

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) was active during the Renaissance, developing adventurous ideas even while serving as a churchman. The religious issues with which he engaged — spiritual, apocalyptic and institutional — were to play out in the Reformation. These essays reflect the interests of Cusanus but also those of Gerald Christianson, who has studied church history, the Renaissance and the Reformation. The book places Nicholas into his times but also looks at his later reception. The first part addresses institutional issues, including Schism, conciliarism, indulgences and the possibility of dialogue with Muslims. The second treats theological and philosophical themes, including nominalism, time, faith, religious metaphor, and prediction of the end times.

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## Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition

*Essays in Honor of  
Gerald Christianson*



*Edited by*

Thomas M. Izbicki, Jason Aleksander  
& Donald F. Duclow

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# Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition

*Essays in Honor of Gerald Christianson*

*Edited by*

Thomas M. Izbicki, Jason Aleksander and  
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Bronze memorial plaque of Cusanus by Werner Kofler, Brixen Cathedral, 2001. Photo: Geraldine Duclow, with permission of the photographer.

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Frontispiece: Gerald Christianson, by Gregory Christianson, with permission of the photographer

# A Tribute to Gerald Christianson

*Thomas M. Izbicki, Jason Aleksander, and Donald F. Duclow*

Jerry Christianson has compiled an enviable record as a teacher and a scholar. His interests lie not only in Church history but also in music and liturgy, and his work extends beyond formal academics to ministry and community service. Jerry's role in the American Cusanus Society has included organizing conferences in Gettysburg, getting the proceedings of the conferences into print, and serving in executive positions, including three years as president. Therefore, we, his Cusanus colleagues, offer this tribute in gratitude for his labors and commitment.<sup>1</sup>

Born and raised in Minnesota, Jerry Christianson received his BA from Gustavus Adolphus College in 1955 and a BD from Augustana Seminary in 1960. He was ordained to the Lutheran clergy in June 1960. Jerry then undertook graduate study at the University of Chicago, receiving an MA in 1964 and a PhD in 1972. He taught at Augustana in 1966–67. Later in 1967, Jerry began teaching at the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, now part of the United Lutheran Seminary. His teaching areas were the early Church, history of worship, the medieval Church, and Christian art and spirituality. In 1988, he became the Central Pennsylvania Synod Professor of Church History, a position he held through 2005, perhaps the longest tenure of a faculty member in his seminary's history. Christianson served as Professor Emeritus of Church History in Residence from 2006 to 2010.

A former student at the seminary, Gretchen Cranz Fornof, remembers Jerry Christianson's teaching role fondly:

While getting my MAR (1976) and MDiv (1996) at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, I was a student in every course he taught. Jerry's enthusiasm for his subjects and devotion to his students shone during classes and daily on campus. His broad interest in church history and worship, great Christian thinkers, and music is an integral part of who Jerry is. I will always be thankful for his presence in my life!

Another former student, Philip Krey, a contributor to this volume, says of Jerry's impact on his career:

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1 The Society previously honored Jerry with a session titled "Late Medieval Reform of Church and Society" at the 39th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 2004.

As I reflect upon Gerald Christianson as a teacher, I recall that when I arrived right out of college in 1972 at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, he was already established as a professor there. That did not prevent him from immediately drafting me to present my college honors thesis on William Langland at a seminar that he was teaching on the late-medieval period. Petrified, I did my best, and, as usual, he showered encouragement and praise for my efforts. As a teacher, he was most adept at communicating the long-term relevance of the medieval period—its institutions and reforms—to contemporary reforms in the Church and our modern democratic institutions. He was a recruiter and a cultivator of prospects for historical and medieval scholarship. There is little doubt that he was the primary influence in my going on to graduate school to study with his own teacher, Bernard McGinn, at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Like Dr. McGinn, Dr. Christianson has remained a teacher and mentor for his students throughout his career. He introduced us to his friends and colleagues. Jerry invited us to write and co-edit books thus launching our careers as scholars. He drafted many of us into the American Cusanus Society, where we were invited to present to international scholars. Jerry never thought it beneath himself to be part of the simplest but essential preparations for the seminars and conferences to which he invited us. He also painstakingly encouraged us to attend the annual Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo where he would join us for lunch and network for us. An accomplished scholar and exquisite writer, one always felt that he was looking out for you. He understands what it means to be Christ to the neighbor. To many he has been a mentor, encourager, door opener, inspiration, and friend.

As a publishing scholar, Jerry Christianson has authored a highly significant monograph, *Cesarini, the Conciliar Cardinal: The Basel Years, 1431–1438* (St Ottilien: 1979). His articles include studies of Francis of Assisi, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pius II), Giuliano Cesarini, Nicholas of Cusa, and ecclesiastical reform. He urged the American Cusanus Society to begin publishing the proceedings of its conferences, and he has often taken the lead in those projects. Working with Thomas Izbicki, Michiel Decaluwé, and Christopher Bellitto, he has co-edited several volumes of scholarly articles, most of them focused on Nicholas of Cusa, the Council of Basel, and other Church councils. He has been involved in translating important texts from Latin and German, while also editing important and often unpublished work of F. Edward Cranz, Morimichi Watanabe, and H. Lawrence Bond. His patience and steady hand have advanced all of these scholarly projects, along with studies of the German Awakening, music, and liturgy.

Jerry Christianson's many roles in church and the community are too numerous to list, even in brief. His services to the Lutheran Church are many and are deeply seated in his historical scholarship. Service to the Gettysburg community includes engagement with the region's history, most recently with the Seminary Ridge Museum in the original seminary building. He is the founder of Music Gettysburg and longtime host of the radio program "The Seminary Explores." His commitments have included Habitat for Humanity and historic preservation.

Few scholars have so fine a record of dedication to church, scholarship, and community. Consequently, we have assembled these essays in this festschrift to honor Jerry, our colleague in the American Cusanus Society, a moving force in much that we have done, and a generous host of academic gatherings.

These studies fall into two sections. The first section is largely historical, covering areas in which Jerry Christianson has excelled. Walter Andreas Euler provides an overview of Cusanus' place in the Church of his day, dealing with both the diversity he saw around him and the unity he wished to achieve without losing that diversity. His effort to find harmony in the dissonance of conciliar and papal politics marks Nicholas out as an unusual figure in his generation. This approach was carried over into Nicholas' efforts to deal with the Turkish threat to Christendom. The remaining studies in this section follow a roughly chronological sequence. Nicholas was born into the Great Western Schism (1378–1417), which divided the Western church between two, and then three, claimants to the papacy. Special attention is given to the Council of Constance (1414–18), including the conciliarist ideology it adopted to end the schism (Morrissey), its successful diplomatic efforts to end the schism (Stump), and the contemporary fight over whether tyrannicide is licit (Flanagan). There follow studies involving the Council of Basel (1431–49) and Cusanus himself. Topics covered include Basel's decision-making ethos, compared with other political bodies of the time (Decaluwé). Nicholas' career as papal legate occurred in this context. His legation addressed reform but also dealt with the hot topic of indulgences (Izbicki). Two essays discuss the cardinal's views of Islam in the *Cribratio Alkorani*: John Monfasani argues that the *Cribratio Alkorani* is more irenic and scholarly in its approach to Islam than were the writings of most of Nicholas' contemporaries, or even his own *De pace fidei*; and Il Kim links the *Cribratio Alkorani* to Christian antiquarianism in papal Rome. This section concludes with studies linking Cusanus to Martin Luther and the Reformation. The reformers treated Cusanus as someone who failed to follow through on Basel's reforming efforts (Krey), but he also was an early proponent of the reform of the Roman curia that was still being urged in the sixteenth century (Bellitto). In the section's final essay, Knut Alfvåg surveys the issues on which Cusanus and Luther shared common ground, as well as of those on which their approaches strongly differed.

The second section focuses on Cusanus' unique line of thought, a subject pursued creatively at the Gettysburg conferences. The first two essays analyze Nicholas' views of faith in both their historical and pastoral contexts (Casarella) and their philosophical implications (Aleksander). The following articles examine Cusanus' contested place in intellectual history. Meredith Ziebart argues that Cusanus' theory of knowledge fits squarely within the Aristotelian rather than the nominalist tradition, and Elizabeth Brient traces the Neoplatonic sources for Nicholas's account of time and eternity. Taking up the Platonic strand, David Albertson shows how Cusanus' geometry—derived from Thierry of Chartres and his heirs—shapes the mystical theology of *De visione Dei*. Exploring the metaphor of light in *De visione Dei*, Clyde Lee Miller goes on to suggest that “the light of metaphor” illumines much of Nicholas' symbolic theology. Donald Duclow then examines Cusanus' wide-ranging play with coins as metaphors for human beings as stamped with God's image. The volume concludes appropriately with the apocalyptic, both as it appeared in Nicholas' Brixen preaching (Serina) and as he attempted to conjecture or surmise the timing of the End in his *Conjecture on the Last Days* (McGinn).

The editors offer these studies as a tribute to Jerry Christianson in gratitude for his work as a teacher, scholar, colleague, and churchman.