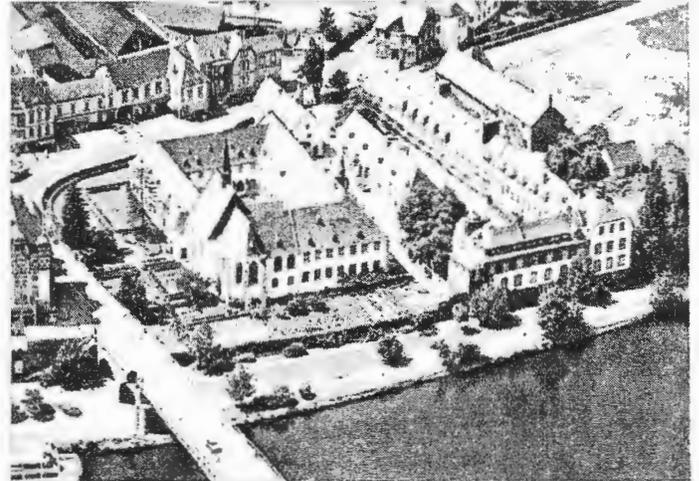


American Cusanus Society Newsletter

✱ 25th Anniversary of its Founding ✱

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Hospital of St. Nicholas at Kues.

Newsletter XVII, 1, June 2000



Gelaciones Hausserschiv, Monach.

Ms. 12, fol. 6^r

The lawyer Cusanus (right top) writing a legal opinion in the Bacharach case (1426).

Newsletter IX, 1, July 1992



Cathedral of Todi, where Cusanus died in 1464

Newsletter XXIV, December 2007

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task to write a paper for a conference in Moscow about Cusanus' relationship to the Eastern Churches and I recognized how helpful and necessary it is to study this collection of documents.

Young theologians who know enough Latin (or who are willing to learn it) should examine Nicholas of Cusa. It's worth to do it and it's also a challenging task, especially for intelligent young people with open minds, who are prepared to work hard. There are so many things to discover in Cusanus! Most texts have already been published in excellent editions and it is now possible to analyse and interpret these texts thoroughly. Our understanding of these texts is far from being sufficient. Obviously it's also important to translate the Latin texts of Nicholas of Cusa systematically into the modern languages, particularly in English, the global language par excellence.

A few concluding remarks about the significance of Cusanus research:

What is true with respect to the interpretation of Nicholas of Cusa by Rudolf Haubst is also true regarding his interpretation in the future: it will be dependent on the "major trends" of theology, which can be different in various denominations at the same time.

At the moment there is a certain tendency (at least in Europe) to see Cusanus as the forerunner of postmodern pluralism and relativism – the uppermost ideal of many intellectuals. As we all know there are some statements of Cusanus which support this reading of his texts, but the mainstream of his thinking is neither pluralistic nor relativistic. He is stressing the perspectivity and finiteness of human knowledge on the one hand (Cusanus' consequence is not scepticism, but tireless search for deeper understanding) and the demand of man for divine revelation on the other hand. So Cusanus tries to connect faith and reason, theology and philosophy, in very intensive way. He sees faith and reason as the two sides of the same coin, which cannot be separated without destroying man's desire for understanding, fulfilment and enduring happiness.

Concerning the relationship between faith and reason we must recognize serious deficiencies in our present situation (at least in Europe). Pope Benedict XVI said in his famous lecture at the University of Regensburg (Sept. 12, 2006) on "Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and Reflections": "The intention here is not one of retrenchment or negative criticism, but of broadening our concept of reason and its application. While we rejoice in the new possibilities open to humanity, we also see the dangers arising from these possibilities and we must ask ourselves how we can overcome them. We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons. In this sense theology rightly belongs in the university and within the wide-ranging dialogue of sciences, not merely as a historical discipline and one of the human sciences, but precisely as theology, as inquiry into the rationality of faith. Only thus do we become capable of that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today. In the Western world it is widely held that only positivistic

reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid. Yet the world's profoundly religious cultures see this exclusion of the divine from the universality of reason as an attack on their most profound convictions. A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures."

The analysis of the Pope of the present state of affairs is quite clear and convincing. But it is not enough to complain about our situation. It is necessary to overcome the problems. Cusanus is an excellent assistance to do so. His philosophy as well as his theology helps us to regain "vast horizons", which we have gradually lost in modern times. Of course there is no simple way back to the past and studying the texts of an author of the 15th century does not automatically solve the difficulties of today. Nevertheless it can help "broadening our concept of reason and its application", as Pope Benedict states. And it can facilitate understanding people from other cultures, who reject the idea of exclusively positivistic reason. Therefore research on Nicholas of Cusa is not only fascinating and exciting but also valuable for our societies and good for our common future in a globalized world.

I'm looking forward to the next roundtable discussion about this issue in 25 years – then celebrating the 50th anniversary of the American Cusanus Society in Kalamazoo in the year 2033!

II. "The Future of Cusanus Research and the Modern Legacy of Renaissance Philosophy and Theology"

Jason Aleksander, St. Xavier University

First, I would like to say that I deeply appreciate having been asked to speak at this roundtable. Since there are a great many of you whose books I have started but haven't finished reading, I think it might be appropriate to begin by saying that the future of Cusanus research for me will continue to involve researching Nicholas of Cusa both in his texts and through yours.

This being noted, the question that I find especially compelling in the future of Cusanus research occurs in relation to one of the more common perspectives on Nicholas of Cusa, and it concerns whether and how Nicholas of Cusa's philosophy and theology disclose what might be called an epochal threshold between premodern and modern European thinking. But, of course, to say that this question originates in a common perspective on Nicholas of Cusa is *not* to say that there has ever been or will ever be a clear consensus on what would answer the question.

Be that as it may, to be more precise, the question that compels me is not about what makes Nicholas of Cusa a modern thinker but about the degree to which dominant concerns of modern philosophy are constituted by an often unacknowledged

* Delivered remarks for a roundtable discussion sponsored by American Cusanus Society on "The Future of Cusanus Research" at the 43rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 8, 2008.

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relationship to those of Renaissance philosophy and theology. That is, rather than interpret Nicholas of Cusa as an untimely Renaissance thinker and in light of a tradition or traditions of philosophy and science that followed upon the Renaissance, I would hope to find in the future of Cusanus research a way of discussing modernity's continuities and discontinuities with Renaissance philosophy and theology. Or, put differently, I would like to investigate what is meant by "modernity" in modern philosophy and science—and this is *not*, I think, the same thing as to investigate what is or might be modern about Nicholas of Cusa.

In light of this, I would like to make explicit an assumption that I believe should limit and motivate such research. Many students of Nicholas of Cusa tend to have rather robust opinions on the question of his status vis-à-vis medieval and modern philosophy. To mention but one of the more widely known views—a view that also serves as an index to several others—according to Jasper Hopkins, the view that Nicholas of Cusa is a precursor of thinkers such as Copernicus, Bruno, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, or Einstein is made on the basis of evidence that would justify the same claims regarding Maimonides or St. Thomas, claims that Hopkins believes to be obviously anachronistic in the latter cases.¹ It is not necessary, I think, to debate this point in order to raise the question that I would like to raise, though I do not wish to concede all of its ramifications. In other words, I will accept—indeed, I will even *reiterate*—the claim that to modernize Nicholas of Cusa would be to misunderstand him.

Or to use an example to illustrate this point, it might certainly be possible to see a way in which Spinoza's discussion of the Substance-Mode relationship as it pertains to the human capacity to engage in intellectual love of God/Substance bears some striking similarities with Nicholas of Cusa's understanding of the contracted immanence of the absolutely infinite in a finite human being's attempt to love and envision God. But we would not want these similarities—as deep or as significant as they may be—to encourage the conclusion that Spinoza is really just a Renaissance Christian neo-Platonist in disguise any more than we would want to suggest that Nicholas of Cusa is really a Jewish, anti-Cartesian modern philosopher who flatly denies the existence of a free will and also wishes to undertake a radical political critique of theology. Instead, the fact that the two thinkers share such fundamentally similar views on the varieties of proper understandings of the infinite ought to stimulate questions about why these understandings differ so drastically in their philosophical deployments.

And yet, I also believe that we must acknowledge that what often stands in the way of a fruitful consideration of questions about possible continuities between late medieval or Renaissance philosophy and modern philosophy or of the influences of late medieval and Renaissance philosophers upon their modern successors is the assumption that the character of modern philosophy is fundamentally discontinuous with that of premodern

philosophies. In short, the argument that Nicholas of Cusa is no more a precursor of any particular modern philosopher than any other late medieval or Renaissance philosopher in itself seems to me to rest on an assumption that modernity is inaugurated by an historical revolution in the habits of thinking that radically severs it from prior traditions of philosophy. Such an assumption does not mean that a genealogy of this discontinuity is impossible or that such a genealogy would always depend upon anachronism. But the assumption that philosophical modernity is inaugurated by an historical revolution in the habits of thinking that severs it from prior traditions of philosophy does imply that any genealogy of modernity that does not admit a fundamental incommensurability between modernity and pre-modernity *would* be open to the charge of anachronism.² I would like to challenge precisely this assumption. I believe that it is not only possible but also philosophically valuable to undertake a genealogy of modern philosophical commitments that attends especially to the significance of the modern legacy of Renaissance philosophy.

Now, why would Cusanus research be especially pertinent to such an investigation? Leaving aside the point that it is intrinsically valuable to read a thinker of the caliber of Nicholas of Cusa and that all thinkers of his caliber are interesting barometers of the intellectual needs and capacities of their respective epochs, there are some distinct issues and topics with which Nicholas of Cusa was concerned and in relation to which it might be possible to undertake an investigation into the question of the modern legacy of Renaissance philosophy and theology.

If I am to make some suggestions for the future of research in this vein, I would like to begin with general characterizations of significant discontinuities between modern and premodern habits of thinking and in relation to which Cusanus research may disclose a moment in the transformation of intellectual habits. A laundry list of these discontinuities would include issues which have each, in their turn, been put forward as a key (or sometimes *the key*) issue disclosive of or causative of the epochal shift. Such a list would include, for instance: (a) the transition from a conception of the heterogeneity of being as understood through its distinct categories to the regulative principle of the homogeneity of matter, including, of course (b) an erosion of the distinction between sublunar and supralunar matter as well as (c) the infinitization of the cosmos. This list would go on to include also (d) a transition from theological eschatology to modern notions of progress, particularly progress as a regulative ideal in the sciences; (e) increasing demands for the reducibility of sciences to common techniques and principles; and (f) an increasing reliance on techniques of mathematical formalization for the purposes of description of the natural world. Clearly this is

² Consider the question also in this light: given such an assumption, it would not come as a surprise that historians of modern philosophy would tend not to be concerned with the premodern philosophical developments that may have shaped the constitutive methods and/or interests of modern philosophy. In fact, modern philosophy announces its own uniqueness from prior modes of thinking and, in so doing, effectively imposes a taboo against the attempt to trace in its comings features the legacy of prior traditions. I will return to this point in the conclusion of this talk.

¹ See, for instance, *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, (1978), 15.

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not an exhaustive list of important and meaningful differences between modern and pre-modern habits of thinking. As a matter of fact, I do not believe that the investigation of any single issue above is going to cut it if we are to attempt to understand the general nature of discontinuities between modern and premodern habits of thinking. But I do think there are fruitful and less fruitful ways of attempting to gather these and other issues together.

In this vein, I am currently partial to suggestion supplied by Amos Funkenstein in his 1986 work *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (Princeton University Press). In this work, Funkenstein suggested that the unfolding of a variety of discontinuities such as those mentioned above might, in some sense, be gathered together by understanding them as a trend towards a secular theological world view. Given the seemingly paradoxical nature of his notion of "secular theology," it should be clear that "secular" is used here—pardon the expression—in an entirely orthodox sense. That is, throughout the Renaissance, the philosophical profession became increasingly practiced in universities rather than monasteries, and its concerns became increasingly distanced from the explicitly ecclesiastical concerns that had shaped Western medieval philosophy to a much larger degree. But, in this sense, "secular" does not mean materialist, atheist, or even non-religious. Rather, as Funkenstein puts it: "Theology became 'secularized' in many parts of Europe in the original sense of the word: appropriated by laymen" (5). Accordingly, concerning the legacy of this secular theology in modern science, Funkenstein writes:

A new and unique approach to matters divine, a secular theology of sorts, emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to a short career. It was *secular* in that it was conceived by laymen for laymen. Galileo and Descartes, Leibniz and Newton, Hobbes and Vico were either not clergymen at all or did not acquire an advanced degree in divinity. They were not professional theologians, and yet they treated theological issues at length. Their theology was oriented toward the world, *ad seculum*. The new sciences and scholarship, they believed, made the traditional modes of theologizing obsolete.... Science, philosophy, and theology [were] seen as almost one and the same occupation. (3, all emphases in the original).

In short, then, according to Funkenstein, it is not that the significant transitions or discontinuities between modern and premodern habits of thinking are accomplished through the secularization of knowledge claims in general but rather that they are brought about, initially at least, through the secularization of theological imagination. Specifically, Funkenstein claims that these transitions are to be located in epochal shifts in the regulative ideals associated with understandings of the divine attributes of *omnipresence*, *omnipotence*, and *benevolence*, the last of these especially as it relates to the question of divine providence. And it is in relation to these that it is possible for me to return to the question of the future of Cusanus research.

First, in relation to the discontinuity that arises between modernity and pre-modernity on the issue of the significance of *divine omnipresence*, I would first want simply to state that I am in general agreement with Elizabeth Brient's claim in *The Immanence of the Infinite* (Catholic University of America Press, 2002) that Nicholas of Cusa's articulation of a philosophy of the immanence of the infinite provides a rich index of an epochal transformation in the making. I might also mention that I am generally convinced by her criticism that Hans Blumenberg's emphasis on nominalism causes him to misidentify how Nicholas of Cusa indeed exposes this epochal threshold. That is, to use the schema suggested by Funkenstein, Blumenberg seems to try to interpret how Nicholas of Cusa contributes to a shift towards a secularized understanding of omnipotence rather than, as Brient helps us see, a shift in relation to the more relevant question for Nicholas of Cusa of omnipresence. In both cases—that of the epochal shift in understandings of both omnipresence and omnipotence—the issue of the infinite would appear to be crucial, but it is in relation to the consequences of the secularization of the understanding of omnipresence that Nicholas of Cusa's articulation of the immanence of the infinite in the cosmos would be more significant for exposing this shift.

Returning to Funkenstein's schema, the other main area in which the future of Cusanus research might help to disclose the modern significance of the legacy of premodern thinking concerns the attribute of benevolence, especially as it relates to the question of divine providence in history. To my knowledge, Nicholas of Cusa is explicitly concerned with the issues of time and temporality *mainly* in *Dialogus de genesi*, *De principio*, and the third part of *On Learned Ignorance*.³ As might be expected, in general, these texts confirm that Nicholas of Cusa's dependence on the notion of the immanence of the infinite in created things commits him to a philosophy of history that also contracts the immanence of the absolutely infinite and therefore eternal in the infinite but temporal unfolding of the cosmos. But, even if he had said nothing explicit about the issue it seems to me that Nicholas of Cusa's fundamental perspectivalism and its curious presupposition of the contracted immanence of the infinite in the cosmos would still have provided fruitful ways to unfold an investigation of an epochal shift in the understanding of history. Indeed, there are at least two ways in which this issue is pertinent to the future of Cusanus research.

The first way to think about how Nicholas of Cusa indicates an epochal shift in the understanding of history is to connect the

³ In *De docta ignorantia* (1440) see especially III.5-12. Here Nicholas of Cusa is concerned not only with the relationship between eternity, immortality, and temporality in Christ, but also how, through Christ as mediator, human beings are perfected and achieve immortality. In *Dialogus de genesi* (1447), see especially part II in which Nicholas of Cusa discusses how infinite (immeasurable) duration is related to the Eternal Absolute Same which is its only adequate measure. In *De principio* (1459), the point that Nicholas of Cusa discusses in relation to in relation to a variety of textual sources concerning the question of Creation is that the One Beginning (the Beginning of Beginning in Eternity) is exalted and uncontracted and gathers into itself (enfolds) the multitude of existing things. By the same token, multitude is a contracted/contractible oneness as only a representation of revelation of Absolute Oneness.

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issue of the temporal unfolding of the cosmos with the temporal unfolding of human beings' attempts to understand the cosmos. In this sense, what Nicholas of Cusa provides is an understanding of history that presupposes the infinite unity of that which human beings strive to understand adequately but perennially fail to accomplish from the singular, finite perspectives possible for them as singular, finite beings. I think, then, that Brient is probably right that such a view has something important to tell us about an epochal shift towards a regulative ideal of adequate knowledge that implicitly endorses a notion of scientific progress towards an infinitely deferred but presupposed unitary understanding of the cosmos. Thus, viewed in the light of a modern legacy of Nicholas of Cusa, we may see that the success of this scientific activity according to the regulative ideal of what we might call *philosophia perennis* is in its progress both despite and in relation to the recalcitrance of the world to a fully adequate understanding of it.

The second way in which Cusanus research might disclose a new direction in the development of modern philosophies of history concerns his understanding of the necessity of a *presupposition* of the unity of faith as a guiding regulative ideal for the endeavor to understand the world. In relation to this point, the text that I think can be particularly fruitful is the *De pace fidei* in which Nicholas of Cusa offers what he takes to be a convincing demonstration of the ways in which the diversity of religious rites necessarily presupposes both the unity of a single true faith and the possibility—again, perennially deferred—of achieving a lasting religious harmony. In this text especially, I think we can find a resource for investigating ways in which modern philosophies of history (e.g., those of Kant or Hegel) often remain tacitly wedded to an understanding of the teleology of history that is distinctly Christian despite their claims to understand the *universal* features of historical processes.

I will end with this point because it is the one in relation to which I might more forcefully make clear what I think the future of Cusanus research might offer in relation to the general question of the modern legacy of Renaissance philosophy and theology. In short, it seems to me that although modern philosophy and science both insist on the irrelevance of the empirical experience of personal revelation in the investigation and production of knowledge, they nonetheless retain the regulative ideals of the heritage of Renaissance Christian theology. In light of this, it would not be a mistake to understand the general intellectual character of the Enlightenment, for instance, as largely guided by an imperative always to challenge the legitimacy of "faith"—understood in the context of personal revelation—as an access to truth. Accordingly, then, I do acknowledge a significant gap between modern thinking and that of Nicholas of Cusa. However, I also maintain that there are ways in which this gap can and should be understood as bridged. And the ways in which modern philosophies of history often tend to involve an immanent universal teleology would be a sign of this.

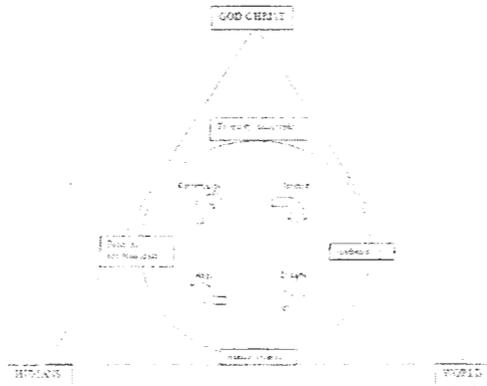
To wrap up, the kinds of questions I would find most compelling in the future of Cusanus research are those which would challenge the uniqueness of modern philosophical conceptions of reason

that understand it to be a strictly secular human enterprise that obtains or constructs non-theologically grounded knowledge of the organization of the *cosmos* and/or of a universal plan of human history. Or to restate this more precisely, it is the *significance* of reason's *secular character* according to these varieties of modern philosophy that might fruitfully be put in question by the future of Cusanus research.

Specifically, to the extent that Nicholas of Cusa is a part of a modern legacy of Renaissance philosophy and theology (and to the extent that this legacy is to be made part of a program for the future of Cusanus research), his role in this legacy may help to expose the degree to which "modern" conceptions of reason remain wedded to the constitutive dimensions of their particularly Christian theological heritage. That is, to put this as succinctly as possible, if I am right that what Cusanus research may help to disclose for us is the degree to which modern philosophy operates largely in the same intellectual space as Renaissance philosophy or at least in relation to the same crises of Renaissance philosophy, then what would still be required if modern philosophy were to live up to its own perennial insistence on its own legitimacy and uniqueness would be to engage in self-criticism in light of a recognition of its continual disavowal of the modern legacy of Renaissance philosophy and the historical predominance of its Christian theology.

III. "The Future of Cusanus Studies - Some Proposals"

**Clyde Lee Miller, State University
of New York - Stony Brook**



First of all, I would like to express my appreciation for the invitation to join this panel and my deep regard for my co-panelists, Prof. Euler and Prof. Aleksander, and for their work. As I thought about being on this panel, I realized that no one, including myself, has ever thought of me as a prophet. Even so, I will not hesitate to make at least one prediction about the future of Cusanus studies, say for the next fifty years. Looking back at the last fifty years, I predict that, barring some social or ecological global catastrophe, we can expect that to see that Cusanus studies will bring us more of the same: conferences, papers, monographs, translations,