

Nicolaus of Cusa's ideas give new life to the world

by Nora Hamerman

Toward a New Council of Florence: 'On the Peace of Faith' and Other Works

by Nicolaus of Cusa;

translated by William F. Wertz, Jr.

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William Wertz's collection of new translations of Nicolaus of Cusa is that *rara avis*: an inexpensive, popular edition of primary texts by one of history's often overlooked great men, the ferryman's son from Cues, Germany, Nikolaus Krebs, who became the foremost scholar, scientist, diplomat, and churchman of his day and was elevated to the cardinalate. His ideas, mostly written in Latin under the name Nicolaus Cusanus, not only inspired those founders of modern science, Johannes Kepler and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, but continue to provide fresh inspiration today.

The new collection has been assembled because, in the words of the editor and translator, "What is needed today if human civilization is to survive and progress is a revival of the initiative taken by Nicolaus of Cusa beginning 500 years ago, to establish global peace based on the development of the divine potential of the human species for the exercise of reason and the expression of charity. . . . Although the problems in the world today are more complex than during the 15th century, the fundamental solutions advanced by Cusanus in his writings remain valid."

Indeed, this past April Schiller Institute founder Helga Zepp-LaRouche took a major step in implementing the program Wertz proposes here, when she addressed an audience at the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow

on the subject of Nicolaus of Cusa and the need for a new Renaissance. Mrs. LaRouche's commitment to this project, which Wertz credits with having provided the initial impetus for his work, goes back to the 1970s. I have in my possession a copy of the proceedings of the Cusanus Gesellschaft, the scholarly society which studies all aspects of the cardinal's life and work, reporting on a symposium held in Trier, Germany in October 1977 on "The Image of Man in Nicolaus of Cusa." Among the participants were two collaborators of Lyndon LaRouche, Helmut Böttiger and Helga Zepp, who was to marry LaRouche in 1977. It is interesting to record their interventions in order to see the continuity of thought down to the present day, more than 15 years later (the translations from the German here are my own).

In Helga Zepp's first intervention, following the presentation of a paper on the relationship of body and soul in Cusanus by Giovanni Santinello, she remarked, "I wanted to point out a passage of 'De Ludo Globi' ['The Game of Spheres' by Cusanus], which brings the debate about apriorism or assimilation theory to a practical point. At that spot Cusanus says that the human soul is the place where science, namely arithmetic, geometry, music, and astrology [sic], are found. And the soul experiences in this perception the power, which is enfolded into it. Then he goes on to say: 'For these sciences are discovered and unfolded by man. And since they are imperishable and truly remain the same, the soul also sees that she herself is imperishable and truly immortal. For those mathematical sciences are only enfolded in her [the soul] and in her power and unfolded through her power—so much that, if this intellectual soul did not exist, they themselves could not be.' "

She added, "Here it is established that the object of learning is not something static or closed-off, but that through

human creativity a further development, i.e., an advance of the creative act, is possible. This is possible, because man, as Cusanus believes, is the likeness of God and this creative activity is what is most important in man."

Following a second presentation by Gerda v. Bredow, centered on "The Mind as the Living Image of God," both Miss Zepp and Mr. Böttiger made comments which are summarized in the Proceedings.

Zepp: "If Nicolaus of Cusa were here today, he would certainly give a speech making the case that this unity of thought and life was the principle according to which he personally acted. If such a great thinker as Nicolaus of Cusa developed such clear realistic principles, then in the moral crisis in which today's youth find themselves—I refer to the university situation—it behooves us to bring these thoughts more strongly before the public."

[Bredow strongly agrees.]

Zepp: "The source, where progress takes place, is the human *soul*, and that is only possible because it is in the likeness of God, which represents the creative quality in its highest form. That the laws of the human *mind* as the most developed part of the universe are the same as in the universe as a whole, can be simply proven by the fact that that which starts in the human mind as hypothesis and then is experimentally tested, is also precisely that which ultimately has an effect on the material universe. Thus scientific and technological progress is the only proof up to the present day, that the microcosm and the macrocosm both truly obey the same laws."

At this seminar, the second discussion topic was Eusebio Colomer's paper "The Image of Man in Nicolaus of Cusa in the History of Christian Humanism."

Helmut Böttiger opened the discussion by making the point that the Cusanus Gesellschaft has the duty not just to explain Cusanus's thought but to make it into reality; that there is a world crisis which is not just economic but also political and has brought us to the brink of war.

Later in the discussion, Helga Zepp elaborated: "In all these thinkers [Cusanus, Pico, Ficino], whom you have named, within freedom there is responsibility. . . . I believe, that when one looks at the overall political activity of these humanistic thinkers one can say: . . . Humanistic concepts are not just a matter of having an idea, but also turning it into reality. Especially in the present-day situation it is necessary to get away from academic observations about these great thinkers and to give new life to the world with their thoughts."

The higher geometry

It is precisely such a mission which the present book seeks to fulfill. In contrast to the "multicultural" approach which marks many so-called ecumenical efforts, Nicolaus of Cusa insisted that differences be resolved neither by dividing, nor by seeking the least common denominator where everyone backs off from controversy, but by finding a higher geometry, where "opposites coincide." His method of Coinci-

dence of Opposites allows the intellect to recognize the ontological reality of the world of Becoming (change) which participates in the world of Being. This frontal assault on the dictatorship of Aristotelian discursive reason won historically crucial battles, but it also met with extremely sharp resistance from oligarchical forces on all sides. This is why the revival of Nicolaus of Cusa is today a piece of crucial, unfinished business.

The watershed of these efforts was the ecumenical council convened in Ferrara and Florence between 1438 and 1444. In 1439, the council united Latin Catholics and Greek Orthodox for the first time in nearly 400 years—a union which proved fragile. It also sparked the full-scale importation of Greek science into the Latin West and the reconciliation of Platonism and Christianity which characterized the full flowering of art, science, technology, and exploration we refer to as the Renaissance, which proved enduring—although as Wertz points out, it was also undermined by the rejection of the full agenda of the Council of Florence.

While most other translators of Cusanus have narrowed their focus to one domain, Wertz's translations range over his philosophical, mathematical, and ecumenical writings and especially focus on the later works (after 1460), which have received the least attention. The introduction is valuable in situating Cusanus's thought and ferreting out misinterpretations by the cardinal's modern detractors and admirers, which have caused him falsely to be seen as a forerunner of everything from the Luther revolt to the New Age to Marxism.

Of course, I hope that readers will also want to add to their libraries other Cusanus texts, such as the recently published full translation of *The Catholic Concordance*, the full-length political treatise by Cusanus (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); his *On Learned Ignorance* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning, 1981), the first of his major scientific writings; or any of numerous shorter writings.

Getting acquainted

Readers unfamiliar with Nicolaus of Cusa might wish to begin reading with the dialogue "On the Peace of Faith" which is the centerpiece of the volume, and proceed from there to some of the more difficult speculative pieces, such as "On the Hunt for Wisdom" or "On Conjectures." If you get stuck, this is a good time to go back and read the introduction. In a world beset by frightful "religious" strife, Cusanus's writings as presented by Wertz offer the most direct path to the level of the intellect where these conflicts are truly resolved.

As Wertz makes clear, the ascent to these lofty domains did not occur because Cusanus and his co-thinkers inhabited a peaceful world. For example, the first essay in this volume, "On Conjectures," was dedicated in 1440 "to his honored teacher, the God-beloved, most Reverend Father, Lord Julian, most worthy Cardinal of the Holy Apostolic Chair, N.C." Yet the dedicatee perished atrociously four years later, as a victim of the war which the Council of Florence had

been convened to prevent.

He was Julian Cesarini, who had been the teacher of the 20-year-old Nicolaus Krebs at the University of Padua. Cesarini, scion of an impoverished Roman noble family, was only three years Cusanus's senior. Like Cusanus he had been a member of the conciliar camp, which sought to reunify the Catholic Church following the Great Schism which began when rival popes were elected in 1378. Both men had been deeply involved in diplomatic efforts to secure a peaceful settlement of the dispute with the Bohemian Church after its leader, Jan Hus, had been betrayed and put to death at the Council of Constance in 1416 (Cesarini, who led an army against the Hussites, became convinced that the military solution could only fail). Both had rallied to the side of the papacy when the Council of Basel rebelled against the pope. Cusanus in 1437 became a key diplomat in negotiating for the Greek Orthodox prelates and emperor to attend the Council of Ferrara-Florence, while Cesarini presided over the council, which reached its peak in July 1439 with the signing of the Bull of Union. By then Nicolaus Cusanus had returned to Germany, where he tirelessly negotiated with the German princes and emperor to break with the schismatic Council of Basel. He wrote to Cesarini after hearing of the Union, "The Holy Spirit is present in Florence, not in Basel."

The main theological sticking-point in the schism between Latin and Greek Christianity was the *Filioque*, a phrase meaning "and from the Son" which was spoken in the Latin version of the Nicene Creed, where it says "I believe in the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and from the Son. . . ." The phrase had been added by French Christians in the era of Charlemagne, to emphasize the divinity of Christ following the long battles with the Arian heretics. But Greek Christians considered this an illegitimate addition and moreover heretical, since they asserted that the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, proceeds "through" the Son from the Father, rather than equally "from" both Father and Son. The strong assertion of the divinity of Christ, Who is both God and man, had been the theological corollary in the West for the necessity of technological progress, in which man is seen as responsible for continuing the process of creation, in fulfillment of his own identity as in the image of God.

The 'Filioque' debate

Besides the indispensable role Cusanus played in preparing for the Council of Florence, there were other figures whose work allowed the Greek Orthodox leadership to accept the *Filioque*. The deadlock was broken in Florence by the eloquent intervention of the Greek Platonist John Bessarion, the Metropolitan of Nicea and later cardinal of the Catholic Church, who pointed out that no mere human preposition, either "through" or "from," could fully express the procession of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, and therefore there could be no objection from the Greek side to the use of the Latin phrase. Even this brilliant compromise was, as Wertz reports, rejected

violently by the rulers of Moscow, as it was by the mass of monks and a good part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Orthodox Byzantium. Thus the Union collapsed from the eastern side, paving the way to a military debacle and depriving Russia and the lands it came to rule of a Renaissance.

Bessarion and others allied to Cusanus had envisaged a new birth of Greece under the concepts embedded in the *Filioque*. They realized that the continuation of the old Byzantine Empire was neither possible nor desirable. Instead, for them, the Florentine Christian humanists and their international co-thinkers like Nicolaus of Cusa were pointing the way to a recovery of the lost greatness of Greek philosophy and science—the legacy of Socrates, Plato, and Archimedes upon which the Greek nation should be rebuilt in the Christian era. Tragically, this was not what happened.

The military debacle began in 1444, when Cusanus's teacher Cesarini and the king of Poland were killed in the rout at the Battle of Varna, after what most contemporaries considered to be treachery by the Venetian fleet, which had promised to meet the armies defending Christian Europe. The Varna massacre made the downfall of Constantinople in 1453 almost inevitable, and "On the Peace of Faith" includes as its preface, an account of Cusanus's own reactions to that terrible event.

Cusanus's method of Socratic dialogue changed people, even himself—shifting from an early leaning to the conciliarist outlook which gave the council authority over the pope, to becoming an ardent defender of the papal institution as crucial for Christian unity. Then he won over his most brilliant adversary, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, who later, as Pope Pius II, brought Cusanus to Rome in 1459 and made him second in authority in the church, as they jointly mobilized the military defense of Europe against the aggressive war of the Ottoman Turks and also, jointly, shaped the terms of peaceful dialogue with Muslims.

While focused on this strategic task, Cusanus found the energy to pen some of his deepest philosophical and scientific works (works from 1458-64 fill nearly half the present volume); and Pius II wrote his celebrated *Commentaries*, considered one of the classics of the Italian Renaissance spirit. Both men died, within days of each other, in 1464, just as the crusade to resist the Turkish onslaught was finally beginning.

The present book includes a short excerpt from Cusanus's study of the Koran. In marked contrast to the poet Dante, who had consigned Muhammad to one of the lowest circles of Hell as a terrorist in his *Commedia* of 1300, Cusanus expressed the belief that discrepancies between Islam and Christianity were due more to Muhammad's ignorance, and he proposed remedies which would overcome this theological deficiency. He suggested that the Prophet Muhammad had been recruited to a heretical form of Christianity, Nestorianism, which denied the divinity of Christ. It would be difficult to prove this hypothesis, but it had already been proposed many centuries earlier by other Christian writers,

and there were historical facts which lent credence to it, along with certain internal features of the Koran itself.

As reported by Franz Babinger in his definitive biography of Mehmed the Conqueror, the Ottoman sultan who conquered Constantinople, Cusanus's study became the basis for an extraordinary peace gesture by Pope Pius II, who offered Mehmed full recognition for his sovereignty over all the lands he had conquered, provided the Turk would convert to Christianity.

I do not know of any echo or reaction in the Muslim world to Cusanus's writings seeking a common high ground and lessening of violence, or even if they were ever translated into Arabic or Turkish. In Byzantium, the *Filioque* was betrayed by an imperial court which Cusanus branded as treacherous, and was rabidly rejected by a band of Aristotelian monks led by Gennadios, later installed as patriarch of Constantinople by the victorious Mehmed the Conqueror when the city fell in 1453. In the Latin West, one Johannes Wenck wrote a bitter attack on Cusanus's first scientific masterpiece *On Learned Ignorance*. Cusanus identified this as an outburst from the dominant "Aristotelian sect" within the church. This Aristotelian sect, backed by the Venetian and other western financiers, became so predominant in the ensuing period, that the German cardinal's influence was all but silenced in the 16th century throughout the western Christian world, which had by then split along national and confessional lines as Cusanus had feared.

Glorious images of early Renaissance

by Nora Hamerman

Fra Angelico at San Marco

by William Hood

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Fra Angelico, the Dominican friar born Guido di Piero in Mugello and beatified officially by Pope John Paul II in 1984, was a contemporary of Nicolaus of Cusa. Professor Hood's beautiful and painstakingly researched book will satisfy many readers simply by the selection of the photographs, the care with which they were taken to reveal the architectural context of Angelico's paintings in the Dominican convent of San Marco in Florence, and the sharpness of the reproductions. The numerous images of the cloisters with their painted

decorations can only be described as stunning, but in this large book, even many comparative illustrations are reproduced in full color, making it into an accurate if partial memento of the visual beauty of the Christian humanist movement which organized the Council of Florence.

We are certainly not talking about a "coffee table book," however. The dense text will be, for nonspecialist readers, harder to get through, but William Hood has some crucial insights and information to offer to anyone who has been "bitten" by the fascination of the early Renaissance in its cradle, Florence. The theme of the book is the some 50 paintings in tempera and fresco executed by Fra Angelico and his workshop between 1438, the year of the opening of the Council of Florence, and 1452, the year before the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks. This means that the artist's activity at San Marco coincides precisely with the era of Nicolaus of Cusa's most intense diplomatic activity for the unity of Christendom.

Dominicans as papal theologians

In 1989, at the Schiller Institute's conference in Rome commemorating the 450th anniversary of the Union at the Council of Florence, this reviewer heard Cardinal Ciappi, the Theologian of the Papal Household, and I learned for the first time of the important role of the Florentine Dominican friars in organizing the Council. Sitting at the dais next to Helga Zepp-LaRouche, Cardinal Ciappi, an octogenarian, said that he had become a priest at S. Maria Novella, the Florentine church where the working sessions of the Council of Florence were held in 1438 and 1439. (Indeed, S. Maria Novella was the hub of the papacy of Eugenius IV from 1434 until 1443, when the pope was finally able to return to Rome.) Ciappi spoke of Fra Angelico the artist; of Saint Antoninus, the Dominican who became bishop of Florence in the 1440s and wrote the first treatise on a Christian outlook on the emerging "capitalist" system; and underlined that St. Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of the Dominican order in its founding century, the 1200s, had been particularly devoted to the *Filioque*.

All of this greatly impressed me, but it was not until I read William Hood's book that I realized that *all* Theologians of the Papal Household since the 13th century have been Dominicans, the popular name for the Order of Preachers founded by St. Dominic (just as the Order of Friars Minor are called Franciscans for their founder, St. Francis). Nor did I grasp the particular nature of the Dominican Observants—the reforming movement that challenged the Conventuals—in Italy in general, and in the special case of Florence. The Observants insisted on a return to the letter and spirit of the original Constitutions governing the order in the time of the founders.

Professor Hood has little to say about the Council of Florence and nothing about the world strategic situation of the time. His subject is rather enclosed within the cloistered