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Nicholas of Cusa: Continuity and Conciliation at the Council of Basel

PETER L. McDERMOTT

On 7 May 1437, in a ritual both sad and absurd, the Council of Basel broke apart in discord and disorder. Two factions in the cathedral session that morning, each "simultaneously reading its decree, shouting its *Placet* and singing its *Te Deum*," divided the house on the issue of selecting a site for unification talks with the Church of Constantinople.¹ The council that claimed the authority to rule Christianity in *concordantia catholica* (in universal harmony), the council that proclaimed its primacy over the pope, demonstrated its incapacity to put its claims into practice.² Nicholas of Cusa, a prominent figure in the conciliarists' camp and author of the 1433 treatise *Concordantia catholica*, the declaration by which the council intended to reassert its supremacy over the papacy, was on the side of the minority that morning. On this occasion the learned conciliarist found himself in the unusual position of supporting Pope Eugenius IV. What had caused his change of mind, or heart, or, at least, position? Had Cusa indeed changed, or beneath this apparent conversion was he constant in his convictions?

Historians studying the collapse of the conciliar movement in the fifteenth century have identified the apparent volte-face of Cusa at Basel as a defining event. They offer a variety of reasons to explain his evident shift in allegiance from council to pope. In this essay I argue that Cusa was not a committed conciliarist and that his role as author

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1. James E. Biechler, "Nicholas of Cusa and the End of the Conciliar Movement: A Humanist Crisis of Identity," *Church History* 44 (1975): 6.
2. The selection of the site for reunification talks was in fact a contest over whether pope or council would control the proceedings and the outcome. The pope, responding to the Greeks' request, insisted upon an Italian venue. The council, dominated by French interests, demanded the comfortable distance afforded by transalpine Basel or Avignon.

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of *Concordantia catholica* has led to the conflation of the conciliarist position that the treatise asserts with Cusa's own. Cusa's point of view at Basel was both more personal and more universal than can be discerned from viewing him as the conciliarist-author of *Concordantia catholica*. I demonstrate a consistency in Cusa's thinking and behavior before, during, and after Basel rather than the abrupt change seen by some historians. I show that Cusa's metaphysical positions and his political attitudes converge during the council, not as a decision between two alternatives, nor as a synthesis derived from two sources, but as a harmonization of the whole. Finally, I evaluate Cusa's importance in ecclesiastical politics and discuss some recent historians' views of him.³

Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), fifteenth-century humanist and cardinal, has been a subject of speculation, puzzlement, and study for more than five hundred years. Cusa was born the son of a prosperous vintner and fisherman in Kues on the Moselle. At the age of twelve, according to tradition, he was sent to be educated by the Brothers of the Common Life in Deventer, the Netherlands.⁴ Thomas à Kempis, author of *The Imitation of Christ*, was then a member of the brotherhood in Deventer, and the images of ecstatic spiritual experience that suffuse his writings are representative of the religious instruction to which Cusa was possibly, but not certainly, exposed.⁵ In 1416 he entered the University of Heidelberg. The following year he began six years of study at the University of Padua, where he specialized in canon law

3. Bernard McGinn, introduction to *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 8–9. McGinn asks where Cusa stood on all this: "the champion of Pope Eugenius IV in his struggle against the conciliar party, the shifts and paradoxes in Cusanus's ecclesiastical career make it difficult to provide a simple explanation for all his actions. Was there an essential continuity to Cusanus's career and church political thought, or do the inconsistencies and changes of direction we find indicate radical reversals, even possible opportunism?"
4. Karl Jaspers, *Anselm and Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 27. This work was first published in 1957 and contains the "traditional" account of Cusa's early life. It retells the pleasant stories and the myths. It depends for the early life of Cusa upon Edmond Vansteenbergh's 1920 *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues (1401–1464): L'Action—la pensée* (Paris: Champion, 1920). There appears to be no firm evidence that Cusa was estranged from his father, that he was the victim of child abuse, that he was thrown into the river by his father for being lazy—or even that he attended the school at Deventer.
5. James Francis Yockey, *Meditations with Nicholas of Cusa* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Bear, 1987). Yockey notes the mystical influences at work in Cusa. Again, with Cusa, it is important to remember that exposure to mysticism and having mystical experiences were not the same. While scholars have been prepared to acknowledge the debt Cusa owed to Meister Eckhart, what he owed to Hildegard of Bingen has not been sufficiently appreciated. It is important to distinguish between mysticism and speculative thinking. The latter attempts to hold a mirror to reality. The former reflects another state of reality.

and received the degrees *doctor decretalium* in 1423 and *doctor in jure canonica* in 1425.⁶

The prevailing philosophical climate to which Cusa was exposed in Padua was Aristotelianism of the Averroist variety. Western rationality, beginning with the Greek philosophers and proceeding through fourteen centuries of Christian scholarship, had tried and failed to build an edifice of understanding that was comprehensive, united, and eternal. Cusa was familiar with the conflicts between nominalism and realism and sought to fashion a new explanatory model employing a non-syllogistic method. His rejection of Aristotle's principle of contradiction was the key to the elaboration of his philosophic system. His "coincidence of opposites" and his view of the "interminate" nature of the universe cannot be comprehended intellectually without disposing of the rational impediment which traditional logic contained. For Cusa, opposites coincide, they do not contradict. Instead of the polarity from which traditional logic with its dialectic reasoning begins, Cusa offered an incorporation and a reconciliation of contradictions. From this insight, Cusa later developed a process of intellectual apprehension the results of which were no less certain, merely less rational, than those pursued by traditional means. Cusa's denial that absolutes can be known would place him in the nominalist's camp; however, his insistence upon attaining a state of certainty by some other means would distance him from its center.

In the completion of his education, he acquired proficiency in Latin and Greek, and pursued his own humanist studies including medieval Germanic law.⁷ Entering the service of the elector Otto von Ziegenhain, archbishop of Trier, in 1425, Cusa taught canon law in Cologne.⁸ In 1427 he went to Rome to obtain papal grants and dispensations,

6. Donald Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer: The Papal Delegation to the Germanies, 1451-1452," *Mediaeval Studies* 36 (1974): 384. Sullivan has Cusa "committed to the conciliarist ideal of a reform of the church" before 1423. This needs to be measured against his pursuit of papal patronage in the next few years.

7. Cusa's apologies for his deficiencies in Latin may have been a flourish of polite humility. He wrote voluminously in Latin, and his contemporaries do not seem to have complained. Those present-day scholars who cite him for deficiencies in Latin may be reacting either to his studied ambiguity or to poor translations. Morimichi Watanabe remarks that Cusa's ideas are "often paradoxical, cryptic, and even impenetrable" and that his "Latin is rough and never simple" (*Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, ed. H. Lawrence Bond [New York: Paulist, 1997], xvii).

8. J. E. Hofmann, *The Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1970), 3:513. This reference claims that Cusa discovered Pliny's *Natural History*. This is incorrect. It was rather the Plautus manuscript currently in the Vatican Archives that Cusa discovered in 1426. Hofmann states that Cusa proved the Donation of Constantine to be a forgery. Clearly, Cusa, in the *Concordantia catholica*, presented at the Council of Basel, attacked the authenticity of the Donation and the church's claims to secular power (*Concordantia catholica*, III, 1); however, he did not present the forceful and conclusive arguments that

which allowed him to hold several income-producing benefices simultaneously.⁹ Cusa's associations with Italian humanists and his attachment to papal largess began before Basel and continued throughout the years of his involvement with the council.

Cusa, now dean of the church of St. Florin in Koblenz, was sent to the Council of Basel in 1432 on behalf of his patron, Ulrich von Manderscheid, a candidate for the archbishopric of Trier. Ulrich was appealing Martin V's decision awarding the disputed election to the see of Trier to Raban, archbishop of Speyer. When Cusa came to Basel, he came as a lawyer. He had been sent by his patron and client, Ulrich, with a petition that challenged a papal decision. It was to this gigantic protopopular committee known as the Council of Basel, suffused with national and political interests, contesting with corruption and entrenched power, that Cusa repaired for the redress of the grievance of his patron, Ulrich.

The revival of conciliarism with the Council of Constance (1414–1418) helps in understanding Ulrich's expectations and Cusa's behavior at Basel. Constance, which was convened by and presided over by the Emperor Sigismund, had been called to resolve the problem of multiple popes, to deal with the Bohemian heresy, to establish order in church governance, and to address many other ecclesiastical abuses. Its internal structure, an organization of national delegations dominated by bishops and other high prelates, limited the role of university graduates and academic reformers.¹⁰ More importantly, the dominance of canon lawyers framed the debate in the terminology of politics, canon law, and hierarchy rather than theology and philosophy. By the time of its dissolution in 1418, the council had dealt effectively with the problem of the three popes, and in its decree *Haec sancta* had forthrightly, if not convincingly, proclaimed the authority of the council of bishops over the pope. Specifically, it claimed authority over the pope it had selected, Martin V. Moreover, the council claimed the power and authority to correct and to depose all future popes. Its decree *Frequens* established a program of regular conciliar sessions to deal with future reforms.¹¹ However it was dominated by secular

Lorenzo Valla was later to do. See also Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Society* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 78.

9. Sullivan, "Cusa as Reformer," notes Cusa's complaints against absentee benefice holders without noting Cusa's own abuse of the system (387).
10. Joachim W. Stieber, *Pope Eugenius IV, the Council of Basel and the Secular and Ecclesiastical Authorities in the Empire: The Conflict over Supreme Authority and Power in the Church* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 6.
11. John Neville Figgis, *Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius, 1414–1625* (1907; reprint, New York: Harper, 1960), 41: With some exaggeration, Figgis referred to the decree of Constance, *Haec sancta*, which asserted the claim of conciliar supremacy, as "probably the

interests, and accomplished little besides the restoration of a papal monarchy. It deferred action on further church reform and the protection of the faithful against heresies, but in announcing its supremacy over the office of the papacy, the council had challenged a significant body of tradition and canon law, leaving behind enough ambiguity to require further clarification.¹²

Constance was followed by the perfunctory, sparsely attended Council of Pavia and Siena in 1423–1424.¹³ Its most significant act was to schedule a future meeting of the council at Basel, which was summoned by Martin in 1431. The enthusiasm of his successor, Pope Eugenius IV, for subordinating himself and his office to the council in 1432 may be reflected in the council's hesitant beginnings. On the day it was to have opened officially, 4 March 1431, one delegate was present.¹⁴ At the time of its actual opening on 23 July 1431, only about a dozen representatives were in attendance, at least three of whom were from the University of Paris. There is little evidence that great numbers of reformers were approaching an urgent task with determination. Faced with desultory attendance, concerned about the council's composition, and uncertain over his ability to control it, Eugenius dissolved the council on 18 December 1431.¹⁵ If it accomplished nothing else, this act of papal imperium gave a powerful reminder to conciliarists that lethargy had its price.

Understandably, neither Martin nor Eugenius trusted the intentions of those who had led the conciliar movement.¹⁶ The recent councils had been organized along lines of national affiliation; Basel, on the other hand, would be composed of committees assigned to specific areas of study. Academicians and minor clergy were to play a far greater role in conducting the business of this council. Eugenius's announcement that he would convene a new council at Bologna in

most revolutionary official document in the history of the world." See also Paul Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 17; Sigmund, significantly, omits the word "probably" in citing Figgis and incorrectly associates Figgis's comment with *Frequens*, the conciliar decree on regularity of council meetings, instead of with *Haec sancta*, which deals with conciliar supremacy.

12. C. M. D. Crowder, *Unity, Heresy and Reform, 1378–1460: The Conciliar Response to the Great Schism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 30.
13. A combination of national divisions within the council, Italian peninsular politics outside it, and papal apprehension concerning the role of a council in church governance all led to its dissolution by papal legates less than a year after it had been convened. Its move to Siena was necessitated by an outbreak of plague in Pavia.
14. Henry Bett, *Nicholas of Cusa* (London: Methuen, 1932), 14.
15. J. N. D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 242. This is Kelly's date; Stieber gives 12 November as the date for the bull of dissolution.
16. Kelly, *Dictionary of Popes*, 242.

eighteen months' time and would personally preside over it was a sudden and shocking challenge to conciliar authority.¹⁷ This reassertion of papal control over church governance represented an opening salvo in what was to become a decade of contention between the supporters of the papacy and those of the conciliarists. In August 1433, faced with the fact that the council continued to sit and under pressure from Sigismund, Eugenius relented.¹⁸

After this unhappy infancy, the Council of Basel (1431–1449) lurched toward a bizarre adolescence—erratically attended, troubled by the divisive nature of German and French national interests, yet trying to fulfill the promise of reform that had begun at Constance. It issued a series of decrees that addressed abusive and corrupt practices in the church, dealt with matters of faith, sought unification of the Christian church, and clarified the governing and authoritative structures of the church. Its assertion of conciliar supremacy, the *Concordantia catholica*, formed the basis upon which it based its authority for all other reforms.

Whereas Constance had attracted 70,000 people and numbered among its participants three patriarchs, 29 cardinals, 33 archbishops, 150 bishops, 100 abbots, and 300 doctors of theology and canon law, Basel attracted less importance to ecclesiastical rank and accordingly attracted fewer participants. By 1435 most of the cardinals had departed, and by 1437 there were fewer than one hundred mitred persons among over five hundred members.¹⁹ The council gradually became dominated by ordinary clerks and, having lost the participation of the mighty, became less effective than Constance. Those council members who maintained a commitment to church reform also operated in a shifting political landscape where nascent nationalism played a crucial part.²⁰ These men, however, who brought political, dynastic

17. Kelly, *Dictionary of Popes*, 242.

18. H. Lawrence Bond, Gerald Christianson, and Thomas M. Izbicki, "Nicholas of Cusa: On Presidential Authority in a General Council," *Church History* 59 (1990): 19. Meanwhile, Eugenius had a number of other problems. The duke of Milan threatened the papal states in the name of the holy synod, and in May 1434 a rebellion in Rome forced the pope to flee down the Tiber.

19. Morimichi Watanabe, "Authority and Consent in Church Government: Panormitanus, Aeneas Sylvius, Cusanus," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33 (1972): 224.

20. Watanabe, "Authority," 235–36. Watanabe has given a valuable summary of the factions at work at Basel: "Eugenius IV, the Venetian, was supported by England, Burgundy, Venice and Florence; the Council of Basel was defended by France, Aragon, Milan and Siena. Duke Philip of Burgundy supported the pope because his enemy France was on the side of the council; Duke Filippo Maria of Milan, Eugenius IV's enemy, naturally defended the council. The king of Aragon also supported the council for the same reason as the Duke of Milan. On the other hand, the Guelph towns, such as Venice and Florence, were on the papal side, while the Ghibelline city of Siena supported the council, which, in its early stages, found the Emperor Sigismund a warm supporter and friend."

and other factional interests to Basel, were more than “opportunists who sacrificed principle to self-interest.”²¹ For some the scent of personal opportunity was no doubt real, but in the first few years of the council’s meetings there is evidence of true reforming zeal. Cusa is one such conciliarist who brought to Basel client interests and personal opportunity; he also brought a unique vision to his involvement with conciliarism.

Cusa’s reason for presenting himself to the council at Basel was his advocacy of Ulrich’s appeal. This represented a clear denial that the Pope was final authority in the matter of the disputed election. His submission of the appeal to the council suggests that he was present at the council out of necessity, not out of reforming conviction. He was obliged, in the best interests of his client, to become a participant in the council and exercise his skills as a canon lawyer and scholar. While waiting for the disposition of Ulrich’s matter, he was put in the service of the council defending the conciliar position as well as it had ever been defended in that “stunning display of canonical and patristic learning,” the *Concordantia catholica*.²² There is no evidence that Cusa had prepared any of the text of *Concordantia catholica* in advance of his arrival in Basel (as some have contended) or that he went to Basel for the purpose of participating in church reform. Cusa was not inclined toward some conception of nascent democracy, nor had he adopted a conciliarist position. When he was asked to take the oath of incorporation, which formally acknowledged his responsibilities as a member of the council, he asked for a delay until the representatives of Raban, the other party in Ulrich’s dispute, had arrived. This does not suggest an eagerness for a role in the council. His request for a delay was denied, however, and he was sworn in 29 February 1432.

Cusa wanted something from the council and it demanded something of him. He was appointed a member of the council’s Committee on the Faith and produced in 1433 that brilliant synthesis of legal argument, the *Concordantia catholica*.²³ He based it upon canon law, the political thinking of Marsilius of Padua, and the canonical expertise

21. Watanabe, “Authority,” 217. Watanabe mentions this possibility suggested by other historians, including Figgis.

22. Louis Dupré, “Introduction, and Major Works of Nicholas of Cusa,” *The American Philosophic Catholic Quarterly* 64 (1990): 2.

23. Cusa’s ordination into the priesthood is variously placed in 1426, 1430, 1436, and 1437—the last date seems to have the greatest support at the moment. Joachim W. Stieber, “The ‘Hercules of the Eugenians’ at the Crossroads: Nicholas of Cusa’s Decision for the Pope and Against the Council in 1436/1437—Theological, Political and Social Aspects,” in *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Morimichi Watanabe*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki, The American Cusanus Society (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 237.

that Jean Gerson and Cardinal Francesco Zabarella had provided to the Council of Constance.²⁴ The document he submitted, which was approved by the council, argued the legitimacy of council over pope. Cusa marshaled the principles of feudal, natural, and constitutional law to produce this document. Addressing the long tradition of tension between authority and freedom in the Western church, Cusa developed a line of argument that began with the conception of divine concordance and continued to a discussion of the differences that compose all concordance. From this he derived a harmony of the one in the many, and he constructed a system of parallelisms and hierarchies in the temporal and spiritual spheres.²⁵ Cusa argued that the authority and legitimacy of a council depended upon its adhering to order and proper form and that this principle was made evident by a resulting concord that included the pope or his representative.²⁶ The model of pope *in* council—ordered, harmonious, and characterized by consent—defined legitimate authority in the church for Cusa. This was Cusa the canon lawyer. At the same time, as will be seen, this was Cusa the Neoplatonist developing his own cluster of philosophical insights: incorporating all into one, reconciling poles of opinion and their contradictions.

For someone who has been credited with founding no school, leaving no followers, and giving new meaning to the term ambiguity, Cusa continues to receive a great deal of attention. He left an endowed library and in various ways influenced Copernicus, da Vinci, Bruno, and Descartes. The fifteenth-century humanists and the early sixteenth-century publishers of Paris knew his work. His modern biographers, with the exception of Jasper Hopkins, seem to have been infected with Cusa's own peculiar ambivalence. Nonetheless, Cusa has become of increasing interest to twentieth-century philosophers, theologians, and historians. Modern scholars, cautious to avoid anachronism, are approaching this Neoplatonic puzzle warily; but they approach him in great numbers. An image of Cusa is emerging from the mass of detail and the abundance of speculation. It is, understandably, a disjunctive and fascinating picture.

Scholars have sought an explanation for Cusa's apparent change of heart. They have looked for evidence of motives either expressed or implied. However, they have not seen Cusa as the consistent proponent of a single principle, but rather as a sort of dialectic particle within

24. Paul E. Sigmund, *The Catholic Concordance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xvii.

25. Sigmund, *Concordance*, xxviii–xxix.

26. Stieber, "Hercules," 226.

a canonical force field. At Basel, Cusa had seen the need for harmony and unity within the entire Christian church as an important part of his argument for assigning final authority to the council. He saw this need no less in assigning that same authority to the pope. Josef Koch saw the opportunity for unification with the Greeks in 1437 as Cusa's motive for aligning himself with the pope.²⁷ Both council and pope were very interested in establishing a reunion of the Christian churches. The party that controlled that process would potentially gain a powerful ally in the Eastern church. By 1437, Eugenius had a dominant role in negotiations with Constantinople, and Cusa may have seen the opportunity to serve a larger Christian entity.

Seeking additional motives, a number of other historians have suggested that career enhancement and material gain were determinant in Cusa's decision. Some have even proposed that more than one incentive may have driven him. James E. Biechler claims that Cusa experienced a "humanist's crisis of identity" at Basel, that his "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."²⁸ As Biechler would have it, psychohistorically, Cusa's failure to achieve a personally fulfilling experience with the council led to his crisis and a religious conversion whose radical nature is concealed by the gradual nature of its emergence.²⁹ Biechler's unsuccessful imposition of the oft-used term "crisis" upon Cusa's apparently calculated political shift romanticizes and psychologizes at the same time. This "humanist's crisis of identity" places more emphasis upon the humanist aspects of Cusa than would seem justified by the evidence, and it avoids another possible explanation: Cusa was not a conciliarist.

Stieber, on the other hand, is not entirely convinced that Cusa is a humanist at all.³⁰ He notes that sharing philosophical interests with humanists is not the same as being one, and he observes Paul Oskar Kristeller's insistence that a primary concern with rhetoric is the defining criterion of humanism.³¹ Although Cusa might not fit Kristell-

27. Josef Koch, *Nikolaus von Cues un seine Umwelt*, Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse. 2. Abhandlung (Heidelberg, 1948), 27-29.

28. Biechler, "End of the Conciliar Movement," 25.

29. Biechler, "End of the Conciliar Movement," 8.

30. Stieber, "Hercules," 225.

31. Stieber, "Hercules," 225.

er's criterion for a traditional rhetorician, he shared too many interests with the humanists to be excluded from their number.

Paul E. Sigmund correctly sees Cusa as combination Neoplatonist and canon lawyer.³² For him there is less ideological change in Cusa than consistency in his belief in order and harmony, unity and reunion of all Christians, and allegiance to authoritarian and hierarchical elements in the world.³³ Stieber, however, sees in Cusa's 1437 shift a "fundamental career decision," while he characterizes the *Concordantia catholica* as an attempt "to defend a broad principle which had not yet been tested in conflict between a legitimate, reigning pope and a general council."³⁴ Stieber claims that little could have appealed to Cusa in the direction that the council was taking: it issued decrees in June 1435 abolishing annates and controlling the abuse of benefices.³⁵ He supposes that actions the council was taking may have run counter to Cusa's philosophical predilection for hierarchical forms, but more important, it would not have furthered his interests as a canon lawyer or his pursuit of financial opportunity within the church. This evidence, Stieber believes, was much more important in Cusa's defection from the council than ideology.³⁶ Although historians may disagree over many aspects of Cusa's life and thought, his role at the Council of Basel can be understood by uniting his philosophy with his politics.

As author and explicator of *Concordantia*, Cusa is traditionally associated with the conciliarist position. But did the decree mean the same thing to him as it meant to them? To determine whether he actually embraced the same principles that guided those committed to the conciliar movement or whether he was acting merely as their agent without fully endorsing the concept, Cusa must be seen within the context of his writing and actions before he came to Basel and after the final disposition of the petition of Ulrich in February 1436.

A reference to *graduatiōne concordante et harmoniaca*, which appeared in Cusa's 1432 Koblenz Christmas sermon (soon after the council had begun and while he was working on the first portion of *Concordantia catholica*), is the first suggestion of his conciliar or concordial thinking.³⁷ And if there is no hint of the conciliarist in Cusa before Basel, there is ample evidence that he was not one afterward. A church governed by council was less important to him than one that was

32. Sigmund, *Cusa*, 39–118.

33. Sigmund, *Concordance*, xxxii.

34. Stieber, "Hercules," 221, 230.

35. Kelly, *Dictionary of Popes*, 242.

36. Stieber, "Hercules," 232.

37. Sigmund, *Concordance*, xv.

governable at all. He saw unity and harmony as the desiderata of both the earthly and the eternal spheres of existence. The *Concordantia catholica*, despite its comprehensive arguments for the authority of the council, never excluded the papacy from a vital place in the body of the church. Using analogic thinking and a humanist's knowledge of science, Cusa compared the invigoration and nourishment of the church to the human body, not denying first priority to the head, but acknowledging the dependence of all members of the body upon a common source of vital spirits. He accordingly denied autonomy to both head and members.

Cusa did not eventually succeed in obtaining a conciliar reversal of the papal decision against his patron, but until that decision became final, Cusa cooperated with the council. The writing of the *Concordantia catholica* was a forceful defense of the conciliarists' position, and Cusa, as its author, was recognized as the council's foremost theoretician. Nor can his prominence in conciliar affairs have harmed Ulrich's case. Cusa continued to maintain cordial associations with other members of the council while remaining alert to opportunities for personal advancement.³⁸ As early as 1425 he had acquired a parish church as the first of many ecclesiastical benefices. As has been noted, Cusa went to Rome in 1427 to obtain a papal dispensation that would allow him to hold multiple benefices. Joachim Stieber, on Cusa the hunter of benefices, says that he "pursued every opportunity," held many benefices while occupying none, and collected a substantial portion of their revenues while fulfilling none of the incumbent duties.³⁹ Hardworking, ambitious young men who came from non-noble backgrounds were not likely to be successful candidates for preferment in the church hierarchy. Good friends and service to one's superiors were important, and the income that flowed from benefices gave one the time to pursue other interests as well as self-interest. Amid factional alignments and shifting political forces, Basel presented him with a rare opportunity to demonstrate his abilities. As

38. As Erich Meuthen has perspicaciously observed in the introduction to his edition of "Der Dialogus concludens Amedistarum errorem ex gestis et doctrina concilii Basiliensis," *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 8 (1970): 49, "Man kann dieses Werke des Cusanus nicht aus ihrer politischen Situation isolieren; denn sie sind für diese Situation geschrieben, von der sie herausgefordert worden sind."

39. Stieber, "Hercules," 236-37. Brigide Schwarz has produced a small work on the role of patronage in the life of Cusa—as donor and as recipient ("Über Patronage und Klientel in der spätmittelalterlichen Kirche am Beispiel des Nikolaus von Kues," *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 68 [1988]: 284-310). Despite Gerson's rattling the accusation of simony against the practice of absentee benefice-holding at the Council of Constance, the practice continued to grow throughout the fifteenth century.

long as Ulrich's suit remained unresolved, he seemed to be a conciliar partisan.

In the long Western tradition of tension between authority and freedom, the conciliar movement of the fifteenth century stands as a sustained attempt to assert conciliar rights while at the same time reconciling the interests of ecclesiastical and political powers. The debate before the council was framed in terms of canon law and theology, precedent and persuasion. This was no new leap toward liberal democracy or even its precursor, as Figgis has suggested.⁴⁰ The *Concordantia catholica* was rather just another lawyer's effort to create a contract within the institutional governance of the church—to develop language that forged bonds of mutual obligation between ruler and subject. In fact, Cusa was endeavoring, within the formalistic framework of the document, to weave strands of ecclesiastical and political theory into a unified and harmonious whole.⁴¹ Rather than seeking an accommodation based upon compromise—a resolution in which opposing sides confront each other and concede certain interests to the other—he sought to reorder all interests, leaving nothing out.

His attempt to reconcile differences was not an effort to make all things seem equal. Hierarchy, as an underlying assumption, was never far away. A sense of time, infinity, and the concordance of the Trinity permeate the first few pages of the *Concordantia*:

Concordance is the principle whereby the Catholic Church is in harmony as one and many—in one Lord and many subjects.⁴² Flowing from the one King of Peace with infinite concordance, a sweet spiritual harmony of agreement emanates in successive degrees to all its members who are subordinated and united to him. . . . But every concordance is made up of differences. . . . The highest first created things (angels) participate symbolically in the First Principle through a certain God-revealing concordance. However, since a finite creature is incapable of concordance with the infinite they are infinitely removed from the original infinite concordant essence in which the Son is the image and splendor of the Father and three persons and one God, the eternal Light.⁴³

The vocabulary of Neoplatonism—with its hierarchical levels, the rational incompatibility of the created with the infinite, and Cusa's

40. Figgis, *Political Thought*, is not alone in revealing a bit of Whiggery when it comes to Cusa, 69.

41. Sigmund, *Concordance*, xviii.

42. Sigmund, *Cusa*, 5, traces this definition to Raymond Lull. For a comparison of their epistemologies, see Theodor Pindl-Büchel, "The Relationship between the Epistemologies of Ramon Lull and Nicholas of Cusa," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1990): 73–87.

43. Sigmund, *Cusa*, 8.

determination to reconcile the differences—is apparent in these few lines. Although the full maturity of Cusa's metaphysical thought is not revealed in this early work on constitutional relationships, the sources from which institutions derive their authority, and the role of individual consent and participation within institutions, there are clear indications that Cusa was moving toward a unified philosophical system. The development of Cusa's thinking can be understood from this beginning as part of a continuous process, rather than as the sudden, unanticipated disjunction of an unprepared intellect. There is little evidence of incipient mysticism in Cusa's *Concordantia catholica* nor is there any reason to look beyond what he said and the circumstances in which he found himself, in order to understand his reasons for seeming to abandon the council and to declare for the pope.

In May 1434 Ulrich's petition was denied and an appeal was lodged. The progress of the appeal defined Cusa's continued participation in the council. In May 1435 he petitioned Eugenius for confirmation of his benefices and a provostship.⁴⁴ He continued to represent Ulrich's appeal to the council until the final decision (between 7 December 1435 and 7 February 1436). As early as May 1435, however, Cusa had been positioning himself for a shift by seeking confirmation of his benefices from the council at the same time he requested a provostship from Eugenius. It would appear, therefore, that even before he had concluded his role as Ulrich's advocate, Cusa continued to seek favors from the pope and positioned himself for a move to the pope's party. Until that time, Cusa, as Ulrich's procurator, was threatened with the possible loss of his benefices and with excommunication.⁴⁵ Stieber pictures him "at a crossroads," but I believe that Cusa's move looks more like a lane change.⁴⁶

As attitudes within the council became coercive and divisive, Cusa abandoned his position with the conciliarists in favor of the pope. By May 1437, his break was public and complete. Although Cusa had failed to unite pope and council, he continued to pursue a range of long-term interests. During the negotiations over Ulrich's appeal, he

44. Stieber, "Hercules," 233.

45. Stieber, "Hercules," 232–33.

46. Thomas M. Izbicki, "The Church in the Light of Learned Ignorance," in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 3:188. Izbicki attempts to place Cusa in a more continuist mode than Stieber, but sees him as struggling to define himself as a papalist from 1439 until 1444 with a substantial shift in his position becoming evident in 1442 as reflected in his letter to Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo. Scott H. Hendrix considers *Concordantia catholica* and announces his position in the ranks of the unsurprised that Cusa was more concerned with "harmony, unity, and reform" than with "the form of church government which achieved them" (*On Christ and the Church*, 117).

had cultivated a friendship with Ambrogio Traversari, the general of the Camaldolese order and the pope's personal emissary to the council.⁴⁷ Traversari, aside from his potential influence with the pope on Cusa's behalf, was considered the foremost authority on the great sixth-century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius, whose Neoplatonism was of great interest to Cusa.⁴⁸ This connection with the Italian humanists was to prove important in the evolution of his metaphysics and epistemology.

In November 1437 Nicholas of Cusa, former conciliar theorist, was sent by Eugenius as a member of the deputation to Constantinople to discuss reunification of the Christian church. He returned in 1438 with a delegation of representatives from the Greek church including both the patriarch and the Byzantine emperor. The delegation had obtained agreements on unification, but these subsequently collapsed at the 1438–1439 Council of Ferrara-Florence.⁴⁹ Cusa's expedition into ecclesiastical diplomacy had revealed to him a world of conflicts and possibilities. His thoughts turned from law and church governance to the larger arena of Christian unity built upon a harmonious convergence of reason and faith.⁵⁰

The flowering of Cusa's metaphysics began, according to his own account, with his journey to Constantinople. He recounted an event experienced during his return from Constantinople:

returning by sea from Greece, when, by what I believe was a celestial gift from the father of lights from whom comes every perfect gift, I was led to embrace incomprehensibles incomprehensibly in learned ignorance, by transcending those incorruptible truths that can be humanly known. This learned ignorance I have, in him who is the

47. Gerald Christianson, "Cardinal Cesarini and Cusa's *Concordantia*," *Church History* 54 (1985): 7–19.

48. Bond, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 4. Traversari's translation of Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, was sent to Cusa in 1443 by another friend from his Italian days, Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli.

49. Cusa returned with the emperor, the patriarch, twenty-six archbishops and the primate of Russia (see Bett, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 31). See also H. Lawrence Bond, "The Historical Matrix," in *On Christ and the Church*, 145. According to Bond, Cusa did not participate to any significant degree in the Council of Florence. He was assigned to German fence-mending by Eugenius. There is no good recent evaluation of the Council of Florence. Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), is the best. William F. Wertz Jr., *Toward a New Council of Florence* (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1993), gestures toward Florence but does not essay the journey.

50. Gerald Christianson, "The Presidency Debate at the Council of Basel," in *On Christ and the Church*, 102–103. Christianson reflects on "the apparently fundamental shift in Nicholas's conceptual framework from law to metaphysics after his 'shipboard experience.'" Yet he sees a continuing desire for unity and notes that Cusa was less concerned with inconsistencies than he was with consequences.

truth, now set loose in these books, which on the basis of this same principle can be compressed or expanded.⁵¹

The union and transformation of which he speaks is an eerie echo of the passage from *Concordantia* cited earlier. The experience of God, to which Nicholas of Cusa referred in this excerpt from the 1440 letter to his patron Cardinal Julian Cesarini, was explained in his first publication, *De docta ignorantia*.⁵² Published in 1440, it reflected Cusa's unique attempt at a metaphysical synthesis of truth and belief, reality and faith.⁵³ This mysterious attempt to explain his thought was the beginning of his life's work in philosophy, science, and theology. It was cobbled together from the accumulated materials of Neoplatonism, Augustinianism, Christian humanism, and contemporary ecclesiastical thought.⁵⁴

After Cusa departed Basel in 1437, and following his return from Constantinople, he was employed by the papacy on extensive missions to negotiate with the northern German princes on the question of conciliarism.⁵⁵ Through his diplomatic efforts on behalf of the papacy, the authority of the pope was eventually recognized by these princes,

51. Bond, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 206. In this same work, Bond says that Cusa's journey to the East "provided him with a fresh vision of unity and difference coexisting not only within the church but also in the soul's experience of God and the world" (5). See also Nicholas of Cusa, *Of Learned Ignorance*, trans. Germain Heron (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1954), 173. This charming but dated translation has been superseded by that of Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa: On Learned Ignorance* (Minneapolis: A. Banning, 1981). Pauline Moffitt Watts, "Talking to Spiritual Others," in *In Search of God and Wisdom*, notes that this same language, regarding "the father of lights" taken from James 1:17, is used in the *Vita coetanea*, the contemporary account of Llull's life (205).
52. *Concordantia catholica*, *De docta ignorantia*, and *De coniecturis* were dedicated to Cardinal Cesarini, papal legate to and president of the Council of Basel. A respect for institutional authority and a political sensibility seem conjoined in this happy consistency or coincidence. Izbicki, in "The Church in the Light of Learned Ignorance," says, "Cusanus's own change of allegiance cannot be divorced from his own self-interest; nor can it be separated from the fortunes of Cesarini" (186–87). Morimichi Watanabi and Izbicki in "A General Reform of the Church," in *On Christ and the Church*, argue that as early as 1434, during the debates on the presidency of the council, Cusa had "tied his fortunes to those of Cardinal Cesarini" (176).
53. Pauline Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus, A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982), 26. Watts, in stating that Cusanus first sets forth his disjunctive metaphysics in *De docta ignorantia*, may have overlooked the fact that Cusa had already begun his development along this path, as is apparent in *Concordantia* seven years earlier.
54. Bond, "Matrix," 162–63: The extent of the mystical component in Cusa's experience and in his metaphysics continues to be debated. His "unshakable grasp of the Hidden revealed" and the specific epistemological devices he employs argue against a passive or emotional attitude.
55. Christianson, "Presidency Debate," says that Cusa "never again returned to conciliar thought" after Constantinople. This is hard to square with his 1442 letter to Sánchez de Arévalo which specifically castigates the continuation of the Council of Basel, and with his late work, *Reformatio generalis*, which discusses the conciliar role played by the college of Cardinals. See also Watanabi and Izbicki, "General Reform," 198.

and Cusa was rewarded with a cardinal's red hat in 1446. His later years were spent in Rome as a member of the Curia, engaged in church administration and developing his thoughts in natural philosophy, mathematics, and ecclesiastical policy.

Cusa, the lawyer and conciliarist, had become Cusa, the 1438 diplomat and the 1440 metaphysicist author of *De docta ignorantia*. He had been exposed to the mystical spirituality of the *devotio moderna*; the Aristotelian scholasticism of Heidelberg and Padua; the Renaissance humanism and Neoplatonism of the Italian city-states; Eastern Christianity and Islam. From these influences and experiences he developed a system of thought with which he attempted to unify the totality of human knowledge and to define humanity's relationship with God.

His output of speculative works in natural philosophy, some of which approach experimental science, and his treatises on theology and metaphysics, range over a vast area of intellectual contemplation. Those who cite the mystical nature of his writings have little evidence of any such experiences in his life. That which comes closest to a mystical experience was the one described above on his return from Constantinople. There is no evidence of ecstatic content in this single instance of intuitive vision that Cusa experienced.⁵⁶ Medieval spiritual mysticism had its roots in the writing of Neoplatonists such as Plotinus, Proclus, and St. Augustine, leading on to Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, and Ramon Llull. Though Cusa was familiar with the medieval writings of Albertus Magnus and Meister Eckhart and found mysticism interesting, it did not dominate his philosophical inquiry.⁵⁷ Cusa's spirituality is seen by Pauline Watts as mystical only in an intellectual, not an affective, capacity.⁵⁸ The distinction between speculative philosophy and mystical religious experience has been glossed over too frequently in analyzing the life of Cusa and the content of his work.⁵⁹ Central to his visionary experience is *intellegere*.

56. James E. Biechler and H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa on Interreligious Harmony* (Lampeter, Wales: Edward Mellen, 1991), xlv: they note the "vision" and the "celebration" that characterize Cusa's insight.

57. M. L. Führer, *Nicholas of Cusa* (Toronto: Dovehouse, 1989), 11. Cusa's mysticism, derived from Meister Eckhart and other German medieval thinkers (Ulrich, Dietrich, Bertold, and Heinrich), is not apparent in either *Concordantia* or in *Docta ignorantia*, except for the latter's dedicatory letter from Cusa to Cardinal Cesarini. Indeed, Cusa seems to avoid the vagueness and poor explication inherent in trying to communicate mysticism in these early works. This is not to say that in his later works he is as successful. It may be, rather, that he lost confidence in the discursive powers of rhetoric. Another explanation is that mysticism is seen by some Cusanists where there is only garden-variety Neoplatonism.

58. Watts, *Fifteenth-Century Vision*, 27.

59. Llull (1234–1316) was a prolific writer, some of whose works Cusa translated and annotated in and around 1428. Llull was a lay missionary from Majorca. He was

McTighe cites Jasper Hopkins in this regard, who, he says, wants "to turn Cusa into a kind of Aristotelian-Thomist."⁶⁰ Rice, in his study of Renaissance thought, has compared the uses to which "ignorance" is put by Petrarch's *On His Own Ignorance* and those employed by Cusa in *De docta ignorantia*. He notes the importance that ignorance has played in understanding the concept of "wisdom" in both authors. The "transcendence of wisdom and its inaccessibility by unaided reason" led to a search for some power inherent in intellectual skepticism combined with autonomous will that would permit the attainment of wisdom.⁶¹

Cusa devised a metaphysical system built upon the view that one could know only one's ideas and not the reality that those ideas attempted to apprehend. Approximations, analogies, and attitudes unrelated to traditional syllogistic tools of reasoning served as Cusa's implements and structures in dealing with contradictions, the coincidence of opposites, vast conceptions of time and space, divine power, and the problem of necessity.

Cusa developed his metaphysics from Augustine who, Christianizing the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and others, invoked the mind's self-knowledge, which is produced from the distortions of the sensory world turning the mind back upon itself.⁶² The mind sensing its own

influenced by Sufi mysticism, had several visionary experiences during his life, and had attempted to develop a philosophical system which would unify all knowledge. Using arguments from analogy, he sought to relate Platonic levels of being, or reality, through their relationships to one another. He used as an example the theory of the elements and their use by physicians in explaining health and disease. Analogies, as later used by Cusa, were guidelines, not cognitions. That is, in their use Cusa attempted, through comparison and suggestion, to communicate the unintelligible, intelligibly. The use of analogy is another step removed from reality as conceived by Aristotle. Whereas syllogistic reasoning demonstrates, analogy compares and implies. Llull represents, as does Cusa, the refusal to abandon the possibility of knowing God simply because human reason is inadequate to the task. For them, the art of finding truth was not accomplished in a truly satisfying way by syllogism and disputation. They sought another way, a way that transcended human reason and arrived at a greater truth. Cusa possessed almost the complete works of Llull and his copies were heavily annotated. As Louis Dupré notes, for Cusa, "from his early to his later writings the 'intellectual' cognition culminates 'in that most simple and abstract intellect in which all things are one.' For Llull love becomes a substitute for what the intellect is unable to accomplish" (*Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, 212).

60. Thomas P. McTighe, "Contingentia and Alteritas in Cusa's Metaphysics," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1990): 64.
61. Eugene F. Rice Jr., *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 186.
62. Raymond Klibansky, *Plato's "Parmenides" in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Munich: Kraus, 1943; supplement, 1981), 24–32. On the basis of Cusa's library holdings, the dates of acquisition, and references in his sermons, Klibansky locates Cusa securely, and unsurprisingly, in the Platonic tradition.

finitude seeks enlightenment through divine illumination. As Augustine said, "There is in us, as it were, a learned ignorance, *docta ignorantia*, an ignorance taught by the spirit of God which comes to the help of our weakness." Structuring his philosophy upon a faith-based epistemology, Cusa's first major philosophical treatise, *De docta ignorantia*, on learned ignorance, contained the seeds of all his future philosophical development.⁶³ The underlying notion upon which its arguments rested was "the coincidence of opposites."⁶⁴ This doctrine abolished the rules of logical inference by violating Aristotle's first principle of reason, the Law of Contradiction. Technically, Cusa's coincidence of opposites did not reject the principle of contradiction as much as it restricted its range—reason itself being insufficient in speculative philosophy and in theology to achieve unity with God.⁶⁵ By embracing all the elements of contradiction as if they were a single entity, Cusa rejected the possibility of achieving final, objective knowledge by the use of human reason.⁶⁶ He challenged the Aristotelian idea of a finite universe by conceiving it as a maximum, not simply superior to a comparative, but the antithesis of all comparatives—an incomparability.⁶⁷ The universe thus becomes not a quantitative entity, but a qualitative one. To Cusa, the universe was both finite and infinite simultaneously; this condition he called "interminate."⁶⁸ While not original with him, this metaphor is associated with Cusa: "God is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose periphery is

63. The perfect passive participial construction is probably most accurately translated as "concerning learned ignorance." The ambiguous nature of this title is typical of much of Cusa's writing. Is he suggesting that those who are educated are really ignorant, or is he advocating a conscious effort to empty out the contents of the mind in order to create new possibilities of receptivity? We are invited to entertain both meanings simultaneously.

64. Nicholas de Cusa, *De ludo globi, The Game of Spheres*, trans. Pauline Moffitt Watts (New York: Abaris, 1986), 15: "Men who use logic and 'all philosophical inquisition' are like hunting dogs who follow their noses about, running back and forth in search of their prey: logic and all philosophical inquiry does not arrive at vision. Hence, just as the hunting dog uses the 'discourse' native to him in following footprints through sensible experience, in order that finally in this way (*via*) he may reach what he seeks, . . . so man uses logic."

65. Donald F. Duclow, "Mystical Theology and the Intellect in Nicholas of Cusa," *American Catholic Philosophic Quarterly* (1990): 117.

66. Führer, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 14.

67. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 235. Jaspers, *Anselm and Cusa*, agrees, stating, "All [Cusa's] views on astronomy are based purely on speculation or unverifiable hypotheses. Not a single observation is adduced as proof. His speculation on the nature of the cosmos as a copy of the divine Original has nothing in common with astronomical observation based on observation and measurement" (106).

68. Jaspers, *Anselm and Cusa*, 175–76.

nowhere."⁶⁹ Cusa, convinced of the harmony of God's universe, saw the appearance of contradiction and opposition within that universe not as symptomatic of some underlying, fundamental conflict but as an opportunity to surmount both.

This was his attitude when the council revealed its irreconcilable differences in public confrontation and discord. His lack of interest in finding proofs for the existence of God was evidence of the premise upon which his metaphysics rested: an all-good, universal, loving God apprehended by faith required—and could have—no proof. Just so, his politics rested on a comparable foundation: sovereignty over the church is a universal power contained in the one and many, in pope and council. No demonstration of loyalty to one over another is appropriate; supremacy exists at both the center and the perimeter of the ecclesiastical universe. It is ironic that Cusa's failure to decide has led historians to ignore the evidence of his metaphysics when they examine his politics.⁷⁰

In looking back on Cusa's role in the 1437 Council of Basel in light of the philosophy that he subsequently articulated, it is clear that Cusa did with opportunities the same thing that he did with philosophies: he put them to use in new and unique ways. He saw political and metaphysical possibilities at Basel, possibilities that might lead to concord among Christians. His role in the church expanded as he was empowered by circumstances and enlightened by reflection. However, by using the opportunities that appeared to him Cusa did not necessarily become a mere opportunist.

In his move from the role of advocate for Ulrich and lawyer for the conciliarists to that of papal emissary, prince of the church, and philosopher, Cusa gained for himself a lifetime of patronage in the hierarchy of the church. He also gained numerous benefices for himself and his relatives. The papacy for its part gained an advocate who tirelessly lobbied the German princes for unity, if not harmony, with Rome. Failing church reform by the council, with the growth of a monarchical, absolutist papacy, and with protest quelled among the Bohemians and the Germans, Cusa contemplated the eternal ambiguities. He acquired the resources, the connections with the community

69. Watts, *Fifteenth-Century Vision*, 67. Watts attributes this conception to the physicists of Oxford and Paris and to the work of Thierry of Chartres. Cusa used it to explicate theological problems.

70. Paul E. Sigmund, "Nicholas of Cusa on the Constitution of the Church," in *On Christ and the Church* (127–34) looks at the *Concordantia* as a political abstraction completely divorced from the grubby reality of contesting powers and the conflicting roles played by the actors.

of humanists, and the opportunity he needed to pursue philosophical discourse.

Not surprisingly, Cusa has been made a threshold figure: he is seen as drawing the Middle Ages to a close while anticipating the Reformation, the development of democratic institutions, and the Scientific Revolution. One can imagine his amusement were he required to choose which direction to face. Cusa never apologized for or explained his behavior at Basel. That which appeared to be a shift in position was for him clearly no change in ideology in need of explaining or defending. He did not include the *Concordantia catholica* in compiling the catalog of his works for his library. Was the omission a coincidence?