"Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa: An Introduction"

Peter J. Casarella, DePaul University
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AN INTRODUCTION

* Peter Casarella *

"Nicholas of Cusa . . . never swayed from the conviction that the idea of God in its utter unknowability must remain the prime nodal point in all reflection on the cosmos, the Church, and even daily life."

The imperial city of Constantinople was dubbed by Constantine the "new Rome" and remained the capital of the Byzantine empire through the first half of the fifteenth century. But in 1453 it fell to the Turks. The decisive attack sounded an alarm throughout Latin Christendom not altogether different than the global panic that followed the events of September 11, 2001. One Western observer noted that the Sultan’s entrance into the city was marked by blood flowing through the streets like rainwater after a sudden storm. The Ottoman troops had looted the imperial palace and the homes of the rich. The cathedral of Hagia Sophia, the building project of the sixth century Emperor Justinian, was transformed overnight into an imperial mosque.

In the old Rome, Pope Nicholas V, who in 1439 had attempted a reunion Council with the Greeks, called for a crusade against the Turks. This last ditch effort provided little hope. The Popes of the fifteenth century (unlike their counterparts in the thirteenth century) no longer sent crusaders to retake the Byzantine capital, but the Western Church had also failed to support their
beleaguered Eastern counterpart in either military or financial terms. Neither Pope Nicholas nor his immediate successors were successful in changing the situation. A new world order had come into place, and the Turks had brought down what remained of the Eastern Christian Empire. In such an environment, few in the Christian West were ready to engage Islam in a conversation.

Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, however, set to work immediately on a dialogue entitled *On the Peace of Faith*. Without the least hint of false irony, Nicholas offered a dream vision in which religious leaders of many different faiths met in heaven. The representatives of the different rites would put forward their version of the truth, and all in the end would submit to the authority of God the Word. Nicholas’ conviction that Christ dwelled hiddenly in the *una religio* binding together the diverse rites was no less firm than his humanist faith in dialogue itself.

Several years later he published a study of the Koran entitled *Cribratio Alkorani* (“A Sifting through the Koran”). He prefaced this meticulous analysis of multiple Latin translations of the Islamic holy texts with a methodological comment:

*[B]ecause our intellectual spirit is not that very Good which it desires . . . the intellect does not know what the Good is. Therefore, the intellectual spirit by nature desires to understand that Good. For although [that Good] cannot be lacking to anything that is—since to be is something good—nevertheless, unless the intellect understands the Good, it will be deprived of it and will not be able to be at rest.*

Accordingly, the Good is the end of our intellectual appetite, but it is also its source. Standing before and in awe of the Good as such, the human intellect becomes profoundly aware of its own *docta ignorantia* (“learned ignorance”). An admission of reason’s quixotic core impulses not just epistemological humility but a quest to achieve real gains in approaching the truth. Such modesty hardly restrained Cusanus from rebuking the distortions of the gospel perpetrated by Mohammed, but it allowed him to present, to name just one example, a *pia interpretatio* of the Muslim defense of Mary’s virgin birth. Nicholas’ method for searching for the truth through an encounter with Islam is quite remarkable. Cogent argument stands alongside an unshakable faith that the harmony with which the Creator originally endowed things can be brought to light through patient inquiry. Instead of the universal rationalism of Enlightenment metaphysics (e.g., Leibniz’s notion of a rationally attainable “pre-established harmony”), Cusanus believed that the human intellect reaches *discors concordia* (“harmony through difference”) and *concordans differentia* (“difference in harmony”). For this uniquely Christian approach to speculative reason, Balthasar says that Nicholas’ creative genius compares to that of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The year 2001 marks the sixth centenary of the birth of the German-born Cardinal. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) lived during what is sometimes dismissed as a transitional period in Western culture, for his life and thought crossed the epochal threshold that divided the still closed world of late medieval theology from the dawn of Renaissance humanism’s infinite universe. During his lifetime, the so-called “Cusanus” (literally translated, “the one from the village of Kues”) was acclaimed throughout Europe as a scholar, a lawyer and canonist, a collector of ancient manuscripts, a mathematician and philosopher of science, and a preacher. Modern scholarship (e.g., Neokantian philosophy and Ernst Cassirer) frequently emphasized his affinity with the forerunners of modern science. After all, he conjectured the infinity of the world, proposed a perspectival theory of knowing, and outlined an experimental method for the measurement of weight. More recent inquiries, however, have shown that the Cardinal’s *philosophical* acumen was also a central element of his religious beliefs.

To mark the sixth centenary, *Communio* is offering two testimonies to why the writings of this fifteenth century prince of the Church are of abiding interest. Neither of these has ever been published in English. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s “Why we Need

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2 This is a slightly altered translation of what appears in Jasper Hopkins, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, vol. II (Minneapolis: Banning Press, 2001), 976.
Nicholas of Cusa appeared in a Swiss newspaper in 1964. Balthasar’s affinity with the thought of Cusanus is hardly surprising, for the Swiss theologian’s engagement with the latter goes deeper than is often acknowledged. In 1965 he dedicated a chapter of the volume on metaphysics of *The Glory of the Lord* to Cusanus under the heading of “the knot.” Cusanus, Balthasar claimed, was successful in pointing forward to modern developments only because he represented such a formidable synthesis of ancient paths to wisdom and especially the Neoplatonic heritage of thinking God’s presence in and beyond the world analogically. Cusanus also plays a pivotal role in the articulation of a christologically sound theology of Holy Saturday in the volume known to English speaking readers as *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*. Finally, in the second volume of the *Theologic* (1985), Balthasar returned to Cusanus. This time he presented him alongside Maximus the Confessor, St. Bonaventure, and Rupert of Deutz under the “kata-logical” aspects of a speculative Christology and showed a more thorough acquaintance with the Cardinal’s sermons.

Our second contribution comes from Pope John Paul II. The letter published in this issue was sent to the local ordinary of Trier, for the German Cardinal’s birthplace lies within that diocese along the Mosel River valley. The letter details the Cardinal’s heroic (and often unsuccessful) efforts to reform the Church at the cusp of the Protestant Reformation as well as his allegiance to the office of the bishop of Rome.

On May 27th, 2001 John Paul II’s missive was read aloud at the conclusion of a Eucharist presided over by Karl Cardinal Lehmann in Cusanus’ hometown of Bernkastel-Kues. In attendance were the townspeople, German dignitaries, and scholars from throughout the world who had spent the week discussing Cusanus’ philosophy, theology, politics, and contributions to science. Similar academic gatherings took place in recent months in Washington, D.C. (at The Catholic University of America), Deventer (The Netherlands), Menaggio (Italy), Brixen (South Tyrol, Italy), Czech Republic (Palacký University), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Tours (France), and Tokyo. No less than in the fifteenth century, the impact of the son of the Moselle is now felt throughout the globe.

Balthasar maintains that we need Nicholas of Cusa today precisely because he never swayed from the conviction that the idea of God in its utter unknowability must remain the prime nodal point in all reflection on the cosmos, the Church, and even daily life. Balthasar recognizes that this message is a good as much to secular thinking as it is to the obliqueness of God among the faithful. The God of Cusanus is radically *non aliud* (“not other”) and in that transcendentally inexhaustible immanence never subject to either the grasping projections of modern subjectivism or the fatiguing orations of a Christianity fully come of age. Cusanus reflected upon and lived out of the sacred mystery of his own ignorance before the divine. So central was this stance to his life and thought that the following apt description accompanies his tomb in his titular Roman church of St. Peter in Chains: “Dilexit Deum, timuit, et veneratus est, ac illi soli servavit.”

*Peter Casarella is associate professor of theology at the Catholic University of America.*

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7“God he loved, feared, and adored. He was subject to Him alone.”