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**Markus Riedenauer:
Challenges of Religious Pluralism and Fundamentalism - Understanding
religio with Cusanus**

Why we need Cusanus is a short reflection by Hans Urs von Balthasar¹, in which he identifies Nicholas' passion for God as the inspiring core and central motif of his thought. This is a paraphrase of his own self-description as "a man inflamed with zeal for God"² in the very beginning of *De pace fidei*. Von Balthasar attributes the freshness of Cusanus' thought to the wellspring of his passion for God, which von Balthasar understood as a contrast to the Christianity of his time. Contemporary issues such as the role of technology in our world and the dominance of the paradigm of instrumental reason are identified as "fields" which could be irrigated by the waters of Cusanus' thought. In particular, the reduction of reason to instrumental rationality might be relativised by the insight that we are creatures and creative images of the creator. This important aspect has been treated for example by Martin Thurner³.

Another important field mentioned by von Balthasar is the plurality of religions and theologies. Nicholas serves as a resource, showing us viable paths to avoid the dangers of religions becoming violent. Since my 'Habilitationsschrift' about the topic was published⁴, the world has witnessed much more of this fanaticism. The dangers that Cusanus saw in religious fanaticism are intensified today in the phenomena of radicalisation, religious politicisation, and fundamentalism. Therefore, it is not so astonishing that recent research has been conducted on what we can learn from Nicholas about the concept of religion itself⁵, religious pluralism⁶ and tolerance⁷, modern forms of mysticism and spirituality⁸ and about the development of Christian relations with Islam and the Quran⁹.

Von Balthasar affirms that Cusanus sees some truth in all religions and doctrines of God, which all have conjectural character - including Christianity itself¹⁰. I here want to pursue the question in how far the philosophy of religion which I find in

¹ Warum wir Cusanus brauchen. For a more detailed discussion of von Balthasar's argumentation, see Mandrella in this volume

² *De pace fidei* 1 n.1 (h VII p.3, 4): 'vir zelo Dei accensus' (translated by Hopkins, 671).

³ Thurner: "Unendliche Annäherung".

⁴ Riedenauer: Pluralität und Rationalität.

⁵ One interesting example being Knut Martin Stünkel: *Una sit religio*.

⁶ See e.g. Aikin / Aleksander: Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei* and the meta-exclusivism of religious pluralism. Here, *De pace fidei* is taken to propose a tolerant kind of pluralism.

⁷ By way of example, see Gottlöber: *Das Prinzip der Relationalität*.

⁸ See e.g. Möde (ed.): *Spiritualität: Neue Ansätze im Licht der Philosophie und Theologie des Nikolaus von Kues*.

⁹ Burman (ed.): *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom*; Levy / George-Tvrtkovic / Duclow (eds.): *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages*.

¹⁰ Warum wir Cusanus brauchen, 93, on the basis of an important quote from *De filiatione Dei* c.6 n.84 (h IV p.60, 9-15).

Nicholas is anti-fundamentalist and his understanding of 'religio' serves as a basis for a peaceful and meaningful interreligious dialogue.

Two objections could be made, the first one being that a fundamentalist version of a religious faith operates well below the cognitive level of the respective theologies. Certainly, each religion must call upon its own sources and traditions to mount theological confrontation with its radical and violent shadow. But is that enough for the demands of reason? From the Enlightenment to the end of the last century, practical reason has posited a binding framework for all citizens - namely human rights, guaranteed by the rule of law, and an auxiliary separation of state and religion - should be sufficient in order to cope with and to minimise the risks posed by pluralistic societies. Meanwhile, it seems to become more acknowledged today that religious pluralism also presents a challenge for theoretical reason - and a guiding assumption of my interpretation is that Cusanus was one of the first to recognise this challenge. What is required, is more than a theoretical pluralism that keeps religions at equidistance and their truth claims outside of the public sphere.

Another objection against the thesis of this article would be that it constitutes an overinterpretation of some aspects of *De pace fidei*, while neglecting the specifically Christian character of the religious concordance developed in this dialogue on the peace of faith. The reply to this is threefold: A thorough interpretation of the works of Nicholas needs much more space than one article and can be found elsewhere¹¹. There it is argued that several other writings are needed to interpret *De pace fidei* and also *Cribratio Alcorani* in a profound way. Thirdly, the scope of this article is not to contribute to the hermeneutics of these two works, but to take the philosophy of religion which can be found in Cusanus as an inspiration in order to address contemporary issues, regarding the theory of inter-religious relations and tensions. If different cultures with different religions as their core clash due to incompatible truth claims, how can philosophy of religion interpret them on a non-fundamentalistic basis while simultaneously avoiding relativistic interpretations that cannot be reconciled with the self-interpretations of the believers on the other hand? Moreover, theologies do imply philosophies. Hence a lack of clarity about basic philosophical assumptions make it difficult for theologies to confront their own fundamentalisms.

It has also been claimed that monotheism itself was the seedbed for violence, insofar as it destroyed pluralistic polytheism and introduced a sharp distinction between true and false religious convictions. How can the claim to absolute truth in monotheistic religions be reconciled with the factual plurality of religions? Can the experienced relativisation of one's own religion be related to the one true God in such a way that the danger of fundamentalist radicalisation is banished, but at the same time the pluralistic flattening and levelling is avoided?

¹¹ See Riedenauer: Pluralität und Rationalität.

My conviction is that with Nicholas, his fundamental ideal of 'docta ignorantia' and his conjectural epistemology, we can understand 'religio' in this way.

1. Challenges posed by religious pluralism

I see at least four structural similarities between our general religious situation today and Cusanus' understanding of his epoch:

a) The cultural horizon was expanded by new media and more mobility of people and ideas. In the 15th century, we have a novel kind of historical research, findings and translations of old texts, codices brought by scholars fleeing from Constantinople, and the new technology of printing books. More knowledge of other worldviews generally leads to experiences of relativisation of one's own interpretations.

Cusanus himself was always a traveller between different cultural worlds and sensitive to experiences of pluralism. To me it appears as very important that a new historical paradigm developed in the early humanism since Petrarch, where the focus of attention was moved away from the eternal to the temporal, from the universal to the particular, from the representative and typical phenomena to the peculiar¹². Humanistic and Renaissance studies have shown that thus, a new awareness of cultural pluralism emerged.¹³

b) The second particularly modern awareness regards pluralism within Christianity: Today, pluralisation results from migration and the spread of evangelical Christian groups. At the 'Concilium Basiliense' (Council of Basel), where the Hussite question was debated, Nicholas developed his ideas of how to deal with ritual diversity. He stated that there may be different regional rites, as long as there remains the unity of the church¹⁴. Furthermore, he acknowledged and cited many examples that there has been historical variability: Church rites have changed over time, so has the interpretation of Scripture¹⁵. Already in 1433 we find in Cusanus' writing not only an

¹² See Gilmore: *The Renaissance Conception*; Pocock: *Politics, Language and Time*, 80ff.; Baron: *Das Erwachen des historischen Denkens im Humanismus des Quattrocento*; Buck: *Das Geschichtsdenken der Renaissance*; Garin: *Il concetto della storia nel pensiero del Rinascimento*.

¹³ „The most immediate achievement of the Renaissance seems to have been the discovery of human culture and its variability, as well as the deepening of individual and collective self-consciousness. This was manifested above all in a historical consciousness ... Inseparable from this awareness of the differences of linguistic cultures was the Renaissance consciousness of historical difference in institutions...“ (Trinkaus: *Renaissance Ideas and the Idea of the Renaissance*, 674). Cf. Kelley: *The theory of history*.

¹⁴ "In eadem quidem ecclesia remanente unitate varium posse ritum esse sine periculo nemo dubitat" (*De usu communionis*, h XV, 10, p. 11). Cf. his praise of diversity: "diversus ritus in concordanti unione ecclesiae catholicae aequaliter laudatur" (h XV, 36, p.37).

¹⁵ Prominent among such repeated acknowledgements is the passage: "diversis temporis alius et alius ritus sacrificiorum, etiam sacramentorum stante veritate invenitur scripturasque esse et ad tempus adaptatas et varie intellectas" (h XV, 13, p. 15).

awareness of synchronic as well as diachronic diversity and an ambivalent view of pluralism as an enrichment within a frame of unity and as a danger, insofar as it cannot be integrated into the unity, but also the task to develop an integrative concept of unity.

Two other practical challenges (which I can only mention here) forced the young Nicholas to rethink the relationship of unity and plurality: Conciliarism itself and the search for a reunion of the Latin church with the Eastern churches.

c) The main motif for him to include other than Christian traditions into his endeavour to integrate religious plurality and delegitimize its tendency to violence was the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453. Elsewhere I have analysed in detail the impact of the message in Western Europe and on Cusanus who replied immediately by writing *De pace fidei*¹⁶. Thus, the ongoing challenge of how Christian theology, culture, and philosophy of religion could position themselves towards Islam became a central topic, just as it is today.

d) In this context we also find the fourth challenging moment: religiously motivated violence. In the first sentence of *De pace fidei*, the author confesses to be shocked by the atrocities reported from Constantinople: "Consequently, with many groanings he beseeched the creator of all, because of his kindness, to restrain the persecution that was raging more fiercely than usual on account of the difference of rite between the religions."¹⁷ Further on, "the king of heaven and earth" himself explains the reason for the envisioned gathering of the heavenly council: "sorrowing messengers had conveyed to him the moanings of the oppressed, that for the sake of religion very many were in armed conflict with one another, and that by physical force men were either compelling [their fellow-men] to renounce their long-adhered-to religious sect or were inflicting death. From the whole earth there were very many message-bearers of the laments"¹⁸.

I hold that already the variety of reasons for religious violence and oppression which Cusanus is aware of in *De pace fidei* chapters 3-4 is interesting: Most men are compelled to live hard lives, leaving them no leisure to gain knowledge and insight. In addition, they are subjected to rulers and not free - so there are socio-economic and political problems. Furthermore, the people have been given prophets and teachers by the Lord (so all of them seem to be somehow of divine origin and legitimate to Nicholas!) - but they misunderstood and over-interpreted their religious traditions and in the end defended the words of the messengers as the truth itself¹⁹.

¹⁶ See Riedenauer: Pluralität, 169-181; Riedenauer: Pluralità di prospettive; forthcoming: Riedenauer: Plurality as a Challenge to Rationality.

¹⁷ *De pace fidei* 1 n.1 (h VII, p.3, 5-8) (transl. Hopkins, 671).

¹⁸ *De pace fidei* 1 n.2 (h VII, p.4, 11-15) (transl. Hopkins, 671).

¹⁹ See *De pace fidei* c.1 n.4. Cf. sermo CLII: "Et attende, quo modo omnes homines se putant Deo coniunctiores in sua secta et discordantes ab eis a Deo remotiores et daemonio propinquiores. Sicut qui Deo figuram tribuunt, se fingunt gerere similem figuram eius et daemonium contrariam, uti nigri

If it is true that in Cusanus' life and works we find the beginnings of an awareness of religious pluralisation and its dangers, we can draw some consequences:

Nicholas was one of the earliest thinkers to understand religious and also cultural pluralism as a challenge not only asking for practical responses (like the strengthening of central power within Catholicism, the reunion of Western and Eastern churches or the organisation of a defensive crusade against the Turks and the military threat posed by them particularly after 1453), but also as a challenge to reinterpret the concepts of unity, rationality, and religion. They had to be revised to meet the theoretical challenge created by the experiences of pluralisation and violence. The fact that Cusanus was always striving for religious truth which he presupposed, while at the same time acknowledging a real diversity of perspectives, sets him apart from some postmodern philosophies and pluralistic theologies of religions.

On the basis of his historical awareness, Nicholas had to go beyond any traditionalism and see the human task of shaping history: to develop new perspectives, to reconstruct institutions and rules, to take courageous decisions. The civic humanism which flourished in Florence at his time stressed human freedom and power to shape institutions and influence the course of history²⁰. Such a background-mentality may render more understandable why Cusanus was optimistic concerning the real transformative power of better interpretations of man, religion, and society in a pluralising world.

The assumption of human freedom and power to influence historical developments is based on his theological anthropology of 'imago Dei' (explained below) and accounts for Cusanus' confidence that a reform of religions with the aim of their concordance is possible, just as it was presupposed when he wrote to the Bohemians about the freedom of the church to install or change ritual practices.

Nicholas understood his time as asking for a better theoretical framework within which even all the other religions (not only the monotheistic ones) could be integrated with their partial perspectives on divine truth, and their relations to the Christian faith could be formulated by way of an active self-relativisation without relativism. But this challenge requires considerable metaphysical groundwork.

aethiopes Deum pingunt nigrum et diabolum album; contrarium faciunt albi homines. Quando igitur aliquis movetur religiose secundum consuetudinem loci, «ex Deo » hunc esse creditur; quando contrarie, e diabolo". (h XVIII s.CLII n.5, 1-11).

²⁰ Charles Trinkaus states that „the humanists offered through their writings a new affirmation of the possibility and value of human action. They presented a vision of man controlling and shaping his own life and the future course of his history and they stressed a new conception of human nature modelled on their own image of the Deity.“ (In our Image and Likeness II, 767)

2. *Ontological and epistemological resources*

Maybe we are witnessing a dialectic between postmodern, diversity-friendly views on pluralism (which are sometimes based on constructivist epistemologies), and exclusivist self-interpretations of religious groups drawing a sharp line between truth and its misconceptions, between true revelation on the one hand and pretensions and lies on the other. Violent consequences of such ideas are drawn by contemporary fundamentalists. Adherents of both extreme positions should regain the search for divine truth or truth about God as a search, in its process-character and its performative aspects - something for which von Balthasar recommends Cusanus. His metaphysics could not support any of those simplistic conceptions of religions. After all, a partial and exclusivist unity opposed to anything outside of it, is no real, i.e. integrative unity.

Book I of *De coniecturis* proposes the famous figure P ('figura paradigmatica') as a symbol for the metaphysical relation of unity and alterity: Two isosceles triangles are placed one on top of the other in such a way that the basis of one triangle is touched by the top point or vertex of the other one in its middle - and vice versa (c. 9 n. 41-43). The whole created universe should be seen as lying in between the two extremes between light and darkness, God, and nothing, thus being unity in alterity in different degrees²¹.

In consequence, everything we can experience is always constituted of some unity and some alterity. Our concepts which work through distinction, negation and exclusion therefore will hardly grasp the true ontological structure of anything - much less gain an adequate insight into the nature of utmost unity which is God²². The consequence is that God is unknown to all creatures²³ and hidden - Cusanus has dedicated to this central topic his little dialogue *De Deo abscondito*. Consequently, *De pace fidei* affirms that God in his infinity can neither be called One nor Triune nor anything else - but remains unspeakable and inexpressible²⁴.

The basis for human experience is the factual diversity with which we are confronted, within which we find ourselves; unity is a principle which reason finds in itself and accepts as a normative ideal; the reduction of plurality to unity is the task to create concordance, which thus becomes the necessary response to all experience, including the challenging implications of conflicting theoretical truth claims.

²¹ Cf. *De coniecturis* I c.9 (h III n.42, 1-3). [Compare W. Chr. Schneider in this volume.](#)

²² *Ibid.*: "deus, qui est unitas".

²³ "Video, quod ob hoc tu deus, es omnibus creaturis ignotus" (*De visione Dei* 16, n.67, h VI, p.55, 7f.). *De pace fidei*, too, states that the „hidden God“ (*Deus absconditus*) in himself remains „unknown and ineffable to all“ (*uti es manes omnibus incognitus et ineffabilis*): h VII n.4, p.5, 17 and n.5, p.6, 16f.

²⁴ Cf. *De pace fidei* 7 n.21 (h VII, p.20, 9-12) - quoted below in footnote 54.

The relation of God and the world is explained since *De docta ignorantia* by the concepts of 'complicatio' and 'explicatio'. The general idea of this holistic ontology²⁵ is that in the absolute One everything is contained in the mode of complication, enfolded - while in the world it is explicated and exists in the unfolded mode. Complication and explication are a pair of concepts working differently than simple oneness and otherness; it allows to transcend the conceptual opposition of 'unitas' – 'alteritas' and to think towards the unity of unity and alterity. We must say, "towards" because reflection can never leave its epistemological conditions behind. Therefore, the intellectual ascension to this highest ontological truth must have a character different from the usual mode of thinking. How can this be conceptualised? For an answer, we have to consult Cusanus' epistemology.

His concept of the human mind as a capacity to discern ('discretiva virtus')²⁶ functionally differentiates its three levels of sense, reason, and intellect ('sensus' – 'ratio' – 'intellectus'). They build on each other in such a way that the higher power integrates on a meta-level what the lower level cannot unify and is thus more precise and provides the measure for the lower mental activity. Each level is transcended by seeking its presuppositions on the higher level - which is, in the case of the human intellect, finally God himself. „Now, reason is the preciseness of the senses... but is a true measure [only] after the fashion of reason. Intellect, which is a true measure, is the preciseness of things rational. However, Truth itself, which is God, is the Supreme Preciseness of the intellect. “²⁷.

The senses provide manifold sense experiences in a purely affirmative way, but the negating, discerning, ordering, and integrative action of reason is needed in order to develop concepts, propositions, and conclusions. The frequent use of expressions like "touching" the truth or "reaching out" together with "vigour", "power" and the like indicates the receptive element in all recognition together with the active or creative element, thus a movement or progress towards the truth is possible.

The strength but also the limitation of the rational capacity is rooted in its structure: Its assertive concepts are defined by what they do not mean, i.e. by

²⁵ In depth analyzed by Moritz, Explizite Komplikationen, where on p.116 he correctly remarks that the terminology of "complicatio/explicatio" is not used in *De pace fidei*, even where it would seem close at hand (like in c. 1 n.6 about the relation of one religion and various rites). It could be argued that to define all religions as explications of the absolute unity which must necessarily remain deficient, would not necessarily have undermined his argument for the superiority of the Christian faith, if his epistemological perspectivism and gradual concept of truth are taken into account.

²⁶ *De coniecturis* II c.14 n.142, 1f. Cf. *De dato patris luminum* 2 n.101, 1: "Anima nostra est vis discretiva universalis ad discernendum".

²⁷ "Ratio vero praecisio quidem sensus exstitit... rationaliter vera mensura. Rationalium vero praecisio intellectus est... Summa autem praecisio intellectus est veritas ipsa, quae deus est." (*De coniecturis* I c.10 n.52, 8-14, transl. Hopkins, 251; cf. *De coniecturis* II c.16 n.159)

exclusion. Limited affirmation and distinction require negation. To establish relations and proportions between concepts and propositions includes stating differences and alterity. As already *De docta ignorantia* explained, reason works generally through comparisons. Knowledge is gained by measuring (Cusanus understands 'mens' as derived from 'mensurare'²⁸) the proportion of what is already known to the unknown²⁹.

Because rationality works through comparisons, it is unable to grasp what is beyond all comparability - the Infinite. The Infinite, by definition, not be de-fined. But it is also present implicitly in everything finite, just as 'unitas' is in everything. Therefore, according to Cusanus' metaphysics, nothing can be understood exactly or fully by the mind. The early works stress the limiting consequences of this epistemology, while in the later works the dynamic aspect allowing for progress of knowledge and insight seems to receive more attention. Reason has in itself a discursive principle in its basic, literal sense - the Latin word 'discursus', meaning "to run through"³⁰, one place after the other - which is also implied in the Greek 'dianoia'³¹. This makes a successive completion of each - necessarily limited and contracted - insight possible.

But whence can we know that reason is contracted? How do we understand the limited character of all rational knowledge? This is the power and task of the intellect which is capable of thinking - or as Nicholas prefers to say: of seeing or touching - simultaneously what reason runs through successively, of understanding reason's concepts as explications of what in its own act is complicated³². In its reflective movement subject, object, and the act of insight itself become one³³. On the highest level, the mind is capable of the coincidence of contradictions.

Having sketched the epistemological levels of 'sensus - ratio - intellectus', we can see important implications of the limited, comparative and discursive character of human reasoning: In *De coniecturis* Cusanus explains the limited, preliminary and tentative, or „conjectural” character of all positive assertions of truth as a

²⁸ Idiota de mente c.1 n.57, 5f.

²⁹ *De docta ignorantia* I c.1 (h I n.2, 16-18): "Omnes autem investigantes in comparatione praesuppositi certi proportionabiliter incertum iudicant; comparativa igitur est omnis inquisitio, medio proportionis utens".

³⁰ Man progresses through the movement of reason: 'motu rationis discurrit' (*Idiota de mente* c. 2 n.65, 10); cf. *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* 42 (h II, p.28, 15 ff.: 'ratio discurrens – intellectus videns') and *ibid.* 21, p.15, 3-16.

³¹ Plato may be regarded as the father of the distinction of 'dianoia' and 'noesis/nous', see *Politeia* VI, 510b - 511b.

³² *De coniecturis* I (h III c.6 n.23, 7 f.): "Intellectualis illa unitas radix quaedam complicativa oppositorum in eius explicatione incompatibilium exsistit".

³³ *De filiatione Dei* 3 (h IV p.51, 17f.): "Est ipse intelligens et id quod intelligitur atque actus ipse qui est intelligere".

consequence of the unattainable nature of truth itself³⁴. It is not easy to translate the central Latin word 'coniectura' into English, but 'pro-jection' comes close as it emphasises an outgoing activity in a creative act³⁵. But it must be kept in mind that to project conjectures is not arbitrary, as it works on the basis of rationally unified, differentiated and proportionated experience; while to stress the subject's activity prevents the misunderstanding that the proportions and relations which 'ratio' establishes could ascertain reality as it is. All explications are relative to its origin in the mind, and to the world. Therefore, it is possible as well as necessary to discuss these explications with other minds, i.e. to draw the consequence of their open-ended and dynamic character by comparing them with other conjectures. Therefore, dialogue is the fulfilment of the above-mentioned discursive character of human rationality.

Put otherwise: How can the shortcomings of the single, limited conjectures be overcome? How can the undeniable progress of growth in knowledge, the possible completion or deepening of insight be explained? The answer is grounded on the mobility of discursive reason, expressed in an important visual metaphor: It relies on the possibility to change perspectives and gather various aspects of truth. Nicholas provides an early but mature epistemological and metaphysical perspectivism in the history of philosophy³⁶.

Behind his new conjectural, dynamic and perspectival epistemology there is a theological conviction that human creativity is founded in man's ontological status as image of God, that by his being an image of the creator, man is himself dignified and called to be creative³⁷. This fits well with the new humanist stress on arts and crafts of various kinds, which find their way into Cusanus' works as well, and it implies an innovation, compared with the stress on the enormous difference between human and divine creativity which characterised medieval theological anthropology³⁸. At the same time, this theological-anthropological interpretation of human creativity seems helpful today in an opposite one-sidedness³⁹.

³⁴ De coniecturis, prol. (h III, 2, 4-6): "praecisionem veritatis inattingibilem ... consequens est omnem humanam veri positivam assertionem esse coniecturam".

³⁵ Cf. Idiota de mente c.7 n.97 with its terminology of „fabricating“ concepts. Hopkins translates ‚De coniecturis‘ with „on surmises“.

³⁶ See Herold, *Menschliche Perspektive und Wahrheit*; and Riedenauer: *Pluralität*, 265-279.

³⁷ As explained by **Tilman Borsche in this volume**, the attribution of the capacity for ‚creare / creatio‘ to humans is embraced by Nicholas somewhat hesitatingly in *De ludo globi* n.93f.

³⁸ For Thomas Aquinas it is strictly impossible to apply the term „to create“ to any creature: "impossibile est quod alicui creaturae conveniat creare, neque virtute propria, neque instrumentaliter sive per ministerium" (*Summa Theol.* I q 45 a. 5; cf. *Summa contra gentiles* II,21: "Quod solius Dei est creare").

³⁹ Following a remark by von Balthasar, this understanding of ‚imago Dei‘ might serve to correct a dominant self-interpretation of modern reason. "Wohl hat der Mensch, als echtes Bild des absoluten Geistes, eine schöpferische Möglichkeit, einen Bereich der Exaktheit, aber dieser Bereich kann nicht

Starting in the 14th century, Italian humanists became aware of the human capability to create really new things, beyond mere imitation of nature, first in the mechanical and liberal arts. The background of the pictorial revolution of central perspective in contemporary painting is helpful to understand Cusanus' perspectivism. Most important for our topic is how he uses it for a transition from the lonely discursive reasoning of one mind to discourse in the usual meaning of an exchange of perspectives, i.e. plural insights of several interlocutors. This transition to a mutual enrichment of various perspectives is most explicit in the book on the vision of God (*De visione Dei*). The context of this work is a spiritual one, as it treats the possibilities of different individual God-searchers to see - and be seen by - God. Therefore, its principle can be transposed to the issue of different approaches and perspectives on the Divine by different religions.

The setup of the well-known experiment of *De visione Dei* has striking similarities with the principles of central perspective and far-reaching implications which cannot be unfolded here⁴⁰, but most important for understanding Nicholas' proposals for harmonising plurality is the threefold discursive character: Firstly, the movements of the spectators around the image are a ‚discursus‘ in the original sense, a running through different positions, thus picturing the principle of the ‚motus rationalis‘ - going through various perspectives which successively reveal more of the truth. This mobility allows for progress. Secondly, the contracted and limited character of each individual perspective is transcended only by a discourse in the common, intersubjective sense: The monks need to discuss and compare their experiences and insights. Thirdly, the basis for such a progress in understanding lies in the seemingly unlimited gaze of the portrait, to which the individual gazes respond - the foundational discourse between the centre image and those who answer its appeal.

Finally, Cusanus stresses still another aspect of creativity beyond the production of external objects and the transformation of the world, including societal and religious institutions: The autopoietic capacity of the mind to develop itself further:

"Therefore, mind is created by the Creative Art - as if that Art willed to create itself, and because the Infinite Art is irreplicable, there arose its image... as if a painter

das Reale, sondern nur das Irreale sein. Der Mensch hat die Zahlen. Die Mathematik. Die Technik. Er kann eine »eingebildete« Welt aufbauen, die solange in der gottgewollten Ordnung bleibt, als er ihre Irrealität durchschaut und sie – wie sich selber im Ganzen – nur als Bild und Gleichnis versteht." (Warum wir Cusanus brauchen, 93)

⁴⁰ See Riedenauer, Pluralität und Rationalität, 308-325.

wished to reproduce himself by painting, and because he himself is not replicable, there would arise - as he was reproducing himself - his image."⁴¹

The image of the relation of a painter to his picture is transcended insofar as the painting by itself is passive, whereas the mind is an image - or mirror, in an analogous metaphor - of God which can complete, straighten out, perfect itself. It is a living image: 'imago viva'⁴². Whenever this is being done, 'religio' takes place in the basic sense of a personal way to respond to God and thus to lead a spiritual life. Through continuing adaptation and self-perfection (not excluding grace, theologically speaking), man answers to the claim by the creator in an existential dialogue which transforms his whole being, leads to a growing unity of exemplar and image, and opens the space for a dialogue between different traditions of conceptualising the salvific relation of divine and human reality. Particular religions can then be viewed in relation to that generally religious, or spiritual philosophy. Their manifold cultural heritage is helpful and necessary, particularly for those people lacking the intellectual education or leisure for philosophising, as the comparison with agriculture in Cusanus' little treatise „on the gift from the father of lights“ shows⁴³.

3. *The significance and potential of 'religio' understood with Cusanus*

Cusanus had been heralded as a thinker of tolerance, although the verb 'tolerare' is used only once in *De pace fidei*, related to the tolerance of different rites, as long as peace in faith and love are safeguarded⁴⁴. Since Karl Jaspers, serious doubts were articulated that the religious concordance according to *De pace fidei* could be interpreted as any form of modern tolerance⁴⁵. In fact, Nicholas wanted more, which makes his philosophy of religion even more interesting - or needed - today, when tolerance does not suffice, because religious groups try to enforce their truth-claims not only publicly, but sometimes with violence. It is indispensable to

⁴¹ Idiota de mente c.13 (h V n.148, 8-11) (transl. Hopkins, 626): "Unde mens est creata ab arte creatrice, quasi ars illa se ipsam creare vellet et, quia immultiplicabilis est infinita ars, quod tunc eius surgat imago, sicut si pictor se ipsum depingere vellet et, quia ipse non est multiplicabilis, tunc se depingendo oriretur eius imago".

⁴² See *De visione Dei* c.11 (h VI, p.15).

⁴³ *De dato patris luminum* n.121 (h IV, p.86, 3-5): "...et pro eius cultura variae nobis illuminationes traditae reperiuntur per eos, qui huic intellectuali culturae diligenter invigilarunt". Cf. Thurner: „Cultura agri intellectualis“.

⁴⁴ *De pace fidei* c.16 n.60 (h VII p.56, 19f.).

⁴⁵ Cf. Moritz: *Die Andersheit des Anderen*. A differentiated position is defended by Akasoy: *Zur Toleranz gegenüber dem Islam*. **In this volume, compare Davide Monaco.**

work on those self-interpretations and the truth-claims connected to them. For this task, it is again necessary to arrive at a deeper understanding of religion itself.

From the resources summarised in the previous part of this paper stems a new understanding of 'religio' in Cusanus which seems to be relevant today. The scientific research on religions necessarily deals with visible, measurable, ascertainable, comparable expressions of religion in ritual-practical, ethical, and dogmatic articulations, and in social forms and processes, all of which are studied by psychology and sociology of religion and other cultural studies. These external aspects are those meant by 'lex' or 'secta' in antiquity and medieval times. Nicholas is one of the first to see them and take them seriously, as can be shown particularly in *De pace fidei*.⁴⁶ - At the same time, he insists on and deepens the classical core meaning in his guiding concept of the 'una religio' presupposed in all religious phenomena and their differences: the personal response of every human being to how he finds and understands himself called, addressed, and appealed to by the Divine, while taking into account the finitude, perspectival contractedness, conjecturality, and discursivity of all human understanding. In conjunction with *De docta ignorantia* I, 26 we can assume three dimensions of religious phenomena with Cusanus: First, the plurality of rites as symbolic expressions of the different relations to the Divine. Behind them, there are the various religious interpretations with their dogmatic explanations and cognitive demands, called 'religiones' already by Nicholas in several places. They are founded on affirmative theologies, which can and must be criticised, so degenerations of religions can be named and corrected. Still behind these phenomena is the universally presupposed 'una religio', the 'ratio essendi' of every concrete and real religion. Its difference to the second level is that it integrates negative theology. The full concept of religion must include all these dimensions.

I see different levels of interpretation within *De pace fidei* which should not be mixed up: the dominant philosophical approach, inspired by a high trust in the intellect, enlightened by a self-critical epistemology; furthermore the anthropological foundation of all religion in the desire for truth, goodness, salvation and peace; in addition to the hermeneutical interpretation of particular religions in view of a philosophical theology and Christology; and finally its reintegration in the perspective of a Christian who believes in the unity of God and man in Jesus.

Beyond the doctrinal surface, the concept of religion in Cusanus' works is differentiated and contains the following elements: The classical Latin term 'religio'

⁴⁶ Cf. Riedenauer: Pluralität, 393-434.

did not mean sociological entities in the way "religion" is mostly understood today (the main term used for this also by Nicholas is 'secta'), but primarily the devotion in the personal cultivation of one's relation to the Divine.

The ritual dimension ('ritus/cultus') is an expression of this and can evidently change, it comes to be understood as a cultural product. Therefore, transformation of the historically and culturally varying forms of personal and communal devotion towards more adequate expressions of religious truth can and should be fostered. The third dimension, a community with different members possibly ordered in a hierarchy, a social formation determined by authoritative interpretations and rules ('lex') is now not viewed as something definitely fixed, but as dependent on individual and communal experience, allowing and demanding exchange in dialogue, for correction and completion in view of the infinite divine truth. We may conclude that exchange of religious articulations and changes of their forms are interrelated moments of religious and interreligious dynamics.

This imperative of reason leads to the fourth, the moral dimension of all religions, which is founded in their purpose of guiding to salvation as well as in their social nature. Now, fundamentalism and violent exclusivism are irreconcilable with this differentiated concept of religion.

It has been stated that what "religion" should exactly mean remains an unsolvable problem in religious studies. Therefore, Knut M. Stünkel proposes a topological approach: In "contact situations" (which I prefer to call challenging experiences of relativisation), concepts move to other places or levels, from object-language to meta-language, they transmigrate and develop, they thereby become reflexive. In this way Stünkel reads *De pace fidei*, as an answer to the challenge posed by religious conflict on the level of object-language, while the philosophical basis used to solve the conflict is on a meta-language level: a new concept of religion⁴⁷.

Some of the theorems developed by Nicholas seem to be most helpful for this task: The inner differentiation of our capacity to orient ourselves as human beings in sense perception, rationality in the narrower sense, and intellect clarifies the necessity of rational discourse, its strength as well as its limitations insofar as they refer back to intellectual insight which is always a personal intellectual event ('Ereignis'). The discursive nature of rationality, rooted in temporally, spatially, and ontologically contracted human existence and in its dynamism, in its creative potential and mobility, explains - together with epistemological perspectivism - the

⁴⁷ Stünkel: *Una sit religio*, 87f.

necessity for a truth-oriented dialogue. A moderate perspectivism and a conjectural concept of rationality allow for a reasonable self-relativisation in vigour of the fundamental relation to divine mystery. As this is seen as the common basis for all religions, their self-understanding as religions is not ignored and passed over, but integrated. The promising concept of religion implicit in Cusanus starts from the assumption that man finds himself addressed by truth itself; the first meaning of „truth claim“ is therefore to be understood in the ‘genitivus subjectivus’: a claim by truth on me and likewise on you – on each individual mind.

What seems most important to me is the creatively responsive character of *religio* according to the epistemology and anthropology of Nicholas: Man is the responsible being - in every respect and far beyond the merely moral meaning of responsibility. In giving creative answers to practical and theoretical challenges, a discourse with the Divine unfolds. The function of all religions is to make this relation explicit; thus, they have a common philosophical-anthropological basis, giving hope for making progress towards concordance. Philosophies and religions, understood as answers, receive their common goal and their dignity from the dignity of man who is creative in the image and likeness of the Creator. Their truth-claims often seem to be conflicting - but interpreted as responses to a claim by truth itself on each human mind, and a growth of concordance, a movement towards better insight through interreligious discourse is conceivable.

The existential basis for intellectual progress is always the human desire for knowledge, for love, and union with the Divine - in all religions. Thus. the possible relation to God is not in the first place a grasping with limited rational concepts, but a gasping: an admiration⁴⁸ for the intimate presence of the infinite origin within everything which is its explication as well as in the dynamic of the mind itself; a being seized, engulfed - the presupposition for an answer which the whole human being is called to give, in the transcending dynamic of creative re-integration of the explicated reality.

The consequence of Cusanus’ ontology of ‘explicatio’ as well as of the Trinity itself is that plurality is legitimised on a fundamental level. In interreligious relations and encounters, therefore, the point is not to eliminate pluralism, but to eliminate its disintegrative potential (‘contrarietas’) or in one word to establish ‘concordantia’. Such a well-ordered relation of different parts and functions is recognized as the ontological principle without which nothing can exist. In *De concordantia catholica* I n.7, the divine Trinity is taken as the model for all unity in diversity - the strongest

⁴⁸ Cf. the foundational role of ‚admiratio, admirari, desiderium‘ e.g. in the introductory letter and first chapter of *De docta ignorantia* (I n.1-2). Also in *De pace fidei*, humankind is „excitatus admiratione“ (n. 3 h VII p.5, 7).

justification for the Christian theologian to seek, justify and promote such concordant structures. After all, Cusanus thinks in the tradition which understands everything created as mirroring the Trinity. Already in chapter 3 of *De concordantia catholica*, Augustine's *Letter to Deogratias* is cited with his opinion that the historical diversity of sacrificial rites expresses the one Christian truth in accordance with the variations of time and place, for „one and the same religion is observed at one time by some customs and signs, at other times by others, earlier in a more hidden fashion and later more openly, earlier by a few and later by a larger number.“⁴⁹. Variations even seem to be established by God in view of salvation, “ut diversitas sit devotionis adauctio”⁵⁰.

But the specifically Christian trinitarian metaphysics is universally understandable on the basis of the ontology of ‘unitas’ and ‘pluralitas’. The metaphysical origin of plurality is „that there cannot be a great multitude without much diversity“⁵¹, which legitimises it and demands that unity be found in plurality and not against it. In chapter 3 Nicholas adds that „in the sensible world nothing remains stable, and [since] fluxible opinions and conjectures are changed from time to time, as are also tongues and interpretations “⁵². On the same page, the freedom of man is stressed several times, indicating his own responsibility in leading a truly religious life.

From this diagnosis it is clear that the basis for religious harmony must be the free consent of all, in order „that henceforth all the diverse religions be harmoniously reduced, by the common consent of all men, unto one inviolable [religion].“⁵³

The Christian religion it is not a priori identical with the ‘una religio’. According to my interpretation of Cusanus, it comes closest to the unspeakable truth, but his metaphysical and epistemological principle of the infinite disproportion between the infinite and the finite remains in vigour. An epistemologically enlightened Catholic theology has to embrace it. A strong example of this is the relativisation of the Trinity, Christianity's highest ‘mysterium fidei’: In *De pace fidei* chapter 7, Nicholas lets the divine word itself state that “as Creator, God is trine and one; as Infinite, He is

⁴⁹ De conc. cath. I c.3 (h XIV n.14, 11-15) (Transl. by Sigmund, 11): "Et haec varietas pro hominum salute a deo facta et praecepta exstitit... Aliis enim tunc moribus et signis, aliis nunc, et prius occultius et postea manifestius, et prius a paucioribus, postea a pluribus una et eadem religio sanctificatur et observatur". Cf. already De usu communionis n.14.

⁵⁰ De pace fidei c.1 n.6 (h VII, p.7, 12).

⁵¹ De pace fidei c.1 n.4 (h VII, p.5, 1-2) (transl. Hopkins, 672); cf. De conc. cath. I c.1 n.6, 4f.

⁵² De pace fidei c.3 n.8 (h VII, p.9, 19- p.10,1-2) (transl. Hopkins, 674).

⁵³ Ibid. c. 3 n.9 (h VII, p.10, 17-19) (transl. Hopkins, 675): "Omnem religionum diversitatem communi omnium hominum consensu in unicam concorditer reduci amplius inviolabilem".

neither trine nor one nor any of those things that can be spoken of“; he remains “*ineffabilis*”⁵⁴.

Thus, Cusanus reformulates the central Christian dogma in a philosophical way, which opens a new space for interreligious discourse. This can also be seen from how he relativises the Christian names of the divine persons: In chapter 8 he says, „some (!) call the unity Father, the equality Son and the connection Holy Spirit, which are convenient significations, although not proper. For the Son is from the Father, and love or Spirit stems from unity and the equality of the Son “⁵⁵.

Nicholas does claim that Christianity represents the most reasonable explication of the unspeakable divine truth - here, particularly the threefold relationality in God. Other religions participate in different grades and can thus be put into a proportionate relation - hence the necessity to develop a philosophy of religion starting from an enlightened Christian perspective.

We have seen: Even if the assumption is that Christianity comes closest to divine truth, there is a remarkable self-relativisation: the philosophical and also mystical insight into the infinite distance of the Absolute and its truth to everything which can be expressed in limited concepts and words opens up one’s own religious interpretations for a growth towards the unattainable truth - in principle also with the help of other traditions. This consequence would be drawn with much more emphasis today, and it does in fact happen in many interreligious spiritual encounters. Insofar as this theory of religion can be called a kind of inclusivism, it can and should be open for a mutual inclusivism from the perspectives of other religions⁵⁶. A reasonable, true, and real dialogue between different religions seems possible, in so far as the other religions, too, engage in similar processes of philosophical reformulation and self-relativisation.

The Christian faith would gain a lot from seeing itself from the perspectives of other religions and traditions, its specific profile and implicit presuppositions would become more articulated, and maybe it would see better than Nicholas himself did that his philosophy of the Trinity and of the idea of Christ (as unity of God and man, as ‘maximum absolutum et contractum’ etc.) is rooted in a historical experience. In a genetic perspective (‘ordo cognoscendi’), the first encounter with the Divine Mystery

⁵⁴ De pace fidei c.7 n.21 (h VII p.20, 9-12) (Transl. Hopkins, 681) "Deus, ut creator, est trinus et unus; ut infinitus, nec trinus nec unus nec quicquam eorum quae dici possunt. Nam nomina quae Deo attribuuntur, sumuntur a creaturis, cum ipse sit in se ineffabilis et super omne quod nominari aut dici posset."

⁵⁵ "Nominant aliqui unitatem Patrem, aequalitatem Filium, et nexum Spiritum Sanctum; quia illi termini etsi non sint proprii, tamen convenienter significant trinitatem. Nam de Patre Filius, et ab unitate et aequalitate Filii amor seu Spiritus." (Ibid. c.8 n.24, p.25, 1-4; cf. his proposal for proper designations ‚unitas, iditas et idemptitas‘ ibid., 7.)

⁵⁶ Cf. Bernhardt: Prinzipieller Pluralismus oder mutualer Inklusivismus.

for an individual believer would happen in being personally appealed by one's own tradition; the doctrinal content of such an experience could and should then be reformulated philosophically; which would provide a basis for dealing with - again factual, historical - experiences of the testimonies and truth-claims of other traditions, i.e. relativising experiences of religious plurality in a reasonable, non-fundamentalistic, fruitful way.

De pace fidei calls for a religious enlightenment through dialogue and develops a model for it from a philosophically enlightened Christian perspective. It should not be overlooked that in *De pace fidei* two phases on the way to religious concordance are proposed - the second one only very briefly, so that it can easily escape attention: First, the wise philosophers of religion of seventeen nations (including the Tartars and the Indians - the furthest foreign religious world-views of which Nicholas had any knowledge) debate the doctrinal issues with the divine Word, the apostles Peter and Paul, in order to consent on the truth which all religions aspire. In a second procedure, which is only indicated in the last paragraph (n. 68), various sources containing information about different religions are studied historically and hermeneutically. They are expected to produce the same result: The one universal faith is not a different one from the existing religions, no new faith, but that which is presupposed in all of them⁵⁷. To make the implicit presuppositions explicit, thus manifesting the interreligious unity already existing on a meta-level, is the task of the wise men. For this reason, the method applied in *De pace fidei* is called a "dialectic of presuppositions"⁵⁸.

The significance of Nicholas' interreligious concordance project can be understood according to the following principles:

- a) Religions as communities of believers with common practices and interpretations do change and develop as all cultural phenomena do. Symbolic and ritual explication of any faith is a work of human creativity and thus conjectural and subject to variation. Humanistic historical and canonistic research revealed such changes to the effect of a diachronic relativisation, together with synchronic diversity.
- b) The character of human existence asks for an active, responsible shaping of social, cultural, and religious institutions. The renewed Renaissance interpretation of theological anthropology explained and legitimised this as a participation in divine creativity on the basis of man being a living image of God.

⁵⁷ *De pace fidei* c.4 n.10 (h VII, p.11, 11f.): "Non aliam fidem, sed eandem unicam undique praesupponi reperietis".

⁵⁸ Cf. *Compendium Theol.* n.7, 35 (h X/2a p.36) and - regarding *De pace fidei* – Kremer: *Die Hinführung (manuductio)*.

c) Truth claims by religions are to be understood as answers to a claim and appeal by truth, the Divine or the Absolute itself. They are thus always relative in a fundamental sense, contracted, perspectival, and limited. For their clarification, completion, and perfection, they require a dialogue with other traditions.

d) It is important to see that even if the ultimate aim of concordance on a theoretical level should be missed in reality, the first aim of the whole concordance enterprise could still be reached: Fundamentalist religious interpretations would be delegitimised. In such dialogical processes, believers and their “religions” are inevitably transformed.

e) The passively suffered relativisation of the Christian faith and truth claims is transformed into an active relativisation, by way of a reasonable explication of the horizontal relation to competing religious interpretations in the light of the vertical relation to the origin and aim of all religion. This provides the ultimate horizon developed out of religion itself and not foreign to it, in which all perspectives are to be integrated. This vision of concordance is rooted in the core of religion and its spiritual dynamic itself.

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