

TRANSLATION

A Dialogue of Two Men The One a Gentile, the Other a Christian ON THE HIDDEN GOD (1444) Nicolaus of Cusa

CARDINAL NICOLAUS OF CUSA was born in 1401 in the city of Cues, opposite the city of Berncastel on the Moselle River in Germany. During the sixty-four years of his life, Cusa emerged as one of those rare universal geniuses, whose work transformed in a fundamental way not only his own generation, but generations to come.

During his life, Christian Europe was threatened militarily by the Turks. As an envoy of the Vatican, Cusa first attempted to reunite the Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches, by helping to organize the Council of Florence. He then worked to reunite the Roman Catholic Church, which was divided by the election of an anti-Pope. After the Turkish seizure of Constantinople, he proposed a policy of ecumenicism in a work entitled, "On the Peace of Faith," whose principles are still valid today. In the last years of his life as a bishop and cardinal, he battled for an internal reform of the Church which, if successful, would have corrected the abuses which contributed to the later divisive Reformation.

*In the area of natural science, years before Copernicus and a century before Galileo was born, he overturned the prevailing Aristotelian view of the universe, by arguing in *On Learned Ignorance* that the universe is neither geocentric, nor heliocentric in the simple manner later assumed by Copernicus. Through his mathematical writings on the isoperimetric principle and the Golden Mean, he contributed directly to Johannes Kepler's founding of modern physical science. In the nineteenth century his role in contributing to the development of the concept of the transfinite was acknowledged by Georg Cantor.*

The dialogue which follows, written in 1444, reflects the scientific method employed by Cusa, including his notion that the Absolute Infinite is "not other," i.e., that God as Creator is not a particular created being, although every creature derives its existence from Him. Therefore, no name created by man and attributed by him to God, can fully comprehend God's infinity. Moreover, in contrast to Aristotle, Cusa maintains that the logical law of contradiction does not apply to God, because in the Absolute Infinite there is a coincidence of opposites—since God created all opposites and thus precedes and enfolds them.

And the *Gentile* says: I see you bowed down full of reverence, shedding not false, but rather heartfelt, tears of love. I wish to know who are you?

CHRISTIAN: I am a Christian.

GENTILE: Whom do you adore?

CHRISTIAN: God.

G: Who is the God, whom you adore?

C: I do not know.

G: How can you so earnestly adore, what you do not know?

C: Because I do not know, I adore.

G: I find it astonishing, that a man is affected by something, that he does not know.

- C: It is even more astonishing, that a man is affected by something, that he thinks he knows.
- G: Why so?
- C: Because he knows that, which he believes he knows less than that, which he knows he does not know.
- G: I beseech you to explain!
- C: Whoever thinks he knows something, although one can know nothing, seems insane to me.
- G: It seems to me rather that you are entirely lacking in rationality, if you say one can know nothing.
- C: I understand by knowledge, apprehension of the truth. Whoever says that he knows, says he has apprehended the truth.
- G: I believe the same.
- C: Then how can one apprehend the truth, except through it itself? For it is not apprehended, if the apprehending comes first and the apprehended afterwards.
- G: I do not understand, why the truth cannot be apprehended, except through itself.
- C: Do you believe, that it can be apprehended in another way and in something other?
- G: I think so.
- C: You are clearly in error; there is no truth outside of the truth, no circle outside of circularity, no man outside of humanity. Therefore truth is not found outside of the truth, neither otherwise, nor in something other.
- G: How then is it known to me, what a man is, what a stone is, and everything else, of which I have knowledge?
- C: You know nothing of these, but only believe that you have knowledge. For if I questioned you about the quiddity of that, which you think you know, you would affirm, that you cannot express the actual truth of man or the stone. But that you know the man is not a stone, comes not from the knowledge, through which you knew the man and the stone

and their difference, but rather comes from their accidents, from the diversity of their actions and shapes, upon which, when you discern them, you impose diverse names.

- G: Is there one, or are there several truths?
- C: There is only one: for there is only one unity, and truth coincides with unity, because it is true that there is only one unity. Just as only one unity is found in number, so only one truth is found in the many. And thus whoever does not attain unity,

will always be ignorant of number, and whoever does not attain truth in unity, can know nothing truly. And although he believes he truly knows, he nevertheless easily experiences, that that, which he believes he knows, can be known more truly. For instance, the visible can be seen more truly, than it is seen by you; it will indeed be more truly seen by more acute eyes. Hence it is not seen by you, as the visible is in truth. It is the same with hearing and the other senses. However, since everything which is known, but not with that knowledge with which it can be known, is not known in truth, but rather otherwise



Albrecht Dürer, Peter of Almastra, 1500.

and in another way (however, since otherwise and in another way from the way which is the truth, the truth is not known), he is insane, who believes he knows something in truth and is ignorant of the truth. Is not the blind man judged to be insane, who believes he knows the distinctions of color, when he is ignorant of colors?

- G: Which man then is knowing, if one can know nothing?
- C: One is appraised to be knowing, who knows his ignorance, and only he will revere the truth, who knows that he can apprehend nothing without it, neither being, nor living, nor understanding.
- G: Perhaps it is that, which attracts you to adoration, namely the desire to be in the truth.

- C: Exactly this, which you say. For I worship God, not him, whom you Gentiles falsely name and think you know, but rather God Himself, who is the ineffable truth itself.
- G: Now since you, brother, worship the God, who is truth, and since we do not intend to worship a God, who is not God in truth, I ask you, what is the difference between you and us?
- C: There are many differences, but the greatest one of these is that we worship the absolute, unmixed, eternal, and ineffable truth itself; you, however, do not worship it as it is, absolute in itself, but rather as it is in its actions, not absolute unity, but rather unity in number and multitude. And you are in error, for the truth, which is God, is not communicable to another.

G: I ask you, brother, to lead me to it, so that I can understand that, which you know about your God. Answer me: What do you know about the God, whom you adore?

C: I know, that everything which I know, is not God, and that everything I conceive, is no comparison to Him, but rather He excels it.

G: Therefore God is nothing.

C: He is not nothing, for even this nothing has the name nothing.

G: If He is not nothing, is He therefore something?

C: He is also not something, for something is not everything. However, God is not something rather than everything.

G: Astonishingly, you affirm the God whom you adore, is neither nothing, nor something; that, no rationality comprehends.

- C: God is above nothing and something. The nothing obeys Him, so that it becomes something. And this is His omnipotence, through which power He exceeds everything, which is or is not, and that which is and that which is not obeys Him in like manner. For He causes not-being to pass over into being, and being into not-being. Therefore, He is nothing of those things, which are under Him and which His omnipotence precedes. And, since everything comes from Him, one can no more call Him this than that.
- G: Can He not be named at all?

C: What is named, is small. He, whose magnitude cannot be conceived, remains ineffable.

G: Is He therefore ineffable?

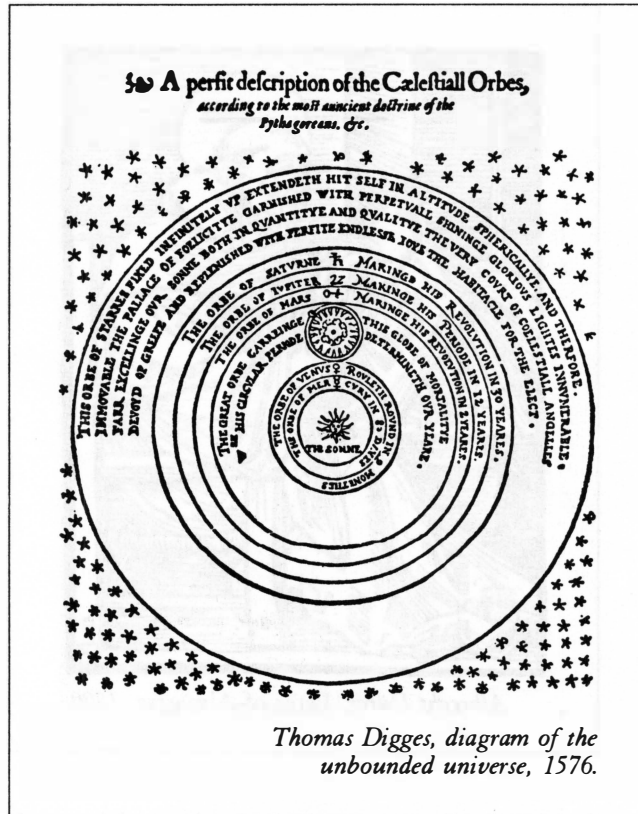
C: He is not ineffable, but rather above everything effable, since He is the cause of everything nameable. How could He, who gives a name to the others, Himself remain without a name?

G: Therefore He is both effable and ineffable.

C: This neither. For God is not the root of contradiction, but rather He is the simplicity prior to every root. Hence one also cannot

say, that He is effable and ineffable.

- G: What, then, do you say concerning Him?
- C: That He is neither named nor not named, nor named and not named, but rather that everything, which can be said, disjunctive and copulative, in agreement or contradiction, on account of the excellence of His infinity, does not correspond to Him. He is the one origin before any formable cogitation concerning Him.
- G: Therefore God does not correspond to being.
- C: You speak correctly.
- G: He is therefore nothing!



C: He is neither nothing nor is He not, nor is He and is He not; rather He is the font and the origin of all principles of being and not-being.

G: Is God the font of the principles of being and not-being?

C: No.

G: But you have just stated this.

C: I have said the truth, when I said it, and now say the truth when I deny it. For if there are principles of being and not-being, then God precedes them. But not-being does not have as its principle not being, but rather being. For not-being needs a principle, in order to be. Therefore being is the principle of not-being, because not-being does not exist without it.

G: Is God not truth?

C: No, rather He precedes all truth.

G: Is He something other than the truth?

C: No, for otherness does not befit Him; rather, He is infinitely more excellent than everything, that is conceived and named by us as truth.

G: Do you not name God, God?

C: We name Him thus.

G: Are you speaking truly or falsely?

C: Neither the one nor both. For we do not say the true, if we say, that this is His name, and we do not say something false, for it is not false, that it is His name. And we also do not say the true and the false, for His simplicity precedes everything nameable and not nameable.

G: Why do you name Him God, although you are ignorant of His name?

C: On account of the similitude to perfection.

G: I beseech you to explain.

C: The name God [*Deus*] comes from *theo*, which

means "I see." For God is in our domain, as vision is in the domain of color. Color can only be attained through vision, and so that any color whatsoever could be attained, the center of vision is without color. In the domain of color, therefore, vision is not found that is without color. Hence, in regard to the domain of color, vision is nothing rather than something. For the domain of color does not attain being outside its domain, but rather asserts that everything, which is, is inside its domain. And there it does not find vision. Vision, which exists without color, is therefore unnameable in the domain of color, since the name of no color corresponds to it. But vision gives every color its name through distinction. Hence all denomination in the domain of color depends on vision, and yet we have discovered, that the name of Him, from whom all names exist, is nothing rather than something. Therefore, God is to everything, as sight is to the visible.

G: What you have said, pleases me. I understand clearly, that in the domain of all creatures, neither God nor His name is to be found. And that God escapes every conception, rather than be af-

firmed as something; since as something that does not possess the condition of a creature, He cannot be found in the domain of creatures. Also, one does not find the not-composed in the domain of the composed. And all names, which are named, are names of composition. However, the composed is not from itself, but rather from that, which precedes all composition. And, although the domain of the composed and everything composed are through this, that which they are, nevertheless since it is not composed, it is unknown in the domain of the composed. Therefore, may God, hidden from the eyes of all of the wise men of this world, be praised in eternity.

—translated by William F. Wertz, Jr.



Albrecht Dürer, Christ shows His disciples the signs in the heavens, 1503.