

# Nicholas of Cusa

(1401–1464)

## 1. His Life

- also called Nicolaus Cusanus
- philosopher, theologian, mathematician, cardinal
- born in Kues, situated along the Moselle River across from Bernkastel (today one city, Bernkastel-Kues).
- one of the four children of Johan Krebs (or Cryfftz), a prominent shipper, and Katharina Römer Krebs.
- 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.
- contact with Italian humanists as well as with the latest developments in mathematical and astronomical thinking
- 1425 University of Cologne
- 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.
- 1432 member of Council of Basel
- revision of the church calendar (*De reparatione kalendarii*)
- Nicholas was named by the minority party to the three-man delegation which, with the pope's blessing, sailed to Constantinople in August 1437.

- 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.
- 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.
- He died on 11 August 1464, in the Italian town of Todi, while en route from Rome to Ancona.

## 2. Writings

*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 beryllo* (1458), *De matematica perfectione* (1458), *De aequalitate* (1459), *De principio*, (1459), *Aurea propositio in matematicis* (1459), *De possess* (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), *De apice theoriae* (1464) and about 200 sermons.

- English translations: [www.hoye.de/cus](http://www.hoye.de/cus)

## 3. Teaching

- regarding political theory:  
 "Therefore since all are by nature free, every governance – whether it consists in a written law or living law in the person of a prince ... can only come from the agreement and consent of the subjects. For if men are by nature equal in power and equally free, the true properly ordered authority of one common ruler who is their equal in power can only

be constituted by the election and consent of the others, and law is also established by consent.”<sup>1</sup>

- He taught that the universe is infinite and that the earth is not its center and is itself in motion.
- All human knowledge remains “conjectural” (cf. *De coniecturis*)
- Cusanus called man a “human god”, a “second god”, a “god Manqué” [*deus occasionatus*]

## 4. Learned Ignorance

- *On Learned Ignorance* [*De docta ignorantia*]:

“Chapter One: How it is that knowing is not-knowing.

We see that by the gift of God there is present in all things a natural desire to exist in the best manner in which the condition of each thing’s nature permits this. And [we see that all things] act toward this end and have instruments adapted thereto. They have an innate sense of judgment which serves the purpose of knowing. [They have this] in order that their desire not be in vain but be able to attain rest in that [respective] object which is desired by the propensity of each thing’s own nature. But if perchance affairs turn out otherwise, this [outcome] must happen by accident—as when sickness misleads taste or an opinion misleads reason. Wherefore, we say that a sound, free intellect knows to be true that which is apprehended by its affectionate embrace. (The intellect insatiably desires to attain unto the true through scrutinizing all things by means of its innate faculty of inference.) Now, that from which no sound mind can withhold assent is, we have no doubt, most true. However, all those who make an investigation judge the uncertain proportionally, by means of a comparison with what is taken to be certain.

Therefore, every inquiry is comparative and uses the means of comparative relation. Now, when, the things investigated are able to be compared by means of a close proportional tracing back to what is taken to be [certain], our judgment apprehends easily; but when we need many intermediate steps, difficulty arises and hard work is required. These points are recognized in mathematics, where the earlier propositions are quite easily traced back to the first and most evident principles but where later propositions [are traced back] with more difficulty because [they are traced back] only through the mediation of the earlier ones. Therefore, every inquiry proceeds by means of a comparative relation, whether an easy or a difficult one. Hence, the

<sup>1</sup> Nicolaus Cusanus, *De concordantia catholica*, ed. G. Kallen (*Nicolai de cusa opera omnia*, Bd. XIV [Hamburg, 1963]) II, 14, nr. 127.

infinite, qua infinite, is unknown; for it escapes all comparative relation. But since *comparative relation* indicates an agreement in some one respect and, at the same time, indicates an otherness, it cannot be understood independently of number. Accordingly, number encompasses all things related comparatively. Therefore, number, which is a necessary condition of comparative relation, is present not only in quantity but also in all things which in any manner whatsoever can agree or differ either substantially or accidentally. Perhaps for this reason Pythagoras deemed all things to be constituted and understood through the power of numbers.

Both the precise combinations in corporeal things and the congruent relating of known to unknown surpass human reason to such an extent that Socrates seemed to himself to know nothing except that he did not know. And the very wise Solomon maintained that all things are difficult and unexplainable in words. And a certain other man of divine spirit says that wisdom and the seat of understanding are hidden from the eyes of all the living. Even the very profound Aristotle, in his *First Philosophy*, asserts that in things most obvious by nature such difficulty occurs for us as for a night owl which is trying to look at the sun. Therefore, if the foregoing points are true, then since the desire in us is not in vain, assuredly we desire to know that we do not know. If we can fully attain unto this [knowledge of our ignorance], we will attain unto learned ignorance. For a man—even one very well versed in learning—will attain unto nothing more perfect than to be found to be most learned in the ignorance which is distinctively his. The more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be. Unto this end I have undertaken the task of writing a few things about learned ignorance.”

## 5. Searching for God

- *On the Pursuit of Wisdom [De venatione sapientiae]*
- *On Seeking God [De quaerendo Deum]*
- “Let us now determine whether the name ‘Theos,’ or ‘God,’ offers us assistance in these matters. For the name ‘Theos’ is not that name of God which excels every concept.<sup>7</sup> For that [name] which cannot be conceived, remains ineffable. For to express is to externalize an inward concept by means of words or other befiguring signs. Therefore, the name of Him whose likeness is not conceived is not known. Hence, ‘Theos’ is the name of God only insofar as God is sought, by human beings, in this world. So let him-who-seeks take careful account of the fact that in the name ‘Theos’ there is enfolded a certain way-of-seeking whereby God is found, so that He can be groped for. ‘Theos’ is derived from ‘theoro,’ which means ‘I see’ and ‘I hasten.’<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the seeker ought to hasten by means of sight, so that he can attain unto God, who sees all things. Accordingly, vision bears a likeness to the pathway by means of which a seeker ought to advance. Consequently, in the presence of the eye

of intellectual vision we must magnify the nature of sensible vision and construct, from that nature, a ladder of ascent.”

## 6. Divine Names

- the Non-Other [*non-aliud*]
- Actualized-Possibility [*potest*]
- Possibility itself [*posse ipsum*]

– aus: *De apice theoriae*:

“Peter: I feel sheepish because of my inexperience. Nevertheless, encouraged by your graciousness, I ask what new thing it is which has entered your meditative reflection this Easter season. I thought you had already perfected the whole of the speculation that has been set forth in so many of your different manuscripts.

Cardinal: If the Apostle Paul, who was caught up unto the third heaven, did not even then comprehend the Incomprehensible, no one will ever be content not continually and insistently to seek to comprehend better Him who is greater than all comprehension.

Peter: You are seeking what?

Cardinal: You are right.

Peter: I ask you a question, and you make fun of me. When I ask what you are seeking, you answer: ‘You are right.’ Yet, I am asserting nothing but, rather, am asking.

Cardinal: When you said ‘You are seeking what’ (*quid*), you spoke correctly because I am seeking something (*quid*). Whoever seeks seeks something. For if he were not seeking something, then surely he would not be seeking. Therefore, like all scholars, I seek something, because I exceedingly desire to know what whatness itself is, i.e., what quiddity itself is, which is being sought so intently.”

- “God is the absolute presupposition of everything.”<sup>2</sup>
  - “Every question about God presupposes God.”<sup>3</sup>
  - “God is what is presupposed in every doubt.”<sup>4</sup>

## 7. Coincidentia oppositorum

<sup>2</sup> Deus est ipsa absoluta praesuppositio omnium. *Idiota de sapientia*, II, n. 30, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Omnis quaestio de Deo praesupponit quaesitum. *Ibid.*, n. 29, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Deus est, quod in omni dubio praesupponitur. *Sermo LXXIII* (Codex V. 2. G 72/1, Öffentliche Studienbibliothek, Salzburg, fol. 174<sup>r</sup>).

## 8. Christianity and Other Religions

- *On the Peace of Faith* [*De pace fidei*]
  - written after the fall of Constantinople.
- "On religion in a variety of rites" [*una religio in rituum varietate*]

## 9. Mystical Theology

- Cusanus was not a mystic himself.
- *De visione Dei*
- Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Mystische Theologie*
- intellectual
- a leap over the "wall of paradise"
- "No one can see God mystically unless in the darkness of the coincidence."
- "Hence, I experience the necessity for me to enter into obscuring mist and to admit the coincidence of opposites, beyond all capacity of reason, and to seek truth where impossibility appears. And when— beyond that [rational capacity] and beyond every most lofty intellectual ascent, as well—I come to that which is unknown to every intellect and which every intellect judges to be very far removed from the truth, there You are present, my God, You who are Absolute Necessity. And the darker and more impossible that obscuring haze of impossibility is known to be, the more truly the Necessity shines forth and the less veiledly it draws near and is present.

I thank You, my God, for disclosing to me that there is no other way of approaching You than this way which seems to all men, including the most learned philosophers, altogether inaccessible and impossible. For You have shown me that You cannot be seen elsewhere than where impossibility appears and stands in the way. And You, O Lord, who are the Nourishment of the full-grown, have encouraged me to do violence to myself, because impossibility coincides with necessity. And I have found the abode wherein You dwell unveiledly—an abode surrounded by the coincidence of contradictories. And [this coincidence] is the wall of Paradise, wherein You dwell. The gate of this wall is guarded by a most lofty rational spirit; unless this spirit is vanquished the entrance will not be accessible. Therefore, on the other side of the coincidence of contradictories You can be seen—but not at all on this side. If, then, O Lord, in Your sight impossibility is necessity, then there is nothing which Your sight does not see."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> De visione Dei, chap. 9.