CHAPTER TWO

THE TEGERNSEE DEBATE

In December 1454, the Carthusian Vincent of Aggsbach (c. 1379–c. 1465) attacked Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance in a section of a letter which later came to be known as the "Impugnatorium doctae ignorantiae". As is immediately apparent from the construction of this letter, however, Vincent's criticism was not limited to the latter's doctrine, and in fact the ensuing disagreement between Vincent and Cusanus was part of a much broader debate regarding the proper nature and practice of mystical theology. For Cusanus is just one member of a “trinity” created here by Vincent, which he sarcastically dubs “Gerchumar”—being comprised of John Gerson, Nicolaus C(h)usa, and Marquard Sprenger—whom he so combines because he believes all represent the same erroneous view of mystical theology. At the same time, Cusanus is clearly the most reviled of this unholy trinity: whereas Gerson and Marquard at least possessed the redeeming quality of being conciliarists, Cusanus—as a former conciliarist who had switched to papal support—was in Vincent’s eyes an opportunist, a hypocrite, and a traitor to the Church. Thus, much like Wenck, Aggsbach, as a trenchant and embittered defender of the fading conciliarist cause, was an opponent of Cusanus long before this exchange began.

1 The primary source for documents relating to the Tegernsee debate has been the edition of Vansteenberghe, E. Autour de la Docte Ignorance. Une Controverse sur la Théologie Mystique au XVe Siècle (BGPM XIV). Münster: Aschendorff, 1915. However, a number of relevant documents are edited only in Pez, B. and Hueber, P., eds. Codex Diplomatico-Historico-Épistolari : Quo Diplomata, Chartæ, Epistole, Fragmenta Opusculorum, Epitaphia, et alia id genus vetera monumenta . . . continetur, totiusque pene Europæ historia illustratur. Augustae Vind. et Graecii: Veith, 1729. The correspondence between Cusanus and the Tegernsee brothers has also been edited in the Acta Cusana. At the time of publication of this dissertation a new, critical edition of the works of Bernard of Waging and some of Vincent of Aggsbach’s writings is being prepared under the auspices of the Martin Grabbmann Institute (München). As this is some years away from completion, our references to the Tegernsee-related documents rely primarily on Vansteenberghe, Pez, and the Acta Cusana. English translations here of the Cusanus-Tegernsee correspondence edited in Vansteenberghe (1915) are based on a yet-unpublished translation of Thomas Izbicki, used with his permission, with my occasional changes.

2 The title is not included in Vincent’s actual letter, but derives from Bernard of Waging’s subsequent Defensorium laudatorij doctae ignorantiae (1459), in which he defends his earlier praise of learned ignorance: « Ecce finit Defensorium laudatorij docte ignorantie contra Impugnatorium eiusdem [. . .]. » Vansteenberghe, ed. (1915), p. 188.
Also like in the Wenck case, the debate between Vincent and Cusanus was an indirect encounter, carried out through letters addressed to common acquaintances of both who then acted as intermediaries, passing the letters and their subsequent responses back and forth between the adversaries, as well as transmitting copies to other acquaintances. Unlike in the Cusanus-Wenck debate, in this case, others became actively involved in the argument, offering their own defenses of either Vincent’s or Cusanus’ respective positions, in some cases taking sides, and in some cases attempting to mediate between them.

While this debate is generally identified with the Benedictine monastery of Tegernsee (and is sometimes referred to as the “Tegernseer Mystikerstreit”), in fact the texts which formed the focal point of the debate were by Cusanus, Tegernsee prior Bernard of Waging, München theologian Marquard Sprenger, and Vincent, who belonged to the Carthusian monastery at Aggsbach, with Melk prior John Schlitpacher, serving as intermediary, transmitting texts and correspondence between the various parties. Thus the “Tegernsee” debate encompassed a somewhat broader sphere. The debate was furthermore complicated by the fact that Aggsbach’s interpretation of Cusanus’ doctrine of learned ignorance was based not on De docta ignorantia—which he had not read—but on an encomium of the treatise written by Bernard.

Although our primary focus in this study is Cusanus, nevertheless, neither the criticism nor praise his doctrine of learned ignorance received in the course of this debate can be properly appreciated without grasping something of the context out of which it evolved. To make clearer how and why this debate emerged in the first place, we must first familiarize ourselves with the respective players, the intellectual and political milieu

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5 There were also some later contributions, or at any rate, responses to this debate, such as the De mystica theologia (c. 1458–65) of Nikolaus Kempf of Gaming, who, however, was not involved in the exchange of letters comprising the debate proper. On Kempf, see below, section “The University of Vienna and reform in Austria”, n. 27.  
6 In this respect, Bernard is also a direct target in the Impugnatorium, although not included in the trio “Gerchumar”, probably since Vincent considered Bernard’s encomium to be a mere compilation of quotations from De docta ignorantia, containing no original material (an accusation against which Bernard protests in his subsequent Defensorium laudatorii docte ignorantie).