

H. Lawrence Bond and Gerald Christianson. *Reform, Representation and Theology in Nicholas of Cusa and His Age.*

Variorum Collected Studies Series. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011. xxv + 334 pp. \$149.95. ISBN: 978-1-4094-2960-9.

This solid collection of essays is divided between Gerald Christianson's more historical pieces and the late Larry Bond's more theological papers — almost all of them refer to Nicholas of Cusa. The historical essays set out the milieu in which Nicholas first made his mark at the Council of Basel and the important influence of Cardinal Cesarini as a model of moderation and commitment to reform in word and action. The theological essays turn to Nicholas's ideas and take up themes from his famed *De docta ignorantia* (*Learned Ignorance*), from his mystical theology in *De visione Dei* (*The Vision of God*) and *De ludo globi* (*The Game with the Sphere*), and finally his less well-known later works that conceive God as *Posse* (possibility or power). Every essay in the book offers food for careful consideration, helping us understand the man from Cusa who was neither just a university theoretician nor simply a church administrator, but combined action and thoughtful reflection in a busy life and wrote a series of works that continue to provoke our wonder and admiration.

In particular, the Christianson essays highlight the troubled Council of Basel and Cusanus's role there and set out a detailed account of the Council's struggles with the papacy. After introductory essays on ecumenical reform, G. G. Coulton, and the historiography of the Council of Basel, Christianson takes up in six subsequent essays topics such as the conflicts at that council, the problems of reunion with the Hussites, Nicholas's emphasis on concord, his *De concordantia catholica* (*The Catholic Concord*), Cardinal Cesarini's centrality to the Council, and Nicholas's part in the presidency debate. Remarkable for their clarity of expression and balanced judgments in weighing the historical evidence, these essays surely establish themselves as among the best work on the Council of Basel from the late twentieth century. Having them together in a single volume is a gift to everyone interested in that fraught Council and its import for conciliarism then and since.

In the light of these essays, that Nicholas of Cusa moved from his initial conciliarism at Basel to supporting a series of not totally admirable popes seems a reasonable, if not inevitable, choice. As Christianson writes in a sentence worth careful pondering, "Comprehensive as Cusanus's concept of catholic concord was,

and as broad-minded as Cesarini's invitation to the Hussite heretics still appears, the unity of the church in concord and harmony had always been the highest goal for the two leaders, and neither could withstand the perceived threat to unity when the political demands of the day seemed to cut off all other options." Both of them abandoned Basel and moved on to the Council of Ferrara-Florence.

H. Lawrence Bond was as much a historian as he was admirable pastor and theologian. His essays begin with a detailed historical account of the setting of Cusanus's *De docta ignorantia*, including his illumination on the sea voyage returning from Constantinople with the Greeks for the new Council of Ferrara-Florence, his composing his treatise while representing the pope as a legate to the various German diets, and finishing it during a winter stay at Cusa in 1440. Then his essays move to more theological topics such as the coincidence of opposites in Nicholas's Christology; his mystical theology, especially in *De visione Dei*; and his final works.

Throughout these essays Bond provides a reading of Nicholas that interprets him as a still viable guide to spirituality and to thinking of God aright. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the insights of two essays. In one he reads *De ludo globi* and proposes that playing the ballgame becomes symbolic both of the soul at play en route to the divine and of the play in the soul on its journey to God; and his essay on the icon in *De visione Dei* ends with a striking "guided meditation" on the face of God based on chapter 7 of Nicholas's treatise. Every careful reader cannot but be struck by the care and depth of Bond's thinking in each of his essays here.

Reading these two authors is, in sum, an intellectual pleasure that should evoke our gratitude for the light their essays shed on Nicholas of Cusa's milieu and ideas.

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