

DIALOGUE ON PEACE

Nicolaus of Cusa And the Search for Truth



Alinari/Art Resource, NY

Benozzo Gozzoli, "Journey of the Magi," 1459 (detail). The fresco subject was chosen as a metaphor celebrating the 1437 Council of Florence, and portrays the gathering together of the Council participants from both the West and the East. In the detail shown above, the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople appears on horseback to the left.

The debates at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September, indicate how relevant our topic is today, since it was not the great powers who pointed a way out of the crisis, but, rather, the countries of the Third World. The U.N. has made 2001 the “Year of the Dialogue of Civilizations.” We have the opportunity to shape this initiative—which is also the 600th anniversary year of Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa’s birth—with our discussion now.

by Renate Leffek

The visit of the Iranian President Seeyed Mohammed Khatami to Weimar, Germany in July, was a decisive point upon which to build, not only for a “Dialogue of Cultures,” but, moreover, for a dialogue on *peace*, just as the great philosopher Nicolaus of Cusa conducted it.

Would we could hear from our own politicians speeches such as that which President Khatami gave in Weimar! The Iranian President demonstrated how an in-depth study of philosophy and the history of cultures is necessary, to be able to conduct a statesman-like dialogue with other countries. Only at this level, can the basis for a dialogue among different cultures, which is so important for peace among nations, be laid.

In order to conduct this dialogue, President Khatami thought it important to identify the potentials, attitudes, and identities in the East and the West; and, he saw it necessary to orient to the higher truths, “in order to find a common human essence between materialism and spirituality in the changing world of today.” He recognized the beauty in this undertaking, namely, that people from the Orient and the Occident could mutually enhance each other.

The President used the German poet Goethe’s *West-östliche Divan (West-Eastern Divan)** as an example of

Renate Leffek presented this material to Schiller Institute meetings in Germany in August and September of this year.

* “*Divan*,” Persian for assembly or collection, is used to describe a collection of poems, usually by one author. Goethe wrote the poems collected in the *West-Eastern Divan* following an intensive study of Persian poetry.—Ed.

how dialogue between cultures and peoples is possible, and pointed out, with Goethe, where the obstacles, and sabotage, to a policy of peace among nations lie. He criticized the colonialist intentions of Western policy in recent years, and emphasized that such dialogue should not be held merely to satisfy scientific curiosity, but to discover *truth*, and to live together in understanding, warning that war is always the consequence of “blindness to truth.” We see how right he was, in the many wars which have broken out over the past decade.

One might ask, why, in our Information Age, do we need to know the people and ideas of the past? We no longer live in the Middle Ages, so what are we supposed to do with these old-fashioned philosophers, in our world of computers and digital media? Shouldn’t we just stick with the spirit of the times (the *Zeitgeist*)? Or, is it not the case that in this virtual-controlled media world, we have become slaves of just such un-thinking, emotionless machines? And that, today, so-called “dialogue” is nothing more than an exchange of flattened banalities, or meetings at which watered-down compromises are negotiated? Do we really wish to merely adapt to a lowest common denominator—and thus, not only prevent real dialogue with other countries, but also create the conditions for unrest and war, rather than peace?

President Khatami’s presentation was striking, because he emphasized that it is the *highest* common denominator which can, and must be found; and that, for this reason, it is crucial to recall the poets, thinkers, and philosophers of the past, and to study them today. Our goal lies in the commonalities among people, in mutual fructification in the arts and sciences; and also, in the necessity that statesmen become practiced in the art of philosopher-kings.

Nicolaus of Cusa: Think Ahead of One's Time!

Precisely in this age of so-called globalization, when political potentates proliferate only division and unrest among peoples, is it necessary again and again to find new—or “old”—pathways toward peace. Nicolaus of Cusa showed us how we might find these pathways. Despite his “age”—he will be 600 years old next year—Cusa thought more progressively than today’s “Zeitgeist”-thinkers, whose heads are so stuffed full of “information.”

Cusa was a revolutionary thinker in his Fifteenth century. He initiated a Renaissance, indeed, a new epoch of history. His works—philosophical, theological, and scientific—are continually amazing, because they show how far ahead of his own time his thinking was. For Cusa, theoretical knowledge always went together with practical experience; therefore, his work always focussed on taking responsibility, as an individual person, for historical processes—which meant, taking responsibility for humanity as a whole.

In his dialogue *De pace fidei* (*On the Peace of Faith*) (1453), we find the true concept of the *œcumene*, of ecumenism, which is so critical today, just as it was then. Cusa shows us many ways to peace, or harmony, among the nations. He did not wish to impose compulsion on nations, peoples, or their religions, nor did he call for the predominance of one form of faith over another. Although the foundation for him was belief in Christ as the bridge between God and man, he did not conceive of the church in a narrow or static way, but rather, based himself on the ecumenical idea, as he represented it in his *Concordantia catholica* (*Catholic Concordance*) (1433).

Thus, as *On the Peace of Faith* makes clear, it was more important to him that faith bring about peacefulness and love, than some superficial agreement, which papered over deeper, unresolved conflicts. This has nothing to do with negotiating compromises between fixed doctrines, or with liberalism, but, instead, it is a very clear idea of how to solve conflicts, without violating or sacrificing the most basic principles of humanity; nor does it have anything to do with calling into question the fundamental principles of Western Christianity. This dialogue provided an excellent pedagogical way to oppose all forms of fanaticism and religious fundamentalism.

The Council of Florence and the Fall of Constantinople

I would like to briefly review the history of the period, because what was at issue for Cusa was the resolution of the schism between the Eastern and Western churches that had begun in A.D. 1054. In his first major work, *Con-*



Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa

cordantia catholica, Cusa had already laid the foundation, in the sovereign nation-state, for the unity, harmony, and peace between church and state. He would return to many of those proposals in *De pace fidei*. In 1437, Cusa travelled to Constantinople as an advisor to the papal ambassador, in order to win over the scholars and Greek Orthodox church fathers to the union of the Eastern and Western churches. The delegation returned to the Union Council in Ferrara with 700 Greek emissaries, among them the Emperor John VIII Paleologue and the Orthodox patriarch. Later, the negotiations were moved to Florence, where they went down in history as the Council of Florence, the beginning of the Golden Renaissance. In 1439, the union of Eastern and Western churches was solemnly voted up. By 1445, the Armenian, Syrian, Coptic, Chaldean, and Maronite churches had joined.

During his months-long visit to Constantinople, Cusa met not only with Christians, but also with Muslims. He made many friends and had a number of important experiences. Classical Greek culture, whose writings were largely lost or buried up to that time, was once again made accessible to the Western world through Cusa's trip. He brought many of the writings of the Greek philosophers back with him to Italy, both those of contemporary thinkers like Gemisthos Plethon, as well as those of Plato. The first thing Cusa did, was to have Plato's *Parmenides* dialogue translated into Latin, which circulated immediately in scholarly circles, and led to many lively debates. It was Cusa's reintroduction of Classical

Greek culture in the Western world of the Fifteenth century, which made the Golden Renaissance possible.

Some years later, however, the Turks conquered the city of Constantinople (May 1453), and the once-powerful Byzantine Empire was occupied. Only then did the Western nations and broad circles in the West understand the impending danger. Constantinople was, after all, the symbol of the church in the East.

The Western world reacted to the fall of Constantinople with horror and concern, and a good friend of Cusa's, Cardinal Bessarion, a born Greek, described the terrible situation in a letter: "Unfortunate me! I cannot write it without great pain. The renowned, flourishing city, the capital of all of Greece, the glory and pearl of the Eastern world, has been captured by the most inhuman enemies of Christendom, by bloodthirsty barbarians, plundered and laid waste. The treasures have been plundered, the wealth of the families scattered, the churches robbed of their treasures, their relics and all their precious symbols. The men have been slaughtered like mindless animals, the women dragged away, the virgins dishonored, the children torn from the arms of their parents."

Cusa was very moved by the situation, because he had made many friends when he visited Constantinople in 1437.

A Peace Conference in Jerusalem

Cusa saw that the only solution to achieve peace lay in the unity of the Christians among themselves, and in dialogue with the non-Christians. His contribution was *De pacei fidei*, a dialogue on ecumenical agreement among religions. How much Cusa's concern was bringing about peace, becomes clear in the introduction, where he relates himself to the ongoing process. He begins: "The news of the atrocities which the Turkish Sultan committed in recent times in Constantinople has filled one, who had seen these sites with his own eyes, with such passion for God, that he appeals to the Creator of the universe with many tears, that He put a stop to the persecution out of His goodness, which rages beyond all measure on account of the different religions."

Cusa's idea was to achieve agreement at a kind of conference with representatives of all the different religions (which represented the different peoples of the world), and thus to secure peace. Cusa recognized that, for lasting peace to be achieved, religious agreement would have to be established by means based upon *truth*.

The most suitable location for this event, this peace conference, would be Jerusalem. "Why Jerusalem?" some might ask, as we remember how important a successful peace conference in Jerusalem would be for the world today. Jerusalem is the holy city for the three great

monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have synagogues, churches, and mosques there, at sites where Solomon, Jesus, and Mohammed worked, which is why Jerusalem has a particular significance.

According to Cusa, many diverse religions and peoples were to participate in this conference, recalling the efforts to achieve unity of the Eastern and Western churches. The only essential difference was that in Cusa's dialogue, all the arguments of the different people, over which there had been many wars in history, are presented and discussed. He shows that unity or agreement is possible only if it presupposes the highest principle of humanity: "Human beings are endowed with a reasonable soul, in which the image of God radiates in unspeakable power." As in the case of the Greek philosopher Plato, this is man endowed with Reason according to the model of Christ, man in the image of God. Cusa therefore invited only the best of each religion or people to this agreement.

The following participants appear in Cusa's dialogue (or, as we might call it, his "peace conference"), each contributing viewpoints and disagreements which stem from his particular culture and customs:

The Greek, who loves philosophical wisdom and represents ancient philosophy. The Italian, in the role of the Roman philosophers, who considered themselves students of the Greek school of wisdom. The Arab, representative of Islam, passionately committed to the unity of God, who opposes the doctrine of the Trinity. (In the Koran, Jesus is placed above the Hebrew prophets, but cannot be accepted as the son of God, as this implies polytheism; Jesus's special status makes the idea of his Crucifixion a blasphemy.) The Indian explains his problems with idolatry and polytheism. The Chaldean seeks an explanation of the Trinity. The Syrian asks about the resurrection of the dead; he also transmits Greek Classical thinking to the Islamic world, through the doctrines of the philosopher Ibn Sina. The Persian, in the tradition of the Islamic philosophers, who also look upon Greek philosophy as the foundation, and who orient to Al Farabi. The Turk, a follower of Mohammed, wants an answer to the significance of Christ's Crucifixion. The German turns against the all-too-earthly idea of eternal life. The Tatar, who represents a people of lower cultural development, complains about the differences in religious rites. The Armenian, who comes from a very old Christian people, is instructed on baptism. The Jews are represented not by a Jewish philosopher, but by one of the faithful, who sees their bond with God in the rite of circumcision. The Frenchman is a representative of the University of Paris, the most concentrated location of science in the West during the Middle Ages. A Scythian, a representative of an alien people from the Russian steppe, also less

culturally developed. The Bohemian provides Cusa an opportunity to clarify the dispute in church doctrine over the meaning of the Last Supper. The Chaldean represents the interests of the common man. The Englishman and Spaniard pose questions about the significance of the sacraments.

As you can imagine, this is a lively and profound discussion.

On the Peace of Faith

Truth and wisdom are sought in the dialogue, for, as Cusa says, it is the nature of man to seek the truth. But, when each believes he is defending already-established truths, there can be no peace. Instead, the precondition for dialogue is that each seek and strive for truth based upon reason. Thus, in the introduction to the dialogue, when one of those present is selected to speak to God and ask Him to aid their endeavor, he begins with man's creation in the image of God, saying, "You pleased to endow human beings with a reasonable soul, so that in him the image of your unspeakable power should radiate." The speaker goes on to complain that customs are accepted as if they were derived from nature, and are defended as truths, and that this is the cause of the emergence of conflicts, for "each worships and defends his God, but since God is not comprehended by the Understanding, He has to show himself in some recognizable way, for everyone is seeking after the one—his—God. . . . Hatred, suffering, and war could be avoided if it were understood, that among the diversity of religious customs, there is only one religion."

For Cusa, the precondition for peaceful dialogue lies in man's free will, which is much misunderstood today. His concept is, that God has given human beings free will, so that they can stand in a community as equals, and can freely decide *for God*.

What a grand idea of freedom that is! What is our world like today? What do people today do with this great responsibility to preserve the freedom of human beings? Here Schiller's words come to mind, when he asks whether man is mature enough to build the grand edifice of freedom. Today's neo-liberals, followers of the "Enlightenment," see freedom less as a principle of tolerance, than as a license to pursue their own selfish fantasies. They reject the universal laws upon which universal truth is based, and thus cause or legitimize war, and deprive the poorer nations of the world of the right to develop.

We thus find in the principle of freedom the highest concept of humanity. Those who have a false understanding of the idea of freedom, can destroy more than

they preserve. The ignorant person knows only sensuous life, says Cusa, and he becomes therefore a slave to the forces of darkness. But there are fortunately the prophets and Christ, who lead people away from their errant ways and toward truth.

At the beginning we spoke of the search for truth. But truth has something to do with wisdom, for the truth which is worth searching for feeds the spirit. Cusa says that the immortal sustenance of truth is to be found in human nature. G.W. Leibniz spoke about inborn ideas. Like Cusa, he considered these an inner principle, which strives for wisdom and truth. Friedrich Schiller called it the beautiful soul.

Let us now listen (in paraphrase) to what the representatives of the different religions and peoples say to us about wisdom, and how they want to find it. It is surely no accident that it is the Greek who begins the dialogue, and that it is the Greek who, following after the participant labeled "The Word" (*logos*), sets the cultural and moral standard for the discussion.

THE WORD: All you, who are here, are called wise by those who share your language. You are philosophers and love wisdom.

That is correct, says the GREEK. The WORD replies to him: If you all love wisdom, do you not presuppose that this wisdom exists?

Everyone agrees, and the WORD continues: There can be only one wisdom. If many were possible, then they would all have to come from one, for unity is prior to all multiplicity. . . . As soon as a human being directs his eyes to the visible world, and observers that everything he sees has arisen from the power of wisdom; and once he observes the same for the ear, and everything else which affects the senses, he must admit that the invisible wisdom surpasses everything.

THE GREEK: In fact, we too, who occupy ourselves with philosophy, come to the sweetness of truth in no other way than that we savor it in admiration of the sensuously perceivable world. Who would not want to sacrifice his life to achieve that wisdom from which all beauty, all sweetness of life, and everything which is worth striving for, springs? What a power of wisdom radiates in the creative power of human beings, in their limbs and in their frame, in the life infused therein, in the harmony of the organs, movements, and finally in the thinking mind of the human being, which is capable of the most wonderful arts and represents at once an image of wisdom, the eternal wisdom which radiates over everything as in a image

viewed at close distance, the same as the truth in our memory. (But what is wonderful beyond all amazement, is that this reflection of wisdom sustains itself by the moving devotion of the mind ever more toward truth, until from the shadowy image the reflection becomes more true and more in conformity with true wisdom, although absolute wisdom itself, just as it is, is never achievable in another.) Consequently is the eternal, inexhaustible wisdom itself the ever-growing and never-receding sustenance of the spirit.

THE WORD: You are on the right path to the goal we strive for. All of you, although you belong to different religions, presuppose in all the multiplicity, the *one*, which you call wisdom. But tell me: Does not the one wisdom embrace everything which can be stated?

Here the ITALIAN answers: The whole of infinity is encompassed by wisdom.

THE WORD: Then wisdom is accordingly eternity.

THE ITALIAN: It can be nothing else.

THE WORD: But it is not possible that there are many eternities, since prior to all multiplicity there is unity.

THE ITALIAN: No one can deny that.

THE WORD: Wisdom is accordingly God, the one, the simple, eternal God, the origin of all.

THE ITALIAN: So must it be.

THE WORD: See, then, how you philosophers from so many schools agree in your view of the one God, who you all, as children of wisdom, presuppose. . . . If you, as children of wisdom, admit that there is absolute wisdom, do you believe then that there are spiritually superior people who do not love wisdom?

THE ARAB: I am completely convinced that all people strive for wisdom by nature, for wisdom is the life of the spirit. . . . Just as every living creature strives for that without which it cannot live, so spiritual life has a desire for wisdom.

THE WORD: Accordingly, all people agree with you that there is an absolute wisdom, which they presuppose, and this is the one God.

So, the philosophers and the representatives of the various religions reach an agreement, and since they love wisdom above all else, they let themselves be guided by the WORD. A further precondition for this unity, however, is that human beings be reasonable, and give up their false opinions. Cusa lets the Tatar speak for the simple people, who cannot be called philosophers, but

who are good as people and believe in God. The Tatar does not doubt that his people accept faith as the law of love, but he ridicules other religions and their strange customs. He cannot imagine how an agreement could be possible, although he understands that it is necessary. But, eventually, he too allows himself to be instructed by ST. PAUL.

At the conclusion of the dialogue, one asks oneself whether and how peace could be preserved. Cusa ends by emphasizing once again, that it would be difficult if some nations demanded that others accept a different faith. So, he proposes that it suffices to make peace *firm in faith in the commandment to love*, and that the different customs on every side should be tolerated. This is totally different from “liberalism,” because the agreement is built on a firm foundation, the principle of truth and wisdom.

After the conclusion of the peace conference (that is, the end of the dialogue), the representative of each of the nations is given the opportunity to verify, by reference to ancient texts, that all “diversity is located more in religious customs [rituals], than in the worship of the one God.” This is why the “simple people were often seduced by the Prince of Darkness, frequently not mindful of what they were doing.”

And that is our situation today—that many people are forced into conflict by ignorance. And so the words of President Khatami in Weimar are a model of how to work against this. Recalling the example of the German poet Goethe, he criticized the chauvinistic and fanatical viewpoint: “[A]t that time, the thinkers of the dialogue spoke a different language. They made poetry:

Gottes ist der Orient!

*Gottes ist der Okzident!**

Mohamed Iqbal† decorated the first page of his *Message of the East* with the verse from the Koran, “God is of the East and of the West,” in order to show the source of the inspiration of the German poet. Both poets wanted to show where East and West find their ways together. The common place is the divine origin of all people. . . . So, may East and West complement one another.”

—translated from the German by George Gregory

A complete English translation of Nicolaus of Cusa's dialogue, “On the Peace of Faith,” is available in “Toward a New Council of Florence: ‘On the Peace of Faith’ and Other Works by Nicolaus of Cusa,” trans. by William F. Wertz, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute, 1993).

* “The East is God’s! The West is God’s!” From Goethe’s “Talismans,” in the *West-Eastern Divan*.—Ed.

† Mohamed Iqbal (1873-1938), national poet of Pakistan.