

Nicholas of Cusa and the Making of the Early Modern World

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Edited by

Simon J.G. Burton, Joshua Hollmann, and Eric M. Parker



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Abbreviations

- h Nicholas of Cusa. *Opera Omnia*. 22 vols. Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1932–2005.
- trans. Hopkins Nicholas of Cusa. *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*. 2 vols. Edited and translated by Jasper Hopkins. Minneapolis, MN: Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001.
- WA Martin Luther. *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar, 1883–2007.
- LW Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*. St Louis, MO, 1955–1986.

Varieties of Spiritual Sense: Cusanus and John Smith

Derek Michaud

In recent years there has been a resurgence of academic interest in the Christian tradition of the spiritual senses of the soul.¹ Among the consequences of this renewed attention is a better understanding of the theological aesthetics of Nicholas of Cusa and the Cambridge Platonist, John Smith (1618–52). Both the late medieval Cardinal and the early modern don developed theories of “spiritual sensation” that transcend the stale precision of the scholastics. Each urges a mystical path of knowledge by acquaintance via “spiritual sense.” They differ profoundly, however, on just how *sense* is imbued with *spiritual* significance. For the Reformed Smith, one spiritually senses God directly; while for the Catholic Cusa, sense reveals the pattern necessary for contemplation of the Divine.

These similarities-cum-differences notwithstanding, there is no clear, direct textual connection between Cusanus and Smith. Cusa’s works are not among the books Smith donated to Queens’ College Library in 1652.² Smith’s lone publication, the posthumous *Select Discourses* (1660), contains no reference to Nicholas of Cusa. While other “Cambridge Platonists,” including Peter Sterry and Ralph Cudworth, were familiar with Cusa, I am unaware of any clear connection between the don and the Cardinal.³ My comparison of the two thinkers is thus conceptual and not genealogical.

1 The most significant recent publication representing this trend is *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2 Anonymous, “Queens’ College Donation List (17th century),” Queens’ College, Cambridge, MS 47. Digital facsimile available at <http://issuu.com/03776/docs/qunsdonors>. There may have been a copy of Cusa’s works available at Queens’ College library during Smith’s tenure there in the 1565 edition published in Basel. See Thomas Hartwell Horne, *A Catalogue of the Library of the College of St. Margaret and St. Bernard Commonly Called Queen’s College in the University of Cambridge* (London: Samuel and Richard Bentley, 1827), I.134.

3 Intriguingly, it is possible that Cudworth and Sterry taught Smith. On this possibility see my “Reason Turned into Sense: John Smith on Spiritual Sensation” (PhD Diss., Boston University, 2015), 127–31. On Cusanus’ influence on Sterry, see Eric Parker’s chapter in this volume.

The Spiritual Senses

The Christian tradition of the spiritual senses arose out of early Patristic interpretations of passages in the Scriptures that appear to speak of the perception of divine things.⁴ Faced with the paradox of reports (or predictions) of seeing that which cannot be seen, some of the Fathers interpreted these texts to mean that there is a kind of spiritually attuned perception. Above all, this is rightly associated with Origen.⁵ While the “spiritual senses” is best understood as an “umbrella term” for a wide variety of distinct expressions uniting “sense,” either in general or a particular modality, with “spirit,” “heart,” “soul,” “mind or intellect,” “inner [person],” or “faith,” it is with the Latin translation of Origen that the expression “spiritual senses” entered the medieval West.⁶ For this reason, as much as the specifics of their own varieties of *sensus spirituales*, it is this original Origenist understanding that will form the basis for our discussion of Cusa and Smith’s places within the broader tradition.⁷ Our authors both seek to accommodate Origen’s spiritual senses to their milieus.

The Origenist theological aesthetic posits a two-fold sensorium, one external engaged through the five physical senses, and one internal engaged by the spiritual senses.⁸ Origen affirms the existence of a set of five spiritual senses analogous to the physical senses located in the mind or soul, what he calls the “inner man,” which is distinct from the physical body and thus also from the

4 Compare, for example, Exodus 33:20 and 1 Corinthians 13:12.

5 Karl Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ According to Origen,” in *Theological Investigations, XVI: Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, trans. David Moreland (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 89–103; Augustine, too, set off a long line of speculation on “spiritual vision,” through many medieval monastic and scholastic authors. See Veerle Fraeters, “Visio/Vision,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 178–88; and Matthew R. Loo-rens, “Augustine,” in *Spiritual Senses*, 56–70.

6 Paul L. Gavriluk and Sarah Coakley, “Introduction,” in *Spiritual Senses*, 2.

7 Both Cusanus and Smith have more nearly contemporary influences as well. However, our focus here is limited to their appropriation (and modification) of Origen. For a full treatment of the spiritual senses in Smith see my *Reason Turned into Sense: John Smith on Spiritual Sensation* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2017). A complete assessment of the theme in Nicholas of Cusa has yet to be written. The analysis offered here is thus a report on the state of research with regard to both authors.

8 Garth W. Green, “Nicholas of Cusa,” in *Spiritual Senses*, 213–4, 223; Also Mark J. McInroy, “Origen of Alexandria,” in *Spiritual Senses*, 20–35. While not all of the Fathers who have something important to say about spiritual perception accept this dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual sensoria, Origen’s approach was to form a classic model taken up throughout the medieval period.

physical senses.⁹ For Origen the spiritual or allegorical reading of scripture suggests that references to sensing the divine are not simply literal accounts.¹⁰ At the same time, however, Origen is convinced that references to spiritual senses are not without some kind of literal meaning. That is, rather than reading these passages as *mere* metaphorical references to knowledge, or comprehension, Origen takes a sudden and unexpected turn by suggesting such passages refer to literally “spiritual senses.”

There were important variations and modifications of this basic scheme by later Patristic and Medieval theologians, but the spiritual senses remained a living option well into the early modern period.¹¹ Both Cusa and Smith took up this tradition of theological aesthetics in their own ways but it is with the late medieval Cusanus that we see a reformation of this tradition, while the early modern Smith looks back more directly to the example of Origen.¹²

Cusa's Theological Aesthetic

Cusa's theological aesthetic takes up the Origenist inheritance only in the broadest possible sense. Like the Alexandrian, Cusanus places significant importance on sensibility, employing sense and sensibility often throughout his corpus and making especially prominent use in one of his best known treatises, *De visione Dei*.¹³ Likewise, Cusa employs sensibility in a pattern of ascent from everyday observations to the contemplation, and thus understanding, of

9 The outer/inner human being motif is Pauline (e.g., 2 Corinthians 4:7, etc.).

10 The consensus is that Origen speaks of five spiritual senses analogous to the physical senses. See Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition From Plato to Denys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 66–7; John M. Dillon, “Aisthêsis Noêtê: A Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses in Origen and in Plotinus,” in *Hellenica et Judaica*, ed. A. Caquot, et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 1986), 443–55; and Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 17–35.

11 See, for example, William J. Wainwright, “Jonathan Edwards and his Puritan Predecessors,” and Mark T. Mealey, “John Wesley,” in *Spiritual Senses*, 224–40 and 241–56.

12 While there are precedents for key aspects of Cusa's spiritual senses in figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and others, the intensity of his apophysis sets Cusa apart from the mainstream of the tradition, especially in the Latin West. See Paul L. Gavriluk, “Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,” in *Spiritual Senses*, 86–103; Frederick D. Aquino, “Maximus the Confessor,” in *Spiritual Senses*, 104–20; Boyd Taylor Coolman, “Alexander of Hales,” in *Spiritual Senses*, 121–39; “Thomas Gallus” in *Spiritual Senses*, 140–58; and Gregory F. LaNave, “Bonaventure” in *Spiritual Senses*, 159–73. Cf. Rudy, *Mystical Language*, 35–43.

13 Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei* (h VI.3–90; trans. Hopkins, II.679–743).

God. Beyond these general features the Cardinal's aesthetic bears little substantive resemblance to that of the church father.

While the theme of vision in Cusa has received no shortage of treatment¹⁴ there is only one analysis that expressly situates him in the Christian tradition of the spiritual senses.¹⁵ As Garth Green has shown, it is Origen's *intent* rather than his doctrine that Cusa takes up. In this, Cusanus is following a long line of Catholic theologians who did just the same by reconciling this aesthetic intention with the latest in epistemic fashion. As was the case for many scholastic authors before him the epistemological state-of-the-art for Cusa was a variety of Aristotelianism.

Whereas in its first classic expression the spiritual senses were conceived of as a separate set of perceptual faculties, Cusanus is unable to employ this dualistic aesthetic because of his (qualified) acceptance of Aristotelian epistemology. Nevertheless, Cusa finds in sensibility, especially vision, a topic of deep spiritual and theological significance. However, on the principles of the Aristotelian *ordo cognoscendi* Origen's *aesthesis pneumatike* is impossible. While committed by orthodoxy to the *visio Dei* and by orthopraxy to the *contemplatio (theoria)* of the Divine, Cusa was also faithful (albeit with reservations)¹⁶ to an essentially Aristotelian epistemology that made these commitments paradoxical at best. Cusa's solution to this incongruity is to wed the *spirit* of the spiritual senses tradition (i.e., immediate perceptual encounter with the Divine) to his epistemology by exploiting the structure of sensibility itself.

Cusanus is committed as a faithful Christian to a *visio Dei* but as a philosopher cannot give a reasonable account of such a vision. In order to appreciate Cusa's predicament here it is important to remember that, although he is not alone in discussing the *visio Dei* during our earthly existence, this vision is far more commonly reserved for the final goal of human life in the eschaton. However, there is also a long tradition, especially associated with Christian mystics, which holds "that some kind of seeing of God is possible in this life as preparation for and foretaste of what is to come."¹⁷ Cusa's approach, although

14 See, for example, Hugh Lawrence Bond, "The 'Icon' and the 'Iconic' Text of Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei* I-XVII," in *Nicholas of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality*, ed. Thomas M. Izbicki and Christopher M. Bellito (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 177–95 and Michel de Certeau, "The Gaze – Nicholas of Cusa," *Diacritics* 17:3 (1987): 2–38.

15 Green, "Cusa," 210–23.

16 See, for example, Cusa's critiques of the Peripatetics in *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* 6 (h II.4–5; trans. Hopkins, I.462–3) and Aristotle himself in *De docta ignorantia* 2.9.148 (h I.94; trans. Hopkins, I.85).

17 Bernard McGinn, "Seeing and Not Seeing: Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei* in the History of Western Mysticism," in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter J. Casarella (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 27.

deeply informed by later developments (especially [Pseudo-] Dionysius and medieval Aristotelianism) takes up themes already employed by Clement of Alexandria in the second century. Specifically, both the Patristic Catechist and the Renaissance Cardinal wrestle with the “fundamental *aporia*” of how “the utterly invisible God” can “become visible in a divinizing vision.” Moreover, both employ the same basic strategies in addressing their topic; they seek to understand the “vision of God in terms of Platonic *theoria*,” each connects the *visio Dei* to divinization or theosis, and both use “categories taken from Hellenistic philosophy to express biblical teaching about God’s invisibility and unknowability.”¹⁸

The problem, as Cusa seeks to understand what he believes, is essentially as follows. If one accepts, as Cusa does, the Aristotelian account of the *ordo cognoscendi*, sensibility bears a directionality that precludes the sensing of spiritual realities. The key concept here is the *sensus communis*, or “common sense.”¹⁹ For Aristotle, and his scholastic followers, the order of cognition begins in the receptive process of the individual sense faculties which take as their objects the domains appropriate to each. For example, the object of sight is the visible. In this way, what is seen is not heard or smelled and vice versa. However, “Each particular sense functions within a single sensible horizon, established by the ‘common sensibles’ (movement, rest, number, figure, magnitude). These, Aristotle continues, ‘are not peculiar to any one sense, but are common to all,’ as those characteristics by means of which individual senses discern their respective properties and objects.”²⁰ It is thus via the common sense that one perceives the measured movement and exquisite sound of a virtuoso musical performance as a single experience.²¹

Notice however that the common sense is situated in an *order* of cognition. As Green puts it, “*Only* upon the reception of sensible data by the five external senses does the common sense possess material for synthesis, and *only* as synthesized by the common sense can such data be determined by, for example, imagination and intellection.”²² The directionality is clear; from the external world, to the special senses, to the common sense, to imagination, and intellection. There can be no sensation of the color blue without the activity of sight, but “this blue thing that I am seeing now” does not arise without the

18 McGinn, “Seeing and Not Seeing,” 30.

19 See, above all, *De anima* III. 1, 425a 27; *De memoria et reminiscencia* I, 450a 10; and *De partibus animalium*, IV.10, 686a 31.

20 Aristotle, *De anima* II.6, 418a 18, quoted by Green, “Cusa,” 211.

21 This is why live music is more enjoyable than prerecorded music.

22 Green, “Cusa,” 212. Emphasis added.

common sense providing the “horizon” within which such a sensation takes place and the cognitive faculties by which we remember and judge any “this” to be a “that.” It is only through this process (highly abbreviated here) that the “material object outside us is transmuted in distinct stages into an immaterial idea.”²³

The Cardinal was thus aware, as Thomas Aquinas put it, only “material and sensible things” can “form our proper natural objects” of cognition.²⁴ There is no room here for the separate, non-physical, fivefold sensorium suggested (or assumed) by Origen. If all that can be perceived must be sensed by the five physical senses, and if what can be thought can only be given to imagination and intellection by the common sense that receives its input from those special senses, then Origen’s “spiritual senses” are simply impossible. There is, on this view, nowhere for such faculties to operate. Such talk must be metaphorical, referring to one or another of the non-sensory faculties with which understanding of spiritual realities are had.²⁵

Thus, to the extent that Cusa is an Aristotelian he cannot accept Origen’s spiritual senses.²⁶ The Cardinal’s solution to this impasse, since he clearly wants to employ sensibility in theologically significant ways, even as he recognizes the obstacles to this employment, is at once brilliant, modern in its emphasis, and ancient in its inspiration. Rather than reject either Origen or Aristotle (or Thomas for that matter), Cusa modifies and synthesizes them both to “discover a hidden theological significance within the shadows of the physical sensorium.”²⁷

23 Green, “Cusa,” 213.

24 *Summa Theologiae* 1a q 87.1 ad., 1, quoted by Green, “Cusa,” 214. See also *Summa contra Gentiles* IV.1: “The human intellect, to which it is connatural to derive its knowledge from sensible things, is not able through itself to reach the vision of the divine substance in itself, which is above all sensible things and, indeed, improporionately above all other things” (Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. Charles J. O’Neil [University of Notre Dame Press, 1975], 35). See Cusa’s claim that “the infinite, qua infinite, is unknown; for it escapes all comparative relation,” in *De docta ignorante* 1.1.3 (h I.6; trans. Hopkins, I.5).

25 Green, “Cusa,” 213–4. See also Richard Cross, “Thomas Aquinas,” in *Spiritual Senses*, 174–89.

26 Green is careful to distinguish the Platonic Cusa from a purported Aristotelian Cusa (219 n.51). I would argue, with Gerson, that such a distinction is overdrawn, for Aristotle is himself a sort of Platonist. See Lloyd Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 3–33, 97–129; and Lloyd Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005). This is not to deny the Renaissance era controversies over such labels but it is to suggest that those conflicts were more historically rooted than conceptually necessary.

27 Green, “Cusa,” 214.

Although he abandons the Origenist spiritual sensorium *per se* “Cusa employs the language of the spiritual senses throughout his corpus.”²⁸ While the Cardinal makes analogical use of taste, smell, touch, and hearing, it is vision above all that forms the “distinctive feature of Cusa’s theological aesthetics.”²⁹ In addition to the traditional goal of human life in the *visio Dei*, and the preference for vision in Western thought generally,³⁰ Cusa has an etymological argument for the priority of vision in theological reflection. In explicating Paul’s sermon to the Athenians on the Areopagus in Acts 17, an event still connected to the *Corpus Dionysiaticum* for Cusanus despite his doubts about its authorship,³¹ the Cardinal observes that human thought can bear no likeness to God.³² It is on this basis that the Apostle correlates the “Unknown God” of the Athenians with the unknowable God of Israel and Jesus Christ (Acts 17:23). However, while Paul acknowledges the unknowability of God, he also, “names him God – or *Theos* in Greek.”³³ Thus, the Apostle both names and un-names God at once. The resolution of this curiosity is, for Cusanus, that this name, *Theos*, is not the name of God beyond all concepts. Instead, *Theos* is itself a concept and only “the name of God insofar as God is sought” by human beings.³⁴ *Theos* is thus a conceptual tool for our seeking and finding the God yet unnamed and only eschatologically known. For, “*Theos* is derived from *theo*, which means both ‘I see’ and ‘I hasten.’”³⁵

Thus, the name used by Paul reveals a “pathway” by which one may seek the “Unknown God.”³⁶ This “pathway” takes three successive forms, matching the familiar pattern of mystical theology. First, by calling attention to “sensible vision.” Second, by analyzing “intellectual vision.” And third, after these sensible,

28 Ibid., 215. Vision far exceeds other senses in frequency and importance for Cusa. Compare, for example, *De visio Dei* 20.91 (h VI.71; trans. Hopkins, II.722–3) on smell, 16.71 (h VI.58–9; trans. Hopkins, II.712) on taste, and near constantly throughout on sight.

29 Green, “Cusa,” 216.

30 The “superiority” of sight goes back at least to Aristotle (*De anima* III.3 429a). See Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2005), especially 61–71 on the “Christian appropriation of the ‘Aristotelian’ hierarchy” of the senses.

31 William Franke, *On What cannot be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), I.158.

32 *De quaerendo Deum* 1.17 (h IV.13–4; trans. Hopkins, I.314) and Acts 17:22–31.

33 *De quaerendo Deum* 1.17 (h IV.13–4; trans. Hopkins, I.314).

34 *De quaerendo Deum* 1.19 (h IV.14–5; trans. Hopkins, I.315), quoted by Green, “Cusa,” 217.

35 Ibid. See also Cusa, “On Seeking God,” in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. and intr. Hugh Lawrence Bond with a preface by Morimichi Watanabe (New York Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 320 n.11.

36 Green, “Cusa,” 217.

and symbolic moments, speculatively attaining a *visio Dei*.³⁷ The mystical path here exploits the fundamental structure of vision at each stage. This is most obvious at the level of sensible vision. The act of vision stands above, and apart from, the objects of sight. What is seen is color. But the seeing thereof is not colored. Indeed, sight itself is unseen, precisely because it is by means of sight that we see the objects appropriate to that sensory modality. Vision is the principle, the thing seen is principled. What is especially significant is that Cusa identifies an absence of sight (the unseen vision that allows for our seeing) in the very act of seeing.

The invisible is already ingredient in the employment of our sensible faculties. Vision includes “that which sees and is not seen,” an image for the Unknown God who sees but remains unseen by us. Likewise, the *sensus communis*, which “contains within itself ‘the form of the sensible world,’” sits above sight (and the rest of the external senses). Sight however is “uniquely capable of evincing the basic figures of Christian self-understanding” at “each of the three levels of mystical ascent.”³⁸ So, the pathway opened up by an examination of vision continues to guide Cusa even as he proceeds from the external to the inner senses. Moreover, this path continues beyond even the realm of sensibility.

Just as vision is the principle for the objects of sight, so too the intellect for Cusa is the principle for rational things. As he notes in *Idiota de mente* and elsewhere, the “mind is that from which derive the boundary and the measurement of every [respective] thing. Indeed ... mind [*mens*] takes its name from measuring [*mensurare*].”³⁹ Thus, the mind is not to be found in the realm of the rational objects, since it is by means of the intellect that these are determined. To look for the mind among the rational is to look for the measure among the measured. So, in keeping with the pattern thus far established, “the mind, too, cannot understand [‘see’] itself except by means of the relative position between an invisible origin and a visible image or manifestation thereof.”⁴⁰

So, the path is clearly laid out for the seeker. Consideration of the seen leads to the unseen origin of vision. Consideration of the known leads to the unknown origin in the intellect. Each attempt to figure points beyond itself to

37 Ibid. See also Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* 2.1.93 (h I.62; trans. Hopkins, I.59); *De visione Dei* 24.105–10 (h VI.81–4); *De beryllo* 5 (h XI/1.7–8; trans. Hopkins, II.793); and *Triologus de posset* 62 (h XI/2.73–4; trans. Hopkins, II.947).

38 Green, “Cusa,” 218–9.

39 Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de mente*, 1.57 (h V.90–1; trans. Hopkins, I.535–6). Additionally see Clyde Lee Miller, “Cusanus, Nicholas [Nicholas of Cusa],” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published 10 July 2009, revised 26 March 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/cusanus/>, §2.2.

40 Green, “Cusa,” 219–20.

an invisible ground. So too at the stage of speculation it is by means of our limitations that we are given a glimpse of God. For Cusa takes the injunction of the Psalmist to “be still and know that I am God”⁴¹ as a call to continue this pathway or pattern of seeing and unseeing, knowing and unknowing. For a proper *visio Dei* cannot “remain in a mere cognitive seeing, which puffs us up.”⁴² No, a proper vision of the invisible God must be the realization that we do not see. “The frustration of *visio* is propaedeutic to the frustration of *ratio*, and to a theological vision of the limits of physical and philosophical vision.”⁴³

By following the pathway revealed by the *ordo cognoscendi* Cusa guides his reader to (through) an ascent that “does not yield a new visibility, but rather yields necessarily limits thereto.” In this way our *visio Dei* lies in our seeing “that we do not see,” and our realizing that we do not know.⁴⁴ Thus, the vision of God is, for Cusa, something that “is not, and cannot be, brought fully to sensible presence.” Sensibility is spiritually significant primarily as a figure involving both presence and absence (seen and unseen). Green hypothesizes that this accounts for Cusa’s insistence that “revelation falls short of savoring.”⁴⁵ The mystical path leads to a “re-vealing, but also and equally ... a re-veiling.”⁴⁶ The Origenist intension is thus only partly satisfied by a glimmer set within a larger darkness. The Cusan *visio* anticipates the vision “face to face” but remains unconsummated and an enigma in this life.

Smith’s Spiritual Sensation⁴⁷

As I have argued elsewhere, for Smith spiritual sensation takes several distinct forms and answers to distinct theological problems.⁴⁸ He employs varieties of

41 Psalm 46:10 (Vulgate 45:11). Importantly for the history of the spiritual senses, the Hebrew (*ūḏə’ū*) and Greek (LXX; *gnote*) here is ‘know’ while the Vulgate has ‘see’ (*videte*). All three terms carry connotations of ‘knowing’ and/or ‘seeing’ however.

42 Green, “Cusa,” 220, n.62. The image of knowledge “puffing up” comes from 1 Corinthians 8:1. Smith too employs this image to distinguish between understanding that rectifies and knowledge that does not lead to improvement of the spirit. See John Smith, *Select Discourses* (London: F. Fleisher, 1660), 7, 19, 324.

43 Green, “Cusa,” 221.

44 Ibid. Learning that we do not know, or achieving what Cusa famously calls “learned ignorance.”

45 *De visione Dei* 17.80 [17.79] (h VI.62; trans. Hopkins, II.717), quoted by Green, “Cusa,” 221.

46 Green, “Cusa,” 221.

47 Some portions of this section appear in much more expansive form in my *Reason Turned into Sense*, 100, 102–5, 107–13. Used here by permission of Peeters Publishers.

48 Michaud, “Reason Turned into Sense,” 192–365.

spiritual sense to account for the reception of prophetic revelation, the appropriation of theological truth by non-prophets, and the justification for those truths in light of external critique. In order to address these necessary functions Smith conceives of spiritual sensation as (1) a form of intellectual intuition following the examples of figures such as Plotinus and Origen, (2) imaginative inspiration especially in the case of prophecy revealed to the imagination sans external object, and often (3) a combination of the two.⁴⁹

In keeping with Cusa's concern to provide an account of the contemplation of the object of faith, our discussion of Smith's spiritual sense will be limited to his programmatic first discourse "Of the True Way or Method of Attaining to Divine Knowledge."⁵⁰ As we will see, in this "Method" Smith argues, on the basis of a direct inheritance from Origen, for spiritual sense that is free from the compromise necessitated by adherence to Aristotelian epistemology we have seen in Cusa. For Smith, the principle for the intelligibility of theology lies in a "Spiritual Sensation" which unites the will, intellect, and the affections. This is the basis of his theological method. Smith's intent is to establish a firm foundation upon which all his later work can stand. In this, his deep admiration for Descartes shines through.⁵¹ Moreover, whereas Cusa recommends a spiritual practice of contemplation Smith has already embraced the turn toward methodology that came to prominence in the modern period. Nevertheless, much of what Smith has to say about this method echoes Origen.

While Karl Rahner is certainly correct about the exegetical provenance of Origen's doctrine, his claim that it is a conclusion based solely on scripture wholly fails to convince.⁵² It is far more probable, as Dillon has suggested, that Origen is drawing on previous and contemporaneous speculation about "a noetic correlate of sense-perception" found in Plato, Philo and Plotinus among others.⁵³ For only if the spiritual senses have an initial air of plausibility can the move to read biblical passages allegorically, but not totally so, be justified.

49 Smith does not maintain strict distinctions between imagination and intellection. In this, he is following earlier Platonic examples (including Origen) and anticipating the later Romantics. The unity of Smith's theology stems in large part from his consistent appeal to aesthetics as such, not to his affirmation of a single aesthetic faculty or modality.

50 Smith, *Select Discourses*, 1–21.

51 On the relationship between Smith and Descartes, see John E. Saveson, "Descartes' Influence on John Smith, Cambridge Platonist," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20 (1959): 258–62 and "Differing Reactions to Descartes among the Cambridge Platonists," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 31 (1960): 560–7.

52 Rahner, "Spiritual Senses," 83.

53 Dillon, "Aisth sis No t ," 455.

In the same manner, Smith appeals directly to scripture and the Neoplatonism of Plotinus as his “evidence” for the spiritual sensation upon which an individual’s theological understanding rests. Spiritual concepts are understood by being perceived. For both Smith and Origen the spiritual senses are capacities of mind that are *both* conceptual *and* perceptual. Perceptual in the sense that it is by means of these senses that purely noetic (spiritual) objects are brought to awareness, and conceptual in the sense that they have to do with realities that are by their very nature concepts or ideas not physically sensible things. Thus, in both authors we find that the spiritual senses involve intellectual intuition.

Smith combines Plotinus’ affirmation that, “Every thing is best known by that which bears a just resemblance and analogie with it” with the biblical principle that a good life is the prolepsis for coming to an understanding of divine things.⁵⁴ Additionally, Smith introduces the sixth Beatitude (Matthew 5:8) with a reference to Plotinus. “Divinity is indeed a true efflux from that eternal light” but this light does not merely *enlighten*, but *enlivens* also. While the framework here is borrowed from the light mysticism common to Plotinus and Origen (and others),⁵⁵ the real authority for Smith’s point lies with Christ, who connects “purity of heart with the beatific vision.” What is essential in theology is a practical, existential, and spiritually sensitive approach and not the study or composition of dry treatises.⁵⁶ Here Smith is taking aim at the scholasticism that still formed the official curriculum at Cambridge and other Universities throughout Europe.⁵⁷ In so doing Smith is taking up a critique that as we have seen was already well underway in the time of Cusanus.

Smith turns again to Plotinus and light mysticism for the idea that just “as the eye cannot behold the sun ... unless it hath the form and resemblance of the sun drawn in it” so too for the soul to “behold God ... unless it be God-like.” This Neoplatonic (and Aristotelian) commonplace leads back to scripture immediately; “the apostle St. Paul, when he would lay open the right way of attaining to divine truth, saith, that ‘knowledge puffeth up,’ but it is ‘love that edifieth.’”⁵⁸ For Smith, emotion and the will (especially love) play a central role in the directedness of our attention. When we direct our wills toward inner

54 Smith, *Select Discourses*, 2. Smith’s sources are Plotinus, *Ennead* I.8.1 and Proverbs 9:10 (“the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”).

55 See Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 35–72.

56 Smith, *Select Discourses*, 2.

57 For a discussion of Smith’s complex relationship with the scholasticism of his day, and his ultimate rejection thereof, see Michaud, “Reason Turned into Sense,” 125–59, 192–3, 227, 230–1, 288, 342, and 368–9.

58 Smith, *Selected Discourses*, 3. The Pauline reference is to I Corinthians 8:1. The reference to Plotinus appears to be *Ennead* I.6.9. On the perfection of divine knowledge in love

spiritual things, love plays a positive role in spiritual sensation. The spiritual senses are partly activated by, and partly cause and deepen, love of God made possible through God's grace in creation and salvation.

As an early, and in some respects uncritical, admirer of Descartes, Smith seeks to offer foundations for his theological work in ways that Origen does not, but Smith finds his foundations not in modernity, but in Origen's era. In short, Smith was urged by his present to recover a past within the tradition of (patristic) Christian Platonism. While he follows the example of Origen's creative combination of platonic plausibility and allegorical scriptural exegesis, Smith's specific indebtedness to Origen is best seen when one considers the way in which Origen acts not only as a model but also as a source.

From the outset Smith is eager to show that theology has a kind of demonstration that is different from ratiocination or the presentation of doctrines and proofs. He assures us that, "We must not think we have attained to the *right knowledge* of Truth, when we have broke through the outward shell of words & phrases that house it up; or when by a *Logical Analysis* we have found out the dependencies and coherences of them with one another."⁵⁹ Smith is here framing his presentation of the "True Way" in apologetic terms against a merely logical or intellectual approach to philosophy and theology, especially scholastic Christian Aristotelians.

It is in the midst of his apology that Smith makes direct appeal to Origen. "It is but a thin, aiery knowledge that is got by meer Speculation, which is usher'd in by Syllogisms and Demonstrations; but that which springs forth from true Goodness, is *θειότερόν τι πασης ἀποδείξεως*, as Origen speaks, it brings such a Divine Light into the Soul, as is more clear and convincing than any Demonstration."⁶⁰ Examination of Origen's works, and the editions of Origen known to have been available to Smith, reveals that the "quote" here is most likely a paraphrase taken from *Contra Celsum* I.2. That Smith intends this passage specifically is indicated by Origen's usage but most strongly by the parallel intentions at work in both texts. In *Contra Celsum* I.2, Celsus is criticized for trying to apply the criterion of a "Greek proof" to Christianity. Origen says "that the gospel has a *proof which is particular to itself*, and which is *more divine than* a Greek proof based on dialectical argument. This *more divine demonstration* the apostle calls a 'demonstration of the Spirit and of power' ..."⁶¹ Immediately

in Smith and others see Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 234–42.

59 Smith, *Selected Discourses*, 8.

60 Smith, *Selected Discourses*, 4.

61 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I.2 (trans. Chadwick), emphasis added.

after his reference to Origen, Smith continues his attack on the “thin speculations” of logicians (both believers and non-believers).

While it is clear from these considerations that the spiritual senses are not *merely* metaphorical for Origen, it remains to be seen if they are rightly understood to be five in number or if they are merely so many ways of speaking of a single spiritual capacity or “intellectual sense” as Smith puts it.⁶² In *Contra Celsum* I.48 Origen suggests, in the midst of a discussion of the demonstration of the Spirit in prophecy and its connection to the five spiritual senses, that there is a single “general divine perception” but notes that this single spiritual sensibility takes many forms. These Origen gives as the five spiritual senses. Smith is in basic agreement on this point. However, unlike Origen, Smith does not put forward a clear theory of five distinct spiritual senses. But he does consistently speak of the spiritual senses as more than simply one. Divinity is best known through a spiritual sensation for Smith that may take a form analogous to any of the physical senses, in keeping with Origen’s statement in *Contra Celsum* I.48.⁶³

It seems probable therefore that Smith has in mind an arrangement very much like the one suggested by Origen where a “general divine perception” takes many different forms in order that the plentitude of the divine nature may be more fully expressed.⁶⁴ This would help account for the ease with which Smith can go from speaking of a single noetic sense, using sensory language as a metaphor for knowledge (i.e., intellectual intuition), to multiple senses akin to the physical senses with different sensory objects within the spiritual realm (i.e., spiritual sight, taste, touch, of etc.).

As we have seen, for Smith we come to an understanding of divine things via the activation of our capacity for spiritual sensation. This power is noetic and functions as an intuition of Divine truth. Moreover, this ability is affective and captured best by employing the language of sense.⁶⁵ Smith intends here *both* intellectual intuition *and* something more along the lines of the five spiritual senses of Origen. However, there is a problem with understanding how Smith’s “spiritual sense” can be simultaneously intellectual and sensible. At least one commentator has tried to get around this issue by interpreting Smith’s discussion in the “True Way” discourse as entirely concerned with intellectual intuition *simpliciter*.

62 Smith, *Selected Discourses*, 3.

63 Smith speaks of spiritual sight, touch, and taste already on the third page of the *Select Discourses*.

64 See Michaud, “Reason Turned into Sense,” 226–74.

65 On Platonic affective cognition see James, *Passion and Action*, 225–52.

William Wainwright has argued that spiritual sensation for Smith is a matter of “affect-laden intellectual insight or intuition.”⁶⁶ Drawing on many of the same passages discussed above he rightly concludes that the spiritual senses are a matter of intellectual intuition with a strong “affective dimension.”⁶⁷ However, Wainwright misses the subtle way in which Smith speaks of the spiritual senses as *both* unitary, as a figure for intellection, *and* diverse, on analogy with the five physical senses. He is correct that “Platonists think that reason itself has an affective dimension”⁶⁸ but the emotional response to the intuition of Divine things is also perceptual for Smith. It is perceived through a “living sense” in and through a truly spiritual life. Wainwright argues that other “analogies are at least as apt” and he mentions as an example “our immediate acquaintance with numbers.”⁶⁹ However, Smith thinks that the “true Perfection, Sweetness, Energie, and Loveliness” of the purified soul reflecting Divine truth “is *ούτε ρητού ουτε γραπτον* [neither explicit nor written] ... [and] can no more be known by a naked Demonstration, then Colours can be perceived of a blinde man by any Definition or Description which he can hear of them.”⁷⁰ But what does it mean to have an “immediate acquaintance” with numbers if not to be brought to a proper cognition of them by a demonstration, definition, or description?

There is, therefore, more “sensibility” here than Wainwright has allowed. For, our intellectual intuition of divine things must remain in this life “but here in its Infancy.” Even the understanding of the “true Metaphysical and Contemplative man” must still contend with the “*Imaginative Powers*” that will be “breathing a grosse dew upon the pure Glasse of our Understandings” so that *at best* we intellectually intuit “in a glass darkly.”⁷¹ That is, the sensible images of our imaginations remain with us while we live. The eschatological goal remains pure “affect-laden intellectual ... intuition” but this is a goal we are, here on Earth, only ever approaching.

For all the intellectualism in the “True Way,” the imagination is not, cannot be, completely surpassed. To do so would be to take the “life” out of Smith’s proposed method. Moreover, as one sees in Smith’s theory of prophecy, the imagination, no less than the intellect, plays a key role in the reception of the saving truths of revelation.⁷²

66 Wainwright, “Jonathan Edwards,” 229.

67 *Ibid.*, 231.

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*

70 Smith, *Selected Discourses*, 15.

71 *Ibid.*, 20, 21. Also, 1 Corinthians 13:12.

72 Mario Micheletti, *Il pensiero religioso di John Smith platonico di Cambridge* (Padua: La Garangola, 1976), 360–85.

Interpretations

As we have seen, both Cusa and Smith find Aristotelian epistemology lacking for theological reflection. In this, their understandings of “spiritual sense” represent two moments in the Renaissance/early modern critique of scholasticism.⁷³ Cusa, however, follows earlier medieval, and specifically Thomist precedent by using the tradition of Aristotelian rationalism to lead (and ultimately yield) to theology. In his exploitation of the limits of Aristotelian epistemology Cusa opens space for his transcendental apophasis. Like Thomas, Cusanus brings together philosophy and theology by uniting them at the breaking point of reason. While neither saw philosophy and theology in opposition, both make explicit use of the distinction thereof.

Smith, on the other hand, simply builds a theological perspective employing concepts adopted from the Bible and the Neoplatonic tradition. Cusa’s (Aristotelian) philosophy leads to (mystical) theology. Smith’s Reformed philosophy is always, already, theological, and vice versa. Thus, with Cusa we see the beginning of the internal critique of the scholastic consensus and in Smith we see one fully willing (if not yet fully able) to move beyond the schoolmen.

Both Cusa and Smith are Christian Platonists, but this takes on distinctly different forms in their respective theories of spiritual sensation. Smith’s spiritual senses are decidedly kataphatic.⁷⁴ Cusa, on the other hand brings Pseudo-Dionysian doctrines to the fore, bringing out an overwhelmingly apophatic significance for sensibility. For Cusa, God is ultimately mystery, source, and Unity. For Smith, God is ultimately the Good. Cusa’s God reveals most fully in

73 The literature here is large and growing in quality. For an accessible overview see Luca Bianchi, “Continuity and Change in the Aristotelian Tradition,” and Christopher S. Celenza, “The Revival of Platonic Philosophy,” both in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 49–71 and 72–96. On developments in Smith’s milieu see Michaud, “Reason Turned into Sense,” 125–59. On Cusa’s place in this transition see Maurice de Gandillac, “Platonisme et Aristotelisme chez Nicolas de Cues,” in *Platon et Aristote à la Renaissance* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1976), 7–23; “Neoplatonism and Christian Thought in the Fifteenth Century: Nicholas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino,” in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. Dominic J. O’Meara (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982), 143–68; and K. Meredith Ziebart, *Nicolaus Cusanus on Faith and the Intellect: A Case Study in 15th-Century Fides-Ratio Controversy* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

74 Smith’s kataphatic preference is broadly in keeping with Origen but less so his other significant ancient source in this area, Plotinus. However, while elements of negative theology do abound in the *Enneads*, there is also a strong element of Smith’s type of purified kataphasis too. For example, see *Ennead* VI.9.7.

and through re-veiling, Smith's in and through the revelation that transforms and purifies.

The Cardinal and Cambridge Platonist each adopt their distinctive emphases from a common Neoplatonic inheritance, but they do so in very different immediate contexts. Cusa, in a late medieval world still thoroughly sacramental guards against idolatry with his negative theology. Smith, on the other hand, on the far side of the Reformations and during the birth of early modern secular philosophy, guards against the possibility that God might not be contemplated at all (atheism) and the temptation to think that knowledge of the Divine might be all-too-easy (enthusiasm/fideism). Where Cusa can rest secure in the certain eschatological fulfillment of his mysticism Smith's focus is in the here-and-now.

Both think of the "spiritual senses" as a foretaste of the Beatific Vision. But where Cusa's apophysis emphasizes futurity, Smith's kataphasis is aimed at the practical, moral transformation of the individual. Smith's Protestant world is already, by Cusa's standards, de-sacramentalized. Thus, the need to "make present" the Divine Goodness in the purified icon of the soul. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the contrast between Cusa's aversion to the more intimate language of touch and Smith's wholehearted embrace of that language. The Cardinal thinks of touch (and taste) of God as too consummated for this earthly existence.⁷⁵ Smith, on the other hand, freely speaks of our "intellectual" or "inner" touch of the Divine in this life.⁷⁶

Cusanus and Smith represent important moments in the development of Christian thinking on the spiritual senses. Both are more concerned with *using* this language to capture a key aspect of the mystical path, or religious experience. They are not worried about the medieval preoccupations of the exact nature and number of these "senses" and their precise relation to various doctrines in systematic theology, nor are they particularly interested in explaining the spiritual senses themselves. Instead, they are concerned with using these figures to inform the spiritual life.⁷⁷

Cusa offers a transcendental argument to direct our contemplation beyond the limits of sense and reason into the illuminous darkness of Dionysian

75 McGinn, "Seeing and Not Seeing," 29–38, 42–4, 49–50. See also Dorothy Koenigsberger, *Renaissance Man and Creative Thinking: A History of Concepts of Harmony, 1400–1700* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), 132, and Cusa, *Idiota de sapientia* 1.18 (trans. Hopkins, 1.503–4), cited by Green, "Cusa," 216.

76 Smith, *Selected Discourses*, 3, 52, 148, 360, 371–2, 377, and 391. Smith contrasts this "intellectual" touch, proper to theology, with corporeal touch which inhibits our understanding of God.

77 See Michaud, "Reason Turned into Sense," 26–103 and Green, "Cusa," 215 n.23.

negative theology. At each stage along the way something unseen, yet ingredient in the very act of seeing, is intimated, pushing reflection beyond the immediate object of contemplation. Seeing has as its transcendental source the power of sight. Thinking, the transcendental power of thought. The human mind, the transcendental power of God. In this, Cusa does anticipate Kant's famous use of transcendental reasoning, albeit to apparently different ends.⁷⁸ Cusa exposes the limits of our vision in order that they be transcended, opening up space for what he takes to be the heights of mystical ascent. Smith's kataphatism leads him to critique the misuse of human faculties from a predominately moral perspective. Through purification of the will and intellect one becomes capable of intuiting the Good and thus having a proper relationship with God.

Both Cusa and Smith present their teaching on "spiritual sense" in the context of educating others. Cusanus offers a guide to contemplation for a religious elite primarily while Smith's aim is catechetical. Smith's original audience were students at Queens' College Cambridge. While many of them were destined for clerical careers, formation in the Christian faith was an essential part of the edification even of the laity too. Here we see one of the effects of the reformations standing between our authors. Smith demonstrates a clear concern for the personal appropriation of religious truth by firsthand experience that characterizes much of Protestant piety; a democratized version of late medieval monastic piety.⁷⁹

Smith speaks implicitly as one who has "seen" that of which he speaks for himself. In contrast, Cusa's claim to never have had a mystical experience himself is illustrative here.⁸⁰ For the Cardinal's advice is to embrace reason until it breaks and to locate theological insight in this failure. Smith, on the other

78 "Apparently" because the practical difference between Kant's "postulate of practical reason" and Cusa's unseen God is not immediately obvious. Everything depends, of course, on one's reading of both authors. On this see Don Cupitt, "Kant and Negative Theology," in *Is Nothing Sacred?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 3–17 and Sergei Bulgakov, "Kant and Negative Theology," in *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 150–2.

79 Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 73–134, 245–89. See also Marvin B. Becker, "Aspects of Lay Piety in Early Renaissance Florence," in *The Pursuit of Holiness*, ed. Charles Edward Trinkaus and Heiko Augustinus Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 177–99. F. Edward Cranz's, "Cusanus, Luther and the Mystical Tradition," in *Pursuit of Holiness*, 93–102 is of interest as well.

80 Nicholas of Cusa to Gaspard Aindorffer, 22 September 1452, in Edmond Vansteenberghe, *Autor de la Docte Ignorance: Une controverse sur la theologie mystique au XV^e siècle* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1915), 113, cited by Certeau, "The Gaze," 25.

hand, speaks of reason that is always already theological. The negative moment of unsaying (i.e., withdrawing one's gaze from the external and corporeal) is purifying for Smith, not the culmination of the spiritual life.

Smith feels entitled to this because he is unapologetically dualist. For him the outer man is wholly inadequate to the theological task but the purified, inner man is already a spiritual being, at home with the Divine Author of all. This may lead to problems that Cusa avoids simply through ignoring them but it makes the Cambridge Platonist far more obviously "modern" than the Cardinal if by that one means a predilection for Cartesianism. It is precisely these theological and philosophical issues raised by mind/body dualism that the importance of Cusa's monistic anthropology becomes clear. By bringing external sense, and thus the body, into theological significance, Cusa opens conceptual space for an appreciation of embodiment, incarnation, and sacramentality largely absent in Smith and many other Protestant theologians.⁸¹

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81 That said, both Cusa and Smith are fond of the incarnational imagery of the birth of the divine Son in the human soul, an important theme for Meister Eckhart too. See Cusa, *De filiatione Dei* (h IV.39–64; trans. Hopkins, I.341–69) and *De visione Dei* 20.88 (h VI.69–70; trans. Hopkins, II.721). Smith discusses the Christian life as "nothing else but God's own breath within him, and an Infant Christ (if I may use the expression) formed in his Soul" (*Selected Discourses*, 21). For Eckhart, see for example, his German Sermon #22 on Luke 1:28, trans. Edmund Colledge, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, ed. Bernard McGinn and Edmund Colledge (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 192–6.

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