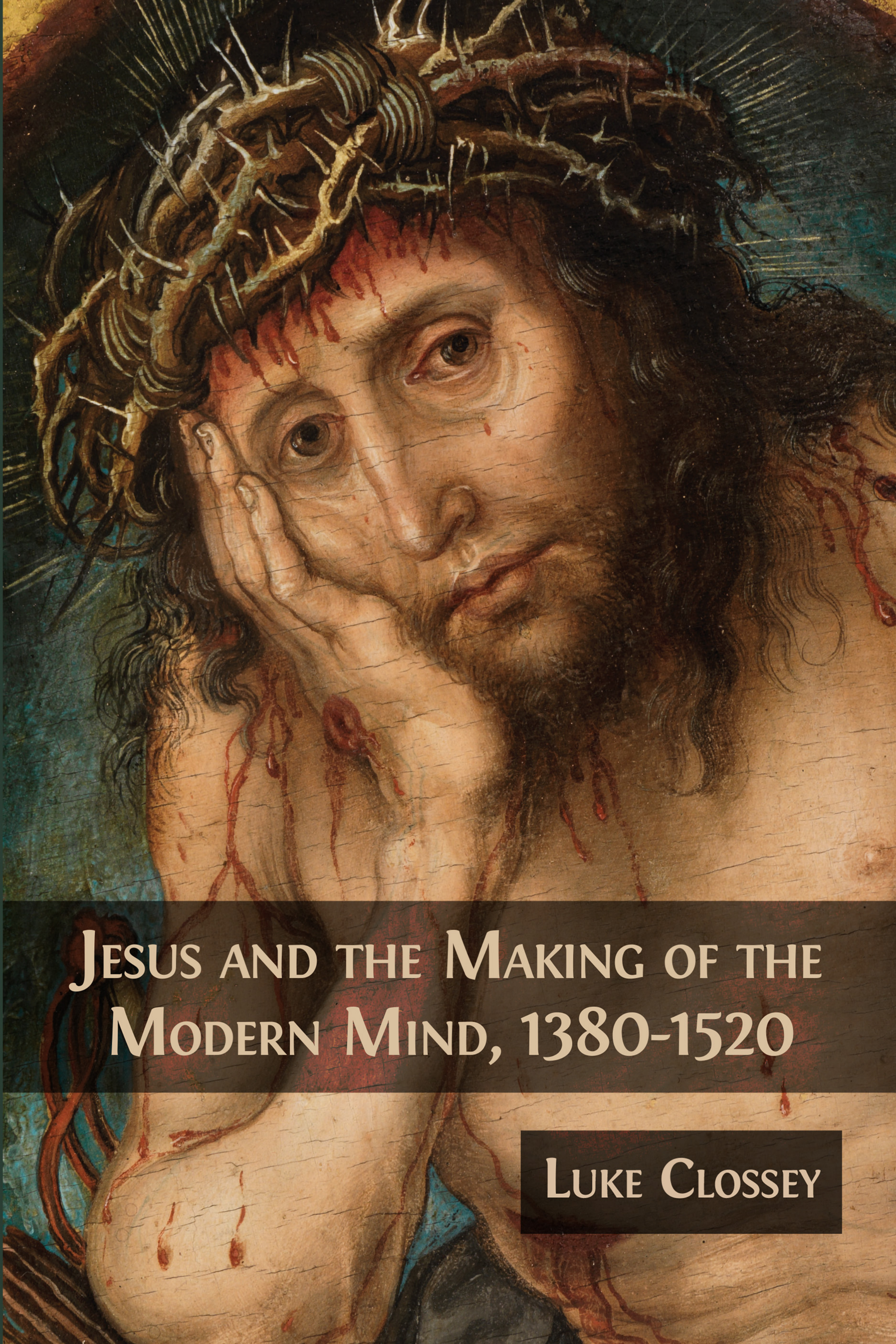

Jesus and the Making of the Modern Mind, 1380-1520

Luke Clossey

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Any digital material and resources associated with this volume will be available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0371#resources

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-818-0

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-78374-957-7

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-001-9

ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-305-5

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-307-9

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0371

Cover image: Albrecht Dürer, *Christ as Man of Sorrows* (ca. 1492–93), Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, https://www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de/kunstwerke/Albrecht-D%C3%BCrer/Christus-als-Schmerzensmann/4CF6CD9D45DD6B1AC91CECAE9EC57F44/

Cover design: Isaac Schoeber and Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.
Cover created by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

13. Nicholas of Cusa's Jesus

Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) towers, both in his own philosophical stature and in his importance to this book's subject. In an obituary his former secretary Giovanni Andrea Bussi (1417–75) praised Cusa: "He retains by memory all histories, not only ancient, but of the middle season [*mediae tempestatis*], old and more recent up to our own time."[1] As this is one of the earliest references to something like the "Middle Ages," we might say that the medieval period was invented to understand Cusa. He continued to command scholarly interest, and has been described as the last medieval, the first modern, or—in our less exciting terms—the last Early Traditionalist or the first Late Traditionalist. One historian dubbed Nicholas of Cusa "the dance-leader of that preparatory between-space."[2]

Nicholas is additionally important for our purposes because he found a way to negotiate between the kens. That way was Jesus.

This chapter builds on the previous two's investigation of how scholars in the fifteenth century pursued knowledge. Here, we will approach Cusa carefully, by first outlining his biography, and then considering two accessible examples of his thought—a Jesus-themed game he invented, and an optical Jesus illusion—before looking more theoretically at the intellectual problem he faced, his Jesus solution for that problem, and the possible applications of that solution.

1 Giovanni Andrea Bussi, *Preface of the Metamorphoses of Apuleius*, in *Praefationes et Epistolae Editionibus Principibus Auctorum Veterum Propositae*, ed. Beriah Botfield (Cambridge, UK: Prelo Academico, 1861), 76.

2 Richard Falkenberg, *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie von Nikolaus von Kues bis zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Viet, 1886), 12. See Elizabeth Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002); Catalina M. Cubillos, "Nicholas of Cusa between the Middle Ages and Modernity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86 (2012): 237–49, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq201286218; Paul Lehmann, "Vom Mittelalter und von der lateinischen Philologie des Mittelalters," *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur lateinischen Philologie des Mittelalters* 5 (1914): 1–25.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0371.13

Biography

In accordance with the decree that councils be called every five years, the new Pope Martin V (1369–31) reluctantly summoned the Council of Pavia, near Milan, in 1423. Plague forced its immediate evacuation to Siena, where it launched redundant decrees against heresies already condemned—specifically pointing to Jan Hus (ca. 1370–1415) and John Wycliffe (ca. 1328–84)—and against the schismatic followers of other clerics claiming their own popes. The Council postponed the difficult work of negotiating a possible union with the Greeks, and dissolved before it had a chance to formally postpone the more difficult work of church reform. Its greatest accomplishment was choosing Basel as the location for its next meeting, which conveniently put the Alps between the next council and papal interference.

As the Council of Pavia concluded, a more consequential event took place 300 km to the east, in Padua. From the university there a twenty-two-year-old foreign student received the doctorate degree of canon law. The German Nikolaus from Kues, on the Moselle River, had entered a Latinate world and became Nicolaus Cusanus, of Cusa. He would dedicate his life to solving every problem plaguing the Pavia-Siena Councils, and—as we will see—to introducing Christology to bowling.

When it finally met in 1431, the Basel Church Council appointed Cusa to its delegation to Constantinople, and that visit quickened his interest in the Greek language.[3] In the late 1440s, he became a cardinal, and in 1450 was appointed the Bishop of Brixen, in the Alps in Tyrol, and a papal legate.

Among Cusa's first duties on behalf of the papacy was a reform tour around central Europe to promote the indulgence declared for the 1450 Jubilee Anniversary. He began this tour by accepting an invitation to say mass at the papal altar in Rome, one of only five instances of this honour bestowed in the fifteenth century. The tour encompassed 80 churches and monasteries, over 15 months, across 4,500 km, on the back of a donkey. Bursting with energy, he banned priests' concubines, suppressed simony, reformed religious orders, forbade nuns from leaving their cloisters, and—on penalty of interdict—required Jews to wear marks identifying themselves. [4]

---

3 Martin Honecker, *Nikolaus von Cues und die griechische Sprache* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1938); Erich Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography*, trans. David Crowner and Gerald Christianson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 53–54.

4 Meuthen, *Nicholas*, 88–91, 96–97, 117, 134; Donald Sullivan, "Nicholas of Cusa as Reformer: The Papal Legation to the Germanies, 1451–1452," *Medieval Studies* 36 (1994): 382–428.

Cusa described his arrival at Liège, on the edge of the Holy Roman Empire, by comparing it with the Jews' rapturous welcome of Jesus—who, like Cusa, rode a donkey—on Palm Sunday; they were less enthusiastic when he, like Jesus, attempted to "clean their temple." Cusa's efforts provoked intense hostility to Roman interference in German affairs. Clergy jealous of their prerogatives subverted his reforms, and, in one instance, allegedly extended to him a cross to kiss—one laced with poison, in a failed assassination attempt.[5]

Cusa's last project was Pope Pius II's (1405–64) great crusade. Thousands of knights were wandering erratically around central Italy, and the Pope directed Cusa to organize them against the Ottomans. Cusa died during this work, on 11 August 1464. Three days later, Pius died as well. Cusa's heart was sent to a hospital at Kues, his birthplace, where he had funded a hospital, to serve as the final home—and provide a highly structured and uniform life—for thirty-three poor, work-worn elderly men. The number was chosen with the deep ken to resonate with the years of Jesus's earthly life. Cusa's body was buried at St. Peter in Chains, Rome, and his heart buried under that hospital at Kues.[6]

Cusa's engagement with Jesus was, generally, more deep ken than plain. He chose the same method of transportation, he perhaps almost died via the same instrument—a miniature cross too small to hang from but large enough to be poisoned by—and in death he created an endowment with numerological consonance with Jesus's life. Perhaps in his effort to "clean the temple" we see some plain-ken impulse—an attention to the historical Jesus's own interest in "ecclesiastical" reform—but it is not clear whether this was a plain-ken understanding of the temple as the historical predecessor of the first-century Catholic church, or its symbolic analogue.

5 The hostility lasted long after his visitation tour ended. In April 1458, the abbess Verena von Stuben of the Benedictine convent of Sonnenburg at Bruneck, who had been deeply opposed to Cusa's "hateful" reforms, illegally sent armed men to collect the local farmers' rent. Resisting with stones, some four dozen farmers died while running off the thugs. Cusanus's captain mounted a counterattack on the convent itself. Because Cusa's forces attributed their victory to God's help, they called the nearby cliff the "Crep de Santa Grazia," and installed wooden figures representing Jesus and the sleeping disciples. Giovanni Alton, *Proverbi, tradizioni e anneddoti delle valli ladine orientali con versione italiana* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1881), 90–92; Hermann Hallauer, "Die 'Schlacht' im Enneberg 1458," in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno*, ed. Congresso internazionale Nicolò Cusano (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1970), 447–69; Meuthen, *Nicholas*, 91–95, 121–22.

6 Morimichi Watanabe, *Nicholas of Cusa: A Companion to His Life and His Times*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Ashgate: Franham, 1988), 356; Meuthen, *Nicholas*, 139–42.

The challenges in Cusa's official life related to a parallel set of challenges in his intellectual life. How should one handle Hussite Christian heretics? How should one respond to Muslims who denied Christianity altogether? How could one know God? How could one know anything? Cusa was aware of the kens grinding against each other, and by the resulting sparks he found an answer in Jesus. First, let us look at two straightforward examples.

Example 1: Jesus Bowling

When the twenty-year-old Duke John of Mosbach (1443–86) visited Rome, he called on Cusa. The conversation worked its way to sports. The young Duke mentioned that "all of us are fascinated with this new and fun game" of bowling. He asked Cusa to explain its symbolism. Cusa agreed that enjoyable games could have moral force: "For example, this very fun game of bowling, it seems to me, symbolizes for us no small amount of philosophy."[7] He then went on to explain the theory of Jesus Bowling, in the two-part *De ludo globi* [On the Game of the Ball] (1462–63).[8]

Let us first outline the rules of the game. Jesus Bowling used a ball that was not perfectly spherical, but partly concave and partly convex. Rolled, it would trace out a wild spiral path, rather than a straight line. Indeed, the game's "frequent amusement" came as a result of this irregular ball's "variegated and never-certain course."[9] Ten concentric circles formed a bullseye (see Fig. 13.1). In turns, each player rolled the ball towards the centre, and won points corresponding to which circle it came to rest in. The closer to the innermost circle, the more points were awarded. Whoever reached thirty-four points first won.

7 Nicholas of Cusa, *De Ludo Globi* (*The Bowling-Game*), trans. Jasper Hopkins, Metaphysical Speculations 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Banning, 2000), 1182 (1.2). See Erich Meuthen, "Nikolaus von Kues und die Wittelsbacher," in *Festschrift für Andreas Kraus zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Pankraz Fried and Walter Ziegler (Kallmünz: Lessleben, 1982), 111–13. "Curling" more precisely describes this game, but I use "bowling" to follow the scholarship and for the ease of non-Canadian readers.

8 Although unusual, Jesus Bowling was not unique. Jean Gerson had similarly designed a spiritual game of chess, that was simultaneously a musical instrument activated by meditation. Jean Gerson, "Figura scacordi musicalis simul et militaris tamquam chorus castrorum," in BnF MS Lat. 17487, fol. 225v–26r.

9 Nicholas of Cusa, *De Ludo Globi*, 1206–07 (1.50).

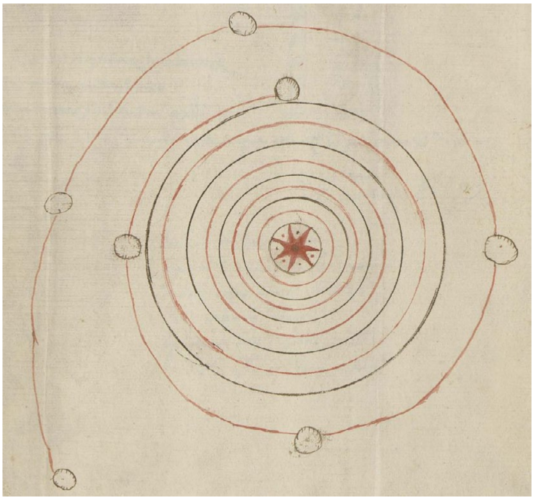

Fig. 13.1 Diagram of Jesus Bowling, Nicholas Cusanus, *De globo*, Kraków, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, BJ Rkp. 682 III, fol. 2v, public domain, https://jbc.bj.uj.edu.pl/dlibra/publication/600346/edition/602440/content

The meaning of the game, for Cusa, came from its contrast between the deep-ken perfect circles of the target and the irregular, unpredictable, and therefore plain-ken path to them traced by the deformed ball. As Cusa explained, "When someone throws a bowling-ball, he does not hold it in his hand at one time in the same way as at another time; or he does not release it in the same way or does not place it on the ground in the same way or does not impel it with an equal force. For it is not possible that anything be done twice in exactly the same way."[10]

Cusa understood the game in Jesus terms. Thus players, and sinners, must negotiate between deep-ken perfection and unexpected plain-ken twists. Cusa explains that "even a curved bowling-ball can be controlled by the practice of virtue, so that after many unstable deviations of movement, the ball stops in the Kingdom of Life." Jesus showed us how to play, for he "moved the bowling-ball of His own person in such a way that it would come to rest at the Center of Life. He left us an example in order that we would do just as he had done and in order that our bowling-ball would follow" his. Still, Cusa admitted the impossibility "that another ball come to rest at the [exact] same Center of Life at which Christ's ball comes to rest. For within a circle there are an infinite number of places and mansions."[11]

10 Ibid., 1184 (1.6).

11 Ibid., 1207 (1.51), 1209 (1.54).

When the young Duke remarked "how difficult it is to direct the curved bowling-ball so that it follows the pathway of Christ, in whom was the Spirit-of-God, who led Christ unto the Center of Life," Cusa replied, "It is very easy for one who has true faith." The winners are those "certain about the truth of the Gospel because the Son of God does not lie."[12]

Even the goal of thirty-four points had deep-ken significance. Cusa explained that this corresponds to the years lived by Jesus. There was an odd discrepancy here, for normally Jesus's lifespan was given as thirty-three years—and Cusa himself later willed the establishment of a hospice for thirty-three poor men. This could reflect an alternate way of counting, in which the first and last units were each counted, so that there were, for example, "eight" days in a week.[13]

Example 2: A Jesus Optical Illusion

In 1453, Cusa sent a new icon of Jesus, painted in the Netherlands, accompanied by his treatise on divine vision, to the Benedictine Tegernsee Abbey in Bavaria.[14] Cusa, like most contemporary theorists, appreciated the beauty of the human body, which he located in the proportion of its parts, as well as in the brilliance of its colours (see Chapter 15). He especially understood the power of the frontal gaze, the saint in the icon staring directly at the viewer, and found distasteful those modern portraits that used the frontal gaze for secular subjects.[15]

12 Ibid., 1208 (1.52–53).

13 Nicholas of Cusa, *Gespräch über das Globusspiel*, trans. Gerda von Bredow (Hamburg: Meiner, 2000), 107.

14 On Cusa and images, see Leonard Goldstein, *Social and Cultural Roots of Linear Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: MEP, 1988), 64–66; Thomas M. Izbicki, "Christiformitas in Nicholas of Cusa's Roman Sermons (1459)," *Asian Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities* 1 (2011): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.7282/T3Z31X45; Joseph Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 127–30; Clyde L. Miller, "*Christiformitas* in Nicholas of Cusa," *The Journal of Religion* 90 (January 2010): 1–14; Clyde L. Miller, "Nicholas of Cusa's The Vision of God," in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984), 293–312; Clyde L. Miller, "The Icon and the Wall: *Visio* and *Ratio* in Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei*," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 64 (1990): 86–98, https://doi.org/10.5840/acpaproc19906423

15 Charles H. Carman, "Alberti and Nicholas of Cusa: Perspective as 'Coincidence of Opposites'," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 33 (2007): 196–219, https://doi.org/10.1163/23526963-90000339; Karsten Harries, "On the Power and Poverty of Perspective: Cusanus and Alberti," in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter J. Casarella (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 105–26, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt284vvk.12; Giovanni Santinello, "Nicolai De Cusa: Tota pulchra es, amica mea (Sermo de pulchritudine): Introduzione ed ediz. critica," *Atti e Memorie dell' Accademia Patavina* 71 (1959): 51–56.

The Jesus image Cusa had given the abbey faced forward. Regardless of the angle between the observing monk and the Jesus image, the observer felt observed: "Stand around it, at a short distance from it, and observe it," Cusa advised, and "regardless of the place from which each of you looks at it, each will have the impression that he alone is being looked at." A monk who paced before it, because he knew the image did not move, "will marvel at the changing of the unchangeable gaze."[16] The popularity of Cusa among Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and his friends suggests that Cusa's omnivoyant Jesus may have influenced Dürer's lifelike and Jesus-like self-portrait from 1500 (see Chapter 16).[17]

How did this illusion work? Cusa distinguished between the deep-ken absolute Gaze and the plain-ken vision, which was "contracted to time, to the regions of the world, to individual objects, and to other such conditions."[18]

This was an image of Jesus, who was an image of God. Observers were two steps away from the divine Gaze: Jesus himself was not really looking at the viewer, but the illusion allowed the viewers to engage with Jesus, with some realization that this was not a normal case of someone gazing at them. Much like God, the face could look at multiple people with each person feeling they are being viewed directly and specifically. God's seeing of the viewer was an illusion; in reality, God truly did see him or her, but invisibly. When Cusa spoke of the *visio Dei*, the seeing of God, he used it in two senses simultaneously: God's deep-ken seeing of the monks and the monks' plain-ken seeing of God. Cusa concluded that the two kinds of the seeing of God were in fact one and the same: "O Lord, when you look upon me with an eye of graciousness, what is your seeing, other than your being seen by me? In seeing me, you who are *deus absconditus* [hidden God] give yourself to be seen by me. No one can see You except insofar as you grant that you be seen. To see you is not other than that you see the one who sees you."[19]

Even more broadly, Cusa wrote about the deep-ken potential hidden in the plain-ken world, a potential which he found in a small stone, in a small piece of wood, and in the mustard seed, which Jesus himself had used in a parable.[20] Each of these contained within itself every geometrical shape, and thus the

16 Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei*, in *Nicholas of Cusa's Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation, and Interpretive Study of De Visione Dei*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis, MN: Banning, 1988), 680–82 (preface, 2–4). See David Freedberg, *Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 52.

17 Joseph Leo Koerner, *Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 129–30.

18 Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei*, 682 (1.6).

19 Ibid., 686 (5.15).

20 Mt 13:31–32; Mk 4:30–32, Lk 13:18–19.

shapes of all flora and all fauna. A great artist could transform the potentiality of this wood to the actuality of, say, the face of a king. God, however, was the greatest, most subtle artist, who could transform from the smallest substance "all the forms that exist in this world or that could possibly exist in an infinite number of worlds."[21]

Cusa's Two Kens

In his description of images, Cusa spoke of perspectives that might be described as the deep and plain kens, although his usage was more specific than ours. In his other writings, Cusa described the two concepts more generally, not as perspectives, but as realities. Looking with the plain ken, Cusa saw the world and its multiplicity as a kind of *alteritas* [otherness] that he identified with *mutibilitas* [mutability]—impermanence and the tendency to change. Peering underneath that confusion, the deep ken could see oneness, unity, and in fact God himself.[22]

Each of the two realities had its own way of being known. The plain ken was knowable directly by experience. However, one could not be certain about that direct knowledge. We *perceive* the plain-ken world without *comprehending* it, and so could only have "conjectures" about it. Cusa was aware of the plain-ken facets of the limitations of our perceptual knowledge. For example, your visual perception of a body extended in space is limited. Cusa would approve of the cautious observer who saw a black sheep in Scotland, and concluded only that "in at least one field in Scotland, there exists at least one sheep, at least one side of which is black."[23] Sight knows things from one side and under a certain aspect, and such limitation gives to knowledge a sense of otherness. Going beyond perceptional knowledge, even those symbols and images we use to process perceptions are historically and culturally inflected.[24]

The deep ken, in contrast, could not know *directly*, but the simplicity of the Oneness meant the deep ken can most *certainly* know it. Ultimately, God and infinity were beyond language, where even the law of non-contradiction collapsed. Infinity was beyond reason, which needed quantification and proportions. Cusa explained that "you have seen [...] that precise truth is

21 Nicholas of Cusa, *De quaerendo Deum* (*On Seeking God*), in *A Miscellany on Nicholas of Cusa*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis, MN: Banning, 1994), 328 (4.47).

22 Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance* (*De Docta Ignorantia*), trans. Jasper Hopkins, 3 vols. (Minneapolis, MN: Banning, 1981), 12–13 (1.7.18).

23 Ian Stewart, "Manifold's Signs," *Manifold* 3 (1969): 4.

24 Nicholas of Cusa, *De Coniecturis* (*On Surmises*), in *Metaphysical Speculations*, trans. Jasper Hopkins, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, MN: Banning, 2000), II, 188–92 (1.11.54–60).

unattainable. Accordingly, it follows that every human affirmation about what is true is a surmise."[25]

Cusa's problem, then, was how to know. The plain ken could know directly, but without certainty. The deep could know certainly, but not directly. Was there a way to certainly know something directly?

Jesus to the Rescue

Cusa is most famous for one solution to this problem: ignorance. While he sailed between Constantinople and Venice in the 1437–38 winter, an epiphany something like a divine revelation came to him: "The more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be."[26] If the how-to-know problem was insurmountable, then the wise person should take intellectual refuge in the limitations of that knowledge. This kind of scepticism Cusa called "learned ignorance" (or "sacred ignorance"). He reported the results in a treatise of the same name, *De docta ignorantia* (1440).[27]

Such an attitude was controversial at the time. The most prominent critics included the theology professor Johannes Wenck, who around 1443 composed *De ignota litteratura* [On Ignorant Learning] to expose the dangers of Cusa's thought for Christology. He raised his own skepticism, adding a "perhaps" even to his accusation that "this man of learned ignorance, who under the guise of religion cunningly deceives those not yet having trained senses," was the false prophet predicted by 1 Jn 4:1: "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Wenck associated Cusan thought with that of the Waldensian Poor and the Wycliffites, whose teachings "have long shown from what spirit this learned ignorance proceeds."[28]

---

25 Nicholas of Cusa, *De Coniecturis*, 163 (1.0.2); Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei*, 705 (13.55). See Wolfgang Achtner, "Infinity as a Transformative Concept in Science and Theology," in *Infinity: New Research Frontiers*, ed. Michael Heller and W. Hugh Woodin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2011), 19–52 (34), https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511976889.003

26 *On Learned Ignorance*, I, 6 (1.1.4).

27 See Meuthen, *Nicholas*, 32, 58–66, 83; Brient, *Immanence of the Infinite*, 184–242; Rudolf Haubst, *Das Bild des Einen and Dreieinen Gottes in der Welt nach Nikolaus von Kues* (Trier: Paulinus, 1952); Rudolf Haubst, *Die Christologie des Nikolaus von Kues* (Freiburg: Herder, 1956); Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1957), 6–24; Dermot Moran, "Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464): Platonism at the Dawn of Modernity," in *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity*, ed. Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 9–29, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6407-4_2

28 Rudolf Haubst, *Studien zu Nikolaus von Kues und Johannes Wenck* (Münster: Aschendorff 1955); Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck: A*

However, Cusa did not stop there, and found a more productive solution, less remembered today, in Jesus.

What was the relationship between the two kens? First, we need to understand the deep-ken nature of God, which for Cusa presented challenges and opportunities. For Cusa, only God was actually infinite. God was the "Absolute Maximality" and "Infinite Oneness" (*unitas infinita*).[29]

Cusa's doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum* [coincidence of opposites] brought the absolute minimum and the absolute maximum together. Cusa wrote that "the oppositeness of opposites is oppositeness without oppositeness." He identified God, infinite, with this "oppositeness of opposites."[30] God's infinite was (through *coincidentia oppositorum*) not just maximally large, but at the same time maximally large and minimally small. God was "that simplicity where contradictories coincide [*ubi contradictoria coincident*]."[31]

Jesus lay at the centre of this labyrinthine conundrum. Oneness, the most pure and the most simple, was the foundation for multiplicity, which allowed all the multiples to cohere: as one modern Cusa scholar has summarized, "since

Translation and an Appraisal of De ignota litteratura *and* Apologia doctae ignorantiae (Minneapolis, MN: Arthur J. Banning, 1988), 426.

29 Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, 11 (1.5.14). The early Greeks had a negative view of infinity, because of its lack of rational structure—for example, $\sqrt{2}$ has no equivalent in the ratios of counting numbers; 99/70 is only a rough approximation. For Aristotle, a "potential" infinity could be constructed from a rational process of approximation (1.414...). Plotinus turned infinity into a positive good, and identified God as a potential infinity. Nyssa, with Dionysius following him, pushed this forward: Motivated to defend against Arianism, he argued that God was an "actual" infinity, even though that is beyond reason. Infinity for Cusa went beyond all quantity, and so he could not accept Aristotle's potential infinite. After Cusa everyone opposed actual infinities, in part because of the realization, demonstrated by Nicole Oresme, that there are not fewer odd natural numbers (1, 3, 5, 7 ...) than natural numbers (1, 2, 3, 4 ...). Only with Bernard Bolzano (1781–1848) do we get serious attempts, accepted as successful by the experts, to resolve these apparent contradictions with reason. That impulse culminated in Georg Cantor's (1845–1918) identification of God as an actual infinity that did not lack rational structure. These discussions operate in the gray borderland between the kens. What has more deep-ken beauty, $\sqrt{2}$ or 99/70? The former has fewer digits, the latter is more complex but is an approximation. A potential infinity is a process of construction and approximation *in time* (plain ken), although the end result is exact but cannot be achieved in time (deep ken). Achtner, "Infinity as a Transformative Concept"; J. Sesiano, "Vergleiche zwischen unendlichen Mengen bei Nicolas Oresme," in *Mathematische Probleme im Mittelalter-der lateinische und arabische Sprachbereich*, ed. M. Folkerts (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 361–78; Stefan Kirschner ed., *Nicolaus Oresmes Kommentar zur Physik des Aristoteles* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1997).

30 Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei*, 703–07 (13.52–59).

31 Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, 8–9 (1.4.11–12), 12 (1.6.16–17), 24–25 (1.16.42), III, 151 (263).

there is nothing real that is not different from all other real things there exists a general dissimilarity of things. Yet, since the oneness of the world is in them, they still correspond to each other. Dissimilarity and correspondence, *differentia* and *concordantia*, constitute the principles of the structure of the world."[32] Cusa located that diversity in the concordance in the one Jesus.[33] Each ken dwelt within the other through Jesus.

This was the highest possible form of knowing that we could attain, namely the analogous recognition of knowing that we did not know. We could only get negative knowledge of God, what he was not. Opposites came together—creating maximum dissonance—and that was where God was. Given his divinity and humanity, everything was combined and unified in Jesus. His infinity was more than the greatest; it was maximum and minimum at the same time.

Application 1: Unify the Christian Subcult

Especially given its links to the deep ken and the divine, unity was a priority for Cusa, both within Christianity and between Christianity and Islam. Many of his contemporaries also looked with the deep ken towards Unity as an indisputable desideratum. The Italian cardinal Francesco Zabarella (1360–1417), for example, argued that disunity contradicted the Church being the (one) wife of Jesus, who himself prayed, "Father preserve them that they may be one as we" (Jn 17:11).[34]

Before we look at Cusa's more practical efforts, we can consider his theory of the unified Church.

Cusa pioneered democratic theory. Though taking a special interest in the rights of those who hold a minority view, Cusa found the true Church was always located in the majority. Before later in life drawing more into the papal fold, he initially drew from conciliarist ideas of the Council of Constance (1414–18), supporting the supremacy of council over pope. To a high degree, a universal council's decisions were *infallibilius* [infallible] and *tutius* [secure]. Infallibility was relative to salvation: a council's infallible teaching was not absolute truth, but even if wrong would not count against the salvation of those who followed it.[35]

32 Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 65.

33 *On Learned Ignorance*, III, 146 (3.12.256).

34 Thomas E. Morrissey, "The Call for Unity at the Council of Constance: Sermons and Addresses of Cardinal Zabarella, 1415–1417," *Church History* 53 (1984): 307–18 (313–15), https://doi.org/10.2307/3166271

35 Nicholas of Cusa, *The Catholic Concordance*, trans. Paul E. Sigmund (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1991), 47–48 (2.17.67–68), 71–72 (2.7.95); Nicholas of Cusa, *De usu communionis*, in *Haec accurata recognitio trium voluminum operum*, 3 vols. (Paris: Vaenundantur cum caeteris eius operibus in aedibus Ascensianis, 1514),

Jesus appeared most importantly in Cusa's writings on the Church as an institution in two ways.

First, Jesus was married to the Church, and functioned as the Church's core unity: "Flowing from the one King of Peace with infinite concordance, a sweet spiritual harmony of agreement emanates in successive degrees to all its members who are subordinated and united to him. Thus, one God is all things in all things." The Church reflected the universe. For Cusa, the plain-ken multiplicity did not disunite the deep-ken unity, nor did the unity bulldoze through the multiplicity, but multiplicity found its fulfillment in unity. There were political consequences to this, namely that subjects' consent was the foundation for governance, for "men are by nature equal in power and equally free."[36]

Second, Jesus's promise to Peter gave the Church absolute power. Cusa saw a series of priests going back to Jesus, and a series of popes going back to Peter. Thus, the entire Church (multiplicity) was contained in the pope (unity). The Church then used its authority to give authority to the Gospel, to Jesus's commandments, and to its own rituals.[37]

Alongside these deep-ken reflections on Jesus-based unity, Cusa worked out practical strategies, essentially using the plain ken, that looked at historical change over time. For example, Cusa thought that Bohemians and Greeks must return to the Church. Cusa saw controversies about the filioque, a controversial credal clause, as the major obstacle to reunion with the Greeks, and attempted to solve it, with a plain-ken philology, by bringing back from Constantinople manuscript sources dealing with the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries.[38]

A similar strategy appeared in Cusa's 1433 *De communione sub utraque specie* [On Communion in Both Kinds]. His approach was relatively friendly to Hussites. He admitted that alternative opinions were not necessarily incompatible with Church unity, which was what was truly essential. With the

---

II, fol. 5r–9v. See Thomas Prügl, "The Concept of Infallibility in Nicholas of Cusa," in *Cusanus*, ed. Casarella, 150–77 (156, 163–67), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt284vvk.15; Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 44, 49; Paul de Vooght, "Esquisse d'une enquête sur le mot «infaillibilité» durant la période scholastique," in *L'infaillibilité de l'église*, ed. O. Rousseau (Gembloux: Chevetogne, 1962), 99–146.

36 Nicholas of Cusa, *The Catholic Concordance*, 5 (1.1.4), 98 (2.14.127). See Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 45–46.

37 *De usu communionis*, 7r. See Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 81, Prügl, "Concept of Infallibility," 152–59; Watanabe, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 24, 172.

38 Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 53–55; Anthony Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 157, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195372045.001.0001; Isaac Schoeber, "Temporal and Perdurable Byzantine Perspectives on the Fifteenth-Century Decree of Church Union" (unpublished manuscript, 2 August 2023).

plain ken, he accepted that the sacrament had changed through history, and thus could change again, as long as this did not detract from the unity of the Church, in itself and in the sacrament. The Hussites, however, erred in deviating from custom and in permitting disunity. They should therefore reunite with Rome. Cusa proposed a compromise: they be allowed Communion in both kinds, and in return drop their demands for unlicensed preaching, for the policing of morality, and for clerical poverty. The Hussites declined, but Cusa's proposal would later underlie the eventual 1436 resolution.[39] This was a plain-ken tactic to achieve a deep-ken goal.

Application 2: Unify the Christians and Muslims

Cusa showed a parallel interest in relations between Christians and Muslims.[40] The fall or liberation of Constantinople in 1453 motivated much of his efforts here. His insight was that "peace" could be achieved through the deep-ken harmony of doctrines. He wished that "henceforth all the diverse religions be harmoniously reduced, by the common consent of all men, unto one inviolable" religion, because a core doctrine common to all religions was hidden behind the plain-ken diversity of ritual. This peace would necessarily happen because truth itself was one. Every religion sought to be true. Christian doctrine was true, and indeed was the only truth fully revealed by God. Thus, Cusa argued, every religion "presupposes that Christ died and ascended into Heaven," and was seeking to be Christianity.[41] Truth was one, and there was only one orthodox

39 Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 38–39.

40 J. E. Biechler, "A New Face toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia," in *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom*, ed. G. Christianson and T. M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 185–202; Darío Cabanelas, *Juan de Segovia y el problema islámico* (Madrid: Universidad de Madrid, 1952); Marica Costigliolo, *Islam e Cristianesimo: mondi di differenze nel Medioevo: Il dialogo con l'Islam nell'opera di Nicola da Cusa* (Genova: Genova UP, 2012); Walter A. Euler, "Una religio in rituum varietate—der Beitrag des Nikolaus von Kues zur Theologie der Religionen," *Jahrbuch für Religionswissenschaft und Theologie der Religionen* 3 (1995): 67–82; T. M. Izbicki, "The Possibility of Dialogue with Islam in the Fifteenth Century," in *Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. Christianson and Izbicki, 175–83; Steven J. McMichael, "The Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus in Medieval Christian Anti-Muslim Religious Polemics," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21 (2010): 157–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596411003619806; Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 129–30; Morimichi Watanabe, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Idea of Tolerance," in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno*, ed. Congresso internazionale Nicolò Cusano (Florence: C. Sansoni, 1970), 409–18.

41 Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei* (*On Peaceful Unity of Faith*), *Nicholas of Cusa's De pace fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis, MN: Banning, 1994), 636–37 (3.8–9), 659 (14.49).

faith, but plain-ken divergent customs were acceptable if that deep-ken orthodox unity was maintained in peace.

Cusa believed that he understood the Qur'an better than Muslims did. Cusa found in the Qur'an a very positive attitude to Jesus, who was the "spirit and soul of God" and the "supreme envoy of God." Cusa read Qur'an 3:45 as Jesus being "a good and the best man, and the face of all people in this and the future age." The Qur'an, of course, did have a positive attitude towards Jesus, although some of these specific phrases derived from Cusa's dependence on Robert of Ketton's (fl. 1150s) skewed Latin translation. Cusa concluded from this phrasing that Muslims understood Jesus to be the son of God: using the following verse (3:46), Cusa took Jesus as being *sapiens* [wise], but concluded that because God was *sapiens* and wisdom was united, Jesus must therefore be God. Cusa further argued that Muslims did not understand that death honoured, not shamed, Jesus. Indeed, even if Muslims did not realize it, they actually believed in the Trinity. God was not numerically or essentially three, Cusa explained, but related to Himself in three ways; for example, the Father was only a father because there is a Son. Muslims, and Jews, would recognize the Resurrection of Jesus if only they were less ignorant. Cusa appreciated the Qur'an's agreement with the New Testament that Jesus lived still. Writing to Juan of Segovia (ca. 1395–1458), Cusa recommended that Christians defending their faith should seek out Qur'anic passages compatible with the Gospel: "We find in it such things that serve us; and those which oppose us we interpret through those" which do serve us.[42] Cusa used the Gospel as a foundation with which to correctly interpret the Qur'an; that is, he would interpret it in consonance with the Old and New Testaments, a reflection of this deep-ken unity.

For Cusa, the Qur'an was in fact an *occultatus* [hidden] Gospel, with a hidden meaning. His plain-ken justification for this strategy was temporal and philological: considering history, Cusa asserted that Muhammad was a Nestorian Christian brought up by Nestorians, but he had to adapt his message to his ignorant polytheistic audience. Jesus had perfected Moses's path to God, and Muhammad tried to make it easy enough for polytheists to tread. Considering

42 Nicholas of Cusa, *Cribratio Alkorani* (*A Scrutiny of the Koran*), in *Nicholas of Cusa's De pace fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis, MN: Banning, 1994), 997–98 (1.16.68), 1000–01 (1.18.75–76), 1001–02 (1.19.77–80), 1023–26 (2.8.107–2.11.114), 1029 (2.13.121), 1036–39 (2.16.133–39); Nicholas of Cusa to John of Segovia (29 December 1454), in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Raymundus Klibansky and Hildebrandus Bascour, 22 vols. (Leipzig and Hamburg: Meiner: 1932–83), VII, 99. See Walter Andreas Euler, "An Italian Painting from the Late Fifteenth Century and the *Cribratio alkorani* of Nicholas of Cusa," in *Cusanus*, ed. Casarella, 127–42 (131–32, 141), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt284vvk.13

the texts, he argued that after Muhammad's death the Jews edited the Qur'an to include anti-Christian passages. Maybe, Cusa sniffed, Muhammad was also ignorant or arrogant.[43] Cusa thus used plain-ken reasoning to justify his deep-ken vision.

In his later writings, Cusa shifted from this general tolerance to a more focused, and less tolerant, look at the plain-ken particularities of Islam and the Qur'an. In 1437, Cusa had been in Constantinople as an emissary from the Council of Basel minority, where he had studied the Qur'an in consultation with Christian scholars. Now he put that knowledge to use, especially in his 1454 letter to Juan of Segovia and the 1461 *Cribratio alkorani* [Sifting the Qur'an], the latter written at the urging of Pius II.[44] Like Segovia, Cusa wanted to use dialogue and mission against the Turks. Setting a good example, he felt, would be more effective than actual fighting. This likely came from his optimism about the power of morality, and his pessimism about the power of the Turks. Eventually both would lead him to despair. Fearing the advance of the "enemies of the cross of Christ," Cusa wrote with resignation to the Archbishop of Trier, Jacob von Sierck (d. 1456): he worried that their power would "flagellate us" because he saw no possible alliance for resisting them. Instead, Christians should seek refuge in God, "although," Cusa added grimly, "He does not hear sinners."[45] Cusa died preparing the Pope's crusade against the Ottomans.

Application 3: Reliable Knowledge

Despite the impossibility of certain knowledge, we can use this coincidence of the two kens to sort-of know, to "investigate incomprehensibly."[46] Cusa described the way forward, the way for us to sort-of know, in two ways.

First, our minds could move "into a certain secret and hidden silence wherein there is no knowledge or concept of a face," characterizing it as an "obscuring mist, haze, darkness or ignorance."[47] Wisdom cannot be tasted, and so "it is tasted untasteably [*ingustabiliter ergo gustatur*], since it is higher than everything

43 Nicholas of Cusa, *Cribratio Alkorani*, 967–69 (prologue, 7–11), 999–1000 (1.17.72–74), 1028–29 (2.12.119), 1045–48 (2.19.154–58). See Qur'an 3:7 and Euler, "An Italian Painting," 131–39.

44 Nathan Ron, "Erasmus's Attitude toward Islam in Light of Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*," *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval* 26 (2019): 113–36.

45 "Nicholas of Cusa to Jacob von Sierck (October 9, 1453)," in *Acta Cusana: Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Johannes Helmrath and Thomas Woelki, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Meiner, 2016), II, 552–53 (nr. 3673).

46 Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, 6 (1.2.5).

47 Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei*, 689–70 (6.22)

tasteable, everything sensible, everything rational, and everything intelligible. But this tasting-untasteably-and-from-afar occurs, as it were, just as a certain fragrant scent can be said to be an untasteable foretasting."[48] Considered another way, "truth may be likened unto the most absolute necessity (which cannot be either something more or something less than it is), and our intellect may be likened unto possibility."[49]

The other way of describing a way forward was with symbols and mathematics, by which we can know, partially, an infinite God. In mathematics, we can extrapolate infinite from finite math objects; in the same way, we can reach towards truth. Because mathematical entities exist only as mental objects, we can use our minds to understand their essence. In mathematics, we know, "with absolute certainty," that every point on a circle is the same distance from the centre. However, symbols cannot give us certainty about God.[50]

Consider a circle. As a circle becomes bigger, its curved circumference gets closer to a straight tangent. At these extremes the straight and the curve, opposites, converge—and the centre becomes uncertain.[51]

Consider Jesus. A crude approximation of the relationship between his humanity and divinity might be a triangle, representing his humanity, inscribed in a circle, which represents his divinity. The triangle is in a sense more knowable than the circle; the length of its sides might be measured by a ruler in a way a circle could not. There is still a gap between the length of the human triangle (5.1961524…, for a one-unit radius) and the circumference of the divine circle (2π=6.2831853…). We can improve on the approximation by replacing the triangle with a square, improve it further by replacing the square with a pentagon, and so on. Jesus, both human and divine, can be, partially, understood as the limit of a series of regular n-gons, a kind of infinity-gon.[52] The mathematical limit is the basis of calculus, and indeed this is a more certain

48 Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Sapientia*, in *Nicholas of Cusa on Wisdom and Knowledge*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis, MN: Banning, 1996), 502 (1.10).

49 Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, 8 (1.3.10).

50 Ibid., I, 19–20 (1.11.32, 1.12.33). See Inigo Bocken, "Mathematik in der Philosophie des Cusanus: Die Zahl als Grundlage der Bedeutung bei Nikolaus von Kues," *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 29 (2005): 201–20; Meuthen, *Biography*, 61–64.

51 Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, I, 20–22 (1.13.35–36), 29 (1.18.52).

52 Ibid., I, 7–8 (1.3.9–10), 33 (1.20.60), III, 119–23 (3.3.198–99 to 3.4.206). See Elizabeth Brient, "How Can the Infinite be the Measure of the Finite? Three Mathematical Metaphors from De docta ignorantia," in *Cusanus*, ed., Casarella, 210–25 (220–24), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt284vvk.18; Fritz Nagel, *Nicolaus Cusanus—mathematicus theologicus: Unendlichkeitsdenken und infinitesimalmathematik* (Trier: Paulinus, 2007).

foundation than was used by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century.

Similarly, Jesus is the limit of the potentiality of the human intellect: "Whatever intellectually gifted people are capable of knowing was reality in Christ."[53]

Thus, Cusa's skepticism was not total. Oneness is simple and therefore certain, and oneness is not a concept but God. We work from what we know using logic, to what we do not know, like God. We can use symbols to learn about God. We do know that every point on a circle is equidistant from its centre, and we can build from this mathematical certainty. One modern Cusa scholar puts this more clearly: the "straight line is no longer a given length, but, exceeding all dimensions, is infinite. Then it is simultaneously the infinite triangle, the infinite circle, the infinite sphere, because the circle with the largest circumference is the least curved, and the least curved line is straight. Of course, our conceptual thinking cannot comprehend this convergence of infinite figures, yet reason compels us to acknowledge it."[54]

We can look at Cusa's epistemology another way, by looking at a more practical text. In a sermon on the Lord's Prayer, Cusa noted that "just as divinity lay hidden in the humanity of Christ, so also all intelligible wisdom is hidden in the simple words of Christ's teaching, which no one in this world can completely comprehend." This gives us a need for teachers, since people will understand the Lord's Prayer with greater or lesser insight: "That is why one person, in accordance with the grace of God, can have a clearer and higher insight into the words of the *Pater noster* than another, just as one person has sharper eyes than another for gazing at the sun."[55]

Application 4: Relativistic Spacetime

For now, we conclude with a single example of Cusa's thought, which itself casts a shadow across the next centuries of world history, until today. This is relativistic spacetime, the most plain-ken of Cusa's conceptions, although even this is rooted in the deep ken.

Cusa derived an unbounded universe without a centre from the omnipotence of God. In his *Idiota de mente* [The Layman on Mind] (ca. 1450), the infinite benevolence and knowledge of God were linked to the straight line and to

53 Quoted in Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 66. See Brient, "How Can," 224.
54 Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 60.
55 Nicholas of Cusa, "Nicholas of Cusa's Sermon on the Pater Noster," in *Cusanus*, ed. Peter Casarella, trans. Frank Tobin, 1–25 (5), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt284vvk.7

basic units of measurement, for the divine gift of measuring was fundamental to human wisdom. He understood the universe, a mirror of God, to be, in a way, infinite with respect to space and motion. "God, who is everywhere and nowhere," Cusa wrote, was the universe's "circumference and center." If the centre was the circumference, then there was no centre, and the earth was uncentred and in relative motion. The centre of the universe came together with its circumference, so the universe itself did not have a circumference. Indeed, God, as existence's own absolute maximum, became the "centre of the earth and of all the spheres." Space was all homogenous in terms of its nobility. For Cusa, the earth was not at rest, so motion and space must both be relative: wherever you found yourself was the centre of the universe. The limitations on our knowledge of ourselves and the universe paved the way for the relativity of space and time.[56]

This shows a plain-ken awareness of temporality and perspective, that the observer's location powerfully informs what is seen and how it is seen. Aristotle (384–322 BC) had denied the existence of a "void," since motion required a medium. His universe was limited, and finite. Thomas Bradwardine (ca. 1300–49) had identified God with an infinite sphere with omnipresent centre and no circumference.[57] A century later, the Jewish theologian Hasdai Crescas (ca. 1340–1410/11) effectively invented unified, homogeneous, infinite space.[58] Nicholas of Cusa, parallel to Crescas, and building on a tradition going back at least to the thirteenth century, described the power of God in terms of an infinite physical space, strikingly similar to the space of the linear perspectivists. He was, moreover, a prominent voice for them, and had connections with them. Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) (see Chapter 14) and Cusa were familiar with each other's work, and probably knew each other personally.[59]

---

56 Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, II, 89–93 (2.11.156 to 2.12.162). See Samuel Edgerton, *Renaissance Recovery of Linear Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 36–37; Karsten Harries, "The Infinite Sphere: Comments on the History of a Metaphor," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13 (1975): 5–15 (6); Max Jammer, *Concepts of Space: The History of Theories of Space in Physics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969), 82–84; Eli Maor, *To Infinity and Beyond: A Cultural History of the Infinite* (Boston, MA: Birkhauser Boston, 1986), 190–91; Sarah Powrie, "The Importance of Fourteenth-Century Natural Philosophy for Nicholas of Cusa's Infinite Universe," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2013): 33–53, https://doi.org/DOI 10.5840/acpq20138712

57 Thomas Bradwardine, *De causa Dei*, ed. Henry Saville (London: Billium, 1618), 179.

58 Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord* (*or Hashem*), trans. Roslyn Weiss (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 9, 32–39, 72–77, 274–76. See Jammer, *Concepts of Space*, 74–82.

59 Charles H. Carman, *Leon Battista Alberti and Nicholas Cusanus: Towards an Epistemology of Vision for Italian Renaissance Art and Culture* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014); Cesare Catà, "Perspicere Deum: Nicholas of Cusa and European

To understand the deep-ken unity that undergirds all his thought, we might describe Cusa's spiritual demography as a series of nested circles, as in the playing field of Jesus Bowling. In the innermost, we have the loyal Church, bound together by a political theory that associates consensus with union. Because of Jesus's promise to Peter, the Church has an absolute power, and the pope was a "holy prince." This effects a spiritual marriage between Jesus and the Church. The second ring holds those Christians not in unity, which would include the Greeks and the Bohemians. In the third ring, we see representatives of all nations and religions together before Jesus (even if, say, the Muslims did not recognize this). Beyond the third ring is everything, all creatures, combined and unified in Jesus, through the combination of his divinity and humanity. Between the deep-ken unity and the plain-ken multiplicity, Cusa's skepticism combined with his negative theology, and led to a practicality evident in his attitude towards Wilsnack, and to a transcendent impulse that links us back to the universal unity in Jesus.

Envoi

Five hundred years later, scholars began to celebrate Cusa as the first modern thinker, or a "medieval thinker for the modern age."[60] Even outside of Europe, the Círculo de Estudios Cusanos de Buenos Aires, the Cusanus Society of America, and the Japanese Cusanus Society sprang up. Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) began this renaissance when he argued that Cusa's reconciliation of what we here refer to as the two kens makes him "the first modern thinker."[61] One modern commentator sees him as the herald of the scientific revolution, for Cusa "preserved the place of rationality in theology by transforming the ontological infinity of God into an infinity of epistemological processes, in mathematics,

---

Art of the Fifteenth Century," *Viator* 39 (2008): 285–305, https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.1.100123; Joan Gadol, "The Unity of the Renaissance: Humanism, Natural Science and Art," in *From the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation: Essays in Honor of Garrett Mattingly*, ed. Charles H. Carter (New York: Random House, 1966), 29–55; Edward E. Lowinsky, "The Concept of Physical and Musical Space in the Renaissance (A Preliminary Sketch)," *Papers of the American Musicological Society* (1941): 57–84; Tom Müller, *Perspektivität und Unendlichkeit: Mathematik und ihre Anwendung in der Frührenaissance am Beispiel von Alberti und Cusanus* (Regensburg: Roderer, 2010); Rhys W. Roark, "Nicholas Cusanus, Linear Perspective, and the Finite Cosmos," *Viator* 41 (2010): 315–66, https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.1.100577

60 Kazuhiko Yamaki, ed., *Nicholas of Cusa: A Medieval Thinker for the Modern Age* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002).

61 Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), 10.

physical sciences, as well as philosophy. Thus, he created the epistemological prerequisites of modern natural science."[62] For Cusa, as for all skeptics, certain knowledge was not possible. However, the coming together of the two kens in Jesus allowed for some investigation, though flawed, of the world. While today scholars particularly appreciate Cusa's development of plain-ken thought, it was his Jesus-rooted reconciliation of both kens that had consequences beyond his contemporary needs. Jesus's significance for Cusa and Cusa's importance for the modern mind suggest the fundamental importance of Jesus in conditioning how we have come to think today.

62 Achtner, "Infinity as a Transformative Concept," 37.