

# Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition

*Essays in Honor of Gerald Christianson*

*Edited by*

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## Faith as *Poiesis* in Nicholas of Cusa's Pursuit of Wisdom<sup>1</sup>

*Jason Aleksander*

Among the many metaphors that Nicholas uses to explain the conjectural process that is involved in all varieties of human intellection, I am partial to one that he offers in the *Compendium*, a work written in 1464, near the end of his life, and in which he summarizes his psychology and epistemology. In the first part of this passage, Nicholas begins with a metaphor for the process by which the material and temporal processes of sensation provide content for intellectual operations.

A completely developed animal in which there is *both* sense and intellect is to be likened to a geographer who dwells in a city that has the five gateways of the five senses. Through these gateways messengers from all over the world enter and report on the entire condition of the world ... [And the geographer] endeavors with all his effort to keep all the gateways open and to continually receive the reports of ever-new messengers and to make his description ever more accurate. At length, after he has made in his city a complete delineation of the perceptible world, then in order not to lose it, he reduces it to a well-ordered and proportionally measured map.<sup>2</sup>

1 I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to present versions of this essay in three different venues in 2015: (1) the 21st Annual Colloquium of the Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale, on the topic of "Tolerance and Concepts of Otherness in Medieval Philosophy" at Maynooth University, Ireland; (2) a satellite session of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy at the American Catholic Philosophical Association annual conference in Boston, Mass.; and (3) at a colloquium of the Department of Philosophy at Saint Xavier University in Chicago, Ill. I am grateful both to the organizers of these events and to the many interlocutors who provided early feedback on this work. I also would like to express my gratitude to Don Duclow and Meredith Ziebart for insightful criticisms that have encouraged me to shore up weaknesses in the argument.

2 *Compendium* 8, § 22-23 (h XI/3, 17-18; 1398). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are those of Jasper Hopkins in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: 2001). All Latin references are to *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heigelbergensis* (Hamburg: 1932-2005) (= h) as reproduced by the Cusanus Portal of the Institute for Cusanus Research at the University

Although this portion of the passage depicts the root of knowledge as the relatively passive reception of sensation (albeit a passivity that is also an activity insofar as the geographer must endeavor “with all his effort to keep all the gateways open”), the metaphor also suggests that the first activity of the mind, properly speaking, is an act of abstraction that constructs a symbolic order, the purpose of which is to convey an understanding of the external world. At this point in the passage, Nicholas turns his attention from the relationship between sensation and mental representation to a reflection on how intellect uses mental content to seek to transcend rational limits in the understanding of that which lies beyond “the wall of paradise.”<sup>3</sup>

And he turns toward the map; and, in addition, he dismisses the messengers, closes the gateways, and turns his inner sight toward the Creator-of-the-world, who is none of all those things about which the geographer has learned from the messengers, but who is the Maker and Cause of them all. He considers this Maker to stand antecedently in relation to the whole world as he himself, as geographer, stands in relation to his map. And from the relation of the map to the real world he beholds in himself, qua geographer, the Creator of the world when he contemplates the reality (*veritatem*) by means of its image (*in imagine*) and contemplates, by means of its sign, that itself which is signified. (*Compendium* 8, § 23 [h XI/3, 18-19; 1398-99])

While the first part of the passage emphasizes how knowledge of the world involves a representational activity that is rooted in sensation, the second part of the passage, however, suggests that the highest function of intellection is located in—or is a byproduct of—the attempt to comprehend the nature of divine creation on the basis of an analogy to our own *poietic* endeavors. That is, while the first part of the passage emphasizes a creative dimension of the process by which we derive knowledge of the world through our own representational activities, the second part of the passage seems to indicate that our deepest intellectual insights require that we also form a representation to ourselves of the very process by which the divine intellect created us in its own image. In other words, we best pursue wisdom by understanding our own knowing to be

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of Trier (<http://www.cusanus-portal.de/>). Citations will be to titles, parts, chapters, and sections, followed in parentheses by volumes and page numbers in h and page numbers in the cited translation. Part, chapter, and section references for all works follow those of h, even when these differ from those employed in the translations.

3 See *De visione Dei* 9, § 37 (h VI, 35; 697).

an imitation of the divine intellect's knowledge of the created world (of which we and our knowing are also a part).

Given Nicholas' situation in the intellectual climate of his time, it is worth noting that this epistemology flattens the traditional Aristotelian divisions between different species of intellectual disposition as pathways to wisdom<sup>4</sup> so that, for instance, artistic skill is no less a form of knowing than scientific knowledge—or, rather, Nicholas treats all intellectual activities as both *mimetic* and *poietic* insofar as they involve a process that is both assimilative and creative. There are many passages in Nicholas' prior treatises that bear out this reading of the passage from the *Compendium*, but one indication that Nicholas does not denigrate artistic knowing relative to theoretical knowledge is indicated both in the content of as well as in the very fact that he frequently resorts to metaphors to articulate his understanding of the conjectural process.<sup>5</sup> For instance, at the outset of the *Idiota de mente*, the philosopher is brought to an underground dwelling near the Temple of Eternity where he is introduced to an *idiota* (layman) who engaged in the artistic activity of carving a spoon out of wood (1, § 54 [h V, 88; 534]). Needless to say, in Nicholas' text it is the *idiota* who will lead the philosopher in the pursuit of wisdom rather than the other way around, and a discussion of the crafting of the spoon becomes an early tool in this quest (2, § 62–64 [h V, 95–99; 538–39]).<sup>6</sup>

4 Aristotle stipulates in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.3 that there are five habits of true thinking: *nous*, *epistêmê*, *technê*, *phronêsis*, and *sophia* (intellection, scientific knowing, artistic knowledge, practical wisdom, and speculative wisdom). Crucially, although Aristotle is explicit in *Topics* 1.11 that dialectical inquiry begins with the interrogation of *doxa* (or, more precisely, of *paradoxa*), he does not treat *doxa* (opinion, belief, or custom) as a habit of true thinking, since these may be true or false. As for the five habits of true thinking, Aristotle (along with his scholastic interpreters) does maintain hierarchical relationships between these. In the first place, of these five, Aristotle only explicitly identifies *phronêsis* and *sophia* as virtues. Moreover, Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.13 that, although *phronêsis* is necessary for *sophia* and gives orders to the soul for the sake of obtaining *sophia*, it does not give orders to *sophia*. I will argue below that Nicholas dissolves this hierarchy except where wisdom (*sapientia*) is concerned.

5 The relationship between metaphor and conjecture in Nicholas' thought receives extensive discussion in Clyde Lee Miller's contribution for this volume.

6 See K. Meredith Ziebart's essay in this volume for a more detailed analysis of this passage, which concludes by noting that although "it is fair to see in this discussion an emphasis on—even valorization of—human creativity ... this passage does not imply [that] humans invent the forms which they strive through activities like spoonmaking to perfect" {p. ■}. This interpretation of the spoonmaking metaphor is thus rendered in support of Ziebart's convincing argument that although "the mind creates concepts, that creation is fundamentally an act of assimilation" {p. ■}. It should be noted, then, that although I generally agree with Ziebart's reading of Nicholas' epistemology, my essay will tend to emphasize the creative (or *poietic*) rather than the assimilative (or *mimetic*) aspect of human intellection as it pertains

Moreover, especially in later works, such as *De ludo globi* (1462–63) and *De venatione sapientiae* (1462–63), artistic mastery is offered as the paradigm on which Nicholas appears to understand scientific knowing, since mastery in the case of the sciences is no less than in the case of the arts defined as the ability to produce a harmonious ratio that, at best, only represents and approximates the formal essence or mode-of-being of the object of intellection. For instance, as he puts it in a well-known passage from *De ludo globi*,

The soul by its own inventiveness creates new instruments in order to discern and to know [in the way that] Ptolemy invented the astrolabe, Orpheus invented the lyre, and so on. Inventors created these instruments not from something extrinsic but from their own minds. For they unfolded their conceptions in a [sensible] material. (*De ludo globi* II, § 94 (h IX, 117; 1232))

Implicitly, the geographer metaphor offers a similar case, and interestingly, that it constructs a four-term proportional as its intellectual tool suggests that Nicholas may regard all forms of intellection to be simply more or less explicit constructions of ratios of this sort. In any case, throughout § 15–19 of *De aequalitate* (h X/1 17–26; 851–53) Nicholas addresses the *mimetic* and *poietic* processes that are at work in all mental activities—a discussion that culminates in the following example:

[The situation is] as if grammar, considered in and of itself, were an intellect that knew itself in terms of its own precise *ratio*, or definition. In that *ratio*, it would know all that could be known [about grammar] or that could be externally spoken, or expressed, or set forth. For that *ratio* would encompass, universally and particularly, all such things, howsoever knowable and expressible. Consequently, nothing could be said grammatically that would not have to be said in accordance with that *ratio* and in accordance with the expressibility that coincided with that *ratio*. Therefore, every expression would go forth into the perceptible world in accordance with its own *ratio* and its own expressibility, both of which were—in the *ratio* of the grammar—the *ratio* of the grammar ... And comparably with what was said about grammar, elevate yourself to absolute mastery, in which every art and every science are enfolded; and in

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to Nicholas' understanding of the relationships between faith and religious beliefs in the pursuit of wisdom.

like manner note that the *ratio* of that mastery is just as you have heard regarding the *ratio* of grammar.<sup>7</sup>

As a consequence of this epistemological/hermeneutic theory, Nicholas confronts us with the question of how our beliefs and social customs convey or manifest the deeper intellectual truths out of which they are produced. On the one hand, because our mental activities depend upon the representational process that generates a symbolic order through which we understand the world, our understanding is largely beholden to the sorts of conventional signs that allow us to communicate with one another about the world.<sup>8</sup> Yet, on the other hand, we certainly have reason to be suspicious of the potential for beliefs and rites to stimulate the hunt for wisdom because, *especially* when the stakes are high, we are not always attentive to the arbitrariness of the relationship between our beliefs, signs, and rites, and the truths that these manifest. This could not be clearer than it is in the conclusion of the archangel's lament that sets in motion the dialogue of *De pace fidei*:

It is a characteristic of the earthly human condition that a longstanding custom which is taken as having become nature is defended as truth. Thus not insignificant dissensions occur when each community prefers its faith to another. Therefore come to our aid you who alone are able. For this rivalry exists for the sake of you whom alone they revere in everything that all seem to worship.<sup>9</sup>

But, if it is the case that religious rites and beliefs (and other species of custom and belief as well) are often obstacles rather than tools in our pursuit of

7 *De aequalitate* § 18-19 (h X/1, 23-25; 852-53). Translation altered where Hopkins renders various cases of *ratio* as "form."

8 Nicholas articulates this point in various works, but the first few chapters of the *Compendium* provide a succinct summary of his view. In support of the claims above, consider the following passage: "Signs which have been arbitrarily and conventionally instituted for designating [objects], are made known (to those to whom the convention is foreign) only by means of a contrivance or instruction. And since all signs by means of which knowledge is to be handed down must be known to both teacher and students, the first instruction will be about a knowledge of such signs. This instruction is first because without it no [knowledge] can be handed down and because in the perfection of the knowledge of signs there is included all [knowledge] that can be handed down" (2, § 5 [h XI/3, 6; 1388]).

9 1, § 1.4-5 (h VII, 6). All translations of *De pace fidei* are from the text provided in James E. Biechler and H. Lawrence Bond, eds., *Nicholas of Cusa on Interreligious Harmony: Text, Concordance, and Translation of De pace fidei* (Lewiston, NY: 1990). Pagination in the translation follows h.

wisdom, then we are left with a difficult question concerning the nature of the relationships between true faith as a path to the highest wisdom and the ways in which diverse religious beliefs and practices function as potential manifestations of that true faith.

To draw out Nicholas' peculiar understanding of the relationships between religious beliefs/rites and the true faith that he regards as the only pathway to the highest wisdom, this essay proceeds in three steps. First, to describe Nicholas of Cusa's basic understanding of the relationship between diverse rites/beliefs and faith, I will provide an overview of how Nicholas explores these in *De pace fidei*. My main intention in this section of the paper will be to provide a preliminary definition of faith by identifying the principles by which Nicholas attempts to adjudicate the question of the legitimacy of various diverse religious practices. In the second section, I will turn to some of Nicholas' later speculative works to explore how Nicholas' psychology and philosophy of history undergird his approach to the question of the relationship between rites/beliefs, faith, and the pursuit of wisdom. In this section, I will argue that, for Nicholas, in all of our mental activities—whether practical or theoretical; whether artistic, scientific, or religious—the soul poietically produces even while it also discerns, perceives, or assimilates harmonies in its self-constituting activities. In the concluding section, I will return to some lingering problems encountered in *De pace fidei* in order to grapple with the practical implications of Nicholas of Cusa's understanding of true faith as a habit of mind that makes use of religious rites or beliefs in a way that sustains or develops one's potential for *poietic*, self-creating activities.

## I      **The Relationship between Faith, Religious Rites, and the Pursuit of Wisdom in *De pace fidei***

*De pace fidei* is certainly not the only work in which Nicholas discusses the relationships between religion, faith, and the pursuit of wisdom; it is, however, arguably the most poignant, since it was written in 1453 in direct response to the fall of Constantinople—a fact that is revealed in the opening sentence of the work:

After the brutal deeds recently committed by the Turkish ruler at Constantinople were reported to a certain man, who had once seen the sites of those regions, he was inflamed by a zeal for God; with many sighs he implored the Creator of all things that in his mercy he restrain the persecution, raging more than ever because of different religious rites.



Yet while the reader of *De pace fidei* is initially encouraged to think of the work as a response to that specific historical event, Nicholas quickly moves on to reframe the rest of the dialogue by taking it out of the temporal realm altogether. Immediately following the opening lament, Nicholas begins to construct a literary space in which he offers an imagined discussion that takes place at an “intellectual height” (1, § 2 [h VII, 4])—or, as he puts it later, in “the heaven of reason” (19, § 68 [h VII, 62])—between the Incarnate Word (*Verbum/Logos*<sup>10</sup>), St Peter, St Paul, and seventeen (identified) “eminent men of this world” (3, § 9 [h VII, 10]) representing diverse provincial customs. In all, the seventeen representatives with speaking parts include a Greek, an Italian, an Arab, an Indian, a Chaldean, a Jew, a Scythian, a Frenchman, a Persian, a Syrian, a Spaniard, a German, a Tartar, an Armenian, a Bohemian, an Englishman, and, although he is only given one sentence in the entire *De pace fidei*, a Turk (see 4, § 47 [h VII, 44]).

Throughout this work, Nicholas' explicit aim is to argue for the thesis that, by means of interreligious dialogue, “a single easy harmony could be found and through it a lasting peace established by appropriate and true means” between the diverse religions of the world (1, § 1 [h VII, 4]). As should already be clear from the introduction to this essay, Nicholas treats all of our mental acts—including all acts of signification—as processes of intellection. It is for this reason that Nicholas regards all religious rites and doctrines as special cases of the ways in which all mental habits may be regarded as the contracted signs of the same unified truth that is presupposed as their transcendent origin. The trouble, of course, is that, as we have seen from the archangel's lament, in the case of diverse religious rites and beliefs, the worldly manifestations of this presupposed truth are often sources of conflict, ignorance, and servitude rather than of free, harmonious self-knowing.

As I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> also worth noting is that the “appropriate and true means” that Nicholas has in mind for establishing peace in the world seem to be qualified by his implicit admission that only those who are “vigorous in intellect” are capable of understanding that “there is one religion and worship, which is presupposed in all the diversity of rites” (6, § 16, [h VII, 16]).

10 In *De pace fidei*, Nicholas typically signifies Christ with *Verbum*. But in 10, § 27 (h VII, 28-29), for instance, Nicholas makes explicit the notion that, in this sense, *Verbum* should be understood as identical to *Logos*: “Reason, which is the *Logos* or Word [*Verbum*], emanates from that which speaks it so that when the Omnipotent speaks the Word, those things which are enfolded in the Word are made in reality.”

11 “The Problem of Temporality in the Literary Framework of Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei*,” *Symposion: Theoretical and Applied Inquiries in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 1, 2 (2014), 135-45.

Therefore, Nicholas also seems to admit that the “single easy harmony” can be achieved only under the condition that there are, simultaneously among the diverse religions of the world, enlightened rulers or prophets who recognize, encourage, and participate in dialogue. And, moreover, it would only be under the peaceful conditions established by these enlightened rulers and prophets that there would also be good reason for the hope that reason might lead “all diversity of religions ... to one orthodox faith” (3, § 8 [h VII, 10]).<sup>12</sup>

In part because of these hints that Nicholas himself had misgivings about the practical efficacy of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue,<sup>13</sup> it is difficult to square Nicholas’ explicit attempts to reconcile his own apparent presuppositions that, on the one hand, all religious rites and beliefs are manifestations of the one true faith underlying them all and his insistence that, on the other hand, some specific rites or beliefs—e.g., baptism and belief in the possibility of individual immortality—are so intimately associated with the one transcendentally unified faith that they are not merely optional but are, rather, required for entrance into the one true faith. In fact, there is a fundamental ambiguity in *De pace fidei*’s deployment of terminology concerning the relationships between rites/beliefs/practices, religion/religions, and faith/faiths. As I have noted above, 1, § 4-5 (h VII, 6) seems to imply that there are multiple faiths, since particular political communities favor their own faiths to that of others. However, in another formula cited above (3, § 8 [h VII, 10]), Nicholas emphasizes that the dialogue seeks to identify and/or produce a unified, orthodox faith (*unam fidem orthodoxam*) that is expressed through a diversity of religions (*religionum diversitas*). But the formula that seems to guide Nicholas’

12 In relation to the rhetorical strategies of *De pace fidei* and other works, see especially the discussions of Nicholas’ reliance on a conception of the methods of “manuduction” (leading by the hand) and *interpretatio pia* in James E. Biechler, “A New Face toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia,” in *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom*, eds. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: 1991), pp. 185-202; Biechler, “Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*, eds. Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (New York: 2004), pp. 270-96; and Gergely Tibor Bakos, *On Faith, Rationality, and the Other in the Late Middle Ages: A Study of Nicholas of Cusa’s Manuductive Approach to Islam* (Eugene: 2011).

13 Although the evidence of Nicholas’ epistolary communication with Juan de Segovia suggests that Nicholas did believe that some variety of interreligious dialogue could serve as a practical and expedient means of achieving peace, Nicholas in no way suggests that the specific methods one should employ ought to be modeled on the fictional conversation that is depicted in *De pace fidei*. Indeed, as Biechler pointed out, in his 1454 letter to Segovia Nicholas explicitly recommended that the Christian side of any interreligious conferences “be placed in the hands of influential laymen rather than priests because, he said, the Turks would prefer these” (“A New Face toward Islam,” p. 200).

usage most frequently in *De pace fidei* occurs in 6, § 16, (h VII, 16)—also cited above—where Nicholas seems to maintain that one religion and worship (*una est religio et cultus*) is presupposed by the diversity of rites (*diversitate rituum*).

In other words, it is not entirely clear whether Nicholas intends to maintain that there is one faith or many faiths, nor is it clear whether it is one religion or many that align with a true or orthodox faith. Perhaps he means that there is only one special configuration of rites that can be considered an “orthodox faith.” If so, then perhaps he means that, among all the various religions, there can be only one religion that maximally manifests or produces this orthodox faith. And yet, if faith is also to be understood as a mental disposition that orients us toward wisdom, then it does not seem to me that Nicholas would wish to maintain that only a single orthodox faith has the capacity to nurture that pursuit. For this reason, I will call “true faith” any variety of faith, whether orthodox or not, that orients the intellect toward wisdom. True faith, then, is a “faith seeking understanding,” to borrow Anselm’s formula.

Even if *De pace fidei*’s terminology governing the relationship between religion and faith is murky, what is clear is that the fundamental problem of *De pace fidei* is to adjudicate the question of the relative legitimacy of various diverse rites and religious beliefs as tools for the development of true faith. Consequently, in this essay, simply for the purposes of eliminating more complicated expressions that would require awkward references to “rites and beliefs,” I will sometimes refer to clusters of temporal religious rites and beliefs as “religions” and so will concern myself with the question of the legitimacy of various religions as collections of particular rites and beliefs that arise in different historical circumstances. Thus, part of my intention is to try to identify a consistent definition of “true faith” by reference to the question of the principles by which Nicholas attempts to adjudicate the question of the legitimacy of diverse religions.

In any case, what is both troubling and interesting about these ambiguities in *De pace fidei*’s terminology is that, by employing them in an effort to establish principles for adjudicating the question of the legitimacy of diverse religions, the text seems to be held in tension between its apologetic aims and its ecumenical ones. For instance, Nicholas’ interpreters are generally in agreement that the manuductive process by which the representatives of Islam are led to agreement with the Word and its apostolic representatives is, at the very least, open to criticism—especially if we read *De pace fidei* in light of the less conciliatory *Cribratio Alkorani*.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the text’s treatment of Judaism is

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14 See, however, John Monfasani’s essay in this volume, where a case is made for the claim that *De pace fidei* is less conciliatory than *Cribratio Alkorani*.

hardly innocent of the sort of apologetic excesses that should make most contemporary academic theologians blush. Even leaving aside Nicholas' record as a papal legate,<sup>15</sup> it is difficult to square Nicholas' apparent ecumenism with the fact that the imagined discourse of *De pace fidei* denies the representative of Judaism the one thing that every other participant achieves. For, when the Jewish interlocutor is depicted as reluctant to acknowledge and accept the mystery of Incarnation, the Persian points out that "it will be more difficult to bring the Jews than others to this belief for they admit nothing expressly about Christ." Even more telling, to this remark, Peter simply responds:

[T]hey have all these things in their scriptures about Christ; but following the literal sense they [refuse] to understand (*intelligere nolunt*). Nevertheless, this resistance of the Jews will not impede concord. For they are few and will not be able by arms to disturb the whole world. (12, § 41 [h VII, 39], my emendation)<sup>16</sup>

In other words, on the one hand, *De pace fidei* appears to offer a definition of faith that acknowledges different religions as points of legitimate access. On the other hand, the text is also haunted by its apologetic aims insofar as it regards other religions as true only to the extent that their rites point to the superior mode of faith that is manifested by Christianity. But held in tension between these two impulses, the text does not offer sufficient guidance about the grounds for the legitimacy of particular rites in particular hermeneutic and political contexts. Ultimately, the logic seems to be that non-Christian rites may be preferred in some particular political contexts because they are expedient for producing the sort of peace that would be required to cultivate other virtues and thereby lead to a greater likelihood of conversion to Christianity. Consequently, the doctrines that receive the greatest degree of discussion are those that Nicholas regards as most significant to the intellectual content of Christianity—namely, rites and beliefs concerned with the Trinity, Incarnation, and the possibility of individual immortality. But beyond this generality,

15 For a discussion of Nicholas' legate decrees against Jews, see Thomas M. Izbicki, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Jews," in *Conflict and Reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. Inigo Bocken (Leiden: 2004), pp. 119-30.

16 In light of St Peter's comment here as well as what I take to be Nicholas' interpretation of the Jewish practice *Kiddush HaShem* in 15, § 53 (h VII, 50), I have argued in other contexts that Nicholas' anti-Jewish sentiments constitute a betrayal of his own apologetic strategy in *De pace fidei*. See "'But following the literal sense, the Jews refuse to understand:' Hermeneutic Conflicts in the *De pace fidei*," *American Cusanus Society Newsletter* 31 (2014), 13-19.

Nicholas leaves open the question of how to evaluate the legitimacy of other particular rites.

For instance, Nicholas' depiction of St Paul seems to waver considerably on the question of circumcision in *De pace fidei* § 16.60 (h VII, 55-56). When the Tartar expresses "grave doubts" that the Tartars will accept circumcision, at first Paul says that "accepting circumcision has no bearing on the truth of salvation" because there can be salvation without it. Next, Paul allows that even those who acknowledge that circumcision is not necessary for salvation are not condemned on account of circumcision provided that they maintain true faith. But then Paul provides arguments that suggest that, for the sake of peace, either the minority should give up the practice to be in conformity with the majority or the majority should conform itself to the minority in receiving circumcision. And finally, he concludes that, since it does not seem likely that either party will conform to the rites of the other, both parties should simply tolerate one another's rites.

Notwithstanding that this does not address the Tartar's bafflement that any Christians would willfully practice circumcision, Paul's answer also depends upon a fabricated scenario in which both parties tolerate one another on the basis of an understanding that circumcision is not a rite that expresses an intimate relationship to faith—which, of course, simply begs the question (in the context of *De pace fidei*, anyway) of why Paul does not consider this rite to be as intimately linked to true faith as, for instance, marriage. Indeed, the very argument to which Paul briefly gestures on behalf of Christian marriage conventions in 19, § 67 (h VII, 61)—that monogamous heterosexual marriage is to be preferred to polygamous and non-heterosexual practices as an allowance for human weakness that redirects human impulse away from a greater sin of unbridled cupidity toward greater purity—is similar to various historical justifications for the practice of circumcision—namely, that by dampening genital sensation, circumcision discourages lasciviousness.<sup>17</sup> And yet, while Paul seems to regard the moral benefits of marriage as being so significant that conformity rather than diversity of rites ought to be established, he seems comfortable with a great deal of diversity in the sensible signs and religious practices associated with the sacrament of the Eucharist (18, § 66 [h VII, 60-61]).

My point in offering these brief examples is not that the reasons Nicholas gives for expecting more or less conformity in any particular rite are unintelligible or invalid. Rather, my point is that, even when the reasons are relatively

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17 Maimonides, for instance, offers this as one of the key reasons for practicing circumcision in *Guide for the Perplexed* III, 49.

clear in relation to particular rites that are discussed in the dialogue, they do not always seem to depend upon the same sorts of considerations. In other words, the various inconsistencies in the ways in which Nicholas treats various rites as well as the cursory nature of some of the examinations indicate that Nicholas is to some extent reticent to provide an explicit articulation of the apologetic grounds on which he justifies the hierarchical relationships between these rites and the primary legitimacy of the central tenets of his interpretation of Christianity.

The upshot of this reticence is that interpreters are left with more than one strategy for responding to *De pace fidei*. For instance, the question of the legitimacy of various rites can be settled by interpretations that reinforce the centrality of its Christological metaphysics.<sup>18</sup> However, the same vacillations that permit these more apologetic interpretations of the text also leave open the possibility of approaches that emphasize Nicholas' pluralism or, at the very least, his hesitancy in the face of contrary impulses.<sup>19</sup> I think both sorts

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18 Among studies that emphasize the fundamental Christology of *De pace fidei*, see especially Knut Alfsvåg, "Divine Difference and Religious Unity: On the Relation Between *De docta ignoranta*, *De pace fidei*, and *Cribatio Alkorani*," in *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages*, eds. Ian C. Levy, Rita George-Tvrčković, and Donald F. Duclow (Leiden: 2014), pp. 49-67; Walter A. Euler, *Unitas et Pax: Religionsvergleich bei Raimundus Lullus und Nikolaus von Kues* (Würzburg: 1990); Joshua Hollman, "Reading *De pace fidei* Christologically: Nicholas of Cusa's *Verbum* Dialectic of Religious Concordance," in Levy et al., *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam*, pp. 68-85; and Joshua Hollmann, *The Religious Concordance: Nicholas of Cusa and Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Leiden: 2017). Monfasani's essay for this volume, "Cusanus, the Greeks, and Islam," argues that *De pace fidei*, unlike *Cribatio Alkorani*, is a work in the vein of Christian apologetics. However, it is also clear that Monfasani, unlike the studies cited above, also regards *De pace fidei* as a "deeply flawed work" because of its apologetic strategy. Marica Costigliolo emphasizes the apologetic nature of both *De pace fidei* and *Cribatio Alkorani*, but her work stresses how these treatises are indicative of the development of Nicholas' views in response to the concrete historical context in which they were written. See *Islam e Cristianesimo: mondi di differenza nel Medioevo: Il dialogo con l'Islam nell'opera di Nicola da Cusa* (Genoa: 2012); and *The Western Perception of Islam between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Work of Nicholas of Cusa* (Eugene: 2017).

19 Among interpreters who emphasize the significance of the tension between *De pace fidei*'s apologetic and ecumenical impulses, see, for instance, Bakos, *On Faith, Rationality, and the Other in the Late Middle Ages*; Jos Decorte, "Tolerance and Trinity," in *Conflict and Reconciliation*, pp. 107-17; Paul Richard Blum, "Truth, Violence, and Peace According to Nicholas of Cusa," *American Cusanus Society Newsletter* 33 (2016), 29-35; Birgit H. Helander, *Nicolaus Cusanus als Wegbereiter auch der Heutigen Ökumene* (Uppsala: 1993); Thomas P. McTighe, "Nicholas of Cusa's Unity-Metaphysics and the Formula *Religio una in rituum varietate*," in Christianson and Izbicki, *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom*, pp. 161-72; and Markus Riedenaer, *Pluralität und Rationalität: Die Herausforderung der*

of interpretation are potentially valid as far as *De pace fidei* itself is concerned. However, my specific aim in what follows is to clarify *De pace fidei*'s tacit understanding of the relationship between religion and faith by appealing to speculative works that otherwise provide only an oblique angle on the question of the legitimacy of non-Christian rites. The import of this analysis will be to highlight the value and meaningfulness of the tensions within *De pace fidei*'s contrary impulses rather than attempt to offer a synthesis or direct refutation of other interpretations.

## II Human Psychology and the Philosophy of History in Nicholas of Cusa's Later Treatises

Precisely because the arguments of *De pace fidei* rest on the premise that all religions are products of the unique historical circumstances from which they originate, discussing the philosophy of history that is articulated in some of Nicholas' later philosophical treatises may provide us with an important supplemental resource for considering the question of the legitimacy of particular religions as manifestations of faith. Therefore, although I will return to a discussion of *De pace fidei* in the concluding section of this essay, in order to undertake an analysis of Nicholas' underlying philosophy of history, this section will focus mainly on two late works that were written as companion "sermons" in the first half of 1459.<sup>20</sup> These texts, which Nicholas apparently did not title but which we today refer to as *De aequalitate* and *De principio*, are each devoted to a theme text from the Gospel of John,<sup>21</sup> and both texts are fundamentally concerned with reflections on eternity and on the mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>22</sup>

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*Vernunft durch religiöse und kulturelle Vielfalt nach Nikolaus Cusanus*, Theologie und Frieden 32 (Stuttgart: 2007).

20 *De Principio* references *De aequalitate* in § 21 and § 30. Indeed, even if these two relatively brief texts are not sermons in the ordinary sense of the term, Nicholas referred to them as *sermones* and seemed to offer them as discourses on the themes treated in his other sermons. For a discussion of the place of these treatises in Nicholas' oeuvre, see Edward Cranz, "De aequalitate and the De principio of Nicholas of Cusa," in *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, eds. Gerald Christianson and Thomas Izbicki (Leiden: 1996), pp. 271-80.

21 *De aequalitate*'s theme text is John 1:4: "The life was the light of men;" *De principio*'s is John 8:25: "Who art Thou?" Jesus answered them: 'the Beginning—I who, indeed, am speaking unto you.'

22 For a discussion of how this theme is explored in *De ludo globi* and *De venatione sapientiae*, see Donald Duclow, "Tempus—Aeternitas—Perpetuum: 'Eternal Time'—Nicholas

In *De principio*, Nicholas begins with a fairly commonplace argument that the world cannot be self-caused and that therefore there can be only one necessary beginning from which all existents are caused (§ 2-7 [h X/2b, 3-7; 880-82]). From this relatively familiar argument, however, Nicholas soon departs in order to follow a more or less Proclusian argument<sup>23</sup> based in the following definitions:

Since the beginning (*principium*) is the beginning, it is eternal and whatever things are seen in eternity are eternity. Hereupon you will recognize that in eternity there cannot be a beginning without there being that which is begun ... Know, as well, that eternity must not be considered to be a kind of extended duration, as it were, but must be thought of as, at once, totality-of-being, which is the beginning. Therefore, when eternity is considered to be the beginning, then our speaking of the beginning of the begun is nothing but our speaking of the eternity of the eternal or our speaking of the eternity of the begun. (§ 10 [h X/2b, 11-12; 883])

In other words, according to Nicholas, the Beginning is not prior in time to the world but is prior ontologically. In fact, the Beginning does not exist in the proper sense of the term, since it is prior to all affirmation (§ 24 [h X/2b, 35; 890]).<sup>24</sup> Hence, for Nicholas, creation is not in time, but rather

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of Cusa on World, Time and Eternity," in *Manuductiones: Festschrift zu Ehren von Jorge M. Machetta und Claudia D'Amico*, ed. Cecilia Rusconi (Münster: 2014), pp. 211-21; Mathieu van der Meer, "World without End: Nicholas of Cusa's View of Time and Eternity," in *Christian Humanism: Essays in Honour of Arjo Vanderjagt*, eds. Alasdair A. MacDonald, Zweder R.W.M. von Martels, and Jan R. Veenstra (Leiden: 2009), pp. 317-37; and Iris Wikström, "The Notion of Time in Cusanus' Work *De ludo globi*," in *Eriugena Cusanus*, eds. Agnieszka Kijewska, Roman Majeran, and Harald Schwaetzer (Lublin: 2011), pp. 249-63.

23 The references to Proclus are explicit in both *De principio* and *De aequalitate*, but Nicholas also remains deeply indebted (even if less explicitly acknowledged) to Augustine and Boethius in these texts. For further discussion of the influences of Augustine on Nicholas' philosophy of time, see Norbert Fischer, "Cusanus' Concept of God and Man in the Light of His Reflections on Time," trans. Peter Casarella, *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 15 (1992), 252-74; for the influence of Boethius, see Jean-Michel Counet, "Le temps come l'explication de l'éternité chez Nicolas de Cues," *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 101 (2003), 319-39; for the influence of Proclus as well as a detailed discussion of *De aequalitate*, see Elizabeth Brient's contribution to this volume.

24 Nicholas provides a variation on this theme in *De ludo globi* § 87, where the cardinal admonishes Albert that he is mistaken for believing that God has existed from eternity: "For it is not possible that something existed but that time did not yet exist, since 'existed' is indicative of past time. Time is eternity's creature; for time is not eternity, which is present as a whole at once, but is the image of eternity, since it consists of successiveness" (h IX, 107; 1228).



time, as the measure of the perpetual duration of the world, unfolds from the one, eternal Beginning. As a consequence of this ontology, temporal things are entirely other than the Beginning from which they are caused, and so Nicholas' notion of the relationship of creature to Creator is not pantheistic. And yet, because the Beginning is the *ratio essendi* of all things *possible-to-be-made* (*possibile-fieri*) (§ 15 [h X/2b, 18; 885]), "that which is made in the order of time is existent [*subsistens*] *per se* in eternity" (§ 22 [h X/2b, 31; 888]).

Whereas *De principio* focuses on the relationship between timeless creation and the temporality of the existent world, Nicholas' nearly impenetrable concern in *De aequalitate* is to explain how it can be possible that the human soul "sees that it itself is timeless time (*intemporale tempus*)"; "that it itself is not eternity, since it is time, although it is time timelessly"; that it "sees itself, above temporal things and on the horizon of eternity" (§ 11 [h X/1 15; 848]); and, most enigmatically of all, that it sees itself as "unlimited conceptual delimitation without otherness" (§ 10 [h X/1, 14; 847]). What Nicholas seems to have in mind by these definitions of the soul's *intemporale tempus* is that when we strive to conceive eternity—which is beyond naming, beyond discourse, and beyond comprehension—we arrive at an image of eternity in the notion of the world's perpetual duration as an unfolding of the eternal Beginning that is presupposed as its cause. The reasoning behind this is rooted in Nicholas' assertion that "in general, an external thing that is knowable [is knowable] by means of something internal that is consubstantial with [the rational soul]" (§ 6 [h X/1, 10; 845]), and that therefore:

By an intuitive seeing, the soul illumines and measures all things through itself; and by means of conceptual truth it judges the truth in different things. And by means of the truth which it finds to be present in different ways in different things, it is directed unto itself, in order to view within itself—truly and stably and without otherness—the truth which it has seen existing in different ways in different things, so that within it itself, as in a mirror-of-truth, it may see all things conceptually and may recognize that it itself is the notion of all things. (§ 9 [h X/1 13; 847])

Thus, on the one hand, when the soul considers itself from the standpoint of its relationship to its own cause, it must see itself as a likeness of eternity. This is borne out in § 14, which offers a more philosophically abstract articulation of the point that Nicholas makes in the second part of the geographer metaphor that I discussed in the introduction. Nicholas writes:

When [the soul] understands the fact that it enfolds all things conceptually, or assimilatively, and understands that its own conception is not the reason or cause (*rationem seu causam*) of things' really being that which they are, it would turn to seeking, by means of itself, the Cause of both it itself and all other things and would say [to itself]: "In the Cause of myself—a Cause that shines forth within myself qua caused, so that I am a conceptual enfolding of the world—there is, necessarily, the essential and eternal enfolding of all causable things. [These are present in my Cause] as in each and every thing's most adequate Ground both of being and of knowing. In the likeness of this Universal Cause, I partake (by its gift) of intellectual being, which consists in a universal likeness of the Universal Cause both of being and of knowing. For in myself there shines forth the rational power (*virtus rationalis*) of that Cause's universality and omnipotence, so that when I view myself as its image, then by means of contemplation I can approach it more nearly through a transcending of myself. For in order to see myself amid all the things [in my conceptual world], I remove otherness from them all. But in order to be able to see my Cause, I must take leave of myself as caused and as image; otherwise, I will not arrive at the Living Ground (*vivam rationem*) of my reason." (h X/1, 19-20; 850-51)

But even though the soul may pursue an understanding of itself as an expression of a transcendent universal cause, Nicholas is also clear that the tools through which we might wish to pursue such an understanding do not provide us with the means of fully achieving any such comprehension since, as the cardinal explains in *De ludo globi*, "we conceive of eternity only in terms of duration" (II, § 88 [h IX, 108; 1228]). That is, even in our most comprehensive moments of understanding we must cut off from the Beginning some particular determinate *ratio* that provides only a partial understanding of that which is caused from the Beginning. Consequently, as Nicholas puts it in *De principio*:

Although [each being] cannot comprehend That which it desires so ardently, nevertheless it is not totally ignorant of it but knows most certainly that That which it desires exists. Moreover, the intellectual nature which knows that That [which it desires] exists and is incomprehensible, sees that it itself is more perfect the more incomprehensible it knows to be That [which it desires]. For the Incomprehensible is approached by way of this knowledge of one's ignorance. (§ 29 [h X/2b, 41-42; 892])

In short, Nicholas' view that the soul is the image of eternity counterintuitively entails the conclusion that human intellect operates in a flux, unfolding—through an ongoing dialogue with itself—the meaning of its internal representations of what it imagines to be external to it. However, since our intellectual possibilities are necessarily limited, we are, ironically, most aware of how our intellect is an image and likeness of eternity only when we are also attentive to the limited, all-too-human nature of our own comprehension.

Nicholas also conceives this structure of human thinking as the source of the “freedom” that was mentioned by the archangel in the supplication in *De pace fidei*—the only sort of freedom by which we may be said to possess a capacity to develop an understanding of ourselves. This is a freedom located in privation rather than the mere absence of compulsion for two reasons. First, as Nicholas explains in *De venatione sapientiae*, no created thing exhausts the perfection of its species:

Since what-is-made is subsequent to the possibility-of-being-made, it is never made in such a way that the possibility-of-being-made is exhaustively delimited in it. For although the possibility-of-being-made (according as it exists actually) is delimited, nevertheless it is not unqualifiedly delimited. For example, in Plato the possibility of being made a man is delimited; but the possibility of being made a man is not exhaustively delimited in Plato. Rather, there is only that delimiting mode which is called platonic; and countless other, more perfect modes remain [outside of Plato]. But even in Plato the possibility of being made a man is not [exhaustively] delimited; for a man can be made to be many things which Plato was not: e.g., a musician, a geometer, a mechanic. (§ 37.108 [h XII, 101; 1345]).

Second, even were we to assume that Plato could at least maximize his own Platonic nature, Nicholas also maintains in *De aequalitate* that our soul “sees that because of its imperfection, it needs instruments and temporal succession in order to come from potentiality to actuality” (§ 11 [h X/1, 16; 848-49]). Nevertheless, while this kind of freedom is a consequence of privation, it is only in this kind of freedom that we have the capacity to find or create ourselves. In Nicholas' speculative treatises, the clearest expression of this point that I can think of is in chapter 7 of *De visione Dei* (1453),

O Lord, the Sweetness of every delight, you have placed within my freedom that I be of my own if I am willing. Hence, unless I am my own, you are not mine, for you would necessitate [*necessitates*] my freedom since

you cannot be mine unless I also am mine. And since you have placed this in my freedom, you do not necessitate [*necessitas*] me, but you wait for me to choose to be my own. This depends on me and not on you, O Lord, for you do not limit your maximum goodness but lavish it on all who are able to receive it ... You teach me that sense should obey reason and that reason should be lord and master. When, therefore, sense serves reason, I am my own. [But one does not have reason from which one is directed] except through you, O Lord, who are the Word and the Reason of reasons. I see now that if I listen to your Word, which does not cease to speak in me and which continually shines forth in my reason, I will be my own, free and not the slave of sin. (7, § 25-26 [h VI, 27])<sup>25</sup>

Still, even if it is more obscure than *De visione Dei's* exploration of the ethical consequences of this hermeneutic conception of human freedom, *De aequalitate* provides a more refined discussion of how it is that the tools with which each of us is capable of understanding may be more or less attenuated to ratios that explain the harmonies that may be perceived in the relationships between external things as they exist in time—and it is this point that will be my pathway back to the question of *De pace fidei's* reflection on the question of the legitimacy of particular manifestations of self-understanding that are expressed through various religions as well as attitudes toward the religions of others. In section 11, for instance, Nicholas notes that:

But [our soul] sees that one man's soul, being more united to the continuous and to time, or succession, arrives more slowly at an understanding, whereas another's soul arrives more quickly, because it is less immersed in the continuous. This latter soul more quickly frees itself [from time, or succession], since it has more suitable instruments for its operation; and it attains [an understanding] more precisely. (h X/1, 16; 848)

As I noted in the introduction, in sections 15-19 Nicholas develops this point in order to discuss why it is that mastery in any art or science is the consequence of the soul's ability to discern a *ratio* that allows it to delight in and, in the

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25 Trans. H. Lawrence Bond in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: 1997), p. 247. Translation altered: in this passage, Bond has "constraint" for *necessitas*, but Nicholas seems to be speaking of the kind of necessity that Thomas Aquinas, for instance, would call "absolute" or "natural" necessity, which is not a form of constraint or compulsion. Nicholas may also have in mind the same peculiar relationship between freedom and necessity that Boethius explores in *Consolation of Philosophy*.

case of practical activities, produce harmonious relationships between external things. And though the text does not explicitly discuss the question of how to produce harmony in one's own soul, it may not be too much of a stretch to suggest that Nicholas' understanding that the soul must poietically produce rather than simply perceive harmonies strongly implies an ethical imperative. After all, if I am who I am because I am capable of a dialogue with myself, and if I must also live with myself as the agent responsible for my actions, then I should certainly strive to be a good dialogical partner for myself and for others insofar as it is within my power to do so.<sup>26</sup>

### III True Faith as a *Poietic* Pursuit of Wisdom

Leaving aside the oblique angle through which Nicholas approaches this ethical dimension in the speculative writings, I may now turn more straightforwardly to spelling out the tacit consequences of the philosophy of history that I have been discussing for the question of the legitimacy of religious rites and beliefs. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>27</sup> the philosophy of history articulated in these later speculative works allows us to reexamine *De pace fidei's* notion that there is but one religion expressed through a variety of distinct rites in light of what appears to be an abandonment of any univocal conception of creation in favor of one that gives rise to a notion of the human soul as always seeking and producing itself as an image and likeness of an absconded God. In other words, according to Nicholas' late works, all historical events, insofar as they are the unfolding of the eternal Beginning, are conceptually linked to the significance of the Incarnation—but, as we have just seen, these conceptual links can only ever be historically unique signs (or interpretations) of the Incarnation.<sup>28</sup> Thus, to the extent that one might speak of an *arche* or *eschaton*, these later

26 I am thinking of Hannah Arendt's "Thinking and Moral Considerations," *Social Research* 38 (1971), 417-46, especially her discussion (pp. 438-46) of why, on Socrates' account in the *Gorgias*, it is better to suffer than to do wrong.

27 "But following the literal sense ...," pp. 14-15.

28 It is not clear to me that Nicholas was entirely aware of some of the implications I am drawing from my interpretation of these late works. However, I am not alone in thinking that in his later speculative writings there is a distinct shift in Nicholas' philosophy of history away from the concordist eschatology that Bernard McGinn discusses in his essay for this volume. For instance, Mathieu van der Meer argues that in both his sermons and his speculative writings, Nicholas' Christology is linked to an explicit eschatology only until about 1455, at which point he stops discussing the question of the last days altogether ("World without End," p. 321).

treatises imply that one may speak only of an eternal referent for any temporal activity whatsoever. Or, as Nicholas puts it in *De possess* (1460), there is no contradiction between the claim that “eternity as a whole is at once present at every point of time” and the claim that “God as the Beginning and the End is at once and as a whole present in all things” (§ 19 [h XI/2, 25; 924]). Consequently, each and every historical unfolding derives its legitimacy as a manifestation of true faith solely as a function of its awareness of itself as a manifestation of the Incarnation, an “event” that is both unfolded in time and yet also enfolds the meanings of all other histories of temporal events. Nevertheless, because of the multiplicity of existent, individuated souls, the meaning of the history of Incarnation is not the product of a stable referent but of an unstable one. Rather, to be more precise, the ultimate referent for the meaning of any contingent history remains an Incarnative Beginning that is beyond comprehension, but this Beginning, precisely because it is beyond comprehension, does not itself provide a univocal determination of the intelligibility of any particular range of history from which one might seek meaning. There are, in short, multiple histories, and each history provides a unique hermeneutic frame of reference within which a soul produces itself as an image of what is presupposed as the same underlying but otherwise inaccessible Incarnational origin. To borrow from a previously cited passage from *De ludo globi* 11, § 94 (h IX, 117; 1232), a belief might be thought of as a lyre, that is, as an instrument which measures and represents various harmonies expressed in time. But although one lyre may be more harmoniously constructed than another, equally harmonious lyres may be constructed with different numbers of strings and tunings. Further, even if there could be a single, maximally harmonious five-string lyre, it would not be a maximally harmonious seven-string lyre. In other words, (a) even if we assume, as Nicholas does in *De pace fidei*, that all particular religions can be presupposed to be unique expressions of the self-same Incarnational metaphysics out of which the human mind may produce more or less harmonious ratios for its self-understanding, (b) it remains the case that all religions are rooted in their own irreducibly unique historical frames of reference. Therefore: (c) even though some religions will be more apt than others to encourage poetic production under any given set of circumstances, (d) nevertheless, no particular religion can claim universal legitimacy.

Nevertheless, this claim does not entail the conclusion that we must therefore tolerate all religions that differ from our own. First, and most obviously, those who insist on the universal legitimacy of their own religion are fundamentally mistaken about the very nature of the beings for whom religions are the product of *poietic* expression and the hermeneutic frameworks within which all varieties of mental activities occur. I think this is precisely why even

though the views that Nicholas attributes to St Paul in *De pace fidei* about circumcision, the sacrament of marriage, and other religious rites may rest on an understanding of human nature that many contemporary Cusanus scholars would not easily endorse, it is nevertheless worth noting that Nicholas' portrayal of Paul at least makes an appeal to a conception of human nature that Paul evidently assumes he shares with the other fictional interlocutors in the dialogue rather than to the mere personal certainty that the religious rites that he prefers have been directly and transparently ordained by God in opposition to social practices that would be grounded in rites that originate under different historical conditions.

Here, it may be worth noting that the question of *De pace fidei's* audience may be relevant to how we interpret the text. Given that the text was written in Latin, we can suppose that it is not a dialogue written with the intention of converting non-Christians to Christianity, nor even of convincing non-Christians that there is a unity of faith underlying diverse rites. Although the scene that unfolds for the reader is one in which non-Christians are won over to the point of view of Christians, perhaps the purpose of the dialogue may be more fruitfully understood as aiming to win over Christians to a particular reading of their own theology—to provide a criticism and corrective to Christian theology even while offering an apologetic defense of that reformed theology. Moreover, even while Nicholas pays significant attention to non-Christian rites, as Paul Richard Blum points out, most of the contributions to the dialogue actually come from “representatives of dissent within the Christian culture.”<sup>29</sup> Read in light of these considerations, *De pace fidei* suggests that, on the basis of an interpretation of the basic tenets of Christianity itself, Christians should strive to accommodate rites that differ from their own (whether of non-Christians or of other Christians) in the interests of achieving peace because it is only under conditions of peace that one has the leisure to turn to a consideration of oneself as an image and likeness of a Beginning that is beyond all temporality.

Still, Nicholas' incarnational metaphysics does not oblige us to tolerate those who believe that their own religious preferences are the only or even the most universally legitimate manifestations of faith; instead, we should note that the epistemic disadvantage of holding beliefs in this manner is likely to contribute to an ethical and political sensibility of entrenchment on any of a number of other matters. Consequently, we may say that, for Nicholas, religions have more or less legitimacy as expressions of true faith the more or less

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29 Blum, “Truth, Violence, and Peace,” p. 34.

they are capable of producing epistemic advantages for those who hold them and those who can be persuaded to accept them. However, if my interpretation is defensible, then Nicholas' philosophy of history also suggests that, where the ethical and political legitimacy of religious beliefs and practices is concerned, the manner in which we maintain our beliefs is far more relevant than the content of the beliefs or the circumstances of their historical inception. Content and historical inception are not wholly irrelevant, of course, since both of these tend to have a relationship to the manner in which a person holds a belief. However, it is the manner of the holding of the belief that requires justification in the scheme we have seen. Faith is only a true faith when it is a faith seeking understanding, and the legitimacy of faith as a *poietic* pursuit of wisdom is not ascertained by assessing the content of a religion in isolation of the question of the hermeneutic consequences of the manner in which one relates to that religion's central beliefs and practices. Rather, the question of the legitimacy of religious rites and beliefs concerns whether or not the ratio expressed by one's religious practices are harmonious or not, and, on the whole, harmonious practices are those that can be deployed as a tool for the production and development of other such practices. In other words, true faith is whatever manner of religious practices fosters or develops the pursuit of wisdom, and the only legitimate religious manifestations of true faith are practices that stimulate further inquiry and self-examination.<sup>30</sup>

It is in this respect that *De pace fidei* might be understood as offering reasons to be modest in our ecumenical ambitions—lest we deny differences that our interlocutors would prefer that we recognize—and moderate in our apologetic inclinations—lest we illegitimately confuse our opinions with the truths that these opinions help make meaningful for us in guiding our ethical practices. In short, a hopeful reading of *De pace fidei* would be one that treats the text as offering a reason to believe that many possible harmonies may be found between the multiple histories of the world and that we therefore also have a good reason to treat our own histories as occasions to produce these harmonies by subjecting our own beliefs to a scrutiny that is even more rigorous than that which we employ in the interpretation of beliefs whose histories we regard as different than our own.

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30 Some atheists clearly believe that all religions tend to inhibit inquiry and self-examination. Although I am skeptical of that as a categorical claim, I should note that it remains an open question for me whether or not it is possible to have a "true faith" that is not partial to any particular religious practices—or, in other words, a faith that is not constructed on the basis of conviction regarding the veracity of revealed knowledge.