Divine Difference and Religious Unity: On the Relation Between *De Docta Ignorantia*, *De Pace Fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*

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Nicholas Cusanus is commonly known as a promoter of religious dialogue and tolerance. His phrase '*religio una in rituum varietate*' is often quoted¹ and interpreted as an anticipation of a goal of peaceful coexistence,² which certainly is not realized, but has become even more important now than it was five hundred years ago when Cusanus wrote *De pace fidei*, his book on the peaceful unity of different faiths. This is not to say that it was unimportant then. Cusanus wrote the book from which the aforementioned quotation is taken within a few months of receiving the news of the Muslim Turks' conquest of Constantinople, a conquest that meant the end of a Christian empire with a history of more than a thousand years, and within whose borders were, or had been, the historical sites of the origins of the Christian faith.³ Furthermore, with news of the conquest there followed the all-too-common stories of persecution and violence. If we think that the relationship between Christians and Muslims is difficult today, we probably cannot even begin to understand the

- 1 The quotation is from *De pace fidei* I, 6. For the Latin text of this work, see Nicolaus Cusanus, *Opera omnia*, ed. Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. VII (Hamburg: Meiner, 1932ff). All Cusanus citations will be to the *Opera omnia* by title, book (where applicable), chapter, and paragraph number. For Jasper Hopkins' useful English translations of Cusanus's works, see Nicholas of Cusa, English translations, accessed 30 April, 2012, <http://jasper-hopkins.info/>.
- 2 See, e.g., David J. Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 475. The story of the loss of interest in Cusanus's work and the rediscovery of its significance by Lessing is told in Raymond Klibansky, "Die Wirkungsgeschichte des Dialogs *De pace fidei*," in *Der Friede unter der Religionen nach Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Rudolf Haubst, *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 16 (1984): 113–125; cited hereafter as *Friede unter der Religionen*.
- 3 For an overview of the historical context of Cusanus's works on religious dialogue, see James E. Biechler, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 270–296.

feeling of catastrophe that filled the Christians when they heard the news of the fall of Constantinople. They had fought for centuries to avoid this outcome, and now it was the new reality with which they had to cope. What to do now? Was there anything to do beyond calling for a new crusade, thus attempting to reverse the apparently unavoidable process of history?⁴

There was, however, an alternative, a peaceful approach, and Cusanus is among its best-known proponents. He was an unlikely candidate though,⁵ as he represented the only remaining politically powerful Christian institution in Western Europe: the Catholic Church. As one of its cardinals, he had a vested interest in maintaining its integrity and position as a power player on the international scene, and as an expert of church law and administration, he was well aware of the significance of the ongoing power struggle between the Christian and Muslim empires. Although he had a broader intellectual orientation than many of his contemporaries, it was still one-sidedly Christian, though it did include a familiarity with the tradition of the Eastern Church, which must have let him feel the anguish of what happened in Constantinople to an even greater extent than most.⁶ Still, he seems to have been opposed to the idea of a new crusade, and advocated instead for a peaceful approach to the problem of religious plurality, an approach that emphasized the need for informed dialogue and discussion, with the explicit goal of promoting understanding and unity among the adherents of different religions.

Why did Cardinal Nicholas choose this approach? What was it in his intellectual history that led him along this alternative path? Was it possible for him to promote religious tolerance and dialogue without compromising his position as a representative of the Christian church? Moreover, was he consistent in maintaining his position, and thus presumably representing a theological and philosophical approach to the problem of religious diversity that could be of interest even in a contemporary perspective? Or do his writings reveal compromises and adjustments that make his approach appear more as a haphazard collection of incoherent ad hoc statements? The problem of religious

4 This is what Pope Nicholas V did; see Biechler, "Interreligious Dialogue," 281.

5 For introductions to Cusanus's biography, see Donald F. Duclow, "Life and Works," in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 25–56; Erich Meuthen, *Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

6 This personal background for Cusanus's work with the unity of religions is emphasized in M. de Gandillac, "Das Ziel der *una religio in varietate rerum*," in *Friede unter die Religionen*, 192–204, especially 193.

pluralism has not left us, and neither has the danger of it being exploited by violent extremists of differing persuasions.⁷ Thus, the question begs to be asked: could the fifteenth-century cardinal have something to say that is still worth exploring by us today, in the twenty-first century?

I will try to answer these questions by first presenting the approach to the problem of religious pluralism that is found in Cusanus's first important theological and philosophical work, *De docta ignorantia*,⁸ written more than ten years before the fall of Constantinople. Next, I will investigate how far this approach informs what is probably his best-known work in this area, *De pace fidei* (1453). Finally, I will look at *Cribratio Alkorani*, a considerably more detailed investigation of Islam that Cusanus wrote in 1461.⁹ This will hopefully give us an overview of the basic elements of Cusanus's understanding of religion, and will consequently allow for a conclusion concerning how far these elements remained constant throughout Cusanus's career.

The Presence of the Infinite as Christian Theology

The starting point of Cusanus's philosophy of religion is the close connection he finds between God and the idea of infinity.¹⁰ This has two immediate consequences that orient all he has to say on God and on God's relation to the world. Firstly, there can only be one infinity, since to be counted, entities must be limited in relation to each other and thus cannot be infinite. Hence, there can only be one infinite God, and accordingly, monotheism is established as the only appropriate kind of theology. Secondly, there is no proportionality between the finite and the infinite; thus, relations that presuppose proportionality (and for Cusanus that includes both purpose and causality) are from the outset disabled as possible avenues of thought in exploring the relation between God and the world. Therefore, God cannot be considered either as the end or the

7 While I am writing this, we have in Norway commemorated the anniversary of the massacre in Oslo and at Utøya in July 2011, when 77 persons were murdered as a protest against the allegedly devastating influence of Islam on Christian Europe.

8 Cusanus, *Opera omnia*, vol. I. Another useful edition is Nicolaus Cusanus, *Philosophisch-theologische Werke*, 4 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2002), vol. 1 (Latin text with German translation).

9 Cusanus, *Opera omnia*, vol. VIII.

10 For a more extensive presentation of the thought world of *De docta ignorantia* and the relevant research, see Knut Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived: An Investigation of the Significance of Christological Apophaticism* (Leuven-Paris-Walpole: Peeters, 2010), 126–146.

cause of worldly events, in analogy with the relationships between finite phenomena; ergo, the teleological and cosmological proofs of God's existence fail.

Cusanus therefore finds participation to be the only possible concept that lets one explore the relation between God and the world in a way that lets both maintain their integrity. Thus, the finite participates in infinity by having its very finitude defined by infinity, which neither conflates the two nor reduces one to the other.¹¹ Infinity is therefore present in the finite world as that which determines its finitude, and the finite manifests its finitude through participation in the infinite.

This is an approach that in Cusanus's view is easily aligned with biblical monotheism.¹² But he is also open to the possibility that this understanding of the infinite as present within, but not reducible to, finite phenomena might also be found within pagan religions. Admittedly, pagans tend to conflate divinity with its manifestations, thus committing the sin of idolatry by worshipping finite phenomena as divine, instead of considering them as transparent to but never identical with infinity. But they do not necessarily do so.¹³ Cusanus thus upholds the philosophical and biblical criteria for distinguishing between idolatry and true worship, but without insisting that idolatry is a sin that all pagans necessarily commit.

There are reasons, though, for the traditional identification of paganism with idolatry, and in Cusanus's view, the main reason is that the two central Christian doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation make the Christian faith unique precisely in the way it understands the relation between God and the world. All phenomena in the finite world are characterized by alterity (or otherness) and inequality; if not, they cannot be explored as finite phenomena. But oneness logically precedes alterity, and is *ipso facto* eternal. In the same way, equality also manifests eternity by preceding all inequality. Oneness, equality, and their union are thus all eternal and manifest the same infinity. God is therefore not only present in finitude; he is also present as the triune identity of oneness, equality, and union.¹⁴

11 E.g., a finite line participates in the indivisibility of an infinite line by not being divisible beyond the point where it no longer is a line; *De docta ignorantia* I, 17, 47.

12 Due to the Hegelian influence on twentieth century theology, this conflation of biblical monotheism and the simplicity of apophatic infinity has been heavily contested. For a contemporary defense of a perspective closely related to Cusanus's, see David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

13 *De docta ignorantia* I, 25, 84.

14 *De docta ignorantia* I, 7, 10.

This exploration of Augustinian Trinitarianism as modified by the school of Chartres¹⁵ may sound abstract and speculative, but the point Cusanus is trying to make is valid, given the idea of infinity as his philosophical point of orientation. Alterity and inequality are basic phenomena in the finite world in the sense that they are presupposed in the investigation of all other phenomena, in other words, things and concepts can only differ by being different. As transparent to infinity, phenomena manifest infinity in two different ways that are each equally transparent to the same infinity. The infinite can thus only be present in the finite through the identity of difference.

With these arguments, Cusanus succeeds in integrating divine oneness and threeness so that, without succumbing to modalism, he avoids the critique leveled against Peter Lombard for emphasizing God's unity to the extent that it acts as a fourth element besides the three persons.¹⁶ The only consistent alternatives¹⁷ to the Trinitarian approach Cusanus advocates here are either a severing of the relation between God and the world (resulting either in a sharply dualist or a one-sidedly atheist worldview), or their conflation, leading to idolatry or pantheism. From Cusanus's point of view, these options may be flip sides of the same coin. God may be inexorable in his infinite inexplicability; in his relation with the world, however, God can only be consistently approached as triune.

Whereas the doctrine of the Trinity presents a non-idolatrous understanding of finite participation in the infinite as a logical necessity, the doctrine of the Incarnation presents it as a temporal reality. As a thought experiment, however, it is possible to develop a Chalcedonian Christology of the hypostatic union of the divine and human in Christ without separation or conflation, and in the beginning of Book III of *De docta ignorantia*, this is exactly what Cusanus does.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Gospel story insists that this hypothetical union is actually realized,¹⁹ where the full realization of the participation of

15 See Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300–1500)*, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism, vol. 4 (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 470–475.

16 See, e.g., Martin Anton Schmidt, "Dogma und Lehre im Abendland II: Die Zeit der Scholastik," in *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte*, ed. Carl Andresen, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 567–754, 609–610.

17 The question whether the Orthodox approach to the Trinity as origin, birth, and procession is to be considered as an alternative to the modified Augustinian approach maintained by Cusanus, is beyond the scope of the present investigation. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, tries to combine them.

18 *De docta ignorantia* III, 1–3.

19 *De docta ignorantia* III, 4.

finite createdness in infinity is given with the perichoretic unity of God and human in Christ. Accordingly, Book III of *De docta ignorantia* is an exploration of faith, unfolded with an appropriation of the doctrine of the Incarnation as the key to understanding the relation between God and the world.²⁰

The worldview explored in *De docta ignorantia* is Christian at its core and unlimited in its scope. Cusanus's starting point is the exploration of the philosophical concepts of finitude and infinity. But he insists that the participation of the finite in the infinite (without which the world either falls apart in disparate fragmentation or merges into undifferentiated fuzziness) can only be upheld through strict adherence to the Chalcedonian emphasis on the immutability and inseparability of the two natures of Christ. Here we see an intriguing—possibly even provocative—insistence on the necessity of a Christ-centered exploration of the world, even within a philosophical context. Given Cusanus's basic presuppositions, though, his position can hardly be seen as inconsistent.

Trinitarian Christological Monotheism as Theology of Religion

How, then, does Cusanus apply his Christologically informed dialectic of finitude and infinity to the problem of religious pluralism? In response to this question, we will see that he does this basically by repeating and extending the approach of *De docta ignorantia*, seemingly without finding it necessary to undertake any major shifts in the positions maintained within the work.

In *De pace fidei*, Christian faith is taken for granted as the point of orientation, in the sense that from the outset, the Incarnation is seen as what enables the ordering of human existence toward its divine origin.²¹ The means by which religions can be reduced to a harmonious unity is thus, on the one hand, through an exploration of the extent to which elements from the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation can be accepted within the other religions, and on the other hand, through an investigation of how far one can go in accepting the variety of religious rites from the perspective of Christian worship. A number of wise figures from different religions and traditions are therefore summoned to the heavenly throne, in order to discuss and to be instructed in how to realize this inherent unity within the apparent plurality of world religions.²²

20 For references to literature discussing the centrality of Christology in the thought of Cusanus, see Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived*, 127–128.

21 *De pace fidei* II, 7.

22 *De pace fidei* III, 9.

Monotheism is the obvious presupposition of this approach: All true believers seek the one God, as there is no other to be sought.²³ The problem of polytheism is therefore the first to be dealt with, and this is easily done, as Cusanus claims that even polytheists maintain the oneness of the concept of deity, common to all deities.²⁴ Thus, in the council of the wise (as it is called in the book), both the monotheist Arab Muslim²⁵ and the presumably polytheist Indian²⁶ accept this solution.

The doctrine of the Trinity presents a larger—though still not insurmountable—hurdle. To address this, Cusanus simply reiterates the doctrine of the Trinity from *De docta ignorantia*, again emphasizing how the ineffability of divine infinity informs the Trinitarian structure of God's work as Creator,²⁷ and presenting Christ as the manifestation of the equality through which God establishes the difference of the world.²⁸ Muslim and Jewish critiques of the Trinity are interpreted as the consequence of an obviously misguided idea of a plurality of gods, whereas everyone in the heavenly council agrees that to reject the Trinity as it is here explained would be to isolate God and creation from one another, thus nullifying the idea of divine fecundity and creativity. Understandably, the latter is a position nobody wants to defend.²⁹

Having thus established that all the wise have reached a common understanding of the Trinity,³⁰ the investigation proceeds to Christology,³¹ and the discussion shifts towards the question of whether one can maintain the idea of human nature participating in God, though without compromising God's oneness. The apostle Peter, who at this point in the discussion is the one representing Cusanus's position, argues that one cannot distinguish between the

23 *De pace fidei* I, 5.

24 For a discussion of this argument in the context of Cusanus's thought, see Klaus Kremer, "Die Hinführung (*Manducatio*) von Polytheisten zum einen, von Juden und Muslimen zum dreienen Gott," in *Friede unter die Religionen*, 126–159, 127–136.

25 *De pace fidei* VI, 17.

26 *De pace fidei* VII, 20.

27 *De pace fidei* VII, 21. Kremer ("Hinführung von Polytheisten, Juden und Muslimen," 143–146) explores how, in spite of this emphasis on unity, the distinction between the persons is sufficiently treated. For a discussion of Cusanus's doctrine of the Trinity in *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani* and its historical provenance, see also Walter Andreas Euler, *Unitas et Pax: Religionsvergleich bei Raimundus Lullus und Nikolaus von Kues* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1990), 161–170.

28 *De pace fidei* VIII, 24.

29 *De pace fidei* VIII, 24–IX, 26.

30 *De pace fidei* X, 27.

31 For a discussion of this part of the work, see Euler, *Unitas et Pax*, 171–183.

nature of maximally realized wisdom at its source and in its manifestation, and that the Nicene doctrine of consubstantiality must therefore be upheld.³² This is a doctrine that even the Muslim Persian accepts can be taught without hurting the doctrine of God's oneness.³³ The Jews may still disagree, Cusanus admits, but since they are few and unarmed, it does not present much of a problem.³⁴ Furthermore, insofar as humans have a hope of immortality, they in fact all presuppose the possibility of a union between the divine and human, since only through participation in divinity can humans be carried across the divide of death. Christ demonstrates the realization of this union through his resurrection, which in reality is presupposed by all who hope for immortality.³⁵ Hence, Christology is the fulfillment of the hope of all religions, not their rejection.³⁶

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- 32 *De pace fidei* XII, 37–38. The idea of having the fisherman from Galilee arguing the finer points of Nicene Christology may strike a modern reader as somewhat counterintuitive. By seeing in Cusanus's Christological argument nothing but "laborious and contrived . . . convolutions" (Biechler, "Interreligious Dialogue," 277), however, one just declares one's lack of willingness and/or ability to engage with the central elements of Christian thought with anything even remotely close to the seriousness Cusanus brings to the question. As documented in Rudolf Haubst, "Die Wege der christologischen *manuductio*," in *Friede unter den Religionen*, 164–191, 172, both the Qur'an and contemporary Muslims may express a view of Christ considerably closer to Cusanus's.
- 33 *De pace fidei* XII, 39. By letting a Persian represent Islam here, Cusanus may be thinking of, and speaking to, the alleged Nestorian influence on Mohammad; see Haubst, "Wege der christologischen *manuductio*," 167–168; Euler, *Unitas et Pax*, 171. Historically, Mohammad's rejection of Christ's divinity is hardly due to Nestorian influence; as maintained by Siegfried Raeder, *Der Islam und das Christentum: Eine historische und theologische Einführung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001), 28, the tendency toward a kind of Pelagianism among Syrian monks may be a more likely candidate.
- 34 *De pace fidei* XII, 41. Cusanus employs here a strangely pragmatic argument that differs substantially from the otherwise very principled discussion in the rest of the book; one may therefore, as Biechler suggests ("Interreligious Dialogue," 278), speak of a certain 'anti-Jewish bias' at work here.
- 35 *De pace fidei* XIII. As Euler emphasizes (*Unitas et Pax*, 175–176), Cusanus defends here the necessity of the incarnation without any reference to the doctrine of original sin.
- 36 As maintained by Gandillac ("Das Ziel der *una religio*," 210), Cusanus thus finds the unity of religions in "die Bejahung der Heiligsten Dreifaltigkeit und des erlösenden Selbstopfers des fleischgewordenen Gottlichen Wortes." Euler (*Unitas et Pax*, 180) emphasizes that this leads to a correlation between Christology and anthropology that may remind a modern reader of the work of Karl Rahner.

The Muslims represent an additional problem in that they do not accept the death of Christ on the cross.³⁷ Cusanus handles this problem in the same way he handles the objection against the doctrine of the Trinity: it is commendable as an expression of respect for Christ's significance, but when Muslims understand that Christ's death on the cross in fact *enhances* his glory, they will readily accept even the reality of his death.³⁸ Furthermore, Cusanus employs allegorical interpretation to solve the fact that Muslims and Jews seem to expect a more sensual and temporal heavenly kingdom than the one expected by Christians; he argues, therefore, that the heavenly maidens of the Qur'an should be understood '*similitudinaliter*,' i.e., as parables.³⁹

Having thus solved all doctrinal problems to the satisfaction of (almost) all the learned representatives of the different religions, Cusanus finally comes to the issue of the variety of rites. Here he finds inspiration in the New Testament emphasis on unity in spite of differences concerning the practice of the law,⁴⁰ and therefore tries to solve the problem by referring to the doctrine that informs the New Testament approach, namely, Paul's message of justification by faith alone, as founded on the biblical faith in the one God.⁴¹ Salvation is therefore brought through faith in the divine promise.⁴² This faith is served by various signs, though these signs may change even if what they signify does

37 For an extensive treatment of this problem within the contemporary context, see A. H. Mathias Zahniser, *The Mission and Death of Jesus in Islam and Christianity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008). His main argument is that Jesus' prediction of his death is hardly compatible with his voluntary escape from this destiny; this is an argument that should speak even to Muslims. His approach is thus methodologically quite close to Cusanus's.

38 *De pace fidei* XIV, 47–48.

39 *De pace fidei* XV, 51.

40 See Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10.

41 As emphasized, e.g., by Euler (*Unitas et Pax*, pp. 203–224) and Biechler ("Interreligious Dialogue," 279), Cusanus approaches the problem of religious unity and diversity informed by his Neoplatonic emphasis on oneness, but the close relation he then finds for good reasons between his own approach and that of the Pauline link between monotheism and justification by faith (see Romans 3:30–31) is generally overlooked in the scholarship on Cusanus's theology of religion. Albrecht Peters, "Zum christlichen Menschenbild: Freiheit, Erlösung und Rechtfertigung, Glaube und Werke," in *Friede unter die Religionen*, 214–242, 227–234, discusses Cusanus's reception of the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith in *De pace fidei*, but more in the context of his anthropology than in relation to his theology of religion.

42 "Vis igitur quod sola fides illa iustificet ad perceptionem aeternae vitae?" is the question Paul is asked by his somewhat confused interlocutor, according to *De pace fidei*, to which his answer is affirmative (XVI, 58).

not.⁴³ As an example, Cusanus—still following in Paul's footsteps—refers to the problem of circumcision (cf. Galatians 5:6). This rite does not necessarily lead to salvation, and should therefore be avoided; still, for the sake of peace, the majority may accept the differing practice of a minority, so long as it takes place within the framework of a mutual agreement.⁴⁴

But are there, then, no necessary rites? A cardinal of the Catholic Church cannot be expected to treat the sacraments in quite the same way as Paul treats circumcision, thus Cusanus's answer to this question is clearly affirmative: there are necessary sacraments. Concerning the rites of everyday worship, however, he limits their number to two: Baptism and Eucharist. Admittedly, according to Cusanus it is faith that saves, not the sacrament.⁴⁵ But by not making use of the sacraments, one shows oneself to be lacking in faith.⁴⁶ The sacraments are therefore to be taken seriously,⁴⁷ and his defense of them includes an attempt at making the doctrine of transubstantiation acceptable for a representative of the Bohemian opposition.⁴⁸ Concerning the other sacraments, Cusanus argues that no conformity is necessary, with the exception that monogamous marriage and some form of priesthood are to be upheld. In other matters, all are entitled to maintain their respective ceremonies, as long as faith and peace are served.⁴⁹

Cusanus's attempt at solving the problem of ritual diversity through the doctrine of justification through faith alone gives his reflections in this part of *De pace fidei* an almost Lutheran flavor. Parts of his discussion thus read

43 "Signa autem mutationem capiunt, non signatum." *De pace fidei* XVI, 55.

44 *De pace fidei* XVI, 60. This is essentially a repetition of Paul's argument in Galatians: Circumcision is acceptable as long as it is not considered necessary.

45 In this respect Cusanus, like Luther a few decades later, just follows Augustine; see Martin Luther, *Luther's works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958–1967), vol. 32, 17.

46 "Fides est necessitatis in adultis, qui sine sacramento salvari possunt, quando assequi non poterunt. Ubi vero assequi possent, non possunt dici fideles, qui se tales esse per regenerationis sacramentum [baptismum] ostendere nolunt" (*De pace fidei* XVII, 62).

47 Cf. the summary of Cusanus's view in Peter Casarella, "Sacraments," in *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa*, 347–372, especially 347: "Cusanus's Christ-centered mysticism... highlights rather than ignores their necessity."

48 *De pace fidei* XVIII, 67–68. It is therefore hardly correct to say that Cusanus in *De pace fidei* "betrachtet... verehrungswürdige Gebräuche als Nebensache auf dem Gebiete der Sakramente" (Gandillac, "Das Ziel der *una religio*," 204), or that Cusanus downplays *unus cultus* for a one-sided emphasis on *una fides* (Klibansky, according to the discussion recorded on 205 in the same volume).

49 *De pace fidei* XIX, 67.

as an exposition of article seven in *Confessio Augustana*.⁵⁰ There are two important differences though. Cusanus's reflections are structured by a dualist reception of the Augustinian *res/signum* dialectics that Luther, however, rejected;⁵¹ in this respect, Luther's insistence on the reality of the sacramental manifestation of divine presence arguably maintains the perichoretic emphasis of Chalcedonian Christology more consistently than Cusanus and Augustine's perspectives. On the other hand, there is a breadth of scope in the Cusan approach that leaves all internally Christian applications of the rite problem behind; as there is only one God, all worship service is—willingly or unwillingly—related to him, and has to be evaluated as such.⁵²

Cusanus may seem naive in his apparent optimism concerning the universal applicability of a Neoplatonic philosophy of religion and the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone, viewing them as closely related aspects of a unified approach to the problem of religious pluralism. After all, religions are not that easily reconciled. But naiveté may not be the appropriate description. Cusanus may well have been aware that *De pace fidei* could hardly expect immediate approval in all quarters.⁵³ It is probably more appropriate to say that he was trying to work out the implications of the basic points of orientation constituting his own worldview. He had already come to the conclusion that one cannot reject the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation without committing idolatry by destroying the possibility of developing a coherent doctrine of divine creativity. This argument is worked out in detail in *De docta ignorantia*, while in *De pace fidei* it is applied in a way that invites the adherents of other

50 "And it is enough for the true unity of the Christian church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere"; Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 43.

51 As far as the word of God and the divinely instituted sacraments are concerned, there is in Luther's view an identity between *signum* and *signatum*; see Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived*, 227–228. But even Luther does not identify revelation and Bible to the extent that he questions the translatability of the latter in the way Muslims traditionally have done with the Qur'an (Raeder, *Der Islam und das Christentum*, 211–212).

52 Luther would, however, basically agree, and one may read his exposition of the first commandment in the Large Catechism (Kolb and Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord*, 386–390) as an attempt at undertaking just such an evaluation.

53 According to Euler (*Unitas et Pax*, 223), Cusanus may have thought of this as an eschatological goal. Gandillac ("Das Ziel der *una religio*") speaks of the utopian character of *De pace fidei*, carried by a hope for what "vom rein menschlichen Standpunkt aus als unerreichbar gelten muß" (204).

religions to consider its merits.⁵⁴ Given Cusanus's basic presuppositions, this was probably the only way of doing it.

Thus, there are no major shifts in Cusanus's thinking between *De docta ignorantia* and *De pace fidei*; there is a difference of emphasis, but not of content. The argument is expanded, however, in Cusanus's exploration of the relevance of the Pauline argument concerning the link between monotheism and justification by faith. If God, as Cusanus argues in *De docta ignorantia*, is always present in finite phenomena as the condition of their being perceived as finite phenomena, all finite phenomena can therefore be seen as manifestations of the divine, so long as finitude and divinity are not conflated. Hence, the irreplaceable phenomena explicitly singled out by divine revelation (the sacraments) are respected. Cusanus may thus advocate (to a considerable extent) the possibility of a *rituum varietas*. However, he unabashedly emphasizes that the one criterion for their evaluation is the existence of the idea of the Creator's presence within creation, which informs the Christian doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, the absence of which Cusanus views as leading unfailingly to the idolatry of a dualist spirit/matter reductionism. If God is not really present—and how can he be if the possibility of Incarnation is rejected?—then all worship degenerates to idolatry. But once the specificity of the sacraments is upheld and the centrality of the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation is accepted as undisputable, one should then courageously explore the principle of '*religio una in rituum varietate*.'

The Inconsistency of Alternative Religiosity as Critique of Islam

Although *De pace fidei* is in principle universal in its approach to the problem of religious plurality, the Abrahamic religions are still nevertheless the main frame of reference. Other religious traditions come into view insofar as the problem of polytheism is briefly considered, but beyond that the discussion is limited to problems related to Judaism, Islam, and different Christian tra-

54 This Christological foundation of Cusanus's theology of religion is emphasized also by Euler (*Unitas et Pax*, 215), whereas in Wolfgang Heinemann, *Einheit in Verschiedenheit: Das Konzept eines intellektuellen Religionsfriedens in der Schrift De pace fidei des Nikolaus von Kues* (Altenburg: CIS-Verlag, 1987), the author—though clearly aware of it (138)—pays scant attention to it in his analysis of Cusanus's theology of religion, thus coming to the conclusion that Cusanus considers religious pluralism as a necessity both for ontological and epistemological reasons (177–179).

ditions. Still, the approach is somewhat general in the sense that not much attention is paid to the specific doctrines of the different religions.⁵⁵

This is different, however, in Cusanus's *Cribratio Alkorani* ("Sifting of the Qur'an"), which, as the title suggests, discusses only the Qur'an, the holy book of the most important alternative to the Christian faith at the time. But it is also not completely different, since Cusanus reads the Qur'an as a book from within the Abrahamic tradition that shows considerable Christian influence in the way it treats the person of Christ and some of the Christian doctrines. Accordingly, Cusanus's objective in *Cribratio* is to discover the truth of the Gospel in the Qur'an, in spite of the fact that in his view, Mohammad was far removed from a correct understanding of it.⁵⁶ Cusanus does this by showing that the Qur'an maintains some Christian doctrines that are fairly unaltered, while those that criticize and reject other parts of the Christian faith are inconsistent and self-contradictory. One can certainly consider this a far cry from the peaceful approach demonstrated in *De pace fidei*.⁵⁷ Arguably, however, the main difference is the greater realism of the *Cribratio*, as Cusanus here actually engages with Muslim theology and does not satisfy himself with lofty affirmations of what all wise members of the heavenly council ought to agree on.

In Cusanus's view, the Qur'an is of course to be commended for its monotheism.⁵⁸ The problem is, however, that the Qur'an understands the Trinity (the view of Christ as the Son of God) and Christ's death on the cross as incompatible with true monotheism.⁵⁹ Cusanus has a nuanced approach in response to these problems. Concerning the Trinity, he repeats the main points from *De docta ignorantia* and *De pace fidei* concerning the close relationship between the doctrines of Trinity and creation. In Cusanus's view, it is impossible to reject the one without rejecting the other, and he remains convinced that he can make this point in a way that should be relevant for Muslims.⁶⁰ Apart from the rationality of the Trinitarian doctrine, Cusanus points to the Qur'an's doctrine of the Spirit of God⁶¹ and its esteem for the New Testament (which clearly

55 Cf. Euler, *Unitas et Pax*, 216: "Die Aussagen zu den dogmatisch-theologischen Gehalten der nichtchristlichen Religionen bleiben in *De pace fidei* äußerst vage."

56 *Cribratio*, I, 16: "in Alkorano reperiri evangelii veritatem, licet ipse Mahumetus remotissimus fuit a vero evangelii intellectu."

57 See, e.g., Biechler, "Interreligious Dialogue," 285.

58 *Cribratio*, I, 2.

59 *Cribratio* I, 3.

60 *Cribratio* II, 1–11.

61 *Cribratio* II, 11, 112.

has a doctrine of the Trinity) as a holy book⁶² as arguments that should lead Muslims to accept a Trinitarian view of God.

The Qur'an holds Christ in high esteem, considering him a man of God born by the Virgin Mary. Despite the fact that the Qur'an denies Christ to be the Son of God, Cusanus tries to show that the Qur'an does in fact consider Christ divine by describing him as the word sent from heaven who could perform miracles.⁶³ Furthermore, the Qur'an also accepts the Christian view that Christ is still alive.⁶⁴ Hence, Cusanus considers the Muslim rejection of Christ's death on the cross as an example of accommodation, since the Arabs at Mohammad's time would not have been able to reconcile Christ's exalted position with his lowly death on the cross.⁶⁵ Again, basically following the argument of *De pace fidei*, Cusanus thus seems fairly confident that he can use the Qur'an as a testimony to Christ's divinity.

What, then, is the reason that the Qur'an both rejects and confirms the Trinity, as well as the divinity of Christ? Here Cusanus becomes somewhat more ambiguous, entertaining the view that Mohammad was both misguided⁶⁶ and willingly deceived others to maintain his own position.⁶⁷ The outcome is that his message is unclear;⁶⁸ consequently, Cusanus claims that the Qur'an cannot be considered a book of God.⁶⁹ In some of his critical passages, there-

62 *Cribratio* II, 11, 114. For a summary of this argument, see Euler, *Unitas et Pax*, 168.

63 *Cribratio* I, 12, 59. Cusanus's reference is to Surah 3:45: "O Mary! Lo! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah)"; and to Surah 3:49: "And will make him [Messiah] a messenger unto the Children of Israel, (saying): Lo! I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. Lo! I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it is a bird, by Allah's leave. I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I raise the dead, by Allah's leave." Cusanus used the Latin translations of the Qur'an available to him, whose interpretations of the text are not always confirmed by modern translations. My quotations are taken from Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, trans., *Holy Qur'an* (Hyderabad: Mir Osman Ali Khan, 1976).

64 *Cribratio* II, 13, 121.

65 *Cribratio* II, 13, 124. Cusanus does not discuss the New Testament view that this *skándalon* is a necessary aspect of the Christian message; see 1 Corinthians 1:23.

66 *Cribratio* I, 1, 23. Cusanus is here following the traditional view that Mohammad was influenced by the Nestorian Sergius; see, e.g., Euler, *Unitas et Pax*, 157.

67 *Cribratio* III, 8.

68 *Cribratio* III, 2, 163; III, 9–10.

69 *Cribratio* I, 1. Cusanus states this in no ambiguous terms; it cannot be true that the Quran is from God, "cum illa in libro contineantur, quae ob suam turpitudinem iniustitiam et notorietatem mendacii et contradictionis deo sine blasphemia adscribi nequeant" (I, 1, 22).

fore, Cusanus seems less interested in inviting Muslims into a reasonable dialogue, and instead clearly states what he as a Christian thinks of this book. Thus, it may well be the case that Cusanus is mainly writing to convince Christians who have converted to Islam.⁷⁰ Still, Cusanus generally interprets the Qur'an as a humanist scholar, taking the book seriously as it presents itself, namely, as a religious tract, written from within the Christian tradition to the extent that it refers to the Old and New Testaments, the prophets, and Christ as undisputable religious authorities. And, given his point of departure, Cusanus may very well be right in maintaining that the contradictions and ambiguities of the Qur'an may be too many to neglect.

As a scholarly work, *Cribratio Alkorani* does not quite reach the level of *De docta ignorantia* and *De pace fidei*. It is somewhat haphazardly organized, and—apart from the obvious fact that it engages with Muslim positions considerably more in detail than the former works—does not really advance the philosophical and theological arguments contained in the other two books. One may even argue that the *Cribratio* falls behind since it nowhere discusses the rites question. Cusanus does not say why it is left out, but perhaps the more detailed study of the doctrine and practice of Islam had made him doubt the feasibility of his earlier position. Except for the anti-Islamic rhetoric of *Cribratio*, it is still a work that recommends a peaceful approach to the problem of religious pluralism. It encourages religious leaders to relate to one another by means of argument and discussion, taking care not to let doctrinal differences disappear in a cloud of fuzzy benevolence. Compared to the somewhat high-minded declaration of a Christian-based unity of religions in *De pace fidei*, it is not at all clear whether this is to be considered a mistake.

Cusanus's Theology of Religion in a Contemporary Perspective

As demonstrated, Cusanus's understanding of the finite world's relation to the infinite informed his theology of religion. It made for a consistent and fruitful approach through which Cusanus sought to guide his contemporaries away from violence and toward a peaceful dialogue, aiming to establish a common point of reference for all religions without overlooking their obvious differences. A last question, however, remains to be asked: if Cusanus's approach were to be extended into today's debates, where would it take us?

70 This is the view of Biechler, "Interreligious Dialogue," 285. Cusanus explicitly refers to this group in *Cribratio* I, 3, 28.

In contemporary scholarship, the discussion concerning the evaluation of the relation between religions is usually structured according to four different models: Christological exclusivism, Christological inclusivism, universalism (also known as pluralism), and parallelism (or incompatibilism).⁷¹ Of these, universalism is obviously incompatible with Cusanus's position. An understanding of all religions as equally valid approaches toward the Unknowable One is clearly far removed from Cusanus's insistence on Christocentric Trinitarianism as indispensable for any rationally defensible approach to the question of religious pluralism.⁷² The one question to be asked from the Cusan perspective to the universalists is whether they can integrate the distinction between idolatrous and non-idolatrous worship into their approaches with the seriousness that all monotheist religions presuppose. If this question is answered in the negative, it seems quite difficult to avoid the conclusion that religious universalism is misguided.⁷³

Furthermore, Christological exclusivism and inclusivism are not necessarily opposites, since the question of how far one should go in looking for confirmation of an incarnational way of thinking within different religious traditions may have a variety of answers. Exactly where on this axis Cusanus should be positioned may well remain an open question.⁷⁴ He is certainly not a narrow-minded exclusivist, but how far his inclusivism really extends is a difficult question to answer without becoming anachronistic. Today, we know

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- 71 For a summary of these positions, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 457–463. Christological exclusivism maintains that Christ alone saves; Christological inclusivism agrees, but finds the saving Christ in a variety of religious contexts; pluralism or universalism maintains the basic equality of all religions, while parallelism or incompatibilism rejects the possibility of comparing them.
- 72 Heinemann, *Einheit in Verschiedenheit* (cf. note 54 above) reads universalism into Cusanus by systematically ignoring his Christological and Trinitarian emphases. As maintained by Thomas P. McTighe, “Nicholas of Cusa's unity-metaphysics and the formula *religio una in rituum varietate*,” in *Nicholas of Cusa In Search of God and Wisdom*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 161–172, this would amount to seeing the differing religions as *explicationes* of the one true religion as their *complicatio*; this way of thinking, however, is contrary to what is maintained by scholars like Stallmach and Biechler, absent from *De pace fidei*.
- 73 According to Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, Minn.: Zondervan, 1992), 70, universalism is founded on modernity's rejection of the possibility of definite divine presence, which (*pace* Heinemann) is the very foundation of Cusanus's theology of religion.
- 74 Euler, *Unitas et Pax*, 256–258 discusses this problem as “die Differenzierung zwischen exklusiver und inklusiver Absolutheit.”

more about religions and the hermeneutical problems involved in interpreting them, thus the question of what Cusanus's position would have been if he had known as much as we do today rapidly dissolves into speculation and counterfactuality.

The question of the relation between Cusanus's approach and that of incompatibilism remains an intriguing one. It does not allow for a direct answer, as the discussion of incompatibilism has been mostly informed by a discussion of the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism, and as there was hardly any engagement with Buddhism in the West before the nineteenth century, this is something entirely outside Cusanus's horizon. Contemporary Buddhist philosophy of religion, however, has engaged with Cusanus and found his perspective fruitful and interesting.⁷⁵ Before one concludes that the relationship might have been mutual, we have to address how the Cusan emphasis on oneness relates to the possibility of its being manifest in incompatible ways. In spite of Cusanus's emphasis on Christocentric Trinitarianism, he is sufficiently informed by apophaticism to recognize clearly the unknowability of the infinite. Still, in Cusanus's view, a religious or philosophical tradition that does not understand itself as the manifestation of the One cannot even hope to be taken seriously as a credible contender in the quest for truth.⁷⁶ Is this approach at all compatible with the idea of the One being present in multiple and mutually incompatible instantiations? It is one thing to maintain the idea of the unknowability of the infinite; it may, however, be something quite different to entertain the possibility of the multiplicity of its simultaneous and incompatible manifestations.

Yet to relate Cusanus's discussion of religious pluralism to the contemporary debate concerning the theology of religion may unduly limit its relevance. Cusanus insists that the idea of an ineffable infinity is indispensable for the exploration of the world. This issues in an emphasis on the rationality of a Trinitarian theology of creation that may still be relevant for current explorations of the relation between God and the world. Modern scholarly

75 See Roger Corless, "Speaking of the unspeakable: Negation as the way in Nicholas of Cusa and Nāgārjuna," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 2 (1982): 107–117. There is also some discussion of this perspective in relation to the Kyoto school in Alfsvåg, *What No Mind Has Conceived*, 268–282.

76 Josef Stallmach, "Einheit der Religion—Friede unter den Religionen," in *Friede unter die Religionen*, 61–81 is therefore correct in summarizing Cusanus the following way: "Es gibt eine Grundgestalt von *Religion*, einen Wesenskern, einen gemeinsamen Grundbestand aller Religionen—weil Gott *einer* ist" (66, italics in original). Cusanus differs from the universalists, though, by never applying this criterion positively to the differing religions; see McTighe, "Nicholas of Cusa's unity-metaphysics," 166.

investigations of the world tend to proceed from a presupposition of its alleged independence from any kind of theological framework. From Cusanus's point of view, however, this kind of secularized scientism is philosophically flawed. In his view, the possibility of giving a consistent definition to concepts like difference and unity (which are basic for all kinds of intellectual and scientific endeavors) is lost once the idea of infinity is abandoned and deemed philosophically irrelevant. For Cusanus, scientism is a worldview that should be approached like other inherently religious worldviews.⁷⁷ Moreover, the idea of its absoluteness can only be taken seriously to the extent that it appropriates the idea of the unknowability of the infinite.

On the other hand, much contemporary theology has interpreted the relation between God and the world in a way that tends toward letting the world appear as necessary for God to be God, the doctrine of creation thus becoming more of a logical necessity than a free decision by the eternal One. For example, this perspective has informed much of the (Hegelian) insistence on the identity between the so-called immanent and economic Trinity.⁷⁸ For Cusanus, however, God does not need the world in order to be God, and what he is and is not in his infinite unknowability is not for humans to know or guess. It is an indisputable fact that he has created the world and thus made his eternal Trinity manifest and knowable. But the creational and historical (i.e., economic) aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity is still limited in the sense that it can never totally inform our understanding of God in his immanence; in fact, we do not know anything about God beyond the relation he establishes with us through a decision that is entirely his own.⁷⁹

For Cusanus, the idea that the unfolding of the Trinity in creation and salvation should define God in the core of his divinity would imply a conflation of

77 This does not imply the idea of an evaluation of the results of scientific research according to the standard of received religious Orthodoxy; it is, after all, Cusanus's emphasis of the disproportionality of God and the world that informs his recommendation of experiment and observation that was to become the methodological foundation of modern science. What it does imply is that science, for the sake of its own integrity, is dependent on a theological framework for a consistent understanding of its own epistemological situation. Accordingly, John Henry, "Religion and the Scientific Revolution," in *The Cambridge companion to science and religion*, ed. Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 39–58 maintains that this is the world view within which the modern scientific revolution took place.

78 See, e.g., Peter C. Phan, "Systematic Issues in Trinitarian Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 13–29, 16–18.

79 On this problem, see Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 155–167.

faith and understanding. From his perspective, all understanding—both scientific and theological—starts with trust in the eternal One as irreplaceable and definitive, as there is no other way for God to remain divine and the world to remain worldly in its transparency for the infinite. This is an approach that might be as critically important today as it was when the cardinal wrote his treatises.

In this context, Islam for Cusanus appears ambiguous. It is informed by Christocentric Trinitarianism to the extent that all central elements of the Christian faith may be found in the Qur'an. But in Cusanus's view, this is partly obscured by the partially misguided attempts at accommodation and self-serving religiosity found in the Qur'an. The honesty Cusanus shows in pointing this out is certainly to be recommended, since attempts at dialogue that do not take difference and disagreement into account lead nowhere. Whether this particular starting point is the most fruitful one is another question. We should, however, have no problems in recommending it as an alternative to discrimination, violence, and persecution.