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### Nicolas of Cusa His Life and Thought

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Nicolas of Cusa  
His Life and Thought

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Concordia Seminary  
Department of Philosophy

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Bachelor of Divinity

by  
Paul H. Riedel 1921-1956

May 1947

Approved by: Richard P. [Signature]  
Paul H. [Signature]

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## Forword

Nicolas of Cusa is a very interesting figure in the history of christian thought and activity, because he lived in an epoch of transition and because the religious and cultural tensions of his age are mirrored in his personality and thought as in a microcosm. Churchman, feudal Lord, theologian, preacher, philosopher, diplomat, reformer, mystic, scientist, antiquary, lawyer, German — Cusa was all of these and more. He was a man of the middle ages whose vision included things that lay far in the future.

Most interesting to the present writer were Cusa's mysticism and his universalist approach to Christian truth and values. A mystic, he, nevertheless, strove to communicate his insight rationally. Though a sincere reformer, he remained a loyal adherent of the Roman church.

Of late Cusa has been rescued from comparative obscurity. Until 1932 there had been no English book about him. A contemporary revival of interest witnesses to the fact that his thought has more than purely historical interest to many. This despite the fact that much of it is of questionable philosophical and theological value.

The present writer, while critical of many of Cusa's views and activities, wishes to view the latter sympathetically. Cusa paid the debt to his times which history demands of all men. In the light of this fact his positive

contributions to humanity stand out all the more clearly.

The writer regrets that most of the Cusan texts were not available to him in the preparation of this paper. In addition to the primary sources, Ernst Hoffman's Das Universum des Nikolaus von Kues would have been of particular value. The latter edits the works of Cusa and has contributed important sections to the literature on Cusa's theology. The writer, nevertheless, hopes that his paper may, despite obvious lacunae, present an interesting and informative picture of the man, Cusa, and his thought.

The work is divided into three chapters, of which the first seeks to set forth the man in his times and the second his thought and influence. The third chapter presents a brief critical evaluation of Cusa's philosophy.

## Chapter One

### Cusa's Times, His Life, and Personality

#### 1.

Nicolas of Cusa (1401 - 1464), otherwise known as Chrypffs or Krebs after his native town of Kues on the Mosel in Trier was born into a changing world. As is inevitable in every period of transition his age was characterized by religious and cultural tensions. A world view which had dominated the lives of millions of people was disintegrating with groanings, while new forces were breaking into life.

The medieval structure which was undergoing pronounced changes in the times of Cusa has been broadly characterized by Pitrim Sorokin as part of an ideational<sup>1</sup> cultural epoch. The term connotes the predominance of an other worldly point of view, which in medieval times affected every sphere of life. People's thoughts and activities centered ultimately about the way of salvation, a road to which the church alone held the keys.

The medieval attitude toward the highest of human

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1. Cp. Pitrim Sorokin, The Crisis of Our Age. Sorokin interprets history as a process of oscillation between ideational, ideal, and sensate cultures. While his approach to the patterns of culture is somewhat too sociological to please the writer, his carefully documented studies must be conceded a high value.

aspirations received its final and most impressive formulation in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. He had created a mighty philosophical synthesis in which were united philosophy and theology, credere and intellegere. It was a synthesis based largely on the intellectual cosmos of Aristotle<sup>1</sup> which sought to determine the place of every human activity on a ladder of ascent which lead ultimately to the vision of God. But, the Thomistic structure and the medieval world view of which it was the highest expression did not provide a satisfactory answer to a great variety of human problems and needs. They bore within themselves the seeds of decay. By the fifteenth century the death hour of the Middle Ages had arrived. Life and particularly religious life had to be expressed in new forms. The process of transition to new forms can be studied in the philosophy, theology, and political theory of the times, in the sciences and arts, the worship life of the people, and in almost every sphere of human activity. In the following paragraphs it will be necessary to do no more than briefly describe some aspects of the disruption of the medieval outlook which are significant for the subject of this paper. Gusa's debt to his times will be discussed more fully in subsequent paragraphs.

Though there is a drive in the Thomistic thought system which has not to this day been stilled, there was no urgency<sup>2</sup> in the thought of the school-men of the fifteenth century.

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1. On Aristotle's influence on the cosmology of the Middle Ages see below, p. 44.

2. Willy Andreas, Deutschland vor der Reformation characterizes the work of 15th century school-men as "...Schulwissenschaft von Spätlingen gepflegt."

The latter, of course, still sought to maintain their influence,<sup>1</sup> but their authority was being undermined from various directions. William of Occam, the invincible doctor, 1270 - 1347, had advanced his belief that God could only be apprehended intuitively and that philosophy and theology were disciplines which must operate in two different spheres. He had, furthermore, questioned medieval political theory when he challenged the pope's right to temporal power as well as the theory of papal infallibility. Most destructive for the Thomistic outlook was his thesis<sup>2</sup> that the Scriptures are the source of Christian faith.

The political theory of the schoolmen had received a further shattering blow at the hands of Marsilius of Padua and John of Jandun, who maintained that both church and state should rest on the sovereignty of the common people. These two men had likewise advocated church reform and the abolition of the canon law.<sup>3</sup> The great councils of Pisa, Constance, and Basel, all held during Gusa's lifetime further weakened the prestige of the papacy, the head of the medieval world, and the bizarre situation which existed during the period of the divided papacy could hardly be expected to maintain the cultural pattern of the preceding centuries. In addition, the separation of the Eastern

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1. Cp. the attacks on Gusa by the contemporary Thomist, Wenck, below, p.67 .

2. Cp. Heinrich Schmidt, Philosophisches Wörterbuch,<sup>8</sup> pp. 302 f.

3. The contents of the Defensor Pacis are given in summary by Lars P. Qualben, A History of the Christian Church, pp. 191 f.



Church from Rome created a great many problems for such men as Cusa who were captivated by the ideal of the visible universal church of Christ.

Very significant for the departure from the thought of the schoolmen was the influence of Neo - Platonic philosophy. Plotinus' doctrine of emanations involved a cosmology radically different from that of Aristotle and St. Thomas.<sup>1</sup> Study of Neo - Platonism in Cusa's day and before bore fruit in the thought of a series of influential renaissance thinkers. Mention need be made here of only a few such men, of which at least one was directly influenced by Cusa, e.g., Paracelsus, Valentine Weigel,<sup>2</sup> Giordano Bruno, Jakob Böhme, and Sebastian Frank.

The influence of Plotinus' thought may be recognized clearly in the arts.<sup>3</sup> It may be said indeed that the arts particularly reveal a new emphasis on human values which was not characteristic of the medieval world view. Though the tendency is not as yet toward the representation of pathological types as in our modern era, the history of painting reveals an interest in sensate forms in the fifteenth century which is quite different from that of earlier periods of the Christian era.<sup>4</sup>

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1. The writer has used Bertrand Russel's brief but clear exposition of the thought of Plotinus, Cp. B. Russel, A History of Philosophy, pp. 284-297.

2. Cp. Rudolph Steiner, Mystics of the Renaissance.

3. Cp. the layer-like structure of St. Peter's in Rome.

4. The present writer has noticed this change particularly in studying the changing portraits of Christ. Cp. Ernst Kitzinger and Elizabeth Senior, Portraits of Christ.

The fourteenth century particularly brought mysticism which was greatly dependent on Neo - Platonism to the foreground. The originator of the mystical revival was Eckhart, who was still under the sign of the church but whose reaction to Aristotle was violently negative.<sup>1</sup>

Under the influence of the mystics a popular devotion broke out in verse and imagery which was a far cry from the stilted scholastic forms of worship in vogue.<sup>2</sup>

Popular preachers began to appear among the people in increasing numbers. An additional sign of unsatisfied needs among the people was the beginning of the growth of lodgery.<sup>3</sup>

In its emphasis on the nearness of God to the created world and in modifying the conception of God's transcendence, mysticism helped to pave the way for intensified study of the created world. Gusa's day witnessed a renewed emphasis on the sciences, chiefly mathematics.<sup>4</sup>

This emphasis, added to the humanistic interest in research, produced a spirit quite other than that current among the school-men.

Finally, Gusa's day saw an increasing need for doctrinal reform in the church and for betterment of the lives of the

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1. Cp. B.A.G. Fuller, A History of Philosophy, p. 423.

2. Cp. E.F. Jacob, "Cusanus the Theologian", in John Rylands Library, Manchester Bulletin, vol. 21, p. 407.

3. ibid.

4. C.W. Morris, "The Period of Renaissance and Enlightenment: From Galileo to Kant", in The University of Chicago Syllabus for Philosophy 102, 1935. p. 5.

clergy. The Hussite movement, which was of particular importance for Gusa's life, sufficiently attests this fact. The many incongruities in the medieval church, e.g., the existence side by side of the preaching of humility with a greediness for temporal power and pomp were inevitably forcing the reformation of the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

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1. A complete discussion of the tensions in the church leading to the reformation of the sixteenth century and the new learning is given by Andreas, *op. cit.* See particularly the introductory chapters.

2.

Into such an age Nicolas of Cusa was born. Tauler had been dead forty years, Ruysbroeck and Wycliff twenty.

Thomas a Kempis was twenty years Cusa's senior. Laurentius Biel Valla, Bessarion, and Gabriel<sup>A</sup> were contemporaries. Erasmus was born just three years after Cusa's death.

Because he was inept at his father's duties — Cusa's father was a prosperous boat owner who plied his trade on the Moselle — the young Nicolas left home and placed himself under the protection of the Count Thomas Theodoric von Manderscheid. The latter, realizing that the boy could become a talented scholar, sent him to the school of the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer. It was there that Thomas a Kempis had been trained and there that Erasmus later studied as a boy. The school of Deventer left a lasting mark on Cusa. Höffding<sup>1</sup> states that the mysticism of the school is the chief key to Cusa's later thought, and Evelyn Underhill<sup>2</sup> describes Nicolas the mystic as a direct descendant of the Brethren of the Common Life.

At the age of fifteen Nicolas transferred to the University of Heidelberg, which was at the time Nominalist and

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1. History of Modern Philosophy. Vol. I, p. 82.

2. Cf. her introduction to E.M. Salter's translation of Cusa's De Visione Dei, The Vision of God, p. VIII.

conciliar. The portions of this paper dealing with Gusa's thought will show that he must have overcome whatever influence Heidelberg had on him rather early in life.

After just one year, in 1417, the young student enrolled in the University of Padua, the most famous of Italian universities in his day. There he studied astronomy, statics, dynamics, map making, mathematics, Greek, and chiefly law. The influence of the mathematicians of Padua on him was lasting as can be clearly seen from the following quotation from the theological appendix to his De Mathematicis Complementis, a document dedicated to Nicolas V.

Everyone knows that in mathematics truth can be more surely reached than in the other liberal arts... for the geometrician does not care for lines or figures of bronze or gold or wood; he cares for lines or figures as they are in themselves...He beholds, therefore, with the eye of sense figures of the sensible world, in order that with the eye of the mind he may be able to behold the figures of the mind...mental perception in the abstract will see the figures free from all variable otherness; since the mind discovers itself when the otherness of sense is not there to impede it.<sup>1</sup>

It is of importance to note that the university of Padua was at Gusa's time the center of Averrhoism. A great similarity may be found in the psychology of Gusa to that of Averrhoes, who "suggested a whole hierarchy of intellectual levels culminating in the active reason, which link the mind of man with the divine intellect and enable us to have knowledge of God and union with Him."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Cited from E.F. Jacob, op. cit. p. 411.

2. Fuller, op. cit. p. 196. Cp. also p. 425.

In 1423, Nicolas at the age of twenty three years received the degree of Doctor of Canon Law from the University of Padua. Shortly thereafter he entered the law courts only to lose his first and last case. Cusa's legal opponent, George of Heimburg, stated that the former ceased practising<sup>1</sup> law, because he was not a success in this profession. The reason given is, however, improbably, since Heimburg was Cusa's life-long opponent. A more accurate conjecture might be that Cusa felt a strong personal need for extra legal studies. This need led him after a brief visit to Rome to seek truth in theological studies at the University of Cologne. Here he impressed his superiors to such an extent that he was given a canonry in 1425 even before being priested.

Cusa's marked talents did not escape the notice of Giordano Orsini, Cardinal and papal legate to Germany, who appointed the young scholar to the office of private secretary. In this manner Nicolas started on a career as ecclesiastical diplomat. As such he came into constant contact with the Italian humanists. In the course of his life as a result of this contact he discovered some unknown writings of Plautus, collected many ancient manuscripts, and had several translations made of the writings of Plato. While secretary to Orsini he also began the study of the pseudo Dionysius in Greek. According to E.M. Salter, the translator of Cusa's

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1. Cp. McClintock and Strong, Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, vol. II. p. 611.

Vision of God,<sup>1</sup> the latter took over many ideas from Dionysius. The story of his life shows, however, that despite his contact with humanists, Gusa never lost his primary character as a prince of the church.

As a church diplomat Gusa's chief problems were occasioned by the residency of the popes in Avignon and the anti-popes, who brought about the conciliar movement, by the Hussite movement, and by the separation of the Greek from the Roman church.

Through the papal schism the papacy lost a great deal of prestige. Loss of income from the Italian territories made the Avignon popes even more avaricious. Ultimately the council of Pisa was called in 1409 to overcome the evils of the schism. By the time the council first met there were three popes. In 1414 the emperor Sigismund forced a meeting of a new council at Constance to deal with the situation. This council deposed all the popes and elected Martin V, who used his new power to dissolve the council; however,<sup>2</sup> not before provisions for a new meeting had been made. Thus the stage had been set for some of the troubles in which Gusa became embroiled.

The Hussite movement which occasioned further difficulties for Nicolas was likewise in great measure the result of a papal political measure which had turned out unfavorably. On the accession of Richard II to the throne of England pope Clement VII had brought about a marriage between

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1. Op. cit. p. XIX.

2. On the councils op. Qualben, op. cit. p. 190.

Richard and Anne, sister of Wenceslaus of Bohemia, whose  
 mad reign ending in 1400 is well known. Through the marriage  
 frequent intercourse was occasioned between England and  
 Bohemia, and as a result the writings of Wycliffe were read  
 on the continent. Here they greatly influenced Hus. After  
 Hus' martyrdom at Constance his followers revolted. Two papal  
 crusades against Bohemia caused a great deal of bloodshed.  
 Finally on Nov. 30, 1433 an agreement was reached at Prague  
 whereby the Hussites were conceded communion in both kinds,  
 if they would agree that Christ's whole body was fully  
 present in both the bread and the wine.<sup>1</sup>

In 1054<sup>2</sup> the eastern and western branches of the church  
 had excommunicated each other. This created a problem for  
 Gusa, the diplomat. Furthermore, as will be clear from the  
 second chapter of this paper, some of his most important  
 concepts center about the doctrine of the Trinity. In this  
 Gusa adopted a view which did not contradict the filioque.

The significant part of Gusa's career as a diplomat  
 began at the council of Basel, 1431 - 1449. He had been  
 commissioned to go there by the Count Ulrich von Manderscheid  
 to appeal a decision by which the archbishopric of Treves  
 which the count desired to administrate had been turned  
 over to another.<sup>3</sup> The appeal was lost, but Gusa became em-  
 broiled in the problems of the council.

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1. On the Hussite movement, op. Bett, Nicolas of Gusa, p. 24.  
 2. Qualben, op. cit. pp. 162 f.  
 3. Op. Bett, op. cit. p. 14.



Nicolas at first favored the conciliar movement. His literary contribution to the establishment of the conciliar principle is contained in two writings, the De Concordantia Catholica and a tract, De Auctoritate Praesidendi in consilio generale. Maurice de Wulf characterizes the De Concordantia Catholica as follows:

...brimful with an abundance of ideas and an incoherent mass of erudition, obscure indeed by reason of the abuse of vague terminology, the incoherence of incompatible ideas, but in spite of all this, a powerful work, because of the idea which gives it an organic unity, namely the devotion for the unity of the church, and at the same time a brilliant work by reason of certain original and faithful ideas contained in it.<sup>1</sup>

De Wulf adds the information that in this treatise Nicolas attacked the Donations of Constantine and the False Decretals.<sup>2</sup>

A summary of the general content of the De Concordantia is included in Schaff's History of the Christian Church.

A general council, being inspired by the Holy Spirit, speaks truly and infallibly. The church is the body of the faithful — unitas fidelium — and is represented in a general council. The pope derives his authority from the consent of the church; a council has power to dethrone him for heresy and other causes and may not be prorogued or adjourned without its own consent. Peter received no more authority of Christ than the other apostles. Whatever was said to Peter was likewise said to others. All bishops are of equal authority and dignity, whether their jurisdiction be episcopal, archiepiscopal, patriarchal or papal, just as all presbyters are equal.<sup>3</sup>

Despite such thoughts as these, it should be noted, that Nicolas, even at this time, regarded the papal office as necessary. Though he conceived of the church as a "living

1. M. De Wulf, History of Medieval Philosophy, p. 227.

2. ibid.

3. Phillip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, vol. V. part II, p. 224.

unity of souls in fellowship with Christ," he believed that "...an order of connection is necessary, and this is provided by the hierarchy...in the universal church the unity of the whole is assured and represented by the pope."<sup>1</sup>

Unquestionably Nicolas was very influential in bringing about the decision by the council of Basel that councils are superior to popes.

In passing it might be well to point out that the emphasis on unity and harmony in the De Concordantia is likewise reflected in Gusa's political theory. He believed in a Germany united in an order after the manner of the church with the pope at the head of all. Perfect harmony of church and empire, he believed, would guarantee human welfare. "Harmony results from order, from the due submission of the parts and the unity of the whole."<sup>2</sup> Hard realities seem to have forced him to forsake this political idealism at times.

The same emphasis on concordantia is revealed in the first of the Epistolae ad Bohemos, in which Nicolas contends that it is presumptuous to hold one's own opinions to the point of breaking the unity of the whole. In the second letter he contends that communion in both kinds cannot afford more grace than communion in one kind.<sup>3</sup>

Of interest is the fact that Gusa's thoughts were not devoted exclusively to ecclesiastical polity in these times.

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1. Cp. Bett, op. cit. pp. 66 f.
  2. Bett, op. cit. pp. 18 f.
  3. Bett, op. cit. p. 23.

In 1439 he presented to the council a tract entitled De reparatione Calendarii.

Three years after the writing of the De Concordantia, that is, by 1436, Nicolas was refusing to be a partner to further measures against the pope. During the interval after writing the treatise on the church he had been having contact with papal envoys to the council. However, any charge that he had been bribed would be unjust. Höffding finds the reason for his defection from the conciliar side therein that Gusa felt that the only hope for church reform lay in strengthening the papacy.<sup>1</sup> It is true that Gusa was a life long reformer. If we add to this the fact that the church councils were often clamorously democratic, that ignorant and learned alike appeared on the floor, and that the conduct of the meetings was often boisterously turbulent, there would seem to be some justification for Gusa's point of view. At any rate it can be justified in the light of his knowledge and best insights. Bett says of him,

Obviously on his whole record he was an honest man. There was more than enough at Basel to disgust a sincere reformer, and he was that all his life long. His activities as legate and Bishop of Brixen are sufficient proof of it.<sup>2</sup>

Having cast his lot with the papal side, Nicolas now concentrated his utmost on serving the pope. In 1437 he was appointed papal envoy to the patriarch of Constantinople by Eugenius IV. The ultimate object of the journey was reunion of the two churches.

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1. Op. cit. p. 84.

2. Op. cit. p. 29.

It was on the return trip from Constantinople that Nicolas had an experience which became fundamental for all his later thought. He describes it as follows:

I made many efforts to unite the ideas of God and the world, of Christ and the church into a single root idea; but nothing satisfied me until at last on my way back from Greece by sea, my mind's vision, as if by an illumination from above, soared up to that perception in which God appeared to me the supreme Unity above all contradictions.<sup>1</sup>

Nicolas immediate object in Constantinople was to urge the Greek delegation to come to a conference at Ferrara and not to go to Basel, since the pope had officially dissolved the council in session there. But Basel had meanwhile elected a new pope, <sup>Felix</sup> Nicolas V. As a result both sides began to contend for the favor of the German electors, who professed neutrality. Nicolas supported Eugenius with such vigor that he earned from Aeneas Sylvius the title "Hercules of the Eugenians".

Hercules tamen omnium Eugenianorum Nicolaus Cusanus existimatus est homo et priscarum literarum 2 eruditissimus et multarum rerum usu perductus.

It was Cusa who ultimately won Germany for Eugenius. This earned for the pope's envoy the title of cardinal and papal legate to Germany. As such he was forced to consider the German political situation. Andreas says that no man of his time approached him in political depth.

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1. Cited from Steiner, *op. cit.* pp. 154 f.  
 2. Aeneas Sylvius, *De rebus gestis bas. concil.* See *opera.* (Basel, 1571), p. 3. Cited by Bett, *op. cit.* p. 33. note 1.

Nicolas spent his first years as Cardinal Legate on a tour of Germany proclaiming a papal indulgence and preaching reform. He preached chiefly in German, and this is no doubt part of the reason for which he was affectionately called the Cardinal of the Germans. His reform activities were directed: 1) against abuses in the sale of indulgences in Magdeburg;<sup>1</sup> 2) against superstitious practices in connection with the reverencing of bleeding hosts. Unfortunately he did not get enough papal support to accomplish much in this respect.<sup>2</sup> 3) against simony and concubinage among monks and other clergy. Priests had the right of collacium in Cusa's day whereby they could purchase the right to have a concubine. 4) against turning the inquisition against people in debt. 5) against overloading parishes with clergymen who did not minister to the spiritual needs of the people. 6) against the lack of discipline in churches and monasteries. 7) Against the formation of new orders and the distribution of indulgences to those already existing. Despite his good intentions, however, Cusa's reform was a torso without a head. Andreas says concerning the cardinal's work as a reformer:

Der Kardinal selber packte die Misstände nicht tief genug an der Wurzel an, und seine Wirksamkeit blieb vielfach in der Ordnung der äusseren Dinge und Formen stecken.<sup>3</sup>

When Nicolas had finished his tour of reform, he set out on the task of cleaning up his own diocese of

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1. Cp. Schaff, op. cit. p. 226.

2. On this and other reform problems mentioned below, cp. Andreas, op. cit. pp. 46 f. 75, 91, 99, 103, 152.

3. Op. cit. p. 123.

Brixen. To this end he called repeated councils and synods to enact reform measures. Citation of a typical list of regulations approved by the synods will suffice to indicate the state of the diocese.

The clergy are not to frequent taverns or to play at cards or dice. They are not to wear long hair or large hats, rings or jewels, garments of striking colors or of ultra fashionable cut. They are to instruct the people in the faith, teaching them the meaning of the sacraments and of the commandments, and reciting the Paternoster with them, urging them to come to mass fasting, and forbidding the sale of victuals before the end of the mass. They are to guard the people against superstition...<sup>1</sup>

Particularly in the light of the geographical region in which Brixen lay one can easily understand that reform must have been a difficult task. Communication was very difficult, since the region is mountainous and wooded. Most trying for Nicolas was the effort to reform an abbey at Sonnenburg. The abbess in charge refused to be reformed and resisted to the point of calling upon the Archduke Sigismund for aid. The latter was happy to enter the fray, since he and the cardinal were at odds with each other on the subject of their feoffal rights, Nicolas<sup>2</sup> maintaining that Sigismund was his feudal vassal. The abbess had ultimately to be excommunicated, but even after the decree of excommunication had been published, blood had to be shed before she could be removed from the abbey.

After this time Nicolas had only one peaceful year at Brixen. This was the year 1453 in which the cardinal

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1. Bett, op. cit. p. 50 f.  
2. Gp. Schaff, op. cit. p. 224.

wrote his De Visione Dei, a work which shall receive more attention at a later point in this paper.

The most indefensible act of the cardinal's life occurred in his last years. He used the threat of excommunication and actually did excommunicate four canons who did not accept one of his rulings which gave an undeserved prebend to his nephew.<sup>1</sup> In 1458 Aeneas Sylvius, who was now pope (Pius II) invited Nicolas to Rome where the latter served for some time as governor of Rome and papal territories. He seems to have done this task well. Meanwhile the battle with Sigismund went on. It continued, in fact, until after Gusa's death. The controversy was put before the pope, Sigismund declaring that Nicolas had misused his office and Nicolas affirming that the archduke had plotted against his life. George of Heimburg, again Gusa's opponent served as Sigismund's lawyer. The battle gradually became more and more an affair between pope and archduke with Nicolas participating less and less.

The cardinal died August 11, 1464 after providing that his possessions should be used for the establishment and maintenance of institutions of charity and education. Bett states that there was greater weeping at the time of Gusa's death than at that of Pius II.<sup>2</sup> A part of the inscription on the cardinal's tombstone reads:

Dilexit Deum, timuit et veneratus est, ad illi soli servivit. Promissio retributionis non defellit eum...<sup>3</sup>

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1. Op. Bett, op. cit. p. 60.  
 2. Op. cit. p. 79.  
 3. ibid.

## 3.

Before proceeding to a discussion of Cusa's thought it will be well to review briefly some of the traits of his personality. In considering the character of the man it is necessary to emphasize the fact again that he lived in a period of transition and that his spirit was uniquely sensitive to every conflict of his changing age. Andreas says of him:

Es ist als ob die Unrast seines Jahrhunderts ihn von einem Gedankenkreis zum anderen treibe, ihn dränge seine Kräfte gerade an den schwierigsten Problemen und in den verschiedensten Wirkungsbereichen zu erproben.<sup>1</sup>

Here then are two traits of his personality, an insatiable desire to get at the difficult problems of life and a willingness to try every approach to these problems. He had lost faith in Thomism as well as in any purely rational approach to truth. No doubt the acquaintance with mysticism greatly affected him in this respect. And now, because he could no longer make pretensions to having the truth black on white, he was spurred on to ever widening fields of research. We may cite Andreas again, who says of Nicolas that he had

ein sehr persönlicher, nimmer ganz zu stillender Erkenntnis-hunger...Hier rang ein Mensch wie <sup>2</sup> Jakob immer wieder Brust an Brust mit dem Engel.

In facing the new problems presented by changing conditions Nicolas was forced to realize that a break would have

1. Op. cit. p. 38.

2. Op. cit. p. 40.



to be made with the past in more than one respect. He had the stature to face this fact and yet the firm resolve to hold fast to that part of his tradition which his best insights told him was good. G.G. Coulton says of him that he combined wide reading and bold speculation with the most zealously loyal intentions.<sup>1</sup> Andreas pays him tribute when he says,

Wie jede grosse Persönlichkeit barg sein Wesen erhaltende und zerstörende Kräfte. Vergangenheit und Zukunft rangen um seine Seele.<sup>2</sup>

Heinrich Schmidt points out that Nicolas sought to re-<sup>3</sup>concile the two movements renaissance and reformation. No doubt the universalist bias which was a part of his every decision drove him to strive to harmonize these polar forces.

A significant insight into Cusa's personality is gained when one realizes that despite his ceaselessly unsatisfied mind Nicolas maintained his position as a loyal servant of the church. Had he not done so, he might have become a stubborn heretic, a modern mathematician, a political reformer, or almost anything else that he desired. He had the potential abilities to fill almost any office from scholarly antiquary to political organizer. But the unity of the church was a conception which gripped him profoundly. It was to maintain this unity that he sometimes subordinated his better insights, as in the case of

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1. G.G. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*, p. 528.

2. *Op. cit.* p. 38.

3. *Op. cit.* p. 72.

his defection from Basel. In the opinion of the writer it would not be fair to judge the man for acts such as these even though one may consider them to have been ill advised. Gusa played the game honestly as he saw it. Stadelmann states,

Nikolaus hat in der Tat, wenn man bei einem als Charakter so geschlossenen Mann das Wort gebrauchen kann, zwei Seelen in der Brust, eine konservative und eine umstürzlerische, wenn wir es grob bezeichnen wollen; besser wäre eine seelsorgerliche und eine private.<sup>1</sup>

It is not mere conjecture to say that he had the elements of character which Stadelmann calls "seelsorgerlich", because he was a Christian man. "He lived towards God on every side of a rich and powerful personality: as scholar and philosopher, as churchman and reformer, he is one of the greatest figures of the fifteenth century."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Rudolph Stadelmann, "Vom Geist des ausgehenden Mittelalters", in Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte, Buchreihe 15. p. 47.

2. Cited from Evelyn Underhill, op. cit. p. IX.

## Chapter Two

### Cusa's Thought

#### 1.

#### General Characteristics

To present the thought of Nicolas of Cusa is no easy task. The responsibility for this fact lies, perhaps, with the cardinal himself. Andreas speaks of "eine rätselhafte Undurchdringlichkeit"<sup>1</sup> which characterizes Cusa's profound thought structure, and Stadelmann lends support to this testimony when he writes:

Es ist in Cusa etwas von dem rätselhaften Blick, den die italienischen Porträtisten des Quattrocento ihren Personen geben, von dem einsamen Augurenlächeln, das zu sprechen scheint: Mein Geheimnis werdet ihr nie enthüllen; ihr seid zu roh es zu verstehen, und ich bin zu stolz es zu verraten.<sup>2</sup>

Others like De Wulf are unable to appreciate poetic passages such as the above. The latter simply affirms that Cusa is often not too logical:

We may say of him as of Eckhart, that he preserved his orthodoxy only at the expense of his logic.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the reason, it must be admitted that Cusa is difficult to grasp. This fact, however, has not and should not deter many from studying his philosophy. The cardinal's thought is of unquestioned depth and has a marked originality, even though its unity may lie only in the unity of personality

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1. Op. cit. p. 37.

2. Op. cit. p. 70.

Cited by G.G. Coulton, op. cit. p. 528.

behind the thinker's words.

The writer of this paper regards his own effort herein set down not as an attempt to write an all inclusive word on the philosophy of Cusa but only as an introductory step toward understanding a movement which had important historical consequences. Cusa is a part of the Christian spiritualist tradition. His thought together with that of Telesio and Copernicus provided the basic materials from which Giordano Bruno moulded his philosophy. The latter's bold and outspoken pantheism was avowedly based on the "divino Cusano".<sup>1</sup> Cusa himself, however, might not have appreciated this recognition.

It will be well at the outset to point out certain general characteristics of the system of this man who was in many important concepts ahead of his time:<sup>2</sup>

In addition to its depth and originality optimism characterizes the thought system of Cusa. Nicolas firmly believed that men could know truth. When asked by his secretary whether the essence of reality could ever be known, he replied, "Certainly it can; for the impulse (motus) which all scholars have is not in vain."<sup>3</sup> In the same discussion he added, "I think that many people have seen it and have written about their vision...if it was utterly unknown, how should it ever be sought,"<sup>4</sup> Scepticism was not a part of his character.

Insight into the essence of things was to Nicolas the reward of intellectual striving. Andreas says:

Denken war für Kusanus Arbeit, es führt zu Gott;

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1. Op. cit. p. 528.

2. Cusa's theory of the earth's motion included radically new concepts for which Copernicus had to contend a generation after Cusa's death. Cp. Steiner, op. cit. p. 133.

3. Cp. Jacob, op. cit. p. 415.

4. Jacob, op. cit. p. 416.

insofern dieser Inbegriff höchster Seligkeit ist,  
war D enken auch ihm ein freudiges Beginnen.<sup>1</sup>

In the opinion of the writer this emphasis on the intellectual is a most significant characteristic of Gusa's thought. It is a natural emphasis in the light of the cardinal's belief that all life exists for the sake of intellectual nature. He was a philosopher whose stimulus came largely from philosophies, not primarily from the data of history. This despite the fact that he was dependent on a doctrine of revelation and that his immediate historical environment probably greatly colored his thought.<sup>2</sup> Gusa was a metaphysician, not a philosopher of history nor a moral philosopher. This quite possibly accounts for the fact that his thought is characterized by an optimistic outlook and by a lack of emphasis on certain subjects which one would normally expect a Christian thinker to stress. Such are, the will of man, the cross of Christ, and the tragic in history.

May it not likewise have been the emphasis on the intellectual which kept Nicolas loyal to his mystic heritage throughout his life, Wilhelm Lütgert has carefully developed the thesis that rational philosophy ultimately ends in mysticism.<sup>3</sup> This paper shall seek to show in some measure

1. Op. cit. p. 42.

2. Andreas, op. cit. p. 40. "Entsprang vielleicht das Mähen um coincidentia oppositorum, das unentwegte Streben nach Ausgleich der Gegensätze, das nach Frieden in Staat und Kirche wie von Konkordanz im Weltanschaulichen dem Gefühl, dass der Boden rings um ihn zitterte?"

3. Cf. his Die Religion des deutschen Idealismus und Ihr Ende.<sup>2</sup>

how the thought of Gusa's life is incorporated in the mysticism of his later years.

The cardinal's characteristic emphasis on unity and universality has already been mentioned. His was a synthetic mind seeking to find a place for everything in one grand picture. This emphasis can no doubt be explained in large measure as being a result of his zeal for the unity of the church. Stadelmann writes:

Die Idee der umfassenden pädagogischen Organisation, die Erhaltung des cornus mysticum als irdischer Körperschaft um jeden Preis, die concordantia aller auseinander strebenden Tendenzen im Dienst dieser Einheit — das sind die Richtungs-punkte seiner praktischen und literarischen Wirksamkeit.<sup>1</sup>

Finally it might be stated as characteristic of Gusa that he always thought in triads and that this form of triadic thinking always centered about the orbit God, Christ, the world: God as the coincidentia oppositorum, the world as the explicatio complicati, and Christ, through whom concordantia varietatis becomes possible.

As a conclusion to this general introduction the titles of Gusa's works are listed below with the exception of the three already mentioned. Stadelmann points out that Gusa<sup>2</sup> worked at his problems in the following sequence:

- a) The objective relation of God and world      Can men
- b) The subjective approach to God                      know God?
- c) The nature of God
- d) Mysticism

The exposition of Gusa's thought in this paper shall follow much the same order, treating first of all the problem of knowledge, i.e., How do men know, and how much can they know,

1. Op. cit. p. 45.

2. Op. cit. p. 49.

On this follows a discussion of Gusa's views on God and the cosmos and their relation to one another. Man and Christ's relation to men are the subject of part three. A discussion of Gusa's mysticism concludes the chapter.

1  
Gusa's Works

1) De Docta Ignorantia - 1440.

This is the first and most important of Gusa's philosophical works. Bett contends, "It contains the whole of his system, and that system was never really modified."<sup>2</sup> Jacob states that all Gusa's works are an explication of the thoughts of this one: "...the notion of the one, changeless and transcendent deity, the structure of a finite universe subject to variation and mutability."<sup>3</sup>

2) De conjecturis - 1440-1444.

Of all Gusa's works this is second in interest.

3) De quaerendo Deum - 1445.

4) De dato Patris Luminum - 1445-1446.

5) De filiatione Dei - 1445.

6) De genesi - 1447.

7) Apologia Docta Ignorantia - 1449.

A reply to Gusa's critic, Wenck, who had attacked Gusa in his De ignota literatura. Nicolas' Apologia commends the works of Scotus Erigena and Eckhart.

8) De Sapientia (two books) - 1450.

9) De Mente - 1450.

10) De staticis experimentis (Also called Idiota, because the principal interlocutor is an idiot.)

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1. The titles are listed by Bett, op. cit. When not otherwise indicated, explanatory notes are based on Bett.

2. Op. cit. p. 88.

3. Op. cit. p. 409.

11) De novissimis diebus - 1452 - 1453.

Cusa believed that the world would come to an end within the first thirty four years of the eighteenth century. His doctrine of the end of the world was based on Augustine. Cp. De Civitate Dei, XXIII, p. 30. He calculated that 1700 years had passed between Adam and the flood, 1700 years between the flood and Moses, and 1700 years from Moses to Christ. The end of the world would come 1700 years after the birth or death of Jesus, he reasoned.

12) Complementum theologicum - 1453.13) De pace seu concordantia fidei - 1453.

Cusa takes the fall of Constantinople which had shocked Europe as a text for tolerance. Christianity, Nicolas taught, is the supreme religion, but since there is some truth in all religions, all men should live in peace.<sup>1</sup>

14) De visione Dei - 1453.

This book will be discussed in detail.

15) De beryllo - 1458.16) De Possess - 1460.

Nicolas conceived of God as Him in whom both possibility and actuality coincide. Falckenberg: "Kann-Ist".<sup>2</sup>

17) De non aliud - 1462.18) De venatione sapientiae - 1463.19) De apice theoriae - 1463.20) De ludo globi - 1463.21) Compendium - 1463.

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1. G.G.Coulton, op. cit. p. 528.

2. Richard Falckenberg, Geschichte der neueren Philosophie von Nikolaus von Kues bis zur Gegenwart<sup>9</sup>, p. 20.



22) De cribatione Alchoran - 1460-1461.

Nicolas wrote this work at the pope's request while the western world was under the threat of the Turk after the fall of Constantinople. It is a refutation of the doctrines of the Koran. Nicolas sifts out true parts from the Koran and uses these to prove the sole truth of Christianity. He says, "Ego ingenium applicui, ut etiam ex Alchoran Evangelium verum ostenderem."<sup>1</sup> However, he identifies Mahomet with a monster of the Apocalypse. He believed that Mahomet had perverted Christianity for the reason that he knew it only through Nestorianism. Nicolas frankly recognizes the literary merit of the Koran.

It is of interest to note that Gusa's works were first edited by Faber Stapulensis, whom Schaff describes as "a French forerunner of Luther in the doctrine of justification by faith."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Bett, op. cit. p. 98, note 2.  
2. Op. cit. p. 226.

## 2.

Epistemology

Many scholastic thinkers were content to operate within the syllogism. They determined things as unquestionably true or false by the principle of contradiction. They recognized the limitations of reason, distinguishing sharply between truths of reason and truths of faith, but believed that within these limits reason could build a ladder of truth which was unassailable. Nicolas, having inherited Occam's scepticism, adopted none of these principles in exactly the same form. He was, to be sure, trained in scholasticism, and this is reflected in his thought, but, as Andreas says, his philosophical faculty was operative on quite a different level from that of the scholastics. He denied any absolute sanctity to the syllogism, denied that there could be any final knowledge at the level of the ratio, and made no clear distinction between faith and reason, contending that the former must precede the latter, if any final truth is to be known, but that the latter is the explication of the former. The object of faith to him was Christ; its end was the same as that of knowledge — the vision of God. Gusa's unwillingness to distinguish sharply between the several capacities of the human spirit is indicated in the following words of Andreas:

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1. Op. cit. p. 42.

Es gab für Nikolaus von Kues keine Erkenntnis ohne Glauben, keinen Glauben ohne Liebe, keine Liebe ohne Hoffnung, keine Hoffnung ohne Ziel. Das Endziel war Christus in dem der Weltsinn tönend geworden ist.<sup>1</sup>

Nicolas viewed the knowledge process as active on four levels. They are as follows:<sup>2</sup> 1) The level of sense impression and imagination. On this level there can be no thought of objective truth. The senses apprehend things, and imagination seeks to bring together the impressions of sense. However, only a confused picture results. 2) Sense and imagination supply the reason (ratio, Verstand) with the basic materials with which it must work. Reason begins to unite complex images, to give objects names, to classify them according to space and time. Reason analyzes impressions according to the principle of contradiction. Thus it establishes polarities. 3) The mind, however, cannot rest with polar concepts. It seeks to harmonize, to unite the several on a level above that of contradiction, to combine and to assimilate. This is the function of the third stage in the operation of the mind. Nicolas calls it intellectus (Vernunft). 4) At this level the understandable function of mind must stop, for mind cannot operate without alteritas. Recognition of this fact was to Nicolas docta ignorantia, learned ignorance. The final stage in the mind's approach to absolute truth, to the absolute unity, can only be a mystical intuition, visio sine comprehensione, intuitio, filialio.<sup>3</sup> At the end of understanding lies the vision of

1. Op. cit. p. 43.

2. On Gusa's theory of the knowledge process, cp. Höfding, op. cit. p. 85 and Falckenberg, op. cit. pp. 18 f.

3. Cited from Falckenberg, op. cit. p. 18.

God, the only absolute unity.

The various levels of intelligence are not, however, to be conceived as distinctly separate and without affect on each other. Reason cannot operate without sense impressions, and intellect cannot unite what has not been analyzed. Rather, the whole process is inexplicably interwoven, as Falckenberg says:

So stellen die verschiedenen Erkenntnisweisen nicht unabhängige Grundvermögen, sondern ein system zusammenwirkender und einander fördernder Modifikationen Einer Grundkraft dar.<sup>1</sup>

On the levels of understanding prior to the final intuition knowledge is to be conceived as neither true nor absolutely false. It is more true or less false. Error consists in absolutizing what is relative. We quote from the same author:

Es gibt Grade der Wahrheit, die Mutmaßungen sind weder schlechthin unwahr noch völlig wahr.<sup>2</sup>

This is in general the epistemology of Cusa. It is our task now to add further detail, wherever possible citing Cusa himself.

Two things, in the opinion of the writer, made it possible for Cusa to be satisfied with his system. The one was sudden mystical intuition such as he had experienced on his return from Constantinople;<sup>3</sup> the other was a conception of revelation. In reconstructing the process whereby he attained knowledge, however, Nicolas did not begin with revelation or mystical experience. He did not seek philosophical truth at

1. Op. cit. p. 19. .

2. ibid.

3. Op. below, p. 15.

first within the content of the Christian faith as had many of the mystics. He began by examining the things of the sensible world. The fact that he sought enlightenment in this fashion may, according to Rudolph Steiner, be blamed on his Aristotelian training. Had Nicolas not been trained to think scientific knowledge all knowledge, the latter contends, he would have realized at once that mystical knowledge is not an enrichment of the content of lower knowledge but a completely different, higher form of insight.<sup>1</sup> The cardinal, however, reflecting his scholastic training, maintained that understanding of lower forms of knowledge must precede higher insights. He says, "The road to the uncertain can lead only by way of the presupposed and the certain."<sup>2</sup>

It is by a process of comparison that one proceeds from the known to the unknown:

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1. Op. cit. pp. 133 ff. Rudolph Steiner, 1861-1925, follower of Haeckel and founder of the German anthroposophical movement is interesting as an interpreter of Gusa, since he is himself a mystic. Steiner criticizes scholastics as follows: The scholastics believed that in the process of knowing man creates within himself an image of that which is to be known. This theory when applied to the understanding of God forced the scholastics to believe that God was a thing outside themselves. They believed that knowledge of the God outside them was much the same as knowledge of sensible objects, except that in the case of the former the knowledge had to be revealed. They erred in assuming that the truths they considered to be revealed had not existed before Christ's revelation. Steiner is more favorable to the Christian mystics: They were "stimulated by the doctrines of the church which were contained in its theology but had been misinterpreted, to bring forth afresh from within themselves as inner living experience a similar content." (op. cit. p. 150 f.) The "inner living experience" is believed by Steiner to be exactly what Plotinus believed he had experienced: "...that in myself and through myself the All-Being expresses itself, or in other words, knows itself." (Op. cit. p. 162.)

2. Nicolas of Gusa, De Docta Ignorantia, tr. by S.G. Tornay, in U. of Chicago syllabus for philosophy 102, p. 33. Hereafter to be cited: D.D.I. p. \_\_\_ (syll. p. \_\_\_).

In all investigation we come to know that which is uncertain by a proportionate comparison with something that is certain by presupposition. All inquiry then is comparative, using proportion as a means.<sup>1</sup>

Since all knowledge must be acquired per similitudinem, Nicolas contends, it is essential that the forms to be compared be as rigidly fixed, as stable, as possible. Thus the use of mathematical symbols is essential in philosophy. Thought must employ symbols. The variability of non abstractions is too great for accuracy. Therefore, Nicolas concludes:

We intend to follow the road of the ancients and make use of mathematical signs because of the indubitable certainty proper to them.<sup>2</sup>

It will be readily apparent that a principle of relativity has already entered into Nicolas' argument. There are two reasons why this is so: First, truth is relative, because the symbols compared in seeking truth are themselves known only by comparison with still other objects of which in turn one has only comparative knowledge, etc.. In the second place, no matter how rigidly stable the abstractions employed in the process of comparison are, a margin of error creeps in, because no likeness can be perfect. Nicolas suggests as an illustration the relation of a polygon to a circle. The two would meet only in infinity. He states,

The intellect never comprehends truth so precisely as not to be able to comprehend it even more precisely by endless approximation.<sup>3</sup>

This truth holds even for number which makes proportion, because even it is proportionable.

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1. D.D.I., p. 5 (syll. p. 31).
  2. D.D.I., p. 5 (syll. p. 31).
  3. D.D.I., p. 6 (syll. p. 31).

Two conclusions must follow upon this process of reasoning. The first has been mentioned: All human knowledge is relative. The second conclusion is that infinite or absolute truth cannot be known. We quote Nicolas:

For that reason (i.e., that knowledge is acquired through likeness) the infinite, as infinite, because it escapes proportion is not known.<sup>1</sup>

The results of Gusa's reasoning to this point are thus negative. Stadelmann says;

Aus diesen Gedankengängen ergibt sich jedenfalls für das Absolute...nur ein undurchdringliches ignotum, ein Verzicht auf die Wahrheit.<sup>2</sup>

Gusa applies the foregoing argument to the problem of knowing God. Since God must be infinite, He cannot be known by proportionate comparison. When sought by the intellect alone, therefore, God must always remain Deus absconditus. Gusa's doctrine of God shall be more fully developed in a later section of this paper. At this point we may pass over some of his theory concerning the manner of knowing God in order to point out at once that Gusa did not consider his negative philosophy a ground for despair. In his estimation, the mind itself creates proportion and on that account has other possibilities than those exhausted by proportionate reasoning. The following passage from his De Mente reveals Gusa's

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1. D.D.I. p. 5. (syll. p. 31).

2. Op. cit. p. 52.

belief in a higher intuition:

The mind is carried to the measuring of things with a certain avidity in order to attain to its own measure. For the mind is a living measure, which by measuring others realizes its capacity. It operates in everything to know itself, but seeking its own measure in everything it finally finds it only in the unity of all. There lies the truth of its precision, for there is its adequate exemplar.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the theory of ignorance at which Nicolas had arrived was after all a theory of docta ignorantia, learned ignorance. This was to him an ignorance desirable to have. In it lay great potentialities. Steiner's view of this is as follows: "Now what the spirit develops in itself about things is the being of those things. The things are spirit... the being of things (not their sensible encasement) enters into the spirit."<sup>2</sup> The spirit must look into itself or into the inner principle of things. It has no desire to know outer or lower reality, since this hinders insight into inner truth. It is in this sense that the spirit desires not to know, for the higher stage of knowledge follows not-knowing on the lower level of sensible knowledge.

Thus on the level of rational knowledge Nicolas had truly arrived at a "Nirwana des Wissens"<sup>3</sup>. He even went so far as to deny the possibility of knowing that God is non-existent at this stage of his argument:

"Non poterit infinitius responderi an deus sit quam quod ipse nec est et non est."<sup>4</sup>

It logically follows then, that when Christians call God "God", this is neither true nor false. It follows, furthermore,

1. De Mente, p. 264 in U. of Chicago syllabus for philosophy 102, p. 35. (Hereafter cited: De Mente, p. \_\_\_ (syll. p. \_\_\_).  
 2. Op. cit., n. 153.  
 3. Stadelmann, op. cit. p. 56.  
 4. Cited from Stadelmann, op. cit. p. 55, note 6.



that the Bible is poetry, that philosophical pretensions to knowledge are projections of the human psyche.<sup>1</sup> The value of learned ignorance consists in this that it enables men to avoid such projections which are responsible for the vast number of conflicting theories about God. Far from being despair of intellect, docta ignorantia guards the thinker against adhering slavishly to anthropomorphisms which dishonor God.<sup>2</sup> Learned ignorance is required to make the effort of abnegation by which man comes within the realm of the vision of God. Nicolas did not assume, then, that the existence of God can be disproved by the fact that there are many conceptions of Him. The existence of many religious mythologies proves only that God as "Ding-an-sich" cannot be rationally known.

Nicht: die Mythologie greift Platz weil es nichts Absolutes gibt, sondern: weil Gott unangreifbar, jenseits alles Sehens ist, gibt es nur Ansichten von ihm.<sup>3</sup>

Nicolas suggested several ways of getting beyond his negative philosophy. One would seem to be no more than a pious sentiment, viz., some conceptions of God must be more true than others. It must, for example, be more accurate to think of God as light than as stone. In religion sacra ignorantia must replace docta ignorantia. Höffding says:

Although all predicates of the deity must be denied, yet the negation of the greatest imperfections must be truer than the negation of the highest predicates.<sup>4</sup>

Nicolas' other suggestions for a positive theology center

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1. Jacob, op. cit. p. 417.

2. The desire to avoid every anthropomorphism is common to all mystics. Häckel referred to the "spiritualized yet anthropomorphic God of the advanced religions as a gaseous-vertebrate". Cp. Steiner, op. cit. p. 252

3. Stadelmann, op. cit. p. 53.

4. Höffding, op. cit. p. 88.

about a theory of revelation of the Trinity through Christ and in nature. This will appear at the point in this paper where Nicolas' Christology and mysticism are discussed.

## 3.

God And The CosmosIntroductory:

The nature of Cusa's conceptions of God and the universe is partly revealed by saying that one cannot well consider the two separately. Nicolas exhibits an attitude very similar to that of the young Goethe, who was so impressed by the activity of God in the natural world that he wrote:

Separatim de Deo, et natura rerum disserere difficile et periculosum est, eodem modo quam si de corpore et anima se junctim cogitamus; animam non nisi mediante corpore, Deum non nisi perspecta natura cognoscimus, hinc absurdum mihi videtur, eos absurditatis accusare, qui ratiocinatione maxime philosophica Deum cum mundo conjungere. Quae enim sunt, omnia ad essentiam Dei pertinere necesse est, cum Deus sit unicum existens, et omnia comprehendat.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Cusa's tendency to assert the close relationship between God and the universe was not influenced so much by experience with the natural world as, again, by his unitary bias, his desire to unite all things under one head. Nicolas had his eye fixed on a constellation, the unity of the many things which seemed to him to be ever striving to become separate.<sup>2</sup>

One of the ways in which Nicolas sought to explain the relationship of God to the cosmos was to describe God as the unity in which both possibility and actuality coincide. "His works," says Jacob, "are one long act of contemplating this

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1. Cited from the collection of the young Goethe's writings by M. Morris, Der junge Goethe, (five vols.) vol. II, p. 33.

2. Andreas, op. cit. p. 45.

being as it is manifested in possibility and actuality, posse and esse, at one and the same time."<sup>1</sup>

It has been shown that Aristotle and the mystics strongly influenced Gusa's epistemology. A strong platonist emphasis in his theory of God and the universe is a further mark of his wide range of interests. He writes,

There is a consensus among the wisest and most divine doctors maintaining that the visible things are images of the invisible ones and that the creator can be seen in the creation as in a mirror.<sup>2</sup>

The question whether such a conception as the above involves Nicolas in pantheism will be discussed in a subsequent paragraph. The above will suffice as a preliminary step toward understanding his doctrine of God. At the risk of repeating some ideas which were mentioned in the discussion of Gusa's epistemology it will be of advantage at this point to consider more fully the cardinal's philosophical approach to knowledge of God.

### Knowing God.

Nicolas never considered the idea popular in modern times that God might not exist. He took the existence of something supreme for granted, speaking of it in the following words:

I call that supreme than which nothing greater can exist... This Supreme is one absolute thing which is everything and in which everything exists, for it is supreme... This Supreme thing by the agreement of the faith of all nations is believed indubitably to be God.<sup>3</sup>

The important question for Nicolas was thus not whether God exists but whether He can be known. Nicolas' final answer

1. Op. cit. p. 416

2. D.D.I. p. 22. (syll. p. 33). The conception of the creation as a mirror of the creator was very fruitful for the esthetics of later idealists.

3. D.D.I. p. 7 (syll. p. 31).

was that God can be known but — by the unaided philosopher — only as incomprehensible, for God is all that exists, and therefore, the coincidence of opposites which transcends reason. Cusa arrived at these conclusions by employing the concept of magnitude. The idea is presumably derived from Anselm's ontological argument which contains the words, "We believe that Thou art somewhat than which no greater can be conceived."<sup>1</sup> Cusa's reasoning is as follows:

The Supreme... because it is infinite truth, cannot be known except as incomprehensible... For all things which are apprehended by sense or reason, or intellect differ among themselves in such a manner that no precise equality can be found among them... Further, the absolutely Supreme, being all that can be, is altogether pure actuality; and it cannot be greater, for the same reason neither can it be smaller, for it is all that is possible.<sup>2</sup>

There are two arguments in the above. The one is that God cannot be known, because comparative reasoning is inaccurate. The second is that the Supreme escapes comparison because it is supreme, that is, by definition, "all that can be". This would seem to be no more than an assumption. Likewise the use of the terms greater and smaller seems to end in pure equivocation. Nicolas uses the illustration of number. The question is whether number can be infinite. He concludes that it cannot, for if it could,

...there would be no discreteness of things, no order, no plurality, no exceeding and exceeded in numbering, nay there would not even be a number. Therefore, it is necessary to arrive at a number that is a minimum than which no smaller exists, and such is unity. And because there can be nothing smaller than unity, it will be a unity which is the absolute minimum, which coincides with the greatest.<sup>3</sup>

This unity which is the minimum or maximum cannot be number,

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1. Cp. Bett, *op. cit.* p. 135.  
2. *D.D.I.* p. 10 (syll. p. 32.).  
3. *D.D.I.* p. 12 (syll. p. 32.).

because it doesn't admit of a more or less. It is, on the contrary, "the principle of all number by being the minimum,<sup>1</sup> and is the consummation of all number by being the maximum".

Nicolas is saying that because there can be no number smaller than the minimum unity it must also be a maximum, but this seems to the writer to rob the conception of magnitude of all meaning. One might as well say that north and south or hot and cold are the same, if one forgets the ideas of direction and heat. All that would seem to be left of the argument is that the terms "greater" and "smaller" cannot be applied to God. Nicolas does, however, use the argument and thus establishes his view that God is the coincidence of opposites, since God is neither greater nor less nor comparable to anything in any way. As such He is incomprehensible, as Stadelmann says:

...so gilt es alles Begrenzte und Konkrete hinwegzuwerfen, selbst die Vernunft, um zu erkennen, dass Gott schlechterdings hinter dem allem, über dem allem beginnt. Aber dieses Überalles ist zugleich<sup>2</sup> ein Nichts-von-allem, es ist die Reduktion auf Null.

### The Relation of God to the Universe:

In speaking of the principle and consummation of number as above Nicolas has in part indicated his view of God's relation to the world. He has said that the Supreme cannot be greater or less than a finite thing because the infinite cannot be compared with anything. There can thus not be a progression into infinity, but, "the principle and end of all finite things must necessarily be the supreme."<sup>3</sup> God is, then,

1. ibid.

2. Op. cit. p. 54.

3. D.D.I. p. 13 (syll. p. 32).

the ground of all being, a necessary being, with reference to whom all finite things must be determined. In Him everything is implicit, as Nicolas says:

and because everything is implicit in God, even those things which are contradictory, nothing can escape His providence; for whether we do something or its opposite or nothing at all, everything was implicit in the providence of God.<sup>1</sup>

Thus everything begins and ends in God, who is "the unoriginated, undifferentiated ground of all possibility and all actuality, and these are one in Him."<sup>2</sup>

It is evident that Nicolas is speaking in terms different from those of the Biblical Christian, who conceives of God as the creator of the world. What then is the relation of God to His creation in Cusa's terms? How does the concrete world with all its variability come into existence?

Nicolas, borrowing from a Neo-Platonic source, employs the term explicatio Dei in describing the nature of the created world. The existence of the manifold is explained by a series of emanations, the gulf between the one and the many being bridged by a number of individual powers both created and creative. Nicolas did not teach that the concrete world is related to God as the part to the whole. Nor did the eternal unity of God seem to Him to be communicated to the sensible world in exactly the same manner as that which the Neo-Platonists described when they spoke of emanations. At least Nicolas uses different language. He brings God and the sensible world under the same concept of reality, conceiving

1. D.D.I. p. 44 (syll. p. 32).  
2. Bett, op. cit. p. 106.

this reality as having two sides. Jacob cites the following passage from Cusa's De Possest: "Quid est mundus nisi invisibilis Dei apparitio? Quid Deus, nisi visibilium invisibilitas?"<sup>1</sup> Nicolas uses other language which is very similar. He says, "Idem ipsum Deus et creatura: secundum modum datoris, Deus, secundum modum dati, creatura."<sup>2</sup>

Falckenberg sums up the relationship of God to the world in Cusa's thinking as follows:

...wie sich im Menschlichen Vernunft, Verstand, Phantasie und Sinnlichkeit verhalten, so verhalten sich in der objektiven Sph"re Gott, Geist, Seele und Körper oder auch Unendlichkeit, Denken, Leben und Sein, ferner die absolute Notwendigkeit Gottes, die konkrete Notwendigkeit des Universums, die Wirklichkeit der Individuen, die Möglichkeit der Materie.<sup>3</sup>

Pantheism:

The question has already been raised whether such a conception as the above involves Nicolas in pantheism. Falckenberg suggests that Nicolas was attracted to pantheism by his concepts of the infinite size of the universe, and of the interrelationship of all life.<sup>4</sup> Nicolas, however, would most probably have denied that he had contradicted the position of Biblical theism, even though his language might be different from that of the Bible. Whereas he contended that the infinite implies the possibility of the finite, he also maintained that the existence of the universe derives from God. It might be put in Eckhart's terms: "Gott ist Wesen, und Wesen ist niht Gott".<sup>5</sup> Bett concedes that there is a

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1. Op. cit. p. 419.  
 2. Cited by Bett, op. cit. p. 103, note 2.  
 3. Op. cit. p. 20.  
 4. Op. cit. p. 21.  
 5. Cited from Bett, op. cit. p. 104, note 2.



stronger emphasis in the language of the older Gusa on the self-identity of the God-head. However, he defends the views of the cardinal outlined above in the following way:

The creation is a necessary consequence of the nature of God, but Nicolas and many of the mystics would have contended that it is none the less a free act of God. The necessity is a moral necessity. It is not an external constraint... essential goodness is expansive.<sup>1</sup>

The same writer states:

He was certainly not a pantheist in intention, nor can he be made to appear such, unless we lay undue stress upon paradoxical statements about God and the All.<sup>2</sup>

Bett believes that every exaggeration of God's transcendence must end in deism, whereas undue stress on the immanence of God leads to pantheism. He defends Nicolas as one who trod a middle course. No doubt it would be more fair to use Wilhelm Dilthey's term, "panentheism" when referring to Gusa's views, since the word allows both the connotation of transcendence and immanence. Höffding contends that conceptions such as those of Gusa were very fruitful in the history of philosophy, because they led to speculation concerning the dynamic character of nature.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately they also led to serious modification of the scriptural view of the cosmos as the creation of the living God.

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1. Op. cit. p. 110f.  
2. Op. cit. p. 113.  
3. Op. cit. p. 87.

Relativity:

Cusa's cosmology was radical for his day. Perhaps this can best be seen by comparing it briefly with Aristotle's cosmology which was the basis of medieval thinking about the universe.<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle's world view was based on immediate sensory data. He conceived that things on the earth alone were transitory, thinking the heavenly region to be eternal and regular in motion. He called heavenly matter aether and taught that it was ceaselessly moving in a circle, always returning to itself. The world, according to Aristotle had one central point toward or away from which things moved accordingly as they were light or heavy. Matter in his view consisted of one or more of four elements. It had always to be considered as formed and limited. Beyond the highest sphere of the cosmos nothing was believed to exist. In Aristotle's understanding the earth was the place of the lowest matter. The medieval philosophers made only one change in this cosmology, teaching that the earth existed for its human inhabitants.

The Aristotelian world view according to Höffding was broken down from two sides in the renaissance. First, observation made other interpretations of the nature of the universe possible, and secondly, the discovery that every determination of place depends on the position of the observer made the conception of the universe as limited and having a center seem questionable. Plotinus was perhaps the first to cast doubt on the Aristotelian theory when he

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1. The following summary of the Aristotelian world view is taken from Höffding, op. cit. pp. 79 ff.

taught that "Finite forms, essences, and regions, then are, each in themselves only limited manifestations of the infinite."<sup>1</sup>

In Cusa's thinking the earth had neither periphery nor center, for it could have these only in relation to something external by which it was limited. It would thus not be the whole universe. Nicolas described the cosmos as an infinite sphere, the centre of which was everywhere and the circumference nowhere. A few passages from the De Docta Ignorantia will suffice to clarify his thinking on this point. Enough has been said about the cardinal's thought to make them self-explanatory.

Now the earth which cannot be a center cannot be conceived as without any motion... The earth is not the center of the world, nor is the sphere of the fixed stars its circumference. Neither the earth nor any sphere can have a center. For as the center is a point equidistant from the circumference, and as it is not possible to have such a perfect sphere or circle than which no more perfect can be given, it is apparent that there cannot be a center than which no truer and more precise can be given. There is no precise equidistance to the diversity of things except in God, who alone is infinite equality. God, the most high, then, is the center of the world. He is the center of the earth and of all the spheres and of whatever is in the world, being at the same time the infinite circumference of everything.

Further there are no immobile and fixed poles in the sky... but it is necessary that all parts of the sky be in motion.

...because we cannot comprehend motion except by comparison to a fixed point, to poles or centers, and we presuppose them in measuring motions, therefore our conjectural thinking is involved in errors... Contrary to all perception neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the earth, nor any sphere can describe a true circle in motion, because they do not move around any fixed point...To us

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1. Höffding, op. cit. p. 83. Plotinus according to Höffding is the ancestor of protests against the conceptualistic dogmatism of the scholastics. He broke down the theory concerning fixed forms and limits.

it is already manifest that this earth is in reality moving although we cannot observe it. We cannot perceive motion except by some comparison to a fixed point.<sup>1</sup>

### God as Triune:

Recalling Cusa's epistemology it will be remembered that he began his search for God by rejecting all definite terminology. God according to Cusa's negative philosophy could not be seen as Trinity, for the rational search for the absolute ends in rejection of everything definite which men predicate of God. According to the negative philosophy, therefore, God neither begets nor is begotten, nor proceeds. Bett points out that according to Augustine, Erigena, Eckhart, and Cusa all finite terms applied to God, such as will, action, existence, etc. must be considered no more than words for something which is in reality inexplicable.<sup>2</sup>

Only in relation to the cosmos can God be called Triune according to Falckenberg:

Nur als Schöpfer der Welt und in Relation zu ihr ist Gott dreieinig, an sich ist er die absolute Einheit und Unendlichkeit, der nichts als andres gegenübersteht, die alle Dinge ebensowohl ist als nicht ist und die, wie schon der Areopagite lehrte, durch Negationen besser begriffen wird als durch Affirmationen.<sup>3</sup>

The Triune God is revealed only by Christ through the Bible. Without this revelation the world could not be intelligible to human beings. After the revelation is known, however, man can learn that the Trinity is not only a description of God's essence but the plan of the universe.

1. D.D.I. pp. 100 ff. (syll. p. 34.).

2. Op. cit. p. 104.

3. Op. cit. p. 20.

Nicolas uses several terms to describe the Trinity, e.g., possibility and actuality, producing and produced, and the bond which unites these opposites, which is motion. "The Holy Spirit is the bond of nature, is one with nature as the sum of all that motion brings about, coincidentia, complicatio, and connexio are all one, although the three denote different relations."<sup>1</sup>

Most often Nicolas describes the three persons of the Trinity as Unity, Equality, and Connection. Infinitude considered as unity is the Father, as equality, the Son, as connection, the Spirit. To cite Bett:

Things in the world are many, but they are ever seeking unity; they are different, but they are ever seeking equality; they are divided, but they are ever seeking connection.<sup>2</sup>

Nicolas uses the analogy of rest and motion. The two imply each other as do creator and creature. Rest contains motion within itself or implies at least the possibility of motion.

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1. Höfding, op. cit. p. 87.  
 2. Op. cit. P. 149.

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### Christ. His Significance for Men

To understand Cusa's views of Christ and of His relation to men it is necessary to refer once more to the cardinal's cosmology. Cusa considered the finite world to be a descent or separation from the infinite unity. He believed that as things become separate from this unity, they become individual. The goal of all individuated parts of creation is, according to Nicolas, reunion with the primal unity. He called the process of reunion ἀποκατάστασις. From the cardinal's epistemology one sees that he regarded the being of things in knowledge as higher than that of those in fact. Knowledge, then, is the goal of men, for at the level of God it becomes mystic union. This gnostic emphasis in Cusa's theology must not be overlooked. In his treatise on mysticism Cusa expresses his belief that all of creation exists for the sake of intellectual nature. The process of uniting intellectual nature with the primal unity Nicolas called filiiatio, that is, entering into relationship with the Father in like manner as the Son is related to Him, i.e., into eternal generation of unity from unity.

Nicolas described man as the most important intermediary creature for the process of ἀποκατάστασις. Humanity is the middle term of the creation. Bett says:

Lifted into union with the greatest, it is the fulness of the perfection of the whole universe and of all individual existences in it, so that in humanity all reaches its highest level.<sup>2</sup>

1. Additional information on this subject is offered in section five of this chapter which deals with mysticism.

2. Op. cit. p. 195.

The following passage from Falckenberg summarizes man's position with respect to the other created orders and the process of reunion with God:

In erhöhtem Masse ist der Mensch ein Mikrokosmos (parvus mundus), ein Spiegel des Alls, da er nicht bloß, wie die übrigen Wesen, alles existierende tatsächlich in sich hat, sondern von diesem Reichtum weisz und ihn zu bewussten Bildern der Dinge zu entwickeln vermag. Und dies eben macht die Vollkommenheit des Ganzen und der Teile aus, daß das Höhere im niederen, die Ursache in der Wirkung, die Gattung im Individuum, die Seele im Körper, die Vernunft in den Sinnen ist und umgekehrt. Vervollkommnung ist nur Aktivierung eines potentiellen Besitzes, Entfaltung von Anlagen, Erhebung des Unbewussten ins Bewusstsein.<sup>1</sup>

Falckenberg fails to do justice to the importance which Cusa ascribes to Christ in this process of redemption, because he is not interested in the theology of Cusa regarding much of it as an unfortunate remnant of the medieval mind.

Nicolas, however, is quite specific about the importance of Christ. Without Christ, Cusa is aware, no man could have knowledge of the nature of redemption. Secondly, Cusa teaches that the return of creation to the primal unity is possible only because humanity and divinity were perfectly united in one person. Christ was to Nicolas the maximum of humanity, of uncorrupted humanity. Christ's was the will of the spirit, which was imparted to humanity by Him. Christ's intellect was to Cusa truth and the image of truth. Nicolas says:

I see that man cannot understand Thee, the Father, save in Thy Son who is intelligible and the mediator; and that to understand Thee is to be united unto Thee.<sup>2</sup>

Bett points out that two theories were current in the Middle Ages concerning the beatitude of the redeemed soul.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Op. cit. p. 21.
  2. Cp. Jacob, op. cit. p. 423.
  3. Op. cit. p.191.

One was that the blessedness consisted in loving God. This view was held by Duns Scotus. Aquinas, however, emphasized that the beatitude consisted in knowing God. In this Gusa followed the latter, and thus his entire philosophy took on a gnostic character.

What then is the meaning of faith in the Cusan system? According to Schaff Nicolas defined faith as "the state of the soul given to God's grace."<sup>1</sup> Such a soul finds out truths which the unaided intellect cannot attain:

Fides est habitus bonus, per bonitatem data a deo, ut per fidem restaurentur, illae veritates objectivae, quas intellectus attingere non potest.<sup>2</sup>

Faith unites a believer with Christ. From that time on wisdom, the explication of faith, works toward unity with God. Nicolas truly emphasized the fact that faith is the power of Christ in the believer.

There does not seem to be much of a doctrine of the atonement in Nicolas' thought. He was, it seems, more preoccupied with the nature of God and the person of Christ than with Christ's death. This cannot, however be taken to mean that he had no theology of the atonement. The following passage from Bett indicates that the cardinal was able to be fairly specific about the death of Christ.

Christ took upon Him all the sins of human nature that draw us down to earth, that he might purge them and slay them. The death of Christ on the cross was representatively the extinction of all the carnal desires of human nature, and the satisfaction for all the sins of men.<sup>3</sup>

Gusa's theology of redemption might thus be summed up somewhat as follows: All nature desires to return to the

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1. Op. cit. p. 225.

2. ibid.

3. Op. cit. p. 198.



primal unity. The path is via intellectual nature. Man is the middle term of creation. Christ, the logos, the God-Man, is the uniting principle of intellectual and sensible nature. All of creation consists of ascending layers of progress to the absolute. The universe is contracted into genera, genera into species, species into individuals which exist in actuality. As soon as an individual can be classed as perfect in its species it becomes a member of the next highest level. Nothing is so high that it cannot be higher or so low that it cannot be lower, except Christ, in whom humanity attains its maximum and thus achieves unity with God. Christ is all that can be attained in His species, because He is both God and man, both creator and creature in one. Through Christ's humanity human nature has become incorruptible. Those who believe in Him will be glorified, because they are united with Him. Damnation consists in eternal inability to become one with God.

A word will be in place on the implications of Cusa's doctrine of redemption for ethics. Falckenberg sums up the cardinal's ethic as follows:

...das Schlechte (ist) nur ein zurückbleiben auf dem Wege nach dem Guten...das Erkennen die Urtätigkeit und Hauptaufgabe des Geistes, der Glaube ein unentfaltetes Wissen, das Wollen und Fühlen ein selbstverständlicher Nebenerfolg des Denkens; die Erkenntnis eine Zurückführung zu Gott als seinem Ursprung...<sup>1</sup>

Some of the above statements of Falckenberg require modification. This is evident from Cusa's treatise on mysticism, a discussion of which follows immediately upon this chapter. The writer believes, however, that Cusa's ethic does lose

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1. Op. cit. p: 22.

an all important dynamic through modification of the scriptural conception of man's nature and through equation of the knowing of right with the ability to do right. The desire to do the just thing does not always follow upon knowledge of what is right. Before judging Gusa too severely, however, it is necessary to consider more of his own expressions on the problems which arise. This will be done on the following pages.

## 5.

Mysticism

Several allusions to Gusa's mysticism have necessarily been made in earlier sections of this paper. Without reference to mystic intuition there could be no discussion of Gusa's epistemology, of his theory of redemption, or of his eschatology. This final section on Gusa's thought seeks to amplify what has been said before, to pick out important characteristics of the cardinal's mysticism, and to show how it relates to the rest of his thought. This is to be done on the basis of a summary and analysis of Gusa's book on mysticism, The Vision of God.

From what has been said before about the cardinal's mysticism, it is known that he cannot have considered mystical consciousness an altogether different form of knowing than that of rational knowledge. A study of his epistemology indicates that Gusa believed final intuition to be the end link of a chain and that he considered it necessary that intellectual activity on the several lower planes precede mystical knowledge.

A second important characteristic of Gusa's mysticism is that Nicolas, unlike other mystics, did not immediately choose an object of contemplation or purposely follow a method of devotional exercises in order to attain his highest insight by the force of his will. His treatise on the vision of God gives very few directions as to a method of gaining

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1. The writer has used the translation of Emma Gurney Salter, Nicolas of Gusa, The Vision of God.

mystical insight. There are beautiful devotional passages, but a much stronger emphasis is laid on the metaphysical and on intellectual subtlety. This intellectual emphasis, however — it is important to remember — is really not the thing of greatest importance to Nicolas. He insists repeatedly that no insight of value is possible except through the revelation of Jesus Christ. A seventeenth century translator of the Vision of God, Giles Randall, summarized the book as follows:

There is no true living knowledge of God within us till He be in us formed in the Face of Jesus Christ. This is the divine argument of this little work selected and culled out of the most elaborate pieces of that learned Dr. Cusanus...<sup>1</sup>

The words "in the face of Jesus Christ" suggest a third characteristic of Cusa's book on mysticism, and that is its author's emphasis on the grace of God in Christ which makes it possible for men to know God. This emphasis is indicated in the title, for when Nicolas speaks of the vision of God, he has reference not to men who attain this vision but to the gaze of God which is eternally fixed on men. This emphasis leads Underhill to speak of the Augustinian character of Cusa's mysticism.<sup>2</sup>

Other important characteristics of the cardinal's mysticism will be pointed out as the analysis of the text suggests them.

The Vision of God, like much mystical literature, is

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1. Cited from E.M. Salter's introduction to her translation, op. cit. p. XXVII, note 2.

2. Op. cit. p. XII.

addressed to a group in sympathy with Nicolas — the prior and monks of the Benedictine abbey of Tegernsee. The cardinal had lived at the abbey for two years, instructing the monks in that "ignorance which surpasses knowledge" taught by Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>1</sup>

### The Vision of God

Nicolas states his purpose: It is to teach an easy path to mystical theology.

The object of contemplation is an omnivoyant image, the icon of God. The image seems to look at an observer no matter where he stands. Its gaze is fixed on all who are near, and yet on each as an individual as though it cared for him alone.

The image is a useful aid to mystical theology, because it leads one to contemplate the absolute sight from which all other sight is derived. If the gaze of the image is omnivoyant, the absolute sight must surely be so. Furthermore, absolute sight is not narrowed down to time and place, to particular objects, and to other limiting conditions. This is the content of chapter one.

Absolute sight is not at one time loving, at another glad or sad; not at one time the sight of a child, at another that of a man, but

all limited modes of seeing exist without limitation in the absolute sight. For every limitation existeth in the Absolute, because Absolute sight is the

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3. Cp. Underhill, op. cit. p. X. The reference is, of course, to the pseudo Dionysius.

limiting of limitations, limiting not being limitable.  
 ...For without limiting naught is limited, and  
 Thus Absolute sight existeth in all sight.<sup>1</sup>

In the above passage God is represented as the ground of being in whom all diversity is identity. Since Nicolas has concluded that different attributes are really the same in God, he is ready to take a further step: "Thy glance is love."<sup>2</sup> The conclusion follows, but one could probably just as well maintain, were one a Manichaeon, "Thy glance is hate." Nicolas does not consider this.

Since God is the ground of all being, Nicolas continues, no one can exist without Him. Therefore, men must make themselves able to receive Him as best they can. This is done by becoming like God, and, Nicolas holds, men can do so, because they have free will, the living image of God's Almighty power. "By this I can either enlarge or restrict my capacity for Grace."<sup>3</sup> However, though Nicolas contends that man has the image of God in having free will, he does not ascribe to man the power to save himself but rescues the grace of God in the following paradox:

What else, Lord, is Thy seeing, when Thou beholdest me with pitying eye, than that Thou art seen of me? In beholding me Thou givest Thyself to be seen of me, Thou who art a hidden God. None can see Thee, save in so far as Thou grantest a sight of Thyself, nor is that sight ought else than Thy seeing Him that seeth Thee.<sup>4</sup>

This emphasis is oft repeated in the fifth chapter from which several sections are quoted below. Man sins and of his own will turns away from God, but when he does turn

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1. The Vision of God, pp. 10 f. Hereafter, where not otherwise indicated page numbers refer to the Vision of God.  
 2. P. 15.  
 3. P. 16.  
 4. P. 19.

to God, it is because God has first turned to him.

If Thou beholdest me not with the eye of Grace, the fault is mine, who have cut me off from Thee by turning aside, and by turning round to some other thing which I prefer before Thee, yet even so dost Thou not turn Thee utterly away, but Thy mercy followeth me, that, should I at any time be fain to turn unto Thee again, I may be capable of grace. If Thou regardest me not, 'tis because I regard not Thee and despise Thee.<sup>1</sup>

Every sinner, then, strayeth from Thee and departeth afar off. Yet so soon as he return unto Thee Thou dost hasten to meet him, and before he perceiveth Thee, Thou dost cast Thine eyes of mercy upon him with fatherly love.<sup>2</sup>

...nor could any turn unto Thee, wert Thou not already at hand.<sup>3</sup>

I have naught save that Thou givest, nor could I keep that Thou hast given didst Thou not Thyself preserve it.<sup>4</sup>

In the sixth chapter of his book Nicolas discusses the anthropomorphic character of all human descriptions of the attributes of God. God's face is the true archetype of all faces. It is without quantity or limitation. Man makes the mistake of not seeking God's face beyond the human species, "because his judgment, bound up with human nature, in judging transcendeth not its limitation and passivity."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, any concept of God's face is not yet His face but only a veil of it. Because this is so, man must go beyond all concepts into the darkness of ignorance, wherein God's face is revealed. Here Nicolas, the mystic, returns to the conception of docta ignorantia. The conception occurs repeatedly. For example, Nicolas speaks of learned ignorance as a necessary prerequisite to seeing the face of God in nature. He speaks of a tree. The eye of sense sees

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1. P. 20.

2. P. 21.

3. P. 22

4. ibid.

5. P. 25.

all its attributes. The eye of the mind, however, sees its inner principle, views its attributes as a potential in the generative power of the seed. This power is limited, Nicolas says, to a species, but behind it lies an absolute power which is the pattern of every tree. Thus the tree is an explication of the principle which is God. "...the generative power is its cause...is absolute power."<sup>1</sup>

God's absolute face is in a sense the natural face of all nature.<sup>2</sup> God is the absolutely simple (i. e., undifferentiated) exemplar of all species. He moves and rests with all and one as the eye of the omnivoyant image. No one can know this, says Nicolas, unless he first have learned ignorance.

Hence I observe how needful it is for me to enter into the darkness and to admit the coincidence of opposites, beyond all the grasp of reason, and there to seek truth where impossibility meeteth me.<sup>3</sup>

Learned ignorance is foolishness to men. Reason is proud. The coincidence of contraries is the wall of paradise wherein God abides, but "the door is guarded by the most proud spirit of reason, and unless he be vanquished, the way in will not be open."<sup>4</sup> It is only the eye of the mind which can see God, "...but reason hath not whence it may be guided, save by Thee, Lord, who art the word and the reason of reasons."<sup>5</sup>

To the writer these are fascinating conceptions; not primarily on account of the logic involved — Nicolas himself contends that the reason must be humbled — but simply because the man, Gusa, attests that they are a part

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1. P. 30.
  2. P. 43.
  3. ibid.
  4. P. 44.
  5. P. 32.



of his experience. He views nature as does the artist, seeking the essential, the type in the phenomenon. He found God in a tree as Goethe thought he might find the "Urpflanze", not by heaping up syllogisms but by direct intuition or insight, which to Cusa followed upon learned ignorance. No doubt such experiences as Cusa's cannot be validated except by and before men who have them. When reading Cusa's book, however, one cannot but wonder at the manner in which the cardinal's life must have been enriched by his ability to find God everywhere on the face of the earth. There are astounding parallels to Cusa's thought in Luther. The experience is not exactly the same, for Luther is overwhelmed chiefly at the power of God manifest in nature. His terms are less abstract and, therefore, perhaps more dynamic than Cusa's, but the intellectual content is often much the same, as can be readily seen in the passage cited below:

Sie ( i.e., die allmächtige Gewalt Gottes) muss an allen Orten wesentlich und gegenwärtig sein, auch in dem geringsten Blumenblatt. Ursach ist die: Denn Gott ist's, der alle Dinge schafft, wirkt und erhält durch seine allmächtige Gewalt und rechte Hand, wie unser Glaube bekennt. Denn er schickt keine Antleut oder Engel aus, wenn er etwas schafft oder erhält sondern solches alles ist seiner Göttlichen Gewalt selbst eigen Werk. Soll ers aber schaffen und erhalten, so muss er selbst da sein, und seine Kreatur sowohl im Allerinwendigsten als im Auswendigsten machen und erhalten. Drum muss er ja in einer jeglichen Kreatur in ihrem Allerinwendigsten, Auswendigsten und um und um, durch und durch, unten und oben vorn und hinten selbst da sein, dasz nichts Gegenwärtigeres noch Innerlicheres sein kann in allen Kreaturen denn Got selbst mit seiner Gewalt.<sup>1</sup>

Nichts ist so klein, Gott ist noch kleiner, Nichts ist so gross, Gott ist noch grösser, Nichts ist so kurz, Gott ist noch kürzer, Nichts ist so lang, Gott ist noch länger, Nichts ist so breit, Gott ist noch breiter, Nichts ist so schmal, Gott ist noch schmaler, und so fort an, ist's ein unaussprechlich Wesen über und ausser allem, was man nennen und denken kann.<sup>2</sup>

1. Luther's Works, Weimar edition, XXIII, 133 f.  
2. Luther's Works, Weimar edition, XXVI, 339 f.

Nicolas continues by saying that if one views God in the coincidence of opposites, one realizes that in Him seeing and being seen are one. Therefore he contends that when God is seen of man — since the principle of man's sight is in God — this is in reality God viewing Himself. The necessity of the Trinitarian conception of God follows from this, but Nicolas doesn't go into the matter immediately. He takes steps first to guard the self-identity of God:

If I were to see as I am seen I should not be a creature. And if Thou, God didst not see as Thou art seen Thou wouldst not be God Almighty. Thou art to be seen of all creatures, and Thou seest all; in that Thou seest all, Thou art seen of all; for otherwise creatures could not exist, since they exist by Thy seeing.<sup>1</sup>

All things exist only because God has called them into existence. God has ordained that they exist in one act at one time. His mental word is unity. It appears to men to be spoken in successive words, because men are not God. Only in that man ascends to the vision of God, to the conception of God as coincidence of opposites, can he view things as God does. Of himself man could never have such vision, because the perfection of God rules out the possibility of anything perfect existing beside Him, as Nicolas says, "Tis impossible that ought should be made after eternity pure and simple."<sup>2</sup>

Nicolas continues by saying that God unfolds all things and yet without otherness. Otherness takes the principle of its being from not being: "...for because one thing is not another, it is called other."<sup>3</sup>

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1. P. 48.

2. ibid.

3. P. 67.

Otherness, then, is not anything, but the reason wherefore the sky is not the earth is because the sky is not infinity's self, which encompasseth all things.<sup>1</sup>

Nicolas gives an example. If a man's hand is cut off, it may still exist, even though the limited being which gave it being no longer does so. Were the hand completely cut off from the absolute principle of being it would not exist. This argument which is presumably meant to avoid a dualism is meaningless to the writer. "Otherness" seems to be an implied reality in the word "is", and the argument that it doesn't exist, because it is not what something else is, seems to involve too many improper predicates.

Nicolas returns to the subject of seeing God: Were God not one in three, He could not be seen or loved. God is the prime mover in everyone who loves Him. When man loves God, it is God loving Himself. Self-love is in one respect analogous. When a man loves himself he is lover, loved, and the bond between the two. Such a Trinity exists in God. He is "unity that uniteth, unity that may be united, and the union of those twain."<sup>2</sup> The father is God as loving; the Son is God as lovable, and the Spirit is the bond between the two, "and this bond between the two is called Spirit; for Spirit is like motion, proceeding from that which moveth and that which is moved."<sup>3</sup>

If God is infinitely lovable, the question arises why He isn't loved by every intelligent creature. Nicolas says that this is because man has free will, which he uses to

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1. *ibid.*

2. P. 81.

3. P. 93.

turn away from God.

The Son of God is the reason or word by which the Father works all things. Through the Son the union of all things is mediated to created beings. At this point Nicolas speaks of the historical Jesus.

And I see that blessed Jesus, Son of Man, is most closely united unto Thy Son, and that the Son of man could not be united unto Thee, God the Father, save by mediation of Thy Son, the absolute mediator.<sup>1</sup>

In Jesus God descends to man, making the reunion of men with God possible. "Man, then, can be united unto Thee through Thy Son, who is the means of union."<sup>2</sup> The Logos or reason of God is conceived by Gusa to be working in all of creation in many ways, but it is most closely united to the world in the humanity of Jesus — so closely, that no other intermediary can come between the two. But the union of Jesus' human nature to the Father is not the same as that of His divine nature. Otherwise, Nicolas says, "it would attain unto absolute and essential identity."<sup>3</sup> Gusa says:

Wherefore this union, whereby human nature is united unto the divine nature is naught else than the attraction in the highest degree of human nature unto the divine, in such wise that human nature as such could not be attracted to greater heights.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' human nature is seen subsisting in the divine nature as "the image between which and the exemplar no more perfect image can be imposed."<sup>5</sup>

The son is intelligence.<sup>6</sup> In Jesus, "human intelligence

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1. P. 94.

2. ibid.

3. P. 97.

4. ibid.

5. P. 98.

6. P. 99.

is united unto the divine intelligence even as a most perfect image unto the truth of its pattern."<sup>1</sup> Intelligent men do not all believe in this Jesus, because contraries are predicated of Him. "Thus 'tis only humble believers who attain unto this most gracious and life giving revelation."<sup>2</sup> Wherefore, "it behoveth every man to put off the old man of presumption and to put on the new man of humility, which is after Thy pattern, if he hopes to taste the food of life within the paradise of delights."<sup>3</sup> Salvation is by God's grace and can come only through Jesus.

Every man, then, hath attained bliss who is united unto Thee, Jesu, as a limb unto the head. None can come unto the Father unless he be drawn by the Father. The Father drew Thy humanity, Jesu, by His Son,<sup>4</sup> and by Thee, Jesu, the Father draweth all men.<sup>4</sup>

None of the wise men of the world can attain true bliss while they do not know Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Nicolas speaks little of the cross and death of Jesus. At one place he refers to Christ's death by saying that the death of Jesus did not mean eternal separation of the perfect unity established between God and men. "Thy soul did cease from quickening Thy body...and Thou didst truly undergo death, yet wast Thou never separated from true life."<sup>6</sup>

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1. ibid.
  2. P. 103.
  3. P. 104.
  4. ibid.
  5. P. 105.
  6. P. 116.

Had Jesus been entirely cut off from life, he would then, according to Nicolas, have existed in another form than that of the man most perfectly united to the logos. Nicolas compares the death of Jesus to the act of a yogi, who can suspend all animation of his body to such an extent that he appears dead without really being cut off from life.

There is only one other passage in the Vision of God in which Nicolas speaks of the death of Christ. Its meaning is vague.

O Jesu my love, Thou hast sowed the seed of life in the field of the faithful, and hast watered it by the witness of Thy blood, and hast shown by bodily death that truth is the life of the rational spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the chief emphasis in Cusa's thought about Christ is on the incarnation, though he did not regard the cross as being without purpose. The important thing, however, is that in Jesus God and humanity were united. This is quite different from the Biblical word, "He was bruised for our transgressions and wounded for our iniquities."

Man lays hold on the opportunity to become united with God by faith in and love of the logos. It is this that Jesus taught: "Two things only hast Thou taught, O Saviour Christ — faith and love. By faith the intellect hath access unto the word; by love 'tis united thereto."<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the entire created world in its many forms is the self realization of God. This is the substance of the passage below. One recognizes in it the germ of Hegel's aesthetics.

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1. P. 120.

2. P. 124.

esthetics.

Thou Lord, who makest all things for Thine own sake, hast created this whole world for the sake of intellectual nature. Even so a painter mixeth divers colours that at length he may be able to paint himself, so that he may possess his own likeness, wherein his art may rest and take pleasure, and so that, his single self being not to be multiplied, he may at least be multiplied in the one way possible, to wit, in a likeness most resembling himself. But the Spirit maketh many figures, because the likeness of his infinite power can only be perfectly set forth in many, and they are all intellectual spirits, serviceable to every spirit. For, were they not innumerable, Thou infinite God, couldst not be known in the best fashion. For every intellectual Spirit perceiveth in Thee, their God, somewhat which must be revealed unto others in order that they may attain unto Thee, their God, in the best possible fashion. Wherefore these spirits, full of love, reveal one unto another their secrets, and thereby the knowledge of the beloved is increased, and yearning toward Him is aflame, and sweetness of joy.<sup>1</sup>

Since God wanted thus to realize Himself in creation, he united Himself with the humanity of Jesus. The incarnation was thus an act done not only in behalf of men.

Yet, O Lord God, Thou couldst not have brought Thy work to perfect consummation without Thy Son, Jesus, whom Thou hast anointed above His fellows, who is the Christ. In His Intellect the perfection of creatable nature is at rest, for He is the final and entirely perfect image of God who cannot be multiplied, and there can be but one such supreme image. Howbeit all other intellectual Spirits are, through the medium of that Spirit likenesses, and the more perfect the more they resemble it, and all rest in that Spirit as in the final perfection of the Image of God, of whose Image they have attained the likeness, and some degree of perfection.<sup>2</sup>

The book ends on a note of praise to God for His grace in Christ. The following passage is cited for its value as devotional literature. In the last paragraph Nicolas suggests that the things which hold men back from God are ignorance and the empty delight of the world of sense. This

1. PP. 127 f.

2. PP. 128 f.

modification of Scriptural anthropology has implications for all of Cusa's theology. The matter will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this paper. Nicolas concludes his little book as follows:

Wherefore of Thy giving, O my God, I possess this whole visible world and all the Scripture, and all ministering spirits to aid me to advance in knowledge of Thee. Yea, all things stir me up to turn unto Thee: all Scripture strives only to set Thee forth, and all intellectual spirits exercise themselves only in seeking Thee and in revealing as much of Thee as they have found. Thou hast above all given me Jesus as Master, as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, so that absolutely nothing may be lacking unto me... Why then do I delay, why do I not run, in the sweet smell of the unguents of my Christ... What restraineth me? If ignorance of Thee, Lord, held me back, and the empty delight of the world of sense, they shall restrain me no longer. For I desire, Lord (since Thou grantest me so to desire) to leave the things of this world, because the world desireth to leave me. I hasten toward the goal. I have all but finished my course. I will be beforehand with it in taking farewell, I who pant for my crown. Draw me Lord, for none can come unto Thee save he be drawn by Thee; grant that thus drawn, I may be set free from this world and may be united unto Thee, the absolute God, in an eternity of glorious life.

Amen.<sup>1</sup>



### Chapter III

#### A Critical Estimate of Cusa's Thought

The writer does not intend to write an exhaustive critique of Cusa's world of ideas in this chapter. To attempt this without much more study and first hand acquaintance with more of the cardinal's own writings would be presumptuous. This paper has done little justice to the question whether Cusa's ideas underwent any considerable change during his lifetime. The authorities are not agreed on this. Without an exhaustive study which would settle the problem all criticism must be tentative. Much of the secondary source material used by the writer has been of little help on the crucial theological questions involved in this study, because the interpretations of many who have sought to evaluate the cardinal's Weltanschauung have been made under the influence of rather specific philosophies of progress in the history of ideas — philosophies in which specifically Christian doctrines are dismissed as relatively insignificant vestiges of the middle ages. Despite this some attempt must be made at least to state the problems involved in any approach to Cusa from the point of view of the Lutheran Christian and to suggest the scriptural answer to these problems in so far as this can be done within the limitations of the writer's research. The most important problems

have been suggested on earlier pages of this paper. The writer hopes that the following paragraphs will supplement what has already been said.

Gusa did not escape severe criticism, in his own day. He was bitterly attacked by Johann Wenck, professor of the university of Heidelberg, who was a nominalist. The latter, while not the original thinker that Gusa was, saw clearly where the difficulties lay. Stadelmann says,

Der unerschütterte Theist sieht hier in das Innerste der Tendenzen, mit dem Scharfblick, wie ihn nur der Kampf auf Leben und Tod auch dem mittelmässigen Kopf verleiht.<sup>1</sup>

Wenck took issue chiefly with Gusa's doctrine of the unity of all things, their complicatio in God. He interpreted this doctrine as a pantheistic heresy involving a denial of God as creator of the universe. What Wenck believed to be acts of God seemed to him to be interpreted as necessary processes in Gusa's philosophy. He saw human individuality disappearing in a monistic cosmos and could find in Gusa's approach to knowledge nothing by which man's reason could fix anything as unquestionably true. Weakening the law of contradiction as Gusa did was to Wenck the equivalent of declaring the intellect bankrupt. One could no longer think Godward.

This was the reaction of contemporaries to Gusa. Today the points of attack are from various quarters in many respects the same. The Thomist is still critical of

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1. Op. cit. p. 42. The summary of Wenck's criticism given here is taken from Stadelmann, op. cit. p. 41

Cusa's epistemology. In this respect — It is the writer's opinion — the Lutheran Christian does not need to hold Cusa suspect in the same way, since there is to some extent an affinity between Cusa and the followers of Martin Luther on the subject of knowing God. Neither feels the need of a very precise metaphysic based on incontrovertible logic as basic to theology. Furthermore, Cusa does maintain that the efforts of the unaided intellect to find ultimate truth end in ignorance. This is a point with which the Lutheran Christian will not quarrel, though he is certainly under no obligation to accept the logic which Cusa employed in arriving at this conclusion. Cusa also speaks of the importance of the changed mind in the search for God. This is also a point to which a Christian can be sympathetic. However, Cusa taught that the ignorance at which the unaided intellect arrives is learned ignorance. There may be considerable reason to challenge this judgment from the point of view of Christian theology. To the Thomist reason is a necessary tool with which to establish the metaphysical basis for a true theology. Cusa seems to have considered a true philosophy of reason essential to the humiliation of reason which makes possible the enlightenment of intelligence on a higher level. Thus he too seems to make of philosophy a good work essential to true theology, except that he has a philosophy different from that of the Thomists. Nicolas, however, might quite conceivably have denied the validity of the criticism on the ground that docta ignorantia would be of no value for any man's salvation did not the grace of God in the form of revealed truth follow upon it.

From the point of view of logic one can attack Gusa's system at many points. One might, for example, charge him with contradiction in making reason its own infallible adversary in establishing a negative philosophy after emphasizing the relative truth of all rational judgments. Gusa often operates with judgments of value which would be difficult to validate logically. Very often, indeed, one has no approach to his thought from the point of view of pure logic or of unaided philosophy. One cannot really touch anything that comes after docta ignorantia, because here Nicolas appeals to revealed knowledge and to mystical insight. Stadelmann thinks that Nicolas might just as well have stopped at this point. He says,

Und mit dem letzten furchtbarsten Leugnen hat diese Kritik die eigene spekulative Arbeit ad absurdum geführt. Die Aussage von der Unnenbarkeit Gottes ist eben so falsch, wie die gegenteilige Behauptung und wie die Vereinigung beider Anschauungen. Metaphysik und Erkenntnistheorie sind damit dem gleichen Fluch verfallen.<sup>1</sup>

In the opinion of the writer Gusa's claims for mystic experience make any philosophical validation or complete refutation of the cardinal's Weltanschauung impossible.

His approach to knowledge depends on intuition of a deeper meaning of concepts. His acceptance of the Christian revelation as revealed knowledge seems to depend on mystical apprehension of its meaning. Finally, the cardinal claimed mystical union with God on the highest level of intelligence. These mystical experiences were authoritative for him, because he had them. And they present a problem for every

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1. Op. cit. p. 56.

philosopher, because Gusa shares such experiences with many others. William James says,

In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity, which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which brings it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land.<sup>1</sup>

From the point of view of the Christian philosopher or theologian Gusa's approach to mystical union with God presents a somewhat different problem than it would to the non-Christian philosopher. This is the case because the Christian philosopher must assume the validity of a certain type of union with God and must operate with this as a fact of valid experience. The writer believes that the Christian church owes the world a more articulate philosophy than has heretofore been given with respect to such experiences as Gusa's. The problem is too great for the present writer and for the scope of this paper. Perhaps some general statements may, nevertheless, be made on the subject of a Lutheran approach to Gusa's thought which will also suggest some criticism of his approach to mystic union with God.

In Lutheran thinking all spirits are to be tried by the Scriptures to discover whether they are of God. Measured by this standard Gusa's thought is certainly subject to criticism in several areas. The writer will refer chiefly to the cardinal's doctrines of God, of

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<sup>1</sup> William James, Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 410.

the creation, of man, of sin, and of the atonement. Naturally any criticism of these doctrines must also be reflected in all of Gusa's theology.

In the writer's view Gusa's view on all the doctrines mentioned above is conditioned by an attempt to view them sub specie aeterni. In religion this is always dangerous. Reinhold Niebuhr contends that the religious meaning of Scriptural words is often lost in the effort to express their meaning in abstractions which are universally true.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, is it not probable that Gusa's views of how things must appear on God's level is conditioned by Neo-Platonist theories and by mystic states of consciousness which he himself experienced? If this can be shown, and if it can be shown that Gusa's views are in opposition to the scriptures, there is reason to hold his approach to mystic union with God suspect at least in part. A criticism of mysticism from this point of view will not, of course, explain what the mystic experience is.

James states that the philosophical outcome of most mystical states of consciousness is monism and optimism.<sup>2</sup> In Nicolas' system the significance of the scriptural word created does seem to be lost, regardless of the fact that he sought in many ways to avoid an ontological monism. Furthermore, in his doctrine of man Gusa does not state that man's will is turned against God as a result of the fall into sin. He seems rather to interpret man's failings as a necessary consequence of the fact that he is a part of

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1. Cp. his book An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 14.  
2. Op. cit. p. 413.

the world of sense. Sin is a "not yet". This is optimism.

Regarding the nature of mystical experiences, James says,

It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but one of the species, the nobler and better one, is itself the genus, and soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself.<sup>1</sup>

This passage certainly describes the experience which Cusa had on his return trip from Constantinople, and that experience was normative for all of his philosophy and theology. But biblically it is not "the opposites of the world" which make all man's troubles but man's sin which separates him utterly from God. Nicolas' own experiences, cultivated because he was influenced by the mystic tradition may have caused him to minimize the gulf which the Scripture places between God and man as a result of man's sin. This lack of consciousness of the seriousness of sin is in turn reflected in Cusa's doctrine of Christ. In Cusa's view the important thing about Christ is not so much that he died on the cross for men but that he revealed the logos to men. The historical Jesus, therefore, tends to take on the character of a symbol, a symbol which reveals the Trinity to man and shows him how he can by thought raise himself to the level of God. In this way of looking at Christ, no matter how much His importance is emphasized as the revelation of the word — or in Cusa's terms as the uniter of the divine with the human nature, — the work of Jesus

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1. Op. cit. p. 379.

as God and man, as reconciler, as doer of a work which man could not do for himself, tends to be de-emphasized. The importance is attached rather to progressive personal growth toward God, helped by grace, but chiefly dependent on man's will. This emphasis on the progressive union with the ultimate through personal effort and the emphasis on the symbolic meaning of Christ's revelation of the logos are characterized and criticized by Emil Brunner. He writes,

Der Mystiker, der Idealist, der Neuplatoniker meinen, wenn sie von Offenbarung reden, jenes Sichberühren des Göttlichen und der menschlichen Seele, jenes Einswerden des Grundes und des Begründeten im höchsten Akt der Erkenntnis, ... das seinem Wesen nach immer und überall stattfinden kann, und das, sofern es stattfindet, unabhängig ist von allem Zufälligen... Mag auch zugestanden sein, dass jenes letzte Erkennen oder Erleben, das ihnen göttliche Offenbarung heisst, kein unvermitteltes, sondern ein natürlich und geschichtlich vermitteltes sei: dennoch bleibt es seinem Inhalt nach gänzlich losgelöst von allem zeitlichen Geschehen; es ist das unmittelbare Verhältnis zum Göttlichen, zum ewigen Urgrund. Alle 'geschichtliche Vermittlung' steht dann zu dieser Offenbarung bloss im Verhältnis eines zufälligen 'Vehikels', einer Veranlassung, eines Symbols...

Ihr steht der christliche Glaube, und nur er, als reiner Gegensatz entgegen. Denn er besteht in der Gebundenheit an ein zufälliges Geschichtsfaktum, an ein wirkliches raumzeitliches Ereignis, von dem er behauptet, er sei die einmalige Entscheidung für Zeit und Ewigkeit und alle Welt.<sup>1</sup>

Any criticism from the Lutheran point of view will be largely in agreement with the argument of Brunner and will necessarily include the statement that Gusa does not do justice to the Scriptural statements regarding the significance of the one atoning act of Christ Jesus. Gusa's theory of the meaning of Christ does not satisfactorily give account

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1. Emil Brunner, Der Mittler, p. 10 f.



for St. Paul's statement "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself". Nor has the writer found in Gusa's writings any subtle exegesis of the passages which teach the vicarious suffering of Christ, which would not be in conflict with his doctrine of the work of Christ. Evelyn Underhill, a devout Christian mystic, has attempted this.<sup>1</sup> In her view, mysticism and the doctrine of the atonement are not in conflict except on the level of him who does not have the capacity for mystic experience which St. Paul had. Both views — the one that men are saved by Christ's vicarious suffering, and the other, that men are saved by what they themselves do and become — have, in her estimation, their source in St. Paul. When Paul speaks of Christ's vicarious suffering, this is a description of

the drama of the divine life incarnate, humbling and limiting itself to the human life to save it, (which is) essentially a dramatic representation of that other experience, of the divine life limiting itself and mysteriously emerging within each soul, to transmute, regenerate, infinitize it, which the mystics describe to us.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's teaching on the subject of the atonement, Underhill contends was first "called forth by the practical need of finding some meaning in the tragedy of the crucifixion", and is a "development of that profound conception of his own death as a filling up to the brim of the cup of sacrifice and surrender which seems to have inspired Christ Himself."<sup>3</sup>

In the estimation of the writer, who does not have

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1. Cp. her book, The Essentials of Mysticism, pp. 44 ff.
  2. Op. cit. p. 45.
  3. Op. cit. p. 46.

powerful mystic experiences which would provide him with a new organ of interpretation, such exegesis does do violence to the texts, to Paul's feeling for Christ as Son of God in a manner different from the sonship which he could claim for himself. The mystic, it seems, will always find it necessary to interpret the scriptures in the light of his experiences. The manner in which this is done is often objectionable from the point of view of sound textual criticism. For example, Steiner interprets Christ's words, "It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away, the comforter will not come unto you," to mean, "Ye have set too much joy upon my present appearance, therefore, the full joy of the Holy Ghost (direct mystic experience) cannot come to you."<sup>1</sup> Cusa's Christology, because it has mystical implications which stress thought as the divine process by which man ascends to full union with divine intellect would likewise be difficult to validate on the basis of the New Testament.

Finally a word on the approach to ethics which follows from Cusa's thought. The writer has found in the cardinal's writings no conception of evil which fully covers the scriptural teaching. In his Vision of God Cusa states that it is man who turns his will away from God, but this assertion is modified by the rest of his philosophy which implies that man has become separate from God through the process in which the world of sense came into being. Because of this modification of the doctrine of sin, Cusa could

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1. Op. cit. p. 55.

develop a doctrine of the purpose of Christ's coming which ended in an optimistic emphasis on man's ability to think himself into union with God. In the opinion of the writer such an emphasis on thinking ones' self into union with the absolute is not fruitful for ethics, because it places the emphasis not so much on drowning the old Adam in every act of this life but on thinking ones' self away from this life into unity with God in a supernal realm. Man's highest obligation becomes thinking, not living the life in Christ.

Despite all the above criticism the present writer believes that any discussion of Gusa's life and philosophy should end on a note of praise for the man. The son of a fisherman, he made important contributions to knowledge about the world in which we live. He lived in an age in which the church was almost dead. One must praise his efforts to reform it, to enliven its theology, and to restore the interest of its members in the imitation of Christ. The writer sees Gusa as a man in revolt against an age which was sick, a man with a sincere love for Christ and a passionate desire to find truth. If in his expressions of what he believed to be true he sometimes missed the mark, and if his spiritual heritors often contradicted his spirit in his name, the church ought still to count him among its honored heroes.

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