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# *Nicholas of Cusa and the End of the Conciliar Movement: A Humanist Crisis of Identity*

JAMES E. BIECHLER

The ignominious end of the conciliar movement in the mid-fifteenth century strikes many contemporary historians and theologians as one of the tragedies in the history of western civilization. Having shown great promise as an instrument of ecclesiastical reform and credited with ending the scandalous Great Western Schism in 1417, the movement for all practical purposes reached an inglorious end with the signing of the Concordat of Vienna in 1448. Though the tragic dimensions of the movement's demise are somewhat diminished by the truth of Tierney's conjecture that "the merely constitutional reforms emphasized in the conciliar programme could not have produced the much-needed regeneration in the whole life of the Church",<sup>1</sup> one is nevertheless inclined to view with sadness the neutralization of the nascent democratic aspirations which conciliarism represented.

Nicholas of Cusa not only witnessed the end of the conciliar movement but played a considerable role in bringing it about. Not that he had always opposed conciliar ideas; quite the contrary. When he made his debut at the Council of Basel in 1432 as advocate for Ulrich von Manderscheid in his disputed episcopal election case, Cusanus held deep conciliarist convictions. About two years later he presented the council with his *De concordantia catholica*, a lengthy work begun, so it appears, to treat the question of superiority of council to pope, but in its final form, a comprehensive statement of political theory and ecclesiology.<sup>2</sup> The work, for all its ambiguities and inconsistencies, is an unmistakable defense of the conciliar position. One historian even goes so far as to call it "the greatest of all the Conciliar tracts."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Cusanus played an active part in Basel's *declaratio contumaciae* pronounced against Eugenius IV on February 19, 1433 and again in its threat to suspend the pope later the same year. He also prepared a short treatise, *De auctoritate praesidendi in concilio generali*, in which he denied that a papal legate has any judicial or legislative authority over the council. Thus while few today would view Cusanus as rabidly anti-papal, his conciliarist creden-

1. Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory: The Contributions of the Medieval Canonists from Gratian to the Great Schism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1955), pp. 246-247. The recent study by A. J. Black, *Monarchy and Community: Political Ideas in the Later Conciliar Controversy 1430-1450* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970) shows how, ironic as it seems, political monarchism, both secular and ecclesiastical, was the immediate successor and ideological beneficiary of the mature conciliar doctrine.
2. *De concordantia catholica, Praefatio editoris* (14:10). The works of Nicholas will be cited from *Nicholai de Cusa Opera Omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1932-) wherever possible. Volume and page number of this edition will be given in parentheses. See Paul E. Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 36-37. The same general topic was treated by Morimichi Watanabe, *The Political Ideas of Nicholas of Cusa with Special Reference to His De concordantia catholica* (Geneva: Droz, 1963).
3. Francis Oakley, *Council Over Pope? Towards a Provisional Ecclesiology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 68.

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tials are among the best attested of his age. Although he is usually regarded as a moderate among conciliarists, his *De concordantia catholica* and his actions at the Council show that he nevertheless had been prepared to carry the moderate constitutionalism of Constance to the more extreme conclusions espoused by some at Basel.

Cusanus remained one of the most active participants in and supporters of Basel's reform program at least until the end of 1436.<sup>4</sup> On November 19 of that year, in the name of the German delegation, he had argued for postponing the vote on the site for the proposed council of reunion with the Greeks in the hope that further consideration would incline the majority to approve a location suitable to both the pope and the Greeks, all this "pro bono pacis et concordiae."<sup>5</sup> His definitive break with the council occurred on May 7, 1437 when he formally took his stand with the minority faction in that tragicomic ritual enacted shortly after dawn in the Basel cathedral, each faction simultaneously reading its decree, shouting its "Placet" and singing its "Te Deum."<sup>6</sup> From that moment on, Nicholas associated himself ever more intimately with the interests of the papacy. So complete was his conversion and so assiduous were his labors for the papal cause that Aeneas Sylvius would refer to him as "the Hercules of all the followers of Eugenius."<sup>7</sup> And for the rest of his life Cusanus would direct his political energies to the promotion of papal interests.

The contemporary historian is in danger of minimizing the significance of Cusanus' change of allegiance; in many ways his action seemed the natural and intelligent thing to do. For the council had been beset with serious difficulties from the outset, and these only increased as time went on. Many despaired of any true reform coming from a general council which had never been able to muster any but a comparatively meager attendance. This fact gave solid foundation to the arguments of those who denied Basel's claims to be truly representative of the whole church.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, for the first several years of its existence the council had proceeded in defiance of a papal bull of dissolution issued by Eugenius IV in December 1431. So because other ecclesiastics had preceded Cusanus in abandoning Basel and others soon afterwards followed him, including Guiliamo Cardinal Cesarini who had been a president of the council, there arises a strong temptation to regard all these decisions as generically identical and thus

4. Werner Krämer, "Der Beitrag des Nikolaus von Kues zum Unionskonzil mit der Ostkirche," *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* (hereafter *MFCG* 9(1971): 44-45. This necessitates revision of the conclusion of Edmund Vansteenberghe, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues 1401-1464: L'Action-La Pensée* (Paris, 1920 [reprinted Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1963]), pp. 59-60, that Cusanus' declining of his election as judge on the *deputatio fidei* in March 1436 thereby showed his unwillingness to participate in any further antipapal proceedings.
5. Johannes Haller, et al., eds. *Concilium Basiliense. Studien und Quellen zur Geschichte des Konzils von Basel*, 8 vols. (Basel, 1896-1936), 4:338, 351. The actual vote was taken in December 1436, but the question remained open pending negotiations with the Greeks and with the citizens of Avignon, the place favored by Basel's majority.
6. Krämer, p. 47. According to the accepted doctrine of the conciliarists the decision of the *pars maior* should have prevailed. But the minority took the style *pars sanior* and found additional juridical consolation in the claim that their *placet* was shouted before the other!
7. "Hercules tamen omnium Eugenianorum Nicolaus Cusanus existimatus est . . . ." Aeneas Sylvius Piccolominus (Pius II), *De gestis concilii Basiliensis commentariorum libri II*, ed. by Denys Hay and W. K. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 14.
8. For an analysis of the several positions taken on the issue of representation see the recent well-documented study of Werner Krämer, "Die ekklesiologische Auseinandersetzung um die wahre Repräsentation auf dem Basler Konzil," *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 8 (1971): 202-237.

to overlook those particulars which alone make possible a convincing and accurate picture. But without denying common features, there are unique aspects of Cusanus' action which, in addition to their crucial importance for an adequate understanding of his life, lay bare deeper dimensions of the intellectual and spiritual currents of his age and afford a special access to the religious dynamic of Renaissance Europe. Cusanus' important role in the development of conciliar theory makes his transfer of allegiance to the papal party all the more significant, for in that change of course the demise of the conciliar movement itself was presaged. That is, the cultural factors operative in Nicholas of Cusa's conversion played a similarly decisive part in the disintegration of conciliaristic momentum.

Many explanations of Cusanus' behavior have been offered, the most recent and comprehensive being that of Paul Sigmund, who attempts to locate Nicholas' political ideal in the medieval Neoplatonic tradition as well as in its canon law context.<sup>9</sup> Because of its wider scope his analysis is much more satisfying than that of Josef Koch, who emphasized the matter of reunion with the Greeks as Cusanus' compelling motivation.<sup>10</sup> Without underestimating the importance of the reunion issue—it was, after all, the proximate occasion for and Cusanus' own retrospective justification of his behavior—the argument remains unconvincing in the light of the *religious* nature of Cusanus' earlier convictions. For the conciliarism of the *De concordantia catholica* with its confirmation in Nicholas' actions was solidly founded upon theology and thus, in its author's view, participated in the certitude of faith and the stability of the divine order. In that context even Sigmund's interpretation somehow fails to reach that depth of analysis at which Cusanus' new orientation could be explained without giving the impression that he was moved by mere expedience or ambition. Sigmund's failure to give a satisfactory explanation of Cusanus' action is illustrated in his contradictory statements that "there was a fundamental consistency between his early and later thought"<sup>11</sup> and that "there is a very fundamental shift in Nicholas' thinking between the two dates [1433 and 1442]".<sup>12</sup> Only the latter conclusion is tenable

9. Sigmund, pp. 39-118. The most recent contribution to the discussion is Erich Meuthen, "Nikolaus von Kues in der Entscheidung zwischen Konzil und Papst," in *Nikolaus von Kues als Promotor der Ökumene*, *MFCG* 9(1971): 19-33. In his opinion subsequent research will not substantially alter Koch's conclusion that Cusanus' decision pivoted on *aedificatio* vs. *destructio ecclesiae* with the Greek reunion issue as its concrete expression. See n. 10, below.
10. Josef Koch, *Nikolaus von Kues und seine Umwelt. Untersuchungen zu Cusanus-Texte IV, Briefe, Erste Sammlung in Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften* (hereafter *SBH*) 1944-1948, no. 2 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1948), p. 20. Other explanations of Cusanus' behavior have ranged from avarice, alleged by Theodor Stumpf, *Die politischen Ideen des Nicolaus von Kues* (Cologne, 1865), p. 101 (cited in Sigmund, p. 226 n.) to zealotness for harmony, asserted by Rudolf Haubst, "Die leitenden Gedanken und Motive der cusanischen Theologie," *MFCG* 4(1964): 257-277. Most scholars have abandoned the single-motive explanations and see Cusanus as influenced by a complex of political or ecclesiastical considerations. For some examples see Henry Bett, *Nicholas of Cusa* (London: Methuen, 1932), pp. 22, 28-30; E. F. Jacob, *Essays in the Conciliar Epoch* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1953), pp. 250-251; idem, *Essays in Later Medieval History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), pp. 121-122; Karl Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1968; first published, Munich: R Piper, 1964), pp. 180-190; Vansteenberghe, pp. 56-65; Watanabe, pp. 16, 97-98, 113-114.
11. Sigmund, p. 10.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 280. In the case of Cesarini such a marked shift of thinking is not evident and one cannot, therefore, speak in terms of a "conversion." This conclusion is convincingly demonstrated by Gerald Christianson, "Cardinal Cesarini at the Council of Basel, 1431-1438" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago 1972), pp. 471-475. Christianson (p. 474 n.) also rejects the opinion of Morimichi Watanabe, "The Episcopal Election of 1430 in Trier and Nicholas of Cusa," *Church History* 39(1970):

and finds ready confirmation in a comparative analysis of the *De concordantia catholica* and Cusanus' letter to Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo of May 20, 1442.<sup>13</sup> While it is quite possible to discover lines of philosophical and theological continuity between the earlier (conciliar) statement of Cusanus' position and his later (papalist) position, the radical change of posture remains glaringly obvious and must be explained.

It is my contention that Cusanus' abandonment of the conciliar party in favor of alignment with the papal position was far more than a political act. More comprehensively understood, his change of allegiance involved a fundamental realignment of religious and theological values as well as other significant intellectual and vocational changes. To say that Nicholas' decision to abandon Basel and espouse the papal cause marked a turning point in his life is self-evident. Only on the deeper level of personal crisis and religious conversion—one might say identity conflict and resolution—do the various elements of inherited tradition, cultural environment and social interaction merge and find their focal point. In this context it is perhaps misleading to speak of a "decision" to abandon the council or the conciliar position. There is no evidence of any intention so specific. The reorientation, because it was so radical, took place more gradually even though it was, for all of that, not without its moments of drama and crisis.

Etienne Gilson once wrote of Augustine that "his doctrine is the metaphysics of conversion".<sup>14</sup> If the contention of the present article is correct, namely, that a similarly decisive conversion experience occurred in Cusanus' life, an experience which, for all its differences from that of Augustine, required a reorganization of the data of previous experience and resulted in basic intellectual and moral re-evaluations, then we shall have a hermeneutic tool of great importance. For the literary output of Nicholas of Cusa was of strikingly different quality after the resolution of his identity crisis. Comprehensive assessment of Cusanus' activity, including his language, can be made only with some understanding of his self-concept and intention. Works produced after the resolution of an identity conflict cannot be understood apart from their reference to that conflict, nor can they be interpreted along with previous statements as though made of the same cloth. Achievement of personality resolution out of conflicting loyalties and meaning systems inevitably leaves a residue which is sloughed off in one way or another. A man has the right to begin again, to leave his "sins" behind without being required to account for all such material in light of his new vision. Such an understanding would probably have enabled Sigmund, for example, to avoid the contradiction already mentioned.

In the case of Nicholas of Cusa, there can be little doubt that the Council of

315, that the loss of the Manderscheid case was at the root of Cusanus' alienation from Basel. Christianson's observation that it was "unlikely that a man of his [Cusanus'] theological and canonistic training would have abandoned Basel for such a shallow motive" supports the present search for deeper motivation. Watanabe's position reflects that outlined by Vansteenberghe, pp. 56-65. The inadequacy of Sigmund's explanation was pointed out in F. Edward Cranz's review of Sigmund's book, *Speculum* 41(1966): 189-191. Cranz correctly evaluates the change as radical, that is, as altering "almost completely the metaphysical basis of politics and ecclesiology" (p. 191).

13. The letter, which will be dealt with more specifically later in this article, is printed as appendix 3 to *Cusanus-Texte, II: De auctoritate presidendi in concilio generali*, ed. by Gerhard Kallen, *SBH* 1935-1936, no. 3, pp. 106-112. For a discussion of the letter's political doctrine see Sigmund, pp. 266-271. Richard H. Trame, *Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo 1404-1470* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), pp. 58-57. discusses the circumstances and importance of the letter.

14. *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 240.

Basel precipitated a personal crisis. Cusanus had come to Basel as a canon lawyer and it was precisely in the role of *doctor decretorum* that his public actions during the council were performed.<sup>15</sup> And it is clear that the young Cusanus was proud of this role. Having studied at Padua was distinction enough for a canon lawyer because by this time that university enjoyed a reputation in legal studies equal to that of the long-famous Bologna. Foreign students came in such numbers that the *natio ultramontana* was able to succeed in its demands for an additional chair of canon law which was given in 1411 to Prodocimo dei Conti, a lay canonist for whom Cusanus came to have a great respect. Among the manuscripts in Nicholas' library at Kues is a *reportatio* of Prodocimo's lectures on Book II of the *Decretals* made by Nicholas in 1423. Marginal notes indicate that Nicholas not only made repeated use of the text but that he thought highly of his teacher, referring to him as "dominus meus et pater singularis".<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, if one can accept them at face value, certain statements contained in official Venetian records would reinforce Nicholas in his canonist role, for they refer to canon law as the "principalis facultas studii" at Padua and to its *scolares* as "magni prelati et potentes viri".<sup>17</sup>

But Nicholas could also add personal accomplishment to his scholastic background; he had already won some distinction as an advocate and, so it seems, as a teacher of canon law at Cologne. Already in 1428 the newly established University of Louvain offered him its chair of canon law which he refused.<sup>18</sup> Any deficiency in his reputation as canonist would surely have been remedied at Basel. In addition to the canonical treatises he presented to the council—his *De concordantia catholica* was no doubt the most significant canonical work produced by a council participant—Nicholas could point to his relationship to Cesarini, for if Basel bore any resemblance to Constance (and in the minds of its participants it had to), then Cesarini was its hero as Zabarella had been the hero of Constance. And what all three—Zabarella, Cesarini and Cusanus—had in common was Padua, canon law and conciliarism.

The Council of Constance had ended the Great Western Schism when Nicholas was a student at Padua. Perhaps he already had something of a reformer's soul by the time he came to Padua. After all, he was the son of pious, middle-class Christians who surely must have been scandalized by the ecclesiastical strife and schism of the time. During the formative years of Nicholas' youth, two, and for a time even three, popes claimed the obedience and support of Christians, and the hopeless confusion of public opinion was compounded by the uncertainties and disagreements of learned and saintly individuals.<sup>19</sup>

15. Nicholas was *cancellarius* to the bishop-elect, Ulrich von Manderscheid, and head of the six-man delegation conducting the case. In this official capacity he also shared in the papal censure of excommunication leveled against Ulrich. Erich Meuthen, *Das Trierer Schisma von 1450 auf dem Basler Konzil. Zur Lebensgeschichte des Nicolaus von Kues* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1964), pp. 83, 89.

16. Alois Krehňák, "Die Kanonistischen Aufzeichnungen des Nikolaus von Kues in Cod. Cus. 220 als Mitschrift einer Vorlesung seines Paduaner Lehrers Prodocimus de Comitibus," *MFCG* 2 (1962): 80

17. *Ibid.*, p. 81 n.

18. He refused a similar offer in 1435. See Edmond Vansteenbergh, "Quelques lectures de jeunesse de Nicolas de Cues," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, 3 (1928): 277; Erich Meuthen, "Neue Schlaglichter auf das Leben des Nikolaus von Kues," *MFCG* 4 (1964): 39.

19. See J. N. Figgis, *Studies of Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius 1414-1685* (Cambridge: University Press, 1956; first published 1907), pp. 38-39.

When Nicholas matriculated at the University of Heidelberg early in 1416, the Council of Constance was attempting to end the scandalous division. The same growing nationalist attitudes which lay at the root of the Great Western Schism had exerted a catalytic influence on the canonical theory concerning the limitations of papal power and had added momentum to the development of ideas regarding the precise nature of ecclesiastical unity. As Tierney points out, "the urgent, widespread desire for unity in the Church was the very lifeblood of the conciliar movement".<sup>20</sup> This consciousness of a need for unity had grown more intense by reason of the pressures brought to bear against that religious ideal by "the real world of nascent nationalism".<sup>21</sup> Figgis had also used the term "nationalism" in referring to the reasons for Constance's failure to resolve the Hussite problem as well as in describing the attitudes of Gerson and other members of the University of Paris.<sup>22</sup> Thus, evolving consciousness of national and cultural identities contributed to the conciliar movement's twofold thrust, the one checking the absolutist tendencies of the papacy, the other striving to counter-balance the threat of religious fragmentation.

The conciliar theory had reached its maturity by the time Nicholas began his studies at Heidelberg and its faculty sided with the conciliar party. But it was at Padua during the following six years that the young German breathed the air which had given so much sustenance to the conciliar movement.<sup>23</sup> Only a few years before Cusanus began his canonical studies Zabarella had finished his brilliant career as professor there. He had left so high a reputation and so important a legacy that no student could have obtained a canon law degree without knowing Zabarella's works.<sup>24</sup> Cesarini had been taught by Zabarella and thus formed an intellectual link between him and Cusanus. Not much older than Nicholas himself, Cesarini, who lectured at Padua until perhaps 1421, was elevated to the cardinalate in 1426 and, after an unsuccessful campaign against the Hussites, assumed the presidency of the Council of Basel. He later won renown at the Council of Florence, and it was very likely on the basis of his impressive success with the Greeks that Cusanus dedicated to him his *De docta ignorantia*. Cesarini's intense political activity combined with his known personal piety only served to reinforce the Zabarellan conciliar ideas he mediated to Cusanus.<sup>25</sup>

Evidence of the profound influence of these ideas on the young Cusanus is not confined to his citation of Zabarella's *Super quinque libris Decretalium commentaria*; Cusanus' *De concordantia catholica* breathes with the spirit and doc-

20. *Foundations*, p. 239.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

22. *Studies of Political Thought*, pp. 39-40. See also n. 64 below.

23. Although the name Padua immediately suggests Marsilius and the *Defensor pacis*, his influence on the development of the conciliar theory is not yet clear. Cusanus, for example, confessed that he had not seen Marsilius' work until some ten years after leaving Padua. *De concordantia catholica*, 2:34 (14:297).

24. Walter Ullmann, *The Origins of the Great Schism* (London, 1948), p. 193. Although it is true that Zabarella's nephew, Bartholomew Zabarella, taught at Padua during Cusanus' stay there, some caution must be observed in reading such remarks as that of Erich Meuthen: "Die Tradition des Zabarella in Padua wurde zur Zeit des Cusanus forgesetzt durch seinen Neffen Bartholomäus Zabarella," *Nikolaus von Kues 1401-1464: Skizze einer Biographie* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1964), p. 16; or that of Watanabe (following Meuthen): "Zabarella's theories were expounded by his nephew Bartholomew Zabarella . . .," "The Episcopal Election," p. 301. At Basel Bartholomew took the papal side against Cesarini. See František Palacký, et al., eds., *Monumenta conciliorum generalium seculi decimi quinti*, 4 vols. (Vienna and Basel, 1857-1935), 2:475-496; Haller, 2: 504-505.

25. Sigmund, p. 24; Watanabe, "Episcopal Election of 1430," p. 300; Christianson, pp. 476-490, 172-178.

trine of the Florentine cardinal's ecclesiology. Even after Cusanus abandoned the conciliar party he continued to cling to such terminology as *consensus*, *repraesentatio* and *universitas catholicorum*, notions which formed the basis of Zabarella's conciliar doctrine. This fact should serve to underline a notion of great importance in understanding the dynamics of Nicholas' life and especially that turning point which is the subject of our present concern. A conciliaristic understanding of the church was not merely one among several competing theories which the young Cusanus had at his disposal. Given his background and education he could hardly have seen any alternative and was surely not attracted to any other position. The *via concilii*, which had so recently proven itself at Constance, must have seemed in his eyes to be part of the very essence of the church, at least of that church to which *he* belonged. The corporately structured church of the conciliarists was, up until Basel, the only church Cusanus knew. His reversal of position in the years following 1437, therefore, can only be understood as a fundamental reorientation of his life.

There can be little doubt that Basel's decision against Cusanus' client, Ulrich von Manderscheid, was a severe blow to Nicholas, not merely because of his reputation or self-image as a canonist but also because he had made that case something of a composite symbol of the rights of lay representation, of the German "nation" and even of the empire itself—all over against the papacy and curial interests.<sup>26</sup> But shattering though the blow may have been, it could hardly have induced him to transfer his allegiance to the papacy. Edmond Vansteenberghe, author of the most impressive, though now dated, biography of Cusanus, regarded the loss of the case as the decisive factor in Cusanus' abandonment of Basel.<sup>27</sup> A significant factor, yes, but probably not decisive because in rendering judgment against Manderscheid the council gave its nod to Raban of Speyer, who had earlier been appointed by Rome in an attempt to resolve the election crisis. Cusanus had seen this as unwarranted intervention by the papacy, and Basel's resolution of the case in favor of Raban could hardly have made the papal action any more palatable for the idealistic young lawyer who had fought so bitterly on behalf of his client.

Nor did Cusanus become a papalist because he came to recognize some inherent defect in the conciliar ideology. Rather his rejection of that ideology was only a kind of by-product of his "conversion" to the papacy. And that conversion itself was not ideological in its motivation. None of the steps leading Nicholas from conciliarism to papalism was so large that it could be called really definitive even though casting his lot with the minority party undoubtedly marked a turning point. Yet even the minority party continued for some time to regard itself as the true repository of Basel's conciliar authority.<sup>28</sup> One might say that Nicholas one day simply found himself on the side of the papacy and only later modified and developed a rudimentary ecclesiology to support his new allegiance. He was able to do this so cleverly that Vansteenberghe was led to believe that Cusanus did not at all alter his earlier views in their speculative considerations.<sup>29</sup> And

26. Erich Meuthen, *Skizze*, pp. 33-35; Watanabe, "Episcopal Election of 1430," pp. 313-314.

27. Vansteenberghe, p. 58.

28. See n. 6 above.

29. Vansteenberghe, p. 65: "La volte-face de Nicolas s'explique donc moins par le dedans que par le dehors: elle implique de sa part, moins un changement de théorie qu'une modification de jugement pratique."



Sigmund's conclusion that "there is a very fundamental shift in Nicholas' thinking" was based on terminal dates (1433-1442) which in fact represented extremes. Thus the dramatic and relatively sudden nature of the change was overlooked.<sup>30</sup> But fundamental though the shift was, Nicholas framed his new political view in language which had previously served the earlier, opposing ideology. This preservation of the same language through and despite a crisis provides an illusion of continuity and it indicates again that the crisis was one of identity.

For Cusanus the proposed council of reunion with the Greeks served as pre-eminent justification for his leaving the Basel majority. The matter of reunion had been one of Basel's most serious projects and its failure here ultimately led to its own ruin. The success of the Council of Florence in achieving reunion, short-lived though it was, was later seen by Nicholas as a sign of its divine guidance, the presence of the Holy Spirit in its midst. Thus, his own decision shared this divine confirmation and in the same light Basel stood condemned.<sup>31</sup>

Such a rationalization of behavior is readily understandable in the light of the contemporaneous cultural milieu. Reunion with the Greeks had long been an ardent hope in the West, and the early years of the fifteenth century saw a heightening of this desire not only as a result of the Turkish threat but also because of commercial and cultural considerations independent of that threat. Religious or spiritual motives were by no means absent either, but these seem to have been secondary to a number of diverse but secular impulses. In the first place, the risk of renewed schism in the West was still very real, as Basel's later election of an anti-pope shows, and one would therefore expect that those whose motivation to end schism was truly religious would have given priority to healing intramural divisions. Aeneas Sylvius was aware of this when he branded Cusanus and others who had left Basel as schismatics.<sup>32</sup> It must also be remembered that at the time Nicholas made his move toward the papacy it was not all that clear where or even whether the Greeks would in fact come to a Latin council; indeed, Greek hesitation remained a factor almost till sailing time when Nicholas himself seems to have had a part in dispelling some last-minute doubts.<sup>33</sup>

That Cusanus should later speak of the reunion matter as though it were the decisive factor in his abandonment of Basel needs no explanation. After the joyful conclusion of the Council of Florence anyone who had even the smallest role in bringing it about had every reason to be elated. Some ten years later when he was elevated to the cardinalate, Cusanus composed a brief sketch of his life; among his accomplishments it was proudly noted that "when he was 37 years old Pope Eugenius IV sent him to Constantinople and he conducted the Greek emperor, the patriarch and 28 archbishops of the Eastern Church back with him. They then at

30. Sigmund, p. 280. The radical nature of the change becomes clearer when one realizes that Cusanus was actively pursuing conciliar projects at least until the end of 1436 and did not break with Basel until the summer of 1437. By October 1438 he was representing the pope at the Nürnberg *Reichstag*. In the interim he traveled to Constantinople as a member of the so-called minority party but in fact as a papal representative.

31. "Nun autem exitus causarum ostendit veritatem de concilio yemenico cum Grecis habito; exitus edocuit electionem ceteram eorum, qui in numero minores fuerunt, veram et sanctam fuisse, quoniam ibi reductio et unio facta est, hic scisma." *Cusanus-Texte: IV. Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Cues*, ed. by Josef Koch, *SBH* 1942-1943, no. 2 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1944), Ep. 5, Nicholas of Cusa to an ambassador [unnamed] of King Albert II to the Frankfurt diet, November 8, 1439, p. 48. Cusanus ascribes the *exitus causarum* principle to Augustine.

32. *De gestis concilii*, pp. 14, 48.

33. Vansteenberghe, p. 62.

the Council of Florence accepted the faith of the Roman Church".<sup>34</sup> Nicholas was not the only person for whom the reunion council served to focus a variety of diverse spiritual and secular impulses both conscious and subconscious. For Eugenius IV it represented especially the consolidation of his power against the conciliarists and therefore a reassertion of papal universalism against the growing claims of national prerogative and lay ambition. It also implied the recognition of Roman primacy by the Greeks, themselves motivated, not to say humiliated, by a desire for western aid against the Turkish menace. Theological considerations seemed to be decidedly secondary where not completely absent.<sup>35</sup> And for the Roman curial humanists a council with the Greeks promised to open the vast treasures of classical antiquity reposing in the libraries of Greece.

Precisely at this last point do we finally touch the sensitive nerve center which offers a key to the understanding of Cusanus' conversion, for it is here that the cultural *novum* of the age, humanism,<sup>36</sup> coincided with ecclesiastical, philosophical, political and social "lines of force" to forge Cusanus' new identity. The groundwork had been laid at Padua. Along with the canonical formation mentioned above, Nicholas developed at Padua both broad scientific interests and a classical humanist's predilection for antiquity. Canonical training taught him the value of documentary sources, of course, and he used this principle to great effect even in his early practice of law. His success in resurrecting ancient, long-forgotten charters and decrees from dusty archives and libraries contributed to his reputation as a skillful advocate and learned canonist. Aeneas Sylvius described Cusanus as "a man both well versed in ancient literature and well informed through his wide experience".<sup>37</sup> And the ancient literature mentioned here certainly refers

34. Text in Jacob Marx, *Geschichte des Armen-Hospitals zum heiligen Nikolaus zu Cues* (Trier, 1907), pp. 243 f.
35. Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: University Press, 1959) manages to communicate something of that sense of impatience with theological hairsplitting felt by both sides. As Bessarion pointed out, the ancient theologians revered by either Greeks or Latins were actually saying the same thing even though their words were different [!]. *Ibid.*, p. 240. For the complete text of Bessarion's remarks see Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 161:543-612.
36. Without presuming to deny "the central importance of literary preoccupations in Renaissance humanism" spoken of by Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbook edition, 1961), p. 11, it is the broad cultural phenomenon which humanism had become by the early fifteenth century that interests us here. Studies construing the terms "humanist" and "humanism" more narrowly were understandably forced to regard Cusanus as only marginally a humanist, if at all. See, for example, Michael Seidlmayer, "Nikolaus von Cues und der Humanismus," in *Humanismus, Mystik und Kunst in der Welt des Mittelalters*, vol. 3 of *Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters*, ed. by Josef Koch (Leiden and Cologne: E. J. Brill, 1953), p. 3; Sigmund, p. 30; Meuthen, *Skizze*, p. 32 and Eugenio Garin, "Cusano e i platonici italiani del quattrocento," in *Nicolo' da Cusa, Relazioni tenute al Convegno Interuniversitario di Bressanone nel 1960* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1962), pp. 75-100. In what seems to be a significant modification of an earlier position, the recent article of Paul Oskar Kristeller, "A Latin Translation of Gemistos Plethon's *De fato* by Johannes Sophianos Dedicated to Nicholas of Cusa," in *Nicolo' Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno: Atti del Congresso internazionale in occasione del V centenario della morte de Nicolo' Cusano, Bressanone, 6-10 settembre 1964* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1970), p. 177 allegedly "strengthens the case for Cusanus' close connection both with Renaissance humanism and with the philosophical traditions of Platonism, connections that have been doubted or minimized by some recent students of the subject." This article cites nearly all of the standard works dealing with the early humanist connections of Cusanus as well as those describing the humanist MSS possessed by Cusanus. The reader might also be referred to the comments of Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (London: Constable, 1970), 1:14-15.
37. "...homo et priscarum literarum eruditissimus et multarum rerum usu perdoctus." *De gestis concilii*, pp. 14-15.

to more than legal documents.

By the time of the Council of Basel, Cusanus was already personally acquainted with some of the most famous Italian humanists with whom he had collaborated in the search for the lost works of classical antiquity. Poggio Bracciolini, Ambrogio Traversari, Francesco Pizolpasso, Giovanni Ceparelli, Tommaso Parentucelli and Nicolo Albergati are among the most noteworthy humanists of Nicholas' acquaintance at this early date. Although to assert that all the Italian humanists knew Cusanus by 1426 is an obvious overstatement,<sup>38</sup> the report of a recent discovery of Cicero's *De re publica* in Cologne was circulating among the humanists by October of that year. The letters of Poggio first mention the name "Nicolaus Treverensis" in May 1427. It was then that Nicholas arrived in Rome, but without the manuscript whose reported discovery had aroused so many humanist hopes; nevertheless, he was somehow able to keep the skeptical Poggio interested in the prospect that such a treasure could soon be restored to Italy. And Poggio, for all his disappointment with the vagueness of Cusanus' information about the alleged codex, apparently was able to help satisfy the young German cleric's desire to better his beneficiary status.

An improvement in his financial status seems to have been among the primary motives for the journey to Rome, for in a letter dated May 31, 1427, shortly after Cusanus' arrival, Poggio wrote that "Nicholaus Treverensis is treated in such a way that he is both ashamed and sorry for coming to the Curia for he obtained nothing from the Pope. . . ."<sup>39</sup> But by the time Nicholas was ready to return home sometime in November he could carry with him an enviable collection of papal bulls providing him with the deanships of the church of Our Lady in Oberwesel and of St. Florin in Koblenz as well as dispensing him from the law prohibiting the holding of incompatible benefices. These arrangements included the provision and, two months later, the resignation of another benefice, the parish of St. Gangolf in Trier.<sup>40</sup> Altogether, the sagacious maneuvers of the six-month business trip to Rome reveal a man with unusual political and legal acumen, a realist about his own physical well-being, not to say a shrewd and ambitious young cleric for whom the aggressive thrift and careful calculation inherited from his bourgeois father had already become virtues. Cusanus' business acumen would stand him in good stead throughout his life as an administrator of ecclesiastical property. When he later became bishop of Brixen, for example, the diocese was in debt; a few years later he was able to lend money to Duke Sigismund. And the hospital at Kues which he founded and endowed in 1458 still stands today as an irrefutable witness to the same careful administration.

The association of Cusanus' accumulation of benefices and his accumulation of manuscripts is not an accidental one, for his search for a humanist identity was intimately related to his social and economic advancement. Bourgeois and even peasant elements provided some of the dynamism which gave Renaissance humanism the qualities of an actual movement, as social as it was intellectual. Emphasizing classical antiquity meant rediscovering and ennobling one's own background, one's social origin; learning to speak and write the language of the most noble among those ancestors, especially Cicero, was an effective way of enhanc-

38. Vansteenberghe, p. 18.

39. *Poggii epistulae*, ed. by Thomas de Tonellis, 3 vols. (Florence: L. Marchini, 1832-1861) [reprinted as vol. 3 of Poggius Bracciolini *Opera Omnia* (Turin: Bottegi D'Erasmus, 1964)], 1, 50. 3, Ep. 13, May 31, 1427, p. 207.

40. Meuthen, *Skizze*, pp. 18-25.

ing one's self-image and social standing.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, incidentally, Cusanus remained as conscious of his humble origins as of his successes in transcending them, although he quite understandably attributed the improvement in his position to the church's largesse. The short autobiographical sketch mentioned above casts the account of his political achievements in a tone which suggests that the proudest accomplishment of all was his surmounting established social barriers. And in the matter of Latin style, Nicholas frequently confessed his deficiencies which he attributed to his German nationality.<sup>42</sup>

The autochthonous elements of humanism, as well as some of its political aspects, might account for its remaining largely confined to Italy until the mid-Quattrocento. Yet in a sense, all Christians and all Europeans were potentially implicated even on these levels because both the church and the empire called themselves "Roman". Moreover, by the early years of the fifteenth century, urban laymen were already considerably better educated than their ancestors had been and at the same time enjoyed more extensive vocational opportunities.<sup>43</sup> It became less and less possible to look to the clergy or to the nobility for satisfactory standards of excellence, not so much perhaps because these groups had become seriously infected by moral degeneracy (though a good deal of evidence indicates they had) but because educated laymen could no longer be satisfied with the old models.<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Heer, following von Martin and Ernst Walsler, observed that "most fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanists started out as 'little people,' as peasants from the countryside". It was not their worldliness that was new but their heightened spirituality. The reason for their sharp observation of the world stemmed both from a need to master it intellectually and spiritually and from a dissatisfaction with scholasticism and the old asceticism.<sup>45</sup>

Heer's generalization about social status is subject to qualification, of course. Many humanists came from established families of the ruling classes, as several studies have demonstrated.<sup>46</sup> But it remains indisputably true that already by the end of the fourteenth century, humanists occupied influential positions in both civil and ecclesiastical administration. Furthermore, it was well known that several of the most famous humanists, Poggio Bracciolini and Leonardo Bruni to name but two, rose from very humble beginnings to the highest social and financial status.<sup>47</sup> Their example alone was sufficient indication that humanistic studies were a means to power, wealth and intellectual influence which could be matched by none other. Understood with these qualifications, Heer's remarks apply to Nicholas of Cusa, as has already been partially shown; they will be further cor-

41. Alfred von Martin, *Sociology of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbook edition, 1963), p. 32.

42. *De concordantia catholica, Praefatio* (14:2-3); see Menthén, "Neue Schlaglichter," p. 41.

43. Wallace K. Ferguson, *Renaissance Studies* (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbook edition, 1970), p. 70.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

45. Friedrich Heer, *The Intellectual History of Europe*, 2 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books edition, 1968), 1: 290; von Martin, pp. 4-46; Ernst Walsler, *Gesammelte Studien zur Geistesgeschichte der Renaissance* (Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1932) p. 243.

46. A particularly noteworthy example because of its detailed analysis of Florentine financial records is Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists 1390-1460* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963).

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-127. About Poggio, for instance, Martines concludes (p. 127) that "owing to his lucrative affiliation with the papal curia, owing to his humanistic connections, his commercial acumen, and his Florentine friendships, Ser Poggio (later Messer) managed to raise his family to the economic level of the city's oligarchical households."

roborated as we proceed.

Cusanus' bonds with humanism, already well-formed by the time of his arrival in Basel in February 1432, would be steadily reinforced throughout the duration of the council. In particular, his friendship with Francesco Pizolpasso, bishop of Pavia and later archbishop of Milan, found nourishment in their mutual preoccupation with theological and philosophical problems, but most of all, so it seems, in their love of books.<sup>48</sup> Pizolpasso not only used the most endearing terms in addressing Nicholas but thought so much of the young German's linguistic abilities that he is known to have asked him about the precise meaning of a Greek word after he had already consulted Giovanni Aurispa, a curial secretary and one of the period's greatest Greek scholars.<sup>49</sup> Pizolpasso's evaluation of Nicholas' linguistic ability moderated somewhat in the ensuing years even though he continued to be impressed by the Cusan's growing collection of manuscripts. But Pizolpasso was not the only celebrated humanist who was on intimate terms with Nicholas at Basel. Ambrogio Traversari, the Florentine Camaldolese who was destined to play a crucial part in the future Council of Florence and a key figure in Quattrocento Greek scholarship, spoke of Nicholas as "homo . . . multum eruditus", and Cusanus felt himself close enough to the influential monk to request his intervention in securing yet another benefice, this time the lucrative provostship of Münster-Maifeld.<sup>50</sup> And again observing that careful prudence about economic affairs which had made his 1427 Roman trip so successful, Cusanus closed all possible legal loopholes by having his election confirmed by both council and pope. Cusanus' eagerness to obtain this benefice led him to take this first step toward re-establishing his relationship with the Curia following the papal excommunication for his role in the Manderscheid affair.<sup>51</sup>

Traversari had come to Basel to persuade the council to repeal its decree of June 9, 1435 abolishing papal annates on benefices and to dissuade the fathers from their intention to grant an indulgence to raise money to finance the proposed council of reunion. While Traversari's public efforts seemed to have had little effect, in the private and personal sphere his diplomatic skill bore lasting results. He expended his greatest efforts on Cesarini, who initially resisted but later moderated his attitude and ultimately abandoned the council. When Nicholas chose to ask for Traversari's help, he knew he was approaching a man whose high influence with the Roman Curia was exceeded only by his eagerness to increase the political support of the papal position. Both the urgency of Cusanus' appeal and the political nature of Traversari's interest can be discerned in the latter's letter of October 24, 1435 to a curial official:

48. Pizolpasso's letters of December 17, 1432 and January 7, 1433 are printed in Remigio Sabbadini, "Niccolo' da Cusa e i conciliari di Basilea alla scoperta dei codici," *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei* (Scienze Morale), 5th series, 20 (1911): 9-14, 15-16. See Vansteenberghe, pp. 21-22.

49. Pizolpasso to Pier Candido Decembrio, May-June 1437 in Alois Meister "Die humanistischen Anfänge des Nikolaus von Cues," *Annalen des historischen Vereins für den Niederrhein*, 63 (1896), 12-13. On the question of Cusanus' knowledge of Greek, see Martin Honecker, *Nikolaus von Cues und die griechische Sprache*, SBH 1937-1938, no. 2. Honecker's conclusion that Cusanus possessed an elementary knowledge of Greek but not enough to understand a Greek text must now be seen as applying only to the period before his trip to Constantinople. See Alois Krchňák, "Neue Handschriftenfunde in London und Oxford," *MFCG* 3 (1962): 105; Krämer, "Der Beitrag," pp. 44-45 n.

50. *Ambrosii Traversarii generalis Camaldulensium aliorumque ad ipsum, et ad alios de eodem Ambrosio Latinae epistolae*, ed. by Pietro Canneti (Florence, 1759 [reprinted Bologna: Forni, 1968]), 2, Ep. 48, col. 174.

51. Haller, 3: 576, 578; Erich Menthen, "Die Pfründen des Cusanus," *MFCG* 2 (1962): 30-33.

Nicolaus Treverensis, a very zealous man and distinguished for his large collection of books, has written to me and begged me to petition you. . . . And since, as I hear, he is a man of great learning, I urge you to have his case approved because his friendship which I have established here by letter, can contribute much to our endeavors.<sup>52</sup>

This brief excerpt strikingly reveals the concurrence and interrelation of economic, social, political and intellectual factors in the humanist movement and in the life of Nicholas of Cusa, who was becoming increasingly identified with it.

By the time of the Council of Basel, humanist studies had already produced a new privileged class enjoying immense political and ecclesiastical influence. As a Padua-educated canonist and already enjoying a humanist reputation, Cusanus considered himself a member of this elite. And already many of the most famous members of this elite were using their pens against Basel. Poggio urged his countrymen to abandon this "handful of barbarians" and Filelfo declined his services as Greek translator should Basel succeed in its efforts to hold the reunion council in France.<sup>53</sup> Traversari's complaint to Emperor Sigismund that at Basel "the voice of a cook, so to say, has as much value as that of a bishop or archbishop"<sup>54</sup> was echoed by Cusanus who later made frequent references to Basel's proceeding along mere "mathematical" or "arithmetical" lines, indifferent to the dignity or position of those voting.<sup>55</sup> Here was a clear confession that Basel's democracy was a threat to his own rising social status, a factor which should not be overlooked in assessing the forces moving Cusanus away from conciliar ideals and drawing him into the orbit of Eugenius IV. Furthermore, it says a good deal about the cultural dynamic which was slowly strangling the conciliar movement.

Cusanus' successful mission to Constantinople in 1437 furnished the supportive emotional and conceptual elements necessary to confirm and sustain him in the radical change of course he now found his life to be taking. The immense intellectual pleasure he received from intimate contact with learned Greeks, the generally broadened cultural horizons provided by travel,<sup>56</sup> the pride of diplomatic success, the satisfaction of bibliophilic desires and, perhaps not least, the physical exhilaration and relaxation of the sea voyage back to Italy—all no doubt conspired to produce that famous shipboard ecstasy described in the *De docta ignorantia*:

When I was returning by sea from Greece, it was, I believe, by a gift from on high, from the Father of Lights, the giver of every perfect gift, that I was led in the ignorance that is learned to an incomprehensible grasp of the incompre-

52. *Ambrosii Traversarii epistolae*, 2, Ep. 48.

53. Paul Ourliac, "La sociologie du Concile de Bâle," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 56 (1961): 20.

54. Quoted in Gill, p. 67.

55. Nicholas of Cusa, *Dialogus concludens Amedistarum errorem ex gestis et doctrina concilii Basiliensis*, ed. by Erich Meuthen, *MFCG* 8 (1970); 85-86, 103; *Deutsche Reichstagsakten*, ed. by Hermann Herre and Ludwig Quidde (Stuttgart-Gotha, 1928), 16: 429, ll. 20-23. Similar sentiments were expressed by many others, among them the archbishop of Mainz: "Se ammirari, quod eum haberet latam et amplam diocesim et provinciam, quod simplex in sacro concilio tantam vocem habere deberet sicut sui ambasiatores . . ." Quoted in Meuthen, "Entscheidung," p. 32 n. On the composition of the Council of Basel see Ourliac, "La sociologie," pp. 5-32.

56. Whitehead's remarks about the "enlargement of thought" produced by travel find confirmation in this experience of Cusanus. "An individual who travels meets strangers on terms of kindness. He returns home, and in his person and by his example promotes the habit of thinking dispassionately beyond the tribe. The history of rational religion is full of tales of disengagement from the immediate social routine." The result is the development of a "world-consciousness" as contrasted with a "social consciousness". Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cleveland, Ohio: The World Publishing Co., Meridian Books, 1960), pp. 33-39.

hensible itself, by seeing beyond those enduring truths which are humanly knowable.<sup>57</sup>

The language here, reminiscent of Paul's description of the seventh heaven, indicates that for Cusanus the experience was definitive in its confirmatory power; its language and theme would echo through all his subsequent writings. From that moment on, his former canonist identity would recede into the background and his philosopher-humanist identity would dominate. The *De docta ignorantia* proved to be a programmatic statement of the philosophy elaborated by Cusanus during subsequent years, while that last great conciliarist tract, the *De concordantia catholica*, was destined to be all but disowned by its author, who made only one or two passing references to it in the ensuing years and did not consider it fit for inclusion among the other works which he took care toward the end of his life to collect in ornate codices. With the exception of a brief dialogue composed shortly after his return from Greece, he never again wrote a political or canonical treatise but concentrated all of his literary energies on philosophical and theological themes. These treatises bear so tangible a relation to the shipboard experience and the *De docta ignorantia* which elaborated it, that Cusanus is thought by many to have produced a unified, coherent philosophy.<sup>58</sup>

It is worth running the risk of oversimplification briefly to see Cusanus in his new philosopher-humanist-papalist identity as over against his former canonist-conciliarist-nationalist identity. There is no suggestion here that the new identity obliterated the former. But for the most part those vestiges which do remain are distinctly altered in their orientation. The three most important documents which witness to the new orientation are the *De docta ignorantia* (1440), the *De coniecturis* (1440-1444) and the letter to Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo. The two books are totally concerned with the problems of human knowledge, the nature of the universe and the relationship between God and his creatures. *De coniecturis* treats the first question nearly exclusively. Ecclesiological and Christological matters find a place in Book III of *De docta ignorantia*, but despite an insistence on the centrality of Christ it is clear that Nicholas has abandoned traditional theology but has not yet developed a coherent replacement.

Only in the letter to Arévalo is the ecclesiological question treated, and here, from the opening lines on, we are struck by the appearance of a new theological language whose key elements are common to the *De docta ignorantia* and *De coniecturis* and yet are not found in Cusanus' earlier work. Such elements are the terms *complicatio-explicatio*, *coniectura*, *unitas in alteritate* and the various forms of *participatio* language. Moreover, where we would expect to find a liberal sprinkling of appeals of traditional canonical *auctoritates*, these have disappeared and have been replaced (where at all) by citations of ancient philosophers.

Ecclesial unity, Cusanus explained to Arévalo, can exist in this world of the senses only in diversified otherness (*in varia alteritate*), and this means that its unity is hidden. Such is the case with all reality of the finite order: all created things "participate", but in an unfolding and diverse manner, the unity of the divine word which envelops all.<sup>59</sup> Peter's confession, in a similar manner, is a *com-*

57. *De docta ignorantia, Epistula auctoris* (1: 163).

58. Thus, for example, the recent work of Klaus Jacobi, *Die Methode der Cusanischen Philosophie* (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 1960), p. 22 states: "Der cusanische Grundgedanke bleibt ein und derselbe durch alle cusanischen Schriften hindurch."

59. "Unitatem insuper alterni verbi omnia complicantis omnia creata participant explicative, varie quidem. . . ." Letter to Arévalo, p. 106. On the transitive use of 'participate' see E. R. Dodds, trans., *The Elements of Theology* by Proclus (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 2 n.

*plicatio* of the church which in turn is an unfolding (*explicatio*) which "participates" the faith of Peter in the otherness of the multitude of believers. According to the rules of learned ignorance, the church exists *complicative* in the supreme pontiff.<sup>60</sup> Here, then, is the theoretical foundation of a new papal absolutism, for despite all the letter's qualifications to the effect that papal power exists only for the *aedificatio ecclesiae*, the rules of learned ignorance force us to accept the proportion: the pope is to the church what God is to the universe of creatures. The *complicatio-explicatio* relationship applies in each case. As Trame points out, Arévalo never accepted this new ecclesiology, and Cusanus himself, after this brief attempt to apply the rules of learned ignorance to the church, devoted his intellectual energies to philosophy and the vision of the incomprehensible.<sup>61</sup>

Nicholas' insight into the ancient philosophical dictum that there is no proportion between the finite and the infinite led him to assert the relative and provisional nature of all human knowledge. By its very nature knowledge is "conjecturalis", ever capable of more precision, never capable of attaining the fullness of truth itself. For Cusanus this is not a philosophical skepticism but rather the liberation of the mind from authorities (especially Aristotle) and therefore from scholastic methods. The elation evident in his description of the shipboard experience can very well be related to this sense of intellectual liberation. He once referred to members of the "Aristotelian sect" who think they have had a miraculous conversion when they leave it for a higher (mystical) theology.<sup>62</sup> The autobiographical significance of this remark lends direct support to the case this article is attempting to establish.

For Cusanus higher theology meant the mind's attempt to penetrate beyond the wall where reason breaks down with the admission of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. His own insight progressively deepened as he continued to move away from a theological tradition he could no longer accept toward new definitions of the ultimate nature of being, devising along the way a series of new names for God: the *Non Aliud*, *Possest*, *Posse Ipsum*.<sup>63</sup> His thought did not concern itself with social or moral questions, preoccupied as he was with *sapientia* and the metaphysics of *unitas*.

As a papalist Nicholas found that he could no longer single-mindedly support German interests in the give and take of the political forum, even though he retained his national patriotism.<sup>64</sup> No longer a conciliar canonist, he now found himself more often a kind of outsider over against his countrymen. This helps explain the tragic ineffectiveness of his reform mission in Germany as papal legate (1451-1452), perhaps also some of the bitterness of Gregor Heimburg's invective against him.<sup>65</sup> French political power at Basel was an unmistakable factor in

60. Letter to Arévalo, p. 111.

61. Trame, p. 56.

62. *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, (2:6).

63. F. Edward Cranz has analyzed this development in his brilliant essay "The Transmutation of Platonism in the Development of Nicholas Cusanus and of Martin Luther," *Nicolo' Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno*, pp. 73-102.

64. Pius II spoke of Nicholas as "a German too devoted to his nation . . ." *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope: The Commentaries of Pius II*, trans. by Leon C. Gabel, ed. by Florence A. Gragg (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), p. 372.

65. *Invectica Gregorii Heimburg utriusque iuris doctria in reverendissimum patrem dominum Nicolaum de Cusa, sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae tituli S. Petri ad Vincula presbyterum cardinalem, et episcopum Brizinensem*, in Melchior Goldast, *Monarchiae Sancti Romani Imperii* (Frankfurt: Conrad Biermann, 1614 [reprinted Graz: Akademische Druck und Verlagsantalt, 1960]), 2: 1627-1628. For a summary of the reform mission see Bett, pp.42-48 and Vansteenbergh, pp. 87-139.



alienating Cusanus from that council and from conciliarist ideas and forcing him to take refuge in the universalist ideal of the papacy. What little remained of his conciliarist inclinations was now transferred to the college of cardinals which, in union with the pope, he saw as forming a kind of perpetual council with the cardinals acting as national delegates.<sup>66</sup>

As a bishop and cardinal, Cusanus could not completely give himself to his first love, namely, philosophy and the intellectual life. The daily problems of the diocese of Brixen—in Cusanus' case it amounted to constant warfare—simply precluded this. And although nearly all of his letters deal with mundane and secular matters in their most trivial aspects, it is clear that Nicholas did not really live on this level. His heart was elsewhere. There is little hint in his books and treatises of the perpetual strife in which he spent his days; no attempt, except in the most abstract terms, to rationalize his secular activity. That question so often discussed by the humanists of the Renaissance, whether the *vita contemplativa* should be preferred to the *vita activa*, found little mention in Nicholas' writings, but his own life was eloquent witness to the cultural tensions which had given that familiar literary theme a new lease on life.

There can be no doubt that Cusanus felt that strong and clear call of the world which seems so characteristic of the spirit of those times. The irresistible attraction of the cultural *novum* coupled with the expanded horizons of an international consciousness (with all its apparently hopeless nationalistic fragmentation) could be kept in equilibrium only by an intensified reliance on unity-universalist symbols. These were supplied for him on one level, the mundane and practical, by the papacy and on another level, the intellectual or theoretical, by Neoplatonism, especially that of Proclus and his fifteenth-century disciple George Gemisthus (Pletho), both of whom Cusanus "met" on his trip to Constantinople. His interest in Proclus has been noted but not enough significance has been seen in his enthusiasm, so marked upon his return from the East.<sup>67</sup> Cusanus was convinced he had discovered something new but the Neoplatonic language of his earlier writings indicates he was already familiar with many of the elements of that philosophy. "Discovery" in this case implies that he found something for which he was *searching*.

Resolution of Nicholas' personal crisis remained tenuous and strained throughout his life.<sup>68</sup> Because his conflict of allegiance between pope and council was religious in nature it could not be resolved merely on the level of politics. It required a much more radical realignment of cognitive symbols and values. In turning to Neoplatonic philosophy to supply symbols of meaning and order for his own life, Cusanus became the first Renaissance thinker to recognize the religious power which that philosophy could offer the new age. But there were dangers as well in its sublime simplicity, and the accusation of pantheism leveled against him by certain of his contemporaries was not the least of these. While Neoplatonism

66. "Faciunt igitur nobiseum quotidianum compendiosum ecclesiae concilium, quasi legati nationum. . . ." Stephan Elshes, "Der Reformentwurf des Kardinals Nikolaus Cusanus," *Historisches Jahrbuch der Görresgesellschaft*, 32 (1911): 292.

67. Cusanus' letter of August 4, 1439 to Tommaso Parentucelli asks him to urge Traversari on in translating Proclus: "Dimisi apud generalem Cameldunensium Proclum de theologia Platonis ut transferret. Supplico instantissime, quoniam nunc vacare liberius poterit. Sollicita eum." Koch, *Briefwechsel*, Ep. 3, p. 35. For Cusanus' early acquaintance with Proclus see Rudolf Haubst, "Die Thomas- und Proklos-Exzerpte des 'Nicolaus Treverensis' in Codicillus Strassburg 84," *MFCG* 1 (1961): 40-51.

68. The emotional breakdown described by Pius II corroborates the distinct impression, gained after a careful study of Cusanus' life and works, that Nicholas was not a happy person. See Gabel and Gragg, *Memoirs*, pp. 227-230.

provided the intellectual cohesion for his expanding world and proved a useful support for a growing papal monarchism, it could do this only by a renewed devaluation of the physical world and man's activity in it. Cusanus' flight from the multiplicity and fragmentation of the everyday world was facilitated by his choice to regard its truth as merely "conjectural." Consistent with this he saw the church as "ecclesia coniecturalis",<sup>69</sup> and this means that the pope to whom he gave his new allegiance was a "conjectural pope." Beside the divine *Maximum Absolutum* of the *De docta ignorantia*, earthly reality and truth were very thin indeed, and the absolutist claims of the papacy were emasculated and thereby made psychologically tolerable to this former conciliarist.

For all his attempt to achieve an integral anthropology Cusanus saw man as essentially mind, and it is on this level that Nicholas looked to find his own life. Where one reasonably expects an integration of the intellectual with the practical, namely in his sermons, one finds a consistent reiteration of speculative, even epistemological, themes.<sup>70</sup> His hearers complained that his sermons were beyond their reach,<sup>71</sup> and if the sermon sketches that have come down to us edited by Cusanus' own careful hand represent in any way his actual preaching, this complaint was surely justifiable. One senses a deep sincerity yet also a note of desperation in their author's struggle to communicate his insights to a congregation which surely lived on a different level from their bishop.

In view of Cusanus' evident piety and dedication to the *reformatio ecclesiae* some authors have been unable to give a convincing explanation for his relationship with such humanists as Lorenzo Valla, whose Christianity, in their view, left something to be desired. Thus, Vansteenberghe could explain Cusanus' attempt to secure a curial post for Valla as motivated by a desire to neutralize this adversary of the church and turn his vast erudition to the service of the sacred sciences.<sup>72</sup> Such an explanation is limited precisely by its failure to see Cusanus' humanism on the level of personal identity, an identity repeatedly reinforced in years subsequent to the Council of Florence, not least of all by the election of Tommaso Parentucelli as Nicholas V and by Cusanus' own elevation to the cardinalate. The language of Cusanus' letter to Valla suggests not so much that its author was trying to win an enemy over to the church as that he saw the church's interest allied to the values represented by humanism. And these values had long been his own.

Papal and humanist values shared a universalist thrust which combined to provide the religious moment in the resolution of Cusanus' conflict of identity. This is, at the same time, a mirror image of the fate of the conciliar movement. Cusanus' own psychological need for personal integration was a reflection of the needs of his age. His personal resourcefulness in revising traditional symbols and in appropriating others for a resolution of his conflict provides a key for our understanding both the demise of the conciliar movement and the religious dynamic of Renaissance Europe.

69. Letter to Arévalo, p. 107.

70. This judgment is based on a study of Codd. Vat. Lat. 1244 and 1245 containing the collected *sermones*. The only extensive edition is that of Jacques Lefevre d'Étaples, Paris, 1514. These heavily edited selections—*Excitationum libri X*—were undoubtedly chosen because they dealt with themes beloved by the humanists, and taken by themselves they are therefore somewhat misleading.

71. "Quidem solent murmurare, quasi aliquotiens vobis simplicibus praedicem res altas nimis . . ." *Sermo 5, Cusanus-Texte: I, Predigten 2/5. Vier Predigten im Geiste Eckharts*, ed. by Josef Koch, SBH 1936-1937, p. 118.

72. Vansteenberghe, pp. 31-32 (note includes text of the letter to Valla).