (possest) light (lux), the not-other (non aliud), etc<sup>29</sup>.

However, there is one striking new field, “the field of praise”.<sup>30</sup> It seems that here, at the end of his earthly life’s journey and looking back, Cusanus discovers a new theme, which, in fact, he had already dealt with in his earlier explorations without making it explicit or without being aware of it; and it is Dionysius who plays a notable role in this hunting field.

Whereas in *On the Non-Other* it seemed that Cusa was not quite finished with Dionysius, he now changes the rifle from shoulder to shoulder and views his own philosophical search for God from the Dionysian concept of wisdom as developed in his *On Divine Names*, and in which divine names such as *nous* (“intellect”) or *logos* (“reason”) are mentioned as praise. It is these passages that are now quoted by Cusanus and on which his whole philosophy of praise seems to be a variation.

It should be noted that praise (*laus*) is also described not as the ultimate field of wisdom, but as one of ten possible fields. These fields relate “polyphonically” to each other and indicate a multitude of approaches in which there is no one supporting field where the ultimate truth would be articulated. The ten fields represent as many ways of seeking the highest wisdom. In this respect they are theory and praxis at once, connected by the search for wisdom. They are equally valid and each presents new aspects of the search.

However, the field of praise of God stands out. Here, in discussing the fields in which he conducts his own pursuit of wisdom, Cusanus seems to make the observation that all of these fields can themselves be understood as praise and hymns. In other words, the polyphony of the fields is really only understandable from the field of praise. It is no accident that the field of praise is located exactly in the middle of the ten fields. The field

of praise is no more or less than the living center of all the philosophical fields, and thus seems to have a privileged place.

The exploration in *De venatione sapientiae* must be seen in connection with a concrete occasion, the entry of the young friendly novice Nicolaus of Bologna into the Benedictine monastery of Montoliveto. Nicholas wrote a letter to this youth reflecting on the meaning of the religious path for life and for God.<sup>31</sup> Cusanus's thinking is always embedded in praxis, lives by grace of praxis, is ultimately directed toward praxis, and yet it is theory, as Cusanus repeatedly says himself, always constructing a connection between *theory* and *theos* (God) and *theorein*, the beholding that Cusanus conceives as a concrete process.

It is this connection between theory and praxis that is at stake with the introduction of the science of praise. This connection, in turn, is closely related to the problem of the divine names as already elaborated in *On the Non-Other*—in particular, the realization that there always remains a difference between the name and the reality named. In the letter to Nicolaus of Bologna, Cusa makes clear to the young novice why he will sing psalms day in and day out. The letter is nothing less than a pedagogical manual that shows the youngster the actual meaning of the praxis of psalm-singing and the prayer of the Hours, which Cusanus, according to tradition, calls "psalterium" (with that name originally also referring to the ten-stringed instrument and hence to the practice).<sup>32</sup> Again, Cusanus invokes Dionysius, who finds in hymnic praxis a key to clarify the ultimate meaning of all that exists. Everything is aimed at praising God. In the praise of God everything that exists finds its justification; it is the living praxis of the orientation to the ultimate purpose of all the sensuous, of all action and thought<sup>33</sup>.

## 8. Man as a Living Hymn

Everything that exists praises, and praises God. Praising God gives a framework of meaning to things as they exist in their nature. It is their reason for being. But in Cusa's view, man has a distinct place in this set of praising being. For man understands through reason that everything that exists, exists to praise God. He is, moreover, able to understand that God is praiseworthy. This is why Cusanus also speaks of the "*scientia laudis*", the science of praise, for it is given by nature to reason to praise what is most praiseworthy, and that is God. In praising, all that is reasonable is gathered together; praising is that which gives reasoning direction and—modernly speaking—meaning.

Indeed, for Cusanus, the ability to praise is the most ultimate measure of the reasonable. Therefore, Cusa says, we should choose that which we know belongs to praise, and everything that cannot be praised should be rejected and criticized.<sup>34</sup> Praising what is praiseworthy, however circular this may be, also gives direction to all praxis, according to Cusa. The human mind can and must distinguish between what is praiseworthy and what is not. It does this from the knowledge of what is praiseworthy, which is never fixed, but must be discerned again and again.<sup>35</sup>

Cusanus is aware that we do not always know immediately what is praiseworthy and what is not. More to the point, only God knows what is praiseworthy and what is not. In *De venatione sapientiae* Cusa, therefore, develops the bold idea that not only is God the praiseworthy par excellence, but he himself is ultimately the praiseworthy. *Laus Dei*, praise of God, can be understood in a double sense: God is not only the one who is praised but also the one who praises. Since we never know for sure what is praiseworthy and what is not, and must learn to discern this over and over again, it is ultimately the living praise that is God that is the purpose of our praise. God not only *knows* what is praiseworthy, His knowing is also a doing. He brings all that is to the maximum of what it can be, what it is capable of, although every being does not come to that in the actuality of the finite world. This differentiation between the maximum realization of the possible and the actuality realized is bridged by praise, which gives space to the being to grow beyond itself into that which it actually is, its very nature, as it is in God.

There is ultimately only one idea inaccessible to the human mind. The tension between the being determined and defined by the human mind and that divine measure of all things,

which is at the same time the measure of every single thing, has the effect that the very nature of things is to rise above themselves and to be directed toward the divine idea.

Since this is not just an epistemological construction, but a living reality, it is in praising God that this differentiation becomes a lively concordance. According to Cusanus, this is a praising because all things speak of this maximum, which they are not, yet at the same time they are. The things thus praise God, who is Himself the praising of the things, because He is precisely space and foundation for the transcendent growth and striving of all things.

These thoughts of Cusanus are, perhaps, surprisingly modern in that they bid farewell to the more traditional metaphysical premise that things have a fixed essence. The possibilities hidden in all things are not merely hypothetical, but real; but that is not to say that in things dwells a tragic longing for a goal that will never be achieved. It is the act of praising that throws another perspective on the unattainability of the goal, the maximum realization of every being. It is the act of praising that opens all beings to their infinite and for us incomprehensible destiny. Praising God makes things appear as praises of God and makes it possible for us to understand things as things that speak of something they are not.

In this reciprocal praising, the human mind, according to Cusanus, occupies a very special place because it knows about the infinite multitude of possibilities. Because the “living and thinking man”, unlike the things around him, does not coincide with his praising and must learn to discern in the praxis of life what is praiseworthy and what is not, he is, for Cusanus, the “most glorious of all the praises of God”. According to Cusa, man, through his living actions and thoughts, gives back to God the praise that emanates from God. This is so because it is man who can see through the praise of all things and bring it to speech. Man has the ability to live and think in such a way that he can thereby bring things in their praise to speak and even to sing. Praising is an act of the whole human being. The spiritual act of praising gives direction and meaning to all the senses, to all the limbs, to all that is man.

### 9. A Living Psalter

Praise is the essence of man who, in the act of praise, is connected to all that is. This is why Cusa writes in his letter to Nicolaus of Bologna that this is the meaning of the choral prayer and the psalter with which the young novice will live from now on. The spiritual life is in fact nothing other than to practice oneself in seeing that which anyone can see who looks into his own mind, that is, to discover that he is a “living hymn”, a “vessel” created to praise God, and slowly, but surely, to become a living zither singing within himself the praise of God—the unknown God. Slowly but surely man can learn to be this living hymn himself, the living zither, the living psalter.

With the reference to the psalter, Cusanus here comes to the extreme of his thinking. Günter Bader, in his refined interpretation of Cusanus’ *Psalter theology*, describes how with him at that stage of his thinking, concrete references to Psalm texts have become extremely sparse, if not almost entirely absent (See Bader 2006). He does still refer—both in *De venatione sapientiae* and in his letter to Nicolaus von Bologna—to the ten strings of the psalter. Bader sees in this a sign of the increasing fading of the importance of the Psalms themselves in the time of Cusanus. However, perhaps in doing so he overlooks something important. For the reference to the ten strings is nothing more and nothing less than a biblical foundation of the ten fields with which Cusanus describes his own philosophical quest. The external singing of the Psalms has been absorbed into the hymnody of the living man. Yet, according to Bader, Cusanus’ reference to the psalter is only a silent reminder of concrete psalm-singing.

One can also turn the matter around. There is much to be said that Cusanus actually wanted to express that man can only become a living psalter when there is also a concrete psalter. Praise is then both an act of internalizing the psalterium and an act of externalizing it, namely as an orientation toward the things that one begins to see as praising God, such as the psalterium. The psalterium, according to Cusanus, must be woven into the life of the spirit, making the two part of each other. It is too abstract an interpretation

here that this would make the psalterium superfluous. For it is about the praxis of praise which always depends on things “outside” man, which in the human praxis of praise are brought to speak and sing. Precisely because man can never know definitively what is praiseworthy and what is not, and because he must practice to determine this, he is dependent on external things.

But this, too, is in fact an abstract viewpoint from the outside, which sets itself apart from the praxis of praise, whereas Cusanus, in this last great throw out of his intellectual life, tries instead to think systematically from the concreteness of praising God. Cusanus knows very well that it is possible to praise God without singing psalms, but it is not the case that psalm-singing is no more than an accidental manifestation of praise. The praxis of praise brings together the spiritual and the sensuous and, therefore, always has a certain concrete form. It is from the praxis of psalm singing that one learns to see that God is praised in all things: this is a reality that cannot be taken seriously enough. It is not a principled obligation to first sing psalms and only then understand that God is praised in all things. There are certainly other ways besides psalm singing to praise God, but they cannot all be walked at once. What is practiced in the praxis of psalm-singing can also be practiced and learned in other “practices”, in different ways each time. But what binds everything together is the praise of God, the *laus Dei*, whereby God is praised and honored.

This praxis is reflective embedment and action that brings them together. It is not a safe “heavenly canopy” of a metaphysically founded hierarchical ordering. The capacity for praise transcends any concrete ordering. Praising God is the alpha and the omega, and only praise makes it possible to understand that God is incomprehensible, and that God withdraws from all knowing. Only in praising itself can we understand that we do not know what is praiseworthy and what is not, and therefore we do not know what praising God is. Whoever is able to praise actually participates in the praising that is God himself.

#### 10. Conclusions—The Praxis of Praise and the Dynamic Unity of Action and Contemplation

Cusa’s criticism of Dionysius for remaining too tied to the God name “the One” seems to have triggered a creative process in which he begins to discover the real meaning of praising God. In the view of Cusanus, Dionysius was aware of the central meaning of praise. This becomes clear in the way he quotes Dionysius.

In praise, not only mind and body, but also the finite and the infinite are brought together. However, according to Cusanus, Dionysius still hangs too much on abstract Greek thinking by focusing on “the One”, which ultimately still remains opposed to the other. Yet Dionysius does have an eye for praxis when he also understands his hymnology as a metaphysical design that says something about the destiny of all things and people. In *De venatione sapientiae*, then, Cusanus puts full focus on the praxis of praise, which underlies Dionysius’ thinking but is not always consistently thought through by him.

According to Nicholas, Dionysius correctly saw that praise really belongs to reality; but more radically than Dionysius, Cusanus brought out man’s very own destiny as a hymnic being—in distinction to things (and angels). It is man who is not only aware of the praising nature of reality, but also brings that reality to speech and song in his own actions. All other creatures are by their nature hymnal; man must start from the realization that he does not know definitively what is praiseworthy and what is not, but this not-knowing is precisely a source of creativity that makes praise unpredictable. Thus, he can learn, practicing, to become a living hymn, precisely because he can begin to see the praiseworthy nature of all beings and act accordingly. As a result, man is the only creature who can creatively deal with the praise of God, and thus, for example, can design new names of God, as Nicholas himself practiced in the works from the last years of his life.<sup>36</sup>

It is well known that Cusanus was an involved party in the debate over the status of the god view in the 15th century. Increasingly, there was criticism of the theological claim to reach God with reason. In the view of these critics—such as the Carthusian Vincent of Aggsbach—the mystical vision of God would have nothing to do with reasonableness, but would be a matter of feeling and experience (see [Rinser 2013](#)). Cusa became involved

in this struggle through his friendship with the Benedictine Bernhard von Waging from Tegernsee and knew very precisely who his opponents were (see [de Certeau 2011](#); [Watanabe and Christianson 2011](#)). Again and again, Cusanus also tried to bring into the limelight the reasonableness of not-knowing and how to deal with that not-knowing. Cusanus understands how already in the 15th century science and faith are slowly but surely growing apart, how the praise of God is being detached from human reasonableness and in the course of the centuries it becomes an either subjective or formalistic matter.

It is precisely at this point that it becomes clear that Nicholas of Cusa's hymnic thinking—the 'scientia laudis'—offers a way out of the dilemma facing liturgical thought in the Late Modern Era, characterized by Andrew Prevot as *doxological impurity*. Approaching Cusa's art of praising from the contemporary question of the meaning of a liturgical life—in Prevot's terms: the doxological dimension of reality—shows that this question involves a fundamental question of the relationship between man and reality. For Cusa, praising itself is the most original act that links praxis and theory. Praising is an activity of man, but it can only be understood with the living reality in which man participates. The concrete liturgical, praxis of praise is a matter of encounter with what is due to man. From Cusa's perspective, the 'doxological impurity' can only be avoided by learning to see the act of praising as the most original human act.<sup>37</sup>

The preoccupation with the beauty of the liturgy that would settle into neo-Benedictine movements, and also into Catholic theology in general from the end of the 19th century, is, in a sense, nothing other than an equally clumsy, coercive and authoritarian response to the experience that God withdraws from thought. Liturgy here acquires a monopoly on the praise of God and is a final lifebuoy amid the nihilism of modern reasonableness.<sup>38</sup> Against this background, according to Johannes Hoff, Cusanus can be seen as the last thinker who tried to establish a synthesis between scientific reasonableness and liturgical meaning (see [Hoff 2005](#)).

Whether this is true or not, what is certain is that the formulation of a science of praise indicates that Cusanus was really looking for a connection between praising God and the way of reason. In the late writings of Nicholas of Cusa, a path is shown that is close to the intuitions of the newer theologians in the line of Radical Orthodoxy. The act of praising is ultimately the dynamic unity of reality that connects human making with the totality of reality. Praising mobilizes all the faculties of reason in their relation to the sensory faculties and to the external things in the world. Being able to praise also means learning to see what is praiseworthy and what is not. Praising as such is not enough; one must also praise in the right way. However, Cusa also shows that the positive appreciation of hymnic praxis also implies a radical critique of modern subject-thinking. Praising is a fundamental form of thought that permeates the whole of life and connects it to reality.

Praising requires an understanding of the right proportions and must adhere to what is. Praising is an art because it must be apt, that is, not too much and not too little, and for the right reason.

Praise thinking shows that man, even in the most abstract, theoretical activity, can never stand outside praxis, that he is connected to it, without ever being able to speak the final word.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To this card game John Locke refers in his famous *Epistola de tolerantia* where he describes the church as a society analogous to a society for card games. See [Bocken \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Prevot speaks of *doxological impurity* in this context See ([Prevot 2015](#), pp. 37–69). That falling back on liturgy as a lifeline in a nihilistic world can be a trap becomes clear when one looks at the history of important figures in the Liturgical Movement, such as Ildefons Herwegen OSB (1874–1946). Herwegen, too, saw in National Socialism a related ideology that was very compatible with liturgical life. ([Albert 2004](#); [Scherzberg 2016](#)).
- <sup>3</sup> This is also the point at which one of Henri de Lubac’s most famous students, Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) begins his history of the crisis of the *corpus mysticum* in his work *La fable mystique* ([de Certeau 1984](#)). It came to a rupture between the two because Henri de Lubac considered that Certeau’s interpretation of thinking about the corpus mysticum and the crisis in which this thinking found itself from the 16th century onwards was too oriented to the model of the modern subject and thus failed to provide avenues for a historical reconstruction of a broad model of *corpus mysticum*, see [Hoff \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> This is a thought that has remained under discussion particularly in the Orthodox tradition. We see, for example, that the Russian thinker Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), from a liturgical theology of iconostasis, developed a fundamental critique of Western Modern rationality, which, according to him, is dominated by an illusory desire to control the subject. The question is whether Florensky has not in fact brought a new dualism into the world. See [Bocken \(2008\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> To use a term of Hans Blumenberg: See [Blumenberg \(1966\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Cusanus’ comment seems rather to suggest some astonishment, astonishment because surely Dionysius had no need at all to clothe himself with this authority. See *Apologia doctae ignorantiae/Defense of Learned Ignorance* h II, n. 17.
- <sup>7</sup> Nicholas of Cusa wrote three books with *idiota, layman* in the title. They are conversations between someone from the practice of daily life, who derives his knowledge from acting, and a scholar: *Idiota de sapientia*, *Idiota de mente* and *Idiota de staticis experimentis* in the years 1448–1450. In *Idiota de mente*, *The Layman on Mind*, a philosopher well known in those days engages in conversation with a spoon cutter who discovers in his own creativity the workings of divine creativity.
- <sup>8</sup> *Idiota de sapientia* I, h V, n3.
- <sup>9</sup> This paragraph is based on research published as [Bocken and der Praxis \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> *Idiota de sapientia* I, h V, n2.
- <sup>11</sup> *De concordantia catholica* and *De docta ignorantia*, respectively “on general concordance” and “on learned ignorance”.
- <sup>12</sup> *De li non-aliud/on the not other* c. I, h XIII n.2
- <sup>13</sup> *De docta ignorantia II/On Learned Ignorance*, c. 5, h I n. 117.
- <sup>14</sup> *De li non aliud/On the Not Other* XIV, h VII, n. 54.
- <sup>15</sup> *De li non aliud/On the Not Other* X
- <sup>16</sup> *De docta ignorantia/On Learned Ignorance* I, c. 3, h I, n. 9.
- <sup>17</sup> *De docta ignorantia/On Learned Ignorance* I, c. XXIV, h 1 n. 74.
- <sup>18</sup> *Idiota de mente* c. VII, h V, 105–106.
- <sup>19</sup> It cannot be ruled out that Cusanus is thinking here of the *vera icon paintings* that were frequent in his time, which refer to the Veronica legend, the only one who has the true image of Christ on her canvas, not made by human hands. Important painters and contemporaries of Cusanus, such as Jan Van Eyck, played with this theme by depicting a canvas on a canvas and thus doing something they are not actually doing, namely depicting something with human hands that is not depicted with human hands. See: [Bocken \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> *Idiota de mente/The Layman on Mind* c. 13, h V, n. 148–149
- <sup>21</sup> Michel de Certeau points to the frequent occurrence of adjectives indicating the “sudden” nature of the change of perspective. See [de Certeau \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> There is some discussion about the exact title of the work. In some manuscripts the title reads *Directio speculantis sive de li non aliud: Direction to the one who searches or about the non other*. This addition is illuminating: the god name “*non aliud*” gives a direction to the one who searches and speculates
- <sup>23</sup> *De li non aliud/On the Not Other* c. III, h XIII, n 7.
- <sup>24</sup> *De li non aliud/On the Not Other*, c. XIV, h XIII, 55.
- <sup>25</sup> This formulation is a reference to the principle that Cusanus formulates ‘to understand Anaxagoras better than Anaxagoras understood himself, see: *De docta ignorantia* II, 5, h I n117.
- <sup>26</sup> See *De li non-aliud* Propositio XV, hXIII, n 120.
- <sup>27</sup> *De li non aliud/On the Not Other* XIV, h XIII, n 53.
- <sup>28</sup> Until recently, the literature surrounding Cusanus paid little attention to this late philosophical design. Recently, some studies on this topic were published, following a conference, see [Borsche et al. \(2016\)](#).

- 29 The hunting grounds mentioned by Cusanus are: the knowing not-knowing, the can-is, the not-other, the light, praise, unity, equality, connection, boundary and order.
- 30 See *De venatione sapientiae* Ch. XVIII-XX, h XII, n. 51–58.
- 31 The text can be found in von Bredow (1955); a beautiful more contemporary German translation has been published by Schwaetzer and Zeyer (2006).
- 32 We find a penetrating interpretation of this pedagogy in Bader (2009).
- 33 See “Ein lebendiges Loblied” par. 4.
- 34 See Nicholas of Cusa, Letter to Nicolaus of Bologna, par. 10.
- 35 A similar idea can be found in Keller (2014).
- 36 An attempt to understand Cusa’s philosophy within the framework of *prayer*, see Kim (2019).
- 37 Even when Prevot himself makes it clear that he wants to write primarily about the dimension of prayer and not liturgy, I think the way Cusanus thinks about “praising” warrants this discussion (Prevot 2015, p. 29).
- 38 This discussion could be further developed in conversation with Late Modern orthodox philosophy and theology respectively, and phenomenology. See Hankey (2008).

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