

Johannes Hoff, *Kontingenz, Berührung, Überschreitung. Zur philosophischen Mystik nach Nikolaus von Kues*, Freiburg (Verlag Karl Alber), 2007; 569 bladzijden. ISBN 978-3-495-48270-4

Since the famous studies of Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg, the question whether Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) was a late medieval or an early modern thinker, has become an importance, exceeding by far the domain of the pure Cusanus research. A large number of publications already discussed the relation between Cusanus and the proces of modernisation and often these studies had a more ideological meaning than a scientific one. A totally new sound can be heard in the important and voluminous publication of the German theologian Johannes Hoff. For Hoff too, there is more at stake than a purely adequate text-interpretation of an to often forgotten thinker of 15th century. Cusanus' thought is, in the view of the author, the last model in history in which the traditional christian bound between spirituality and science has been developed in an innovative manner, this against the background of the crisis of the classical metaphysical paradigm of order, criticized by nominalism.

As we may believe the author, the importance of Cusanus lays in the fact that he tried for one last time the impossible: the recovering of the philosophical selfconfidence of a religious symbolic language, which can be conjuncted easily with scientific rationality (p. 59). The theologico-mathematical thought of Cusanus is seen by the author as a platform, out of which one is able to understand the modern crisis of meaning, caused by the development of natural sciences. This platform is founded in the tradition of christian thinking and reaches at the same time an equal level of reflection as can be found in the new natural sciences.

The originality of the Hoff's interpretation consists in his starting point: the discourse analysis in the line of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau. As such Hoff is able to avoid 'anthropoligising' perspectives which characterised most interpretations of Cusanus' relation to modernity until now. This move results in a far more realistic interpretation of Nicholas of Cusa theological and metaphysical way of thinking. By detailed and precise analysis of the texts, the author succeeds to show and to make plausible the often heard remark that there can be found some analogies between the early modern thinking of Cusanus and the late modern criticism of modernity (postmodernism). As such, the book not only delivers important new perspectives on Cusanus, but invites to rethink postmodern discours analysis and deconstruction as well. The analysis of Hoff remembers the fact that postmodern thinking in its best form does not contain a rejection of main theological and metaphysical questions, but far more their relecture in the perspective of alterity.

A first problem field of the book shows the meaning of contingency in Cusanus, which is elaborated by the author by way of an analysis of the irreducible difference between line and curve, a discussion which one also can find in Wittgenstein. There is no neutral measure above these elements and this is exactly one the main problems in the late modern discussion on sexual difference. By referring to this problem, Hoff succeeds in reconstructing the implicit theory of science, which are distributed in several works of Cusanus. A second problem field describes the cusanian thinking from the perspective of 'touch' ('Berührung'). The cosmology of infinitude allows to see the difference between Cusanus and modern subjectivity. Hoff shows that here the way is opened towards a thinking of plurality, which is also typical for postmodern paradigms. However, the author makes it plausible, that in Cusanus this plurality is founded in Christian faith. It is the mystagogic character of Cusa's thinking which delivers a proper methodology to handle with this plurality. A third problem field is that of 'exceeding' ('Überschreitung'). The possibility of exceeding and excession is a consequence of this mystagogic character of the cusanian model of rationality. In line with Michel de Certeau, Hoff refers in this context to the 'experimental' character of Cusa's works. Also the 'exceeding' is a genuine dynamics of modernity. For Cusanus however, one can find here the common characteristics of spirituality and natural science.

This book is without any doubt, one of the most important books on the theological (and metaphysical) thinking of Cusauns in the last 20 years. With his sophisticated argumentation, Johannes Hoff succeeds where other authors failed: to show the meaning of Cusanus for the actual debates in theology and philosophy of religion at the beginning of the 21st century on a very fundamental level. The book is not only an interesting historical study on a thinker of 15th century, but is a book of learning in a way of Christian thinking that, after the defeat of several forms of so called liberal theology, risks the discussion with late modern condition of meaning and knowledge. Acknowledging the importance of the book, one should however make one critical remark: Hoff seems to leave the volitive aspects of Cusanus' epistemology out of his analysis. The argumentation to do so is to weak, in comparison with the level of reflexion we meet in the other parts of the book. This is a point with some importance, inasfar the unity of 'will' and 'discourse' belongs to the centre of the problem of modernity. However, the style of the book is such, that one feels invited to discuss further on problems like these. The major merit of Hoff consists in the fact that he shows theologians that they are not able to forget fundamental philosophical questions (on discourse). At the same time, he shows the philosophers that they are not allowed to neglect theological patterns of thinking in name of autonomous reason. Johannes Hoff brought Cusanus-research at the reflexion level of our time.

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