

# The Idea of Truth as the Basis for Religious Tolerance According to Nicholas of Cusa with Comparisons to Thomas Aquinas

William J. Hoye, University of Münster, Germany

We are all familiar with the reproach against religions that they are responsible for wars and terrorism owing to their truth claims. Truth possessed enkindles fanaticism. While truth is often considered to be a cause of sunderance and conflict, Nicholas of Cusa regards Truth as the key to religious tolerance. His solution to the problem of the variety of religions is worked out by appealing to the desire for happiness innate in human nature. He argues that Christology and other essential truths of Christianity follow from this natural desire. Happiness is understood by him as consisting in the perception of Truth itself. Since the liberal thesis of Cusanus may appear problematical to many orthodox Christians, I am also going to draw a few comparisons to Thomas Aquinas for support.

Tolerance towards non-Christian religions is grounded for Nicholas of Cusa ultimately in the human relationship to Truth itself, truth being understood in this context in a quasi-abstract sense, such that it can be identified with God Himself – Truth itself, as distinguished from truths, and in a sense that does not admit the plural form – the *idea* of truth, taken in a Platonic sense. In other words, Cusanus does not approach the question from the viewpoint of specific Christian truths, but from that of Truth in itself. Although his treatment moves along different lines from those that I intend to pursue, Inigo Bocken has drawn attention to this crucial distinction: "Daß Cusanus die verschiedenen Denk- und Lebensformen als 'mögliche Wahrheitsformen' versteht und die Möglichkeit der Anerkennung der vielen Wahrheiten im Begriff der einen Wahrheit entdeckt, ist dabei aber keineswegs selbstverständlich."<sup>1</sup> Thus Nicholas of Cusa can presuppose that all thinking persons, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with the Christian position, have in any case in common that they are seekers of Truth, even though an individual may be in possession of certain truths. Whereas we can succeed in finding certain concrete truths and errors, our relationship to Truth itself has the form of a striving, not of a possessing. The only possible opponents of the Cusan approach would be non-seekers of Truth –

<sup>1</sup>Inigo Bocken, "Toleranz und Wahrheit bei Nikolaus von Kues," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 105 (1998), 241–266, at 241. "Näher liegt es uns wohl, zu denken, daß der Gedanke der einen Wahrheit die vielen Wahrheiten unmöglich macht; zumindest ist es im heutigen Toleranzverständnis gerade dieser Gedanke der einen Wahrheit, den man ausklammern will. [...] Die verschiedenen Wahrheitsauffassungen, die einander zu widersprechen scheinen, stimmen als 'Wahrheitsformen' auf einer mehr grundlegenden Ebene überein." Ibid.

if that is at all possible –, individuals, in other words, uninterested in reality, life, consciousness. Pursuing this abstract approach, he reaches the result, on the one hand, that Christian dogma is right in its claims and, on the other hand, that all honest thinkers must necessarily agree and at least implicitly do. The unusualness of Nicholas' standpoint is that he uncovers a deep unity with other religions without impinging upon traditional Christian claims, neither compromising nor diluting its truths. M. Watanabe has posed the question: "Was Nicholas prepared to endure the coexistence of largely incompatible und hostile systems of belief?" And his conclusion is that "Nicholas overtly or covertly supports the [...] superiority of Christianity over other religions"<sup>2</sup> – without – and that is precisely the point I want to emphasize – implying intolerance. The famous, simple-sounding solution "one religion in a variety of rites" ["*religio una in rituum varietate*"<sup>3</sup>] sounds modern, enlightened and may appear to be playing down the dogmatic claim of Christianity. But what Cusanus attempts is actually just the opposite. He treats specific Christian truths, like, for example, the incarnation and the resurrection, by viewing them from the perspective of abstract Truth and thus establishing the unity among all religions. I shall now try to work through how this is done in a few steps.

## 1. The Primacy of Truth

The sermon that Nicholas held in 1455 in Brixen on the feast of the Archangel Michael was declared by him to be "the first and the fundamental of all his sermons."<sup>4</sup> It is surely significant, then, to observe what he decided to treat in this programmatic theological text, which he considered to be a *facile compendium* of all his sermons.<sup>5</sup> The topic he chose is God's glory. How does Cusanus go about treating this strictly theological theme? His first step is to set down the unquestioned presupposition, the *fundamentum inconcussum* of his procedure, and this consists in the two-fold assertion that all nations are most certain that God exists and that He is eternal Truth.<sup>6</sup> This conviction represents a consensus held by all nations, namely, the necessary existence of God as undeniable eternal Truth itself, through whom all things are what they are. This point of departure, as he presumes, is affirmed equally by Christians, Jews, Moslems as well as by philosophers.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup>M. Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Idea of Tolerance," in: *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno*, (Florenz, 1970), 409–418.

<sup>3</sup>*De pace fidei*, c. 1, n. 6, p. 7, lines 10–11.

<sup>4</sup>*Sermo CCIV*, n. 1, lines 7–8.

<sup>5</sup>"Nam non pauca meditatione ad hoc Deo sic inspirante perveni, ut facili quodam compendio deprehenderem omnium aliqualem intellectum." *Sermo CCIV*, n. 1, lines 9–12.

<sup>6</sup>"Dico itaque primo, quod apud omnes nationes est certissimum Deum esse et ipsum esse veritatem aeternam; neque concipi potest ipsum non esse, nisi hoc dicatur per excellentiam. Nam si dicitur non esse, hoc verum modo, quo nos alias res esse concipimus, ipsum non esse, quia est super omne esse illud, quod cadit in nostris conceptibus." *Sermo CCIV*, n. 2, lines 1–8. In the sense of the *via negativa*, he grants, God's existence could be denied.

<sup>7</sup>God's existence lies beyond doubt not only insofar as He is the creator of the universe but especially insofar as He is its goal: "Deum autem regem universorum omnes fatentur, non solum Christiani, Iudaei aut Sarraceni, qui unum eundem Deum ut regem regum et dominum dominantium colunt, sed etiam gentiles. Plato enim ipsum Deum regem, Aris-

This is for Cusanus indisputable to such a degree that it is not even thinkable that God does not exist. "Everyone sees," he writes, "that God is Necessity itself, which cannot not exist."<sup>8</sup> This divine necessity Cusanus identifies with Truth; what is more, he maintains that Truth would still lie beyond doubt, even if, hypothetically, God were in truth not to exist. "For," he argues, "if it is true that God exists, then I have established [*habeo*] that Truth exists; if it is true that God does not exist, then, again, I have established that Truth exists. Thus, if you were to say that it is true that Truth exists and similarly that it is true that Truth does not exist, you would always be affirming that Truth exists, no matter how contradictorally you might be speaking. Consequently, the truth is that there exists an absolute necessity of being, and this is Truth itself, through which all that exists exists."<sup>9</sup> The idea of Truth is, evidently, more fundamental than even God Himself, if one were hypothetically to distinguish between the two. The same teaching can be found in *Sermon XLI*, held eleven years earlier (1444) in Mainz and cannot therefore be interpreted as being just an adaptation to the traumatic downfall of Constantinople in 1553.

In the writings of Thomas Aquinas a similar view can be found. The saint takes up the hypothetical problem of the supremacy of Truth in comparison to God on the occasion of Job's dispute with God regarding the truth of his protest against his unjust suffering. Can one legitimately fight for truth against God, the supreme being? Thomas teaches that in reality it is impossible to separate Truth and God, but, if one allows the hypothesis, then he in fact takes the side of Job. "Truth," he argues, "does not vary with the diversity of persons. Therefore, if someone is speaking the truth, he can be conquered by no one, with whomsoever he might be disputing."<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Truth Determines What the Meaning of Life Is: Desire and Fulfillment

"Truth is the life of the intellect,"<sup>11</sup> Cusanus states. For him, as for Thomas Aquinas, life is, in sum, a striving for Truth, i. e., for ultimate reality. "What

toteles principem appellat. [...] Et in hoc omnes concordant." *Sermo CCIV*, n. 5, lines 20–28.

<sup>8</sup>"Sed quod Deus est ipsa necessitas, quae non esse non possit, quisque videt." *Sermo CCIV*, n. 3, lines 1–2. "Et omne id quod est infinitum, cum non possit esse aliter quam est, sed est omne id quod esse potest, est ipsa absoluta necessitas, quae Deus est." *Epistula ad Ioannem de Segobia*, p. 99, lines 2–4.

<sup>9</sup>"Nam si verum est hoc, quod ipse est, habeo veritatem esse; si verum est ipsum non esse, habeo iterum veritatem esse. Sic si dixeris verum esse veritatem esse, et similiter dixeris verum esse veritatem non esse, semper, qualitercumque dixeris contradictorie, affirmas ipsam esse. Unde veritas est esse absolutam essendi necessitatem, quae est ipsa veritas, per quam est omne id quod est." *Sermo CCIV*, n. 3, lines 2–11.

<sup>10</sup>"Et supra dixerat disputare cum deo cupio, ex nunc loquitur quasi Deum habens praesentem et cum eo disputans. Videbatur autem disputatio hominis ad Deum esse indebita propter excellentiam qua Deus hominem excellit; sed considerandum est quod veritas ex diversitate personarum non variatur, unde cum aliquis veritatem loquitur vinci non potest cum quocumque disputet." *In Job*, c. 13.

<sup>11</sup>"Nam nihil in variis obiectis particularibus quaesivit medio sensuum intellectus in hoc mundo nisi vitam suam et cibum vitae scilicet veritatem, quae est vita intellectus." *De filiatione Dei*, II, n. 57, lines 11–13; cf. *ibid.*, n. 57–60.

is sought in the striving of this world is to know Truth."<sup>12</sup> The attainment of this goal is happiness. Happiness is the fulfillment of the ultimate of our desires, and this is eternal life.<sup>13</sup> A few quotations make this evident. "Truth is the life of the heavenly kingdom."<sup>14</sup> "Thinking being finds its fulfillment in the Truth, which is God."<sup>15</sup> Supreme happiness comes from "union with naked Truth itself."<sup>16</sup> Here one is "in the Truth, where the Truth of true truth is to be found."<sup>17</sup> The nature of the union is one of perception, of knowledge; happiness, Cusanus teaches here again in agreement with Thomas Aquinas, consists in the perception of Truth itself.<sup>18</sup> The highest degree of happiness is found "in the perception of Truth, 'as it is'."<sup>19</sup> The "final fulfillment of the intellect" is "the perception of Truth."<sup>20</sup> "Happiness consists entirely in the vision."<sup>21</sup> The purpose (*finis*) of creation in general lies in the manifestation of God's glory; the specific purpose, or goal, of human beings lies in the vision of God's glory, be it in this life in visible creatures as in a looking-glass, or in heaven face to face. Consequently, the final purpose of creation, which is the manifestation of divine glory, consists in the vision of this glory.<sup>22</sup> – Similar thoughts are common in Thomas Aquinas.<sup>23</sup> To quote just one example: "Ultimate human happiness consists in the contemplation of truth."<sup>24</sup>

The connection between this life and the after-life is established by the Aristotelian principle that innate desire must attain fulfillment. Thomas Aquinas employs the same principle. A desire arising from the nature of a

<sup>12</sup>"Et hoc est magisterium, quod in studio huius mundi quaerit, scilicet intelligere veritatem." *De filiatione Dei*, II, n. 58, lines 1–2.

<sup>13</sup>"Divina benedictio est ultimum desideriorum seu felicitas quae dicitur aeterna vita, de qua satis supra audisti." *De pace fidei*, c. 16, n. 57, p. 53, lines 20–21.

<sup>14</sup>"Veritas est illa vita regni caelorum." *De pace fidei*, c. 14, n. 47, p. 45, line 4. Cf. *De filiatione Dei*, II, n. 57–60.

<sup>15</sup>"Quietatur autem esse [...] intellectualem in veritate, quae deus est." *De dato patris luminum*, V, n. 113, lines 6–8.

<sup>16</sup>"[...] Unio eius cum ipsa nuda veritate, ubi est summa felicitas." *Sermo LIV*, n. 24, lines 2–3.

<sup>17</sup>"[...] In vero, ubi verae veritatis est veritas." *De non aliud*, Proposition 13, p. 63, line 15.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. William J. Hoye, "Wahrnehmung als Glückseligkeit nach Nikolaus von Kues," in: *Aisthesis. Die Wahrnehmung des Menschen: Gottessinn. Menschensinn. Kunstsinn*, edd. H. Schwaetzer and H. Stahl-Schwaetzer (Regensburg: Roderer, 1999), 29–48.

<sup>19</sup>"[...] In apprehensione veritatis, 'uti est'." *Sermo LIV*, n. 26, lines 9–10. "[...] Felicitatem illam supremam." *Ibid.*, line 17.

<sup>20</sup>"[...] Ad ultimam scilicet intellectus perfectionem, hoc est ad apprehensionem veritatis [...] ut in se ipsa intellectualiter visibilis." *De filiatione Dei*, I, n. 53, lines 4–8. Cf. *De filiatione Dei*, III, n. 62, line 9: "ultima vitalis felicitas intellectus"; *ibid.*, n. 64, lines 7–10: "Et in hoc est gaudium altissimum intellectualem, quando suum principium, medium et finem omnem altitudinem apprehensionis excellere cognoscens in proprio obiecto, scilicet in pura veritate, intuetur."

<sup>21</sup>"Tota felicitas consistit in visione." *Sermo CCXVI*, n. 31, lines 3–4.

<sup>22</sup>"Hic est ergo finis creationis, scilicet ostensio gloriae creatoris. Venire igitur ad visionem gloriae Dei est attingere finem. [...] Unde, ut ait apostolus, in regno mundi huius in istis visibilibus 'in speculo et in aenigmate' videmus gloriam eius, sed in regno caelorum 'facie ad faciem' sive 'oculo ad oculum,' ut dicitur Isaiae 52." *Sermo CCIV*, n. 6, lines 10–13; 32–36. "The goal of creation is the vision of God's glory to His glory." *Ibid.*, n. 11, lines 1–2; cf. also n. 6–7.

<sup>23</sup>"Ipsa visio divinitatis ponitur tota substantia nostrae beatitudinis." Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sententiarum*, dist. 1, q. 1, a. 1c. "Ultima et perfecta beatitudo, quae expectatur in futura vita, tota consistit in contemplatione." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 3, a. 5c. "Finis igitur hominis est pervenire ad contemplationem veritatis." *Summa contra gentiles*, II, c. 83.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 37, n. 1.

being cannot be in vain.<sup>25</sup>

Hence, "eternal life is nothing other than the inner man's ultimate desire, namely, Truth, which is all that is desired and which eternally nourishes the intellect."<sup>26</sup>

Unlike Thomas Aquinas, for whom it seems to be a self-evident axiom, Cusanus offers an explanation for the principle that a natural desire cannot be in vain. He argues that God is good and His instigating a desire that *a priori* cannot find fulfillment would be to torture his creature, thus contradicting His own essence.<sup>27</sup>

On this basis Cusanus is in a position to treat the problem of the diversity of religions. This is, moreover, the context in which he defines what religion is. Religion has its origin for him precisely in the striving for happiness.<sup>28</sup> "All religion exists for the pursuit of happiness and there can be no deception in this regard, since the hope common to all arises from an innate desire, which is the reason for every religion, which in the same way exists in everyone innately."<sup>29</sup>

Cusanus even regards eternal life in Truth as the reason for the presence of truth in this life.<sup>30</sup>

In order to treat other religions, he emphasizes a further aspect of this teaching. He maintains that fulfillment (*quies*) for a human being, even su-

<sup>25</sup>Nicholas found this axiom in Origen, *Peri archon*, II, c. 11, n. 4 (GCS 22, p. 187, lines 12–18) In his copy of this work (Cod.Cus 50, fol. 227<sup>v</sup>, line 33–fol. 228<sup>r</sup>, line 6) he wrote in the margin "nota." Cf. Aristoteles, *De caelo*, I, c. 4 (271 a 33); *De anima*, III, c. 9 (432 b 21sq.); Albertus Magnus, *Liber II Physicorum tract. 2*, c. 17 (ed. Borgnet, 3, 150b–151a); idem, *Super Dion. Epist. V* (ed. Colon. 37/1, n. 12, p. 404, lines 58–65); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1; q. 62, a. 1; q. 75, a. 6c; *Summa contra gentiles*, II, c. 55; Eckardus, *Expos.s.Ev. sec. Joh.* (1,38) (Lat. W. 3, n. 204, p. 172, lines 5–7; Nicolaus Cusanus, *De docta ignorantia*, I, c. 1 (h I p. 5, lines 3–8); III, c. 4; *De visione Dei*, c. 19; *De sapientia*, I (2. Aufl., n. 16); *Crib. Alk.*, Prol. 1.

<sup>26</sup>"[...] Ipsa aeterna vita non est nisi interioris hominis ultimum desiderium, scilicet veritas quae solum appetitur et, uti aeterna est, aeternaliter pascit intellectum. Quae quidem veritas intellectum pascens non est nisi Verbum ipsum, in quo complicantur omnia et per quod omnia explicantur." *De pace fidei*, c. 2, n. 7, p. 9, lines 4–5.

<sup>27</sup>"Aliquid igitur supra omnem mensuram comprehensionis desiderat nobilis spiritus et ingemescit, quia id, quod maxime desiderat, apprehendere nequit. Unde cum hoc desiderium apprehendendi vitam in sua aeternitate et immortalitate omnibus nobilibus intellectualibus spiritibus insit, qui scilicet suam vitam intellectualem intelligere summe cupiunt, tunc cognoscunt illum, qui de gratia sua hanc dedit nobilem immortalis desiderii naturam, quod non dedit eam tali desiderio fervidam sine spe assequendi. Deus enim nihil frustra agit, et dare desiderium sine spe assequendi est dare torturam, quod optimo Deo non est ascribendum, qui solum novit dare bona. Unde omnes prophetae et sapientes etiam ex gentibus videntes ex se non posse ad hoc, quod spiritus desiderat, attingere, etiam non frustra scientes hoc eis desiderium inesse, affirmarunt illum, qui dedit naturae intellectuali desiderium, etiam gratiam assequendi daturum." *Sermo CCXI*, n. 10, lines 1–22. Cf. *Sermo XL*, n. 7, lines 26–29: "Repperit igitur hoc naturale desiderium humanae naturae inesse, quod quidem desiderium cum haberet a vena boni, hinc vidit non esse frustra."

<sup>28</sup>*De pace fidei*, c. 13, n. 45, p. 42, line 7.

<sup>29</sup>"Et quoniam omnium spes est aliquando consequi posse felicitatem, propter quam est omnis religio, nec in hoc cadit deceptio – quia haec spes omnibus communis est ex connato desiderio, ad quam sequitur religio, quae pariformiter omnibus consequenter connata existit –, hinc video hunc magistrum et mediatorem, naturae humanae supremiorem perfectionis et principatum tenentem, ab omnibus praesupponi." *De pace fidei*, c. 13, n. 45, p. 42, lines 6–12.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. *De pace fidei*, c. 14, n. 47, p. 45, lines 4–7: "Pro veritate dedit vitam huius mundi, ut sic perfectissime evangelizaret regnum caelorum et liberaret mundum ab ignorantia, qua praefert hanc vitam futurae."

pernatural fulfillment, must inevitably remain within the human sphere. It is not a question of individual desires nor of the specific goals of individual religions, but of human nature, holding true for all humans.<sup>31</sup> This human "heaven," as he refers to it ("caelum quoddam ambiens omnem individualement motum suae naturae"), is not defined by the actually realized state of human existence, but by the striving of human nature: not so much what we are as what we desire. It is thus dynamic and future-related. "The movement of my humanity," as he phrases it, "is to attain rest in the human being of my humanity."<sup>32</sup>

The boundary in both a positive and negative sense is therewith established. The fulfillment of a human being must be human, in the fullest sense, on the one hand, but, on the other, no more than this – no more, no less than human. Consequently, no religion can offer anything beyond this limitation. That is to say, the possibility of being raised up to a state of being beyond the human is *a priori* excluded. The fulfillment of an angel – to use the example given in *Sermo XLI* –, although it transcends the human, cannot be the fulfilling happiness of a human being, for it cannot be sought within the human sphere.<sup>33</sup> This principle holds true, moreover, for every possible development.<sup>34</sup> The eye does not desire to perceive sounds. Nor, as Cusanus adds, can a dog desire to be a cat or a pig or a bird or a fish.<sup>35</sup> So too a human cannot find fulfillment in becoming an animal or even an angel.<sup>36</sup> A human would prefer not to exist at all rather than to be raised to a state of existence higher than the human.<sup>37</sup> "Plato wants to be Plato, even though he may want

<sup>31</sup>Only because it represents a desire instilled by nature does the principle hold. "Et cum homini insit hic motus a natura humanitatis suae, hinc sequitur in ipsa humanitatis specie quietem motus attingere posse hominem, qui nec frustra movetur nec extra speciem." *Sermo XLI*, n. 8, lines 32–36.

<sup>32</sup>"Motus igitur humanitatis meae est, ut in homine meae humanitatis consequar quietem." *Sermo XLI*, n. 9, lines 10–11. In *De pace fidei*, c.13, n.44, p.41, lines 9–24 it is put as follows: "Nam omnes homines non nisi aeternam vitam in sua natura humana desiderant, ut se illi aeternae vitae in sua natura melius adaptent. Non appetunt homines beatitudinem, quae est ipsa aeterna vita, in alia quam propria natura; homo non vult esse nisi homo, non angelus aut alia natura; vult autem esse homo beatus, qui ultimam felicitatem assequatur. Haec autem felicitas non est nisi fructio seu unio vitae humanae cum fonte suo, unde scilicet emanat ipsa vita, et est vita divina immortalis. Hoc autem quomodo esset possibile homini, nisi in aliquo communi omnium natura ad talem unionem elevata concedatur, per quem tamquam mediatorem omnes homines ultimum desideriorum consequi possent? Et hic est via quia homo, per quem accessum habet omnis homo ad Deum, qui est finis desideriorum. Christus est ergo qui praesupponitur per omnes qui sperant ultimam felicitatem se assecuturos."

<sup>33</sup>"Non autem quietatur homo in specie sua, quae est species animalis rationalis habentis intellectum, nisi immortalis speciei suae consequatur perfectionem. Vellet igitur homo in sua humanitate, quam exire non vellet, consequi omnem perfectionem!" *Sermo XLI*, n. 8, lines 1–6.

<sup>34</sup>"Omnis enim motus clauditur terminis speciei. Quiescit enim omnis res in natura sua specifica. Species enim est caelum quoddam ambiens omnem individualement motum suae naturae. Hinc extra suum caelum non movetur quidquam, sed motus cuiusque est attingere perfectionem speciei suae, extra quam non iudicat se posse perfici. Immo omnem perfectionem iudicat in suo caelo includi." *Sermo XLI*, n. 7, lines 5–13.

<sup>35</sup>*Sermo XLI*, n. 7, 27–29.

<sup>36</sup>"Sic nec homo potest appetere, quod est alterius speciei, etiam angelus." *Sermo XLI*, n. 7, lines 30–31.

<sup>37</sup>"Et quia perfectior est vita rationalis quam sensualis, quam habent et bruta, tunc in vita rationali vellet habere perfectionem. Potius enim vellet homo non esse quam non esse animal rationale, quia non est appetibile per hominem, quod est brutum alterius speciei. Appetit igitur omnis homo in sua humanitate habere perfectam, rationalem et indeficientem vitam."

to be more learned and healthier."<sup>38</sup>

By taking his point of departure in the desire innate in human nature Cusanus has found an approach that embraces all religions. Now, let us see how he unfolds some fundamental Christian teachings out of this consensus.

### 3. Truth Determines What God Is

In this context Cusanus makes use of a correlative term: *quies*, and calls God *quies*,<sup>39</sup> that is, *rest*, or, as I would like to translate it, *fulfillment*. Happiness requires self-reflection, as the cardinal explains in *Sermo CCXI*, and this is not possible without knowing God the Father and the Son. "For the intellectual nature does not live joyfully unless it is aware of living," he explains, "and it is unable to be aware of living unless it knows the cause of its life, namely God the Father, from Whom it has life, and the Son, the Mediator through Whom it has it."<sup>40</sup> Thus, in correlation with the innate desire of human nature as such Cusanus determines what God is.<sup>41</sup> "No creature is able to think in any other way but that his creator is better than what can be thought."<sup>42</sup> Seeing God as the fulfillment, i. e. the *quies*, of human striving is something Nicholas was able to learn from Meister Eckhart. It goes without saying that as Cusanus understands it "rest" is not the opposite of movement, that is, it is not static. To the contrary, "rest" is fulfilled movement. In a marginal note in his own manuscript of Eckhart's commentary on *Genesis*, Nicholas expressly remarks: "God [is] rest and more movable than everything movable."<sup>43</sup>

### 4. Truth Determines What Christ Is

Within the same human horizon Jesus Christ is to be found. Cusanus makes this assertion with the forcefulness of an *a priori*: "If we do not find Jesus in ourselves, we shall not find him at all."<sup>44</sup> This Cusan humanism is innovative, although strange to our way of thinking today as well as being foreign

*Sermo XLI*, n. 8, lines 10–17.

<sup>38</sup>"Et cum una creatura non posset velle, quod foret alia, nisi desineret prius esse, ideo, cum non cadat desinere esse in conceptu, non potest una creatura consentire, ut sit alia. Contentatur igitur omnis creatura in esse suo tamquam tali, sine quo non esset, et non appetit aliud esse, licet in ea specie, in qua est suum esse, vellet meliori modo esse, quo hoc infra ambitum speciei possibile foret. Plato vult esse Plato, licet doctior aut sanior esse vellet; ita de reliquis." *Sermo CCIV*, n. 4, lines 10–21.

<sup>39</sup>"Quies enim Deus est." *Sermo XLI*, n. 10, lines 4–5.

<sup>40</sup>"Nam intellectualis natura non vivit delectabiliter, nisi se intelligat vivere, et non potest se intelligere vivere, nisi cognoscat causam vitae suae, scilicet Deum Patrem, a quo habet vitam, et Filium mediatorem, per quem habet." *Sermo CCXI*, n. 8, lines 4–9.

<sup>41</sup>"Sed cum nihil maius aut melius dici aut excogitari possit quam id, quod me quietare debet, scilicet vita sine corruptione, veritas sine fallacia, bonum sine omni malo, tunc dico hoc esse Deum. Deus enim est id maximum atque optimum [the critical edition has here erroneously *optimum*], quo maius et melius concipi nequit." *Sermo XLI*, n. 9, lines 12–18.

<sup>42</sup>"Neque potest aliqua creatura aliter sentire quam quod suus creator sit melior quam cogitari possit." *Sermo CCIV*, n. 4, lines 1–3.

<sup>43</sup>*Cod.Cus.* 21, fol. 15<sup>r</sup><sup>a</sup>.

<sup>44</sup>"Nisi enim in nobis invenerimus Jesum, ipsum non reperiemus." *Sermo XLI*, n. 7, lines 2–4.

to Thomas Aquinas. The cardinal point in his analysis, here again, lies in the idea of Truth. "Christ Himself is Truth, and we shall perceive the Truth in him, so that we are *in* Truth just as he *is* Truth."<sup>45</sup> Therefore, so he continues, in this state of perceiving Truth happiness occurs.<sup>46</sup>

All mankind is united, therefore, not in an explicit belief in Jesus Christ – obviously not –, but in a longing for him, regardless of one's particular religion. This is for Cusanus a universal presupposition. To summarize: "Hence, the movement of my humanity has the purpose of my attaining God in the man of my humanity. I find, therefore, in myself the man of my humanity, who is man in such a way that he is also God. And this is the man in whom alone I am able to reach fulfillment [*quietem*] in my humanity. For *quies* is God. Consequently, that man who is also God is he to whom all humans are moved in accordance with their human nature. And this is Christ Jesus blessed."<sup>47</sup>

In this way Cusanus arrives at the conclusion that "Jesus has been secretly longed for by all nations."<sup>48</sup> He is presupposed by all humans.<sup>49</sup> One has a trusting relationship with Jesus as long as one continues to seek Truth.<sup>50</sup> The relationship to Christ, in other words, arises from a need [*defectus*], *i. e.* from the failure to find what human nature is striving for.<sup>51</sup> Recapitulating, Nicholas writes in regard to "how we find Christ in ourselves" "that he is our fulfillment, bringing everything that we desire to completion and bringing our motion to rest, when in our humanity we attain in him divine life and everything desirable."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, let it be noted that in Nicholas' eyes we are dealing here not just with an abstract idea of a savior, but with the concrete, historical Jesus.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>45</sup>"Veritas est ipse, et nos in ipso veritatem apprehendemus, ut simus in veritate, sicut ipse est veritas." *Sermo XLI*, n. 12, lines 13–15. "Quae quidem veritas intellectum pascens non est nisi Verbum ipsum, in quo complicantur omnia et per quod omnia explicantur." *De pace fidei*, c. 2, n. 7, p. 9, lines 6–8.

<sup>46</sup>"Sumus igitur [...] in aeterna quiete gloriam sanctorum cum inexpressibili laetitia apprehendentes." *Sermo XLI*, n. 12, lines 17–19.

<sup>47</sup>"Hinc motus humanitatis meae est, ut in homine meae humanitatis attingam Deum. Reperio igitur in me ipso hominem humanitatis meae, qui ita est homo, quod est et Deus. Et hic est homo, in quo solum ego in mea humanitate quietem attingere valeo. Quies enim Deus est. Homo igitur ille, qui est et Deus, est ille, ad quem omnes homines secundum naturam humanitatis moventur. Et hic est Christus Jesus benedictus." *Sermo XLI*, n. 9, line 21–n. 10, line 9.

<sup>48</sup>"Hic Jesus fuit occultus desideratus omnibus gentibus." *Sermo XLI*, n. 10, lines 10–11.

<sup>49</sup>"Hinc video hunc magistrum et mediatorem, naturae humanae suprematam perfectionis et principatum tenentem, ab omnibus praesupponi." *De pace fidei*, c. 13, n. 45, p. 42, lines 10–12.

<sup>50</sup>"Id ipsum, quo vivimus, movemur et sumus, omnis rationalis humana creatura ingemiscens gemitibus inenarrabilibus desiderat, quamdiu absens est ab illa gloria fruitionis." *Sermo XLI*, n. 11, lines 15–18.

<sup>51</sup>"Defectus hominis salvarentur per Jesum, [...] verum Messiam, hoc est Christum omnem nostrum defectum adimplentem." *Sermo XLI*, n. 10, lines 27–28.

<sup>52</sup>"Doceri possumus quo modo Christum in nobis reperimus, et quod ipse est perfectio nostra omnia adimplens, quae appetimus, et motum nostrum quietans, quando nos in ipsa nostra humanitate in ipso vitam divinam et omne desideratum attingemus." *Sermo XLI*, n. 12, lines 2–7.

<sup>53</sup>"Reperimus igitur Jesum, qui filiam principis resuscitavit et mulierem a fluxu sanavit, Filium hominis, esse fratrem nostrum, primogenitum omnis creaturae, per quem nos in nostra humanitate finem pacis et quietis, terminum rationalis motus nostri spiritus attingimus." *Sermo XLI*, n. 11, lines 1–6.



With his approach Nicholas even goes so far as to claim – it may be added – that all mankind believes in the resurrection. “All humans share the single teaching that our soul is immortal and that even when a human being has died temporally, he will resurrect.”<sup>54</sup> According to Thomas Aquinas the resurrection is natural in regard to what it is, it is supernatural in regard to its actually taking place.<sup>55</sup>

## 5. Truth Determines What Faith Is

Truth is even more fundamental than faith. I find it surprising that neither in *Sermo CCIV* on the feast of Michael the Archangel nor in the one following on the feast of All Saints is there mention of faith. However, in the earlier sermon already mentioned on St. Martin’s feast Nicholas does add prominently a rather extensive treatment of faith. Since this occurs within an exposition of the three theological virtues, it may be presumed that he has the full Christian meaning in mind, and not merely a general notion of faith. And yet he defines faith in this context in the most general sense. He associates faith with movement and declares that faith is that which sets something in motion; it is the dynamic source of movement. Everything that we attain, he says, is reached by faith. We perceive nothing at all if we are not moved by faith.<sup>56</sup> The same absolutely general meaning of the term is then applied to the salvific faith in Christ.

The teaching of Thomas Aquinas on faith and truth – it may be noted – complements the Cusan teaching. Aquinas defines the object of faith as Truth itself [*veritas prima*] *qua* unseen.<sup>57</sup> According to him everything in human life, all desires, all actions, have their goal in the knowledge of Truth.<sup>58</sup>

On the basis of Truth the unity of all religions is thus established by Cusanus: “Since Truth is one and cannot not be grasped by every free intellect, all diversity of religions will lead to one orthodox faith.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup>“Omnium hominum est una sententia animam nostram esse immortalem, atque hominem, etiamsi temporaliter moriatur, resurrecturum.” *Sermo XXVIII*, n. 3, lines 6–8. In *De pace fidei*, c. XIII, n. 42, p. 40, lines 4–8 Cusanus only claims that “almost every religion” believes in the resurrection.

<sup>55</sup>Cf. *Summa contra gentiles*, IV, cap. 81, n. 14.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. *Sermo XLI*, n. 13–14.

<sup>57</sup>“Veritas prima est obiectum fidei secundum quod ipsa est non visa.” *Summa theologiae*, II–II, q. 4, a. 1. Cf. *ibid.*, q. 1, a. 6, ad 2: “ut sit non visum”; q. 1, a. 1c; *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 8; *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 25, n. 10. “Veritas prima, quae est fidei obiectum, est finis omnium desideriorum et actionum nostrarum.” *Ibid.*, q. 4, a. 2, ad 3.

<sup>58</sup>“Ordinantur igitur artes practicae ad speculativas, et similiter omnis humana operatio ad speculationem intellectus, sicut ad finem.” *Summa contra gentiles*, III, c. 25, n. 9. “Finis igitur intellectus est finis omnium actionum humanarum [...]. Est igitur ultimus finis totius hominis, et omnium operationum et desideriorum eius, cognoscere primum verum, quod est Deus.” *Ibid.*, n. 10.

<sup>59</sup>“Quae cum sit una, et non possit non capi per omnem liberum intellectum, perducetur omnis religionum diversitas in unam fidem orthodoxam.” *De pace fidei*, c. 3, n. 8, p. 10, lines 4–6.

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## 6. Truth Unites Religions

The result of this procedure is the establishment of a kind of tolerance that is not especially common today, being quite far removed from timid or irenic indifferentism as well as from the exalted pinnacle of the uninvolved enlightened. Nicholas abides by his Christian convictions, but he interprets them in a way that embraces the convictions of all honest thinkers. He does this, one could say, by climbing to a high degree of abstraction, to a viewpoint, namely, where he can speak of Truth itself as distinct from truths, where truths are seen in the light of Truth. Truth – not truths – frees us from intolerance. By pushing the intellect to an extreme point, Nicholas of Cusa developed an intellectual Christology, but this is not to say, it may be remarked, that he turned theology into philosophy, as Kurt Flasch wants to have it. Cusanus himself considered his position to apply not just to religious believers, but also to philosophers.<sup>60</sup> "The Cusan transformation of ecclesiastical faith into intellectual faith, this 'intellectualizing of faith,'" <sup>61</sup> to quote Flasch, is not what Cusanus called philosophy. Be that as it may, by climbing to a high level of abstraction Nicholas of Cusa was in a position to perceive, with one and the same vision, the depth of Christianity and the unity of religions.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. *Sermo CCIV*, n. 5, lines 20–28.

<sup>61</sup>"Die cusanische Umwandlung des Kirchenglaubens in einen Vernunftglauben, diese 'Intellektualisierung des Glaubens' [...]." K. Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung: Vorlesungen zur Einführung in seine Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1998), 373. Cusanus himself consistently denied that his thought was philosophy.