



Man's "knowledge" and "ignorance" for God in the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa and Nicholas of Cusa

"Conocimiento" del hombre y de la "ignorancia" de Dios en la enseñanza de Gregorio de Nisa y Nicolás de Cusa

O "Conhecimento" do homem e a "ignorância" de Deus na educação de Gregorio de Nisa e Nicolau de Cusa

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**Resumen:** El conocimiento de Dios ha sido el tema principal de la enseñanza de la teología ya la expansión de la doctrina y la enseñanza cristiana. Escritores eclesiásticos como Gregorio de Nisa y Nicolás de Cusa aceptan que el conocimiento acerca de Dios es convencional y simbólica (deliberadamente). Sus atributos son conocidos, sin embargo su esencia "ousia" no se conoce. Dios es infinito. Él es ilimitado en todo tipo de perfección o de que todas las perfecciones imaginables pertenecen a Él en las alturas las formas imaginables. Dios existe por sí mismo y no depende de ninguna otra cosa para su existencia. La bíblica Yo soy el que soy. En relación con la inmutabilidad divina: Dios no sufre ningún cambio. Dios está externamente relacionado con el mundo: ningún caso en el mundo tiene algún efecto en Dios. Dios se ajusta a la metafísica de sustancias de la filosofía griega. Una sustancia es independiente, autónomo y autosuficiente. El hombre no conoce más que los atributos del Dios y no su "ousia". Esto sucede, porque la mente humana finita no puede comprender la esencia del Dios infinito. Además Dios es unknowledgeable e inconcebible a Su "ousia", mientras Él está bien informado y comprensible a sus energías. Está claro que sólo es posible para el hombre para adquirir "amydros" indistintos y débil "asthenis" visión de Dios de acuerdo con sus atributos "ta kathautou". En este artículo, vamos a examinar este conocimiento y la visión de Dios a través de los escritos de los escritores eclesiásticos orientales y occidentales, Gregorio de Nisa y Nicolás de Cusa.

**Abstract:** The knowledge of God has been the main subject of the theological teaching since the expanding of the Christian doctrine and teaching. Ecclesiastical writers as Gregory of Nyssa and Nicholas of Cusa accept that the

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knowledge about God is conventional and symbolic (deliberately). His attributes are known, however His essence “ousia” is not known. God is in finite. He is unlimited in every kind of perfection or that every conceivable perfection belongs to Him in the highest conceivable way. God is self-existent and does not depend on any thing else for his existence. The biblical I am that I am. Related to divine immutability: God does not undergo any change. God is externally related to the world: no event in the world has any effect on God. God conforms to the substance metaphysics of Greek philosophy. A substance is independent, self-contained, and self-sufficient. Man knows only the God’s attributes and not His “ousia”. This happens, because the finite human mind cannot grasp the essence of the infinite God. Besides God is unknowledgeable and inconceivable to His “ousia” while He is knowledgeable and comprehensible to His energies. It is clear that it only is possible for man to acquire indistinct “amydros” and weak “asthenis” vision of God according to his attributes “ta kathautou”. In this article, we are going to examine this knowledge and vision of God through the writings of eastern and western ecclesiastical writers, Gregory of Nyssa and Nicholas of Cusa.

**Keywords:** Gregory of Nyssa – Nicholas of Cusa – Knowledge of God – Attributes – *Ousia*.

**Palabras-clave:** Gregorio de Nisa – Nicolás de Cusa – El conocimiento de Dios – Atributos – *Ousia*.

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## I. Man’s “knowledge” and “ignorance” – “agnoia” for God in the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa is regarded as exponent of the negative theology, and of the mystical tradition in Christianity. The supreme antinomy of the Triune God, unknowable and knowable, incommunicable and communicable, transcendent and immanent is the primary locus of his apophaticism. Moreover, the negative theology of the Gregory of Nyssa is balanced by his acute sense of the revelation of God ad extra, equally predicated of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> M. PLESTED, *The Macarian Legacy: the place of Macarius-Symeon in the eastern Christian*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 57.



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Gregory speaks about the unknowable and incommunicable of God with many and different ways in his writings. He demonstrates the presence of God in the world through examples, arguments and images. He explains how our soul should try to become purified for being able to realise the divine truth. In the Moses' life and in *Contra Eunomium* the Holy Father explains that the human beings cannot understand the “invisible”, “timeless”, “ineffable” of God, they make images of Him which reveal Him<sup>3</sup>.

In opposition to the Eunomium's teaching that the nature of God was absolutely comprehensible, Gregory explains and underlines as well the incomprehensibility and infinity of God and thereby gives to human being to a life of continual conversion in virtue, to an everlasting assimilation to God: “the perfection of human nature consists... in its very growth in goodness”<sup>4</sup>.

Gregory affirms that God is unknowable – or at least that the “ousia” (being) of God is unknowable. Gregory finds theological justification for this in the concept of God's infinity. God is eternal and beyond the time. This eternity results in God being of infinite expanse<sup>5</sup>: “But if the Divine and unalterable nature is incapable of degeneracy, as even our foes allow, we must regard it as absolutely unlimited in its goodness: and the unlimited is the same as the

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<sup>3</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Contra Eunomium*, II, W. Jaeger, Gregorii Nysseni opera, pub. Brill, Leiden 1962, vol. 2, 1, 1021-10: «When God was yet unknown to the human race because of the idolatrous error which then prevailed, those saints made him manifest and known to men, both by the miracles which are revealed in the works done by him, and from the titles by which the various aspects of divine power are perceived. Thus they are guides towards the understanding of the divine nature by making known to mankind merely the grandeur of their thoughts about God; the account of his being they left undiscussed and unexamined, as impossible to approach and unrewarding to those who investigate it».

<sup>4</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Moses*, 31. D. Ang, *The model of paradox in Christian theology: perspectives from the work of Henri de Lubac*, Sudney 2011, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> E. BRIAN, S. J. DALEY, “Bright Darkness' and Christian Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa on the Dynamics of Mystical Union”, in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley, S. J.*, ed. M. J. Hines and St. J. Pope, Crossroad, New York 1996, 219. See also D. Carabine, “Gregory of Nyssa on the Incomprehensibility of God”, in *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. Th. Finan and V. Twomey, Four Courts Press, Dublin 1992, 87.



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infinite”<sup>6</sup>. It is possible through His sanctifying grace to be known His glory, holiness and magnificence.

The knowledge of God is beyond man’s power. God promised that only those who are pure of their heart can have vision of God<sup>7</sup>. For God who is by nature beyond our sight is visible in His activities “energeiai”, being perceived in the characteristics “idiomata” that surround Him. So, it is better for man to speak for the deeds of God but when he is going to speak about His essence, then man should be remain silent.

God is not “object” of knowledge but of admiration. According to the poet’s words: “how majestic is your name in all the earth!”<sup>8</sup>. Gregory’s aim is to show that the beings of all the members of the godhead are infinite in goodness and power and life without distinction. The “ousia” of God has no “levels”. God in his nature is singular, simple, without opposite. It cannot degrade overtime and cannot change or lose its perfection, as even Eunomius argues. In light of this, how can someone compare one infinite goodness in the Son to another infinite goodness in the Father and say that one is lesser and the other greater? Can one infinite good be lesser than another infinite good? Of course not. In this way Gregory challenges the teaching of Eunomius that the Father and the Son are both perfect in goodness and yet the Father is superior to the Son<sup>9</sup>.

God’s essence cannot be approached by man. The latter can feel the divine grace and glory: “Let us not be ignorant of God’s nature which we recognize as his own wisdom and power and which we our minds comprehend”. As God’s infinite nature cannot be fully conceived by the human soul, so God does not seek to reveal Himself completely to those who seek Him. Rather, he reveals just enough to enlarge the desire of the soul for more so that the soul

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<sup>6</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Against Eunomius*, 1.15. Originally translated for the Nicean and Post-Nicean Fathers Series II Vol. 5, Ed. by Ph. Schaff. Accessed at <http://ccel.org>.

<sup>7</sup> VL. LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood, ed. St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York 1997, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 8:9.

<sup>9</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Against Eunomius* 1.19. See Also A. Bottiglia, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Infinite Progress: A challenge for an integrated theology”, *Greek Fathers CHS* 662JZ, [http://westernthm.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/nyssa\\_on\\_infinity.pdf](http://westernthm.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/nyssa_on_infinity.pdf) (2010), p. 4.



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might ever press in closer and closer on its infinite path upwards. In Gregory's own words:

We can conceive then of no limitation in an infinite nature; and that which is limitless cannot by its nature be understood. And so every desire for the Beautiful which draws us on in this ascent is intensified by the soul's very progress towards it. And this is the real meaning of seeing God: never to have this desire satisfied<sup>10</sup>.

The man's desire for the knowledge and the vision of God is constantly satisfied and yet never satisfied. "Moses sought to see God and this is the instruction he receives on how he is to see Him: seeing God means following Him wherever He might lead"<sup>11</sup>.

The knowledge for God sometimes has the same meaning with the ignorance for God and the vision of God in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. The divine darkness leads to the enlightenment. It shows the encounter with God not as an act of comprehension but as a union beyond understanding<sup>12</sup>. He speaks for the vision of God expressed in terms of darkness rather than the prevailing light imagery<sup>13</sup>. This relation between dark and light, knowledge and ignorance for God, the holy father Moses' vision began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness. Gregory explains about the ignorance of God that "divine is there where the understanding does not reach"<sup>14</sup>.

That knowledge is cognitive is perhaps the first assumption with which one must do away, if he is to properly understand St. Gregory of Nyssa's concept of the divine darkness<sup>15</sup>. Yet it is an assumption so basic to modern scientific thought that its influence is hardly given consideration, it is taken entirely as a base fact in the general arena of learning. Yet it is this very idea which

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<sup>10</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Apologeticus on Hexaemeron*, PG 44, 72C.

<sup>11</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Moses*, II, 231-3, 238-9.

<sup>12</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 202.

<sup>13</sup> M. LAIRD, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 111. D. Ang, *The model of paradox in Christian theology: perspectives from the work of Henri de Lubac*, Sudney 2011, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, VI, 888A.

<sup>15</sup> "This is the true Knowledge of what is sought: this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by kind of darkness", GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Moses*, 95.



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Gregory addresses: the entire way of knowing with which we approach the knowledge of God. His is a knowing that goes beyond the confines and limitations of cognition, with its inherent inability to comprehend the transcendent<sup>16</sup>.

It is a knowing that plunges into the negative, into the darkness of that place ‘where the understanding does not reach,’ and there finds the height of true knowledge. Gregory’s concept of mystical knowing is best expressed in his image of the divine darkness: a symbol that is perhaps one of his greatest gifts to the realm of Christian thought<sup>17</sup>. It is presented most clearly in his famous text, *The Life of Moses*, and it is primarily from that text that this brief examination shall be made<sup>18</sup>.

According to Gregory of Nyssa the knowledge about God is based on human mind and cannot be the correct guide for the “vision” of God, but the ignorance for the divine nature is based on the human soul. The man searches for the God and through his ignorance- the darkness of his mind for God, he can discover the divine truth. Only then the finite human being can see the infinite God. The indwelling of the Trinity within the human person. As the godhead dwells within the soul, so is the soul able to relate to the person the knowledge of it, in a manner of knowing that is no longer sensory. The soul acts as a mirror, which projects into one’s knowledge the very nature of God. The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind: “For no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, nor does it belong to those things which usually enter into the heart of man”<sup>19</sup>.

This is the beginning of the knowledge of God by the heart—by the intimate presence of God Himself. Yet it is only faint, and is still blurred, as one would expect within a cloud. The soul must still be purified, and must become ever more accustomed to this new way of knowing. It must, indeed, shed its reliance upon cognition, and embrace the seeming groundlessness of an ‘ineffable knowledge.’ The person “must wash from his understanding every

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. I, 46.

<sup>17</sup> A. PAPANIKOLAOU, *Being With God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion*, Notre Dame, Indiana 2006, p. 18

<sup>18</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Moses*, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 1 Cor. 2:9, Isaiah. 64:4



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opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions, which are, as it were, wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain”<sup>20</sup>.

Generally, the ignorance of God can be equivalent to the darkness. God is the light. The separation of man from the God, brought darkness to the mind and the heart of the human being. Vladimir Lossky underlines with a lyrical way that if God is known as light, the loss of this knowledge is darkness; and, since eternal life consists in “knowing the Father and His Son Jesus Christ”, absence of knowledge of God ends in the darkness of Hell. Light is the result for accompanying the union with God, whereas the dark reality can overrun human consciousness only when human consciousness dwells on the borders of eternal death and final separation from God<sup>21</sup>. Thus the obvious sense of darkness seems to be, above all, pejorative<sup>22</sup>. If a man accepts his ignorance for the eternal God, He can detect the real knowledge for Him. The human soul will capture the God vision, only with its purification. Gregory analyses that only the purified man in heart can see the God<sup>23</sup>.

Gregory teaches that only if the darkness “and the ignorance for God on the Mount Sinai will be changed into the light of true knowledge of Mount Tabor, man will be able to have the vision of God, the glorious face of God incarnate and the eternal uncreated light of the Triune God”<sup>24</sup>. Also he says that the soul that truly loves God desires to be united with Him, man tries to find this union through the vision and knowledge God.

## **II. Man’s “knowledge” and “vision” for God in the teaching of Nicholas of Cusa**

Nicholas of Cusa was marked for his profound mystical writings about Christianity, particularly on the possibility of knowing God with the divine human mind. This is not possible through mere human means — via “learned

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<sup>20</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Moses*, 157.

<sup>21</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Moses*, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>23</sup> E. ARTEMI, “The sixth oration of Gregory Nyssa into the beatitudes”, *Koinonia*, 45 (2002) 167-174.

<sup>24</sup> VL. LOSSKY, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1974, p. 31.

ignorance”<sup>25</sup>. Cusanus wrote of the enfolding of creation in God and their unfolding in creation. He was suspected by some of holding pantheistic beliefs, but his writings were never accused of being heretical<sup>26</sup>. He may arguably be best understood as employing a Christian Neoplatonic framework to construct his own synthesis of inherited ideas<sup>27</sup>.

Cusanus speaks about the transcendence of God and relates it with the ignorance “docta ignorantia”. God is “infinite oneness”- “unitas infinita”<sup>28</sup>. Unaided reason cannot attain to union with God. Nor does union annihilate the distinction between creature and Creator. The divine nature of God is omnipotent and unknown to human beings. This ignorance of God can be transformed into learned ignorance for God. Nicholas of Cusa tries to show how the human mind can transcend natural limits and gives way to “supereminence”. Nicholas supports that the man cannot reach the God through his own mind. Sometimes any human reason can be barrier to attain such participation in God, to attain such knowledge of the divine as is possible to humanity.

Nicholas realises God as the “absolute maximum” and “the absolute minimum”, enfolding as well as surpassing all contraries: “For the both maximum and minimum are superlatives. Therefore absolute quantity is not maximum quantity more than it is minimum quantity, because in it the minimum is the maximum in a coincident way”<sup>29</sup>. For Nicholas, “God preceded opposites, is undifferentiated, not other incomparable, and without opposite, precedes distinctions, opposition, contrariety and contradiction”<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup>D. MORAN, “Nicholas of Cusa and modern philosophy”, (2007)173-192, p. 174, [\\_www.ucd.ie/~14cms/Nicholas of Cusa and Modern Philosophy \(2007\).pdf](http://www.ucd.ie/~14cms/Nicholas%20of%20Cusa%20and%20Modern%20Philosophy%20(2007).pdf).

<sup>26</sup>J. HOPKINS, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and an Appraisal of “De Ignota Litteratura and Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae”*, MN: Banning, Minneapolis, 1988<sup>3</sup>, p. 18. cf. M. B. WEINSTEN, *Welt- und Lebensanschauungen, Hervorgegangen aus Religion, Philosophie und Naturerkenntnis, World and Life Views, Emerging from Religion, Philosophy and Nature* (1910), page 306: “Er ist bis zu einem gewissen Grade Pandeist. Gott schafft die Welt nur aus sich, de nullo alio creat, sed ex se; indem er alles umfaßt, entfaltet er alles aus sich, ohne doch sich dabei irgend zu verändern”.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I. 5.14.

<sup>29</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 91-92, 336.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



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God cannot be known by any human being. The latter is captured with a “learned ignorance”<sup>31</sup>. Man understands that God is ignorant and he realises it with the knowledge which he obtains<sup>32</sup>, God is the absolute Maximum; the universe is a created image of God, the “contracted” or restricted maximum. Christ, the Son of God, the enfleshed second person of the Triune God unites the first two as the Maximum at once absolute and contracted. God is both unlimited and transcendent, unreachable by human mind. So does Nicholas accept the human logic has limitation and God is beyond any logical borders. He underlines that there is not an analogy between infinite God and finite man<sup>33</sup>.

Cusanus explains that man’s attempt to understand God, transforms the ignorance for God to the knowledge: “Mind is the limit and measure of all things”<sup>34</sup>.

Also, he supports that our minds are images of God’s mind: “You know how the divine Simplicity enfolds all things. Mind is the image of this enfolding Simplicity. If, then, you called this divine Simplicity infinite Mind, it will be the exemplar of our mind. If you called the divine mind the totality of the truth of things, you will call our mind the totality of the assimilation of things, so that it may be a totality of ideas. In the divine Mind conception is the production of things: in our mind conception is the knowledge of things. If the divine Mind is absolute Being, then its conception is the creation of beings; and conception in the human mind is the assimilation of beings<sup>35</sup>. All things comes and return to God.

Cusanus is preoccupied by the nature and limits of human knowledge which prevent him from knowing the universe. The latter is finite, so does man cogitate God in proportion. “Cusanus’ interest, however, is not in a modern celebration of the multiplicity of subjective perspectives but is in the more Neoplatonic project of overcoming perspectival limitation and “otherness” to

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<sup>31</sup> P – M. WATTS, *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Fifteenth – Century Vision of Man*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1982, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I.3.9.

<sup>34</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia. Idiota de mente: The Layman: About Mind*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 3.

gain intellectual oneness with the object itself”<sup>36</sup>. Cusanus was influenced by the emerging humanism of the northern Renaissance. Morrat explains that: “Cusanus exploits the nominalist emphasis on God’s absolute power. God is in this sense pure possibility, or the sum of all possibilities. Indeed, Cusanus’ specific originality consists in his use of nominalist claims about God’s infinite and unlimited power, combined with the scholastic claim that God is pure esse, pure actuality, actus purus, “maximal actual being” “maxima actualis entitas”<sup>37</sup>, to make the claim that God is the infinite actualization of all possibilities, “est actu omne id quod possibile est”<sup>38</sup>, God is “wholly in act”- “penitus in actu”<sup>39</sup>.

The Christian Platonic theological tradition teaching found support in the theology of Cusanus<sup>40</sup>. The latter tries to define the suitable way to recognize, identify and utter the infinite and eternal nature of God. God is “absolute infinity” - “infinitas absoluta”<sup>41</sup> and Nicholas adds: “Now according to the theology of negation, there is not found in God anything other than infinity”<sup>42</sup>. It is obvious that for our writer God has infinity and transcendence: “...the ultimate and deepest contemplation of God is boundless, infinite, and in excess of every concept”<sup>43</sup> Only by realization the infinity of God, the man can understand how incomprehensible the divine nature is. The only thing of God that can be understood is the disability of human mind to conceive the superiority of God<sup>44</sup>. Also there are no words to be used for God, because God is beyond opposites<sup>45</sup>. With learned ignorance, a man can learn, can know the ultimate God. All human beings desire to know, but exact knowledge is impossible, “precise truth inapprehensible”<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> D. MORAN, “Nicholas of Cusa and modern philosophy”, (2007) 173-192, p. 177, [\\_www.ucd.ie\\_14cms\\_Nicholas of Cusa and Modern Philosophy \(2007\).pdf](#).

<sup>37</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia* I .23.70.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid* I .5.14.

<sup>39</sup> D. MORAN, “Nicholas of Cusa and modern philosophy”, (2007) 173-192, p. 181, [\\_www.ucd.ie\\_14cms\\_Nicholas of Cusa and Modern Philosophy \(2007\)](#).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De visione dei*, I. 13.

<sup>42</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia* I. 26.88

<sup>43</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De possesset* 40

<sup>44</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia* I. 16.44

<sup>45</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De coniecturis* I .5.20

<sup>46</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia* I. 2.8.



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The root of the difference between God and human's spirit is in the "designation" of the unknown God. For this reason, Nicholas gives the name "Maximum" for God, because He cannot take another name, "quo nihil maius esse potest"<sup>47</sup>. Cusanus underlines for the knowledge of the God's existence and nature that they do not depend on the maximum idea which is "established" about Him because by this sense, the nature of God would be determined according to a comparative relationship with the finite things and therefore the divine nature would lose his characteristic of infinity: "Since the unqualifiedly and absolutely Maximum, than which there cannot be a greater, is greater than we can comprehend, because it is Infinite Truth, we attain unto it in no other way than incomprehensibly. For since it is not of the nature of those things which can be comparatively greater and lesser, it is beyond all that we can conceive"<sup>48</sup>.

God, who is uncontracted, is Maximum *Being* only insofar as being is uncontracted. But uncontracted and undifferentiated "being" is not being in any sense conceivable or nameable by us<sup>49</sup>. Hence Nicholas goes on to state: "Wherefore, although it is evident through the aforesaid that the name 'being' or any other name is not a precise name for the Maximum which is beyond every name, nevertheless it is necessary that being befit it maximally but in a way not nameable by the name "maximum" and above all nameable being"<sup>50</sup>. In *DII*, 24-26 Nicholas concedes the necessity—for purposes of worship—of conceiving of God *as if* He were contracted to various perfections which are signified by their names in our language, *as if* His trinity were truly describable as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and so on<sup>51</sup>.

Cusanus argues that the God can be defined with the oneness: "However, oneness cannot be number; for number, which can be comparatively greater, cannot at all be either an unqualifiedly minimum or an unqualifiedly maximum. Rather, oneness is the beginning of all number because it is the minimum; and it is the end of all number, because it is the maximum. Therefore, by comparison Absolute Oneness, to which nothing is opposed, is

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid* I. 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, I. 4.

<sup>49</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *On learned ignorance -De Docta Ignorantia*, Book I, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1970, 2nd edition, text edited by Paul Wilpert, revised by Hans G. Senger, p. 51.

<sup>50</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia* I. 24-26

<sup>51</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *On learned ignorance -De Docta Ignorantia*, Book I, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1970, 2nd edition, text edited by Paul Wilpert, revised by Hans G. Senger, p. 51.



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Absolute Maximality, which is the Blessed God. Since this Oneness is maximal, it cannot be multiple for it is all that which can be. Therefore, it cannot become number... Accordingly, Absolute Oneness cannot be comparatively greater or lesser; nor can it be multiple, Thus, Deity is Infinite oneness”<sup>52</sup>.

Nicholas supports that we can see God through the images of the creatures, because visible things are truly images of invisible things and that from created things the Creator can be knowably seen as in a mirror and a symbolism<sup>53</sup>. The journey toward God as more of a rush, pushing beyond the senses and the intellect. God is not “something” similar to all of these. God can be found farther on even beyond all “interiority”. This ignorance is truly the knowledge of God. The path that shows that God is unspeakable and incomprehensible, but He is simply God<sup>54</sup>.

As far as for the vision of God, the icon would show some qualities for the Divine Face: “But God, insofar as He is true Uncontracted Sight, is not sight that is less than the intellect can conceive abstract sight to be; rather, He is incomparably more perfect Sight. Hence, the appearance of the icon’s gaze is less able to approximate the supreme excellence of Absolute Sight than is conception. Therefore, that which is apparent in the case of that image must undoubtedly be present in an excellent way in Absolute Sight”<sup>55</sup>.

The invisible Truth of His Face, cannot be seen by the bodily eyes of a man, bur He can be seen by man’s eye of his heart and of his mind. The face of God has no contraction. He is the Face of faces, “For the Face which is the Truth of all faces is not quantitative; hence, it is not greater or lesser than any face. Because it is neither greater nor lesser, it is equal to each and every face; and yet, it is not equal to any face, because it is not quantitative but is absolute and superexalted. It is, therefore, Truth, or Equality, that is free from all quantity”<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia* I. 5

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, I. 11. Rom. 1:20. I Cor. 13:12.

<sup>54</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, translated and introduced by H. Lawrence Bond, Paulist Press, N. Jersey 1997, σ. 43.

<sup>55</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA,, *De visione dei*, I. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* I, 6.



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Cusanus provides no ontological argument to prove the existence of God. This happens because God's existence is not bound by the formation of concept of the absolute. God is beyond even this concept and even the importance of identifying the maximum arrest not attributable to any ontological way the infinite divine being. This is the most critical assumption of philosophy. He explains that the seeker will even then see God through a cloud, though it be a more rarefied one; God will remain incomprehensible<sup>57</sup>.

Nicholas argues that the Absolute Infinite cannot be conceived, realized by finite thought. Hence, in theology, only negations can be assumed as true. Although positive theological statements are inevitable in order to think about God, they are inadequate. Paradoxically, one can reach the incomprehensible God only by knowing his incomprehensibility. This is the meaning of the term "learned ignorance" In the end, both negative and positive theology must be dissolved into inexpressibility; God is ineffable beyond all affirmations and negations<sup>58</sup>. This is the extreme climax of a philosophical theology where the infinite distance between God and the finite has come to a head. More exactly, human beings cannot touch God through knowledge at all, but at the very most only by our yearning for Him<sup>59</sup>. As conclusion, Cusa underlines that God is indefinable; or, rather, He defines Himself. He is eternal power and act, totally unlimited and infinite.

### **III. The comparison of Gregory's teaching about the knowledge of God with Nicholas' of Cusa teaching about it**

Nicholas underlines that man is a finite microcosm which mirrors the infinite universe – itself a manifestation of the immanent-transcendent God. Through reason we can know only what God is not; and we must remain in a state of "learned ignorance". For Gregory, man has truly finite mind, so he cannot really know God, but only through his ignorance can conceive the omnipotent Being.

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<sup>57</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA,, *De docta ignorantia* I. 26.

<sup>58</sup> KL. ROHMANN, "His Idea Of The Coincidence Of Opposites And The Concept Of Unity In Unification Thought", *Journal of Unification Studies*, vol. III, 1999-2000, <http://www.tparents.org/Library/Unification/Talks/Rohmann/Rohmann-000000.htm>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.



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For both ecclesiastic father, the two interdependent movements of divine self-manifestation and divine mystery, immanence and transcendence, are presented as the dynamic nexus out of which theosis arises. Nicholas of Cusa insists that Divine self-manifestation is explored as both a prerequisite and a mode of theosis.

Gregory and Nicholas underlines that the negative theology that results from divine mystery highlights the limitations of human reason as well as the human mind's potential for being the image of God. The Christological character of theosis is found in Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine of Christ as the Word of God, his understanding of the ascent of the intellect to divine Wisdom, and his concept of divine sonship. For Gregory theosis is based on the clean heart and through the darkness (*γνόφος*) of human mind that should be enlightened by the God's light and secret vision of His face.

Both Gregory and Nicholas speak about the doctrine of theosis in their understanding of the created, material world. The knowledge for God is vivid through the material world. Man can know God through his (man's) perfection, purification and illumination<sup>60</sup>. For these writers, God is Light, and that just as in the physical world we know being via light, so too, we can say that in the spiritual world do we know God via spiritual light, revelation. Gregory of Nyssa says we know God via two manifestations, creation and revelation.

For Nicholas of Cusa, he seems to be saying that, "faith" itself is the vehicle through which the soul transmits itself, through which the soul shines. Just as Nicholas of Cusa's reference to light, that it is through light we know being through the senses, thus analogously, in the Mass, through the light of faith our soul learns knowledge of God. As a consequence, the person of faith can see the world from the perspective of God's knowledge of the world through his faith, in addition to his knowledge of the world through his senses and his mind.

Gregory and Nicholas accept that the human reason is finite and God is infinite, beyond time and place. This first is created and the second is eternal, uncreated and the creator of man. Gregory relies heavily on the difference

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<sup>60</sup> N. J. HUDSON, *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa*, the Catholic University of America Press, N. York 2007, p. 24.



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between divine essence and divine energy. Essence transcends every act of comprehensive knowledge, and it cannot be approached or attained by our speculation.

Despite all human attempts to grasp the uncontainable, unknowable God, God remains unsearchable. Nicholas supports that only someone who has faith can know the God.

As conclusion both are accepted the simplicity of divine nature, but Nicholas of Cusa sometimes identifies God to the creation, and this leads to pantheism. Gregory of Nyssa argues that “the simplicity of the true faith assumes God to be that which He is, namely, incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of human but of angelic and all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words, having but one name that can represent His proper nature, in single Name being “Above Every Name”<sup>61</sup>. On the other hand, Nicholas argues: “As Creator, God is three and one; as infinite, He is neither three nor one nor any of the things which can be spoken. For the names that are attributed to God are taken from creatures, since He in Himself is ineffable and beyond everything that can be named or spoken”<sup>62</sup>.

Thus the apophatic tradition reached its epitome and possibility both of religious language and of religious knowledge was denied. The denial was partly philosophical: there is no logic common to ordinary language and language used of the divine<sup>63</sup>. The apophatic tradition of Gregory Nyssa is based to the basic biblical idea of the mysteriousness of God. Man can know God through the cloud of unknowing, the “agnoia”. Nicholas of Cusa also underlines the learned ignorance, stating it is a type of awareness that does not have an intellectual root but has the greatest power to lead us into truth.

Gregory differs from Nicholas, because the eastern theologian is not to say that God and the world are conflated or mixed in a pantheistic manner, but

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<sup>61</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Contra Eunomium* I, 683. II, 586.

<sup>62</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *On the Peace of Faith – De Pace Fidei*, VII, trans. W. F. Wertz.

<sup>63</sup> F. M. YOUNG, “The God of the Greeks and the Nature of religious Language”, *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition*, *Théologie Historique* 53, ed. W. R. Schoedel, R L. Wilken, editions Beauchesne, Paris 1979, p. 45-75, p. 59.



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the Christian East does affirm that created nature already assumes the gift of grace, which then awaits the consummation of supernatural grace and deification. Eastern Orthodox scholars as Gregory of Nyssa, contend that the distinction although not a division according to them, in God between His essence and energies has been neglected by the West both philosophically and theologically<sup>64</sup>. For Western theologians, as Nicholas of Cusa, God is understood to be simple and non-compounded, and there is no room in the Divine nature for a separate metaphysical distinction of energy that would cause a division in the Godhead and create a composite divine nature (σύνθετος)<sup>65</sup>.

## Conclusions

Although their differences, Gregory of Nyssa and Nicholas of Cusa insist that the knowledge for God leads the man to conceive the ignorance for God. For Gregory, what God reveals is that which is capable of being understood in a human way: “Now these modes of generation being well known to men, the loving dispensation of the Holy Spirit, in delivering to us the Divine mysteries, conveys its instruction on those matters which transcend language by means of what is within our capacity, as it does also constantly elsewhere, when it portrays the Divinity in bodily terms, making mention, in speaking concerning God, of His eye, His eyelids, His ear, His fingers, His hand, His right hand, His arm, His feet, His shoes, and the like—none of which things is apprehended to belong in its primary sense to the Divine Nature,— but turning its teaching to what we can easily perceive, it describes by terms well worn in human use, facts that are beyond every name, while by each of the terms employed concerning God we are led analogically to some more exalted conception”<sup>66</sup>.

Nicholas of Cusa, bases the knowledge of God on the coincidence of opposites in God. As the opposites being united as one, present to humans the restriction of limits of human constructs such as the “law of non-

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<sup>64</sup> D. BRADSHAW, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, Cambridge; CUP, 2004. D. HAYNES, *Grace and metaphysics in Maximus Confessor*, doctorate thesis, the University of Nottingham, March 2012, p. 17.

<sup>65</sup> K. WARE, “God Hidden and Revealed: The Apophatic Way and the Essence-Energies Distinction”, *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1975), p. 135. D. Haynes, *Grace and metaphysics in Maximus Confessor*, doctorate thesis, the University of Nottingham, March 2012, p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Contra Eunomium*, VII. Cf Psalms LX, 8 and Psalms CVIII, 9.



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contradiction.” “Since God transcends all predications, all affirmations and negations, it is quite clear that God transcends such a human construct: “Our reason falls far short of this infinite power and is unable to connect contradictories, which are infinitely distant”<sup>67</sup>.

God is beyond all human logic, even if human logic can help us explore the truth about God. For explaining this Nicholas of Cusa shows to man a proportion of the problem of knowledge of God which lies before human mind: “For the intellect is to truth as [an inscribed] polygon is to [the inscribing] circle. The more angles the inscribed polygon has the more similar it is to the circle. However, even if the number of its angles is increased ad infinitum, the polygon never becomes equal [to the circle] unless it is resolved into an identity with the circle. Hence, regarding truth, it is evident that we do not know anything other than the following: viz., that we know truth not to be precisely comprehensible as it is”<sup>68</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *On Learned Ignorance*. Trans Jasper Hopkins, Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1990, p. 54. H. Karlson, “The God Who Is Beyond Predication Transcends Human Logic”, *Vox Nova*, 16 February 2010, <http://vox-nova.com/2010/02/16/the-god-who-is-beyond-predication-transcends-human-logic/>

<sup>68</sup> NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *On Learned Ignorance*. Trans Jasper Hopkins, Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1990, p. 52.



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