

## Article

# Christian Neoplatonism and Deep Incarnation: Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno as Inspirations for Contemporary Ecotheology

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**Abstract:** In response to the specter of looming anthropogenic ecological catastrophe, many Christian thinkers have begun to rethink the God/world relationship and reimagine the ontic cleavage between divinity and creation. The idea of “deep incarnation”, which expands the scope of divine incarnation in an attempt to draw God and creation into closer relation, is a prevalent framework for such reimagination. Two historic, underutilized thinkers that might help deep incarnation theologians expand their own theologies and make sense of the conceptual and ethical differences among them are Neo-Platonist philosopher–theologians Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno. Working within an ecofeminist framework, this article argues that while both Cusanus and Bruno provide significant philosophical grounds for contemporary ecotheologies of deep incarnation, a Brunist perspective is preferable because of its more expansive anthropology and its more inclusive understanding of divinity.

**Keywords:** Christology; ecotheology; Nickolas of Cusa; Giordano Bruno; ecofeminism



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## 1. Introduction

The idea of “deep incarnation”—the extension of the doctrine of Incarnation so that divine identity transcends Jesus of Nazareth and extends into all things—is a promising reimagining of the Christian tradition in the face of ecological degradation. Insofar as it shrinks the distance between Creator and creation, it potentially reimagines Christology toward a more ecologically meaningful doctrine, helping the tradition address the threat of environmental catastrophe. While “deep incarnation” is a relatively novel framework for overcoming the cleavage between transcendence and immanence through contemplation of the life of Jesus, the incarnation has long been the object of reflection in Christian theologies hoping to bring divinity and materiality into closer proximity.

An exploration of historical examples among Christian philosopher–theologians who similarly strive to close the gap between Creator and creation provides contemporary thinkers with resources to further develop a plurality of deep incarnation formulations and reveal the promise and problems of variant approaches to envisioning greater intimacy in the God/world relationship. Two such resources for contemporary deep incarnation include the work of philosopher–theologians Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno. While Cusan and Brunist perspectives have much in common and eschew any cleavage between God, humanity, and other creatures, they share non-trivial differences that shape their theologies and represent divergent possibilities for modern theologians who envision the incarnation as a model for theologically meaningful ecological relations. This article argues that a deep incarnation closer to Bruno is preferable to one following Cusanus. While each is a radical re-imagining of the God/World relation, Bruno rightly avoids—following ecofeminist philosophy—an andro-anthropocentric “logic of domination”, which is implicit in the theology of Cusanus and many contemporary deep incarnation theologies. Unless

such logic is rejected, Christianity remains vulnerable to the sovereignty of certain socio-political hierarchies that have dominated the Western philosophical imagination and made violence a justifiable option against Earth and its inhabitants due to the association of divine identity with a problematic gender–sexual anthropology.

## 2. Cusanus, the God/World Relation, and Deep Incarnation

For Cusanus, everything that exists does so as an expression and overflow of God's being, a creativity that produces the world through divine contemplation. As such, there exists a non-oppositional identity relation between Creator and creation—everything resides within everything, God included. Creator and creature coincide in ontic unity despite a key difference of degree both between humanity and the rest of creation, and the exemplar of humanity, Jesus, who perfectly unites creaturely finitude and infinite divinity. Cusanus, like his Neo-Platonist forebears, maintains an idea he traces back to Anaxagoras, “each thing is in each thing”, including God, who possesses the form and essence of all things, who come to exist through an overflow of divine being (*On Learned Ignorance*, 2.5.117).<sup>1</sup> God is, thus, both the unity of existence, being prior to differentiation in the universe (*complicatio*), as well as the manifestation of the physical world after the information present within the divine unity branches out in the creation of a diverse plurality (*explicatio*). “God is the enfolding and the unfolding of all things. . . insofar as He is the enfolding, in Him all things are Himself, and. . . insofar as He is the unfolding, in all things He is that which they are, just as in an image the reality itself is present” (*On Learned Ignorance*, 2.3.111). Paradoxically, identity is shared between Creator and creation despite their distinction in the unfolding of the world; they are identified and share existence both in terms of the unity of being and the separation of beings, which together characterize the physical totality of pantheistic existence. Strictly speaking, “God is the Absolute Quiddity of the world, or universe;” broadly speaking, however, “the universe is contracted quiddity” (*On Learned Ignorance*, 2.3.116).<sup>2</sup> Thus, despite their shared identity, there is difference between Creator and creation concerning the degree to which each possesses divinity—the former in fullness, by virtue of the simplicity found in the sameness of divine totality, while the later exists in varying degrees that, as we shall see, are rooted in the presence of the central characteristic understood to be normative and essential to the infinite God, i.e., mindfulness.<sup>3</sup>

There is mutual transcendence at work here as infinite divinity is irreducible to the finite world of differentiated things while nevertheless existing as this world in varying degrees as this or that thing. Likewise, the being of the world of things includes its presence within the divine absolute insofar as the infinite, divine Form includes all finite, creaturely forms. The finite world, of course, is only its fullest self in its corporeal manifestations as it incarnates bodies limited by their specificity. When Cusanus says that God is ultimately beyond things, it is because the meshwork of form and matter distributed throughout creation is neither infinite nor a totality in its particular incarnations and is, thus, too restricted in its contingency to bear the designation “God”, at least in terms of the absolute object of religious devotion.<sup>4</sup> “You, my God”, Cusanus confesses, “are Absolute Infinity, which I see to be an Infinite End” (*The Vision of God*, 13.54).<sup>5</sup>

Here, however, resides the problem for Cusanus concerning a more robust identification of Creator and creation. Strictly speaking, God is fully divine only as a totality that holds everything within itself; God is the “Not-other”, or the antecedent ontological sameness that self-expresses and maintains its identity in and as each individual thing in the created order. Cusanus' thinking assumes that the infinite, by definition, cannot absolutely manifest the finite restrictions incarnate in the world or creatures, and thus, God becomes the object referring to the unified totality from which things come to be. We can only speak of God as the enfolding totality, but such sameness does unfold to become all things—God is “Not-other” in the totality of a sameness existing as the Constituting Ground of all created things. Yet, paradoxically, God is also “Not-other” than its finite, differentiated creative expressions, which become all things.

Not-other is not other; nor is it *other* than other; nor is it other in another. [These points are true] for no other reason than that [Not-other is] Not-other, which cannot in any way be an other—as if something were lacking to it, as to an other. Because other is *other* than something, it lacks that than which it is *other*. But because Not-other is not *other* than anything, it does not lack anything, nor can anything exist outside of it. Hence, without Not-other no thing can be spoken of or thought of, because it would not be spoken of or thought of through that without which, since it precedes all things, no thing can exist or be known. Accordingly, in itself, Not-other is seen antecedently and as absolutely no other than itself; and in an other, it is seen as not other than this other. (*On God as Not-other*, 6.20)

This has profound, not to mention dizzying, implications for the essence of creation.

If anyone sees that *Not-other* is not only the definition of itself and of all things but also the object of its own definition and of the definition of all else, then in all the things which he sees, he sees only *Not-other* defining itself. For what does he see in other except *Not-other* defining itself? What else [does he see] in the sky except *Not-other* defining itself? And similarly for all things. Therefore, the creature is the manifestation of the Creator defining Himself—or the manifestation of the Light (which is God) manifesting itself. (*On God as Not-other*, Proposition 118.12)

Yet, while all that exists does so in a plurality of finite, divine incarnations—i.e., the sky is God incarnate as sky—God as the object of religious devotion is not the universe or any creature, but the inclusive totality of Being from which beings arise and the single, perfect exemplar of created being able to fully unite with absolute Being. Only the totality, for Cusanus, is that infinite and most simple Oneness worthy of the divine name.

There is one exception among things, where the cleavage between Creator and creation is nearly bridged. The human is a unique expression of the divine and Jesus of Nazareth its exemplar, the perfect incarnation of humanity and, thus, the fullest expression of God as a creature. While divine incarnation “is everywhere and always”, humanity most closely participates in the essence of divine sameness through its mindfulness, which is able to contemplate the idea of the infinite it receives from God (Bocken 2019, p. 40).<sup>6</sup> This is possible because of the human mind, which, according to Cusanus, approaches infinity insofar as it transcends the restrictions and finitude of perspectival knowing and intuits a Being as the impenetrable source of beings through the creativity of its mindful contemplation—contemplation at the levels of both *ratio* and *intellectus*—which partakes in the creativity of the divine mind. The mind does not discover God through the active efforts of reason (*ratio*) but through the passive reception of the divine through its intellect (*intellectus*). This process begins with the creativity of rationality that eventually discovers its limits, and in recognition of ignorance, the human becomes mindful of the possibility of mystical vision—a divine revelation received and contemplated through grace, faith, and love that unites the subject with God in a moment of theosis.<sup>7</sup> The possibility of such mindfulness, for Cusanus, manifests the crucial distinction between the essence of humanity and all other creatures, establishing the human *imago dei*, an image of God beyond mere likeness, which all things possess in their limited incarnations.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, God, for Cusanus, is not only “Absolute Divine Being” but “Divine Mind”, “Intellectual Beginning and End of all things”, “Infinite Reason”, “Rational Measure”, and “Infinite Mind”, and, thus, only the being modeled on such mindfulness and able to create its own world through the contemplation of the idea of infinity—i.e., humanity—may properly bear its image (*On Surmises* 1.1.5; 1.2.1).<sup>9</sup> While all things are an incarnation of God in the likeness of divinity, humanity participates in God to a greater degree than all others through mind, from *ratio* to *intellectus*, which potentially unites creaturely finitude with infinite divinity as it contemplates infinity and bathes in the revelation of mystical vision. Such is only fully realized, of course, in Jesus, who exemplifies the highest possibility of divine contraction into the world as fully human and divine.<sup>10</sup>

Moving from Cusanus to his possible relevance and inspiration for contemporary theologies concerned with ecology and non-human bodies, we note the similarities be-

tween Cusanus' theology and the idea of "deep incarnation" Christology, which today is becoming a common approach to contemplating the divine/world relationship rooted in the incarnation of Jesus. Deep incarnation Christology, in its dominant form today, understands the identity and essence of God to ground the being of each thing much in the way Cusanus does and acknowledges Jesus, among humans, as representing the deepest degree of divine sameness among creation.<sup>11</sup> As in Cusanus, so in most deep incarnation theologies, insofar as no creature can express or manifest the fullness of the divine, God—the fullness of divinity—is spoken of as the totality, the being from which everything comes to be. God, thus, exists, albeit in a limited degree, in the contracted forms of all things, and all things exist within the unity of God's absolute Form, which is the ultimate degree of divinity. As in most pantheisms, the ultimate unity of things and the ultimate degree of divinity is alone worthy of the divine name.<sup>12</sup>

This perspective is best represented by the work of Niels Henrik Gregersen, whose view of deep incarnation represents the most well-known articulation of the doctrine.<sup>13</sup> Though rooted in Stoicism rather than Neo-Platonism, Gregersen makes similar points concerning the divine Logos as the absolute form and the being from which every being comes to exist. The Logos—"meaning Pattern or Structure as much as Reason or Word"—is the generative, incorporeal matrix of physical possibilities and actualizes the world by shaping matter (Gregersen 2013a, p. 406).<sup>14</sup> The expression of this divine source within and as particular incarnate bodies becomes the physical, created world and the ground of a divinized universe. Comprised of informed mass energy, the world flows from the Logos' being, the self-definition of God expressing as this or that. This broad sense of deep incarnation reflects a real identity between Creator and creation, but like Cusanus' vision, does not consider this divine likeness to be, strictly speaking, the infinite, absolute God, which would make the immanent world an object of religious devotion. Yet, the ontic relation between transcendence and immanence is nevertheless quite radical. For both Gregersen and Cusanus, there is both identity and difference when speaking of divine participation within the world. "Participation", writes Nancy Hudson, speaking of Cusanus, "is the paradoxical theory in which the identity and difference of God and the universe are both maintained. Neither increased nor diminished by the world's creation, God informs the world by being at one with it, while at the same time maintaining his transcendence" (Hudson 2007, pp. 49–50).

For Cusanus, this is because God cannot be named within finitude or restricted by finite bodies, while Gregersen seems more concerned with defining God in terms of agential love.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, "the divine Logos/Wisdom is (minimally) co-extensive with all material forms. . . and there is no gulf between Christ and creation" (Gregersen 2013a, p. 407).<sup>16</sup> As such, Gregersen, like Cusanus, insists that humanity alone, with its capacities for intellectual, religious, and ethical agency, can incarnate God to the deepest degree, and both would hold Jesus as the species exemplar where that incarnation is fullest. While different, Cusanus and Gregersen each evince a deep incarnational structure wherein, broadly speaking, the world has a divine identity, though strictly speaking, the fullest degree of this identity resides with humanity and especially its exemplar, Jesus of Nazareth.

### 3. Bruno, the One and the Many, and a Logic of Domination

The incarnational philosophy of Cusanus is a radical approach to the God/world relationship and offers a significant foundation for any contemporary Christian theology concerned with contemplating creation in the context of the ecological crisis. The deep incarnational structure of Cusanus' vision precludes any reduction of the world to a mere backdrop for the drama of human flourishing, as well as any approach to things that would reduce their theological and moral significance to their utility value. Cusanus' world is divine, and even if not the object of religious devotion, commands respect and love worthy of its divine ontology. Yet, I fear that Cusanus' vision, and the form of deep incarnation it resonates most strongly with, contains a potential problem for conceptualizing infinite divinity and the moral relationship between humanity and the rest of creation.

Anthropocentrism is an inescapable element of Cusanus' thought, and despite God's infinity, there seems a reduction of divine being to a certain perception of normative human being rooted in a common but problematic gender–sexual identification of humanity that shapes the entire theological and moral structure of his philosophy.

Giordano Bruno is an interesting dialogue partner for Cusanus because he is deeply indebted to Cusan philosophy while departing from him on the key issue of metaphysical anthropocentrism.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it is Bruno's mutual appreciation for both Plotinus and Epicurus that complicates his philosophy of the God/world relation and the place of the human within a divine creation, which finds it problematic to identify God most directly with human mindfulness and elevate humanity to the potential locus of exemplary contact between the divinity that is absolute, enfolded infinity and this same divine's expression as the unfolded infinite world.

Influenced by the doctrine of the coincidence of opposites, ideas of the Maximum and the Minimum, and infinity, "as the Cusan, the inventor of geometry's most beautiful secrets, divinely pointed out", Bruno, too, argues for a pantheistic, identic relation between Creator and creation—both the united, enfolded existence of the one being and its modal, unfolded expression as many beings are divine (Bruno 1998, p. 97).<sup>18</sup> Because the infinite is truly all that could be, there requires a total ontic overlap between the constitutive ground of being and its manifold incarnations as this and that being.<sup>19</sup> The world, as such, is identical to the multi-modal expression of one unified, divine substance and being.

We are, therefore, correct in affirming that being—the substance, the essence—is one, and since that one is infinite and limitless, both with respect to duration and substance, as it is in terms of greatness and vigour, it does not have the nature of either a principle or of what is principled; for each thing, coinciding in unity and identity (that is to say, in the same being), comes to have an absolute value and not a relative one. In the infinite and immobile one, which is substance and being, if there is multiplicity, the number which is a mode and multiformity of being by which it comes to denominate things as things, does not, thereby, cause being to be more than one but to be multi-modal, multiform, and multi-figured. . . . Every production, of whatever kind, is an alteration, while the substance always remains the same since there is only one substance, as there is but one divine, immortal being. (Bruno 1998, p. 90)

This is deeply similar to Cusanus' theology, which is Bruno's chief inspiration, but with two crucial differences related to the ontological priority of mindfulness over materiality and the existence of an exemplary species among the many beings who are more closely related to the one being. These differences preclude the possibility of Bruno privileging the one being as divine to a greater degree than its multi-modal, multiform, multi-figured expression and have radical implications for the doctrine of Christology.

First, for Bruno, unlike Cusanus, the one being and substance may indeed be the constitutive ground of beings, but it is not restricted to an essence of immaterial mindfulness that unilaterally shapes matter. The one being and substance is an inseparable meshwork of intellect and matter, without ontological priority being given to the former. The one, in other words, is infinite enfolded physicality prior to its unfolding into spacial extension. Unlike Cusanus, then, absolute divinity cannot be restricted to the intellect present within the enfolding and unfolding of things, primarily because mindfulness and materiality are inseparable, interpenetrating, and mutually generative of one another. Enfolded being is, thus, not an immaterial ground of the world but is itself infinite, mindful materiality that eternally creates the world through a process of self-alteration and self-production. Even if this enfolded ground is understood as "incorporeal" in a sense, insofar as it does not contain the dimension and extension the unfolding of corporeity does, it is still a mode of matter and is a physical reality, possessing "some underlying matter" (Bruno 1998, p. 77). The constitutive ground of things is "eternal corporeal substance. . . the one material principle, which is the true substance of things, eternal, ingenerable, and incorruptible" (Bruno 1964, p. 75). Here, intellect and materiality eternally co-exist as "matter which is always under



the same act, while in variable things, [this same] matter contains now one, now another act" (Bruno 1998, p. 78). Either taken alone would be finite, although such cleavage of what necessarily reside together would be metaphysically incoherent. Bruno does, however, retain a sense of creative priority within this united meshwork, residing in the material essence of being. Whether within the one substance and being or the many things that come to be, matter remains an active force in Bruno's philosophy, irreducible to "a substratum of forms and a potency which is receptive to natural forms" (Bruno 1998, p. 82). After his deconstruction of Aristotelean physics and its inconsistency in withholding the power of creative actuality from matter, Bruno suggests, through the voice of Dicsono, "Rather than saying that matter is empty and excludes forms, we should say that it contains forms and includes them. This matter which unfolds what it possesses enfolded must, therefore, be called a divine and excellent parent, generator and mother of natural things—indeed, nature entire in substance" (Bruno 1998, pp. 83–84).<sup>20</sup> Thus, for Bruno, there is not an immaterial ground that enfolds and creates things through an active contemplation that shapes passive matter, but a physical substance and being that enfolds and produces the forms, or intellect, that subsequently shapes itself as it takes on extended dimension and incarnates as this and that particular being. Hilary Gatti sums up Bruno's position as the "complete reversal of the Aristotelian equation, making matter into the active substance that underlies an infinite world of finite objects and contains within it the total potentiality of all forms: a potentiality that precedes the single form with its acts of motion, and on which all motion logically depends" (Gatti 2002, p. 121).<sup>21</sup> Thus, while structurally similar to Cusanus, the enfolding of forms in material substance that is co-eternal and co-creative alongside intellect adds a physical essence of the contingent ground of the cosmos that the Cusan theology cannot abide.

None of this discounts the significance and usefulness of ideas and roles pertaining to intellect, mindfulness, contemplation, spirit, and form in Bruno's thought. Nor does it rule out speaking of them in divine terms, much as Cusanus does. Spirit—the inner artificer of matter, world-soul, or universal intellect—resides eternally enfolded within the one being and substance and orders the unfolding of the cosmos and individual creatures.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the intelligible forms that shape the sensible are enfolded and produced within the physical substance and being that grounds and becomes the sensible world. Intellect, mindfulness, contemplation, spirit, and form are, thus, physical realities for Bruno, inseparable from their origin in and production by a certain sort of matter, even though they reciprocate creativity by shaping this same material ground as it becomes many things. Matter is inherently mindful in Bruno's physicalist metaphysic, whether in its intelligible or sensible forms. These two sorts of matter remain paradoxically distinct and identical, coinciding, he argues, in their multi-modal unity as the substance and being that both grounds and is the beings of the world.<sup>23</sup> "Every production, of whatever kind", as such, "is an alteration, while the substance always remains the same since there is only one substance, as there is but one divine, immortal being. . . . thus, everything coincides in perfect unity" (Bruno 1998, p. 90). As such, any claim for the ontic priority of intellect over matter or the divinization of mindfulness over the material ends up incoherent in Bruno's thought.

The second significant difference between Cusanus and Bruno, intimately connected to the reasoning of the first, is that among the many divine expressions of the one divine substance and being, there is no exemplar that bridges the gap between the two modes of physical existence. Intelligible and sensible matter coincide in perfect unity, and thus, for Bruno, nothing is more or less divine. For Bruno, infinite, enfolded divine identity is not diminished in any of its unfolded definitions. The infinite is all that it can be both in potency and act. The single, divine substance and being that shapeshifts into a plurality of forms retains its fullness as it coincides with each thing throughout time because the infinite cannot be bound to either the potency of its eternal, enfolded sameness or the actuality of its unfolding throughout time in its particular expressions. The infinite, by nature of infinity, must incorporate all that could be and all that actually is throughout eternity. Since sensible matter is an alteration of the infinite, intelligible matter, there is no recourse to

posit that any individual creature is closer to the one substance and being that it happens to incarnate in a unique manner. As such, no finite thing is more exemplary of the infinite than any other, even if each is an expression of the same substance and being. “You come no nearer to commensurability, likeness, union and identity with the infinite”, Bruno writes, “by being a man than by being an ant, or by being a star than by being a man, for you get no nearer to that infinite being by being the sun or the moon than by being a man, or an ant” (Bruno 1998, p. 88). Thus, while Bruno insists that divine infinity and identity is maintained as the enfolded one unfolds into alterity, no one creature is more divine than any other. Humanity loses its place at the top of any ontic, religious hierarchy and ceases to be the sole *imago dei*, relegating all else to a lesser divine likeness that dimly reflects something greater. The whole physical world throughout time, including each individual body, is the unified multi-modal expression of God. “Thus, not for nothing is it said that Jove fills all things, inhabits all parts of the universe, is the centre of everything which has being: one in all, and that through which all is one, and is that which, being all things and comprehending all being in itself, causes everything to be in everything” (Bruno 1998, p. 89).

As such, despite the deep congruency between Cusanus and Bruno, we see here the two crucial differences between their incarnational philosophies and potential divergent directions for contemporary deep incarnation theologies. Bruno (1) does not appeal to immaterial mindfulness as the creative ground of being or the highest degree of divinity; God is equally the enfolded one, physical substance and being, as well as its unfolded expression as many beings. Following this, Bruno (2) insists that there is no single species among the many that exemplifies the one; there is, thus, no potential exemplary locus of contact between two orders of divine non-otherness that privileges humanity over any other divine expression.

There are multiple perspectives influencing Bruno’s position, including his synthesis of Plotinus and Epicurus (through Lucretius) and a strong anti-Aristotelean bias. Out of this mix comes Bruno’s striking critique of the dominant stream of Western philosophy that denigrates the material part of existence and leads him to a perspective wherein the physical—i.e., intelligible matter—characterizes both the one, enfolded substance and being and the many unfolded beings that exist as modes of the former. Within this critique, Bruno reveals an early recognition of a bias that ascribes a certain form of human normativity, which privileges human mindfulness as ontically superior to corporeity, into the essential essence of the divine. Beyond a simple anthropocentrism, which inappropriately reifies the identity of an infinite God to an alter ego of humanity, Bruno recognizes in his critique of the dominant Western philosophical imagination a humanism infused with an essentialist gender-sexual perspective that normalizes not humanity as such but accepts a normative masculine form socio-political power.

In the fourth dialogue of *Cause, Principle, and Unity*, Bruno uses the character Poliinnio—the dialogue’s Aristotelean representative, who is mercilessly mocked throughout the book—to summarize this view. “A woman is [nothing] but matter”, Poliinnio insists, and if we want to understand women, we must explore their shared essence of brute matter, which is mindless, chaotic, and utterly passive (Bruno 1998, p. 74). “Women are a *chaos* of irrationality”, Poliinnio insists, “a *hyle* [wood] of wickedness, a forest of ribaldry, a mass of uncleanness, an inclination to every perdition (another rhetorical flourish here, called by some *complexio* [complexion])!” (Bruno 1998, p. 71). Women, who are closer in essence to matter according to the Aristotelean, are responsible for the destruction of great cities such as Troy, the downfall of ancient heroes such as Samson, and have wreaked havoc on all mindful men, the symbol of intellectual form on Earth, from the Garden of Eden till the present. Such a negative essence reveals why it was unthinkable for many to view the divine as having any sort of intimate, essential connection to inferior feminine corporeity when juxtaposed with superior masculine mindfulness. Women and corporeity are characterized as:

Intractable, frail, capricious, cowardly, feeble, vile, ignoble, base, despicable, slovenly, unworthy, deceitful, harmful, abusive, cold, misshapen, barren, vain,

confused, senseless, treacherous, lazy, fetid, foul, ungrateful, truncated, mutilated, imperfect, unfinished, deficient, insolent, amputated, diminished, stale, vermin, tares, plague, sickness, death:

*Messo tra noi da la natura e Dio per una soma e per un grave fio.* By nature and by God among us sent as a burden and heavy punishment. (Bruno 1998, p. 72)

Bruno's position rejects any essential, reductive connection between women and matter as well as any notion of its overwhelmingly negative ontic nature. Socio-cultural power structures that generate and/or reinforce such philosophies that bifurcate the world into separable, essentialized ways of being, establish a value hierarchy between these ways of being, and, thus, delimit divine identity based on this hierarchy are suspect in his thinking.

While Bruno links this problematic gender philosophy and theology to Aristotelians and not Neo-Platonists such as Cusanus, I believe there is a connection between Poliinnio's perspective and the reduction of fullest divinity to non-corporeal mindfulness in the theology of Cusanus. Bruno does not criticize Cusanus directly, but it follows that there should be an implicit critique of any system that separates and divinizes mindfulness above corporeity through such a philosophical anthropology. This anthropologically grounded theology separates and contrasts mind and matter through an appeal to the ontological priority and hierarchical value of the former while diminishing the latter. This position is suspect because it reflects an unacknowledged appeal to the normalization of an erroneous view of a certain form of masculinity as the exemplar human, which becomes the basis for delimiting the divine essence, annihilating the divine infinity it means to uphold, and, thus, casting God in the form of a certain sort of hu/man.<sup>24</sup> This critique should hold even if matter is able to receive the creative contemplation of the divine mind and become articulate as its embodied, divinized expression. While the world is divine, for Cusanus, it is still the non-corporeal, formal aspect of God's body that reaches back to that most godlike, mindful contemplation and the human man, which, above all creatures, comes closest to this divinity and contains the possibility of theosis. Cusanus, obviously, does not share the overwhelmingly negative perspective of the world portrayed by Poliinnio—Cusanus' theology is pantheist, and his world is the body of God—but the ontological priority of incorporeal mind, a species preference in restricting the identity of a supposedly divine God, a suspect anthropology, and consequent deficiency in understanding the more-than-human world, problematize his theology and doctrine of incarnation. Bruno's implicit critique here is useful in re-imagining a Christian philosophy of the more-than-human.

Bruno, thus, pushes back against this common bias buried within the Western philosophical imagination, which connects women essentially to corporeity and views the body in a lower hierarchical position in relation to an assumed non-corporeal, masculine intellect.<sup>25</sup> In this system, God's infinite identity is reified as masculine intellect and remains estranged from the world even when divinity expresses itself within and as things. For Bruno, on the contrary, God remains simultaneously the one and the many, and none of the latter exemplify the former more or less than the others. Divine infinity precludes ontological cleavage and hierarchy.

His system tends toward the sort of philosophical egalitarianism we see fleshed out in contemporary ecofeminist discourse and, I suggest, provides a meaningful set of conceptual resources for considering a theology of deep incarnation.<sup>26</sup> Contemporary ecofeminists such as Karen Warren suggest a similar critique of the Western philosophical imagination. Ecofeminism, broadly speaking, suggests that there is a shared conceptual framework underlying and justifying the desire of some men to dominate both women and the more-than-human. The desire for domination is rooted in assumptions about the ontic essence linking women, the more-than-human world, and anyone else not sharing in the nature of the mindful masculinity that exemplifies humanity and the divine ideal. This conceptual framework functions, Warren suggests, as a way "to maintain, perpetuate, and 'justify' the dominations of women, other subordinated humans, and nonhuman nature" (Warren 2000, p. 46).<sup>27</sup> Oppressive domination thus emerges through the creation of a



“value-hierarchical thinking” and “oppositional value dualisms”, which bifurcate the world into “disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as exclusive (rather than inclusive) and oppositional (rather than complementary) and that places higher value (status, prestige) on one disjunct than the other” (Warren 2000, p. 46).<sup>28</sup> A conceptual framework that cleaves the world into mindful, masculine bodies who image and exemplify an incorporeal God more perfectly than do mindless, feminine bodies that remain mired in the material results in these inescapable oppositional value dualisms that have real-world ramifications for how women and Earth are perceived and treated. If such is the case, it becomes apparent that the imagination elevating masculine mindfulness over a mindless, feminine creation is involved not in the revelation of metaphysical truth but rather in a deep, socio-cultural project aimed to maintain its power over alterity. Such is the “logic of domination”—“a logical structure of argumentation that ‘justifies’ domination and subordination”—characterizing much of the Western philosophical imagination, including its Christian articulations, insofar as it exalts humanity and its exemplary men to a divine status not afforded to the rest of creation (Warren 2000, p. 47).

Any perspective, religious or otherwise, operating within this “logic of domination” denies the physical world and its creatures’, with few exceptions, full participation within the most celebrated elements of creation. This logic of domination insists that only those bearing the form of masculine mindfulness possess the privilege of closest divine proximity, even if all things are an expression of God. Yet, even if those who were historically excluded from operating within the bounds of transcendent, incorporeal mindfulness—women, but we could also likely include queer men and women, children, the poor, and those historically subject to racist, colonialist, and imperial rationalities—were invited into the circle of man’s privilege and recognized as fully bearing the *imago dei* as classically understood, they would simply bear the image and identity defined by that once hegemonic power that ordered and dominated the world to ensure the sovereignty of certain men. Their divine character would still amount to a reduction of the other to the same through its retention of that isolating essence that erroneously separates and privileges mindfulness over embodiment, thus obfuscating the deepest sense of the world’s sacred identity, which must retain the freedom and possibility to express beyond any dominant socio-cultural framework. Following Bruno and contemporary ecofeminism, we could say that the form of incorporeal mindfulness is neither normative of human existence, what identifies the species most clearly or uniquely, or what unites creation with Creator. The image of God within such a logic is nothing but the image of a power that aims to dominate alterity.

#### 4. Conclusions: Reimagining Anthropology and Incarnation

If God is truly Not-other—infinite substance and being expressed as a plurality of beings—we should consider adopting a radically non-anthropocentric theology following the concerns of Bruno and contemporary ecofeminism. As radical as Cusanus’ theology is, I fear his theology re-inscribes the hegemonic, masculine conceptual framework that Bruno critiques and cannot maintain the robust appeal to divine infinity that grounds his thought. The same is true of most forms of deep incarnation expressed today, as well as most ecotheologies in general. My argument in favor of a Brunist ecotheology rooted within a philosophy of ecofeminism eschews any logic of domination in favor of radical egalitarianism in which each thing, as well as the totality of the physical, cosmic meshwork of our world, is equally expressive of divinity. This perspective poses its own unique difficulties, which I will not deal with now, especially concerning how we might view such a divinized world as the object(s) of religious devotion and moral responsibility. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties and the good that comes from Cusanus’ thought, I suggest that ecotheology reject any humanism that maintains an andro-anthropocentric framework as this facilitates the possibility for a single species, and its most violent members, to dominate other creation, creatures, and the idea of God.

The theological consequences of the critique I outline in this article are best summarized as an expansion of Mary Daly’s famous challenge to Christian androcentrism.

Daly insists that “if God is male, then the male is God”, while women and whoever else not bearing the exemplary human essence are distanced from divinity and divested of the power and dignity befitting the divine along with the concrete social–political power that accompanies divinization (Daly 1975, p. 38). In light of Bruno’s critique and the ecofeminist criticism that followed in its wake centuries after his execution, I suggest an anthropocentric correlate to the truth revealed in Daly’s theology: If God is human, then the human is God. Likewise, following Daly and the truth manifest in all feminist and otherwise queer theologies, we cannot escape the reality that anthropocentric theologies reinscribe human sovereignty in the world, thus creating real power differences among creation and its creatures that results in deleterious effects on the world. Such is the ground for all anthropogenic ecological catastrophes.<sup>29</sup> The exemplary human in this context is, of course, the mindful man who is inextricably tied to a historic manifestation of male hegemonic power and, as such, an inadequate, myopic vision of humanity. This, however, is not the ultimate problem with anthropocentrism. Even if we could agree on an ideal humanity truly representative of the species in all its beauty and plurality, and even if such a humanity could exemplify the aspect(s) of divinity relevant to the unique human experience, it could still not exemplify an infinite God absolutely. Non-human alterity, in all its beauty and plurality, would still unfold divinity beyond and irreducible to any humanist embodiment.

As such, I argue that insofar as Cusanus and other incarnation theologies restrict divinity in its deepest sense to what is historically a restrictive andro-anthropocentric identity, they help maintain and justify the continued possibility of oppressive domination of creation, suspend divine infinity, and image God in the form of a certain sort of mindful hu/man, placing all else in a position of subordination to this sovereign. Considering this critique, I suggest that future Christian ecotheologies should continue to reimagine their theological anthropology and Christology. While I do not have time or space to address these in detail here or note the new problems such radical ideas raise, each reimagination must grapple with the problematic idea supported by Cusanus and rejected by Bruno that there is an exemplar on Earth and throughout the cosmos—whether humanity or Jesus—that alone unites the ontic cleavage between divinity and creation. Juxtaposing Cusanus and Bruno reveals the need for dialogue among theologies that might otherwise come to considerable agreement.

I suggest first that ecotheology needs a renewed anthropology—one that is not entrenched within a problematic gender–sex view of humanity that can neither speak for the species as such nor determine the essence of God. What is needed is an anthropology that does not remove the human from its total participation within and alongside creation, thus eschewing metaphysical value hierarchies among creation and truly preserving the idea of an infinite God. The whole notion of the *imago dei* must be rethought and extended, potentially to all of creation, risking the collapse of any difference between the doctrines of the image and the incarnation of God. I suggest then that ecotheology also needs a renewed anthropology doctrine of Incarnation and Christology. Just as humanity is problematically seen as exemplary of divinity, it becomes problematic to see the exemplar human—as far as the Christian tradition goes—as the only strict sense of divine incarnation throughout the universe. God might be more prevalently revealed and incarnate throughout the world, perhaps ubiquitously. Such a pluralistic possibility of meeting the divine might quickly unravel towards a sort of theological anarchy unless we were able to categorize the various senses in which enfolded divinity unfolds as all things. We might, for starters, speak of the aesthetic, creative, and soteriological incarnations of God since not everything that unfolds could be uniformly categorized or expressive of divine totality. Incarnational theologies of *glory* concerning the divine beauty and power expressing in the face of each thing; *creative tension* involving birth, evolution, death, and rebirth throughout the universe; and *cruciform ethics* manifest in redemptive love, justice, and liberation might collectively offer a framework for future ecotheological reflections on Christology. Each theme within this structure, after all, is rooted in a historic role-function assigned to Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

To be clear, I do not think these conclusions rule out seeing Jesus as an exemplar in a relative sense, i.e., within Christianity, Jesus might remain the paradigmatic model of divine incarnation in a non-metaphysical sense. As our human exemplar of divine glory, creativity, and love, we might argue that Jesus shows us more clearly than others how to be human and what the human needs for its own redemption and flourishing. But the non-metaphysical nature of this perspective means that it could not be absolutized and would remain open to other incarnations, admitting to a learned ignorance of divine infinity that unfolds in ways that remain alien to and hidden from us. Jesus would, in such an understanding, participate in a deeper, more universal Christological performance of divine incarnation that reveals further instances of glory, creativity, and love.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All references to *On Learned Ignorance* are found in (Hopkins 1981).

<sup>2</sup> See also *On Learned Ignorance*, 2.9.149.

<sup>3</sup> Cusanus continues: “*Contraction* means contraction to [i.e., restriction by] something, so as to be this or that. Therefore, God, who is one, is in the one universe. But the universe is contractedly in all things. And so, we can understand the following: (1) how it is that God, who is most simple Oneness and exists in the one universe, is in all things as if subsequently and through the mediation of the universe, and (2) [how it is that as it] through the mediation of the one universe the plurality of things is in God”. *On Learned Ignorance*, 2.3.116.

<sup>4</sup> Cusanus’s early work states: “it seems that the creation, which is neither God nor nothing, is, as it were, after God and before nothing and in between God and nothing—as one of the sages says: “God is the opposition to nothing by the mediation of being”. Nevertheless, [the creation] cannot be composed of being and not-being. Therefore, it seems neither to be (since it descends from being) nor not to be (since it is before nothing) nor to be a composite of being and nothing”. *On Learned Ignorance*, 2.2.99–100. See also, *On Learned Ignorance*, 1.24–26. Later, in his definition of God as Not-Other, Cusanus will write that “the theologians rightly affirmed that in all things God is all things, even though [He is] none of these things” (*On God as Not-other*, 6.21). All references to *On God as Not-other* are found in (Hopkins 1987). See also, *The Vision of God*, esp. 12–13. All references to *The Vision of God* are found in (Hopkins 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Louis Dupré writes that “when Cusanus refers to God as *forma formarum* or *absolute form* he not only excludes any analogy with finite forms, but shifts ontological perfection from existence to essence” (L. Dupré 1992, p. 112).

<sup>6</sup> I note that mindful, divine contemplation is not a simple production of rationality. Rather, it emerges out of active rationality and the passive, receptive power of the intellect, which beholds the revelation of a mystical vision given by God after one recognizes the mind’s inability to think the infinite. This is our learned ignorance. On this process, see (Hudson 2007, pp. 118–33). There is other evidence of humanity’s bearing the living image of God, such as its social and political nature, but all are associated with the mind. For more, see (W. Dupré 2006).

<sup>7</sup> This theme is seen from the beginning of *On Learned Ignorance*, 1.1, and culminates in the discussion of faith and love as the passive posture able to receive the revelation of God beyond one’s recognition of their finitude and ignorance. Rationality is not abandoned, but neither is it enough to unite one with God, which requires divine grace along with faith and love. See *On Learned Ignorance*, 3.1–12, esp., 3.9; *The Vision of God*, 19–25, esp., 24.

<sup>8</sup> On the difference between likeness and image, see (L. Dupré 2006).

<sup>9</sup> All references to *On Surmises* are found in (Hopkins 2000). Likewise, the human mind displays the creativity of the Absolute divine mind insofar as it is a new enfolding of ideas amidst the unfolding of creation.

<sup>10</sup> For Cusanus’ perspective on Jesus, see *On Learned Ignorance*, 3.1–12; *The Vision of God*, 19–25.

<sup>11</sup> For a variety of perspectives on deep incarnation see (Gregersen 2015), especially Gregersen’s essays in the collection, which represent the normative idea of deep incarnation when discussed in Christological literature. For book length treatments, see (Edwards 2019; Eaton 2023).

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of pantheism, see (Levine 1994). See also (Moran 1990).

<sup>13</sup> An exploration of Gregersen’s work on deep incarnation should include at least the following: (Gregersen 2001, 2010a, 2010b, 2013a, 2013b).

- 14 There is an aspect of Spirit at work here connected to energy, with the Logos being explicitly tied to information. See e.g., (Gregersen 2010b, p. 325). Parsing out Trinitarian minutiae and potential scientific correlates is present throughout Gregersen's writings but too tedious to include here.
- 15 Gregersen suggests that "it seems obvious that the identity of God as Love can't be revealed in a tomato or in a mussel, nor in the birth and decay of stars and galaxies in the macro-scopic realm of the cosmos. The incarnation must take place in a self-reflective religious human person. . . whose life is fully attuned to God's" (Gregersen 2013b, p. 458).
- 16 Breaking from Thomistic approaches to the Creator/creation relation, Gregersen roots his perspective in a more robust idea of infinity. "If God is genuinely infinite, then God is the comprehensive reality—not a being fenced in as one existent alongside other existents. Moreover, if there are finite existents in the world, they must somehow be included in divine life" (Gregersen 2013a, p. 396).
- 17 I understand metaphysical anthropocentrism as a normalization of humanity as the singular embodiment capable of making sense of the world and providing the model to understand the being beneath the becoming of all beings. Theologically speaking, humanity in this framework is the actual divine object of its own religious devotion. A further element implicit within this perspective, and the central insight of ecofeminist theology and philosophy, is that the idea of the human in such anthropocentrism typically masks its normative humanism in a problematic androcentric framework that reduces human identity to a ratio-linguistic element understood to transcend its immanent, affective, embodied being.
- 18 Mary-Jane Rubenstein notes that Bruno—through his mouthpieces in the dialogue, especially Teofilo—seems reticent to straightforwardly declare his pantheistic heterodoxy: "what this 'strictly physical' dialogue has done is to call each of the divine faculties down into nature itself—all the while pretending not to speak of God" (Rubenstein 2018, p. 84).
- 19 The many things possess real difference, even while containing the same essence and substance of the one. The one is fully expressive as each thing, because being infinite it is the possibility and actuality of infinite expression—the one, infinite substance is all that it could be. "You must conceive", Teofilo says, "therefore, that everything is in everything, but not totally or under all modes in each thing. Understand, therefore, that each single thing is one, but not in the same way". (Bruno 1998, p. 90).
- 20 Teofilo immediately confirms Dicsono's perspective adding weight to its symmetry with Bruno's thinking. Note that matter enfolds form, which is something reserved for the intellect and human mindfulness in Cusanus' philosophy. Likewise, Cusanus insists that the human enfold all things through the ideas it creates and that such creativity is the marker of the possibility of the divine image. This is a significant development beyond Cusanus in Bruno' thinking.
- 21 Gatti is actually commenting on another work, Bruno's *The Torch of the Thirty Statues*, which maintains this physicalist metaphysic. For other studies in Bruno's physicalism, see (Gatti 2002, 2011a, 2011b; Stamatellos 2018).
- 22 This is primarily discussed in the second dialogue, esp. (Bruno 1998, pp. 33–50).
- 23 Thus, even if God is understood, as in Cusanus, as some sort of absolute intellect, or mind, such is a physical reality contained within and produced from the enfolded physical substance and being. In the *De triplici minimo*, Bruno writes: "God is the mind over all; implanted within all nature and pervading the whole system. God speaks and orders; Nature executes and acts". My translation of the original Latin: "*Mens super omnia Deus est. Mens insita omnibus natura. Mens omnia pervadens ratio. Deus dicant et ordinat. Natura exequitur atque facit*" (Bruno 1889, p. 136). God and Nature are parallel here uniting the intelligible and sensible matter.
- 24 The idea of a hu/man follows queer theologians such as Marcella Althaus Reid in expressing the plural meaning of a word formulated in a linguistic pairing where words combine to function independently and in relation to the other. In this case, while God is cast in the human image, the humanity imagined here is a myopic generalization of the species rooted in a reductionist view of masculine essence taken to exemplify humanity. See (Althaus-Reid 2000, 2003).
- 25 Bruno does speak of "the womb" as that material matrix that generates form and intellect and only subsequently becomes formed by such, thus keeping something of a gendered understanding of the material (Bruno 1998, p. 70). But the fact that matter actively produces mind and that it is part of an ontic coincidence with the intellect creates a completely different gender-sex philosophy than what he critiques. Poliinnio too speaks of matter as a womb, though his reproductive language is inseparable from his understanding of women/matter as a passive receptacle seeded by masculine form, possessing no real agency, intellect, or creativity.
- 26 Ecofeminism is a philosophy emerging in French thought from the 1970s, and we should obviously not straightforwardly call Bruno an ecofeminist. But, insofar as "ecofeminist philosophy uses sex/gender analysis as the starting point for critiquing 'isms of domination,'" there is a point of connection with Bruno, though historically speaking he cannot properly be labeled a feminist or environmentalist in the contemporary sense of the terms (Warren 2000, p. 43).
- 27 On the variety of ecofeminisms, see (Warren 2000, pp. 21–42) and for her specific articulation of the philosophy, see pp. 42–71.
- 28 Warren continues: "Examples include value dualisms that give higher status to that which has historically been identified as 'male,' 'white,' 'rational,' and 'culture' than to that which has historically been identified as 'female,' 'black,' 'emotional,' and 'nature' (or 'natural'). According to these value dualisms, it is better to be male, white, or rational, than female, black, or emotional" (Warren 2000, p. 46).



- <sup>29</sup> Given time I would argue that the best Christianity resource has to offer for creation care while maintaining human sovereignty—stewardship theology—still results in catastrophic power imbalances and problematic for ecological ethics. For a description and critique of stewardship as a path to ecological care, see (Horan 2018).
- <sup>30</sup> For this sort of approach to Christology, see (Eaton 2023). An ecological Christology grounded in the role Jesus plays in revealing divine glory; co-creating the world with God; and offering redemption through a cruciform ethic of love, justice, and liberation would be a far more comprehensive approach to the doctrine of Incarnation than anything I have previously suggested.

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