No conflict in the early life of Nicholas of Cusa has attracted more interest and attention than his move from the Council of Basel to the side of Pope Eugenius IV in May, 1437. Such ‘conversions’ from council to pope have created controversy ever since Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, a future pope himself, wrote his first apologia for abandoning his unabashed loyalties to Basel, and began a campaign to discredit the council as a ‘mob’ filled with cooks and grooms. While such evaluations were frequently accepted on face value by scholars of previous generations, Morimichi Watanabe provided a watershed in modern studies with an essay in 1972 that compared Aeneas with Panormitanus (Nicholas de Tudeschis) and Nicholas of Cusa.

Watanabe developed two inter-related claims. First, while some scholars in the early twentieth century tended to suspect that the emphasis on Nominalist individualism allowed only for the choice between ‘parliamentary conciliarism’ and ‘absolute papalism,’ Watanabe insisted that we begin with ecclesiology, the ‘theories and ideas of these men concerning the nature and essence of the Catholic Church.’ Second, he pointed in particular to the conflict between authority and consent as the conflict that would finally drive Cusanus to reevaluate his
attitude toward Basel and set him on a course toward Constantinople where he was to fetch the Greeks for a union council in Ferrara.⁴

This brief essay concentrates on these two topics as a chart for Cusanus’ journey and that of his admired mentor, Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini, papal legate and president of the council, who followed the younger man into exile from Basel a few weeks later in January, 1438. Current scholarly opinion ranges from doubt about Cusanus’ commitment to conciliarist principles to the belief that his decision to leave can better be attributed to elements of self-interest, career-seeking, class status, and personal and group loyalties.⁵ Yet, since motives in this particular affair, as in all human affairs, can be complex and in part hidden, we will not likely resolve the debate any time soon. Perhaps a solution is not as important as it was in former days when these turn-arounds were sometimes seen as a sign of victory, a ‘vindication against calumny.’⁶ For the present we may turn to what we can learn from the responses themselves—responses to the predicaments of community-building when communities were experimenting with broader participation in the decision-making process.

In any case, our purpose here falls somewhere in between the ends of the scholarly spectrum. By taking seriously certain central conciliar principles and the context in which they were put to the test, we will limit our scope to the contrast between thought and action, theory and practice. Furthermore, reflecting the theme of this volume on the shape and boundaries of tolerance, we can look at the issue, not so much from the perspective of the open, tolerant society, but from the related and perhaps primary perspective, the personal side of tolerance, and ask whether Cusanus and Cesarini can shed some light on the limits to

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⁴ Watanabe, ‘Authority and Consent,’ p. 218; also in Concord and Reform, pp. 59–60.
⁵ Peter McDermott, ‘Nicholas of Cusa: Continuity and Conciliation at the Council of Basel,’ Church History 67 (1998): 254–273, argues that since Cusanus was not a conciliarist, he revealed ‘a consistency in (his) thinking and behavior before, during, and after Basel rather than the abrupt change seen by some historians.’ (pp. 254–255). Joachim Stieber, ‘The “Hercules of the Eugenians” at the Crossroads: Nicholas of Cusa’s Decision for the Pope and against the Council in 1436/1437—Theological, Political, and Social Aspects,’ in Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden, 1991), pp. 221–258, maintains that ‘... the fundamental career decision of Cusa in 1436/1437 can be attributed far more plausibly to motives related to his social status, his quest for benefices, and his professional training as a canon lawyer.’ (p. 221).
⁶ Carlo Fea, Pius II Pont. Max. a calumniis vindicatus … (Rome, 1823).