

TOMASZ STĘPIEŃ

THE UNDERSTANDING OF SYMBOLS
AND THEIR ROLE IN THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL TO GOD
IN PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE
AND NICHOLAS OF CUSA

INTRODUCTION

Human nature is dual—corporeal and spiritual—so on every stage of the ascension to God the human body assists the efforts of the soul. The body may be perceived as a burden and an obstacle, though man cannot get rid of the body; he remains a corporeal being even at the highest ecstatic stage of deification. That remark shows the importance of symbols in following the mystical path, which in the history of mysticism was perceived as the point of connection between the corporeal and the spiritual world. Symbols are always material; they could be written or spoken, could be an image, sound, or even the entire rite, but the sensual side always points to a certain aspect of spiritual reality.

It seems that late Neoplatonic philosophers were the first who clearly realized the importance of symbols to spiritual life. However, it happened due to the influence of the mystical Chaldean and Egyptian thought transferred to philosophical investigation by the *Chaldean oracles* and *Corpus hermeticum*. The late Neoplatonic thought of Iamblichus and Eastern Neoplatonic schools used symbols and rituals as integral parts of philosophical investigation understood as having a mystical goal. The first part of this article attempts to show the main issues of this first encounter of symbolism with philosophical tradition, which is important because of the revival of the Neoplatonic tradition in the fifteenth century. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areo-

Ks. dr hab. TOMASZ STĘPIEŃ, prof. UKSW – Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie; adres do korespondencji: ul. Dewajtis 5, 01-815 Warszawa; e-mail: t.stepien@uksw.edu.pl

pagite, who creatively transformed the teaching of his pagan predecessors, incorporated the ancient Neoplatonic tradition into Christian theology. An analysis of his idea of symbols and their role in Christian life also seems to be indispensable for a proper understanding of Cusanus' teaching. The second part of this article considers which of those aspects of the understanding of symbols were preserved by Pseudo-Dionysius, and which were transformed or completely rejected.

The third part will analyze the meaning of symbolism in the thought of Nicolas of Cusa. He was deeply influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius and he also places great stress on the role of symbols for the mystical path. The key problem is once again to show what was changed and what parts of ancient tradition remained in his thought. Such an approach should also allow for deriving more general conclusions on the character of philosophical thought at the dawn of the modern era.

SYMBOLS WORKING THROUGH THEMSELVES

The recognition of symbols as an important part of philosophical life did not come with the first Neoplatonic philosopher—Plotinus. He knew well the *Chaldean oracles*, and probably *Corpus Hermeticum*, but he did not admit that the content of those writings played any role in philosophical investigation.¹ The interesting case was that of Porphyry—Plotinus' disciple who acknowledged the importance of Chaldean symbolism in the *Philosophy of Oracles*, but later radically changed his view in the well-known *Letter to Anebo*. One of the most important issues in criticizing Chaldean and Egyptian influences was the irrationality of symbols and rites.² This letter, addressed probably to a fictitious person, did not survive till the present, but we can reconstruct its main topics thanks to a reply written by Iamblichus—*On the Mysteries*. Porphyry pointed out that through symbols and rites called “theurgical,” a philosopher can have control over the powers of Gods and even command them. For him it was irrational to claim that man, who is a lesser being, has control over a higher one. Gods and demons are more perfect and thus men cannot control them.

¹ See John DILLON, “Plotinus and the Chaldean Oracles,” in *Platonism in the Late Antiquity*, ed. Stephen Gersh and Charles Kannengiesser (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 140.

² Emma C. CLARKE, John M. DILLON, and Jackson P. HERSHBELL, “Introduction,” in IAMBlichus, *De mysteriis* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), xxvi–xxxvii.

The polemic between Porphyry and Iamblichus is well known, but in our case it reveals very important aspects of the understanding of symbols. In his answer Iamblichus formulated a point of view, which was hardly changed until the end of pagan Neoplatonic philosophy. He claimed that using the rites and symbols in a philosophical way of perfection was indeed irrational, but it was not due to being less rational. On the contrary, these rites should be conceived as exceeding the human capability of understanding. If they were understandable they would only match the activity of man, but being beyond it, they are actions of the gods themselves. The mode and efficacy of rites was revealed in sacred writings, and thus they are only given to man who cannot understand them, but can perform them using the powers of gods. Thus sacred rites that help the initiate are true *theurgy*—the work of gods.

For Iamblichus symbols are indispensable on the path of man to perfection and unity with the One. His position on the matter means that the way of a philosopher is no longer merely an intellectual activity. Plotinus and his disciple Porphyry claimed that intellectual activity—philosophical investigation—leads man all the way to the point where he reaches the edge of the second hypostasis, that is Intellect (*nous*). The One itself is above Intellect, and thus the last part of the way must follow beyond the concepts of reason. Iamblichus disagrees with that, saying that philosophical life must be partially irrational from very beginning. Norman Russell expressed it well, writing about Iamblichus that: “Doing philosophy could no longer in itself raise the soul to the level of the divine because the divine essence transcends the essence of the human soul to such a degree. It is therefore necessary for the divine to descend by a ‘providential love’ before the lower reality can be perfected through participation in the characteristics of the higher. Iamblichus speaks of theurgy as taking place through wordless symbols beyond the act of thinking.”³

This disproportion between the soul and the divine reality is also stressed by Iamblichus. He also underlines that symbols are entities independent of the activity of a philosopher. They produce specific effects according to their kind by themselves, not thanks to the activity of man. Iamblichus explains this in the fragment *De mysteriis*: “Granting then that ignorance and deception are faulty and impious, it does not follow on this that the offerings made to the gods and divine works (*ta theia erga*) are invalid, for it is not pure thought (*ennoia*) that unites theurgists to the gods. Indeed what, then, would

³ Norman RUSSELL, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43.

hinder those who are theoretical philosophers (*theoretikos philosophountas*) from enjoying a theurgic union with the gods? But the situation is not so: it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception (*hyper pasan noesin*) and the power of unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union. Hence, we do not bring about these things by intellection alone; for thus their efficacy would be intellectual, and dependent upon us. But neither assumption is true. For even then we are not engaged in intellection, the symbols themselves, by themselves, perform their appropriate work, and ineffable power of the gods, to whom these symbols relate, itself recognizes the proper images of itself, not through being aroused by our thought.”⁴

Symbols and the effects they cause are completely incomprehensible for the human intellect. Thanks to such a notion, Iamblichus can refute the claim that lesser beings direct and command the higher ones. The intellectual comprehension of man is not the cause of the operation of symbols. The theurgist can only prepare himself to accept the divine operation of symbols by having his soul in the best condition and maintaining ritual purity.⁵ So the role of man is rather limited to the technique of using them in the proper way. He has no control over what a symbol does to his soul, but thanks to the knowledge revealed in sacred writings he can discover the sympathy of a symbol with the specific deity. Sympathy of this kind shows what the effect of the symbol’s work on the soul could be.

The sympathy of a symbol with divinity points to the cosmological perspective. The usage of symbols in the process of a return to the divine reality must also be proper and has to take place in the sequence, which mirrors how they were created by Demiurge. Those symbols are present in the universe because the gods seeded them during the process of the creation of the material universe. A god who plays the most important role in the creation of symbols is often Demiurge.⁶ He is not understood as the Platonic

⁴ IAMBlichus, *De mysteriis*, 96, 9-97, 7.

⁵ Iamblichus clarifies it in the next lines of this fragment, *De mysteriis*, 97,7-15: “For it is not in the nature of the things containing (*synthemata*) to be aroused by those contained in them, nor of things perfect by things imperfect, nor even of wholes by parts. Hence it is not even chiefly through our intellection that divine causes are called to actuality; but it is necessary for these and all best conditions of the soul and our ritual purity to pre-exist as auxiliary causes; but the things which properly arouse in the divine will are actual divine symbols. And so the attention of the gods is awakened by themselves, receiving from no inferior being any principle for themselves of their characteristic activity.”

⁶ IAMBlichus, *De mysteriis*, 135, 14-136, 3: “The Gods produce signs (*semeia*) by means of

Demiurge of *Timaeus*, but for Iamblichus he is a lesser god who connects the higher intellectual reality with the sensual one. He literally constructs a material cosmos and thus he must be connected to it, and such connection with the sensual world makes him lesser than the higher gods who are purely intellectual. The role of Demiurge then is to translate intellectual reality, which is above the human capability of understanding, into the material world. His work, however, does not make symbols possible to conceive for a human being; they are still above our mind, but are implanted or seeded in the universe. Iamblichus puts it in the following words: “This cult, has it not been intellectually ordained from the beginning according to the sacred laws of the Gods? It imitates the order of the Gods, both the intelligible order and that in heaven. It possesses the eternal measures of beings and wondrous signatures which have been sent down here from the Demiurge and Father of Wholes, through which the inexpressible is revealed through ineffable symbols.”⁷

In the intellectual reality there is an order of perfection, and thus symbols also have their own order that is a reflection of the higher one. We can have a closer look at the symbols embodying the power of the Sun. They can be minerals (heliotrope — a yellow mineral transparent to light), plants or parts of the plants (heliotrope) and animals (like a cock or a lion).⁸ Among higher symbols there are compositions of sounds (music), names, and most of all, numbers. As we shall see numbers are especially important to understand the theory of symbols of Nicolas of Cusa. Iamblichus did not leave any clues as to how numbers were used in theurgic rituals, but undoubtedly “mathematics formed an essential part of the worship of the gods”.⁹ Since Plato’s *Timaeus* mathematical symbols were linked with the structure of the cosmos. The knowledge of the movement of the heavenly spheres allowed performing the rite at the right time according with an appropriate constellation. Those rites were so important because numbers were the highest embodiments of purely intellectual ideas. Performing the rite was aimed at awakening the power of

nature which serves them in the work of generation, nature as a whole and individual natures specifically, or by means of the generative Daimones who, presiding over the elements of the cosmos, particular bodies, animals, and everything in the world, easily produce the phenomena in whatever way seems good to the Gods. They reveal the intentions of the Gods symbolically (*symbolikos*).

⁷ IAMBlichus, *De mysteriis*, 65, 3-9; see also the commentary to this fragment by Gregory SHAW, *Theurgy and the Soul* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 110.

⁸ Many different things can be recognized as a material symbol. It could be “some animal or plant growing in the earth simply and purely preserves the intention of its maker” (*De mysteriis*, 209, 15-17); also stone or aromatic substance (*De mysteriis*, 233, 11-14).

⁹ See SHAW, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 199.

symbols, which are present in the human soul. In this way, the theurgy of numbers becomes the highest form of anamnesis—recollection of divine principles—because each thing in nature is not only determined by numbers, but also is the manifestation of them. So the stars, animals, plants and stones and all other things could be conceived through numbers as a principle. It is worth noticing that the Neoplatonists owed their theurgy of numbers to the Pythagoreans, who treated numbers as principles present permanently in the structure of the universe.¹⁰ For Iamblichus, as well as for later Neoplatonic philosophers, theurgical rites of numbers were so important because they linked the initiate with the gods in the most perfect way. The whole universe becomes the revelation of the minds of the gods, and numbers were treated as full of power, even alive in a sense.

SYMBOLS AND CHURCH LITURGY

Most of modern scholars agree that Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite was a pagan Neoplatonic philosopher himself before he converted to Christianity. He probably studied at the Athenian Neoplatonic School lead by Proclus through the greater part of the 5th century AD. He certainly knew the Neoplatonic teaching on theurgy, symbols and their role in philosophical life. In his writings he preserved some of those teachings, but he put them in a completely new, Christian perspective. That is why he was able to establish a Christian way of perceiving symbols. However, it is very important to distinguish in which matters Dionysius the Areopagite agrees with pagan teachings, which he completely rejects, and the transformations that he makes.

He completely sustains the pagan conviction of the necessity of rites and symbols, though he understands them in a different way. For Dionysius the only theurgy (the work of God) is the Incarnation of Christ.¹¹ Incarnation was the only true unification of the natures of God and man, so the only true work of God in the material world is the Incarnation itself and all that was done by Christ on this Earth. Man cannot perform any theurgical activity, he can only recall it and enact the activity of Christ in the sacraments of the Church. Those rites are performed in the Church and Old Testament only predicted the works of Jesus by way of images and symbols. The New Testa-

¹⁰ See SHAW, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 201, 210.

¹¹ See PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Divine Names*, 644C (PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *The complete works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987)).

ment described the life and acts of Jesus on Earth. As Sarah Klitenic Wear and John M Dillon point out the hierarchy of the Church could be understood as existing in the middle, between the legal hierarchy of the Old Testament and the celestial hierarchy of the New Testament: “With the former it shares the use of varied symbols derived from the realm of sense-perception, with the latter, it shares the contemplation of understanding.”¹² Therefore, man can only refer to the works of Christ and he can recreate them by the means of the liturgy of the Church. Such activity is called by Dionysius *hierourgy*—sacred-making work.¹³

The liturgy of the Church mimics the Neoplatonic scheme of resting, procession and return. Christ rests in unity with the Father; then he proceeds to the many by Incarnation, and returns to heaven. That is why for Dionysius Incarnation is more important than Death on the Cross and Resurrection. Some scholars even understood the necessity of Incarnation as a simple consequence of the order of the universe. Christ was incarnated because of the “logic” of the cosmos rather than because of the sin of man.¹⁴

The activity of a hierarch (bishop) recalls this movement of rest, procession and return during the rites. It could be seen in the most clear way when Dionysius describes the meaning of the Eucharist, which he calls *synaxis* (gathering in to one): “Similarly the divine sacrament of the *synaxis* remains what it is, unique, simple and indivisible and yet, out of love for humanity, it is pluralized in a sacred variegation of symbols. It extends itself so as to include all the hierarchical imagery. Then it draws all those varied symbols together into a unity, returns to its own inherent oneness, and confers unity on all those sacredly uplifted to it.”¹⁵ This whole activity is embodied in the person of the bishop, who first rests in himself at the beginning of the liturgy. The whole rite, and especially the Holy Communion, is like the procession from One to many. The contemplation of what happened during the Eucharist is the return to the One in the intellect of the bishop who “In his mind journeys towards the One. With a clear eye he looks upon the basic unity of those realities underlying the sacred rites.”¹⁶ In this way, in Dionysius’ system the Neoplatonic scheme of procession and return is

¹² Sarah Klitenic WEAR and John M. DILLON, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition. Despoiling the Hellenes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 101.

¹³ WEAR and DILLON, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 99

¹⁴ WEAR and DILLON, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 105.

¹⁵ DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 429 A.

¹⁶ DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 429 B.

moved from the cosmic plane to the liturgy of the Church. All cosmic symbols, which referred to the One as the highest principle, now point at Christ, who is the only way to unity with God. This change can be seen as transferring symbolical activity from the plane of symbols to the plane of grace.

Dionysius the Areopagite links the efficacy of symbols with liturgy just as his pagan predecessors did. There are only two kinds of symbols, which have the power to unite man with the Divine: the symbols and figures of the Old Testament and the Names of God provided by the New Testament. Even the Names of God are to be proclaimed and chanted during the liturgical ceremonies of the Church. The only true “working symbols” are those used in sacramental hierourgical rites. Like the water of Baptism, the bread and wine of the Eucharist and the oil of the Ointment, they are comprehensible and incomprehensible at the same time. They contain the true knowledge of the Divine, as well as the power of making man one with it. Once again, their activity is almost automatic and they can do their work only when man suspends the activity of his own mind. Dionysius explains this in the very first chapter of the *Divine Names*: “We use whatever appropriate symbols [*symbola*] we can for the things of God. With these analogies [*analogiai*] we are raised upward towards the truth of the mind’s vision, a truth which is simple and one. We leave behind us all our own notions of the divine. We call a halt to the activities of our minds and to the extent that is proper, we approach the ray which transcends being. Here, in a manner no words can describe, pre-existed the goals of all knowledge and it is of a kind that neither intelligence nor speech can lay hold of, nor can it at all be contemplated since it surpasses everything and is wholly beyond our capacity to know it.”¹⁷

We can see that for Dionysius it is obvious that the efficacy of the Names of God (as well as material symbols) is granted thanks to the works and power of God. Man can only mimic and make present the activity of God, and the power of return is not possible due to any man’s activity—it is always the work of God alone. The names are especially important for us, because in the treatise *On Divine Names* we can find the only mention of numbers in the context of hierourgy. For pagan Neoplatonic philosophers it was the highest part of theurgical activity, thus one of topmost importance. However, Dionysius speaks of the One only as the name of God, and his explanation concerns the understanding of how we can speak of God as the

¹⁷ DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Divine Names*, 592 C-D.

One: “The name *One* means that God is uniquely all things through the transcendence of the one unity and that he is the cause of all without ever departing from that oneness. Nothing in the world lacks its share of the One.”¹⁸ This fragment and the following passages are rather an explanation of how we can contemplate God as the One, which like other names is knowable and above all knowledge at the same time, because “...no unity or trinity, no number or oneness, no fruitfulness, indeed, nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent Godhead which transcends every being.”¹⁹ In the Dionysian corpus we can find nothing like the complicated structures of mathematic calculations explaining the order of the cosmos, which we have seen in pagan Neoplatonism. Dionysius never speaks about mathematical symbols in such a manner, because they are not used in the Scripture.²⁰ The One is simply one of many names given to God in the Bible. It may be the most important one, but nevertheless its usage does not differ from that of others.

There is yet another explanation of the absence of mathematics in the Dionysian system, influenced as it is by pagan Neoplatonism in such a profound way. For Pagan Neoplatonists, mathematics had a sense only as knowledge, which explained the order of the universe. Heavenly spheres in their own beauty and symmetry were created by Demiurge in the mathematical way. The Neoplatonic view on the matter was only a development of the vision, which “divine Plato” unfolded in *Timaeus*. Astronomy was so important because the Universe itself was the path to the One. For Dionysius, the cosmos as such is no longer the way, because in itself it is no longer divine. The beauty and harmony of the spheres only shows the omnipotence and power of the Creator. The incarnation of Christ and the revelation of the Holy Scripture are for a Christian philosopher a better way to unity with God. We can recognize such a Christian approach on the part of Pseudo-Dionysius in the fragment of *On the Divine Names* where he describes the Sun.²¹ He clearly refers in this fragment to the archetypal Platonic figure of the sun as the image of Good. Following the passages on how we can understand the relation of God to beings by the usage of the allegory of

¹⁸ DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Divine Names*, 977 C.

¹⁹ DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Divine Names*, 981 A.

²⁰ Dionysius explains that considering the Divine Names he does not want to speak of anything, which is not included in the Holy Scripture, see DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Divine Names*, 588 C.

²¹ DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Divine Names*, 697 C – 700 C.

the Sun and its life-giving rays, he explains that: “The old myth used to describe the sun as the provident god and creator of this universe. I do not say this. But I do say that *ever since the creation of the world, the invisible things of God, his eternal power and deity, have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.*”²²

The sun is then no longer god and creator; it only points at the only God and Creator of all. Such a change is very significant in the context of Neoplatonic theurgical approach to the universe. Some scholars today believe that the sun played the role of the highest symbol in theurgical rites. Pagan philosophers owed that conviction to the Neo-Pythagorean influences present in their systems. Especially Gregory Shaw underlines that all theurgy was pointed at the *synthema* of the sun.²³ For Dionysius, the rejection of treating the sun as a god was probably a very important point in making his Christian version of Neoplatonism. However, the Pythagorean conviction of the importance of the sun will come back at the dawn of the Modern Era.

THE REDISCOVERY OF MATHEMATICAL SYMBOLS

The figure of Nicholas of Cusa is especially interesting in comparison with Pseudo-Dionysius. Thanks to the achievements of Italian Quattrocento he knew all the main texts of late Platonic pagan philosophers. Dermot Moran even wrote that: “Cusanus was exceedingly well informed, and often at first hand, on the Platonic tradition.” Among the dialogues of Plato, he knew well the main treaties of Proclus: *Commentary on Parmenides* and *Platonic Theology*.²⁴ Those were the key texts of the last great *diadoch* of the

²² DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Divine Names*, 700 C; Dionysius refer here to the letters of St Paul Apostle — Col 1:7 or probably 1 Cor 8:6.

²³ See SHAW, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 216-228.

²⁴ Dermot Moran gives the catalogue of the manuscripts which were in possession of Cusanus: “He was an eager collector of manuscripts, eventually owning about 300, including many works by Platonists and their Christian followers. He owned Bruni’s translations of Plato’s *Phaedo*, *Crito*, *Apology* and *Seventh Letter*, as well as translations of the *Republic*, *Laws*, *Phaedrus* and *Parmenides*. He possessed manuscripts by Origen, Gregory Nazianzus, Basil, Augustine, Ambrose, Albertus Magnus, the *Liber de causis*, Avicenna’s metaphysics, as well as Calcidius’ *Commentary on the Timaeus*, Moerbeke’s translation of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*, and Proclus’ *Commentary on the Parmenides* as well as Grosseteste’s translations of Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology* and *Celestial Hierarchy*. Unusually for the time, he had copies of part of Eriugena’s *Periphyseon*. He possessed a copy of Petrus Balbus’ translation of the *Platonic Theology*.” *Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464): Platonism at the Dawn of Modernity*, in *Platonism at the Origins of*

Neoplatonic school of Athens, which were thoroughly studied by Pseudo-Dionysius. However, almost a millennium passed between those two great minds and what for Dionysius was fresh and new in Christian doctrine, for Cusanus was an integral part of Christian teaching. Cusanus is aware that some Platonic doctrines are in conflict with orthodox Christianity,²⁵ but he reads the ancient text in a completely new perspective. In the time of Pseudo-Dionysius, pagan religion was still practiced and Neoplatonism was treated by pagan philosophers as an alternative to Christianity. For Nicolas of Cusa, who lived in the Christian world, those old pagan doctrines were like a breeze of fresh air in the intellectual atmosphere permeated by Aristotelian metaphysics and logic. The most interesting and seductive part of those doctrines was certainly the ancient approach to numbers founded by divine Pythagoras himself. It is necessary to note that the Pythagorean teachings of numbers were in complete accord with the Platonic understanding of ideas. Number is simply the highest kind of idea since the time of Plato and in Neoplatonic doctrines, as we have seen, it naturally becomes the highest form of symbol, so important in elevating soul to divinity. That is why the Pythagorean tradition of understanding numbers as principles present in the cosmos was an inherent part of Platonism. For Nicolas of Cusa, this Pythagorean aspect of the Platonic tradition was especially important and Pythagoras was “the first philosopher both in name and in fact.”²⁶

In the doctrine of Pseudo-Dionysius, we observed the change of the character of symbols by moving them from the plane of nature to the plane of grace. For Dionysius, symbols are effective because they were given by God to hierarchy and did their work in the hierarchical order. In the thought of Cusanus we can observe that he places stress on the reading of the beauty of nature as one of the initial phases of the path to God. Nature and the universe as such once again become the path to unity with God. Studying the natural world and the harmony of its composition causes admiration in the man who sees the greatness of God. Simultaneously, those works of God cannot express Him and to truly understand means to know that we can never grasp them with our minds. This is the ultimate knowledge of creation

Modernity. Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy, ed. Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 16.

²⁵ See MORAN, *Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464)*, 18.

²⁶ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I, 11; 32 (*De docta ignorantia*, ed. Ernest Hoffmann and Raymond Klibansky (Leipzig: Meiner, 1932); trans. Jasper Hopkins, *On Learned Ignorance*, in *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance: A Translation and Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* (Minneapolis: A.J. Benning Press, 1985)

provided by learned ignorance: “With regard to these objects, which are so worthy of admiration, so varied, and so different, we recognize—through learned ignorance and in accordance with the preceding points—that we cannot know the rationale for any of God’s works but can only marvel; for the Lord is great, whose greatness is without end.”²⁷

Such statements by Cusanus are very similar to what Pseudo-Dionysius said about symbols, which are similar and dissimilar at the same time.²⁸ Nicolas of Cusa does not use the term *symbol* to describe the wonders of nature, but in my opinion such an understanding of the natural world means that nature somehow holds alternative means used on the path to God. We can observe that such an understanding is also expressed by what Cusanus says about the four arts of the *quadrivium*. Those arts give man the understanding of the world, but true knowledge is once again learned ignorance. They can never be precise enough to express the nature of the world.²⁹

The Cardinal admits that for a man, who is corporeal, the only way to union with God leads through symbols. For him, the most appropriate are those of mathematics. The Pythagorean influences are clearly exposed in his teaching on mathematical symbols and their role in the mystical ascend. Cusanus explains this in the 11th chapter of the first book of *De docta ignorantia*. He claims that he owes to “our wisest and most divine teachers” the conviction that invisible things can be known only through what is visible.³⁰ It is necessary then to use the symbols and images on the mystical path to God. Those symbols should have two main features to guide us properly. What is invisible and intellectual is unknown to us. To get to the unknown we must start with what is known. It is not sufficient to have any knowledge of the thing at the starting point; this knowledge must be as certain as possible. Therefore the symbols must not only be known, but known with certainty which excludes any doubt: “Now, when we conduct an inquiry on the basis of an image (*ex imagine*), it is necessary that there be no doubt regarding the image, by means of whose symbolical comparative relation we are investigating what is unknown.”³¹

We cannot have indubitable knowledge of the material things themselves, because they are constantly changing. That is why the best symbols should

²⁷ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, II, 13; 179.

²⁸ See DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 141 A.

²⁹ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, II, 1; 94.

³⁰ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I, 11; 30.

³¹ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I, 11; 31.

be as remote as possible from the world of sensual perception: “In our considering of objects, we see that those which are more abstract than perceptible things, viz., mathematical, (not that they are altogether free of material associations, without which they cannot be imagined, and not that they are at all subject to the possibility of changing) are very fixed and are very certain to us. Therefore, in mathematical the wise wisely sought illustrations (*exempla*) of things that were to be searched out by the intellect.”³²

Cusanus concludes this chapter by saying: “Proceeding along this pathway of the ancients, I concur with them and say that since the pathway for approaching divine matters is opened to us only through symbols (*non nisi per symbola*), we can make quite suitable use of mathematical signs (*signis*) because of their incorruptible certainty.”³³ After the explanation of why the mathematical symbols are the most suitable for the task, in the next chapter the Cardinal explains how mathematical symbols should be used to achieve the ultimate form of knowledge - learned ignorance:

1. “...we must first consider finite mathematical figures together with their characteristics and relations.”
2. “Next, [we must] apply these relations, in a transformed way, to corresponding infinite mathematical figures.”
3. “Thirdly, [we must] thereafter in a still more highly transformed way, apply the relations of these infinite figures to the simple Infinite, which is altogether independent even of all figure.”³⁴

And he concludes: “At this point our ignorance will be taught incomprehensibly how we are to think more correctly and truly about the Most High as we grope by means of a symbolism.”³⁵ The mathematical symbols then are so important because their role is indispensable to gain the ultimate knowledge of God. Cusanus sees no other means which can lead us to proper thinking about the divine. Mathematics, then, can provide the most sublime and the most certain type of knowledge for us, and only thanks to reaching this highest peak of intellectual activity can we overcome our human concepts and reach ignorance, which is full of the presence of God.

³² NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I,11; 31.

³³ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I, 11; 32.

³⁴ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I, 12; 33.

³⁵ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I, 12; 33: “Et tunc nostra ignorantia incomprehensibiliter docebitur, quomodo de altissimo rectius et verius sit nobis in aenigmate laborantibus sentiendum.”

Cusanus underlines that he derived his knowledge of the role of mathematics from ancient teachers. It is very interesting that among those ancient teachers he mentions Boethius, Pythagoras and St Augustine, whom he calls a Platonist. Even Aristotle, who wanted to be “without parallel,” could not escape the usage of numbers in explaining the differences between species.³⁶ We can see the absence of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite among those teachers, because he never treated mathematical symbols as the means to ascend to God, even in the text *On the Divine Names* where he speaks of the One. We have seen that Dionysius was very careful when he spoke about celestial bodies and especially the sun, because it brought him close to pagan theurgy. Here, we can see the revival of another aspect of ancient Pythagorean teachings. When they spoke of mathematics and geometry embodied in reality as some kind of principal plane, they spoke most of all of the heavenly spheres. The cosmos constructed of indestructible matter was a part of the material reality where there is no generation and corruption and local motion was the only possible kind of change. Thus, mathematics of ideal numbers was especially suitable to describe this most perfect part of the visible cosmos. That is why, by speaking of numbers, Neoplatonic philosophers meant especially their role in understanding the eternal movements of the heavens. For them, the ascent of the soul was a journey inwards into the human soul in which there was an image of the universe as an echo of the descent of the soul to the material realm. So, the travel inward was in a sense tantamount to restoration of the cosmic order. Ascent of the soul was necessarily connected with traversing all the spheres of the cosmos. In this way, the heavenly spheres and the material cosmos were the road to the One. For early Christian writers, the cosmos was no longer eternal. God created it, and thus it was not a road, but rather a guidepost, which only exposed the omnipotence and might of its Creator.

Nicolas of Cusa, as well as other thinkers of his time, rediscovered this ancient teaching of the spiritual meaning of astronomy. They want to demonstrate that Pythagorean teaching is in complete accord with Christian doctrines.³⁷ However, in this case there was one main difference between early modern and ancient scholars. By studying astronomy, Neoplatonists

³⁶ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I, 11; 31–32.

³⁷ The most significant example is Petrus Bungus who in 1599 published his *Numerorum Mysteria*. The goal of his book was to demonstrate the compatibility of Pythagorean numerology with Christian doctrine, and Cusanus was surely his main inspiration; see Paul Richard BLOOM, *Philosophy of Religion in the Renaissance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 21–22.

discovered the reality of the gods, who were coeternal with the heavens. For Nicolas of Cusa, the cosmos itself was not divine in the ancient sense. There were no gods present in it, but rather by studying celestial mathematics he wanted to elevate his mind to the Creator who, being outside of the world, had left in the heavenly spheres the most perfect traces of Himself among all creation. Astronomy, then, is strictly connected with spirituality and mysticism. In recent works by historians of science, we can observe how important the mystical inspiration was to early modern discoveries in the field of astronomy. In this field, Nicolas of Cusa was especially important as one of the predecessor of the Copernican heliocentric revolution.³⁸

There is another aspect in which Cusanus' approach differs from both the pagan Neoplatonists and Pseudo-Dionysius. In the case of the latter, symbols were always something beyond the human mind. As we have seen, they were effective because of their incomprehensibility, which was the best evidence of divine origin. The divine was always beyond the reach of the intellect. Nicolas of Cusa claims that we start our learning of ignorance from what we know, and mathematical symbols are most suitable for us because mathematics provide certain knowledge. So, incomprehensibility belongs rather to the sphere where mathematical symbols cannot reach. They are not incomprehensible themselves, but rather lead to what can be known only by ignorance. Such an understanding of mathematical symbols results in an understanding of the way they act. They do not contain any power in themselves and the role of man is to use them, not to exploit their power. The proper use of symbols means drawing the right conclusions from geometrical demonstration. We can say that what seems to be more important here is how man realizes the truth by the usage of symbols. They do not do anything by themselves, as in the case of the ancient Neoplatonists. Moreover, in the final part of the process the human intellect must "apply the relations of these infinite figures to the simple Infinite."³⁹ This is the action of human intellect, not the work of a symbol itself. Nicolas of Cusa has a much greater confidence in what man can do himself, even at the level of gaining learned ignorance.⁴⁰ His view is then more anthropocentric in comparison to pagan Platonists who were rather cosmocentric, and Pseudo-Dionysius

³⁸ See Edwin A. BURTT, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 41; 54.

³⁹ NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *De docta ignorantia*, I, 12; 33.

⁴⁰ See Ernst CASSIRER, *The individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2000), 39.

who was Christocentric, inasmuch as all the symbols taken from the Holy Scriptures refer to the works of Christ—the only true activity of God in the sensual world.

This leads to the last difference, which I would like to point out. Pseudo-Dionysius shared with his pagan predecessors the conviction that the usage of symbols can be effective only during liturgy. For Nicolas of Cusa, the mystical path meant the sole activity of the human mind. Gaining ignorance and getting closer to spiritual truth is the consequence of mathematical reasoning, and this is the field of learning and drawing proper conclusions, not liturgy. Therefore, for Cusanus the mystical way is no longer done in the liturgical way: it is independent and parallel to the Liturgy of the Church. The sacraments of the Church are accessible to every Christian believer, but the mystical way is only for chosen initiates, those who entered the path of ancient knowledge.

Here we can observe a very interesting similarity to the ancient discussion. Considering the understanding of symbols in pagan Neoplatonic philosophy, we have seen the controversy between Porphyry and Iamblichus on the necessity of theurgy. Iamblichus defended the conviction, which later became common among Neoplatonic philosophers, that merely “doing philosophy” is not sufficient to elevate the soul to the divine. Even philosophical exercises such as meditation, contemplation and ascetic practices are not effective and must be supported with sacred rituals exploiting the powers of symbols. It is significant that in the writings of Nicolas of Cusa, we can observe the rise of an opposite movement. He shows that Christian theology and philosophy (perhaps due to a broader contact with ancient literature) discovered once again a purely intellectual mysticism. Therefore, the doctrine of Nicolas of Cusa can be perceived as a return to Plotinus and Porphyry in a new Christian perspective.

CONCLUSION

The case of Nicolas of Cusa and his understanding of mathematical symbols is a unique testimony of how rediscovery of ancient Neoplatonism was made at the dawn of the modern era. One of the most significant aspects of this process was the rediscovery of ancient mathematics, which was strongly linked with its mystical context. This process was a change of the perspective in which man viewed his place in the universe. The cosmos, and

man in it, were rehabilitated. Ernst Cassirer points out that the Cardinal sees the material cosmos in a way that is far from the Medieval one. Ascending to the divine he must always follow the path of the sensual universe.⁴¹ On this path: “the spirit of asceticism is overcome; mistrust of the world disappears.”⁴²

Such a new approach was somehow a return to the ancient view, which Cusanus borrowed from Neoplatonic texts. The cosmos, and especially the superlunary sphere, once again served the mystical attempts of man. The universe once again became the way to God, losing its status of a signpost, which directed the believer to the Creator. However, we must not forget that some aspects of the understanding of symbols were lost. They became powerless and while the Neoplatonists see in mathematical symbols the powers of gods, which were only a glimpse of divine reasoning, Cusanus sought in them the certainty of knowledge. Nevertheless, the philosophy of Nicolas of Cusa also constituted a return to purely intellectual mysticism independent from the ritual, or complementary to the liturgy of the Church.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BLOOM, Paul Richard. *Philosophy of Religion in the Renaissance*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.
- BURTT, Edwin A. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*. Mineola: Dover Publications 2003.
- CASSIRER, Ernst. *The individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*. Translated by Mario Domandi. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2000.
- DILLON, John. “Plotinus and the Chaldean Oracles.” In *Platonism in the Late Antiquity*, edited by Stephen Gersh and Charles Kannengiesser, 131–140. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.
- IAMBlichus. *De mysteriis*: translation, introduction and notes by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.
- MORAN, Demot. “Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464): Platonism at the Dawn of Modernity. In *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity. Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton, 9–29. Dordrecht: Springer, 2008.
- NICHOLAS OF CUSA. *De docta ignorantia*, edited by Ernest Hoffmann and Raymond Klibansky. Leipzig: Meiner, 1932; *On Learned Ignorance*. Translated by Jasper Hopkins. In *Nicholas of*

⁴¹ CASSIRER, *The individual and the Cosmos*, 40: „In medieval thought, redemption signified above all liberation from the world, i.e., the uplifting of men above their sensible, earthly existence. But Cusanus no longer recognizes such a separation between man and nature. If man as a microcosm includes the natures of all things within himself, then his redemption, his rising up to the divinity, must include the ascension of all things.”

⁴² CASSIRER, *The individual and the Cosmos*, 44.

- Cusa on Learned Ignorance: A Translation and Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia*. Minneapolis: A.J. Benning Press, 1981.
- PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS. *The complete works*. Translated by Colm Luibheid, New York: Paulist Press 1987.
- RUSSELL, Norman. *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- SHAW, Gregory. *Theurgy and the Soul*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.
- WEAR, Sarah Klitenic, and John M. DILLON. *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

ROZUMIENIE SYMBOLI I ICH ROLI W DRODZE DUSZY KU BOGU U PSEUDO-DIONIZEGO AREOPAGITY I MIKOŁAJA Z KUZY

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje problem zmian w postrzeganiu symbolu jako istotnego czynnika życia duchowego w łonie filozofii neoplatońskiej. Wydaje się, że to starożytni neoplatonicy pogańscy pierwsi zdali sobie sprawę z tego, jak wielką rolę posiada symbol we wznoszeniu się duszy ku Bogu. Włączyli oni do rozumienia filozofii jako drogi do zjednoczenia z Jednym zaczerpniętą z *Wyroczni Chaldejskich* i *Pism hermetycznych* naukę o obrzędach teurgicznych, podczas których używano świętych symboli. Pierwsza część tego artykułu podejmuje próbę ukazania spotkania filozofii z tak pojętym rozumieniem symbolu. Szczególnie ważne dla rozumienia późniejszego pojmowania symboli przez Mikołaja z Kuzy miały używane w najwyższej części rytów teurgicznych symbole matematyczne. Druga część artykułu ukazuje w jaki sposób Pseudo-Dionizy Areopagita przekształca naukę swoich pogańskich poprzedników. Najbardziej istotnym elementem nauki Dionizego jest swego rodzaju wyłączenie symboli z porządku kosmicznego i umieszczenie ich w porządku zbawczym, który gruntuje się na Objawieniu. Prawdziwe symbole dla Pseudo-Dionizego to znaki sakramentalne obecne w liturgii Kościoła. Taka transformacja rozumienia symbolu sprawiła, że symbole matematyczne utraciły swoje wcześniejsze znaczenie. Powyższe analizy umożliwiły ukazanie w ostatniej części niniejszego artykułu kolejnej transformacji rozumienia symbolu, która miała miejsce w filozofii Mikołaja z Kuzy. Piętnastowieczne odrodzenie neoplatonizmu i pitagoreizmu spowodowało powrót do mistycznego traktowania symboli matematycznych, ale jednocześnie zostały one odarte ze rytualnego kontekstu obecnego w starożytnych tekstach.

THE UNDERSTANDING OF SYMBOLS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL TO GOD IN PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE AND NICHOLAS OF CUSA

Summary

This article considers the issue of changes in the understanding of symbols as an integral part of spiritual life in Neoplatonic philosophy. It seems that ancient Neoplatonic philosophers were the first who clearly realized the importance of symbols to spiritual life. However, it happened due to the influence of the mystical Chaldean and Egyptian thought transferred to philosophical investigation by the *Chaldean oracles* and *Corpus hermeticum*. The late Neoplatonic thought of Iamblichus and Eastern Neoplatonic schools used symbols and rituals as integral parts of philo-

sophical investigation, understood as having a mystical goal. Especially mathematical symbols played a significant role, because they were used in the most advanced theurgical rituals. This analysis of the pagan Neoplatonic philosophy permits us to show properly the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who creatively transformed the teaching of his pagan predecessors, by incorporating ancient Neoplatonic tradition into Christian theology. Pseudo-Dionysius excludes liturgical symbols from the order of the cosmos and transfers them to the plane of Salvation grounded in Biblical Revelation. Only true symbols are used in the liturgy of the Church, and thus mathematical symbols are no longer needed in the ascent of the soul to unity with God. The third part analyzes the meaning of symbolism in the thought of Nicolas of Cusa. Thanks to the rediscovery of ancient pagan Neoplatonism and Pythagorean thought, Cusanus also brings new life to the mystical meaning of mathematics. Mathematical symbols once again become an important part of the mystical ascent of the soul, but this time without their ritual context.

Słowa kluczowe: Mikołaj z Kuzy, Jamblich, Pseudo-Dionizy Areopagita, symbol, symbol matematyczny, teurgia.

Key words: Nicholas of Cusa, Iamblichus, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, symbol, mathematical symbol, theurgy.

Information about Author: Rev. TOMASZ STĘPIEŃ, PhD — Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw; address for correspondence: ul. Dewajtis 5, PL 01-815 Warszawa; e-mail: t.stepien@uksw.edu.pl