

constitutes a religion to which all others are 'reducible,' he was not attenuating Christianity by repudiating the dogmas of *creatio ex nihilo* [creation out of nothing], *deus ut tres personae in una substantia* [God as three persons in one substance], and *Verbum caro factum est* [the Word was made flesh]. Rather he was claiming that these very dogmas are essential to the non-Christian religions."

In his essay on "Cusa's Hermeneutical Approach," Hopkins writes: "Nicholas harbors the conviction that if he can help the Arabs to see the truth of the Gospel within their own scripture—and can help Christians to see that that scripture, when rightly understood, is not at odds with Christianity's sacred books—then mutual persecution will cease and Christianity and Islam will come closer to actually being *religio una in rituum varietate* [one religion in the variety of rites], the watchword of his previously written 'De Pace Fidei.'"

Hopkins describes Cusanus' method as follows: (1) "Attempt to interpret the Koran in such way as to show it to be compatible with the Old Testament and the New Testament; where a given text cannot be rendered thus compatible reject its teaching as false"; (2) "Attempt to interpret the Koran in such way as to render it self-consistent"; (3) "Where there exist *prima facie* conflicts of the Koran with the Gospel or with itself, look for Muhammad's true intent, hidden beneath his use of symbolism and his accommodation of the uneducated"; (4) "Interpret the Koran as intending to give glory to God without detracting from Christ"; (5) "Work, insofar as possible, with the interpretation that the wise among the Arabs assign to the Koran, and attempt to show that even their interpretation implies Christian doctrines."

The Issue of Natural Law

While Hopkins' analysis is a very useful contribution, he fails to sufficiently emphasize Cusanus' use of natural law to identify and defend the truth of Christianity, as being presupposed by Islam as well as other religions and cultures. For example, in his essay on "Cusa's Hermeneutical Approach," Hopkins writes that the law of Abraham, Moses and Christ are one law, "which is

most fully disclosed in the teachings of Christ and which, in 'De Pace Fidei,' he identifies as 'the law of love.'"

While all Christians certainly believe this to be true, what Cusanus actually writes is that the law of love is impressed on the minds of *all* human beings, insofar as all men are created in the creative image of God: "The divine commandments are very brief and are all 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 of the law of God and all laws are reduced to this."

Thus, Cusanus' argument is based on the truth of the Gospel, but only as illuminated by our God-given natural reason. This is nowhere clearer than in his discussion of the Trinity in both works. From the standpoint of negative theology, God infinitely excels and precedes every name and everything nameable. As infinite, God is therefore neither trine nor one. On the other hand, from the standpoint of affirmative theology, God is the trine and one Creator.

In respect to the latter argument, Cusanus maintains that the Trinity is necessary to the concept of God as Creator. He arrives at this conclusion, as

Venice: The Real 'Empire of Evil'

Elisabeth Gleason's book is not intended for the casual reader of popular biographies. It is a thorough, well-documented biography of a man who is one of the most important and evil figures of the last five hundred years.

Contarini is best known for his role as a cardinal of the Catholic Church during a time in which the growth of the Protestant movement, led by Martin Luther and John Calvin, ripped the Church apart. A major portion of Gleason's work focusses on Contarini's deceptive attempt to find a compromise between Catholics and

did St. Augustine, based upon an examination of the human mind as bearing the image of God's creative power. The human mind is trine and one insofar as it is creative. It is one mind and yet has three and only three operations. As Cusanus writes in "On the Peace of Faith": "Also notice that there is a certain fecundity in the essence of the rational soul, that is, mind, wisdom, and love or will, since the mind exerts intellect or wisdom from itself, and from both proceeds the will or love. And this trinity in the unity of essence of the soul is the fecundity, which man possesses in his similarity to the most fecund, uncreated Trinity."

Thus, Cusanus is not merely defending the dogmas of Christianity, but rather he is rendering them intelligible based upon natural law; and he is directing this not only to Muslims, Jews, and other non-Christians, but also to professed Christians whose misconceptions of the truth of Christianity and failure to act in the spirit of Christianity are themselves a cause of evil and discord in the world. In the final analysis, it is Cusanus' concept of all men and women created in the image of the agapic, creative power of the triune God, which constitutes his enduring contribution to establishing peace among the peoples of the world.

—William F. Wertz, Jr.



Gasparo Contarini:
Venice, Rome, and Reform
by Elisabeth Gleason
University of California Press,
Berkeley, 1993
335 pages, hardbound, \$35

Protestants. His “third way” solution would actually facilitate the split, leading to two hundred years of religious wars in Europe.

Although a cardinal, Contarini’s loyalty was to Venice and to its supreme ruling body, the Council of Three, of which he was a member. The “Three” consisted of three nobles of the Venetian oligarchy. They were the final judge and jury and their “justice” was silent and swift. The result of “The Three’s” secret, nightly sessions could be seen the following morning, when the strangled body of the accused would be found hanging between “The Columns” of Venice’s main square.

Venetian Diplomacy

Contarini was born in 1483, three years before Bartholomeu Dias discovered a trade route, by sea, around the Cape of Good Hope. This discovery would lead to a shift of world power away from Venice to the nations of the north, such as England, the Netherlands, and Germany.

Earlier, during the thirteenth century, Venice’s power had grown through conquest, from a city with a population of 65,000, to an empire of millions. Geographically situated between the European and East Asian land trading routes, she became the world’s commercial center. Venice’s immense warehouses brimmed with goods from around the world. Each delivery of goods was amply taxed, filling the coffers of the Venetian government. After Dias’ discovery, all this changed.

In 1508, spearheaded by the Pope, the major European powers formed the League of Cambrai, dedicated to ending “the insatiable cupidity of the Venetians and their thirst of dominion.” Made up of France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Hungary, and the Papal States, the League conquered all of Venice’s territories. Venice herself was barely saved by a last-minute truce.

Now, if Venice was to rebuild her empire, she would have to rely upon her skills at diplomacy rather than her military might. Her diplomats, trained in the art of deception, sought to pit one

nation against the other, for Venice’s benefit. Contarini’s role was key.

Venetian Roots

Contarini’s family traces its heritage to the Roman nobility of the fifth century A.D. The family gave Venice eight ruling doges, twenty-two bishops, and four patriarchs. Contarini spent eight years at the University of Padua, the “Harvard” of Venice’s elite, where he studied with Pietro Pomponazzi, the leading Aristotelian philosopher of his day.

At the age of twenty-eight, Contarini began the first of many ambassadorial appointments: first to Hungary and then to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. In 1528, Contarini became Venice’s ambassador to the Pope in Rome. It was here that he psychologically profiled both Pope Clement VII and Cardinal Farnese, the future Pope Paul III. In a dispatch of June 16, 1528, he outlined his plan of deception:

“I continually seek to placate the mind of His Holiness by various means. Therefore I sometimes try to be in his presence, seeing that I am not displeasing to him. In this way I can always drop some word or make some courteous and appropriate gesture, which certainly does no harm. In my judgment it is necessary to proceed step by step in this business, and to use all possible skill.”

Within seven months after his appointment, Contarini wrote of his success in gaining the Pope’s confidence, in a dispatch describing the Pope’s having told him, “I trust you to such an extent, that if you were not the Venetian ambassador and a nobleman of that city, I would place all my disagreements in your hands.”

(While in Rome, Contarini showed Venice’s hatred for the fruits of the Italian Renaissance, by noting his distaste for the great artistic portrayals of the lives of Jesus, Mary, and the saints in the works of Raphael and Michelangelo.)

Cardinal Contarini

Contarini returned to Venice, and in 1530 was elected to Venice’s Council of

Three, where he served five years. In 1535, directly from his membership in The Three, he was appointed a cardinal by Pope Paul III. Later, he would be the Pope’s envoy to the famous “Colloquy at Regensburg.” The meeting in Regensburg, Germany in 1541, was a last effort by Emperor Charles V to prevent a schism in the Catholic Church, as well as the division of Germany into warring religious fiefdoms. It was attended by six leading theologians, equally divided between Protestant and Catholic.

As the Pope’s envoy, Contarini played a critical role. Instead of raising the theological level of discussion, Contarini, in typical Venetian fashion, played both sides. One of the critical theological issues was whether man was “justified by faith alone,” as the Protestants maintained, or by “faith through works,” as the Catholics said. Contarini contrived a middle position, or what became known as “double justification.” Contarini wrote: “Those who say we are justified through works are right; and those who say that we are not justified through works, but through faith, are also right.”

John Calvin, who was also at Regensburg, was hardly fooled by Contarini’s “compromise.” Calvin wrote to an associate: “You will marvel when you read the copy of the article on justification . . . that our adversaries have conceded so much. For they have committed themselves to the essentials of what is our true teaching.”

The Regensburg Colloquy ended in failure. Contarini’s network in the Catholic Church, called the “Spirituali,” went on to influence both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Over the next 450 years, Venice’s policy to “divide and conquer” resulted in religious, regional, and even world wars.

Unfortunately, despite her scholarship, Gleason has little understanding of Contarini’s real place in history. Her biography misses the most crucial axiom: Contarini is a Venetian, and was solely concerned with Venetian power.

—Donald Phau