

Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition: Essays in Honor of Gerald Christianson. Thomas M. Izbicki, Jason Aleksander, and Donald F. Duclow, eds. Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 188. Leiden: Brill, 2019. xx + 356 pp. \$197.

In 1429, the humanist Poggio Bracciolini wrote breathlessly to his friend Niccolò Niccoli to report that Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) had discovered twelve lost comedies of Plautus. Poggio saw a fellow manuscript hunter in the young German. And yet Cusanus—canon lawyer, philosopher, theologian, and eventually cardinal—can hardly be called a humanist, and Plautus’s plays seem to have had no significance for him. Poggio’s excitement illustrates the eagerness of Cusanus’s contemporaries to claim him for their circle, to label him as a champion—or adversary—of their cause. Even today, scholars from diverse fields can see their inquiries reflected in his work. That he is able to offer such a multifaceted mirror has to do with the extraordinary breadth of his interests, the richness of his thought, and the tensions in his thinking as it evolved.

This collection of eight historical studies and twelve philosophical and theological essays, offered in tribute to Gerald Christianson, professor emeritus of church history at the United (formerly Gettysburg) Lutheran Seminary, succeeds in embracing this multitude of Cusanus. The essays consider a range of his interests and his context, without attempting to synthesize or impose a definitive reading. Space allows comment on only a few here. Walter Euler examines Cusanus’s literary response to major divisions within Christianity to underline that harmony and unity within the church were consistently overriding ideals for him. Seen through this lens, Cusanus’s eventual support for Pope Eugenius IV in his conflict with the Council of Basel reveals a continuity of conviction, not a radical change of sides. Addressing Cusanus’s engagement with other religions, John Monfasani convincingly upends the established reception of *De Pace Fidei* as an irenic, universalist work, and sees in it a mere “thought experiment,” in contrast to the “serious work of refutation” of Muslim beliefs (104) that is the *Cribratio Alkorani*. Monfasani adds texture to Cusanus’s approach to Islam by comparing it to that of two contemporary Greek apologists, George of Trebizond and George Amiroutzes.

Jason Aleksander and Elizabeth Brient in their respective essays cut a clear path through the complex texts of *De Aequalitate* and *De Principio*, in which Cusanus set out his philosophy of history and time; Aleksander extends this path to a new reading of *De Pace Fidei*, bridging the tensions between its apologetic and ecumenical objectives. Donald Duclow illuminates Cusanus’s rich use of symbolism related to coins in works such as *De Ludo Globi*, reflecting his worldly experience with money and markets. Refuting efforts to categorize narrowly Cusanus’s views on universals, Meredith Ziebart concludes that he cannot be identified as a nominalist, even if he sometimes used nominalist topoi. David Albertson disentangles the semiotics of image, icon,

and painting in *De Visione Dei*, Cusanus's highly original multimedia work. Thomas Izbicki provides a comprehensive analysis of indulgences granted by Cusanus during his legation in Germany, foreshadowing grievances that would give shape to Luther's agenda. Noting the lack of evidence that Luther was influenced by Cusanus, Knut Alfsvåg nevertheless identifies important parallels in the theological and philosophical issues they engaged with, as well as the Neoplatonic thinking they expressed in strikingly similar passages.

Not all essays are about Cusanus. Christopher Bellitto, for example, considers the transition from reform to Reformation in his examination of the 1513 reform treatise *Libellus ad Leonem Decimum*. Michiel Decaluwé proposes that church councils can be fruitfully studied as cultural—not just political—phenomena, drawing attention to the human aspect of delegates interacting in a concentrated space, in and outside of formal meetings.

To write about Cusanus or about the councils of the fifteenth century without quoting a work edited or written by Gerald Christianson has become no easy task. This festschrift is, therefore, a fitting tribute to Christianson, a former president of the American Cusanus Society and a continuing driving force behind its activities. The essays are no introduction to Cusanus, or an overview of his life and work; they assume a familiarity with the person and his times. Cusanus scholars will acquire new insights throughout these chapters, which, in total, discuss some fifteen major works along with a number of his sermons. In addition, students of church councils, church reform, the Reformation, and Neoplatonism will find papers of value here.

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Mystiker, Mittler, Mensch: 600 Jahre Niklaus von Flüe. Roland Gröbli, Heidi Kronenberg, Markus Ries, and Thomas Wallimann-Sasaki, eds. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2017. 388 pp. €24.80.

Niklaus von Flüe is a controversial figure. At the age of fifty, the Swiss farmer, husband, and father of five children traded the domesticity of a farmstead for the frugality of a hermitage. But, while choosing the life of a hermit, he was far from being an anchorite. Inhabiting a cell a stone's throw away from his family home, he served as a spiritual advisor for a great number of people visiting him daily (Roland Gröbli, 31). He engaged in the social and political debates of his time, functioning as a policy advisor. Niklaus was of great interest for both confessions during the Reformation and served as an icon against modernism and liberalism during the *Kulturkampf* of the nineteenth century. Right-wing politicians also used him against the accession of Switzerland to the League of Nations in 1920 (Hannes Steiner, 323); at the same time he was a symbol