The place and the word are one,  
and if there were no place,  
by the eternal eternity!  
No word would ever be.

*Angelus Silesius*

**Iconicity and the Anamorphosis of Social Space.**  
*Retrieving Nicholas of Cusa’s Political Pneumatology*

What distinguishes an icon from an idol? And to what extent does this difference shape our perception of social spaces? I want to answer this question starting from an exemplary event that shaped our late-modern use of images.

On the 23rd of June 1914, eleven days before the beginning of the First World War, Lord Kitchener arrived in England. Kitchener was the British military governor in Egypt and a prominent figure in the public space of the UK. He was a faithful servant of his country, an implacable soldier, a cold-blooded military organizer, and a harsh and ruthless personality. 15 years earlier Winston Churchill had described his “stern and unpitying” personality as follows: Kitchener “treated all men like machines” and his victories were “accompanied by acts of barbarity”.¹

Ten days after his arrival, on the eve of the Great War, the London *Times* published an article urging the prime minister to yield his position as secretary of war to Lord Kitchener. Two days later, while the war had already started, the *Times* repeated its appeal: “The War office really needs Lord Kitchener, and ought to have him.”² Kitchener was appointed secretary of war the same day. In its evening edition, *The Times* responded and issued a call to arms:

“Your King and Country Need You. ... At this very moment the Empire is on the brink of the greatest war in history. In this crisis your Country calls on all young unmarried men to rally round the Flag and enlist in the ranks of the Army ... Join the Army To-day!”³

“The propaganda machine of wartime had started rolling, the massage was there”⁴ – only the face of the massage was missing. However, a solution to this propagandistic challenge emerged soon. From September onwards the call to arms was reinforced by a poster of Lord Kitchener pointing with his trigger finger on everyone who turned his face to his slightly squint-eyed gaze: “Your country needs you!”

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² *The Times*, August 3rd, 1914; and ‘Lord Haldone or Lord Kitchener?’ In: The Times, August 5th, 1914. For the following see: Ginzburg, ""Your Country Needs You”", p.1 ff.
³ *The Times*, August 5th.
⁴ Ginzburg, ""Your Country Needs You”", p.2.
This was the beginning of the most powerful propaganda war in the history of humanity. In the United Kingdom the propagandistic battle was an unprecedented success. The hoard of Kitchener’s voluntary army swelled to two and a half million men. Yet, Kitchener’s poster was only the prototype of a series of images. During the Great War, it was reworked again and again, in Italy, Hungary, and Germany. It also reappeared in the Soviet Union and the US under the guise of Leon Trotsky and Uncle Sam – in accordance with the ideological expectations of the respective populations.

Idols and Simulacra

As Carlo Ginzburg has pointed out, the rhetoric of this poster was simultaneously archaic and modern. Its imagery was consistent with the illusionary features of modern perspective paintings that can be grasped at a single glance; and its message was consistent with the nominalist mind-set of an atomized society that can be united only by an authoritative interruption of the monotony of its everyday life: ‘Join your country’s army to-day!’

Lord Kitchener’s poster did not require the viewer to discern the spirits, or to contemplate the stories that charged his face with an authoritative power. It was not an icon or a symbol that transcends its presence, and guides our desire to know ourselves and the world that we inhabit. Rather, it was a ‘quasi-factum’ in the Kantian sense of this word: an authoritative neutral force open for different and even opposite interpretations. The persuasive power of this pictorial sign produced nothing but itself. Hence it was suitable to serve every power that had the resources to reproduce and distribute it.

In a nutshell, Kitchener’s poster was a simulacrum “that reflects back only what is projected onto it— like the dazzling fetish of money”. Yet, despite this nominalist feature, it had the transient power to create the experience of a unified social space: “The depiction of authority acted like authority itself. A discharge of social energy took place; a command was introjected and turned into a decision which was, literally, a matter of life and death.”

The archaic features of Lord Kitchener’s poster are no less revealing. Ginzburg quotes an eye witness who summarized the immediate effect of his squint-eyed gaze on the viewer when it was displayed in the streets of London and the more rural parts of the country:

“From whatever angle it was regarded, the eyes met those of the onlooker and never left them; and on one side in large letters was the laconic appeal: Kitchener Wants More Men!”

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5 “While the icon is a symbolic representation of a transcendent horizon, indeed, a symbolic performance drawing viewers beyond themselves and towards that horizon, the idol symbolizes nothing. The idol is a representation, but it is not a symbol. It reflects back only what is projected onto it— like the dazzling fetish of money. (...) It produces nothing. It reproduces only itself. Allow me to call this fetish not a symbol but a simulacrum.” Ward, Graham, "The Commodification of Religion or the Consummation of Capitalism." In: The Hedgehog Review (2003), pp.50-65, p.61.


The writer of this quotation did not know that the image of an all-seeing gaze, who looks at everyone as “if it were concerned for no one else”, was once included in icons, whose symbolic charge was connected with a story; nor did he know that it was a key feature of the gaze of Christ in Nicholas of Cusa’s experimental introduction to the vision of God, written in 1453.

In Cusa’s time, images of all-seeing gazes were widespread. In the introduction to his 1453 book De vision Dei he refers, for example, to a self-portrait of Roger van der Weyden and an archer that was displayed at the marked square of Nurnberg. According to Ginzburg, the last-mentioned reference alludes to Pliny’s Natural History. Pliny mentions there not only a “Minerva who viewed the viewer no matter where he looked from”; he also discusses Apelles’ depiction of Alexander the Great holding a thunderbolt. This description inspired many painters in Cusa’s time – e.g., Antonello da Messina’s Blessing of Christ of 1465, which is displayed in the National Gallery in London.

The icon Cusa sent to the monks of Tegernsee in order to provide them with an experimental introduction to the vision of God was (without doubt) a vera icona, an icon of Christ that might have looked similar to Antonello’s painting. Yet the latter has an additional feature that refers back to Pliny’s description of Alexander: the blessing hand of the Antonello’s Christ is famously foreshortened.

According to Pliny the fingers of Alexander had the appearance of projecting from the surface like thunderbolts. This pictorial illusion can be triggered by an exaggeration of the law of ‘linear perspective’. According to this law, objects appear smaller the more they recede into the background. Similar to receding railroad lines, their width and height diminish the more they approach the fictitious ‘vanishing point’ on the horizon. If a painter exaggerates this foreshortening-phenomenon, he can dramatize a painting, for example, in order to emphasize a...
pointing finger – as we know from outstanding examples of thunderbolt-like fingers in Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Caravaggio.

Combined with the iconic appearance of an all-seeing gaze, this effect accounts for the archaic features of Lord Kitchener’s poster. As Ginzburg concludes: “Lord Kitchener’s poster could emerge because two intertwined pictorial traditions existed, involving frontal all-seeing figures as well as figures with foreshortened pointing fingers.”

The Absolutist Roots of the Liberal Levelling of Complex Spaces

Kitchener’s poster is exemplary for the propagandistic serial production of simulacra, and exemplifies their power to trigger the emergence of a unified social space that welds together nations, tribes, religions, and scientific confessions. The illusionary imaging methods that produced its sublime and instantaneous effect on the viewer were invented by contemporaries of Cusa in the early 15th century, while the genealogy of their implementation as a propagandistic tool can be traced back to the beginning of the public staging of politics in the early 16th century – in the era of Caesar Borgia and Niccolò Machiavelli.

However, the Renaissance vision of a new concept of space became an undisputed feature of our perception of physical and social spaces only later; namely in the classical age of Galileo Galilei and Descartes. It is no accident that in the 17th century we can observe the simultaneous emergence of a new representationalist concept of science, and a new, absolutist concept of political representation. From this time on, the image of the sun started to represent simultaneously both, the gravitational centre of a homogenising physical and the political centre of a totalizing social space.

The later found its prototypical representation in depictions of the legendary ‘Sun King’ Louis XIV on paintings, coins, and medallions; and this leads us back to the Christological features of modern simulacra. After all, as Louis Marin has pointed out, the “Portrait of the King” appeared in this age as nothing less but a secularized substitute of the body of Christ.

The imaging technologies that made the ‘real presence’ of Louis XIV body felt in the everyday life of his people built on the illusionism of the early Renaissance. Yet, his appearance was still anchored in a unique physical body. By contrast, in the age of Lord Kitchener the authoritative body that represented the centre of a homogenised social space had become almost incorporeal: It was marked by an exchangeable image and the command to suffer for a simulacrum of power.

14 See the Creation of the Moon and the Sun and similar frescoes of the Sistine Chapel.
15 See his Nude Study of 1525.
16 See his Calling of St Matthew of 1600.
Hence, it might be argued that Lord Kitchener’s poster was more consistent with our post-modern worldview, in which every subject can create its own image of the divine commander that governs its ‘autonomous’ world.

This leads me back to the key question of my essay: To what extent does Cusa’s concept of vision, and his related liturgical concept of space deviate from the illusionary imaging methods of his time that facilitated the emergence of the modern veneration of simulacra?

Cusa’s mystagogical use of images and symbols was rooted in Dionysius the Areopagite and the Proclean Platonism of the Albertist tradition. This tradition was profoundly apophatic, and highly critical against the idolatrous inclination to represent the unifying centre of our world in a univocal way. Instead of looking for a universal power-centre that has the potential to trigger a totalizing levelling of social spaces, it emphasized the simultaneously pluralised and stratified features of social and physical spaces: The unique perfection of God can become manifest only via an ascending line of distinct positions and places that are only analogically (and not univocally) related to each other.

As Albert’s most famous disciple, Thomas Aquinas pointed out in the first Questiones of his Summa Theologica: The divine fullness of being can be approximated via its effects in the creation. Yet, our creation does not reveal its creator in a univocal way. Rather, his eminent perfection becomes manifest only in an analogically ordered hierarchy of positions that displays a multitude of distinct intensities of perfection. Moreover, similar to the modern (meta-) physics of space, Aquinas’s accounts of cosmic and social spaces converge. While the distinction between plants, animals, human beings, and angels reveals a hierarchy of qualitatively distinct natural perfections, the distinction between social dignities, responsibilities, and rules (e.g. between the roles of a blacksmith, a city ruler, and a king) reveals a hierarchy of distinct social perfections.

Nicholas of Cusa built on this tradition, and was committed to defend its complex concept of space. Yet, it was already under severe attack during his lifetime, as the examples of his contemporaries and friends Brunelleschi and Alberti demonstrate. After all, the modern ‘revolution’ of our perception of spaces originated in his life-time. When it became settled in the age of Louis IV, Hobbes, Descartes, Locke, and Newton, no one any longer considered qualitative distinctions as an inherent feature of the real spaces that we inhabit. But to what extent was this revolution irresistible? And to what extent are we justified to conclude that Cusa’s concept of space is outdated? In order to answer this question, I want to take a short detour in more recent philosophical and phenomenological discussions on our perception of spaces, starting from a locus classicus by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Phenomenological Approaches to Cusa’s Concept of Space

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22 See Thomas Aquinas, On Kingship to the King of Cyprus. Transl. by G. B. Phelan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies 1949), I 9 and 15.
In a well-known passage of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein recovers the basic attitude that undergirds Cusa’s Gothic concept of space: I do not believe that my friend is no automaton. The difference between an automaton and a friend is not a matter of ‘warranted beliefs’ or ‘justified opinions’, but a matter of attitude: “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul”. The presence of an embodied soul can change my attitude toward the space that I inhabit. And this is a matter of ethical and cognitive significance.

Wittgenstein’s contemporary Simone Weil makes a similar point when she draws attention to the fact that we move differently, if we step aside for a passer-by on the road than when we step aside to avoid a billboard – for the same reason why “we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently” when we are alone in our rooms. When I have a visitor in my room, I am no longer free to deny that I am seeing myself seen. The presence of an animated body has an immediate impact on my perceptions and actions.

This phenomenon is not only a characteristic feature of our attitude toward human bodies. It characterizes to a lesser extent also our attitude towards non-human bodies, such as animals and trees. To use an example of Thomas Nagel: “it would be callous and objectionable to cut down a great old tree just for the fun of trying out one’s new chain saw.” Why would it? Because my attitude towards a tree differs from my attitude towards a chunk of timber: A tree has the character of a symbolically charged entity that shapes my perceptions and cognitions, and makes me interact in a responsive way. Symbolically charged entities have the power to ‘evoke’ responsive actions and cognitions, because they affect our synesthetic sensibilities. I am able to ‘hear’ and ‘touch’ what I see, for example when I am ‘touched’ by a face that ‘speaks’, even if I look into a speechless face from the distance.

This gift has multiple implications, and can be the foundation of unique skills. As experiments with blindfolded people show, we are, for example, able to ‘see’ invisible trees, or to play catch in an invisible forest, using sound, smell and touch for vision. However, our capacity to cultivate this skill has to rely on pre-reflexive intuitions. Blindfolded people who tend to adopt a detached, self-conscious or hyper-reflexive attitude when they feel unsecure are incapable of playing catch under invisible trees.

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24 “Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power that belongs to him alone, that is, the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a billboard; alone in our rooms, we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor.” Weil, Simone, *War and the Iliad*. Transl. by Mary McCarthy (New York: NYRB Classics 2005), p 7.


In contrast to modern societies, pre-modern civilizations did not consider unresponsive habits as desirable or virtuous. For this reason, thinkers like Aquinas and Cusa took it for granted that our synesthetic sensibility plays an indispensable role in our scientific and everyday perception. In accordance with the Aristotelian tradition, they called it sensus communis and interpreted it as an interior dimension of touch: If we want to keep in touch with the real world we inhabit, we have to pay attention to the sensus communis as a quasi-tactile ‘sixth sense’ that represents the foundation of our five specializes senses, and governs their pre-conceptual harmonisation.

In phenomenological terms, we might interpret this synesthetic ‘sense of touch’ as a musical sense of self-attunement: The sensus communis mediates between our five specialized senses, and discloses similarities between their characteristic features. Yet it needs to be accompanied by a sense of trust with regard to our environment. My ability to be ‘touched’ by ‘speaking’ faces is, for example, always intertwined with my ability to share my perceptions with other people. The cultivation of our intra-sensual self-attunement presupposes a kind of ‘musical attunement’ with our social environment – there is no sensus communis without a healthy measure of common sense. It is no accident that the English expression common sense derives from the Latin word sensus communis. The two meanings of this technical term have been intertwined since Aristotle.

This explains why the sensus communis can shape and transform our habits and interactions only if we trust in our socially habitualised everyday perception more than in the analytic rationality of scientific observers who adopt a “view from nowhere” on the world that we inhabit. However, given the impact of the aforementioned ‘scientific’ mind-set on our everyday life, it might be argued that our synesthetic skills have become impaired in the last 500 years, and that the related “scientific revolutions” have turned everyone into an unresponsive “buffered self”. Modern individuals consider it a virtue to act like detached spectators who hide behind a window or a surveillance camera. If we do so, our perception becomes unresponsive – we act like autistic personalities, and start to think like modern philosophers. It is no accident that the first modern philosopher, René Descartes, no longer felt able to distinguish the men crossing the square before

27 See Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Ia q. 78 a. 4 ad 1; and I q. 57 a. 2 resp. As to Cusa’s theory of perception see: Hoff, The Analogical Turn, pp.75, and 168-74, and Benz, Hubert, Individualität und Subjektivität. Interpretationstendenzen in der Cusanus-Forschung und das Selbstverständnis des Nikolaus von Kues (Münster: 1999), pp.232-316.


30 The intersubjective dimensions of the sensus communis are already discussed by Aristotle, and become again prominent in the late Kant: See Otabe, "Das Problem des 'sensus communis'”, p.74 ff.; and Arendt, Hannah, Vita activa. Vom tätigen Leben (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer 1960), pp.202 ff.


his window from wax figures, or hats and coats that conceal automata. His lack of responsivity predestined him to become the founder of our ‘scientific world-picture’.

However, it would be hysteric to conclude that Descartes’ ‘methodological autism’ has become the default attitude of modern societies, as the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion seems to assume. Maurice Merleau-Ponty was more in touch with the real world that we inhabit, when he argued that synesthetic perception is still the rule: Our attitudes towards persons, trees, or chunks of wax differ up to this present day. Not unlike medieval thinkers, the majority of our population still inhabits a symbolically charged world that is saturated by a multitude of qualitatively distinct perfections.

Modern thinkers were deluded when they considered the real space that we inhabit as a neutral container, an empty void, or a formal apriori of sensual perception. Our perception of spaces is always “situated”, focused and value sensitive: Something pushes to the foreground and attracts our attention while other aspects disappear in the background. Numerous contemporary publications on the phenomenology of vision confirm this phenomenon. “The things attract my look” and make me realize that I cannot hide my gaze behind a surveillance camera: “what we

33 “But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax. Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automats? I judge that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind.” René Descartes, Meditations on first philosophy. With selections from the Objections and Replies. Transl. by John Cottingham; with an introduction by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986), p.21.

34 See Marion, "Seeing or Seeing Oneself Seen", p.320: “What I in fact see – coats and hats moving about beneath my gaze in the street below – not only offers my gaze mere theatre costumes that I can interpret freely either as men or as automata, but functions like the visible sketches of a phenomenon that remains finally at first approach invisible (...) only my ego decides if this is a man or not, just as it decides about every other object.” Marion, in this essay, builds on Jean-Paul Sartre’s dialectic of subjective freedom and objectivation, which is highly counterintuitive (see ibid. p.322 f.). Seen from a more ‘commonsensical’ point of view, we are not even free to ‘decide’ that trees are a piece of wax without taking the risk of appearing as lunatics. My perception is always already situated; and this means: I never see anything that is meaningful without seeing myself simultaneously seen. To be sure, Marion is right to emphasize that it is not possible to put my perception of this situation ‘behind bars’. Yet, this is the case with every mode of vision that relates us to the invisible. For example, I do not hypothesize about the backside of a façade, or the abyss behind my back. I have an immediate awareness of their presence, although it is not determinable in the same way as visible objects are (see Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Phenomenology of Perception (London: Routledge 1989), pp.69 ff.) For this reason, Marion’s Cartesian doubts are in my (somewhat more Anglo-Saxon) view either unduly hysterical or, alternatively, an unsustainable consequence of Descartes epistemological dogmatism. I will come back to the distortive impact of this dogmatism on Marion’s reading of Cusa by the end of this essay.

35 “(T)he vision of sounds or the hearing of colours exist as phenomena. And they are hardly exceptional phenomena. Synesthetic perception is the rule and, if we do not notice it, this is because scientific knowledge displaces experience and we have unlearned seeing, hearing, and sensing in general in order to deduce what we ought to see, hear, or sense from our bodily organization and from the world as it is conceived by the physicist.” Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.238; see also ibid. p.385ff.


see is looking at us”.\textsuperscript{38} And while this charges the places we inhabit with meaning and value, the inverse is also true: What we consider to be meaningful and valuable is always associated with places. As we will see later, even the uttermost meaningful actions of angels are always associated with places and spaces.

Against this background, it might appear as peculiar that almost every educated representative of our modern worldview was committed to defend the allegedly scientific creed that we inhabit a homogenous and qualitatively indifferent space. It would be barbaric to treat an old tree like a big chunk of wax, and impolite to treat a passer-by like on old tree. Yet, our humble inclination to treat the real world that we inhabit as a relic of the past is rationally unjustified. The modern metaphysics of space was not an achievement of scientific research. It was invented by artists like Brunelleschi, Alberti, and Leonardo da Vinci, and politicians like Caesar Borgia, who used mechanical imaging methods in order to create pictorial illusions and political simulacra.

Cusa deviated from this counterintuitive innovation and tried to retrieve a more realistic concept of space, when he insisted that the face of the creator can become manifest in every creature: even trees can have “arboreal faces” (faciei arborae) that reveal his glory.\textsuperscript{39} The creation is a realm of “overlapping complex spaces and participations”\textsuperscript{40}, because every creature participates in and reveals its creator in a qualitatively distinct way. However, even if we admit that our natural world is inherently stratified, to what extent does this principle apply also to social spaces?

Hierarchies of Dignity and Glory: Cusa’s Gothic Cathedral

Western societies tend to marginalise social hierarchies as well. Yet the attitude of a student to his teacher still differs from his attitude to his peers – in the same way as my attitude toward the German president differs from my attitude towards his ghost-writers. Cusa deals with this stratified feature of social spaces in his early work, The Catholic Concordance, in connection with his discussion of ecclesial hierarchies. The phenomenological basic insights that inform this discussion become evident if we focus on the top of the social hierarchies of Cusa’s time.

In accordance with the post-Tridentine tradition, modern Catholics are used to justifying the authority of the pope by reference to biblical decrees of the divine will.\textsuperscript{41} For this reason, depictions of the pope are frequently treated like a Catholic version of Lord Kitchener’s poster. However, the appeal to voluntaristic decrees of an authoritarian God is not a unique feature of modern papalist Catholics. Already at the beginning of 15\textsuperscript{th} century, the opposing conciliarist party justified the burning of Jan Hus with the same voluntaristic arguments.\textsuperscript{42} Cusa had no


\textsuperscript{39} See Hoff, \textit{The Analogical Turn}, p.120 and Fn.8.

\textsuperscript{40} I agree with John Milbank that Cusa was a late representative of a hierarchically stratified, complex concept of space. This is surprising in chronological terms, given that this realm started to become replaced by a “realm of systematic terror and surveillance” already subsequent to the fourth Lateran council (1215). See Milbank, John, \textit{Being Reconciled. Ontology and Pardon} (London: Routledge 2003), p.122-133; particularly p.125.

\textsuperscript{41} See, for example: Catholic, Church, \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church} (London: Burns & Oates 2006), n.881.

\textsuperscript{42} Markert, Gerhard, \textit{Jan Hus und die böhmische Reformation} (Norderstedt: Books on Demand 2013), pp.97-99. See also Inigo Bocken’s concise analysis of Cusa’s position in the conflict between papalists and conciliarists in: Bocken,
sympathies for any kind of voluntaristic authoritarianism whatsoever. For this reason, he already developed in his early ‘conciliarist’ book a realistic account of the phenomenon of social and ecclesial authority – and he never changed his position after his turn to the ‘papalist’ side.

According to this approach, the authority of a bishop is never an indisputable ‘quasi-factum’. It is always a matter of degree, since it depends on the chair on which he sits – or, more precisely, on the ancestral dignity and glory of the place that he presides over. Catholics are answerable to Bishops and the pope, not because they are obliged to do so by a divine command or a categorical imperative, but because each of them occupies a unique Cathedra at which he presides at the Eucharist. However, the uniqueness of sacred places is always contextualized: it is marked by the intersection between angelic and temporal realms, the upheavals of history, and the dignity of sacred practices that bear witness of the faith of the ages (including pagan traditions). Consequently, every cathedra requires us to assess the authority of its occupant in accordance with the variegations of space and time, and the narratives that confirm its relative dignity. Even the ‘infallibility’ of the pope is a matter of degree that depends on places and narratives, and not a matter of unerring black and white distinctions. Two hundred years after Cusa, the poet Angelus Silesius recalled this spatio-logical principle in a little poem: “If there were no place, by the eternal eternity! No word would ever be” – even not the Word of ‘the Bible’ that undergirds theological considerations on ecclesial offices.

At this point it becomes indispensable to consider Cusa’s account of social hierarchies of dignity and glory in its broader context. Following John Ruskin, we might compare his vision of a harmoniously ordered social space with a Gothic cathedral. At first appearance the latter might look static and monumental. Yet, the “shattered majesty” of a Gothic space is always imperfect, irregular, and deficient. Static and dynamic at once, it remains in a process of growth “as wild and wayward as the sea.”

Inigo, "Ibi deus ubi consensus. Waarom de samenleving beelden nodig heeft - en welke." In: Tijdschrift voor Theologie 56/4, pp.314-333. The above (p.14) and all subsequent references to this text refer to the German manuscript. This essay is a further step in an illuminating and thought provoking academic conversation with Inigo Bocken that has taken place for many years (see also my introduction to The Analogical Turn). I am infinitely grateful to Inigo for everything that I have learned from him during these years.

43 See De concordantia catholica, h, I n.52, n.115, n.156-166, and n.251.
45 See De concordantia Catholica, h, I, nn.44-59;
47 „Der Ort unds Wort ist eins und wäre nicht der Ort, Bei ewger Ewigkeit! es wäre nicht das Wort.“ Angelus Silesius (Johannes Schäffler), Cherubinischer Wandersmann (Stuttgart: 1984), I.205 (own translation).
Cusa’s understanding of social hierarchies is in line with this architectural principle. As the Cusa-scholar Inigo Bocken has pointed out, everything is in a state of flux – in the long run even the bedrock of the river Rheine might move.\textsuperscript{49} And this is not even surprising. After all, Cusa’s concept of hierarchies was inspired by Dionysius the Areopagite, who considered hierarchies as a temporary phenomenon: As a spiritual reality that has an educative purpose, every superior rank is destined to cancel itself out after it has passed on the divine light.\textsuperscript{50} This was the teaching that inspired the first Gothic ventures, and this was the ideal that Gothic buildings aimed to express, when they conveyed a sense of glory that, as Ruskin expresses it, depended on “the utter absence of any expression either of pride or self-indulgence.”\textsuperscript{51}

Ruskin leaves no doubt that the reality of medieval societies was different. In the social classes that considered themselves superior, the idea of dignity and nobility encouraged an attitude of pride, and opened a space of misuse.\textsuperscript{52} Cusa was more aware of this reality than anyone else. However, his philosophy remained inspired by the Dionysian promise that the builders of Gothic cathedrals had carved in stone.\textsuperscript{53} Up to his last writing, \textit{On the Summit of Contemplation}, he celebrated Dionysius’ conviction that every creature is destined to show forth the beauty and glory of its creator.\textsuperscript{54}

In a passage of \textit{De coniecturis}, Cusa engages with the political dimensions of this theophanic principle in more detail. On the one hand, Cusa distinguishes here a plurality of roles, professions and skills through which the divine glory can become manifest. In accordance with the broader framework of his philosophical anthropology, he distinguishes in particular between our sensual, rational and intellectual capacities, and attributes to each of them a unique skill, and a unique social dignity. Yet, on the other hand Cusa insists that the harmony of these skills requires a kind of order. For this reason he attributes to the intelligence of wise leaders a superior dignity. Where vicious leaders disperse, wise leaders have the skill to create a mood of unity and concordance.\textsuperscript{55} However, they are able to do so only because they rely on their intelligence (\textit{intellectus}), which is superior to our rational and sensomotoric skills.

\textsuperscript{49} See Bocken, “Ibi deus ubi consensus”, p.11. Bocken refers to \textit{De coniecturis} II, c.15 n.149.
\textsuperscript{51} Ruskin, \textit{The Stones of Venice}, p.27.
\textsuperscript{52} “All that gorgeousness of the middle ages, beautiful as it sounds in description, noble as in many respects it was in reality, had, nevertheless, for foundation and for end, nothing but the pride of life—the pride of the so-called superior classes; a pride which supported itself by violence and robbery, and led in the end to the destruction both of the arts themselves and the States in which they flourished.” Ruskin, John, \textit{The Two Paths. Being Lectures on Art and its Application to Decoration and Manufacture} (New York: John Wiley 1859), p.106.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{De apice theoriae}, h, n.8.
In accordance with this hierarchical logic, Cusa rejects the rationalistic inclination to subject every matter of public concern to a matter of empirical observation, or rational calculation and quantification. Although our sensual and rational capacities have a unique dignity on their own, every ‘lower’ skill is a means to a higher end.\(^\text{56}\) This does not mean that Cusa supports a crude dualism between means and end.\(^\text{58}\) To the contrary, it is exactly the ordered concordance of skills that reveals the dignity and glory of each. Cusa builds on the Aristotelian tradition, to make this point clear: The higher, intellectual realm of ends can become manifest only in the corporeal spaces of the world that we inhabit – like a soul that animates its body. As *forma corporis* the soul is not separable from the body, yet it inspires the latter and provides it with a kind of teleological orientation.

Cusa builds on this ontological principle, when he compares the governing function of the intellect with the relationship of angelic and political “administrators” to their respective fields of responsibility: like angelic “administrators” who govern language groups, kingdoms, congregations and churches to their glorious ends, so earthly “administrators” (e.g. kings and emperors)\(^\text{59}\) are called to govern their realms to their eudemonic ends. And in all these cases the ‘higher’ principle relates to the ‘lower’ like the form to its body, up to the point at which the administrators and their realm become *one* body.

This leads us to the, in political terms, most critical point of Cusa’s concept of social spaces. Cusa does not only emphasize the administrator’s responsibility for the common ends of his or her people. He also emphasizes the unique dignity and nobility of his or her rule taken by itself. As wise administrators, rulers are called to act not only for the sake of their people but also for their own sake. The function of a wise leader is not reducible to the incorruptible ‘rationality’ of a casuistic hyperlink-system, or a modern computer algorithm. Every wise leader has a body of his own; and this is not a ‘necessary evil’ that he or she must accept, but a matter of glory and dignity: No one should put his light “under a bushel basket” (Matthew 5:14) – even political leaders are called to make their unique position manifest as something that deserves our admiration and praise.

Liberal readers of Cusa, who are committed to defend his reputation as a proto-democratic thinker, might hesitate to emphasize this point. Yet, it is consistent with the biblical and virtue ethical tradition: a good leader has to celebrate the ends he pursues for himself as an integral part of the ends he pursues for his people. As Cusa puts it, “if the king reflects in himself the concerns of his people, he constitutes himself as the end of both his concern for himself and his

\(^{56}\) *Nec est intelligentiae natura quanta nec motus intellectualis generis quanti nis intellectualiter seu virtualiter. De coniecturis*, h, II, c.13 n.134, 7f.

\(^{57}\) *[Intellectus] est enim principium atque finis rationalis intelligibilis, sicut eius principium finisque eius unitas est absoluta.* Ibid. n.134, 13-17.

\(^{58}\) As to the non-dualist character of this distinction see also Rowan Williams’s brilliant analysis of Augustine’s (frequently misinterpreted) distinction between *uti* and *frui* in: Williams, Rowan, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum 2016), pp.41 ff.

\(^{59}\) According to Cusa, the emperor is not the owner (dominus) but only the administrator of his empire. See *De Concordantia Catholica*, h, III, n.579.
concern for the welfare of his people.” Saint Paul makes a similar point, when he presents his concern for himself, and not an abstract figment of the historical Jesus, as an example and role model: “join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.” (Philippians 3:17).

On the one hand, this principle encourages a stratified pluralisation of dignities: If every creature is destined to show forth the glory and nobility of its creator, then this principle has to apply also to the highest ranks of a society. On the other hand, it encourages the democratic integration of stratified positions – after all the unique dignity and glory of an emperor or king coincides with his capacity and skill to convey a sense of harmony and belonging to all members of his kingdom.

Cusa does not deny that the communal desire for harmony has to cope with conflicts. The harmony, belonging, and sharing between a king and his people will always be tainted by the shared suffering under failures that cause discordance. Even the kingdoms of wise leaders, who deserve our admiration and praise, will occasionally appear as a discors concordance. Yet, this does not negate Cusa’s insight that wise kings are always governed by the platonic desire to oneness as the ultimate end of every intellectual endeavour, and gifted to embody this value in a unique way. Cusa’s political philosophy was consistent with the medieval teaching that every king has “two bodies”: ‘his concern for himself’ (his individual body) and ‘his concern for the welfare of his people’ (the body of his kingdom) should become one reality (one body) – and if he does not strive for this end he does not deserve to be praised as wise.

Cusa built on this tradition and emphasized the paradoxical features of the intellectual intuition that governs the striving for unity. As a unique intuition of unity, our intellectual intuition always relates us simultaneously to something universal, and to something unique. Cusa illustrates his paradox by using a Pauline analogy: the relationship of the soul to the members of its body is analogous to the relationship of the king to the ‘members’ of his kingdom. In both cases the glorious ‘universal whole’ is present in every unique member as something that is more than the sum of its parts; and inversely the glory of every member (including the king!) participates in this whole in a unique way. In the last paragraph of his magnum opus, De docta ignorantia, Cusa refers to the most concise biblical summary of this perichoretic entanglement, when he quotes the farewell speeches of the Gospel of John: ‘The glory which thou has given me I have given to

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60 Dum enim regni colis quibusdam regalem curam propter eos esse videtur, rex non minus ipsam in se reflectendo se suae curae et salutis populi finem constituit. Ibid. n.139, 7-10.
61 Nam pes refutat galeam et coronam, caput sandalia, et tam discors concordia est in eis, ut eorum quodlibet aliis officium suum omnino deputare recuset. Et tamen de bono unius pariter exsultant, sicut de malo communiter dolent, et officia sua non sibi tantum, sed magis mutuae utilitati exhibent. De concordantia catholica, h, i, n.19,22-16.
63 Nam est [anima] in qualibet parte illius suae regionis et nullibi, in nulla enim parte corporis ut in loco est potius quam in alio. Sicut enim universalia sunt in intellectu atque eorum locus intellectus dicitur, ita ... intellectum scilicet esse in universallibus ita quod ipsa in eo quasi ut præsidens in regno est ita quod regnum in ipso. De coniectures, h, II, c.13 n.134, 28-33.
them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one.’ (John 17:22-23).  

The Remaining Political Significance of Cusa’s Pneumatology

Modern readers of the gospel of John might interpret this meditation on the gifts of unity and glory in exclusively ecclesiological terms. Yet, in Cusa’s view the ecclesial concern for harmony, concordance and glory was not separable from the worldly concerns of the political sphere. Already in his early book, The Catholic Concordance, his political and ecclesiological considerations are inextricably intertwined. For the same reason, Cusa emphasizes in De coniecturis that the unifying gifts of the intellect are participated in by every intelligent administrator in a “theophanic” way. As a matter of wonder and praise, the glory (doxa) of Christ is supposed to shape the thoughts and actions of every social body that is properly ordered to its ultimate destination. And this means in practical terms that every true process of consensus formation has to be marked by practices of acclamation, glorification and praise. The doxa of Christ has to become manifest via practices of doxazein.

In our present time, this doxological feature of premodern practices of consensus formation has been investigated in particular by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Yet, Agamben is right to emphasize that the cultivation of policies of glory is not an exclusive feature of pre-modern societies. To the contrary: „Contemporary democracy is a democracy that is entirely founded on glory that is on the efficacy of acclamation, multiplied and disseminated by the media beyond all imagination.”

Agamben builds on Eric Peterson’s ground-breaking research on the collective practice of acclamation in the early Christian ‘ecclesia’. Cusa was familiar with this practice, and took it for granted that it represents an essential dimension of ecclesial and political procedures of deliberation and decision-making. Although the early Cusa was a conciliarist, his concept of consensus formation differed, already in this time, from the mainstream contractualist one of William of Ockham, which “reduces Church government to a balance of power between formally

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64 See De docta ignorantia, h, III, c.12 n.262; for a more detailed account of Cusa’s interpretation of this quotation see: Hoff, The Analogical Turn, pp.155ff.

65 This becomes most evident in his first work, De concordantia catholica, which consists of three volumes. The first is dedicated to ecclesiological questions in the more narrow sense, the second develops a theory of councils, the third engages with the reform of the empire. For an English translation see: Nicholas of Cusa, The Catholic Concordance (see above Fn.44).

66 Varietatem autem intelligentiarum varie unissimam veritatem theophanice participantium cum mediationis diversitate. De coniecturis, h, II, c.13 n.137.9-10.


69 See De concordantia Catholica, h, III, n.353, n.366 and n.435.
considered individual forces.” The agreement of the faithful is not reducible to a matter of rational calculations about power balances, but a vital fruit of the Holy Spirit, who moves through “holy desires”, and inspires “decisions of life”.

In this way, the Holy Spirit shaped not only the pre-fallen world, but also the ‘militating Church’, for example, when it tried to articulate its unanimous consent in holy and universal synods. Moreover, although the power of the Holy Spirit manifests itself most emphatically in such negotiations of faith (maxime in negotio fidei), it does so also in the negotiations of worldly rulers and kings. Wherever we negotiate in order to find an agreement: A consensus that is not shaped by vital expressions of the Holy Spirit is like a body without a soul. Hence, every true consensus has to be marked by a kind of perichoresis. Similar to the soul, which can shape its body only where it actualizes its inherent potentials (“the potential of the earth”), the Holy Spirit proceeds in all these cases as much from above (mediated through angels, bishops, and kings) as from below (mediated by the people) through acts of acclamation, glorification and praise.

This political pneumatology is consistent with Agamben’s thesis that there can never be an “economy of power” without a liturgical apparatus that is governed by an “economy of glory”. The wheel of political activities does not turn around biological, social, or economic concerns, but around a kind of contemplative “inoperativity”. It gains its momentum where we suspend our rational efforts to solve problems or to mediate between conflicting interests in order to waste time by ‘inoperative’ or ‘contemplative’ activities; and it manifests itself in collective practices of acclamation and praise.

According to this diagnosis, the crisis of the post-political democracies of our present time is the symptom of a kind of ‘unlearned ignorance’: the failure “to confront the decisive political problem”. And this sheds a new light on the disputed question to what extent Cusa might be considered a precursor of modern democracies. On the one hand, Cusa’s commitment to

70 Milbank, Being Reconciled, p.128.

71 Confortas me spiritu sancto tuo, inspiras per eum electiones vitae, desideria sancta. De visione Dei, h. c.25 n.119, 2-3.

72 See De concordantia catholica, h. I, n.17, n.67; II, n.77-96, n.172, n.178-179, n.248; and III, n.585.

73 De concordantia catholica, h. II, n.81.

74 See De concordantia catholica, h. III, n.376 f., n.535, and n.581 f.

75 De concordantia catholica, h. I, n.23.

75 De concordantia catholica, h. II, n.167.

77 Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory, p.201

78 See Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory, pp.xii, 245, and 251.

79 See Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory, p.276.

defend the concerns of the people identifies him as a proto-democratic thinker; yet, on the other hand, his political philosophy is hardly reconcilable with the liberal tradition that shaped our modern democracies in the wake of John Locke. The latter focused on deliberative processes of consensus-building, and marginalised the significance of doxological practices. Hence, it triggered an incremental vulgarisation of the ‘inoperative’ centre that tacitly animated the political bedrock of Western democracies.

This ‘unlearned ignorance’ in terms of doxological practices explains not only the rapid vulgarisation of our political communication in the wake of the media-revolutions of the 21st century; it also sheds light on the crisis of trust in political, social and cultural elites, which this vulgarisation provoked: We have unlearned to cultivate the aristocratic dimensions of modern democracies, because we have unlearned to cultivate practices of acclamation, honour and praise. For a long time the autonomous organisation of internally stratified corporations and guilds was an essential part of democratic cultures, even though they were not subjected to formalized procedures of quality surveillance or democratic control. The work of party politicians, academics, and ecclesial leaders, or representatives of public media, skilled trades, NGO’s, and trade unions was honoured as a matter of public concern that had a life and dignity of its own. This was the tacit soil on which modern democracies thrived. Yet, since no one cared about this soil, no one was prepared to resist the unpredicted side effects of a media revolution that promoted the unfettered dissemination of delusive simulacra of praise – the corporate cultivation of a pluralized culture of praise and glory became replaced by the globalized accumulation of ‘likes’ in Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

The Neglected Middle Ground between Atomisation and Totalisation

This observation should give us food for thought. For a long time modern societies tended to treat liberalism and democracy as two sides of the same coin. However, this equation has turned out to be highly questionable. The liberal mind-set oscillates between the pluralisation of atomized subjective opinions and a totalizing concept of unity that is either enforced by law, or by irrational, periodical discharges of social energy, like in the above example of Lord Kitchener. Yet, the liberal dualism between the one and the many neglects the middle ground of the few that keeps the poles in balance.

Cusa’s political philosophy differs from this attitude. Like the liberal tradition, he insists that every political authority depends on the consent of the people. He even supports quantifiable election

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procedures. Yet, other than the liberal tradition, he has a strong sense that the project of democratisation needs to be underpinned by a politics of glory. For this reason he never questions the educative function of hierarchical structures that mediate between the one and the many based on a politics of friendship that enables us to distinguish between reliable and delusive economies of honour and praise.

For the same reason, Cusa resisted the voluntarist inclination to reduce the process of consensus-building to a matter of formal procedures, or statistical calculations. Although rational calculations have a dignity on their own, they are ultimately nothing but a means to a higher end that is mediated by modes of intellectual intuition. This explains not only his strong sense for the vital forces that govern processes of consensus building; it also explains, for example, his insistence that the practical appropriation of authoritative decisions by local traditions is as important as the processes of ecclesial or political decision making through which they are introduced.

Modern interpreters of Cusa tend to misread this position as a kind of compromise between the political philosophy of the past, and the democratic thinking of the future. It is true, Cusa tried to recover the hierarchical logic of the past. Yet, this aim was intrinsically intertwined with his pioneering efforts to deconstruct the “feudal and nakedly hierarchic features of mediaeval society”. In line with this twofold aim, his already mentioned mystagogical experiment in *On the Vision of God* can be interpreted not only as a concise “description of the very essence of an icon” but also as his most elaborated attempt to reconcile the hierarchical logic of the past with the democratic logic of the age to come.

Cusa never questioned the Dionysian underpinnings of his political philosophy, and he certainly shared this conviction with his friends in the monastery of Tegernsee, to whom he sent his experimental book together with an icon of Christ. Yet, this did not prevent him from designing a mystagogical experiment that levels all distinctions of honour and rank. The monks of the monastery are supposed to encounter each other ‘on eye level’ when they turn their eyes to the icon of Christ; and Cusa makes every effort to demonstrate that the vision, which his all-seeing gaze affords, cannot be appropriated by a single glance. In contrast to the linear-perspective

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84 Inigo Bocken draws attention to this aspect of Cusa’s political thought, based on an unpublished paper of Tilman Borsche on the concept of *Aequitas*. See Bocken, "Ibi deus ubi consensus" p.11.
85 I agree with Inigo Bocken that Cusa’s concept of conjecturing is of uttermost importance, if we want to understand his vision of democratic processes of consensus-building. But I struggle to understand why he thinks this innovative move is incompatible with the more traditional aspects of his political theology. See Bocken, "Ibi deus ubi consensus", p.16ff. See also Bocken, Inigo, *Die Kunst des Sammelns: Philosophie der konjekturalen Interaktion nach Nicolaus Cusanus* (Münster: Aschendorff 2014).
87 Marion, "Seeing or Seeing Oneself Seen", p.315.
88 For a more thorough reconstruction of this logic (although I did not engage with its political implications in this monograph) see: Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, part III.
89 As to Cusa’s conversations with the Tegernsee monks see: Vansteenbergh, Edmond, *Autour de la "Docte Ignorance". Une controverse sur la théologie mystique au XV siecle* (Münster: Aschendorff 1915).
paintings of his Florentine friends, which supported the illusion that everyone can occupy the position of an all-seeing king without further ado, Cusa aimed to demonstrate that no one can occupy this position – even not the pope or the abbot of a monastery. Rather, the social interplay of gazes reveals that the invisible glory of the creator is visible in every human face that turns in love to its creator. While everyone is supposed to focus on the iconic presence of the all-seeing gaze of Christ, he is called to realize that the paradoxical ‘position’ of this gaze cannot be imitated without the effort to actualize a concordance between all perspectives on his mysterious simplicity. It does not suffice to look at his face: Every monk is supposed to listen to his fellow monk, and to trust in the ‘commons sense’ that emerges in this conversation. If he does so, he will realize that the gaze of Christ, who seems to be “concerned for each one, as if it were concerned for no one else”\textsuperscript{90}, comprises viewpoints that are invisible from his own point of view. Hence, he will start to see that his gaze is visible also in the invisible mystery that ‘speaks’ through the face of his neighbour.

Cusa articulates a similar insight in his later book on \textit{The Bowling Game}, in which he argues that the way to the kingdom of God is not straight but ‘triangular’ or ‘helical’:\textsuperscript{91} It requires me to pay simultaneous attention to a non-representable point of unity, in which all oppositions coincide, and to my neighbour’s attempt to approximate this point. No one can be one with God, without being one with his neighbour – be it that he or she is a king or an abbess, be it that he or she is a beggar or a novice.

In Cusa’s view, the egalitarian character of this ‘game’ did not contradict its hierarchical dimensions. To the contrary, the possibility to encounter everyone ‘on eye level’ enables me to appreciate that hierarchical distinctions are an essential part of the effort to actualize a concordance of visions. In contrast to the ideological masterminds of the liberal tradition, Cusa never tried to reduce the concept of dignity to the mere formality of an autonomous, yet ultimately meaningless will. Nor did he ever expect just rulers to treat everyone in accordance with the same rules of ‘fairness’ – up to the point at which every person becomes an exchangeable number on a computer screen. It is not only impolite, but also unjust to subject everyone to the same maxims and laws.\textsuperscript{92} The desire for justice is not reducible to the ‘fair’ application of rules.

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{De visione Dei}, h, Praefatio, n.4, 6f.
\textsuperscript{91} See Yamaki, Kazuhiko, \textit{Der Blick vom Rande und zum Rande im Denken des Nikolaus von Kues}. In: Schwaetzer, Harald; Schneider, Wolfgang; Bocken, Inigo; Mey, Marc de (Ed.), \textit{'Videre et videri coincidunt'} (Münster: Aschendorff 2010), pp.143-162; and Hoff, \textit{The Analogical Turn}, pp.153-165.
\textsuperscript{92} Even liberal political philosophers do not question the need for a certain level of stratification. Who would like to be treated by a medical student if he can be treated by a senior surgeon? Yet since they cannot resist the inclination to marginalize the doxological dimensions of social hierarchies, they tend to take refuge to counterfactual ‘pragmatic’ rationalisations – for example, by arguing that legitimate hierarchies should always be of the greatest benefit for the least advantaged (see Rawls, John, \textit{Justice as Fairness. A Restatement} (Harvard: Belknap Press 2001), §13). Rationalisations like these might not be erroneous, but they neglect the way in which hierarchies shape our attitude toward social spaces, and the impact that the unique position of person has on our assessment of what we consider to be just. It is not only impolite, but also unjust to treat everyone in accordance with the same rules. Up to a certain point this insight already emerged in the later writings of Jacques Derrida, see, for example: Jacques Derrida, \textit{Passions} (Paris: 1993); and Axel Honneth, "Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit. Habermas und die ethische Herausforderung der Postmoderne." In: \textit{Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie} 24 (1994), 195-220. As to the limitations of rule-governed concepts of justice see also Bocken’s considerations on the medieval concept of \textit{aequitas/epikeia} in: Bocken, Inigo,
Hence, Cusa was guided by a wise decision when he insisted promoting a Gothic concept of space: the world that we inhabit is as a realm of overlapping participations that incorporates distinct values, dignities and honours; and this requires us to treat everyone simultaneously as equal and different – in accordance with his or her unique potentials and skills.

Iconicity and the Concept of Space in Pawel Florensky

In the last part of this essay, I will come back to my starting point concerning the relationship between images and social spaces by focusing on the concept of iconicity. In order to do so, I will focus especially on two modern approaches to this topic: the concepts of iconicity in Pawel Florensky and Jean Luc Marion.

Pawel Florensky’s 1920 lecture on the ‘Reverse Perspective’ is presumably the most powerful philosophical text on this issue. However, it remains a fragment that is frequently only known for its uncompromising criticism of the modern linear perspective. Florensky focuses in particular on two aspects of this imaging technology: The idea of an autonomous viewer who is able to capture the depicted scenario in one single glance; and the idea of a homogenous, isotropic and unlimited visual space that is governed by immutable mathematical laws. In combination, these ideas support the Kantian vision of an autonomous lawgiver, yet the accompanying anthropocentric idea of subjective creativity is illusionary, because the homogenous space in which this lawgiver governs is “frozen in ice-bound immobility.”

By contrast, Florensky’s analysis of iconic spaces emphasizes the way in which they reverse the illusion that we are in control of what we are seeing. Contrary to the decreasing lines of the linear perspective, the magnitude of distant objects seems to increase in classical icons, as if they had a life on their own. And this prevents us from being instantaneously drawn into an illusionary space that can be comprehended like a photographic snapshot: Something is looking at me, and this undermines my ability to gain control over what I see.

The standard criticism of this thesis is that it presents the iconic tradition as if it were based on the inversion of something that developed only later. But this misses the point of Florensky’s text. A symmetrical inversion would not be suitable to overcome the illusionary world he aims to deconstruct. If anything it would be equivalent to the reactionary, totalizing flipside of the liberal illusion of subjective autonomy – a simple variation on Lord Kitchen’s poster that confirms the liberal obsession with the ‘sublime now’: ‘Join the army today!’

Florensky makes every effort to deconstruct the obsession with suddenness. For this reason contemporary interpretations of his fragmentary lecture on the ‘Reverse Perspective’ have rightly

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emphasized that we must read it together with his considerations on the ‘reverse time’. We need to contemplate and re-read icons again and again, if we want to rediscover the ‘eternal now’ that inspires its symbolically saturated presence, and this takes time. The “scintillating, pulsating idea” of eternal presence cannot be captured in one glance; rather the viewer has to reproduce in her spirit “what is now an image extended in time and duration.” This account of the ‘eternal know’ is consistent with the Augustinian tradition, and diametrically opposed to Rousseau’s proto-postmodern perversion of Augustine’s concept of temporality. To express it in Cusa’s terminology: the en-folding of the divine simplicity is only accessible in the mode of its spatio-temporal un-folding.

Florensky’s analysis of this phenomenon builds on the scientific and artistic discussions of his time, which crystallized in the multi-dimensionality of non-Euclidean geometry and the cubist movement. Similar to the paintings of cubists, like Picasso and Braque, icons incorporate surfaces that cannot be seen simultaneously. In contrast to photographic snapshots, they imitate the vital realism of a responsive viewer, who gathers together the brightest elements of an object, its most expressive moments, memories that accompany his perception, emotional echoes of inner movements that emerge in an extensive process of contemplation, etc.

Against this background, Florensky shows convincingly that even the leading representatives of linear perspective art could not resist their artistic inclination to deviate from the sterile rules that they had set up in their theories. Florensky leaves no doubt that the Renaissance artists he criticizes belong to the “greatest masters of the history of art”. Yet they deserve our admiration not because they did what they pretended to do, but because of their vital energy to fight against the iron cage of their ambitious theories. Bruno Labour has made a similar point in more recent times, when he argued that the achievements of modernity are significant not because, but despite of the fact that they were supposed to be ‘modern’ in the philosophical sense of this word. But why did artists like Uccello, Leonardo da Vinci, and Durer submit their artistic skills to the mindless imaging theories of their time, if they did not do so for aesthetic reasons?

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96 See also Antonova, Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon, p.153.
97 “During contemplation of the picture, the viewer’s eye, passing step by step across these characteristic features, reproduces in the spirit what is now an image extended in time and duration of a scintillating, pulsating idea, but now more intense and more cohesive than an image deriving from the thing itself.” Florensky, Reverse Perspective, p.271.
100 See Florensky, Reverse Perspective, p.270 f.
101 Florensky, Reverse Perspective, p.246.
According to Florensky the linear perspective was not invented for artistic purposes but as a means to a metaphysical end. The point of this thesis becomes evident as soon as we recall that the relevant imaging technologies were already known in antiquity. The basic rules of linear perspective are trivial. Why was no pre-modern painter interested to develop them further? Florensky’s simple but convincing answer emphasizes that they were mainly used to create illusionistic theatre props; such activities were not of interest for artists who were committed to engage with the beauty of the real world that we inhabit. Given this historical background, the modern obsession with the mathematically precise construction of a Euclidean visual space is hardly explicable as the upshot of artistic innovations alone. And this justifies Florensky’ conclusion that the modern linear perspective was not primarily concerned with art, but with the ‘hammering out’ of a new ‘worldview’:\textsuperscript{103} the manufacturing of a world in which everything is under the suspicion to be an illusionistic theatre prop, except we dispose of rationally controllable, and ideally measurable warrants that justify the belief that this is not the case.

The point of this criticism becomes clearer if we contrast it from the aims of the transhumanist and techno-fascist movements of our present time: the project, deadly serious in political, economic and technological terms, to replace the supposedly fallible and irrational intelligence of human minds by the more optimal, ‘artificial intelligence’ of robot-driven technologies.\textsuperscript{104} According to Florensky, this mechanistic ideology is already detectible in Durer’s illustrations of the linear perspective that culminate in his drawing “Man Drawing a Lute” (1523).\textsuperscript{105} The draughtsman is no longer expected to use his eyes – he can achieve a higher level of precision and certainty if he relies exclusively on his sense of touch. Hence he is no longer supposed to paint what he sees, but what he is trained to see according to a theoretical model of vision that governs the mechanisms of sophisticated drawing devices. And if he is in doubt about the quality of his drawings, he is encouraged to contact the scientific experts that have invented his machines. To use Florensky’s own words, as from now science has a “patent on reality”: “reality exists only when and to the extent that science deigns to allow it to exist, giving its permission in the form of a fictitious schema.”\textsuperscript{106}

However, the trust in technological devices that make our own perception redundant is delusive. As the post-analytical philosopher Hilary Putnam has argued: our access to the truth is always “world-involving.” \textsuperscript{107} It requires us to rely on an infinite variety of only analogically related ‘methods’ that reaches from the initiation of simple acts of shared attention, up to the recollection of stories and the celebration of ‘inoperative’ liturgies. We have to inhabit the world.

\textsuperscript{103} Florensky, Reverse Perspective, p.225.
\textsuperscript{105} See Florensky, Reverse Perspective, p.247 f.
\textsuperscript{106} Florensky, Reverse Perspective, p.217.
\textsuperscript{107} See in particular his last publication: Putnam, Hilary, Naturalism, Realism and Normativity. Ed. by Mario De Caro (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP 2016).
if we want to know it, because it has a history and a life of its own that cannot be comprehended by the schemata and models of detached observers or scientific assurance companies.  

This more recent criticism of the modern obsession with the scientific hedging of ‘warranted beliefs’ is not only consistent with Florensky’s criticism of the linear perspective, but also with Cusa’s strong sense for the vital forces that govern processes of consensus building about the truth. Yet, it is incompatible with the Kantian fiction of a Euclidean visual space both for philosophical and theological reason. After all, the Kantian tradition supported the liberal illusion that each sensual experience can be turned into another in accordance with infallible axioms and laws. As Florensky points out, the Kantian concept of space supported nothing but the creation of exchangeable “simulacra” – it encouraged the emergence of a world in which a poster of Lord Kitchener is exchangeable with a poster of Uncle Sam and Leon Trotsky.

The Iron Cage of the Modern Metaphysics of Space

This is the background of Florensky’s notorious polemic against the illusionism of the Franciscan tradition. And there is a grain of truth in this polemic, given that the voluntarist compartmentalisation of our cognitive and voluntative faculties was an achievement of Franciscan philosophers. The latter tradition provided the scholastic underpinnings of a tidied up world of detached observers that leaves no space for the engagement with a symbolically saturated (“theurgic”) reality. To be sure, it was certainly not the intention of Franciscan monks like Duns Scotus to create such a world; yet their philosophies facilitated the emergence of a Kantian mind-set, in which matters of attitude and good-will are no longer inextricably intertwined with cognitive concerns for the truth, and affective concerns for the beauty of social and cosmic spaces.

Cusa had no interest in the disputes between Dominican and Franciscan ‘Aristotelian sects’ (Aristotelica secta). However, he never compromised with the voluntarist traditions of his time, as the Cusa scholar Inigo Bocken confirms. Bocken’s reading of Cusa is illuminating because he combines this confirmation with thought provoking critical objections against my realist reading of Cusa that shed a more nuanced light on Cusa’s Gothic concept of space.

According to Bocken, my interpretation does not sufficiently emphasize the modern break between immanence and transcendence, and Cusa’s, in his view, related, apophatic conjectures

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108 “(F)orms should be apprehended according to their own life, they should be represented through themselves, according to the way they have been apprehended” Florensky, Reverse Perspective, p.218. As to the ideology of scientific insurance companies see: Derrida, Jacques, "Limited Inc a, b, c ..." In: Glyph 1, pp.162 ff.


110 See Florensky, Reverse Perspective, pp.220-223.

111 Florensky, Reverse Perspective, p.222.


113 Apologia doctae ignorantia, h, p.16, 8f.

114 Bocken, “Ibi deus ubi consensus”, pp.6-8, and 14.
about the infinity of God. However, this objection overlooks the modern exaggeration of the alterity, negativity and unpredictability of God, and underrates Cusa’s celebration of the disproportionality between the finite and the infinite. Cusa supported an apophatic theology; but the logic of this apophaticism is incompatible with the logic of those proto- and post-Cartesian thinkers that inspired the iconoclastic ‘negative theologies’ of the modern age.

The difference between these two types of ‘apophatic’ (or ‘negative’) theologies becomes evident, if we pay attention to the fact that the liberal celebration of iconoclastic (‘negative’) breaks, interruptions and revolutions was always embedded in a static, scientific concept of space. Modern individuals do no longer inhabit Gothic cathedrals that display fragmented borders; nor do they take it for granted that the bedrock of ‘scientific’ certainties (e.g. the speed of light) might slowly change. Rather, the modern “metaphysics of space” turns the world into an iron cage in which the demarcation line between immanence and transcendence is statically fixed. Consequently, liberal societies oscillate between the ‘avant-garde’ celebration of interruptions and breaks, and the conviction – shared by liberalists and Leninists alike – that the social spaces that we inhabit need to be subjected to scientific strategies of bureaucratic control, surveillance, quality assessment, academic rankings, risk assurance, etc. We are supposed to believe in revolutions, yet in our everyday life we are “preoccupied with a struggle against life, its goal being to completely stifle it with a system of schemas.”

The hidden dualism that undergirds this ambiguous attitude is consistent with the compartmentalisation of Kant’s three critiques: the mysteries of faith are no longer of cognitive significance; they are reducible to the revealed decrees of an authoritative divine will, or to the voluntaristic belief in sublime acts of ‘creative destruction’. In accordance with this compartmentalisation, liberal thinkers like Lenin and Schumpeter agreed that the desire for change can dispense with the constructive desire to create something new. It suffice to ‘negate’. Hence, our modern world became trapped in the false dichotomy between the desire for scientific

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119 This was the topic of Foucault’s famous lectures on ‘gouvernmentality’, see for example: Burchell, Graham, Gordon, Colin, and Miller, Peter (Ed.), The Foucault Effect. Studies in Gouvernmentality, with two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault (Chicago 1991).

security and governmentalist control on the one hand, and the obsession with an “indivisible remainder”\textsuperscript{122} that issues mysterious but pointless apocalyptic commands.

The genealogy of the dualistic metaphysics of space, that underpins this delusive mind-set, can be traced back to Cusa’s time, but it finds its first concise expression in the work of another Franciscan monk: Fra Luca Pacioli’s book \textit{De divina proportione}, which was published in 1498 together with congenial 3D-illustrations of the modern concept of visual space by Leonardo da Vinci.\textsuperscript{123} Already on the first page of this book, Pacioli appeals to the authority of Nicholas of Cusa. But Pacioli’s praise of Cusa’s philosophy of mathematics strikes a different tune: Mathematics is praised because it empowers us to overcome the commonsensical “old wives’ tales” of the past.\textsuperscript{124} Thanks to its now completely visualisable certainty, it provides every future scientific, practical and mechanical endeavour with a secure foundation (“crucible and cement”).\textsuperscript{125} The new science of mathematics trumps all other sciences and empowers our organ of sight to trump all other sensual faculties (including the \textit{sensus communis}).\textsuperscript{126} Only one science is permitted to transcend the homogenous totality of Leonardo’s Euclidian visual space – the science of God. Yet, other than in Cusa and Dionysius the Areopagite, God appears as a “noble and sublime”\textsuperscript{127} mystery: His reality coincides with the indivisible remainder of the golden ratio (which is defined today as the ‘irrational number’ phi, $1.6180339887…$); it appears as an always ‘hidden secret’.\textsuperscript{128}

To be sure, Pacioli compares the characteristic features of this indivisible remainder with revealed mysteries of faith, such as the triunity of God.\textsuperscript{129} However, other than in Cusa this comparison is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{122} For a post-modern philosophical appropriation of this concept see: Zizek, Slavoj, \textit{The Indivisible Remainder. An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters} (London: Verso 1996).
\item \textsuperscript{123} Pacioli is better known today as the mathematician who invented the accounting logic that governs our modern-day system of capitalism. See Gleeson-White, Jane, “\textit{How a Medieval Friar Forever Changed Finance.}” In: \textit{The Accounting Historians Journal} 39.2 (2012), pp.113-115.
\item \textsuperscript{125} “We will speak of subjects noble and sublime, which are truly the crucible and the cement of all our exquisite sciences and disciplines: and from that derive all the other speculative operations, scientific, practical and mechanical; and without this knowledge presupposed, it is not possible to understand or employ any of man’s sciences, as will be demonstrated.” Pacioli, \textit{On the Divine Proportion}, p.3 f.
\item \textsuperscript{126} “Perspective satisfies the sight, which is much more worthy, as it is the first door of the intellect.” Pacioli, \textit{On the Divine Proportion}, p.9.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Pacioli, \textit{On the Divine Proportion}, p.3.
\item \textsuperscript{128} It is “not possible for this, our proportion, ever to be determined intelligibly by number, nor to express it by any rational quantity, but its value is always hidden and secret and by mathematicians called irrational.” Pacioli, \textit{On the Divine Proportion}, p.12. As to Cusa’s different assessment of ‘irrational numbers’ see: Hoff, Johannes, \textit{Kontingenz, Berührung, Überschreitung. Zur philosophischen Propädeutik christlicher Mystik nach Nikolaus von Kues} (Freiburg/Br.: Alber 2007), part II.
\item \textsuperscript{129} See Pacioli, \textit{On the Divine Proportion}, p.12 f. The golden ratio is found by dividing a line in two parts so that the length of the smaller line relates to the length of the larger line as the length of the larger line to the length of the entire line. The main aspects of Picioli’s theological analogy are that there is only one value for the ‘divine proportion’; that it involves (like the trinity) three lengths; that it cannot be designated by an intelligible number or rational quantity; and that its value is always the same, independent of the absolute length of the divided line (like God who is present in everything in a different way).
\end{itemize}
not based on contemplative conjectures, but on the voluntarist commitment to belief in the sublime ‘revelations’ of a sovereign commander.

Iconicity: Jean-Luc Marion’s Deconstruction of the Iron Cage

The logic of this ‘scientific’ approach to the concept of God is consistent with a late medieval paradigm shift in the understanding of negative theology that has been investigated more thoroughly by Jean-Luc Marion. The tradition of apophatic theology in the wake of Dionysius the Areopagite, on which Aquinas and Cusa built, started with the doctrine of ‘naming God’. The *apophatic* way of negation was only necessary as a corrective – it had to make sure that God goes beyond predication, and that *cataphatic* modes of naming are not reducible to the truth-functional logic of human reasoning. By contrast, the voluntarist understanding of negative theology in the wake of Duns Scotus *starts* with negations, as becomes most evident in Descartes. Descartes’ hyperbolic doubt makes sure that everything starts with uncertainty and indeterminacy: “In contrast with theology, which proffers negations of God only after having exhausted the affirmations, here the ego begins by saying of God that he is named *nescio quis*, a je ne sais qui.”

Similar to Pacioli, who defines God as an irrational remainder of rational calculations, Descartes begins his considerations about God by determining his infinity as absolutely indeterminable. If we move along these lines, we can establish affirmations only further along based on postulatory speculations about the infinite perfection of God, or authoritative revelations of a divine commander. Yet, at the end of the day, we can leave the scrupulous concerns of apophatic theologians behind: “we move from negative vagueness to positive ‘clear and distinct’ ideas, and thus to idolatrous concepts of God.”

The onto-theological metaphysics that results from this inverted form of apophaticism is suitable to fixate the modern metaphysics of space for all eternity. Other than in Cusa and Dionysius, the infinity of God does no longer transcend every rational determination, negation, conjunction and opposition: “it authorizes only the irreparable and inconfusable differentiation between God and creatures”. The essence of God is apriori determined as the rationally indeterminable but perfect counterpart of our rational but imperfect calculations. And this means in spatial terms: His name refers to the invisible outer side of the scientifically monitored iron cage that we inhabit in a clearly definable way – however mysterious this outer side might be ‘in itself’.

Marion draws a conclusion from this critical reading of Descartes that is relevant for the discussion on iconicity. He argues that the Cartesian idea of infinity might be used against Descartes’ explicit intentions in order to transgress the onto-theological metaphysics of modernity. According to

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132 Knight, *The Intimate and the Impossible*, p.17.

133 Marion, *On Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism*, p.273 [my emphasis].
Marion this only requires us to develop a radically temporalized concept of infinity. However, although I agree with Marion (and Heidegger) that the decision to focus on temporality might be a good first step if we want to deconstruct the onto-theological metaphysics of modernity, I have serious doubts that this will lead us far enough. My suspicion, rather, is that Marion introduces a new type of dualism: His ‘pure phenomenology’ replaces the early modern dualism between a finite inner and an infinite outer space by a new dualism between spatiality and temporality.

Marion’s publications on the concept of iconicity are indicative both of the strengths and the weaknesses of this deconstructive strategy. In his essay The Prototype and the Image, Marion recalls the Second Council of Nicaea (787 A.D.), which shaped the orthodox distinction between idols and icons, and draws attention to the fact that the council fathers focused not on the similarities and dissimilarities between icons and idols but on a different ‘manner of approaching’. The veneration of icons presupposes a change of attitude that is formed by humility and love: “The icon has as its only interest the crossing of gazes – thus, strictly speaking, love.”

Up to a certain point, this is consistent with my above statement that iconic spaces are a matter of attitude. However, Marion’s strict emphasis on the difference between matters of similarity and matter of attitude goes along with an overemphasis on the iconoclastic character of the icon as a ‘τύπος (τύπος) of the cross: “Christ kills the image on the Cross, because he crosses an abyss without measure between the appearance and his glory.”

This concept of iconicity is in line with Marion’s project to radicalize the temporality of the Cartesian intuition of the infinite: In the encounter with the crucified Christ, our experience of the visual space, that we inhabit, becomes literally pierced. In accordance with this logic, and the related post-modern celebration of diachronic ruptures, Marion already argued in his groundbreaking 1977 monograph, Idole and Distance, that the icon introduces a ‘fourth dimension’ of depth in our perception of visible spaces: the depth of charity which ruptures the bounds of the three-dimensional space that we inhabit and “surpasses all knowledge.”

This is the background of Marion’s use of the concept of anamorphosis in related writings. Anamorphosis takes place, when we have to shift our gaze in order to find the point of view from which something that seems to be invisible and obscure receives visibility and shape. Holbein’s

134 See Marion, On Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism, p.275.
135 For an example of this post-modern dualism see: Chauvet, Louis-Marie, Symbol and Sacrament. A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press 1995). I will engage with this example more thoroughly in a forthcoming book-publication on technology and sacramentality.
136 “παραπλήσιος indicates approximation, the point of approach [le fait de s’approcher de], without either confusion or assimilation. ... Instead of a vocabulary of similitude, likeness, and comparison, the topological language of “approach” is employed. ... The intimacy of such contact ruptures the bounds of three-dimensional spatialization.” Marion, Jean-Luc, The Crossing of the Visible. Transl. by James K. A. Smith (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press 2004), p.68; Marion refers here to Action VII of the council (13th October 787), see: Denzinger, Heinrich and Hünermann, Peter (Ed.), Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen (Freiburg – Basel – Wien 371991), n. 600-601.
137 Marion, The Crossing of the Visible, p.87.
139 Marion, Jean-Luc, L’idole et la distance (Paris: 1977), pp.309 f.; see also Crossing the Visible, p.69 f.
famous painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) provides us with a proto-typical illustration of this phenomenon: In order to see that the amorphous big spot in front of the two ambassadors is a skull (a humiliating reminder that I am destined to die) I have to bend down to the left side of this painting.

In the case of Holbein, this effect is the upshot of a mathematical projection method that is not significantly different from linear perspective projections. Hence, Marion’s use of the term ‘anamorphosis’ has to be taken with a grain of salt. Yet, it should be clear what the aim of his use of this metaphor is: The description of paintings as anamorphic aims at opening our intuition to a disruptive *mysterion* that cannot be approach via self-controlled *intentional acts*, since it requires us to be attentive to the way in which things *give themselves*. In Marion’s view, intentional acts are consistent with a totalizing, Cartesian attitude toward visual spaces. Hence, we have to resist the inclination of “holding the central position of a neutral and masterly spectator.” Instead of following our own intentions, we have to shift our gaze in order to find “by feel a point, initially undecidable, that is locatable only by successive approximations.”

Marion assures that this disruptive ‘shift of gaze’ is not disconnected from our experience of visual spaces. His anamorphic exploratory movements aim to discover the invisible that *informs* visible appearances: We have to find “the point of view from which it takes a shape for the first time”. However, his most recent publication on Cusa’s *De visione Dei* confirms my suspicion that his deconstruction of Descartes is still trapped in the (post-)modern metaphysics of sublime interruptions.

Retrieving Cusa’s Anamorphic Concept of Space

Up to a certain point, Marion’s iconography is consistent with Florensky and Cusa: Something is looking at me, and this requires me to adopt an attitude of humility with regard to the visible space that I inhabit. As Inigo Bocken has argued with regard to Nicholas of Cusa, images take us by surprise and teach us to see the world with new eyes. Yet, Marion’s account of the invisible does not question but only temporalize the modern metaphysics of space: it carries forward the (post-)modern split between a three-dimensional visual space and a ‘depth’ of invisible movements in a ‘fourth dimension’ that rupture its bonds.

By contrast, in Cusa the invisible is visible *in* the space that I inhabit: I can see the invisible in the eyes of my wife; and if I do not see it, a tentative change of attitude might suffice for it to re-emerge again as something that is both of ethical and cognitive significance. The last point is important, since it questions the modern inclination to restrict erotic experiences to a

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143 “The anamorphosis (...) attests to the fact that only the invisible makes possible the visible, by informing it: crossing over the flatness of the real painting, though without ever exiting, in view of the spectacle aimed by the invisible gaze.” Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, p.12.
144 Marion, "Seeing or Seeing Oneself Seen" (see above Fn. 12).
sentimentalized private sphere. Cusa’s ontology was immune against this inclination: Every creature has the power to reveal the beauty and glory of its creator – even trees have ‘faces’ that reveal the invisible beauty of the divine essence; even the lowest creatures participate in the inexhaustible perfection of their creator to a certain degree.

To be sure, Marion is right to emphasize that the essence of the divine love and beauty escapes our sensual perception. The primary text of Cusa’s *De visione Dei* leaves no doubt about this point. In our current ‘carnal’ state, we can see the divine essence only ‘in a mirror dimly’. The privilege to see God ‘truly’ (verissime) is reserved to Christ alone. Yet, the power of our intellectual intuition (vis intellectiva) permits us to transcend the ‘accidental’ appearance of our visual perception tentatively already here and now; and – other than in Descartes – our intellectual powers are not separated from the power of our visual perception (vis animali visivae) that is actualized by the spatial presence of corporeal objects.

For this reason, Cusa’s participatory anthropology is irreconcilable with Marion’s attempt to reduce the invisible gaze of the creator to the sublime inverted intentionality of a voluntarist love that “pierces” the visible space that we inhabit without transforming it inherently. While every visible face participates in the invisible gaze of its creator, it has the power to look at me, because it makes this invisible gaze visible – however dim this visibility might be. Marion distorts the primary text when he suggests that, in Cusa, the transformative power of God’s loving gaze can be separated from its power to actualize a new mode of spatialized perception. If the divine gaze has the power to change our attitude towards the world, then it does so only because it recovers our ability to see the invisible in every visible creature. Cusa does not employ a vague metaphorical language when he calls the divine gaze a ‘face’ (visus tuus, Domine, est facies tua).

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146 *Videbas igitur, Ihesu, oculo humano accidentia visibilia, sed visu divino absuluto rerum substantiam. Nemo umquam in carne constitutus praeter te, Ihesu, substantiam vidit aut rerum quiditatem. Tu solus animam et spiritum et quidquid in homine erat vidisti verissime.* *De visione Dei*, h. c.12 n.97,4-8; see also Marion, "Seeing or Seeing Oneself Seen", p.330.

147 *Nam sicut vis intellectiva in homine unita est virtuti animali visivae, ut homo non solum videat ut animal, sed etiam discernat et iudicet ut homo, ita visus absolutas unitas est in te, Ihesu, virtuti humanae intellectuali, quae est discretion in visu animali.* *De visione Dei*, h. c.12 n.97, 8-11. Marion quotes the previous passage (see above Fn.146) but omits this explanatory sentence.

148 "(B)y passing from the intentionality of objectivity to the intentionality of love, Jesus pierces through the vision of the other limited to his accidents, to go as far as the vision of the other (or, as it happens, of me) in his final essence as lover." Marion, "Seeing or Seeing Oneself Seen", p.330.

149 Hopkins (c.6 n.20) translates this sentence unsurprisingly as “Your Gaze, o Lord, is your face.” By contrast, Marion uses a “modified” version of Lawrence Bond’s translation that goes as follows: “The aim of your gaze, Lord, is the only face that you can ever show.” (See Marion, "Seeing or Seeing Oneself Seen", p.324 and Fn.61) This is, in my view, a severe distortion of the primary text, but it is consistent with Marion’s aim: "There is nothing else to see of God than the fact that he sees me and that our gazes cross. But this crossing of gazes is enough to define love." (Ibid. 316) This new dualism between ‘faces’ and ‘gazes’ is derivative of Marion’s Cartesian phenomenology of perception, outlined above, as becomes evident in the following explanatory sentences: “Indeed, the other does not show himself as a visible object in the world—for the crowd of “others,” which occupies the environment of each of us, does not offer access to an other in the proper sense, but only to the spectacle of animated objects." (Ibid. p.317) “And this gaze, by definition and phenomenal necessity, cannot be seen as the object of a spectacle. The gaze remains invisible” (p.324 f.). For a more commonsensical phenomenological account of the dialectic of love and vision in Cusa
The divine gaze is a face, because every created face participates in the gaze that it makes manifest; and inversely, every created gaze reveals the divine face, because it is (via a kind of analogy of attribution) ‘analogically related’ to the gaze that called it into and sustains it in its being.

Seen from this point of view, Cusa’s symbolic realism is closer to the phenomenological ontology of Maurice-Merleau-Ponty than to the ‘pure phenomenology’ of Jean-Luc Marion. And it is worth emphasizing this point, since it enables us to see where Marion’s analysis of Cusa’s “description of the very essence of an icon” is governed by preliminary dogmatic decisions that lead to systemic distortions of the primary text.

Marion’s concept of iconicity builds on Edmunds Husserl’s original project to develop a ‘pure phenomenology’, based on a new strategy to solve the conundrums that made this project unviable. Yet this strategy requires Marion to overemphasize intuitive modes of ‘givenness’ at the cost of their entanglement with the (allegedly always totalising) features of intentional acts of cognition and perception.

Husserl already introduced the relevant polarity in his first writings. Like in Marion, the concept of intuition refers here to the experience of ‘givenness’, in which our sensation, imagination or feeling is attentive to the ‘lived experience’ of the ‘thing itself’ (e.g. the sensation or imagination of a unique cup of tea). By contrast, intentional acts aim to extract the essential features of our lived experiences, which are repeatable and hence independent of their mode of immediate givenness (e.g. what we mean when we talk about a cup of tea, no matter if we are in London or in the Arctic Ice). In intentional acts, we do not attend to unique modes of givenness; rather we are ‘stretched out’ towards the objectifiable essence of a phenomenon. Yet, Husserl failed to show how the context-independent (‘iterable’) essence of a thing can be present in a unique mode of ‘givenness’.

In order to overcome this aporia, Marion tried to provide an asymmetrical foundation of Husserl’s concept of intentionality: The concept of givenness is more fundamental than the concept of intentionality, and this requires us to focus our attention on non-objectifiable intuitions at the cost of the holistic features of our everyday perception. However, the philosophical discussion of the 20th century has developed superior ways to overcome the aporia of the early Husserl. It is possible to abandon Husserl’s concept of a ‘pure phenomenology’ without betraying his intentions – as Maurice Merleau-Ponty did in the wake of the late Husserl.

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150 See above Fn.115.

151 Marion, “Seeing or Seeing Oneself Seen”, p.315.


According to this revision of Husserl’s project, our intuitions, and intentional perceptions or cognitions are always already embedded in an impure world that is ontologically saturated and charged. This embeddedness blocks our access to pure modes of intentional objectification and pure modes of intuitive givenness from the outset. In the real world that we inhabit, we are never able to experience pure intuitions, nor are we ever able to adopt a Cartesian view from nowhere.

As pointed out above, Marion exaggerates the consequences of Descartes’ ‘methodological autism’, when he assumes that it has become our default attitude. It makes a difference if our intentions are actualized in London or in the Arctic Ice, because our perceptions and cognitions are always ‘situated’. Whenever I look around in order to ‘objectify’ my environment, my perception is (contrary to Marion) accompanied by the irresistible, spatialized awareness that I am being seen by myself. No one inhabits a vacuum; no one can recreate the world in a clinically sealed laboratory. Even the most rigorous scientist inhabits the middle ground between pure modes of intuition and pure modes of intentionality. Hence, we are left with the necessity to use signs in order to conjecture about a corporeal world that is neither ever fully transparent to our objectifying gaze, nor ever completely manifest in modes of intuitive givenness.

This way out of the Cartesian purism of the early Husserl is consistent with Cusa’s attempt to combine the ontological realism of the past with a conjectural hermeneutic that is open for the signs of unexpected modes of ‘givenness’. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Cusa’s related concept of iconicity displays more similarities with Florensky’s than with Marion’s. Cusa and Florensky built on the platonic tradition, which was familiar with the transformative character of acts of vision since Plotinus at the latest. Marion emphasizes this transformative dimension as well, yet, other than in Marion, Platonic accounts of the encounter with images that change our way of seeing are always rooted in an ontology of participation: Every act of vision and every object of vision participates in the fullness of the ‘divine seeing’ (visio dei) that is revealed through


156 See above Fn. 34.

157 Cf. Marion, "Seeing or Seeing Oneself Seen", p.318 f. (my emphasis): „These two situations do not match up at all (...), since I do not see myself while seeing, or see myself seen. (...) Thus most of the time, and at first glance, I see without ever seeing myself see, or seeing myself seen.” Strictly speaking his ‘mismatch’ is not a consequence of our everyday experience (see also above Fn. 34), but of the dogmatic assumption that every gaze is ‘intentional’ (in the puristic, Cartesian sense of this word). Seen from this point of view, the following sentence is correct – albeit only if we read it in a strictly conditional sense: “Indeed, if one sets down that every gaze is intentional, and that every intentionality is that of an object, then it follows that every gaze on the Other (coming from me) or on me (coming from the Other) will reach neither the Other, nor me.” Ibid. p.322.

158 As to Cusa’s theory of signs see: *Compendium*, h. c.1.

his creation, so that what appears initially as a mere object of vision can become vision itself – up to the point where, as Cusa has put it later, ‘seeing and being seen coincide’.\textsuperscript{160}

Against this background, we might conclude that Cusa’s concept of iconicity is closer to the Platonic tradition than to Marion. However, in contrast to the Platonic tradition, the Christian tradition considered transformative events that change our vision as a gift of the Holy Spirit. And this enables us to see, where Cusa deviates from the Platonic tradition as well – albeit in a less purist way than Marion. The anamorphosis of our perception has the character of a spiritual gift, but it is more than a mere change of attitude: It is simultaneously a manifestation of the life-giving soul of the church as body of Christ.

This explains why Cusa associated our ability to see the invisible creator in his creation with an attitude of listening, for example when he asked the Tegernsee monks to listen to each other. Other than in Marion and Plotinus, our way to the vision of God is governed by the sensus communis – it is neither a matter of pure vision, nor a matter of pure will, but sustained by synthetistic acts of perception that enable us to see what we hear, and mediated by our attunement with our social environment.\textsuperscript{161} In a later passage of De visione Dei, Cusa illustrates this point by his own experience: While he was preaching he looked in the faces of the people who listened to his words, and realized that every individual sees and hears something different; and so he concluded that the divine Word can only arrive through the lived consent between multiple perspectives.\textsuperscript{162} Our way to God is mediated by the ‘common sense’ of the people – and Cusa leaves no doubt that the cultivation of this sense has to build on multiple senses: Since God is able to “see and hear in the same instance the responses of each all,”\textsuperscript{163} our ability to listen to the divine Word appeals simultaneously to our faculties of audition and vision.

The complexity of this scenario is indicative of Cusa’s metamorphosis of the pagan tradition. Other than in Plotinus, the path to the vision of God is not straight but helical: it is mediated by the lived consent of the people, and our synthetistic ability to overcome the compartmentalisation of our sensual faculties. Yet, as Marion rightly emphasizes, this helical path has to be shaped by the ‘typos’ of the cross. It has to be anamorphic, or – to use a more traditional language – it has to be transformed by a movement of metánoia and conversion.

\textsuperscript{160} \textit{(S)}ic et videre et videri coincident et sic videre se est videri a se et videre creaturas est videri in creaturis. \textit{De theologicis complementis}, h. n.14, 21-22; see also \textit{De visione dei}, h. c.5 n.13; c.12 n.49; and Plotinus, \textit{Enneads}, VI.7 n.35. For the following see also: Hoff, \textit{The Analogical Turn}, pp. 134-142, and 185-227.

\textsuperscript{161} In the light of Michel de Certeau’s ground-breaking reading of \textit{De visione Dei}, Marion admits that the communitarian dimensions of Cusa’s experiment with the monks of Tegernsee are relevant for our way to the vision of God. Yet this admission has no impact on his phenomenological reconstruction of Cusa’s account of the essence of an icon. See Marion, "Seeing or Seeing Oneself Seen", p.308; cf. Certeau, Michel de, "The Gaze. Nicholas of Cusa." In: \textit{Diacritics} 17.3 (1987), pp.2-38.


\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Sed si in me esset tanta vis, quod audiri cumaudire coincideret, sic et videri etvidere, sic et loqui et audire uti in te, domine, qui es summa virtus, tunc omnes et singulos simul audirem et viderem et sicut singulis simul loquerer, itae etiam in eodem tunc, quando loquerer, omnium et singularum responsa viderem et audirem. \textit{De visione dei}, h. c.10 n.39.11 f.
presupposed that ‘conversion’ means more than a mere change of attitude: it “implies a shift in the direction of the look, a reversal in the vision, in the imagination, in the heart, before all kinds of good intentions and all kinds of good decisions and good actions.”164

This anamorphotic feature of Cusa’s political pneumatology sheds light on the incompatibility of Christianity and liberalism. The liberal tradition oscillated between the ‘avant-garde’ celebration of iconoclastic ruptures that were supposed to preserve our sense of dignity, and the conviction that the social spaces that we inhabit need to be subjected to robotic schemata of fairness and exchangeability. By contrast, the Christian ecclesia will re-emerge only if we resist both, the idolatrous logic of schematizations and the iconoclastic logic of ruptures that evade the discernment of our spiritual common sense: “Do not be conformed (suschematizesthe) to this age, but be transformed (metamorphosthe) by the renewing (anakainosei) of your mind so that you may be able to discern (dokimazein) the desire of God, which is good, pleasing and perfect”.165

165 Romans 12:2 (own translation).