



A SYMPOSIUM ON THE 600TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF CARDINAL NICOLAUS OF CUSA

Nicolaus of Cusa: A Great Man of Ecumenicism

For one week during March, members and friends of the Schiller Institute, in Hanover, Hamburg, and Berlin, celebrated the 600th birthday of Nicolaus of Cusa (1401-1464). This was also the debut of the “Tell Group” of Hanover, named for the Schiller drama *Wilhelm Tell*: they are attempting to restore to life the culture of the salon. In the salons of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, people gathered, drank good wine, recited poems, discussed philosophical works, and presented music. In this current salon, called the “Schiller Salon,” the idea is not only to have a good time together, but to discuss classical ideas, which have become rare today.

On these evenings, the members of the Schiller Salon attempted to discuss truth, belief, and reason—not simple concepts, as was seen by the level of the debate afterwards. There were many questions, and misunderstandings, owing to the contemporary *zeitgeist*, which often denies the existence of truth altogether. But the lively interest proved, again, that



In March, members of the Schiller Institute “Tell Group” performed selections from works by Cusa, Lessing, and Schiller, at Cusa birthday celebrations in Germany.

today’s citizens and public need not only television culture, and that especially in today’s time, people are hungry for food for thought, and exchange of ideas.

The important person who set the tone for evening, was the “birthday boy” Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa himself. He was enhanced by ideas of Gotthold Lessing and Friedrich

Schiller. The evening was opened by a musical presentation by Jean-Sebastien Tremblay, who played a movement of the Solo ‘Cello Suites by Johann Sebastian Bach. Afterwards, Renate Müller de Paoli “interviewed” the Cardinal himself (portrayed by Frank Hahn). This dialogue was written by Cusa expert, and president of the Cusanus

Gesellschaft (Cusa Society), Helmut Gestrich, of Bernkastel-Kues (the birthplace of Cusa, his name being Kues in German). Through this, the period of Cusa's life came alive, and important developments of his life were mentioned. For example, the fact that Cusa went from being a bishop, to a cardinal, was remarkable, because Cusa himself was not an aristocrat, and at that time these Church positions were usually reserved only for aristocrats.



Courtesy of Dr. Helmut Gestrich, Cusanus-Gesellschaft, Bernkastel-Kues

View of Padua, where Cusa received his law degree in 1423.

Developments In His Life

In the interview, the following aspects of Cusa's life were touched upon.

Nicolaus of Cusa was the son of a well-off fisherman, in the town of Kues, on the Mosel River. At the age of twelve, he attended the school of the Brothers of the Common Life, in the Dutch town of Deventer. His family had friendly connections with this school. In the year 1416, he matriculated at the University of Heidelberg, as a clergyman of the Diocese of Trier, but he left the city after one year, because he felt he could learn nothing more in this town. Instead, he went to the Faculty of Law at Padua, where, in the fall of 1423, he received a degree. He then swore an oath of faith to this university, and the Bishop gave him the power of authority, to teach the subject of canon law.

Starting in 1425, he studied in Cologne, and devoted himself to the study of the history of the sources of law and the Church. He developed a mastery of a critical study of sources of law, which brought him scientific fame, and increasing influ-

ence in the Church.

He became truly famous, though, in the years 1433-34, at which time he presented his first great work, *De concordantia catholica* (*On Catholic Concordance*), to the Council of Basel. At this time, there was a fight within the Church, as to whether the highest authority lay with the Pope, or with the Council; Cusa answered this question, by stating that the Pope and the Council are the Church. Cusa first supported the "Reform Movement" of the Council, against the Pope, and later the Pope, against the divided Council. But his actions were guided always by an attempt to maintain the unity of the Church and Christendom, on all levels.

On the Dec. 20, 1448, Nicolaus of Cusa was appointed Cardinal. In 1451-52, he went on a great diplomatic tour throughout Germany. Already, in 1450, Pope Nicholas V had appointed him Bishop of Brixen, in Tyrol.

The Peace of Faith

Nicolaus of Cusa made prophetic warnings, and was an influence on his time, as shown in his remarkable

writing *De pace fidei* (*On the Peace of Faith*). The main focus of the entire salon was recitation from this dialogue, performed by eight members of the Tell Group.

In this piece, Cusa outlines, for the future, a path for reconciliation of the faiths of the world. Cusa was part of a three-person papal delegation which travelled to Constantinople, to negotiate the union of the Greek Orthodox Eastern Church with the Western Church of

Rome. These negotiations were the basis for convening the Council of Unity, in Ferrara, and later Florence, which ended in the unity of the Greek and Roman Churches. But, in 1453, Constantinople was conquered and destroyed by the Turks. The horrors that resulted were the reason that Cusa wrote *De pace fidei*, as he describes in his introduction to this work.

He describes there, his idea to bring together the different faiths into a "single and happy unity," and to form an eternal peace. Surely, many in the audience were reminded of current events, in which different religions are used to pit various groups against each other, and cause wars.

The scenes performed take place in the presence of God, when "a man, who once saw that region [the conquered Constantinople], with zeal for God, amongst many sighs, asks the Creator of all things, if, in His kindness, He might moderate the persecution, which raged, more than usual, on account of diverse religious rites." Following this, one leader of those persecuted, and the Word-Become-Flesh of God, invite

the representatives of the different religions—including a Greek, an Italian, a Persian, a Tatar, and the Apostle Paul—to a gathering in Jerusalem.

The Greek expresses the wish, that the differences of the religions be brought together into a unanimity of peace. He then points out the fact that this would be quite difficult, because the different peoples of the world have defended their religions with blood.

The Word-of-God answers the representatives of the different peoples, as follows: “You will not find another faith, but rather, one and the same, single religion, presupposed everywhere. You who are now present here are called wise men, by the sharers of your language, or at the very least, philosophers or lovers of wisdom. . . . If you all, therefore, love wisdom, do you not presuppose that this wisdom exists?” All gathered there answer, that nobody can doubt this, and the Word attempts, using the example of knowledge, to explain that all religions have one source: “There can only be one wisdom. For, if it were possible that there be several wisdoms, then these would have to be from one. Namely, unity is prior to all plurality.” The Greek then answers: “None of us doubts, but that there is one wisdom, which we all love and on account of which, we are called philosophers. Because of participation in it, there are many wise men, whereas wisdom itself remains simple and undivided in itself.”

Here, Cusa presents his idea, that despite the differences, everything has an origin in the idea of unity, that the different religions have a common source, and

only in the way they are practiced, are they different.

Now, the Tatar speaks of the different forms of practice: “The Tatars, a numerous and simple people, who worship the one God above others, are astounded over the variety of rites which others have, who worship one and the same God with them. They deride the fact that some Christians, all Arabs, and Jews are circumcised, that others are marked on their brows with a brand, others are baptized. Furthermore, there is such great diversity in respect to matrimony; the one has only one wife, another is legally married to one wife, but nevertheless has several concubines, yet another has several lawful wives. As regards sacrifice, the rites are so diverse, that one cannot even enumerate them. . . . However, as long as there is not a union, the persecution will not cease. For diversity produces division and enmities, hatred, and war.”

The Apostle Paul answers: “It must be shown, that the salvation of the soul is granted, not on the basis

of works, but rather on account of faith. For Abraham, the father of the faith of all the believing, whether they are Christians, Arabs, or Jews, believed in God, and he was reckoned to be justified If that is admitted, then the various kinds of rites are not disturbing, for they are instituted and received as sensible signs of the variety of faith. The signs, not the signified, assume variability.” As a conclusion, Paul says: “The divine commandments are very brief, and are well known, and common in every nation, for the light that reveals them to us is created along with the rational soul. For within us, God says to love Him, from whom we received being, and to do nothing to another, except that which we wish done to us. Love is therefore the fulfillment the law of God, and all laws are reduced to this.”

Through this, Nicolaus of Cusa had already, at that time, disproved those who call for the clash of civilizations, and paved the way for ecumenicism.



The Council of Basel, woodcut illustration.

Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*

After a short pause, the second part of the program started, which was dedicated to a few of the intellectual descendants of Nicolaus of Cusa. The second part was also opened with music. This time, it was a work by one of the sons of J.S. Bach, Carl Philipp Emanuel's 'Cello Sonata, performed by Jean-Sebastien Tremblay and Birgit Brenner. C.P.E. Bach was a friend of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the author of the play *Nathan the Wise*. The music was followed by two poems by Lessing, “*Die drei Reiche der Natur*” (“The Three Kingdoms of Nature”), and “*Die*

Türken (“The Turks”), which served as a bridge to the famous dialogue between the Sultan Saladin (performed by Klaus-Dieter Haege) and the Jew Nathan the Wise (Roland Pagel), from the drama. The dialogue has also become known as “The Parable of the Rings.”

The story is as follows:

Nathan speaks of a ring, as a metaphor for religion, which “makes one beloved of God and man.” For generations, the ring was passed down by the father to his best-loved son. One father, who loved all three of his sons equally, pays to have two exact copies of the ring made, and after his death, his sons fight over which ring is the original. The judge who is summoned by the sons, concludes that none of the three rings is the true one, because the true ring makes one beloved of all, but each son only loves himself the most. He demands that, “therefore, each person strive for his unbribed and unprejudiced love. Each one of you strive, as much as possible, to show the power of his own ring. May this power prove itself through gentleness, with heartfelt good-naturedness and goodwill, and through his belief in God.” The power of each stone will show itself, through many generations, through the children’s children, and a much more knowledgeable man will then tell us which is the “true ring.” With this ending, the question of the true religion is posed.

It becomes clear, how Lessing continued to develop Nicolaus’s idea of “unity in diversity,” in which he brought together the idea of the one religion, through the one ring, and the different practices of religion, through the three rings. Since the true ring cannot be found out, it is shown that all different practices of religion are bound together by a common principle, which is that which the Apostle



Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Paul identifies, in *De pace fidei*, as “the love of Truth.”

Schiller’s *Don Carlos*

Following the dialogue, three songs were performed by Jessica Tremblay and Birgit Brenner. These were all poems of Lessing, made into songs by different composers. The evening was rounded off with works of Schiller. Andreas Richter recited a section of the famous dialogue from Schiller’s *Don Carlos*, on freedom, between the Marquis of Posa and King Philip II of Spain, who presumes, with the help



Friedrich Schiller

of the Inquisition, to become the ruler of Christendom. There, Posa says,

... Look about yourself
Upon his glor’ous universe. On
freedom
It hath been founded—and how rich
it is
Through freedom! He, the great
Creator, casts
The worm into a drop of dew, and
lets,
In e’en the deathly spaces of decay,
Free will enjoy itself—See *your*
creation,
How tight and poor! The rustling of
a leaf
Affrights the Lord of
Christendom—*you* have
To quake before each virtue. *He*—
lest freedom’s
Delightful presence be disturb’d—
He rather
Allows the awful multitude of evil
To rage throughout His universe—
of Him,
The Artist, one is not aware,
discreetly
He veils Himself within th’eternal
laws;
Free thinkers see *these*, yet not *Him*.
Wherefore
A God? they say; the world is self-
sufficient.
No single Christian prayer hath ever
prais’d
Him more than this free thinker’s
blasphemy.

The final event of the evening was Schiller’s poem, “*Die Worte des Glaubens*” (“Words of Faith”) which develops Nicolaus of Cusa’s ideas of freedom, belief, and reason. With Schiller’s appeal that each person should make “these three words”—freedom, virtue, and God—his or her own, the listeners were addressed directly, to think about the meaning of the poem, and thereby, the true meaning of being human.

—*Frauße Richter*