

NICHOLAS OF CUSA

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NICHOLAS OF CUSA (1401-1464), philosopher, theologian, and mathematician. He was born in the German town of Kues, situated along the Moselle River across from Bernkastel (today one city, Bernkastel-Kues). His name, Niclas Krebs (in Latin: Nicolaus Cancer), was gradually altered during his lifetime to Niclas von Cusse (Nicolaus de Cusa, Nicolaus Cusanus), thus reflecting his birthplace. Of Nicholas' early life almost nothing is known except that he was one of the four children of Johan Krebs (or Cryfftz), a prominent shipper, and Katharina Römer Krebs. The legend that he was a pupil of the Brothers of the Common Life at Deventer in central Holland remains without adequate historical support.

In 1416 Nicholas enrolled at the University of Heidelberg, where he studied the liberal arts. The following year he moved to the University of Padua, concentrating on canon law and receiving his *doctor decretorum* in 1423. There he was exposed to the latest developments in mathematical and astronomical thinking, as well as to the revitalizing influence of the Italian humanists and their reintroduction of the Greek language. Toward the beginning of 1425 Nicholas was back in Germany, enrolling during the spring at the University of Cologne; he is presumed both to have delivered and to have attended lectures in canon law. Through his friend Heimericus de Campo, he was influenced by the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius, Albertus Magnus, and Ramon Lull. During this Cologne period, the exact length of which is uncertain, Nicholas lived from ecclesiastical benefices given him by Otto of Ziegenhain, archbishop of Trier. (By September 1427 he was referring to himself as Otto's secretary.) Toward the end of 1428 he discovered twelve lost comedies of Plautus. In December of that year and again in 1435 he was offered a chair of canon law at the University of Louvain; both times he declined.

In 1430 a dispute broke out regarding the election to fill the vacant archbishopric of Trier. When the controversy was appealed to the Council of Basel in 1432, Nicholas pleaded the cause of his client, Ulrich of Manderscheid, by contesting the right of the pope to "impose" Raban of Helmstadt as archbishop. Though the appeal was lost (15 May 1434), Nicholas became prominent at the

council by participating in its other affairs. Upon having taken the oath of the council on 29 February 1432, he had been made a member of the committee to examine matters of faith. His recommendations on how to draw the Hussites back to the Roman church date from 1433 and were the basis of the council's accommodation, as it was announced in 1436. This same year, 1436, he also presented to the council a memorandum regarding revision of the church calendar (*De reparatione kalendarii*).

Initially, Nicholas sided with the council, which claimed to be superior in authority to the pope. But by December 1436 his sympathies had changed to the extent that he voted with the minority faction in favor of letting Pope Eugenius IV determine the location of a projected ecumenical meeting with the Greeks. Nicholas was named by the minority party to the three-man delegation which, with the pope's blessing, sailed to Constantinople in August 1437. Their mission was to persuade the emperor and the patriarch to meet with the pope and the conciliar faction, in the hope of reuniting Eastern and Western Christendom. The agreement that was reached at Florence on 5 July 1439 brought only a short-lived "reunification." Nicholas' change of sympathies is to be attributed mainly to his belief that dissent within the Council of Basel was destroying the unity of the church. In his own day, however, many conciliarists ascribed his "sudden" support of the papacy to ambitious opportunism.

Between 1438 and 1448 Nicholas, as one of several papal envoys, sought to sway the German nation away from its neutrality; partly through his efforts Frederick III, king of Germany and archduke of Austria, signed the Concordat of Vienna on 17 February 1448, aligning the German nation with Pope Nicholas V and against the Council of Basel. In 1446 Pope Eugenius IV had named Nicholas cardinal as a reward for his labors; but Eugenius died (23 February 1447) before making the naming official. Nicholas V elevated him to cardinal on 20 December 1448, and on 3 January 1449 assigned him a titular church in Rome: St. Peter in Chains. (Nicholas had become a priest sometime between 1436 and 1440, although he had held benefices much earlier, as a cleric.)

During 1451 Nicholas traveled throughout

Austria and Germany as a papal legate under instruction to reform the church. In April 1452 he assumed the active, personal administration of the bishopric of Bressanone (Brixen in Tirol), to which he had been named on 23 March 1450. His attempts to reform the diocese and to free it from domination by Sigismund, duke of Austria and count of Tirol, led to threats and clashes that twice caused him to seek consolation and refuge in Rome. He died on 11 August 1464, in the Italian town of Todi, while en route from Rome to Ancona. His body was repositied in his titular church but was lost sometime after its later relocation there. In accordance with his will, his heart was placed in the hospice which he commissioned to be built at Kues and which still serves its founder's aim: to shelter thirty-three—the number coinciding with the years of Christ's earthly life—impoverished men, each being no less than fifty years old. Already underway in 1453 and essentially completed by 1458, though not consecrated until 1465, the hospice also houses his personal library.

Nicholas wrote many works: *De maioritate auctoritatis sacrorum conciliorum supra auctoritatem papae* (1433), *Libellus inquisitionis veri et boni* (1433, lost), *De modo vero habilitandi ingenium ad discursum in dubiis* (1433, lost), *De concordantia catholica* (1433), *De auctoritate praesidendi in concilio generali* (1434), *De reparatione kalendarii* (1436), *De docta ignorantia* (1440), *De coniecturis* (1442-1443), *De deo abscondito* (1444), *De quaerendo deum* (1445), *De filiatione Dei* (1445), *De geometricis transmutationibus* (1445), *De arithmetiis complementis* (1445), *De dato patris luminum* (1445-1446), *Coniectura de ultimis diebus* (1446), *De genesi* (1447), *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449), *Idiota de sapientia* (1450), *Idiota de mente* (1450), *Idiota de staticis experimentis* (1450), *De circuli quadratura* (1450), *Quadratura circuli* (1450), *Tres epistolae contra Bohemos* (1452), *De pace fidei* (1453), *De visione Dei* (1453), *De mathematicis complementis* (1453), *Complementum theologicum* (1453), *De mathematicis complementis* (second version 1454), *Declaratio rectilineationis curvae* (date uncertain), *De una recti curvique mensura* (date uncertain), *Dialogus de circuli quadratura* (1457), *De caesarea circuli quadratura* (1457), *De beryl-*

lo (1458), *De matbematica perfectione* (1458), *De aequalitate* (1459), *De principio*, (1459), *Aurea propositio in matbematicis* (1459), *De possest* (1460), *Cribratio alkorani* (1461), *De li non aliud* (1461), *De figura mundi* (1462, lost), *De ludo globi* (book I, 1462), *De venatione sapientiae* (1462), *De ludo globi* (book II, 1463), *Compendium* (1464), and *De apice theoriae* (1464).

In *De concordantia catholica* Nicholas distinguishes between a universal council (which is open to the bishops and select ecclesiastics of the whole church—that is, of the five patriarchates) and a patriarchal council (which is composed of the bishops and select ecclesiastics of a given patriarchate). Provided there is agreement, a universal council, which is superior to the pope, is more likely to be infallible than is the pope alone; the greater the consensus, the greater the assurance of infallibility. (The Council of Basel was considered a universal council even though bishops of the non-Roman patriarchates—which were in schism or captivity—were not present.) Yet in matters of faith, agreement between a Roman patriarchal council and the pope, to whom the council is subordinate, also guarantees infallibility; and in matters of faith even the decisions of a universal council require the consent of the pope, provided he is not a heretic. A universal council can depose a pope for heresy or for maladministration; a Roman patriarchal council can declare the pope heretical and separate itself from him, but it cannot depose him for merely administrative reasons. Nicholas modified his theory in his letter of 8 November 1439 (*Quamvis, pater colendissime*) and in his speech at Frankfurt between 21 and 23 June 1442. In both cases he inclined toward giving more authority to the pope.

Nicholas' most important philosophical work is *De docta ignorantia*. The title is drawn from the following consideration: When we learn that God cannot be known as he is, we will be more learned. Thus, the title deliberately employs "doctus" in a twofold sense. Strictly speaking, we can know neither what God is nor what he is like, for he is beyond all differentiation; and, as undifferentiated, he is not similar to anything finite. In him all things coincide—not only in the sense that he is undifferentiated being itself, but also in the sense that, ontologically prior to their creation, all

finite things are in God and, qua in God, are God. *De docta ignorantia* emphasizes the *via negativa* but does not deny the practical need for analogical and symbolic representations of God—for example, that God is Cause. Furthermore, it minimizes argumentation for God's existence. And, through developing the notion of mathematical infinity, it attempts to elucidate the sense in which "God is the Essence of all things." This latter statement, however, has given rise to conflicting and highly controversial interpretations of Nicholas' metaphysics. Nonetheless, there is now general agreement that Nicholas is not a pantheist, something he explicitly denied being. *De docta ignorantia* also presents his cosmology, which diverges in several important respects from the Ptolemaic conception, although it cannot rightly be said to anticipate Copernicus' theory. Finally, the Christology presented in book 3 must be regarded as orthodox.

In *De pace fidei* Nicholas seeks to show that monotheist religions such as Islam and Judaism are compatible with Christianity, so that together they can be "*una religio in rituum varietate*." In his attempted harmonization he does not minimize the doctrine of Christ but, instead, stresses the doctrine of learned ignorance: "God as Creator is three and one; as infinite, however, he is neither three nor one nor any of those things which can be spoken of." Nicholas' most literary treatise is *De visione Dei*. It presents his speculative mysticism, and its dialectical reasoning testifies amply to his intellectual movement away from the Middle Ages and toward the modern age. Though his intellectual influence on his own times was minimal, both his prefiguring of certain ideas in Leibniz and his effect on Paul Tillich's theology are intellectually significant.

Among the many writers who contributed to Nicholas' philosophical and theological development are Albertus Magnus, Anselm of Canterbury, Aristotle, Augustine, Bonaventure, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, John Scottus Eriugena, John Gerson, Heimericus de Campo, Hermes Trismegistus, Hugh of St. Victor, Maximus the Confessor, Plato, Proclus, Ramon Lull, Robert Grosseteste, Thierry of Chartres, Thomas Aquinas, and Thomas Gallus. Nicholas' writings are both extremely rich and extremely difficult to compre-

hend. Perhaps no other medieval or Renaissance thinker has so often been so widely misinterpreted.

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