

## Honoring Nicolaus of Cusa: A Dialogue of Cultures

by Helga Zepp-LaRouche

**Editors' note:** *This speech was delivered at a conference of the Schiller Institute in Bad Schwalbach, Germany on May 6, 2001, as a contribution to the 600th birthday of Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa. The speech is a historical first, in that it presents the development of the nation-state, as it originates in Cusa's revolutionary work. Mrs. Zepp-LaRouche's analysis is informed by the work of the late Baron Friedrich von der Heydte, but takes a different emphasis: the importance of the Fifteenth-Century Golden Renaissance in the emergence of the nation-state.*

It is an extraordinary joy for me to speak about my good friend, Nicolaus of Cusa. And, given the fact that it is his birthday somewhere between April and June, he will be 600 years old. And I really mean the joy of a friend having a birthday, because when a friend has a birthday, you realize that without this individual, the world would be so much poorer. And I hope that with my remarks I will interest you in studying Nicolaus of Cusa, his ideas and concepts, so that he becomes one of your dear friends, too, if he is not so already.

The reason why this particular man is so extraordinarily important is, because it was his ideas which gave the beautiful, Italian Renaissance—the Golden Renaissance of Florence—an even higher expression, because he was the towering genius among all the many geniuses who came together at that point. And it was this unbelievable, fantastic explosion of human creativity expressed in this Renaissance, which succeeded in overcoming the Dark Age of the Fourteenth Century. And it is more urgent than ever before, to study the example of the Golden Renaissance, to find the clues to how we can overcome the Dark Age of today.

As during Nicolaus's time, when the issue of peace was

of the highest actuality, so today we have terrible wars raging in Africa, in the Middle East, in the Balkans, but also within nations, like Colombia, Indonesia, and many other countries. The image of man, which Nicolaus so beautifully defined, is once again in shambles; and when the British press talks about "culling people" in the context of the next global flu epidemic, being the equivalent of hoof and mouth disease for human beings, you can see what the value of human life is today. As in Cusa's time, the challenges of these new diseases are such that a new scientific revolution is required. But, also, the issues which concerned him—namely, what should be the principles according to which countries, nations, and peoples relate to each other?—are of the utmost importance today.

To answer all of these questions, one of the most important struggles to understand, both then and now, is the conflict between those, on the one hand, who contributed to the emergence of the sovereign nation-state, through fundamental changes in world outlook during the transition from the Thirteenth to the Fourteenth Centuries, and especially in the Fifteenth Century and Nicolaus's contribution; and those on the other side, who wanted to go back to imperial structures of the period before that, such as the forces of globalization today. That globalization is a new version of the old Roman Empire, an Anglo-American version, which actually kills entire continents and turns the world into a global plantation, is now being seen by more and more people.

But, how precious the instrument of the sovereign nation-state actually is for the defense of the common good, and what enormous efforts it took, to arrive at the concepts of national sovereignty and a community of states based on international law—the knowledge of this has been thoroughly obscured by those who benefit from globalization, and who point to the nation-state as the source of all evil.



*Helga Zepp-LaRouche: “Can we not, for our own sakes, and as the most beautiful birthday present we could give to Nicolaus of Cusa for his 600th birthday, develop the same power of intellect, the same existential commitment and passion to great ideas?”*

What I want to do in this presentation, is to set the record straight, and completely agree with that genius of international law, the late Baron Friedrich von der Heydte, that the ideas of a community of states based on international law, are so very integral to European culture, that this culture cannot even be thought of, without them. Globalization directly threatens the very essence of European culture. Let me therefore present to you some of the ideas, which went into the emergence of the nation-state and the community of nations based on international law, and then show you, why the works of Nicolaus of Cusa meant a qualitative change in the tradition of all Platonic thinkers before him, and why his breakthrough of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the thinking of the opposites in coincidence — which today is represented in a qualitatively enriched form by Lyndon LaRouche — is exactly the level of thinking necessary for a Renaissance today!

### **Birth of the Nation-State**

So, what steps were necessary, for the nation-state to come into being?

Dr. Sergei Glazyev spoke two days ago about world organizations, the IMF, World Bank, WTO;<sup>1</sup> and if, while I’m speaking, you think about the emergence of the nation-state, you can actually see that the effort to put these current instru-

1. Sergei Glazyev, “Reconstruction After the Financial Crash,” *EIR*, May 18, 2001.

ments of globalization in control of the world, is an effort to turn the clock back before A.D. 1000, 1100; actually, before the idea of sovereignty existed.

The Middle Ages in Europe were essentially dominated by two poles: the Holy Roman Empire, on the one hand, and the Papacy, on the other; but, despite changing rivalries, these were united in the concept of a universal, occidental Christianity, in which the philosophical idea of the “*reductio ad unum*,” the reduction of the multitude to unity, governed the political thinking of the time. For example, the “*Königsspiegel*” (“The King’s Mirror”) of Gottfried of Viterbo (1180) develops this universal idea of the Emperor, with all its tradition, in a straightforward way. Even if there were other, regional ruling structures from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries, one could not call these regional power formations, “states.”

It took the decisive change in political thinking, during the transition from the Thirteenth to the Fourteenth Centuries, for the different aspects of what eventually, with Nicolaus of Cusa, constituted the sovereign nation-state, to emerge.

Around the turn from the Thirteenth to the Fourteenth Century, the top of the old hierarchical order—the Empire, and the Church as a temporal power—lost influence, and power structures on a lower level were strengthened. Eventually, these no longer recognized any power, or decision-making authority, above them, arrogating to themselves the right to decide about the life and death of their subjects.

Thus, in the beginning, these regional ruling structures achieved a “status,” a state, *état*.

The Infante Peter of Aragon talks in his “Fürstenspiegel” (“Prince’s Mirror”) of 1355, of a “conservative status.” The same formulation is used in a letter by Petrarch to Francesco of Carrara, about the administration of the community. Also, English authors of the Fourteenth Century use the word “status” for “state.”

The only challenge to the universal hierarchical order of the Holy Roman Empire, was in the Tenth- and Eleventh-Century establishment of Norman monarchies on the outskirts of the Empire—in western France, England, Sicily, Russia, and Poland—which ignored the philosophy of the power of the Empire, and based themselves on a strong administration, their own nobility, a mercenary army, a jurisdiction, and a coherent financial and trade policy. The Norman historian Orderic Vitalis (1075-?1143), for example, did not entertain the idea in his work, that the Holy Roman Empire of his time continued the Roman Empire of the past, but assumed instead that it was the Normans who were the carriers of world historical development, for which divine Providence had selected them. This was a peripheral development, but it did not go unnoticed.

The two individuals who can be called the pioneers—not prophets, but pioneers—of the modern state, were John of Salisbury (1120-80) and Guillaume d’Auvergne (?1180-1249); their social teaching was, however, still based on a cosmological order. John of Salisbury wrote the so-called *Policraticus*, a work of state theory, “[a]bout the vain worries of the courtiers and the influence of the philosophers,” which is one of the few timeless works of state science. But the “*res publica*” is still, for him, embedded within a *spiritual* hierarchy. The same is true for Guillaume d’Auvergne, Bishop of Paris, who in 1235 wrote of the “state of the angels,” being a model for the commonwealth on Earth. These two books were the first social theory ever, and crucial for the new theory of the state in France, in which the tendency for a developing nation-state was most advanced.

The *Policraticus*, taught by the Cistercian monk Hélinant de Froidmont and Guillaume d’Auvergne, influenced Gilbert de Tournai, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Aegidius Colonna of Rome, who wrote the first modern theory of the state.

John of Salisbury emphasized political justice, as being an important step in the evolution of political theory. Aegidius Colonna was the first to speak of political theory as an independent science, and he was the educator of Philip the Fair (1268-1314).

## Emerging National Sovereignty

So, the first sovereign nation-states emerged in England, with Henry II Plantagenet (1154-89); in France, with Louis IX (St. Louis) (1226-70); in Sicily, with Friedrich II Hohenstauffen (1212-50); and in Spain, with Ferdinand III (el

Santo), and his successor, Alfonso the Wise (1252-58).

These new state formations were all based on similar features. First, a clearly ordered jurisdiction. Second, a territorial structure according to jurisdictional districts. Third, the superiority of royal courts over those of the nobility and Church. Fourth, the strengthening of royal courts, and the issuance of new laws and institutions in a code promulgated in the king’s name.

In England, France, and Sicily, an order of financial administration developed parallel to the jurisdiction.

The result of these reforms in these four states was, that it was the new power structure which had control over life and death, it being exclusively in the hands of the leadership of the state, and no longer in the hands of the lesser nobility.

There was a consolidation of power internally, and at the same time, a declaration of sovereignty toward the external. What that meant was, first, not to recognize any higher Earthly power; second, the leadership of an emperor in his own territory; third, to be a coherent community.

This notion, not to recognize any higher Earthly power, suddenly became *the* leitmotif of the transition from the Thirteenth to the Fourteenth Centuries, and this became one of the most powerful ideas in the development of modern Europe!

At the beginning of the Fourteenth Century, in the fight between Pope Boniface VIII and Philip the Fair, this became the fighting slogan of the royalist party. It led to the summoning of the Estates-General in 1302, and the Act of 23 February, in which Philip declared his intention to disinherit his sons, if they were ever to recognize any higher authority in France than God.

Alfonso the Wise in Spain, and Frederick II in Sicily, adopted the same formulation.

In Sicily, interestingly enough, it was the father and brothers of Thomas Aquinas, who helped Frederick II found the Sicilian state. Thomas Aquinas developed this idea to a general theory.

A counter-tendency was the theory of the “Emperor status” of the Pope, as a temporal power. The main theoretician of this was Aegidius Colonna, and his ideas were taken up by Pope Boniface VIII, who expressed them in the Bull *Una Sancta*.

There is an anecdote told—I don’t know if it’s true, but the anecdote is told—that Boniface once climbed the stairs of a church in Rome, and shouted at people: “*Ego Caesar, ego Imperator!*” Which, obviously, was absolutely not the intention of what Popes are supposed to be.

On the other side of the conflict, you had the emerging national sovereignty, where, for the first time, a shift occurred, such that in the state, not only the interest of the king, but the common good, was a concern.

One step in this direction was the writing of Alfonso the Wise, that the king, as the representative of God, has to guarantee Justice and Truth for the people he governs.

The notion of sovereign equality was first mentioned by

the philosopher and poet Ramon Llull (Lullus) at the end of the Thirteenth Century. He also had the idea of a “*persona communa*,” in whom goodness, greatness, and stability for the community, are united. For Llull, however, in the Thirteenth Century, this *persona communa* was still the world Emperor.

Frederick II Hohenstauffen was the first to appeal to the reason of the rulers of the sovereign, *equal* states, instead of just demanding obedience of them.

A truly revolutionary breakthrough occurred, when the Dominican philosopher John Quidort of Paris elaborated the idea of a multitude of equal, independent states, and the idea, that there could be peace in the world only, if there were no Emperor. Only in a system of juridically equal states, each limited to its own territory, could there be peace and concordance. The drive for world dominion, the mere idea of being greater than others, necessarily brings non-peace, he wrote. This represented a decisive step in the evolution of the modern international law of peoples.

Quidort’s writings were ammunition in the fight of France against the demands of papal power. The then-famous lawyer Peter Dubois wrote in 1305 in a leaflet: “In my view, there is rarely a reasonable person, who would like to believe that, concerning temporal matters, there should be one single ruler in the whole world, who would govern everything, and to whom all ears would listen; because if you drive toward such a condition, there will be wars, riots, and fighting without end, and no one could suppress it, because there are too many people, too great distances and differentiations of the individual countries, which are too big, and the natural inclination of people for opposition and dissonances is too large.”

In this entire period, the unresolved tension between the empire and the emerging states was unresolved, and a “*concordantia discordantium*” was the essential conflict of the time. The best thinkers and most advanced kings of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries tried in vain to find a solution to overcome this tension.

The poet Dante is an illustration of Lyndon LaRouche’s argument, that the beautiful visions of poets are often the inspiration for the politicians; such was the vision in his *De Monarchia*, which portrayed the ideal of world community, where the deep longing for peace was realized.

It is interesting that, long before this, what Professor von der Heydte calls the “birth-hour of the modern nation-state,”<sup>2</sup> actually went through its labor pains. St. Augustine wrote in the *City of God*, that only an evil state would be imperialistic—a clear reference to the Roman Empire—and that well-meaning men would not derive happiness from the *size* of their empire. Because its vast extent, would only have grown because of its injustice, against which justified wars would have been fought; whereas, the empire would be small, if there were calm and peaceful neighbors. And thus, according

to Augustine, smaller states would be better than large, never-satisfied empires.

Extremely important for Alfonso the Wise, Llull, and Thomas Aquinas, was the question of justice in the state. Aquinas even said, that life in society cannot exist, if there is not someone on the top of the state, concerned with the *bonum commune*, the common good. And that is exactly what the problem is with globalization today—that at the top of these supranational institutions, they could not care less for the common good.

## The ‘Concordantia Catholica’ and Political Freedom

What inspired the different philosophers, poets, and state theoreticians who contributed to the idea of the international law of peoples, and of national sovereignty, was a passionate drive for peace; and, justice and love were regarded as the preconditions for peace. Especially today, when there is no peace in many areas of the world, when globalization causes wars and threatens a new, global Dark Age, it is of the utmost importance to understand, that *it was the desire for peace, which stood at the beginning of the development of national sovereignty and international law.*

The philosopher whose political theory represented a grand design for a functioning peace-order in the world, who resolved the “*concordantia discordantium*,” was Nicolaus of Cusa, the greatest thinker of the Fifteenth Century. His *Concordantia Catholica (Catholic Concordance)*, a paper written for the Council of Basel, not only contains, in Books I and II, ideas about the reform of the Church, but in Book III, an argument for the reform of the Holy Roman Empire. Nicolaus gives here, for the first time, a concrete institutional form to the constitutional demands on the ruler, which was a major step in the direction of modern constitutionalism, and even the separation of powers.

Completely new in Nicolaus’s approach, was the idea of natural freedom and equality, as the basis for participation in government. Here, we have the beginning of the political rights of all people!

Nicolaus writes in the *Concordantia*:

Therefore, since all are by nature free, every governance—whether it consists in a written law, or in living law in the person of a prince . . . can only come from the agreement and consent of the subjects. For, if men are by nature equal in power and equally free, the true, properly ordered authority of one common ruler, who is their equal in power, can only be constituted by the election and consent of the others, and law is also established by consent.

This was totally revolutionary—that the rulers and the governed are equal and equally free. And, at another place, he says, that what is true for the German, is also true for the

2. Baron Friedrich von der Heydte, *Die Geburtsstunde des souveränen Staates* (Regensburg, Germany: Druck und Verlag Josef Habel, 1952).

Ethiopian! Nicolaus really meant human rights as a universal principle.

In Book III, he writes:

Natural laws precede all human considerations, and provide the principle for them all. First, nature intends every kind of animal to preserve its physical existence and its life, to avoid what could be harmful, and to secure what is necessary to it. For the first requirement of essence is that it exist.

If one were to write a new constitution for a world of sovereign nation-states, this definition of Nicolaus's could go into it completely unchanged, because, first off, people have to exist.

He continues:

But, from the beginning, men have been endowed with reason, which distinguishes them from animals. They know, because of the existence of their reason, that association and sharing are most useful—indeed, necessary for their self-preservation, and to achieve the purpose of human existence.

And therefore, Cusa argues,

Human beings have built cities and adopted laws to preserve unity and harmony, and they established guardians of all of these laws, with the power necessary to provide for the public good.

Nicolaus then, in the clearest way, establishes the principle which separates the sovereign nation-state from the previous oligarchical forms of society, by defining the only legitimate source of power, as caring for the common good, to which all or a majority of people have to consent. He says:

All legitimate power arises from elective concordance and free submission. There is in the people a divine seed by virtue of their common equal birth and the equal natural rights of all men, so that the authority—which comes from God, as does man himself—is recognized as divine, when it arises from the common consent of the subjects. One, who is established in authority as representative of the will of all, may be called a public or common person, the father of all, ruling without haughtiness, or pride, in a lawful and legitimately established government.

While recognizing himself as a creature, as it were, of all of his subjects as a collectivity, let him act as their father, as individuals. That is the divinely ordained marital state of spiritual union based on a lasting harmony, by which a commonwealth is best guided in the fullness of peace toward the good of eternal bliss.

Now, is that not beautiful? I really enjoy reading this, to see that a constitution can be based on coherence with the common good, but that the ruler is also asked to act like a father to all, which obviously requires love.

Nicolaus then defines the representative system, in which the elected representatives enter a reciprocal legal relationship with both the government and the governed. He says:

For this purpose [the public welfare], the ruler should have the best qualified of his subjects chosen from all parts of his realm, to participate in a daily council with him. These counsellors ought to represent all the inhabitants of the realm. . . . These counsellors ought constantly to defend the good of the public which they represent, giving advice and serving as the appropriate means through which the king can govern and influence his subjects, and the subjects on proper occasion can influence him in return. The great strength of the kingdom comes from this daily council. The counsellors should be appointed to this task by agreement in a general meeting of the kingdom, and they should be publicly bound legally by oath to speak out openly for the public good.

Now, you heard yesterday in the panel on the fight for D.C. General Hospital, a living example, if all the citizens would publicly speak out for the common good as it was done by Charlene Gordon or by Dr. Alim Muhamad, then the state would function; and that is exactly what we have to accomplish.

Nicolaus wrote this groundbreaking work in 1433, and it took another 343 years, until these ideas of a representative system as the *only* practical way to defend the inalienable rights of the individual, were formulated in the American Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution.

But, for Nicolaus, this was only his first major work; his real breakthrough was still to come.

## Gifts of the Italian Renaissance

That Nicolaus was educated by the Brothers of the Common Life is quite probable, although it cannot be securely established. A great deal is known about his relationship to the pinnacle of the Italian Renaissance, which both influenced him, just as he inspired the best thinkers, philosophers, statesmen, and Popes, with his groundbreaking philosophical method, which was, on the one hand, in the Platonic tradition, but which also added a spectacular new dimension to the history of philosophical thought.

Nicolaus studied from 1417 to 1423 in Padua, so he was there when he was between 18 and 24 years old. Already, here, he came in contact with the most precious tradition of European civilization, which had been revived in Italy with Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who had started a *de facto* war against the dogmatic, scholastic teaching which domi-



Benozzo Gozzoli,  
*"Journey of the Magi"*  
 (detail). The painting  
 portrays the arrival of  
 delegations of religious  
 leaders, poets,  
 philosophers, and  
 statesmen to the Council  
 of Florence.

nated much of the academic life of Europe, by consciously reviving Plato and Classical Greek thinking.

Petrarch pointed out, that Plato's teachings were coherent with Christianity, while Aristotle's were not; he also attacked the influence of Averroës. Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), who knew Petrarch, was, like all humanists, an avid collector of manuscripts; he became chancellor of Florence in 1375, the year of Boccaccio's death. Leonardo Bruni, who translated several of Plato's writings, and was, from 1427 onward, the chancellor of this city, and Poggio Bracciolini, who was chancellor from 1415 to 1422, were both pupils of Salutati, and represented the continuation of the Platonist, anti-Aristotelian tradition. Bracciolini had known Cosimo de Medici since the Council of Constance; Cosimo had also befriended Nicolaus there.

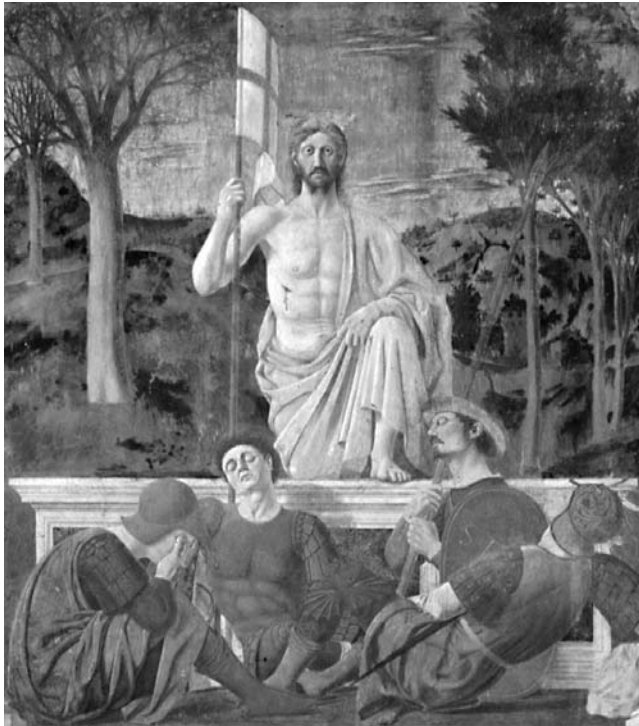
Another group of people, with whom Nicolaus was in contact during his studies in Padua, were his close friend Giuliano Cesarini, Ambrogio Traversari, and Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, all of whom were in this same tradition of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.

In Padua, Nicolaus also started his lifelong friendship with Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (1397-1482), who wrote the famous letter to Fernão Martins, where he argued, that one could reach China and India by the sea route going west—which later was used by Columbus, and led to his discovery of the Americas. Through him, Nicolaus had also close con-

tact to the great artists Leon Battista Alberti and Filippo Brunelleschi.

The translations of Bruni, Traversari, and others, of Plato and Aristotle, had already provoked profound debates about the Good, the value of poetry, and about the nature of the community, which represented the intellectual environment during Nicolaus's studies in Padua, which he clearly developed to a higher level in his *Concordantia Catholica*. But, from 1437 onward, Nicolaus, mediated by his friend Cesarini, took over important functions in the Vatican, and from this moment on, the history of Nicolaus, that of the Renaissance Popes, and the cultural Renaissance, became extremely closely intertwined. Already in 1437, Nicolaus travelled to Byzantium, where apart from his diplomatic mission to accompany and bring back the delegation of 700 representatives of the Orthodox Church, including the Byzantine Emperor and the Patriarch, he was successful in finding the documents proving that the formulation of the "*Filioque*"—namely, that the Spirit emanates equally from the Father and the Son—had already been part of the Creed in the early councils. As we have published, this proof played a very important role in the unification of the Church in the Councils of Ferrara and Florence.

Nicolaus had the closest contact with the 83-year-old Georgios Gemistos Plethon, who accompanied the Byzantine Emperor as an adviser. Plethon at that point knew the entirety



*The cultural environment in which Cusa lived and worked included the flourishing of such artists as Piero della Francesca, who was in Florence after 1439. Here, his “The Resurrection of Christ.”*

of Plato, and naturally Proclus, and as a statesman in his own right, he intended a Renaissance based on Plato for Greece. In 1439, while in Florence, he wrote a sharp critique of Aristotle: Aristotle had misunderstood the Platonic ideas, he had denied God’s creation of the world, and the existence of Providence, as well as the immortality of the soul, he had undermined ethics, and his theory was irreconcilable with Christianity.

Plethon, and Bessarion, the Archbishop of Nicea who also wrote polemically against Aristotle, sparked total excitement about Plato in Ferrara, and it was especially the famous doctor Ugo Benzi from Siena, who was teaching in Padua during Nicolaus’s stay there, organized these debates. Cesarini, to whom Nicolaus had dedicated the *Docta Ignorantia* (*Learned Ignorance*), was the host of many of these lectures about Plato, which excited one of his listeners, Cosimo de Medici, in such a way, that he decided to found a Platonic Academy in Florence, and asked Plethon to translate the entire corpus of Plato.

Nicolaus also had direct contact with Cosimo de Medici, and Petrus Leonius (Pierleoni) from Spoleto, who was the personal doctor of Lorenzo de Medici, collected several of Cusa’s writings and circulated them further.

Just to illustrate the unbelievable intellectual and cultural environment in which Nicolaus worked: He had close contact with Tommaso Parentocelli, later Pope Nicolaus V and the

founder of the Vatican library, and Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, and also Niccolò Albergati; he saw the works of Alberti, Fra Angelico, Donatello, Piero della Francesca, and Paolo Ucello, who had finished his frescos in Santa Maria Novella in 1430, where Masaccio had completed his “Trinity” fresco, painted in perspective form, in 1427.

Piero della Francesca was in Florence from 1439 on. Ghiberti created the bronze doors to the Baptistry in Florence, his “Gates of Paradise.” Brunelleschi, in 1417, had created the first model of the cupola for the dome of Florence Cathedral, which was completed in 1437, and already in 1429 he had made new constructions of San Lorenzo and the Pazzi Chapel in San Spirito.

Since the Italian, and especially, Florentine, Renaissance is a prime model, to study how a civilization can overcome a Dark Age, it is useful to look at how the different influences came together. Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio’s influence created the foundation. From the beginning of the Fifteenth Century, several great artists and philosophers created a new humanist movement. But it was the Councils of Ferrara and Florence, especially the contact with the Greek Platonic scholars, which gave this new movement its decisive boost.

### **The ‘Coincidence of Opposites’**

This was the intellectual and cultural environment in which Nicolaus of Cusa made a conceptual breakthrough. He himself writes, that on the way back from Constantinople in 1437-1438, he experienced an enlightenment, which allowed him to see all problems in a completely different light.

This was his unique “coincidence philosophy.” He repeatedly stressed, that he was teaching something which had never been thought before. He insisted, that not one philosopher before him recognized the method of thinking embedded in the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Aristotle had put forward the idea, that contradictory statements could not be truthful at the same time. In a letter of Sept. 14, 1453, Nicolaus wrote, that the disallowance of contradictory statements had been the common axiom of all philosophy; Aristotle had said so merely in the most explicit form. All the philosophers had failed, the “great Dionysius” being the only exception, in a couple of places.

If one takes the totality of Nicolaus’s attacks on Aristotle together, there isn’t much left of him. Nicolaus reduces him—the absolute master in the teachings of the scholastics in almost all universities—to someone who has the wrong method, who cannot find anything, while restlessly running back and forth, incapable of understanding Platonic ideas.

In the “Apologia Docta Ignorantia,” a defense of his *Docta Ignorantia* against the Heidelberg professor Johannes Wenck, who had accused him of pantheism, heresy, and confusion, Cusa writes:

Nowadays, the Aristotelian tendency dominates, which finds the coincidence of opposites, which one has to



*The Cathedral of Florence. Brunelleschi's dome was completed in 1437, a year before the Council of Florence began.*

acknowledge to find the ascent toward mystical theology, to be a heresy.<sup>3</sup>

To those trained in this school, this approach seems to be totally nonsensical. They refuse it, as something completely opposite to their intentions. Therefore, it would be close to a miracle—as well as it would be a complete transformation of the school—if they were to abandon Aristotle, and reach a higher level.

Nicolaus then quotes Hieronymus quoting Philo, in basically making the point that logic, the Aristotelian method of thinking, is no better than the understanding (*ratio*) of an animal. Because, all understanding beings, humans and animals, are able to draw conclusions:

The methodological approach [i.e., the Aristotelian level of understanding—HZL] is necessarily limited between the starting point and the final point, and these opposing opposites we call contradictions. Therefore, for the methodological proceeding thinking, the goals are opposite and separate.

Therefore, on the level of understanding, the extremes are separated, like the notion of the circle, which says that the center cannot coincide with the circumference, because the distance from the center point to the circumference is always the same.

But, on the level of the reasonable mind, who sees

3. The idea of mysticism during Cusa's time, did not mean what it means today; it merely meant a complete devotion to the truth—HZL.

that, within unity, number, within the point, the line, and in the center, the circle is folded in, the convergence of unity and multiplicity, point and line, center and circumference, are reached in the vision of the mind, without methodological back and forth: That, you could see in the book "*De Coniecturis*" ("On Conjectures"), where I showed, that God is even above the coincidence of the contradictory opposites, because, according to Dionysius, he is the opposite of opposites.

It is not very respectful, that Nicolaus talks here about the "methodological back and forth" of the Aristotelians! And what does he mean by their "intentions"?

Then Nicolaus continues:

After these words, the master reminded me to note, that learned ignorance, like a high tower, brings everyone to the level of vision. Because he, who is standing up there, has an overview of everything, for which the one moving over the field, looking for different traces, is searching; he also sees, how far the one searching, is getting closer or further away from what he is looking for. In this way, learned ignorance, which belongs to the domain of the reasonable mind, judges the methodological approach of the thought process of the understanding.

The metaphor of the tower in which reason is self-conscious about itself, the searcher, and that which is searched, is a pedagogical device to help the mind think in an elevated



way, from above.

Another device is in *De Beryllo (On Beryllus)*, the idea that “coincidence thinking” is like a lens, through which one can see that which was previously invisible. “Coincidence thinking” is not what is seen, it is the method of thinking.

In *De Beryllo*, Nicolaus describes the sensuous world as a book written for us, even created for us, in such a way, that we can understand it from the way our cognition works. Nicolaus develops a truly subjective, cognitive approach here.

Other thinkers before Nicolaus had conceived the idea of a unity which precedes all contradictory statements. What makes “coincidence thinking” and the metaphor of beryllus as a lens different, is to show, how contradicting substantial causes coexist in a principled connectedness, before they separate into their differentiation.

If we have the beryllus, we see the opposites “*in principio convexio*,” before they exist in their duality. In the rectilinear, the Minimum of the acute angle, and the Maximum of the obtuse angle, coincide; before they separate into their contradictoriness, they are together in the rectilinear.

As we will see, this is no academic exercise; rather, Nicolaus is developing a method of thinking here, which has the most fundamental significance for the solution of political and religious problems. And, because Aristotle does not have a beryllus, he cannot think in an efficient way!

In the *Beryllus*, Cusa escalates his attacks on Aristotle, even though he—Aristotle, that is—had talked about a third principle of natural occurrences, namely, the “*steresis*,” the “*privatio*” or “*Beraubung*.” But this had been merely an empty construct, it had not explained anything, only the absence of something. And, after Aristotle had introduced this worthless explanation, says Nicolaus, his scientific research got stymied. So Nicolaus concludes, that Aristotle therefore no longer has any significance for contemporary scientific studies! Which, at that point, was an absolutely, truly revolutionary statement.

There is also a very specific evolutionary conception that Nicolaus’s “coincidence thinking” has for the evolution of the universe, which emphasizes its unity. But, in a radical difference to absolute unity and “biggest-ness” (“*maximitas*,” which is God), the “*unitas universi*” is a “contracted multitude” (“*unitas contracta*”), the incarnation of “unified multitude” (“*maximum contractum*”).

In this universe, there exists a hierarchical order of higher and lower species, which develop into each other for multiple individual differentiations, but which are nevertheless each separated by a “species gap.” Nicolaus says, that no animal, by itself, can become reasonable. But, if some animal were educatable in such a way (*capax*), that it could develop insight into the insight of man, and would prove this through its actions, then it would no longer be just an animal.

Nicolaus says, that no individual of any kind, so long as it is no more than an individual of its kind, has actualized the

maximum perfection of its capacity. For man, this means that he has to be “snatched up,” and mixed with the spiritual nature. Analogously, the inorganic is in relation to the plant, and the vegetative to the animal-like. The potentiality of the lower only realizes its perfect fulfillment through its introduction into a higher principle of being.

But the fascinating thing is that, what the late Professor Haubst calls the “biogenetic law of evolution,” the “maximization principle” of Cusa, does not work from below upwards. Evolution is not understood as starting with the most primitive forms, to then become more differentiated, which is what today’s mechanistic theory of evolution suggests, but it occurs from above. In *De Mente (On Mind)*, Nicolaus develops that God’s knowledge only descends downward into the nature of the mind; further down in the scale of things, it only descends through the mind. “*Mens*,” the mind, is the image of God, but at the same time, the original image of all successive creatures.

This puts man in an extraordinary position in the universe: The world-creating mind—God—has only one avenue to the world, the human mind! This is not only a theory of cognition, this is a theory of world formation, of genesis, in which the mind has an irreplaceable mediative role! This is exactly the same idea, as when LaRouche says, that the universe “obeys” the cognitive powers of the mind!

Professor Haubst even reads Cusa in this way, that for Nicolaus, the universe finds its fulfillment of meaning only in the designation of man. In that sense, for the universe, man is irreplaceable. The universe needs man to have meaning. Without man, the universe would be only a torso. If the universe is not merely to end somehow, its sense designation and perfection can only be the divinely creative activity of the human mind.

In *De Mente*, Nicolaus writes, that number is a coincidence of unity and multiplicity. Here, we see that he does not restrict “coincidence thinking” to theological questions. These numbers are constitutive, because the eternal mind has created the world in a number-like way, as a composer composes. It is mind, as mind, which creates number, and everything else. The world is the music of the eternal mind, which causes proportions, and therefore the beauty of the things of the world. We recognize an idea here, which we find again in Kepler.

In *De Mente*, Cusa describes the infinite perfectability of the mind, which creates motions bringing order into the world, and in this way finds out its own laws of cognition.

As I said, this method of thinking, “from above,” from the “*coincidentia oppositorum*,” is a universal methodological concept, applicable to all aspects of life. The most far-reaching discussion of this idea we find in *De Visione Dei (On the Vision of God)*, a book written for the monks of Tegernsee, who were his close friends. It is probably the most intimate of all of Cusa’s writings. Plato had made the argument that, in order to be truly free and philosophize, you have to be

among friends, because if you are together with people who are not your friends, you cannot speak freely, you have self-protection and guard yourself, and that blocks the ability of the mind to really come to the truth. So Nicolaus wrote this book *De Visione Dei* for his friends, the monks, and it clearly represents his innermost thoughts. Just because it was so intimate and loving, this book was already in the Fifteenth Century, one of the most read of his writings—it reminds me very much of the spiritual exercises of the Pope, described by the Vietnamese Bishop Nguyen Van Thuan. It is about the question, how to train the mind to think from the level of the highest truth. In this case, he uses the notion that God, the “opposite of opposites,” is “behind the wall” of the *coincidentia oppositorum*; that you have to elevate your mind to that divine level, to be able to tackle all problems from the highest level, descending.

Complementing *De Visione Dei*, one must see another of his books, *De Pace Fidei* (*On the Peace of Faith*), written in the same year, 1453. Here you can see, that “coincidence thinking” is not some esoteric, far-away or mystical (in the modern sense) way of dreaming, but has the most dramatic political implications. For, on May 29, 1453, Sultan Mohamed II, who was known as “the Conquerer,” had his most spectacular success: the takeover of Constantinople.

The West saw the fall of Constantinople as a total threat. Even the humanist Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini wrote to Pope Nicholas V, saying his hand trembled while writing these words, and he could not speak for the pain: “What a misery for Christendom! The fountain of the Muses has dried out. This was the second death of Homer and Plato.” Reactions to the reports of what happened in Constantinople were those of terror.

Let me begin with a quote from the Cusa scholar Erich Meuthen, where he reports how descriptions of the fall of Constantinople were received in the West:

First of all: Horror about the carnage. The West’s image of the Turk was painted as a shrill mixture of blood-thirst, bestial cruelty, and perversion. The reports from Constantinople corresponded to what was considered to be certain anyway, yes, it could be aggravated: Blood was flooding the ground, as if it had rained, like water in the streets, blood was flowing. Children had been killed before the eyes of their parents, noble men slaughtered like animals, priest mutilated, monks tortured to death, holy virgins raped, mothers and daughters dishonored. It is reported that Mohamed the Conquerer forced the Emperor’s daughter in his bed on the night of his victory. He wishes to convert her to his belief. She stands firm. Now, he drags her to the Hagia Sophia, toward a statue of the Madonna, which is used as a chopping block for executions. He shows her, how Christians are being beheaded here, rips her clothes off, and orders the girl

to be beheaded on top of the Madonna, and sends her head to Emperor Constantine.

Desecration of man and God in one. Churches are vandalized, altars profaned, reliquaries dispersed to the winds, the Holy of the Holies desecrated, . . .

and so on.

This happened in the Fifteenth Century, but it is happening today in the Middle East and many other places, in Africa, in the Balkans. And just now, just to help you to celebrate the birthday of Nicolaus, the Pope went on this truly historic mission to the Middle East, and two days ago he made a statement, and he said: Look, I ask for forgiveness for the crimes and the cruelties committed by the Crusaders in the Thirteenth Century. Which I think is a truly noble gesture, that he is almost on a personal mission to counter what is being done by Bush and Sharon, to bring peace to the Middle East, to make an effort to overcome this terrible danger of war, of which he is absolutely aware. Today, he’s going to a mosque, which houses the tomb of John the Baptist. It’s the first time that a Pope has ever gone to a mosque. So, you know, this is not theoretical, academic stuff from many centuries away; this has the highest political significance, if we want to find peace.

Now, modern historians refute these horror stories, and say that Mohamed II did not intend to destroy the city. On the contrary, they say that he reconstructed public buildings, and that he brought groups of Muslims, Christians, and Jews into the city for resettlement, and sponsored the arts and the sciences. That may be historically true; I only mention this quotation, to show you that these horror stories were the image the West had at the time of what had happened.

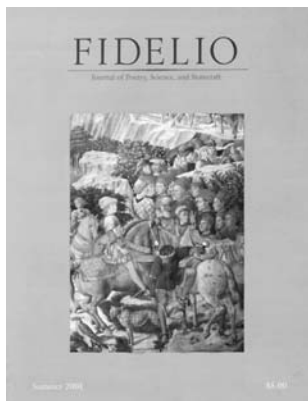
It is all the more amazing, to see the elevated, lofty view which Nicolaus presents in *De Pace Fidei*, about the peace of belief, of faith, knowing it was written under the impression of the terrible reports I mention above.

Nicolaus begins *De Pace Fidei* with the following words:

News of the atrocities which have recently been perpetrated by the Turkish king in Constantinople and have now been divulged, has so inflamed a man, who once saw that region, with zeal for God, that amongst many sighs he asked the Creator of all things if in His kindness He might moderate the persecution, which raged more than usual on account of diverse religious rites. Then it occurred that after several days—indeed on account of lengthy, continuous meditation—a vision was manifested to the zealous man, from which he concluded that it would be possible, through the experience of a few wise men who are well acquainted with all the diverse practices which are observed in religions across the world, to find a unique and propitious concordance, and through this to constitute a perpetual peace in religion upon the appropriate and true course.

## A Symposium on Cusa

The Summer 2001 edition of *Fidelio* magazine, the quarterly journal of the Schiller Institute, features a “Symposium on the 600th Anniversary of the Birth of Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa.” It includes this speech by Helga Zepp-LaRouche, as well as “Nicolaus of Cusa’s ‘On the Quadrature of the Circle,’” by William F. Wertz, Jr.; “Nicolaus of Cusa Moved the Earth,” by Bruce Director; “A Great Man of Ecumenicism,” by Frauke Richter,” and a translation of Cusa’s “On Searching for God.” Subscriptions are available for \$20 from the Schiller Institute, Inc., P.O. Box 20244, Washington, D.C. 20041-0244. The Institute’s website is [www.schillerinstitute.org](http://www.schillerinstitute.org).



Cusa then has representatives of 17 religions and countries participate in a dialogue with the “divine Word,” asking for help, because, they say, “this rivalry is on account of You, Whom alone all venerate in all that they seem to adore.”

So, these representatives of 17 religions and countries go to God and say, Look, we are only killing each other because of You, because we all think that we do Your work. Please help us to overcome this terrible contradiction.

Interestingly, in the beginning of the dialogue, Nicolaus presents a no-illusions view about the oligarchical power structures of his time. One should consider, he says, that most human beings are forced to spend their lives in misery and great strain. On top of this, they live in slavish dependency upon their rulers. Therefore, almost none of them has the leisure to make use of his freedom of will, and arrive at consciousness of Himself. Worries about the physical condition and services they have to perform distract them too much. Therefore, they do not get to search for the hidden God. But, if a union of wise men, coming from all the different religions, were to come together, it would be easy to find a solution.

The approach Nicolaus then develops, really reflects the “vision from above.” He says, that religious warfare is due to some hitherto undiscovered flaws in the self-understanding of the religions. One mistake had been not to differentiate

between the prophet, and God Himself; secondly, they had mixed up traditions to which they were accustomed, with the Truth.

So, basically, the differences exist merely in rites, and not in what is essential.

Now, this is a truly mind-boggling approach, because, who could possibly argue, that the prophets were on the same level as God? So, if you say that the differences are only because of the different circumstances of the different prophets, who are not identical to God, and that the different traditions are not the same thing as the Truth, it is obviously easy to find a solution.

Then, the oldest of the participating philosophers, a Greek, asks: But, how should we bring the manifold of religions to one unity, since our people have defended their religion with blood, and they hardly will be willing to accept a new, unified religion?

The divine Word answers: You should not introduce a new religion. But, you should yourselves comprehend, and then show to the peoples, that the true religion is presupposed *before* all other religions. The unity is *before* the separation occurs.

Since the divine Word is talking to the wise men as philosophers, they can all agree, that there is only one wisdom. He does not talk to them as representatives of different religions, and therefore he can reach them on the level of reason, on a different level.

The peace-bringing new unity of religion is not—Nicolaus is very emphatic on this—some synthetic new belief, but what reason tells all who become conscious of its premises. Thus, the Greek philosopher reacts excitedly about the “*spiritual rationalis*,” which is capable of “*capax artitium mirabilium*”—the ability of the mind to participate in the most beautiful creations of art—and what follows is a hymn on the perfectability of the human spirit. If this spirit is oriented to wisdom, then man gets closer and closer to it. We never reach absolute wisdom, but we approximate it more and more. It tastes, as well, like a sweetness, more and more like eternal nourishment.

So, unity is guaranteed, when the orientation of the mind toward wisdom and truth is recognized as primary and basic. Then, the participation mediates between the One and the Many. Sometimes, it is only the experience of a great catastrophe, as was the perception of the fall of Constantinople in the West, and as is the threatening perspective of a generalized war in the Middle East today, which shocks people into seriously thinking of an alternative. If there is then an appeal to an alternative, and wise men and women to take the initiative, the catastrophe may be avoided.

In *De docta ignorantia* (*On Learned Ignorance*), he speaks of the “*spiritus universorum*,” the spirit of universal-ity, which is efficient in every aspect of creation. Religions or nations, or peoples, are elements of differentiation, but “the totality [the universe—HZZ], as the most perfect of the order

according to its nature, is presupposed to everything, so that everything can be in everything.” This is Cusa’s famous formulation, “*Quodlibet in Quolibet*.”

Concerning the political order, this means, that the multitude of peoples can be integrated without a violation of their specific identity, because the totality of the order is already given before.

Further insight into the relation between the One and the Many in Cusa’s notion, is that every human being is a microcosm — Dr. Alim talked yesterday about D.C. General Hospital as a microcosm, which is absolutely true — which means, that he has not just a place in the universe, the macrocosm, but he contains the entire cosmos in himself in a complicated way.

Every person is therefore the whole universe in the small.

Therefore, any “peace-order” cannot be based on some secondary consideration, but it can only exist, if each microcosm has the chance to develop its fullest potential, which it can only do, if *all* microcosms develop in a maximum way. This has tremendous implications for the relations among human beings, among nations, and among peoples. A peace-order of sovereign nations can only exist, if each one is allowed to develop in the best possible way, which means that the common good is taken care of in the optimal way, so that all of the citizens can prosper and their talents flourish. Only if each microcosm understands that it is in its best self-interest, for all other microcosms to develop in the best way, only if each nation and each people desires the best development for all others, can concordance exist in the macrocosm, in the world as a whole.

This is why “peace negotiations” which focus only on matters of conflict at the level of the understanding — so-called “political solutions” — which Cusa would call the Aristotelian way of running back and forth (one could say, he’s almost talking about an Aristotelian shuttle diplomacy), do not work. One has to start with “coincidence thinking,” the agreement of minds concerning the final goal of mankind as a whole, which is self-perfection, ennoblement, and increase in the general population potential, as the condition for the continued existence for generations to come (naturally, the construction of the Eurasian Land-Bridge today, as a cornerstone for a global reconstruction, is an expression of such a final goal of mankind as a whole) — these philosophical questions must be there at the beginning, as a pre-condition for a functioning peace-order in the world. And this is why the ideas of Nicolaus are the most modern ideas I can think of, among all previous thinkers.

What is needed for this today, to heal the wounds of all the tortured people in Africa, in the Balkans, in the Middle East and other areas in the world, is that the focus be on the “*spiritus universonum*”; but also on a limitless cultural optimism, as expressed, for example, in Nicolaus’s sermon for Epiphany Day, which he delivered in 1454 in Brixen, and which has been called, correctly, a hymn to civilization, which

praises the free and mechanical arts and sciences, as the great gift to mankind, which must be shared by all, so that the development of no one is unnecessarily delayed. At the end of the experiment of the Layman with the scale, he even says that every new discovery must be given over to an international pool, to which every people should have access, so that no one’s development is unnecessarily delayed.

Nicolaus was convinced, that this was the only human way of thinking, and I fully agree with him. In 1459, he wrote, that the human soul is substantially superior to all otherness. It can eliminate all otherness, because it has the non-other image of everything. If the soul thinks in this way, it is in “*intertemporal tempus*,” he says, in timeless time. This is what LaRouche calls the “simultaneity of eternity”!

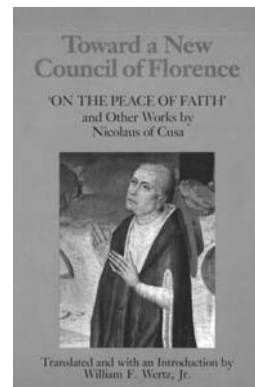
Today, the idea of a community of sovereign nations, based on the common good of all, and based on the international law of peoples, has become a life-and-death issue for the entire human civilization. Can we not, for our own sakes, and as the most beautiful birthday present we could give to Nicolaus of Cusa for his 600th birthday, develop the same power of intellect, the same existential commitment and passion to great ideas? If I look around in this room, I see representatives from all corners of the world. Let us be joyful about the multitude of cultural differentiation and beauty, because we are *One*, before we are *Many*.

## Toward a New Council of Florence

### ‘On the Peace of Faith’ and Other Works by Nicolaus of Cusa

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