

## Reviews

Peter J. Casarella, ed. *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*.

Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006. xxxii + 280 pp. index. bibl. \$79.95. ISBN: 0-8132-1426-9.

The years 2000–01 saw celebrations on four continents of the sixth centennial of the birth of the Renaissance polymath Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64). This volume contains papers from a celebration held at the Catholic University of America in 2001. As the editor, Peter Casarella, notes in the introduction, no single approach typifies every article. Nor are all focused on the same issues. There are, however, certain commonalities. One is noted by the editor: more attention was given to Cusanus's relationship to earlier developments and less to his modernity than at the commemoration of Cusanus's death in 1964. A second is my own: little attention is given to Nicholas's life and practical involvements. One would scarcely know that Nicholas was a canonist, cardinal, and bishop from the articles in this collection.

Although they are interrelated, these essays fall into groups. Six are concerned with the cardinal's speculative thought, two with his attitudes toward Islam, three with his thought on church and politics, and two with his relationship to mathematics and science. In all cases, the contributors are well-versed in their fields of research, and some are among the most prominent names in Cusanus studies. Both American and European scholars contributed their thoughts on important topics, and most are well worth the reading.

The group focusing on speculative topics is strong. A translation of Cusanus's sermon on the *Pater noster* leads off, orienting the reader to Nicholas's themes and style. In an overview worth reading for its breadth of treatment, Bernard McGinn addresses the desire to see the invisible God in Cusanus and his predecessors. Jasper Hopkins examines Cusanus's relationship to the thought of Anselm of Canterbury, and Louis Dupré does the same for Cusanus and Meister Eckhart. Both show how Nicholas made use of earlier thinkers while adapting their thought to his own themes. The latter's reflections on Cusanus's idea of God, which was not pantheistic as occasionally charged, leads us to Wilhelm Dupré's discussion of humanity as the living image of the divinity. Karsten Harries makes a case for Leon Battista Alberti's influence on Cusanus, who emphasized both vision and mathematical perspectives on the universe.

Harries's ideas on Albertian perspective lead us to the articles by Walter Andreas Euler and Il Kim. Here, unfortunately, there is a weak spot in the collection. Euler follows the established scholarship on a painting of "three haloed figures" (128). Treating these as Mohammed, Jesus, and Moses, Euler discusses Cusanus's thought on the value, real but flawed, of the Koran as a witness to the truth. Unfortunately, Il Kim's article destroys this connection to Mohammed, leaving Euler's good ideas hung on a weak frame.

Thomas Prügl's contribution on infallibility rightly orients us away from modern debates over *magisterium* toward Nicholas's concern for the reliability of the Church as the vehicle of salvation. Here he breaks new ground. The more politically oriented articles by Cary Nederman and Paul Sigmund are less exciting. Nederman examines the roots of Nicholas's thought, and that of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II), on the empire. They are shown supporting imperial authority within a framework that allowed nation-states to exist legitimately. Unfortunately, Nederman embraces the much-abused idea of the nation and largely ignores the idea of Christendom that justifies the role of the emperor in the defense of the faith. Sigmund pursues the running polemic between Nederman and Francis Oakley over the continuities and discontinuities of medieval and modern political thought, drawing a line of division at the time of John Locke in the seventeenth century.

Some of the best contributions are found at the end of the volume. Elizabeth Brient leads us through Cusanus's use of mathematics, especially its role as a metaphor in the teaching of "learned ignorance." Regine Kather examines the way in which Cusanus decentered not just humanity but earth itself in the pursuit of God. Medieval hierarchies were displaced, leaving all worlds and persons equally near to the divinity. Here Kather compares Cusanus and Einstein, both of whom had scientific interests that involved the pursuit of truth, as well as verifiable scientific measurements.

The volume concludes with a useful guide to suggested reading prepared by the editor.

THOMAS M. IZBICKI  
The Johns Hopkins University