Review of Gott als das offenbare Gehimnis nach Nikolaus von Kues (M. Thurner)

Peter J. Casarella, DePaul University

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Mystery as Revelation:

Review of M. Thurner, *Gott als das offenbare Geheimnis nach Nikolaus von Kues*

Originally submitted as a *Habilitationsschrift* to the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Munich, Thurner’s monograph is the only comprehensive study to date of the theme of “revelatory mystery” (*das offenbare Geheimnis*) in the writings of Nicholas of Cusa.1 Thurner uncovers a new philosophical path to the Cardinal’s entire oeuvre traversing in the process the frontiers between systematic theology, philosophical anthropology, cosmology, mysticism, and spirituality. He points to an inner unity of these diverse disciplines by taking as his starting point the conviction that “[w]ith Cusanus the original meaning of philosophy lies in the search for the revelatoriness (*Offenbarkeit*) of the mystery of God that is received in faith” (23).

The choice of the leading idea is interesting in its own right. Goethe coined the term “revelatory mystery” as a deliberate inversion of the belief that Christian revelation points to the disclosure of certain particular mysteries. The focus on God and God’s self-communication as “revelatory mystery” contests the idea that the believer through the unveiling of a mystery of faith is then satiated with certain knowledge of a concrete reality. In a revelatory mystery the thirst for the divine is never quenched. The divine reality is not a thing but rather

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an event enacted in and through faith that is both infinitely inconceivable by virtue of its utter transcendence and unconcealable by virtue of its presence in the creativity of the human thinking and the expressiveness of a freely created world. More plainly, the unveiling of a concealed revelation comes to the believer like a finished crossword puzzle. Once we guess the answers from the clues, the puzzle as an object of knowledge holds our interest not in the least. On the contrary, a revelatory mystery draws the believer into its very midst by its concealment. Unlike a puzzle, a riddle, or any other “concealed mystery,” the real achievement of reason in this process is never reducible to a mere victory over what was previously unknown. Rather than conquer the not yet disclosed, the orientation of the intellect to mystery prepares the believer to receive a wholly unowed gift.

In fact, Nicholas of Cusa never speaks of a “revelatory mystery” as such although one encounters terms such as absconditum, mysterium, manifestatio, ostensio, apparitio, and even revelatio in his works. The idea first arises as the title of a poem in Goethe’s Westöstlicher Divan and also receives a seminal articulation in Karl Rahner’s essay from 1967, “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology.”

What for Goethe is a deliberate naturalization of traditional Christianity and for Rahner a reversal of the Neoscholastic manuals of Catholic

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theology was, Thurner argues, already a central concern of Cusanus. Thurner not only makes a cogent case for that bold historical leap but also for the idea that “the revelatory mystery” is in an absolute sense Christianity’s foundational starting point.\textsuperscript{3}

Methodologically, Thurner recasts Cusanus’ entire project as a philosophy of revelation. The idea of a “revelatory mystery” becomes the lynchpin of Cusanus’ philosophical and theological writings as well as selected sermons, a point which Thurner endeavours to illustrate with respect to: 1.) Nicholas’ philosophical anthropology, 2.) his understanding of the world in both its natural dimensions and as a springboard to his theological metaphysics of light, and 3.) traditional theological loci such as Biblical revelation (especially in its fulfillment in Christ) and eschatology.

After a brief introduction of the problem, the study begins with Cusanus’ philosophical anthropology. Thurner posits the free creation of the human person as the very ground for the self-revelation of mystery. By focussing on the human person’s enjoyment of a “royal” inheritance in the order of creation as well as the idea that each rational creature is sedes seu capacitas ostensio sapientiae (“the seat or capacity for the disclosure of wisdom”), Thurner demonstrates a Cusan analogy between the free gift of disseminating goodness by the Creator and the self-disclosure of divine glory in the created person. Rather than identifying the act of creation by God with the Neoplatonic theme of emanation,

\textsuperscript{3} “Der offenbare Geheimnis ist die Grund-Gegebenheit des Christentums schlechthin…,” (4).
Cusanus, Thurner argues, posits an original theological reflection on the freedom of the triune Creator as self-diffusive goodness (36-37). God, in other words, was under no obligation to create the world, but in placing the human person at its apex, he simultaneously invests the royal heir with a divine potential for discovering and revealing goodness and underscores the dignity of the finite as other than God and the recipient of divine love.

Thurner then turns to the dimensions of mystery’s revelatoriness in the natural reality of the world. The world for Cusanus is “self-portrait” of a divine archetype (55-7). Rather than treating the mirroring of the archetype in its image as a simple representation or copy, Thurner lays due emphasis on the linguistic character of worldly expressiveness. He is careful to distinguish Cusanus’ insight from a metaphorical or allegorical presentation of the world as a book (84-94). The difference lies in the way in which Cusanus highlights the dynamic analogy of authorial expressiveness. Just as we are brought in touch with Aristotle as philosopher and pedagogue by reading his written works, so too does the world represent a manifestatio of the divine teacher’s mind at work. Thurner interprets creation as Sprachgeschehen, which is similar to what Hans-Georg Gadamer terms the “linguisticality” of the event (92ff.). This hermeneutical theme is deepened with the awareness of an ungenerated, eternally creative Word within the divine life and the Biblical insight whereby creation itself (…”and the Lord said…”) is paralleled to divine speech.

Thurner considers two theses on Cusan cosmology that are of
considerable importance to the students of Nicholas’ later works—the sign
character of the entire visible world (especially in the *Compendium*) and the
purported overcoming of a metaphysics of substance through a functional
understanding of the world’s internally differentiated modality (68, 74ff.) . On
this last point, those who are not convinced of Cusanus’ outright abandonment
of classical metaphysics will discover that Thurner’s philosophy of revelation
yields important qualifications to the one-sidedly functionalist views of Heinrich
Rombach and Klaus Jacobi (75).

The passage in *De visione Dei*, 25, “Nihil secreti tenes. (Nothing of your
mystery do you keep to yourself)” is central to Thurner’s interpretation and also
the book’s epigram (116-9). Cusanus attributes both mystery and self-disclosure
to God with a single dialogical utterance. The paradoxical formulation
transcends any attempt to make the opposition between revelatoriness and
mystery insuperable. Thurner’s point is twofold. First, the self-disclosive
attribute whereby God keeps nothing to himself is simultaneously the fulfillment
of rational creaturehood. Second, the God revealed in this intimate encounter is
none other than the personal, trinitarian God of Christian faith (cf. 120-1).

A whole new approach to philosophy emerges in the process. The form of
philosophical thinking that results from the interplay of knowledge of the world
and revelation is (as in *De beryllo*) that of a “symbol-laden science” (*aenigmatica
scientia*, 163-88). The self-disclosure of the divine mystery is not only the source
of *aenigmatica scientia* but its end. The goal of this science, according to Thurner,
is found in rational striving for a disproportional or transumptive knowledge of
the unattainable archetype. The imbedding of philosophy in a revelatory
mystery seems to threaten the autonomy of reason, but this appears less
problematic once one recognizes that the world of sensible appearances offers
only a mere (but nonetheless infinitely attractive) glimpse of God’s
unsurpassably hidden mystery. On two occasions Thurner identifies the logical
form of aenigmatica scientia with der rationale Begründungsregress des Denkens (163,
188), which fits with his later highlighting of the positive circularity of
theological argumentation in Ramón Llull (460-1, 474).

The central and lengthiest portion of the study is dedicated to the donated
light of the intellect (das geschenkte Erkenntnislicht). Thurner’s contribution is that
he assumes that the distinction developed by Thomas Aquinas and his followers
between the light of the intellect as a natural desire and the light of faith as a gift
of grace contrasts with rather than clarifies the Cusan position on nature and
grace (192-4). Thurner rejects any neat separation of a supernatural gift from
natural desire for God in Cusanus and thereby takes “light of faith,” “intellectual
light,” and “light of revelation” to be strictly synonymous.

How does the gift of light disclose revelatory mystery? First, Thurner
equates the intellect’s search for truth with theophany and takes the appearance
of truth in otherness as a modality of the revelatoriness of the divine mystery

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4 Cusanus interprets the determinative Pauline passage in 1 Cor. 13:12, in which the divine glory
appears in speculo et aenigmate, in a decidedly Platonic fashion.
Second, spiritual receptivity to the mystery comes through being a hearer of a revealed word, and the revelatory mystery is disclosed in being a recipient of the self-evident certainty offered through faith in Christ. Third, revelatory mystery is unveiled through the light of grace, which is itself coterminous with the revelation that fulfills the human intellect’s natural striving for the truth. Fourth, the phenomenon of prayer also confirms the revelatory mystery when it is understood not as external piety but as a necessary human act that fulfills and completes natural intellectual striving. Giving thanks, as even Heidegger noted, signifies the basic perfection of thinking (319). Fifth, drawing upon De visione Dei, Thurner maintains that the believer experiences both personal and intellectual fulfillment in the encounter with God’s human face (321-9). Sixth, the truth of mystical theology lies accordingly beyond the coincidence of the hiddenness of the via negativa and the revelatoriness of a via positiva (329-73). Finally, Thurner sees within the Cusanus prioritizing of language and incarnational presence the suggestion that “the unspeakable Word of revelation is spoken in every word” (379-82). Thus, the final utterance on revelatory mystery lies hidden in silence.

Other dimensions of mystery’s revelatoriness are found in Biblical revelation, the person of Christ, and the eternally triumphant Church as a the perfection of the human intellect. Here Thurner illuminates some intriguing theological problems, but none is more crucial to his thesis than the role of the so-called mysteria fidei. Cusanus himself dedicates a whole chapter of De docta ignorantia to the concrete events of Christ’s life, and many of his sermons (e.g.,
Sermo XII: “Jesum quaeritis”) are structured in like fashion. At stake is the sharp contrast between the medieval tradition of imitatio Christi and Thurner’s thesis that the revealed content of Christian faith as disclosed in an ever more revelatory mystery. In the case of De docta ignorantia, Book III, Thurner’s interpretation is quite reasonable (419-33). In that text Cusanus treats, for example, the virgin birth, the miracle stories, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ not as ends in themselves but as external proofs that the identity of Jesus Christ given by faith is one with the perfect form of revelation of the divine mystery. Moreover, Cusanus clearly interpolates philosophical reflections into his treatment of the life of Jesus as when he treats the cross in a consciously Platonic fashion as a cipher for the revelation of intellectual truth through the crucifixion of the senses. Here more than elsewhere Thurner interjects a self-criticism of his own hermeneutical lens and displays an awareness that the philosophy of revelation cannot solve all problems in Cusanus scholarship. He is also critical of a tendency in De docta ignorantia to treat the mysteria as merely external confirmations of the revelatory mystery in Jesus Christ rather than as full-fledged condensations of the mystery of the incarnate God. This insight leads to some fascinating reflections on the relationship between the major philosophical works and the sermons precisely because of the different manner in which the life of Jesus is disclosed in these different contexts (430-3).

In analyzing Thurner’s project, one must first consider his careful exegesis
of a surprisingly wide assortment of texts. Most studies of God as mystery in Cusanus at best treat *De docta ignorantia*, the three opuscula of 1445 (*De deo abscondito, De quaerendo deum, De dato patris luminum*), and *De visione Dei* (1453). Thurner’s scope is much broader, for he is able to show that a seemingly foreign concept is firmly imbedded at the heart of Cusanus’ overall project. Not only does he make ample use of both very early and very late works, but he draws insightfully from the mature sermons as a source for Nicholas’ philosophy of revelation. One distinctive advantage of this approach is to present Cusanus’ philosophical speculation and mystical theology as a relatively seamless garment.

The methodological shortcoming of this broad sweep, however, is that little attention is paid to the differences of genre and audience between the different writings. In the prothema to *Sermo XLI* (“Confide filia,” 1444), Cusanus compares the preacher to a baker and admonishes him to prepare his spiritual bread by taking into consideration the level of understanding in the intended audience. Thurner in his study attempts to integrate all the sayings of Nicholas of Cusa into a unified whole, and the rhetorical nuances of different texts become subordinated to the philosophical project. Cusanus, by contrast, calls attention to the need to gauge one’s audience and understands this pedagogical perspectivalism not as a departure from genuine philosophy but as a further confirmation of truth’s manifold expressiveness. Likewise, the theme of divine glory is analyzed by Thurner in terms of a philosophy of praise and
thanksgiving, but only seldom do we encounter a liturgically determined path to the divine mystery in his study.5

A final question concerns the purported novelty of the project. As a study of “revelatory mystery,” Thurner’s study is the definitive work. Thurner mentions Reinhold Weier and Josef Stallmach because they treat mystery and revelatoriness explicitly, but he ignores others who highlighted the singularity of Cusanus’ approach to revelation. Karl Jaspers, whose views on Cusanus’ attitude toward the positive content of revelation were unnecessarily restrictive and are soundly refuted by Thurner, nonetheless wrote in 1964: “To [Cusanus] philosophy was not a rational substructure supporting the higher, the mystery. Reflection on the mystery of revelation was itself philosophy.”6 Moreover, Thurner seems to be aware that Rudolf Haubst, Alfred Kaiser, and others have already brought Cusanus’ christology into conversation with modern transcendental approaches, but many others have touched upon the subject matter of his work even without applying his terms. For example, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Louis Dupré called attention to aspects of Cusanus’ mystical theology that shed significant light on the revelatory mystery. For Dupré Cusanus develops a mystical re-integration of nature and grace that simultaneously skirts their naturalistic identification and nominalist separation.7

5 Cf. 432-3. See also Peter Casarella, “Sacra ignorantia: sobre la doxología filosófica del Cusano,” in: Coincidência dos opostos e Concordia, João Maria André and Mariano Álvarez Gómez, eds. (Coimbra: Faculdade de Letras, 2002).


7 Louis Dupré, “Nature and Grace in Cusanus’ Mystical Philosophy,” American Catholic
Von Balthasar draws attention to the “kata-logical” dimensions of Cusanus’ theology and thereby affirms Thurner’s focus on the *receptio descensiva* in the gift of the Father of lights (112-3).8

Thurner’s study is highly recommended. Its overall value lies, I think, in its restructuring of the entire thought of Nicholas of Cusa as a philosophy of revelation. Thurner disabuses both those who maintain that Nicholas was a secularizing thinker interested in stepping beyond the traditional content of Christian revelation as well as those who treat Cusanus’ contribution to Christian spirituality in isolation from philosophical anthropology and the dynamics of concealment and self-disclosure. The work seems less important for having postulated a single, totalizing *Überbegriff* than for its focus on the difference and relation between philosophy and revelation in Nicholas’ writings.

Nicholas joined philosophy to an anticipatory stance of receptivity to the absolutely free self-disclosure of a transcendent mystery. Thurner shows convincingly that Cusan philosophizing leads to revelatory mystery. Moreover, he makes an equally convincing argument that receptivity to mystery’s penetrating openness is philosophy’s most creative source.

Thurner also draws an intriguing connection between Cusanus and Goethe, a final point that is well worth pondering. Perpetual striving undergirds both Nicholas’ and Goethe’s approach to revelatory mystery. Goethe’s naturalist

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agenda may conflict with Nicholas’ understanding of God and the world, but

Goethe’s Faust is surely a modern heir to the quest for *docta ignorantia*:

> You gave me, lofty spirit, gave me all
> I pleaded for. Not vainly did you turn
> Your countenance to me amid the fire.
> You gave me splendored Nature for my kingdom,
> And strength to feel her, relish her. Not merely
> A coldly wondering visit did you grant,
> But suffered me into her inner depth
> To gaze as in the bosom of a friend…
> Thus reel I from desire to fulfillment,
> And in fulfillment languish for desire.⁹