

# Reflections on the Nothingness of God<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

There is a long tradition in Christian history that prizes negative or apophatic approach to the divine. The Cappadocians, especially Gregory of Nyssa, promulgated a rigorous apophatic theology. The fifth-century Eastern monk who wrote under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite was a true heir of the Cappadocians. John Scottus Eriugena in the ninth century; Meister Eckhart, the Dominican preacher of the early fourteenth century; and Nicholas Cusanus, the Renaissance cardinal of the mid-fifteenth century are prominent figures in this often probed trend of thought or approach to the divine which was shaped by the marriage of Platonic thought and Christian belief that went back to Origen in the third century. After a period of neglect, recent decades have seen a definite “apophatic turn,” on account of the deconstruction trend that swept across various academic avenues.

## **Introduction**

The creed “Quicumque,” probably composed in southern Gaul in the late fifth century, confesses faith in “The uncreated Father, the uncreated Son, the uncreated Holy Spirit; the immense Father, the immense Son, the immense Holy Spirit; the eternal Father, the eternal Son, the eternal Holy Spirit,” adding that “nonetheless there are not three eternals, but one eternal, just as there are not three uncreated or three immensities, but one uncreated and one immensity” (Kelly 1964). We are all familiar with such positive, or cataphatic, language ascribing to God the highest

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names, predicates, and attributes: Supreme Being, Absolute Goodness, Highest Perfection, Life Itself, and the like. We find such denominations throughout scripture and the church's liturgy. What sense, then, can it make to speak of God as not-being, non-goodness, indeed, even as nothing (*nihil*)? Yet there is a long tradition in Christian history that prizes such negative, or apophatic, speech - the non-saying, or un-saying, of even the most elevated predicates and attributes in relation to God. Some might suppose that the negative tradition is rooted in the overheated brains of a few marginal theologians, but it too can claim scriptural warrant. In the Bible some of the most eloquent passages about God's going beyond all we can know or say come from Isaiah, as in the chapter where God tells the prophet: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is 55:8-9). And Isaiah exclaims in another text: "Truly, you are a hidden God" – *Vere tu es deus absconditus* (Is 45:15 Vg.).

### **The Allure of Apophatic Trend**

Negating God - at least the God of our imagining, thinking, and speaking - is an integral aspect of the path to the God who cannot be imagined, known, or spoken in human terms. It has been a part of Christian theology and mysticism from the beginning. After a period of neglect for a number of centuries, recent decades have seen a definite "apophatic turn," a revival of interest in the importance of un-saying God (Carabine 1995; Milem 1997; Sells 1994). Part of the renewed fascination with apophaticism is connected to deconstruction, a broad philosophical, literary, and cultural trend in recent culture (Coward & Foshay 1992; Carlson 1999). But this is not the whole story. Even before the wave of deconstructionist thinking, students of the history of theology and mysticism had pointed to the importance of the neglected negative tradition in Christian thought and life (Turner 1995).

It is important to note at the outset of these remarks that the apophatic dimension of the way to God can never be separated from the cataphatic approach to God. Saying and un-saying God are both necessary in our always feeble attempts to name God, because, as the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 said, "...between the Creator and the creature no likeness can be found without finding a greater unlikeness between them" (Turner 2004). This is entailed in the very structure of human speaking. In order to "un-say" it is first necessary to say something - even the most rigorous apophatic theology constructs its agenda by using words, concepts, images, and metaphors. Apophatic theology and

mysticism are obviously large fields of study. Here I will concentrate on only one aspect of apophaticism through reflections on what some Christian mystics intend when they speak of God as *nihil*, that is, “Nothing,” or more accurately, “No-Thing.”

In Christianity negative theology in the explicit sense is found as early as the second century, both in texts of Gnostic Christians, such as the *Allogenes*, (Layton 1987) as well as in more mainstream authors, such as Justin and Clement of Alexandria (Mortley 1987). A key chapter in the evolution of the tradition came in the late fourth century when the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa) discerned that a crucial source of the errors of the Arians concerning the inferior divinity of the Word (*Logos*) was to be found in their conviction that humans could attain a comprehensive concept of God. No, the Cappadocians argued, there can be no satisfactory concept of God because the divine nature is absolutely unlimited or infinite. To affirm that God is beyond all limits is to recognize that God in God’s-self is unknowable, that is, is “not-a-thing in any way.” Hence, the Cappadocians, especially Gregory of Nyssa, advanced a rigorous apophatic theology. Gregory was also the first Christian author to see that an apophatic doctrine of God entails an apophatic anthropology, which teaches that humans as made to God’s image and likeness (Gen. 1:26) are also radically unknowable (DeConick & Adamson 2013). As he argued in his treatise *The Making of Humanity* (*De hominis opificio*), “Since one of the attributes we contemplate in the divine nature is incomprehensibility of essence, it is clearly necessary in this point that the image ought to be able to show its imitation of the archetype.” Gregory concludes, “Because the nature of our mind evades our knowledge, it has an accurate resemblance to the superior nature, figuring by its own unknowableness the incomprehensible nature [i.e., God]”

### **The Pioneering Efforts**

The fifth-century Eastern monk who wrote under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite (see Acts 17:32) was the heir of the Cappadocians and was well versed in the thought of contemporary pagan Neoplatonist philosophers, such as Proclus, who were deeply apophatic. In his treatises *The Divine Names* (*De divinis nominibus*) and *The Mystical Theology* (*De mystica theologia*) he not only insists that God lies beyond both affirmation and negation in a third level, or dimension, one of dark unknowing, but he also works out a detailed liturgico-spiritual program for ascent to union with the unknown God. As Dionysius summarizes in book seven of *The Divine Names*: “He [God]

is not one of the things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and he is no-thing in nothing (*kai en pâsi panta esti, kai en oudeni ouden*). He is known to all things from all things and he is known to no one from anything." Dionysius goes on: "...the most divine knowledge of God, that which comes from unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond mind, when mind turns away from all things, even from itself, and when it is made one with the dazzling rays...." (Luibheid 1987). At the end of *The Mystical Theology* Dionysius says of the divine nature: "There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth - it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it...." (Corbin 1985).

Speaking of God as "no-thing" appears in various forms in theologians of both Eastern and Western Christianity. Here I will concentrate on the teaching of three Western thinkers in the tradition of Dionysius: John Scottus Eriugena in the ninth century; Meister Eckhart, the Dominican preacher of the early fourteenth century; and Nicholas Cusanus, the Renaissance cardinal of the mid-fifteenth century (Duclow 2006). All three were shaped by the marriage of Platonic thought and Christian belief that went back to Origen in the third century. More particularly, they stood in the theological tradition that can be called (if inelegantly) dialectic mystical Christian Neoplatonism. Such theology is *Christian* in its commitment to appropriating the faith of the church, as well as in its roots in patristic authorities, especially Augustine and Dionysius. It is *Neoplatonic* in the sense that it utilizes, though in a mediated way, the philosophy of Plotinus (d. 270), the father of Neoplatonism, as well as the thought of the last major pagan Neoplatonist, Proclus (d. 485). This mode of theology can also be called *dialectic*, because, like Dionysius, it insists that the God who is beyond both affirmation and negation can only (and always inadequately) be spoken of in forms of language that challenge ordinary speech, going beyond the logical opposition of simultaneous affirmations and negations, at least in the case of God, to explore the dialectic, or mutual implication of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*). Such language has been spoken of as a form of "hyper-negation," but it might be more accurate to speak of it as the point of "passing-over," or "passing-beyond" (*transitus*) all merely human thinking and speaking. Such language about God (*theologia*), finally, is *mystical* in the etymological sense of striving to attain the God "hidden" under all created realities and appearances. Much has been written about the negative theology of these three thinkers, so my remarks here are only meant to serve as an invitation to take up these difficult thinkers to explore what they mean when they speak of God

as “No-thing” (*nihil*) (Duclow 2006). What may seem unusual, even shocking, at the outset (God is nothing?), may be shown to actually teach the deepest wisdom: the “learned ignorance” (*docta ignorantia*) that is the heart of mystical theology.

In order to grasp what these apophatic mystical thinkers had in mind when they spoke of God as nothing, it is helpful to begin with a linguistic reflection. The terms “nothing” (*nihil*; *niht* in Eckhart’s Middle High German) and the rare “nothingness” (*nihileitas*, *nulleitas*/*nitheit* in Middle High German) were understood in two opposed senses in the Middle Ages. While the original meaning of *nihil* was negative or privative, that is, “the nothing that lacks being or reality,” the Neoplatonic and Cappadocian development of a transcendent sense of an infinite First Principle beyond all human conception produced an eminent understanding of *nihil*, that is, “nothing as beyond being.” In Christian Neoplatonism we encounter both the *nihil* of defect and the *nihil* of excess, superabundance, or passing-beyond (Jeauneau 1996-2003). The first sense of *nihil* is the everyday, familiar meaning, as when we say, “Oh, that is nothing at all.” In the second sense, we are talking about what is actually a compound word, *nihil* understood as “No-thing,” the eminent source of all things, or particular existences. This No-thing grounds the universe, and therefore by definition cannot be said to be any “thing.” There have been many ways of presenting both “nothing by defect” and the opposed “nothing by excess,” or eminence, in Christian history. Some teachers, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, created impressive teachings about nothing by defect, particularly with regard to the nothingness of sin (Fitzgerald 1999; Davies 2011). Although Augustine recognized the importance of the apophatic dimension of Christian thought, (Lossky 1954) his negative theology was restricted in the sense that he did not allow for eminent understandings of *nihil* that would permit speaking of God as in some way nothing by excess. The same is true for Thomas Aquinas. The apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and his followers, however, not only allowed, but even encouraged using such language.

### John Scottus Eriugena

John Scottus Eriugena (ca. 810-ca. 880) translated the Dionysian writings, as well as Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Making of Humanity*, from Greek into Latin. His *Periphyseon* (*On Natures*) not only sought to conciliate (*consensum machinari*) Eastern and Western theological traditions, but was also a heroic attempt to express the inexpressible nature of God within a single vast theological *summa* (Jeauneau 1996-2003). According to Eriugena, all positive, or cataphatic, language about

God is metaphorical. Negative language is true, but gives us no real information. Therefore, the most adequate way of speaking about God is by way of “hyper-language,” that is, through terms such as “super-good,” “super-being,” and the like, that are positive in form, but have no definable or conceptual content. Speaking of the term *superessentialis* in Book 1 of *Periphyseon* he says: “For this word says that God is not one of the things that are, but that he is more than the things that are, but what that ‘is’ is, it in no way defines.” Because God is not one of the things that are, Eriugena does not hesitate to go beyond Augustine and to state that God is rightly named *nihil*, or “No-Thing.” In Book 3 of *Periphyseon* he has an extended discussion of God as *nihil*, on the basis of the claim, “The Divine Goodness which is called Nothing for the reason that, beyond all the things that are and are not, it is found in no essence, descends from the negation of all essences into the affirmation of the essence of the whole universe, from itself, into itself, as though from nothing into something.” In order to understand what this means, it will be helpful to take a brief look at the basic structure of the *Periphyseon*.

The theme of Eriugena’s great work is *natura/physis*, the most general of all categories, comprising both the things that are and the things that are not. He distinguishes four kinds, or *species*, of *natura* as the *genus generalissimum*: (1) the nature that creates and is not created; (2) the nature that creates and is created; (3) the nature that is created and does not create; and (4) the nature that neither creates nor is created. These divisions are aspects of God as *natura*, both God in God’s-self and God as manifested in creation. God as *nihil* is prominent in the discussion of *species* one, that is, God the Creator who is not any of the things he creates and is therefore No-thing in relation to all particular forms of reality. The nothingness of God, however, is most deeply rooted in the fourth *species*, that is, God as the hidden end of all things, “...that which neither was, nor shall be, nor has become, nor shall become, nor indeed is...” The second and third *species* of *natura*, on the other hand, form the realm in which positive language becomes available. These *species* help us understand the relation of cataphatic, apophatic, and hyperessential modes of speaking. The second *species* consists of the primordial forms or ideas created in the mind of the Word in the Trinity, which are also creative in the sense that they are the exemplars or archetypes by means of which God makes the world, our universe of space and time, nature’s third *species*. All things, therefore, are theophanies, or manifestations, of God.

We must remain aware of the limitations of both the positive and the negative ways to God. In Book 2 of *Periphyseon* Eriugena notes that

even the two species that are positively ascribed to God do not really belong to God in God's-self, but only to our way of conceiving God. Nevertheless, we must continue to investigate the divine mystery in the language available to us and to experiment with the relation of cataphatic and apophatic denominations. A noted passage in Book 3 lists nineteen antitheses exploring the coincidence of negation and affirmation in speaking of God that give insight into the inner meaning of theophany, beginning, "Everything that is understood and sensed is nothing else but the non-apparent's appearance, the hidden's manifestation, the negated's affirmation" .... (*non apparentis apparitio, occulti manifestatio, negati affirmatio*) (McGinn & Otten 1992). Here the initial subjective genitive in each phrase (e.g., *negati*) expresses the hidden divine nothingness, while the positive nominative (*affirmatio*) indicates God as both proceeding and returning in his theophanies. Therefore, we might paraphrase the third phrase as saying, "the coming forth from what is negated is the affirmation that moves back towards the goal that is also its source."

Eriugena argues that humanity exists on two levels: first as the supreme and general idea (*ratio*), or exemplar, in the second *species* of nature; and then as distinct human beings in the third *species*. Hence, the essential definition of *homo* is "a certain intellectual concept formed in the Mind of God," which, in its ability to know all particular things, functions as the "created wisdom" (*sapientia creata*) by which the "Creative Wisdom" (*sapientia creatrix*) of the Word makes all things. The implication of the exalted status of humanity in this account of *natura* is that both God and human are equally unknowable as "no-thing" (Roques 1977; Otten 1991). Eriugena develops this insight in a daring fashion in Books 2 and 4 of *Periphyseon*. God is not only unknowable to the human mind, but also unknowable to himself, at least insofar as knowing involves "de-fining," that is, setting limits (*fines*) to what is by nature unlimited. "So," argues Eriugena, "God does not know himself, because he is not a 'what'." This does not mean that God is totally ignorant; rather, as Eriugena puts it: "...his ignorance is ineffable understanding" (*ipsius enim ignorantia ineffabilis est intelligentia*). This is "the highest and truest wisdom," that is, supreme self-awareness of his transcendence over all the things that are and can therefore be defined within the world of concepts. God's nothingness and conceptual self-ignorance is also realized in humanity as the image of God. As a remarkable passage in Book 4 puts it:

The human mind both knows itself and does not know itself. It knows that it is; it does not know what it is. And through this.... the image of God is especially thought to be in humanity. For as

God is comprehensible when from creatures it is deduced that he exists, and incomprehensible because by no human or angelic intellect, not even by his own, can what he is be understood, since he is not a thing, but is superessential, so it is only given to the human mind to know that it is; what it is is in no way open to it. What is more wonderful and more beautiful to those thinking upon themselves and their God is that the human mind is to be more praised in its ignorance than in its knowledge.

The character of Eriugena's view of the nothingness of God and human is perhaps the most systematically expressed in the whole tradition of Christian Neoplatonism. What we find in his successors, Meister Eckhart and Nicholas Cusanus, both of whom had some knowledge of the *Periphyseon*, are a series of profound reflections on *nihil*, ones that often develop aspects of *nihileitas* as a way of talking about God and God's image not explicit in the Irish thinker.

### Meister Eckhart's contributions

Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-1328) made considerable use of *nihil/niht* throughout his preaching and teaching. His view of "No-Thingness" can be best approached from the perspective of the character of his dialectical thought (Caputo 1975; Zum Bruun 1993). According to Eckhart, at one and the same time God both "is" (i.e., exists) in an eminent and perfect sense, and "is not," that is, is totally beyond what we know as existent reality. Insofar as naming is a human activity, Eckhart employs ways of speaking about God as beyond both affirmation and negation within a dialectical framework of distinction/indistinction, similarity/dissimilarity, and, more concretely, eating/hungering. That is to say, since God is the being whose distinction from everything else is his indistinction, or to put it more plainly, the One whose difference from other things is the fact that it is "not-different," or "not-other," from everything else as the ground of all, therefore, the more distinct God is, the more indistinct God is, and vice versa (McGinn 2002).

Such predications sound like nonsense from the perspective of Aristotelian logic, where something is either A or B, and the same thing cannot be both predicated and denied of the same subject under the same aspect. Neither Eckhart nor Cusanus denied the applicability of Aristotle's logic to the realm of particular created being, but they both insisted that in the case of God, who is "not-a-thing" (that is, *nihil*), Aristotle's rules and distinctions fail. Although we must use human speaking with its oppositional categories in talking about God, the exercise of trying to "say the unsayable" shows us the limits of speech, emphasizing how talking about God helps us recognize the need to "deconstruct" speaking as we employ it.

From this perspective, even the intricate forms of dialectic language used by Eckhart do not really “name” God, but rather mark out the limits of trying to name him and what these limits entail. Such “language games” are found throughout Eckhart’s Latin and Middle High German works, for example in his commentary on Wisdom 7:27 (“And since it is one, it can do all things”). Here Eckhart argues that “God is distinct from creatures because he alone is indistinct, that is, is one and the same as all.” “Distinct” means “different from,” while indistinct means “not different from.” So, what Eckhart is saying is that what makes God different (distinct) from everything else is that he is really not different from everything else (i.e., indistinct), because he is the source and reality of everything. On this basis, Eckhart goes on to say, “Every thing which is distinguished by indistinction is the more distinct the more indistinct it is, because it is distinguished by its own indistinction. Conversely, it is the more indistinct the more distinct it is.... But God is something indistinct which is distinguished by his indistinction... For God is a sea of infinite substance and consequently indistinct.” Eckhart says this way of speaking about God is nothing else but the “negation of negation” (*negatio negationis/versagen des versagenes*), which is “the core, the purity, the repetition of the affirmation of existence.” The Dominican did not create the category of the *negatio negationis*, which had appeared in Proclus and others (Hedwig 1955). He did, however, make it central to his teaching on God, using it often in his Latin works, and also at times in his vernacular preaching. For example, in German Sermon 21 (Pr. 21) on the primacy of the transcendental term One (*unum/ein*) for God he says: “A master says, ‘One is the negation of negation.’ If I say ‘God is good,’ this adds something to him. One is a negation of negation and a denial of denial... One means something to which nothing has been added.... All creatures have a negation in themselves; one creature denies that it is the other creature. But God has a negation of negation; he is one and negates everything other, for outside of God there is nothing.”

The negation of negation, for Eckhart, is the affirmation of eminent No-thingness on the level of dialectical language. When we move to the level of predicating terms of God in relation to creation conceived of as “other-than-God,” that is, analogical predication (e.g., God is good), then what can be said of God must be denied of creatures, and vice-versa. In treating analogy, Eckhart says: “Every created being is analogically ordered to God in existence, truth, and goodness. Therefore, every created being radically and positively possesses existence, life, and wisdom from and in God, not in itself as a created being.” Forms of “reversing analogy” ground much of Eckhart’s language of *nihil* in this domain of speech. From the perspective of actual existence, that

is, the “formally inhering existence of creatures,” God is *nihil*, literally “No-thing,” but from the perspective of divine transcendence, creatures in themselves are *nihil* because they are totally dependent on God for all that they are. Although Thomas Aquinas and other theologians also had affirmed that creatures in themselves were nothing, Eckhart’s calling creatures nothing was condemned by Pope John XXI. The Bull “In agro dominico,” article 26, attacks the statement from Eckhart’s German Sermon 4: “All creatures are one pure nothing. I do not say that they are a little something or anything, but that they are pure nothing.”

These reversing patterns of affirming nothingness of God and of creatures are brilliantly set forth in German Sermon (Pr.) 71, which Eckhart preached on the text from Acts 9:8, “Saul rose from the ground and with eyes open saw nothing,” that is, the nothingness of both God and the creature (Sturlese 1998; McGinn 1986). At the outset of the sermon Eckhart identifies four modes of nothingness contained in the description in Acts of Paul “seeing nothing”: “One meaning is,” he begins, “when he got up from the ground with eyes open he saw nothing, and the nothing was God, because when he saw God [Luke] calls this a nothing. The second: When he got up, he saw nothing but God. The third: In all things he saw nothing but God. The fourth: When he saw God he viewed all things as nothing.” It is instructive to see how Eckhart jumps from God as the eminent nothing (Nos. 1-3) to creatures as defective nothing (No. 4). In the course of the sermon Eckhart primarily explores the nothing that is God. As he puts it: “He [Paul] saw the nothing which was God. God is a nothing and God is a something. Whatever is something is also nothing.” Reflecting on using “nothing” as proper language about God, Eckhart goes on to say, “When the soul comes into the One and there enters into a pure rejection of itself, it finds God as in a nothing.” He continues with a rare, seemingly autobiographical, statement: “It seemed to a man as though in a dream - it was a waking dream - that he became pregnant with nothing as a woman does with a child, and in this nothing God was born; he was the fruit of the nothing. God was born in the nothing.” Sermon 71 is Eckhart’s most sustained exploration of the nothingness of God, but the same message occurs throughout his vernacular preaching (e.g., Prr. 6, 9, 23, 52, 69, 70, 76, 82, 83), though it is more rare in his scholastic writings.

In his Middle High German works, as in his academic Latin writings, Eckhart was equally insistent on proclaiming the nothingness of creatures (e.g., Prr. 1, 5b, 10, 12, 29, 46, 59, 80, and 84). All creation is nothing in relation to God by way of privation or defect, but human beings are also nothing because of their participation in “No-thingness”

in the eminent sense. Eckhart says that for human beings to be created to God's image and likeness means that on the level of their virtual existence (i.e., their pre-existence in God) humans are one with, that is, "not-other-than," the divine intellect (*intellectus, vernünfticheit*). In his *Parisian Questions* he reversed Aquinas's teaching that *esse*, or the act of existing, is the highest transcendental predicate for God when he proclaimed: "I declare that it is not my present opinion that God understands because he exists, but rather that he exists because he understands. God is an intellect and understanding, and his understanding itself is the ground of his existence." The reason for the primacy of *intelligere* is intellect's ability to know all things, thus demonstrating that taken in itself, that is formally speaking (*in quantum*), intellect cannot be a thing, i.e., a particular created reality (*ens hoc et hoc*). Since it is not a thing, intellect cannot be conceived of or conceptualized; it is rather the capacity to conceive of and create all things - infinite pure possibility. Speaking of the "noble power" of the intellect in Sermon 11, Eckhart says: "This power has nothing in common with nothing [i.e., defective being]; it makes anything and everything from nothing" [i.e., just like God].

Precisely as *imago dei*, the human intellect is the perfect and therefore perfectly-equal image or expression of the hidden God and is one and identical with the divine intellect, as Eckhart explains in a number of places, notably in Latin Sermon XXIX (Steer & Sturlese 2003). God is pure intellect because he brings all things into existence through his thinking. Human beings also possess intellect, both the particular intellect they possess as creatures made "to God's image" (*ad imaginem*), as well as the eminent intellect, the act of understanding in which they are one with the divine understanding as pure *imago*. On this level, humans are "not-other-than-God," that is, they are eminently "nothing." Eckhart invites his audience to strive to realize the truth of their identity with God in their lives: "Anything has as much of God and of the One and of One-Existence-with-God as it has of intellect and what is intellectual. For God is one intellect and intellect is one God.... Every kind of existence that is outside or beyond intellect is a creature; it is creatable, other than God, and it is not God. In God there is nothing other." Hence, the intellect in its identity with God is also "nothing-other" than everything else.

The preaching therapy featured in Eckhart's sermons, with their stress on detaching from all created "something," "letting go" of things, realizing "the birth of the Word in the soul," "de-creating" the self (*entwerden*), and "breaking-through" (*durchbrechen*) into the nameless Nothing beyond the Trinity is aimed at achieving the fused

“Nothingness” (*nihil*) of the ground where God and the soul are indistinct. Speaking of the strange “desert place” (*wüstenunge*) that is nameless and more unknown than known in Sermon 28, Eckhart says: “If you could naught yourself for an instant, indeed I say less than an instant, you would possess all that this is in itself.” This teaching on reducing all to nothing is well summarized in German Sermon 83, where Eckhart speaks of God as “a transcendent being and a superessential nothingness” (*ein überswebende wesen und ein überwesende nitheit*), and an “uncreated self-identity and nameless nothingness” (*ungewordene istikeit und ungenanten nitheit*). The sermon concludes: “You should love him as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image, but as he is a pure, unmixed, bright One, separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of something into nothing.”

### Nicholas of Cusa

The final theologian of divine “No-thingness” I would like to briefly investigate is Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64). Cusa had read both Eriugena and Eckhart and was familiar with their teaching, but he developed his own outlook on how *nihil* and related terms could be used in talking about God and creation (summerell 1998; Beierwaltes 1998). Cusa agreed with tradition in stating that creatures in themselves are nothing. The Prologue to Book 2 of his lengthy *On Learned Ignorance* (*De docta ignorantia*) says that in investigating the universe as the contracted maximum depending on God as absolute maximum, we must remember that “...that which is caused originates entirely from its cause and is nothing from itself” (Bond 1997). Similarly, in his brief treatise *De principio* he affirms, “The creature, since it is nothing and has its whole existence from the Cause, is truth in the principle.” Unlike Eriugena and Eckhart, however, Cusa resisted speaking of God as *nihil* in an unqualified way, because of his radical theory about the limits of all naming. Near the beginning of the treatise *On the Hidden God* (*De deo abscondito*), the Christian discussant admits to the Pagan that all conceptions of God are not really like him, because God surpasses all things; but when the Pagan responds, “Therefore, God is nothing,” the Christian demurs. “He is not nothing, because that ‘nothing’ has the name of nothing.” God is also beyond any naming of “something” (*aliquid*), so it is true to say that “God is beyond nothing and beyond something, because nothing became obedient to him so that it might come into being.” God’s omnipotence rests in the fact that both nothing and something are subject to him, “Because he makes non-being to enter into being and being into non-being.” Nevertheless, Cusa was still willing to claim that God can be spoken of as “nothing” (*non ens*) in some way. In *De principio* 34, as he reflects on how the Ineffable is

prior to all “effability,” or what can be spoken, he says:

Because all that it [i.e., the Ineffable] caused is truer in its cause than in itself, affirmation is better in negation, since negation is its principle. Therefore, the principle is equally prior to the maximum and the minimum of all affirmation, as, for example, not-being-as-the-principle-of-being (*non ens entis principium*) is seen to be prior to being, because by means of the coincidence of the maximum and the minimum it is seen as superexalted. It precedes the being that is both maximum and minimum, as though [it were] not-being, because it is maximally-being (*sive sic non ens, quod maxime ens*). The principle of being is not-being in no way at all, but it is not-being in the sense given.

So the term *non-ens* can be used of God, at least from this particular perspective.

Cusa wants to restrict “something” and “nothing” to the created realm, insofar as they are expressions of human naming. Hence, while he often uses the formulation that God is “nothing of all the things that are” (*nihil omnium*), he avoids directly identifying God as simply *nihil*. He wishes to go beyond both affirmation and negation, a demand first expressed by Dionysius, as we have seen, but rarely carried through more rigorously than it is in the Renaissance Cardinal. Cusa’s exploration of this theme is evident in the treatise *On Conjectures (De coniecturis)*, especially in his reflection on the four unities in Book I.4-8. Here, Cusa extends the Dionysian insistence of God’s surpassing both affirmation and negation by arguing that both the disjunctive (either-or) and the copulative (both-and) forms of predication do not attain to “precision,” or real expression, of God. Thus he says, “There is no more ‘infinite’ [i.e., better] response to the question ‘Does God exist?’, than [to say] that he neither is nor is not, and that he both is and is not.” This is a new form of what has been termed Dionysian “hyper-negation” (or “passing-beyond”), that is, seeking to go beyond both “yes” and “no” as adequate terms for God-language.

Cusa, however, was not finished with experimentation on how to speak about God. In his final treatises, written 1460-63, he experimented with a variety of dialectical forms of God-language to see what else might be said and unsaid about God. Using argumentation at times reminiscent of Eckhart, he explored how to talk about the *primum/principium* that not only lies beyond “yes and no,” but that also necessarily implies the co-inherence of both “yes and no.” The short treatise entitled *On Not-Other (De non aliud)*, for example, has resonances with the Dominican’s use of the language of distinction/indistinction. In creation, Cusa says,

each thing is the same as itself (*idem*) and different from everything else (*aliud*). Although God is the Absolute Same as God-self, God is also “not-other” than anything else. “Not-other,” that is, “not-different-from,” is not God’s name in God’s-self, but is the best expression the mind can find for pointing toward the divine principle as transcendent in its very immanence. The privileged position for this denomination rests in the fact that *non aliud* understood as a reduplicating negative (“the not-other which is not-other than not-other”) defines both itself and all other things. *Non aliud* therefore is prior to and includes all affirmation and negation, being and non-being, pre-containing all that is and all that is not in its supereminence. Cusanus says that this teaching is based on the Dionysian writings.

Insofar as the divine mystery lies beyond affirmation and negation, Cusa claims that dialectical forms of speaking about God can be initiated both by means of negative terms (*non aliud*), as well as positive terms, such as *possest* (“active possibility”) and *posse ipsum* (“possibility itself”), as argued in the treatises *Triologue on Possest* and *On the Summit of Contemplation (De apice theoriae)*. In the *De non aliud* Cusanus employs negative dialectical formulations to tease out the reciprocity of naming and unnamng (e.g., 6 [20-21], 20 [94], and the concluding *propositiones*). In Proposition 7, for example, he says: “Someone who sees how if not-other were taken away, neither something or nothing would be left, because not-other is the nothing of nothing (*nihil ipsius nihil*), would see that not-other itself is everything in all things and is nothing-in-nothing.” In contrast to Eckhart, however, Cusanus generally prefers to speak of the not-other as “the affirmation of the affirmation,” rather than the “negation of negation.” For example, in *De non aliud*, Proposition 14, he says: “Someone who sees in the other that “not-other” is other, sees that in an affirmation a negation is affirmed. He who sees God prior to affirmation and negation sees that in the affirmations which we make concerning him, God is not a negative that is affirmed, but is the affirmation of an affirmation” (*sed affirmationis affirmationem*).

Nicholas of Cusa, therefore, had a distinctive apophatic doctrine of divine nothingness, one which shows some similarities to Eckhart, but which was developed in an independent manner. The Cardinal was especially anxious to place God beyond both the something and nothing of the created world and all the forms of predication based on our knowledge of created things. It is only by constant experimentation with neologisms like *non aliud* and *possest* that we can be pointed in the right direction where we may be able to begin to see reality from the divine perspective - “So that the understanding itself, as the nearest power [to God], may rejoice to conjecture in the divine unity in its

clearest possible way.”

Like Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart, and others, Cusa had no hesitation in ascribing to humans and other created beings *nihil* in the defective sense insofar as they are totally dependent on God and nothing in themselves. But did the Cardinal have an anthropology that allowed him to also think of humans as in some way *nihil* by excess, at least in terms of transcending created particularity? Yes and no may be the best answer (Watts 1982; Casarella 2006; Hudson 2007). As early as the *De coniecturis* Cusa had insisted that the nature of humanity as *imago dei* resides not in rationality as such, but in the mind’s creative activity, that is, its ability to produce the conjectural world of rational entities in the likeness of real beings. On the basis of this isomorphic relation between the divine and human minds, Cusa explored how the mind’s activity of enfolding and unfolding all things (*complicatio-explicatio*) indicates that human nature is a “human God” (*humanus deus*), whose deification is achieved through self-actualization by means of knowing, acting, and loving (Irlenborn 2000). Thus, in his later works the Cardinal asserts an identity of gazing between God and human, as he says in the *De visione dei*: “What other, O Lord, is your seeing when you look upon me with the eye of mercy, than your being seen by me? In seeing me you, who are the hidden God, give yourself to be seen by me.... Nor is your being seen other than your seeing the one who sees you.” This seeing is the positive aspect of ocular identity achieved by the negative process of stripping away all created particularity. Although the identical gaze might seem to imply a corresponding hiddenness of God and of the human person, that is, the presence of a “hidden self” mirroring the “hidden God” - a level on which the soul as *imago dei*, like God, is deeper than both affirmation and negation - Cusa, as far as I have been able to determine, steps back from direct assertions that human beings exemplify transcendent hidden “No-thingness.” Anthropologically speaking, therefore, Cusa’s view of *nihil* is more qualified than those of Eckhart and Eriugena.

## Conclusion

For Cusa, as for Eckhart and Eriugena, these deep apophatic speculations about the “No-thingness” of God and human were not academic exercises, but were practices for transformation in mystical theology conceived of as a way of life. In a letter of 1453 Cusa said: “It is necessary for the person doing theology in a mystical way to place himself in the cloud above all reason and understanding, even leaving self behind. And he will find how what reason sees as impossible, that is, to be and not to be at one and same time, is necessity itself.” The negation

of reason, of understanding, and even of self leads to the same goal for Eriugena, Eckhart and Cusa, the “passing-beyond” that is the essence of mystical theology. This is beautifully expressed in the Middle High German poem called *The Mustard Seed* (*Granum sinapis*), which, even if it is not by Eckhart (this is disputed), summarizes Eckhartian teaching on “No-thingness” in a striking way. After strophes investigating the mystery of the divine Tri-unity and the intellect as the power leading out into the silent desert of God, the poem closes with two strophes inviting the reader to undertake the journey to No-thing. The first addresses the reader: “Become like a child, become deaf, become blind! Your own something must become nothing. Drive away all something, all nothing!” The final strophe is an address to the self:

*O sele min, genk uz, got in!*      O soul of mine, come out, God in!  
*Sink al min icht in gotis nicht,*      Sink all my something into God’s  
 Nothing,  
*Sink in di grundeloze vlut!*      Sink into the bottomless flood!  
 (McGinn 2006)

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