Mystical Theology and Platonism in the Time of Cusanus

Essays in Honor of Donald F. Duclow

Edited by

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Editors' Introduction

The life of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) coincided with the transmission of the Platonic tradition from the heights of medieval Neoplatonism to the flourishing of Renaissance Platonism. Nowhere is this more evident than in Cusanus' personal library in his hometown of Kues, where Nicholas gathered a range of philosophical and mystical works, from ancient dialogues of Plato to the treatises and sermons of his own historical contemporaries. It was this eclectic use of sources that allowed Nicholas to become not merely a scholar, but also a visionary theologian, a path-breaking philosopher, a church reformer, and eventually a cardinal and a bishop.

This collection aims to advance the scholarly conversation about both Platonism and mystical theology by looking backward to the historical sources animating that conversation as well as forward to Nicholas' legacy in the sixteenth century and beyond. This method of progressing by way of retrospection, exemplified by Nicholas of Cusa's library, is integral to the Platonic tradition itself. By going back to Plato, Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and Meister Eckhart, Nicholas was able to take bold steps forward in ecclesiology, theology, and even mathematics. This is what made his thought such an effective conduit between the Middle Ages and the humanist Renaissance. Our goal, inspired by Cusanus' own retrospective creativity, is to deliver a volume that breaks down the barriers between medieval and Renaissance studies, reinterpreting Cusanus' place in the history of thought by exploring the archive that informed his thinking, while also interrogating his works by exploring them from the standpoint of their later reception by modern philosophers and theologians.

Finally, by drawing together these diverse strands in the scholarship on Nicholas of Cusa, this volume honors Donald F. Duclow, an outstanding scholar not just of Cusanus in particular, but of the Neoplatonic tradition in general. A long-standing member of the American Cusanus Society, Duclow has published widely on the relationship between Neoplatonism and mystical theology, especially in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena, Eckhart, and Cusanus himself (please see the foreword to this volume for Duclow's CV and a more detailed discussion of his career). In addition, he is the author of a very well-known synopsis of Cusanus' "Life and Works" (in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*, ed. Thomas M. Izbicki, Gerald Christianson, and Chris Bellitto [Paulist Press, 2004], pp. 25–56), which was responsible for introducing a new generation of scholars to the importance of the late medieval master of learned ignorance. Beyond that, Duclow has

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served as a key mentor to many scholars. His intellectual and personal generosity of spirit has nourished conversation with and between his peers, even as he found time to encourage early career researchers.

Alongside the chapters focused on Cusanus' sources and his own writings, then, the present volume begins with a foreword that pays tribute to Donald Duclow and ends with an afterword that provides a brief summary of the history of the American Cusanus Society, in which Duclow has been an active, leading member for nearly forty years. In keeping with the overarching theme of retrospective creativity, these bookends look back at the past of the Society and encourage others to participate in ongoing conversations inspired not just by Duclow's approach to the history of mystical theology and Platonism, but even more so by the example he set with his own spirit of generosity.

The first part of the volume comprises six essays that examine various facets of the traditions with which Nicholas of Cusa was engaged. The lead essay here is Samuel J. Dubbleman's "Jean Gerson's Annotatio and the Contours of Mystical Theology," which, by discussing the technical terminology cataloged in Gerson's early 15th-century *Annotatio doctorum aliquorum qui de contemplatione locuti sunt*, provides an excellent orientation to the themes and terminology of this volume of essays as a whole. Robert J. Dobie's essay explores the ways in which Eckhart and Henry Suso appropriate *Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy* in their discussions of the entwinement of suffering and human finitude. Thomas M. Izbicki's essay examines the role of Pseudo-Dionysius in the Tegernsee debate, in which Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei* played a noteworthy role. Bernard McGinn's essay focuses on the ways in which Nicholas of Cusa and Johannes Wenck each invoked the writings of Eckhart in their polemical writings against one another—invocations that McGinn shows expose two fundamentally different approaches to theology. Wendy Love Anderson's and Joshua Hollmann's essays offer two different perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa's interest in non-Christian religions and theology. Anderson's essay shows that Nicholas' understanding of Judaism is impoverished by the cardinal's lack of significant, genuine experience with or curiosity about actual Jewish practices and instead tends to rely upon Christian theological constructions of what might be called a "spectral" Judaism. Hollmann's essay, on the other hand, endeavors to show how Nicholas of Cusa mines his interest in late medieval Neoplatonic and apophatic mystical connections between Islam and Christianity in ways that deepen and enrich his own unique Christian approach to the Qur'an.

The second part of the volume comprises eight essays that focus on exegesis and critical engagement with Nicholas of Cusa's thought specifically. The first essay in this group is a contribution from one of Donald Duclow's earliest

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philosophical mentors, Wilhelm Dupré, who, in his essay, engages both with Nicholas of Cusa's *De venatione sapientiae* and Duclow's own approach to its major themes. Following this, Thomas Leinkauf discusses the *Idiota de mente*'s unique approach to mind-intellect as operating through a dynamic relationship between mirroring/representational activities and explicative/expressive ones, highlighting the consequences of this view for Cusanus's understanding of the relationship between finite human being and the divine exemplar of which the human mind necessarily presupposes itself to be a specular reflection.

The three essays of Miller, Pico Estrada, and Hannan all engage with Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei.* Miller's approach emphasizes Cusanus' attention to the affective experience of pilgrimage that the treatise recommends as a particularly fruitful basis upon which intellectual reflection is able to engage with the divine. Pico Estrada's essay also focuses on the relationship between the affective and intellectual dimensions of the *De visione Dei* in her discussion of how this treatise offers a roadmap for a meditative journey whose objective is the spiritual transformation of its readers. Sean Hannan's essay brings Duclow's own discussion of Cusanus' treatise into direct engagement with recent interpretations by Jean-Luc Marion and Emmanuel Falque. Drawing upon Duclow's insights, Hannan excavates the centrality of the human experience of temporality to this text.

Elizabeth Brient's essay, like Hannan's, is explicitly concerned with Nicholas of Cusa's understanding of the temporality of human experience, but looks back on Nicholas' first major philosophical treatise, the *De docta ignorantia*, in which Brient identifies a prototype not only for the notion of temporality that interests Hannan, but also for the notion of spiritual pilgrimage found in Miller's and Pico Estrada's essays. "How to Unlock the Infinite: Leaping *Transumptively* with Nicholas of Cusa" focuses on what Tamara Albertini describes as a "missed technical term in Cusan scholarship"—*viz., transumere* and related terms. Albertini traces not only the ways in which this term has been passed over by translators, but also where noticing its usage may be significant for better understanding a surprising number of Nicholas of Cusa's treatises and sermons. In the final essay in this section, Il Kim discusses Cusanus' indebtedness to Leon Battista Alberti for many of the ways in which he uses metaphors of vision to describe the human relation to the divine, which casts some helpful light back upon the previous chapters that engaged with texts like *De visione Dei*.

The third part of the volume examines themes of mystical theology and Neoplatonism as they reverberate in the wake of Nicholas of Cusa. Leading off this part of the volume, Valery Rees explores potential parallels between

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Nicholas and his near contemporary, Marsilio Ficino, especially in relation to their common interest in Pseudo-Dionysius. Rita George-Tvrtković's contribution returns to the themes discussed in Anderson's and Hollmann's essays from the first part of this volume by discussing the ways in which Nicholas of Cusa's approach to the notion of religious concord was taken up and emulated in the thought of Guillaume Postel. Paul Richard Blum and Elisabeth Blum also provide an essay that calls back to an earlier theme. Where Leinkauf's essay explores the reflective/expressive dynamic at play in Nicholas' understanding of human intellective processes, the Blums' essay takes up the theme of speculation and reflection in both Cusanus and Giodarno Bruno in order to illustrate and discuss their respective approaches to and divergences from orthodox Roman Catholic understandings of the relationship of the human to the divine.

The final essays explore the reception of Nicholas of Cusa in the 20th and 21st centuries. Michael Moore's essay discusses Raymond Klibansky's role in the preservation and transmission of the corpus of Nicholas' writings and the connection of Cusanus to the long history of Platonism. The essay evokes not only Cusanus' investment in the archives and libraries that he found so inspiring in his hunt for wisdom, but also testifies to an aspect of the habits of mind probably shared by all of our contributors. David Albertson's essay—which focuses on Nicholas of Cusa's reception in the work of Gilles Deleuze—concludes this volume by pointing out the complicated ways in which we sometimes remain enfolded (even unwittingly at times) by the histories through which, from which, and against which we seek creative expression of our intellectual commitments.

In the whole and in the parts, then, this collection exhibits an attentiveness to the hermeneutic commitments that have guided Duclow's career. As he wrote in the preface to his invaluable collection, *Masters of Learned Ignorance: Eriugena, Eckhart, Cusanus*, his research follows "a speculative as well as an historical agenda," drawing from contemporary hermeneutics in order to ensure that we continue to engage with the writings of figures like Nicholas of Cusa as "vital sources for our own attempts to confront the basic questions of our lives and world" (VIII–IX). Going further than simply studying the words on the page, we ought to join our medieval and Renaissance-era interlocutors in the "process of creating and interpreting symbols." In so doing, says Duclow, we might just be able to "become masters of learned ignorance ourselves." It is our hope that this volume will do its part to encourage its readers to live up to Duclow's call and measure up to his example.

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