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Nicholas of Cusa

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Introduction

Over the past century, Nicholas of Cusa (Nicolaus Cusanus, Nikolaus von Kues, Nicolas de Cues, Nicolás de Cusa, Nicolau de Cusa, Nicola Cusano) (b. 1401–d. 1464) has garnered increasing attention as a barometer of the intellectual history of the European Renaissance. From a superficial perspective, it is not difficult to account for this interest. Nicholas's theological and philosophical treatises offer a unique perspective on human nature and its relationship to the divine. Moreover, his ecclesiastical career is impressive. In 1432 he took part in the debates at the Council of Basel, where he defended the Conciliarist cause in a manner that earned him a reputation for diplomacy. In 1437–1438, having switched allegiance on the Conciliarism debate, Nicholas was appointed by Pope Eugenius IV to a delegation sent to Constantinople to summon the Byzantine emperor, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and other high Eastern Church officials to the Council of Florence. He was made cardinal in 1448 and appointed Bishop of Brixen in 1450. Beginning in 1451, he served as papal legate and, among other things, was charged with introducing religious reforms in Germany. In 1459 and 1460, Nicholas governed Rome and the Papal States as *Legatus urbis in temporalibus* while Pope Pius II attended the Congress of Mantua. In the last six years of his life, Nicholas served in the papal curia as an advisor to the pope. Given the significance of Nicholas's ecclesiastical career, it is no surprise that a good deal of academic attention on Nicholas has focused on his role in the history of the church. Nevertheless, it would also be fair to say that a good deal of the attention that is focused on the life and thought of Nicholas of Cusa is the legacy of prior generations of scholars who saw in his theoretical work an opportunity to define the most salient features of transformations in the habits of thinking leading from the Middle Ages into the epoch of modernity. Thus, although contemporary scholars have not been able to achieve any clear consensus on the question of whether Nicholas belongs to the Middle Ages or to modernity, the field of Cusanus studies has become much more attentive to the possibility that the uniqueness and significance of Nicholas's vision is a function of his ability to synthesize and redeploy a variety of strands in the Catholic intellectual tradition—strands that are as apt to involve practical matters of canon law and church reform as they are to hinge on a unique and richly developed mystical theology. Given the flourishing of the attention devoted to Nicholas in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the choices about which texts to include in this article were difficult ones. The rationale for this article's predominant focus on scholarship of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is that, insofar as the recent studies listed here enter into the debates that have been shaped by their predecessors, the sources mentioned here will point readers to the prior work in the field not acknowledged here.

General Overviews

Despite the currently flourishing state of scholarship on Nicholas of Cusa, there remain relatively few works (especially in English) that are devoted to providing non-specialists with accessible introductions to his career and thought. Kremer 2002 provides a basic introduction to the life and career of Nicholas of Cusa. Meuthen 2010 (originally published in 1964) remains the best biography available. Flasch 2004 and Gandillac 2001 provide accessible overviews of Nicholas's thought in German and French. Bellitto, et al. 2004 and Watanabe 2011 provide useful overviews of a number of topics relevant to contemporary Cusanus scholarship. Albertson 2010 is a good entry point for those wanting an orientation to current key topics of interest and debate in scholarship on Nicholas of Cusa.

Albertson, David. "Mystical Philosophy in the Fifteenth Century: New Directions in Research on Nicholas of Cusa." *Religion Compass* 4 (2010): 471–485.

Albertson's review of recent literature on Nicholas of Cusa highlights scholarship that attempts "to unify potential divisions in the German cardinal's writings: between science and religion, novelty and tradition, action and contemplation, and mathematics and theology" (p. 471).

Bellitto, Christopher M., Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson, eds. *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*. New York: Paulist, 2004.

Contains thirteen essays providing overviews of the main topics of inquiry in Cusanus studies as well as a glossary and an extensive, topically arranged bibliography (pp. 409–457) that "attempts to list all published literature in English on Nicholas of Cusa from Tudor times to the end of 2002" (p. 411).

Flasch, Kurt. *Nikolaus von Kues in Seiner Zeit: Ein Essay*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2004.

Flasch's scholarship on Nicholas of Cusa has made a significant impact on the field for more than forty years. In this brief volume (111 pages), however, Flasch intends to reach an audience of non-specialists. His essay focuses on Nicholas's biography and career and includes annotated selections from Nicholas's writings.

Gandillac, Maurice de. *Nicolas de Cues*. Paris: Ellipses, 2001.

Gandillac's first major contribution to scholarship on Nicholas of Cusa was his 1942 dissertation *La philosophie de Nicolas de Cues*. In this brief (128 pages) introduction, Gandillac intends to reach an audience of non-specialists. Includes annotated selections from Nicholas's writings.

Kremer, Klaus. *Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). One of the Greatest Germans of the 15th Century*. Translated by Frankie Kann and Hans-Joachim Kann. Trier, Germany: Paulinus, 2002.

A brief (seventy-nine pages), basic introduction to Nicholas of Cusa's biography, career, sources, and legacy. Originally published as *Nikolaus von Kues (1401–1464), Einer der grössten Deutschen des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Paulinus, 1999); also available in French as *Nicolas de Cues: (1401–1464); Un Des Plus Grands Allemands Du 15e Siècle*, trans. Patrick Wilwert (Trier, Germany: Paulinus, 2002). Includes a number of full color images.

Meuthen, Erich. *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography*. Translated by David Crowner and Gerald Christianson. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010.