ON THE VISION OF GOD

An historical and theological inquiry into the significance of

Nicholas of Cusa’s De visione Dei

for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

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by

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Certificate of Authorship

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Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) was among the first Christian thinkers to advocate for dialogue as a means of achieving peace among the religions. Within months of the fall of Constantinople in 1453, with Europe mired in inter-religious suspicion and violence, Cusa wrote *De pace fidei* (*On the peace of faith*), a pioneering work in the cause known today as inter-religious dialogue, and *De visione Dei* (*On the vision of God*), a mystical treatise about how knowledge of God may be obtained via a dialogue of different perspectives.

*De visione Dei* is considered Cusa’s literary masterpiece. Yet, notwithstanding its founding exercise involving a dialogue of different perspectives around an icon of God, the text has only rarely been cited for its potential to resource theological engagement with religious diversity. Therefore, this thesis will advocate for *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. It will do so by, firstly, presenting four warrants to justify deploying *De visione Dei* within those fields of inter-religious engagement and, secondly, applying its ideas to a currently contentious issue for Christian theology of religions and in providing a theological rationale for inter-religious dialogue.

The four warrants that will be presented to justify utilizing *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions are, firstly, the historical resonance between the circumstances in which Cusa wrote the book and our current context; second, the fact that the epistemological framework of the text appears especially germane to inter-religious engagement; third, the thematic complementarity between *De visione Dei* and the pioneering work on inter-religious dialogue.

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dialogue that Cusa wrote in the same year, *De pace fidei*; and, fourth and finally, the expansive nature of *De visione Dei*’s language along with the experimental nature of its opening exercise provide a basis for an expansive reading of the text.

This thesis will also describe and discuss the breadth of Christian theology of religions in order to identify how *De visione Dei* can contribute to that field. Particular attention will be given to a significant point of contention - the fault-line between Christian theological approaches to religious diversity which prioritize commonality or ‘common ground’, on the one hand, and those which prioritize the distinctiveness and particularity of the religions on the other. It is a debate often framed between pluralism and particularism. Two of *De visione Dei*’s central ideas will be deployed in our final chapter to illustrate how Cusa’s text can be creatively utilized as an interlocutor for this currently contentious issue, and to show its value in supporting a rationale for inter-religious dialogue. Those two ideas are Cusa’s emphasis on the epistemological role of dialogue in making visible that which is invisible, and the theological and epistemological significance Cusa places on *particularity* in enabling knowledge of that which is universal.

In setting out the above-named warrants, and applying some of the prominent concepts of *De visione Dei* to current issues in inter-religious engagement, it is hoped that this thesis will establish that Nicholas of Cusa’s visionary text is a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners who seek to deepen inter-religious understanding and respect.
INTRODUCTION

But so great is Your goodness, O my God, that You even permit the blind to speak of the Light.¹

Introducing the Thesis

The privilege of living alongside neighbours from a variety of religious traditions is an increasingly common experience. Growth in global migration saw an estimated 258 million people in 2017 living in a country other than their country of birth, an increase of 49% since 2000.² Given this astonishing world-wide movement of people also results in a global intermingling of religions, the challenge of providing a theologically coherent means to understand and engage this multi-religious reality is critical for all the world’s religions.

The need to resource inter-religious understanding becomes even more acute, and demanding, when we take into account the phenomena of religiously implicated violence. Few assessments of geopolitics in the last fifteen years have not identified the revitalization of religion and the rise of religious militancy as a destabilising factor, and perhaps the destabilising factor, in contemporary global politics.³ Where are the exemplars who can

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¹ Nicholas of Cusa, De visione Dei (1453), chapter 17, paragraph 80, translated by Jasper Hopkins, Nicholas of Cusa’s Dialectical Mysticim: Text, Translation, and Interpretive Study, Third Edition (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1996). Hereafter all references to De visione Dei will be from the Hopkins translation and notations will be ‘DVD, chapter number, paragraph number’.
provide guidance to those who wish to bear witness to the integrity of their faith and yet remain open-minded and humble in the midst of different perspectives? What ideas might resource people of religious conviction who seek the build bridges of understanding and respect among those who hold to different visions of God? How shall we abide in a multi-religious public square without relinquishing our particular beliefs, or violating the beliefs of others?

The Christian ecumenical movement has sought to build bridges between people who hold differently to the doctrines and practices of the Christian church. The ecumenical movement has a distinguished history striving after such unity and yet the relatively few examples of divided churches electing to unite are an indication that building bridges between people with different religious perspectives is a complex challenge, even within a single tradition. The complexity of the task is greater still when seeking to build bridges of understanding from one religion to another. That practical task is known as inter-religious dialogue and, within the academy, the field of study dedicated to examining religious diversity and seeking theological explanations for that diversity has come to be known as theology of religions.

The challenge undertaken by those who practice inter-religious dialogue or study theology of religions is complex yet vitally important, and not only for the commonly cited reason that peace among the nations is possible only when there is peace among the religions. According to that way of thinking, it is strategic to prosper the cause of inter-religious harmony because it stands a chance of increasing social harmony. We will all feel safer if Christians and Muslims, for example, get along. That is part yet not the entire motivation for this work. The fuller reason for pursuing inter-religious harmony is far greater. If we do not understand and respect the integrity of religious perspectives that differ from our own then our social harmony is diminished, certainly, but so too is our knowledge of God.
The fifteenth century theologian and church diplomat Nicholas of Cusa spent much of his life seeking to build bridges between people with diverse understandings of God and the practices of their religion. Cusa sought for unity both within the Christian church, of which he was a cardinal, and between religions. He was an admired Christian ecumenist as well as an innovative thinker about inter-religious relations. Among his publications are *De pace fidei* (*On the Peace of Faith*, 1453), a pioneering treatise in the cause we now call inter-religious dialogue, and *Cribratio Alkorani* (*Sifting the Qur’an*, 1461), an early and, for its time, unusually thorough Christian interpretation of the Qur’an. While *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani* have both been the focus of sustained inter-religious study, this thesis will propose that another of Cusa’s writings, *De visione Dei* (*On the Vision of God*, 1453), should also be regarded as a creative source of wisdom for scholars working toward a Christian theology of the religions or engaged in the practice of inter-religious dialogue.

This thesis will advocate for Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. It will offer four warrants to

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4 It is important to note here that *Cribratio Alkorani* contains anti-Muslim polemic, about which further discussion can be found at pages 92-94 of this thesis. Alongside those polemic elements, nevertheless, one may also recognise Cusa’s desire to achieve a respectful interpretation of the Qur’an that might be harmonised with a Christian understanding of God. For example, at Book II and chapter 1, which is headed ‘On mystical theology, according to which God is ineffable’, Cusa writes ‘Let me now turn to a clarification of the [doctrine of the] Trinity that we revere in the divinity. And let me show that on a devout interpretation the Koran does not contradict the [doctrine of the] Trinity in the sense in which we who adhere to the Gospel speak of the trinity.’ *Cribratio Alkorani*, Book II, Chapter 1, paragraph 86 in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1986).

5 Catherine Cornille’s work on inter-religious dialogue will be engaged in chapter 5. However, it will be helpful to have in mind now Cornille’s definition of inter-religious dialogue, which she describes as ‘a constructive engagement between religious texts, teachings, and practices oriented toward the possibility of change and growth.’ Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue’, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, edited by Catherine Cornille (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 20. On the relation between theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, Paul Hedges has written ‘we may note that the two should be seen as intimately related, the theology of religions is the *theoria* that informs the *praxis* of interreligious dialogue, while interreligious dialogue is the *praxis* that informs the *theoria* of the theology of
justify engaging *De visione Dei* in these arenas and then seek to demonstrate the value the text offers by engaging Cusa’s vision with an issue of contemporary significance to theology of religions, doing so by deploying key ideas exemplified in the book’s opening exercise around an icon of an all-seeing face: first, the role played by a dialogue of different perspectives in enabling an awareness of the presence of the invisible and, second, the significance of particularity in discerning and disclosing God’s universality. In order to establish *De visione Dei*’s potential for theology of religions, we will also study significant contemporary contributions to that field, including, in particular, those approaches commonly referred to as exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist theologies, along with the more recent approach known as particularism.

The main body of the thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter one introduces Christian theology of religions along with a question of contemporary significance in that field, namely, whether Christian theological reflection on the presence and purpose of the multiplicity of world religions is best served by an emphasis on the particularity and distinctiveness of the beliefs and practices of each tradition or, instead, on the perceived commonalities among them. The second chapter provides an introduction to the life and work of Nicholas of Cusa, then a study of the content of *De visione Dei* which focuses particularly on its opening exercise. Chapter three locates *De visione Dei* within the tradition of Western mystical theology and offers a survey of literature relevant to this thesis. Those books and articles surveyed are also interpreted in such a way as to deepen our understanding of Cusa’s theology as a whole. Chapter four proposes four warrants to justify engaging *De visione Dei* with Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. Those warrants are contextual, philosophical, epistemological, and textual. The fifth chapter continues our

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appraisal of the field of Christian theology of religions and deepens our understanding of the
debate between methodologies that prioritize commonality, often known as pluralism, and
those which prioritize distinctiveness, often known as particularism. In that fifth and final
chapter, we will also explore the necessary conditions for fruitful inter-religious dialogue.
Then, with theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue in focus, we will highlight De
visione Dei’s key concepts – the dialogue of different perspectives and the significance of
particularity to disclosing God’s universality - in order to exemplify the potential of Cusa’s
visione as a resource for this contemporary work.

Nicholas of Cusa’s Vision

De visione Dei has been described as Cusa’s ‘literary and spiritual masterwork’. The book was
his reply to a question about mystical theology from a cloister of Christian monks at Tegernsee
within the Diocese of Brixen, in which Cusa was Bishop. The monks had been unsettled by a
controversy over the nature and methods of mystical theology and were seeking their Bishop’s
help to address whether it is the cognitive power of the intellect or the affective desire of the
will that enables an experience of the divine. How may we know God, and is this ‘knowing’
an act of the mind or the heart? Rather than provide a written explanation alone, Cusa decided
to offer the monks an experience in the form of an exercise that they were to complete together.
Thus, he delivered his reply to their questions in the form of both a theological treatise and an

6 Joshua Hollmann, The Religious Concordance: Nicholas of Cusa and Christian-Muslim Dialogue (Leiden:
Man, edited by Christopher M. Belitto, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (New York: Paulist Press,
2004), 43.

7 For a concise discussion of the controversy that led to Cusa’s correspondence with the Tegernsee monks and
ultimately to the writing of De visione Dei see Meredith Ziebart, ‘Laying Siege to the Wall of Paradise: The
Fifteenth-Century Tegernsee Dispute over Mystical Theology and Nicholas of Cusa’s Strong Defence of
exercise to be undertaken around an icon of God, all of which he titled *De visione Dei* – On the Vision of God. Among the most striking features of the book is the exercise with which it begins.  

*De visione Dei*’s opening exercise takes place around what Cusa’s describes as an all-seeing icon and involves its participants in silence, speaking and listening, all of which is intended to enable a new way of seeing - a new vision of God. We will return to the exercise in detail in chapter two and observe, in particular, how it draws our attention to the limitations of a single perspective when seeking knowledge of God compared to the value of a dialogue of perspectives. Following completion of the experiment around the icon, the remainder of *De visione Dei* is devoted to the meaning of that exercise and to elucidating Cusa’s ideas on creation as the enfolded unfolding of a loving and infinite God, Christ as the one in whom finite and infinite meet and, finally, participation as the means of our human access to the divine. We will return to these ideas in chapters two and three.

*De visione Dei* has long held a respected place in the history of Western mystical theology. It has received very little attention, however, from scholars addressing the theological questions raised by religious diversity. That lack of attention is surprising for, although the text does not directly speak to the presence and purpose of the world’s many religions, it appears well-suited to that challenging task. In fact, several key features of *De visione Dei* make attractive warrants for viewing this text as an untapped resource for theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. Those warrants include the historical origins of the book amid the Christian-Muslim violence after the fall of Constantinople in May 1453, the thematic and philosophical complementarity the book displays towards Cusa’s most admired

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8 Johannes Hoff describes Cusa’s offering to the Tegernsee monks a ‘mystagogical exercise’, in *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 8.
9 DVD, preface, paragraph 2.
text on inter-religious relations, *De pace fidei*, the expansive nature of the language Cusa uses throughout the text, the centrality of dialogue in the opening exercise around the icon, the organising dialectic of the one and the many and, finally, Cusa’s signature use of the concept of the knowledge of God as *coincidentia oppositorum* – the coincidence of opposites. Thus, in light of this apparent potential, we will propose that *De visione Dei* may indeed be deployed as a creative resource for Christian inter-religious engagement.

A number of key questions will need to be answered as we proceed with this project. What was Cusa’s original intention in writing *De visione Dei*? What do we mean by theology of religions? Have there been any theologians within that field who have engaged *De visione Dei* in their work? Are there warrants to justify deploying *De visione Dei* into theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue today? Finally, what resources might the text contain for these areas of theological work? By addressing these questions, we will seek to establish whether drawing upon *De visione Dei* as a resource for theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue is warranted or not and, if so, what resources it might offer. While ensuring that Cusa’s original intentions in writing the book are honoured, our aim is to establish that this visionary text can in fact be read creatively as a resource for theologians who reflect on the relationship between Christianity and the non-Christian religions.
Chapter 1

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Introduction

The questions driving this research forward are leading us toward an assessment of whether the deployment of De visione Dei as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue is warranted or not, and what resources it might bring to these fields. A comprehensive Christian theology of the religions is beyond the scope of this project, of course, and yet this thesis aims to make a constructive contribution to that larger project. To that end, a lead will be taken from Walter Brueggemann’s description of the contemporary task of the theologian ‘in this new interpretive situation after Modernity.’ That task, according to Brueggemann, ‘is not a grand scheme or a coherent system’. Instead ‘the task is to fund – to provide the pieces, materials and resources out of which a new world can be imagined.’¹ Along with offering a series of warrants which establish that engaging De visione Dei with Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue can be justified, this thesis also aims to gather up from our reading of Cusa’s visione ‘the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined’. Given that objective, and before we proceed any further, it is timely to address what we mean by the term ‘theology of religions’.

Theology of Religions

How shall we account, theologically, for the plurality of religions? That question is significant, of course, for its personal implications. The ability to offer a coherent account of why religions other than one’s own exist, using the resources of our particular tradition, is an important assurance of the integrity of our faith. The question is also important, however, for its inter-religious and political implications. How the different religions understand and relate to each other has implications for communities, nations, and for the globe. For example, when particular forms of religious teaching about other religions, albeit strikingly aberrant forms of teaching, are provoking suspicion and motivating some people to commit acts of inter-religious violence, the imperative to examine how we understand and relate respectfully among religions becomes critical. Resources are needed now, even more than when the following classic question was posed within this field by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, that enable people to witness to their religious beliefs with understanding for the fact that theirs is only one of many religions in today’s public square.

How does one account, theologically, for the fact of humanity’s religious diversity? This really is as big an issue, almost, as the question of how one accounts theologically for evil – but Christian theologians have been much more conscious of the fact of evil than that of religious pluralism … From now on any serious intellectual statement of the Christian faith must include, if it is to serve its purpose, some sort of doctrine of other religions. We explain the fact that the Milky Way is there by the doctrine of creation, but how do we explain the fact that the Bhagavad Gita is there?

Questions provoked by the number of world religions, particularly as they are commonly understood to be competing religions, are not new. Ancient religious texts, as much as recent theological works, have wrestled with the possibility and place of God in a world that manifests

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many ways of believing in God, or gods. However, there is now a distinctive field of
scholarship that has grown around questions such as those posed here by Cantwell Smith. That
field has come to be known as theology of religions.³

It is rare to find scholars who define theology of religions. It is more common to find,
articulated near the start of books addressing the topic, a series of questions which aim to
summarise the scholarly agenda of the field.⁴ The following questions, or close variations on
them, will often be found in those prolegomenal sections which seek to set the scope of the
work being undertaken: Is there one God and, if so, why is there not one religion? Are all
religions a valid path to God and by what criteria might we attempt to answer that question?
What are the commonalities and differences of doctrine and practice among the religions? Do
people adhering to different religions seek the same salvation? Should a religion other than
one’s own be engaged in order to learn from its adherents or to convert them? Theologians of
the religions approach their task through questions such as these. Furthermore, as we will
discuss again later in the thesis, the manner in which scholars answer these questions has been
the measure by which their work is categorised as, for example, exclusivist, inclusivist, or
pluralist. That three-fold typology was introduced to the field by Alan Race in his influential
work, Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions.⁵ In

³ Some scholars have preferred to offer variations of this term, such as Jacques Dupuis who refers to ‘Theology
of religious pluralism’, Paul Knitter to ‘Theologies of religions’, and Daniel Migliore ‘Theology of the
religions’. However, acceptance of ‘theology of religions’ as an umbrella title for this field is now nearly
ubiquitous. For a helpful discussion see Michael Barnes, Theology and the Dialogue of Religions (Cambridge:

⁴ For example, Michael Barnes, Theology and the Dialogue of Religions, 3-9; Jacques Dupuis, Toward a
Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 4-19; S. Mark Heim, The Depth of Riches:
A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 1-10; Paul F. Knitter, Introducing
Theologies of Religions (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 1-4.

⁵ Alan Race, Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions (London:
SCM, 1983). It has recently been written of the legacy of Race’s work to theology of religions that ‘Over that
time a central focus of those discussions has been the typology of exclusivisms – inclusivisms – pluralisms
fact, the emergence and embrace of those dominant approaches within theology of religions is itself a sign that a discernibly distinct field of study has been established.

The deployment of sample questions to summarise the task of theology of religions, rather than a definition, has merit. It promotes the idea that this theological field has a wide scope, that its scholars are embarked on an open and ongoing search, and that a broad set of approaches is welcomed. The use of questions may also help to guard against ‘the greatest temptation faced by the theologian, the tendency to seek premature closure.’ However, and notwithstanding the aforementioned merit of using questions in its place, a definition does serve a purpose by offering a marker around which the questions and answers are gathered. Indeed, a definition can itself provoke rather than foreclose further questions. Therefore, the following definition is offered as a marker. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen has described theology of religions as,

That discipline of theological studies which attempts to account theologically for the meaning and value of other religions. Christian theology of religions attempts to think theologically about what it means for Christians to live with people of other faiths and about the relationship of Christianity to other religions.

Kärkkäinen’s definition is useful because it neatly captures the directions set by the questions that exemplify the work of this field. This definition is also helpful because it establishes the methodological significance of particularity over universality within theology of religions. It is important to grasp this distinction.

(often now with particularities added as a fourth paradigm), which was first introduced by Alan Race in his classic 1983 book. Elizabeth J. Harris, Paul Hedges, and Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi, Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1.

6 Michael Barnes, Dialogue, 6.

Theology of religions (plural), the field with which we are engaged in this thesis, is not taken up primarily by the study of the philosophical, theological, or sociological theories of the human phenomena we name as ‘religion’. Of course, the study of religion (singular) encompasses questions that are significant to theology of religions: How does one define a religion? How do we account for the origin of religion as a phenomenon among human communities? Are the experiences and institutions we associate with religion born of a genetic disposition, or psychological projection, or culture, or the will to power, or are they a response to divine revelation? These questions, and their various answers, certainly do inform the work of scholars who take up the task of theology of religions. Nevertheless, there is an important distinction to be kept. While the study of religion (singular) will focus on examining the phenomenon of religion en globo, scholars in the field of theology of religions (plural) will deploy the doctrines and practices of their own religion, in its particularity, in order to offer a theological account for the meaning and value of other religions.

This leads to a further important remark that should be made at this point. This thesis is being written by a person who adheres to faith in the God of Jesus of Nazareth. It is therefore as a Christian theologian that I write. However, even though the lens through which I am

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8 Any introduction to theology of religions should acknowledge the ambiguity of what is meant by ‘religion’. Religion is difficult to define, interpret, or explain. It is also apparent that the religions are a source of both charity and greed, peace and violence, welcome and exclusion, love and hate, as evidenced in too many settings to be named. One only need think, for example, of the medieval crusades, Christian justifications for slavery and for European subjugation of indigenous peoples across the globe from the sixteenth century, the Holocaust, Northern Ireland, Hindu and Muslim hatred in Kashmir, contemporary Iraq and Syria. While these observations are not the focus of this thesis, the following recent publications were helpful in understanding the concept, and theories, of religion: Daniel L. Pals (ed), *Nine Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Benjamin Schewel, *Seven Ways of Looking at Religion: The Major Narratives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Christian Smith, *Religion: What it is, How it works, And Why it matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); and an earlier work in the study of religion that remains an important text for any such study is Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), first published in 1962.
framing this task is made of Christian glass, and that is indeed the glass through which I am looking outward at other faiths, my own view is that this lens allows light to pass both ways. Or, to make that same point more adequately, I agree with Jacques Dupuis when he observes that ‘Personal commitment to one’s own faith and openness to the faith of others need not be mutually exclusive; rather they ought to grow in direct proportion.’ It is the particularity of my Christian perspective that I believe will enable me to contribute to, and receive from, those who stand in a different place; those who have gained their vision of God from a different perspective.

**Contemporary Christian Theology of Religions**

It is timely that *De visione Dei* should become the focus of interest from the field of theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. As our literature survey will show, no study engaging the book as an interlocutor for this area of work has yet been undertaken. Therefore, there is academic space for this project. Further, to examine *De visione Dei* for its inter-religious potential may provide an opportunity to look beyond the leading theological frameworks operating in theology of religions at the moment, which are marked by the dominance of modern and postmodern epistemologies, and open fresh possibilities resourced by the pre-modern tradition of mystical theology. The dominant theological accounts of the relationship between Christianity and the non-Christian religions today appear to have come to an impasse. It may be that mystical theology, such as we find in Cusa’s vision, is well suited to nourishing the contemporary inter-religious imagination, for the forms of theology that currently dominate this area of scholarship, to which we will turn now, tend either to reflect or

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react against the subjectivity and rationalism of epistemology since the Enlightenment. Perhaps it is time for contemporary theology of religions to involve a pre-modern, mystical theologian as a conversation partner, one who set out to explore how we may gain a visio of God supported by a dialogue with those who stand at diverse points-of-view.\textsuperscript{11}

With few exceptions, the leading approaches to theology of religions have framed adherents of the non-Christian religions as people to be excluded, included, or pluralised. Michael Barnes explains these terms succinctly.

What is meant by these three terms is fairly obvious: exclusivism privileges one’s own tradition against all others; inclusivism patronises other traditions as lesser or partial versions of what is realised in only one; pluralism argues for the relativising of all traditions, including one’s own.\textsuperscript{12}

The metaphor of a path may be a helpful way to illustrate these three positions. The exclusivist approach views Christianity as the only valid path to God and therefore concludes that adherents of the non-Christian religions are entirely incorrect in believing that the path they are travelling will end where they hope it will. The inclusivist approach considers that some adherents of the non-Christian religions may be on the correct path to God, even though they have incorrectly named and understood that path. However, the inclusivist approach views the

\textsuperscript{11} Lest the observations made here lead to mistaken perceptions, it should be stated that mystical theology did not disappear during the period known as modernity, nor the period of reaction to it known as postmodernity. Neither was reason absent from medieval theology nor absent from theology described as postmodern theology. For a helpful introduction see Douglas John Hall, ‘Knowing in Christian Faith and Theology’, Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 369-449.

\textsuperscript{12} Michael Barnes, Dialogue, 8. There are many discussions of these models in the current literature of the field. Gavin D’Costa, Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2009) has a helpful introduction to this three-fold typology, and variations within them, at pages 3-25.
non-Christian as remaining on the correct path only while his or her beliefs and actions reflect, albeit anonymously, Christian doctrine and practice. Finally, it is the view of scholars commonly known as pluralists that the separate paths taken by the adherents of each of the world’s religions are all equally valid paths, more or less, to a single, albeit differently construed, destination.

Further analysis of these three approaches that currently dominate Christian theology of religions, and which now consistently attract the short-hand language of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, will be offered in chapter five. In addition, the now significant number of studies that contest this three-fold typology, and proposed other variants, will also be considered. Nevertheless, one important observation to make now is that each one of these three leading explanations for the relationship of Christianity to the non-Christian religions provides a similar outcome: all the religions are viewed from a single, totalizing perspective. Despite the appearance of difference, the theoretical framework operating within each approach in this three-fold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism has, in fact, driven inter-religious engagement toward a search for common ground.

To the exclusivist, common ground is reached effectively only by conversion of the other to a common confession of Christian faith. For the inclusivist, common ground is found in those doctrines and practices of the non-Christian religions that reflect an understanding or practice which that tradition is deemed to hold in-common with Christianity. For the pluralist, common ground is found in the common end to which all religions are the means. Problematically, however, that common end can look like a religious amalgam; something unrecognisable to any of the particular traditions. The common ground logic engendered by these dominating approaches to a Christian theology of religions is now more or less
paradigmatic within the contemporary field.\textsuperscript{13} Even advocates for pluralism, whom it may be reasonable to assume are most disposed to respect the diversity of religions, tend to filter out that which is particular and distinctive about the world religions in order to extract what are perceived to be the commonalities.

A significant reaction against this apparent suppression of religions diversity to religious commonality was seen in the emergence of a new approach within Christian theology of religions that has come to be known as particularism. Particularism is now named as ‘a fourth model for theology of religions’.\textsuperscript{14} Tracing its origins to George Lindbeck’s seminal work \textit{The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age}, particularism argues that religious experience and knowledge do not precede language and culture but, rather, are determined by language and culture. Theologians of the religions who approach their work within this model affirm the dominance of religious diversity and methodologically prioritize the particularities of each tradition. The religions are viewed as ‘more different than they are similar. Indeed, at their heart, they are incommensurable.’\textsuperscript{15} S. Mark Heim adopts the particularist approach in his writings toward a Trinitarian theology of religious ends. The following summary serves both to exemplify the agenda of particularism and is an insight into Heim’s application of that approach to his area of special interest, the question of salvation(s) or ‘religious ends’.

I am convinced that the fruitful and viable path for interfaith relations lies in each tradition developing, from its own particularist grounds, frameworks for the fullest legitimate recognition of the distinctive

\textsuperscript{13} This is exemplified by the six essays in Part 1 ‘Disputing and Using the Typology’ in \textit{Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions}, edited by Elizabeth J. Harris, Paul Hedges, and Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 11-110.

\textsuperscript{14} Paul F. Knitter, ‘The Plurarist Path: Where We’ve Been and Where We’re Heading’, in \textit{Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions}, edited by Elizabeth J. Harris, Paul Hedges, and Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 149.

\textsuperscript{15} Paul Knitter, ‘The Pluralist Path’, 150.
qualities (those that finally resist assimilation) of the positive religious aims of other faiths. This path differs from the abstract view of many pluralist theologies, which wishes to maintain that what is truly religiously important is either an indeterminate point of convergence beyond the particularities of all faiths or some analytic, generic essence of their current function in human life. It also rejects the convictions (shared by the most pluralistic theologians and the most exclusivistic ones) that there is one and only one actual religious fulfilment on offer to humanity, that any claims to the contrary are pernicious and ought to be eliminated, and that the only live religious question concerns the number of religious paths that can deliver this payoff.16

Kenneth Surin is another scholar to have presented a robust critique of the exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist approaches.17 As theories regarding the nature of Christianity’s relationship to the non-Christian religions, Surin considers each of the approaches in this three-fold typology highly problematic because, firstly, they are founded on the assumption that the task of theology of religions is to determine a set of ‘right’ doctrines and, secondly, each model manifests a Western historical narrative regarding the non-Western world in which identity is construed solely in relation to the dominant West. Exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism effectively represent a Western ideological periodization of the non-Western and non-Christian other.

Surin draws on Bernard McGrane’s Beyond Anthropology to argue his point.18 The dominant approaches to theology of religions, which Surin exemplifies through the work of Hendrik Kraemer (exclusivist), Karl Rahner (inclusivist) and John Hick (pluralist), can be aligned, Surin argues, with the general paradigms that McGrane identifies in the history of

European interpretation of the non-European. In the first paradigm, up to and including the sixteenth century, the non-European was understood within a Christian intellectual framework in which the non-Christian is a manifestation of sin. The non-European was different therefore due to demonizing, sinful powers. During the second paradigm, roughly contiguous with the period of the Enlightenment, the non-European was construed epistemologically. ‘They’ were different as a consequence of ignorance, error or untruth. Lack of enlightenment is the cause of difference here. In the third paradigm, which had emerged by the early nineteenth century, time became the agent responsible for the difference between Europe and the rest of the world as ‘stages of development’ came to be seen as the cause of non-Europe’s otherness. Europe had reached the highest stage of development yet attained and non-Europeans were at varying, lower stages of civilizational development.

The fourth and final of McGrane’s paradigms emerges in the twentieth century, during which Europe and the United States have come to be categorized together as ‘the West’, and the dominant explanation for the non-West becomes culture. Flattening-out a myriad of historically conditioned differences between peoples into the universal category of cultural diversity, difference was thus democratized. ‘The non-European other is no longer immured in the depths of some petrified past for, with this radical democratization of difference, he or she is inserted into the present, our present, and is thus now our contemporary.’\(^{19}\) The other is now much the same as ‘us’, and much the same as all other peoples and cultures. That is to say, we share the common ground of cultural difference.

\(^{19}\) Kenneth Surin, ‘A “Politics of Speech”’, 198.
‘ignorance’ and ‘superstition’ as with the Enlightenment; and rather than the demonical and infernal as with the Renaissance.  

While Surin does not consider McGrane’s general paradigms entirely satisfactory,  he argues for ‘certain correlative alignments’ between them and the dominant approaches to the non-Christian within Christian theology of religions. Those alignments serve to highlight the intellectual genealogy of the approaches known as exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. For example, McGrane’s predominant approach to the non-European prior to and within the early period of European colonial expansion appears to align with the exclusivist approach, in which Christianity is the one true path to God and those not on that path are in sin. The inclusivist approach, in which Christian theologians propose the possibility that some adherents to non-Christian religions might also be on the right path to God, appears to align with the period in which colonial Europe saw the non-European as ‘other’ due to ignorance.

Surin considers the most troubling alignment as that which he argues can be identified between the pluralist approach to theology of religions and the most recent of McGrane’s paradigms, in which the relationship between the West and non-West is viewed through the lens of cultural diversity. Here, the rise of a pluralist explanation for religious diversity, aimed at a universalized understanding of all religious traditions, in which the religions are viewed as culturally diverse expressions of a single albeit differently named power or being, is a reflection of the rise and then dominance of globalization.  

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23 ‘When the project that had been called “the rise and dominance of the West” was transformed in the decades following World War II into a new project known as “the rise and dominance of the global”.’ Kenneth Surin, ‘A “Politics of Speech”’, 196.
and globalizing approach of pluralist theologies within the field of Christian theology of religions with the emerging strength of the West’s ‘global and “globalizing” topography, as the local is subsumed under the regime of the universal.’

Traditional liberal intellectuals pride themselves on acknowledging heterogeneity and plurality, but this acknowledgement is always fatally compromised by a deployment of homogenous logic – a logic which irons out the heterogeneous precisely by subsuming it under the categories of comprehensive and totalizing global and world theologies.

While the historical alignments are interesting, Surin’s central concern is greater: that the pluralist approach to religious diversity might not only be historically reflective but also politically and ideologically reflective of ‘the new project known as the rise and dominance of the global’. Surin singles out John Hick’s theology for examination. He cites passages from several of Hick’s works to make a case for this ideological alignment in Hick’s thought. One such passage is drawn from Hick’s *An Interpretation of Religion*.

We shall now see the transformation of human existence going on in various ways and degrees throughout the world and throughout human history, rather than only within the borders of our own tradition. This means that the entire human story, with all its light and dark, its triumphs and its tragedies, is to be affirmed as ultimately good in the sense that it is part of a universal soteriological process … the cosmic optimism of each of the great traditions is intensified when we see them all as pointing to the possibility of a limitlessly better existence and as affirming that the universe is such that this limitlessly better possibility is actually available to us and can begin to be realized in each present moment.

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Surin’s critique of the dominant approaches to Christian theology of religions is a reminder that no idea stands outside history. Theological explanations for religious diversity, like all ideas, are synthetic. Surin’s argument also draws our attention to an arena of current work in theology of religions that will receive attention later in the thesis, namely, the totalizing tendency of the pluralist approach and the related development of methodologies that give priority to the particularity of the different religious traditions. As we have noted, those theologians of the religions who focus on particularity, an approach commonly known as particularism, are now often bracketed into the traditional typologies as a fourth option, alongside exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Particularist theologies prioritize the distinctive beliefs and practices of the world’s religions in the work of theology of religions. They do so on grounds of theological integrity, and from a concern that approaches which prioritize commonality between the religions, such as the pluralist and inclusivist, have exhibited a greater tendency toward what Surin describes as Modernity’s homogenous logic.

We will offer further discussion of particularism in chapter five, however, there is one further significant issue to be introduced at this point.

Setting aside for the time being the ideological charges placed by Surin before the pluralist, inclusivist, and exclusivist approaches alike, and adopting a working assumption that the homogenous logic to which he points has been applied with good intentions by theologians of the religions, that is to say, assuming scholars who employ pluralist and inclusivist approaches are motivated to establish common ground among the religions only by their desire to confess the universality of the one God, and God’s love for all humanity, we are still left with a significant methodological question. On what basis can it be assumed that a methodology for theology of religions which seeks to distil and then privilege perceived common beliefs and practices is better able to bear witness to the universality of one God than
a methodology that gives priority to particularity and differences among the religions? Put another way, why should it be assumed that signs of sameness among the various traditions of belief are a more convincing witness to the universality God than signs of difference? As we progress with this project, attention will be given to the manner in which Cusa’s *De visione Dei* can contribute to this question by offering a vision of how approaches to religious diversity that preserve particularity and difference are able to advocate for the universality of one God as convincingly, if not more so, than approaches that seek after commonality, or common ground, to make that case.

Is the task of theology of religions well-served by focussing on a search for perceived commonality among the doctrines and practices of the religions? If so, then Surin and others remind us that the criteria for the assessment of any perceived commonalities are never neutral and are vulnerable to ideological agendas, however unintended. This issue may be placed into relief by focussing for a moment on the pluralist approach.

John Hick is the scholar most closely associated with the pluralist approach to religious diversity. In the 1970s, Hick called for what he termed a Copernican revolution in Christian theology to take account of the diversity of revelations confessed among the world’s religions.28 His works include *God and the Universe of Faiths,*29 *God Has Many Names,*30 *The Metaphor of God Incarnate,*31 and *The Rainbow of Faiths.*32 Through them, Hick intends to deliver a theological model that honours each religion as an equally valid path to the divine. In aiming at such an outcome, he is an exemplar of the pluralist approach and its concern to uphold

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an equality across the diversity of religions. However, Hick offers a framework which in fact privileges similarity over diversity. It is inter-religious *sameness* which Hick believes will provide the most secure ground on which to build understanding and dialogue. Hick’s framework therefore configures the task of the theologian of the religions, or the activity of the practitioner of inter-religious dialogue, as a search for religious perspectives held in common.33

Yet there is a significant risk inherent in this configuration of the task. The drive for common ground may end with a result so abstracted from its starting point that we are left with something akin to a new religion. Reified for the purpose of comparison, the religious traditions become something other than what they are in their particularity.

Hick centres his theology of religions on what he argues is the common ground of salvation.34 His proposition is that the religions offer different and yet, in so far as we can tell, equally valid ways of conceiving, experiencing, and responding in life to the felt desire for salvation.35 There are peculiarities among the religions with regard to the way salvation is understood, but not essential differences. Yet what space is allowed here, it has been asked, for religious traditions that cannot be engaged on the basis of Hick’s salvation metric?36 Is it not theological hubris to frame scholarly engagement with the great diversity of religions through a single, essentially Christian framework?37 Further, where salvation is in fact a meaningful idea within more than one religion, is it helpful to address those distinct teachings about salvation as variations on a common theme? While seeking a framework to understand

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religious diversity which honours difference, does Hick subtly undermine his own project by seeking a ‘homogenous logic’ (Surin) behind all religions? By privileging commonality over particularity, similarity over difference, does the pluralist framework risk becoming un-pluralistic, providing the opposite outcome to that which is intended? Does a search for common ground among the religions become an ideological marker that risks de-railing the journey of inter-religious understanding and respect before it begins?

German theologian Perry Schmidt-Leukel delivered the 2015 Gifford Lectures and, through them, offered what is regarded as the most impressive effort to renew the pluralist approach hitherto associated so strongly with John Hick. Schmidt-Leukel deploys Benoit Mandelbrot’s fractal theory of geometry in nature\textsuperscript{38} in order to present,

\begin{quote}
… a new interpretation of religious diversity suggesting that this diversity is marked by fractal patterns. That is, the [religious] diversity that is found on the global level replicates to some extent the diversity that is found within the major religious traditions and is finally rooted in the diversity of religious possibilities of the human psyche and the human mind. This view is different from those theories that assume an essential identity and those that postulate a radical incommensurability between the religions. On a fractal interpretation, religions resemble each other precisely \textit{in} their diversity.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

In pointing to ‘theories that assume an essential identity’ among the religions, Schmidt-Leukel is acknowledging the inclusivist approach. He also acknowledges the exclusivist approach by pointing to ‘those [theories] that postulate a radical incommensurability between the religions’. His own project, in contrast to these theories, is to renew the pluralist approach by arguing that religious pluralism is not only a viable interpretation of religious diversity but also, in fact, that pluralism is a prevalent interpretation of religious diversity within the religions themselves.


Pluralism is a way of interpreting religious diversity that emerges from within the religions, rather than from without. Schmidt-Leukel makes his case by seeking to demonstrate that it is possible to identify variations of the pluralist approach to religious diversity among all the world’s major religions.

‘Religious pluralism’, as used in this book, is not simply an interpretation of religious diversity, but it is in itself a religious interpretation. That interpretation, as I argue, can be developed only from within the different religious traditions.40

Schmidt-Leukel’s work on religious pluralism is fascinating yet he, like Hick, presents the religions from a single, totalizing perspective. While carefully honouring the diversity of the world’s religions, a step Schmidt-Leukel takes in an attempt to counter criticism that the pluralist approach has focused too heavily on commonality, he reinforces the pluralist ‘homogenous logic’ by taking his correction so far as to make diversity itself the basis of common ground among the religions. An important enterprise in bridge building across the religions again risks being stymied by the totalizing impulse, by the ‘homogenizing scheme’41 that Surin describes as ‘fatally compromised’.42

We will return to our consideration of pluralism in due course. For now, we are beginning to see that even advocates for pluralism, that approach to theology of religions which is most disposed to support the validity of each religion, nevertheless often seek a single perspective through which to view all religions. Whether the religions are alike because of their commonality, or alike because of their diversity - whichever is the case - the outcome is the

40 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Religious Pluralism, 1. Emphasis in the original.
41 Kenneth Surin, ‘A “Politics of Speech”’, 204.
same. In Hick’s work, the coherence of the religions is sought through soteriology; in Schmidt-Leukel, through recurring fractal patterns of diversity. The pervasiveness of this common ground logic is pronounced.

A Fresh Vision

Rather than addressing the differences and incompatibilities of the world’s religions as a mystery which may nevertheless have a positive part to play within the purposes of God, as potentially valuable to those who desire to know and love God, and even a witness in itself to the universality of one God, religious diversity is often perceived as a problem by those engaged in theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. Diversity is viewed as jeopardizing the integrity of all religion, most especially one’s own. As we have begun to describe, the problem that religious diversity is thought to release is most frequently brought back under control by a homogenous logic that points to commonalities; a solution to the problem of religious difference is sought by identifying common ground. According to that form of logic, the belief that our own religion is the container of the one, true, and universal God can be defended and even advanced by finding traces, reflections, and similarities to our own beliefs and practices among other religions. Put another way, if the possibility of a transcendent Universal is thought to be contradicted by the reality of earthly multiplicity, it is tempting to assume the solution to the perceived contradiction will be found by filtering those multiple religious traditions down to their commonalities. If the multiplicity of beliefs and practices represented by the world’s religious diversity is thought to threaten the integrity of belief in a single universal God, the identification of common ground among those diverse traditions of belief is advanced as the answer to that threat.
The universal integrity of my religion (exclusivists), or of my religion along with certain other religions (inclusivists), or of all religions (pluralists), is established and defended by identifying and highlighting common beliefs and practices. Furthermore, and related to this ‘solution’ to the problem, the significance of that which is particular and distinctive within the diverse religious traditions is diminished. In other words, weakening the theological significance of that which is uncommon is understood to serve the same purpose. Distilling *sameness* will locate and secure for us that which transcends earthly diversity. It is an approach that struggles to avoid being accused of a flawed logic which asserts the following: that which is most true will be that which is found most often.  

Yet religious doctrines and practices are not shaped by empirical forms of knowledge alone, nor does it seem helpful to define religion, or categorise the religions, using extracted commonalities. Perhaps the resources needed to move beyond Modernity’s homogenizing logic may be found by looking behind it, to the pre-modern. Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei*, written just as the first indicators of what came to be called Modernity were beginning to appear, might offer fresh resources with which to approach the questions that religious diversity provokes. *De visione Dei* provides what Michel De Certeau has called a *sensible experimentum*, an open space which ‘makes way’ for a dialogue of perspectives. We turn now to begin our examination of whether Cusa’s *sensible experimentum* has fresh resources to offer theology of religions and the contemporary inter-religious imagination. Of special interest will be whether Cusa’s beautiful example of mystical theology, when considered against

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43 Along with hoping to prosper the conclusion that there must be more than fantasy to the idea of a divine being if so many people, among so many religions, believe in that possibility, and believe it in similar ways, commonalities among the religions also serve, according to this logic, as that which will define a valid religion.


current approaches to theology of religions, will lead us to conclude that it is in their particularity that the religions enable and broaden our vision of God. If so, perhaps the risk inherent in theoretical frameworks for inter-religious engagement that seek to deliver a commonality of religious perspective is that they may actually obscure the One they hope to reveal.
Chapter 2

NICHOLAS OF CUSA’S VISION

Introduction

We have outlined the objective of this thesis, which is to propose Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, and have also introduced the field known as theology of religions. The objective of the current chapter is to familiarize ourselves with Nicholas of Cusa’s life and then, secondly, to turn our attention to his treatise *De visione Dei*. Cusa’s life was marked by a desire to bridge religious divisions, within the church and among the religions. He was a seeker after unity. We will also discover that *De visione Dei* epitomizes the abiding convictions of this extraordinary fifteenth century Cardinal. In many ways, *De visione Dei* gives intellectual expression to the record of Cusa’s achievements. Further, the text also illuminates why Cusa believed it is possible to identify a unifying richness in diversity, as well as what he believed to be the theological and epistemological value of dialogue. Practical expression is given to those convictions in Cusa’s remarkable *exercitium* around an icon of an all-seeing face, an exercise with which he introduces *De visione Dei*. It is an exercise in which those who seek understanding and respect within the church and across the religions today may find inspiration. First of all, we will explore Cusa’s life, and then this iconic exercise.
‘A Prince of the church but also a philosopher’

Nicholas of Cusa was born in 1401 in Kues, beside the Mosel River in Germany, the son of a boatman.¹ He studied liberal arts at the University of Heidelberg during 1416 and 1417, graduated with a doctorate in canon law from the University of Padua in 1423, and then studied theology and philosophy at the University of Cologne in 1425.² A brilliant and eclectic thinker, Cusa developed during his studies a particular interest in the humanist pursuits of art, architecture, mathematics, and the analysis of Antiquity’s classical texts.³ He was soon offered and yet declined a professorship at the University of Leuven.⁴ Instead, Cusa became a canon lawyer and advisor to the archbishop of Trier and, thereafter, his work for the church would primarily be as an administrator and a diplomat rather than a parish priest or teacher. A common feature of Cusa’s varied life was the desire to reconcile differences into unity.⁵

That desire for unity first revealed itself as Cusa played a key role at the Council of Basel (1431-37). Nicholas went to Basel as a proponent of conciliarism, a movement advocating for the appointment of a representative council of the people to frame ecclesial laws and hold authority within the church alongside the Pope. It was during this time that Cusa wrote one of his most famous works, *De concordantia catholica* (The Catholic Concordance). It was a sustained argument for the sovereignty of the people. ‘In *De concordantia catholica*, [Cusa] maintains the doctrine of the sovereignty of the entire church, which, when embodied in a

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general council, stands above the bishops and above the pope. Yet the debates, disputes, and the constant threat of schism at Basel eroded Cusa’s commitment to conciliarism and he gradually became convinced that the sovereignty of the people would not ensure unity for the church. He concluded, in fact, that conciliarism may present an even greater risk of rupture and disunity than strengthened papal authority. For that reason, Cusa shifted from conciliarism to the opposing papal camp, doing so not as a papal apologist but, paradoxically, in the belief that support for the papacy would best preserve the unity of the people of the whole church. As H. Lawrence Bond has observed, this reversal of his position, from 1437 onward, represented a significant reorientation in Cusa’s life.

Cusa undoubtedly would have been remembered in ecclesiastical history as an effective lawyer and a major spokesman for conciliarism had it not been for the radical turn of events at the council that caused him to depart and join Pope Eugene IV, who was in the process of transferring the council to Ferrara in Italy, against the wishes of the majority leadership at Basel.

Following his service at the Council of Basel, Cusa was appointed by Pope Eugene as ‘chief of the embassy’ in Constantinople, from 1437 to 1439. Cusa was therefore the leader of the Pope’s appointed delegates from the Council of Basel, delegates who had been given the task of pursuing a reunion between Eastern Christianity, based in Constantinople, and Western Christianity based in Rome. An historic agreement in favour of reunion was reached in July 1439, only for that agreement to be sunk soon after by ‘zealots of the Greek church.’

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7 Ernst Cassirer, *Individual*, 60.
that disappointment, Cusa’s achievements were nevertheless substantial and met with praise in Rome. The Pope appointed him to Germany where he travelled as a papal legate for the next ten years.12

Within those few years during the late 1430’s, prior to his return to Germany, Cusa underwent two life-shaping experiences. The first, as we have mentioned, was a move away from the spirit of the Council of Basel and his commitment to conciliarism, a shift made in the belief that unity would be best served by renewed papal authority throughout the church. The second, to which we will return, was a move toward the East and what became an abiding enchantment with its mystical traditions. Bond describes the significance of these two transformations for Cusa in this way:

He therefore experienced two major shifts following his entry into conciliar work: the first, the break with Basel which brought him into the papal camp, to an ideology of collegiality under papal authority in the special and temporal church; and the second, the journey eastward, which turned out to be a spiritual pilgrimage, provided him with a fresh vision of unity and difference coexisting not only within the church but also in the soul’s experience of the world.13

Having returned to Germany in 1440, the country of his birth and centre of the Holy Roman empire, Cusa was again charged with the task of bridging division. This seeker of unity was commissioned to restore order by repairing the consequences of one of the church’s deepest ruptures over papal succession. A politically charged atmosphere awaited Cusa. A series of ecclesial rifts following the death of Pope Gregory XI in 1376 saw the church with an Italian Pope seated in Rome and a French Pope seated in Avignon.14 This papal contest split the church for forty years; ‘two popes, two sets of cardinals, and two papal courts, each

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14 In Rome, Urban VI, and in Avignon, Clement VII.
supported by its own taxation.\textsuperscript{15} A third Pope emerged from Pisa in 1409.\textsuperscript{16} The election in 1417 of a fourth, compromise candidate finally seemed to resolve the Great Schism, as this period came to be known.\textsuperscript{17} Yet even then another ‘antipope’ appeared soon after. Given the prevailing instability, it is unsurprising that conciliarism, the previously-mentioned movement advocating for sovereignty of the people, gained strength again at this time. Such a council could, it was argued, take charge of the church in the present time of papal crisis.\textsuperscript{18}

Notwithstanding those challenges, Cusa managed to navigate Germany’s rancorous factions during the 1440’s to a place of relative harmony. The Concordat of Vienna, aligning Germany with Pope Eugenius, was executed in 1448, due in no small part to Cusa’s unifying efforts.\textsuperscript{19} Cusa attracted a nickname for his mediating work in Germany, ‘the Hercules of the Eugenians’, as well as the bishopric of Brixen.\textsuperscript{20} He was also made a Cardinal at that time.\textsuperscript{21} Despite its herculean nature, however, reconciling Germany’s ecclesial fractiousness was not Cusa’s last nor his most courageous accomplishment in seeking to bridge religious divisions.

Cusa’s instinct for unity was in evidence once more, not long after he became Cardinal Cusa, when he heard news in June 1453 of the fall of Constantinople the preceding month to an army of Muslim Turks. He felt this tragedy personally.\textsuperscript{22} It was a military defeat that sent

\textsuperscript{15} Bard Thompson, \textit{Humanists}, 53.
\textsuperscript{16} Alexander V.
\textsuperscript{17} Martin V.
\textsuperscript{18} Nicholas of Cusa immersed himself during the 1430’s in the debate about whether it should be a Pope or a Council that held authority in the Church. The promotion of councils was not a new idea yet was still a radical proposal and Cusa’s first landmark work, \textit{De concordantia catholica} (The Catholic Concordance, 1433), was a significant contribution to this debate.
\textsuperscript{19} Donald Duclow, ‘Life and Work’, 33.
\textsuperscript{20} Nicholas was consecrated Bishop of Brixen on April 26, 1450. Jasper Hopkins, \textit{Nicholas of Cusa’s Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation and Interpretative Exercise} (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1996), 3.
\textsuperscript{21} Eric Meuthen, \textit{Sketch}, 80.
shockwaves through Europe. It is no exaggeration to say that Cusa’s response to the capture of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmed II was astonishing.\textsuperscript{23} Amid ‘rumours of horrors, violence and blood everywhere’,\textsuperscript{24} and the desire for vengeance due to the threat that Islam was now thought to pose to all Europe,\textsuperscript{25} Nicholas wrote \textit{De pace fidei (The Peace of Faith)}. This work is widely considered one of the first attempts by a Christian, and perhaps the very first, to approach non-Christian religions by means other than conversion or warfare, namely, by dialogue.\textsuperscript{26}

If previous works dedicated to the dialogue between religions were mostly characterized by the emphasis on rhetorical, moral and intellectual inferiority, and by the humiliating debasement of the interlocutors who were stigmatized as infidels, Cusanus was among the first – an extraordinarily rare and precious exception, perhaps only together with Raimondo Llull, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola – not only to recognize the value of other religions but also to identify a source of richness in religious pluralism.\textsuperscript{27}

That Cusa was able to publish this work without censure is thought to have been possible only because of his close personal relationship with the Pope.\textsuperscript{28} We will return to discuss the content of \textit{De pace fidei} in chapter three, where we explore the philosophical complementarity it shares with \textit{De visione Dei}. For now, it is enough to observe that, although \textit{De pace fidei} did little to diminish the mood to retaliate against the Ottomans and avenge Constantinople’s loss, the book

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Michel de Certeau, ‘The Gaze of Nicholas of Cusa.’ \textit{Diacritics} 17/3 (1987), 3.
\item \textsuperscript{25} James E. Biechler, ‘Christian Humanism Confronts Islam: Sifting the Qur’an with Nicholas of Cusa.’ \textit{Journal of Ecumenical Studies} 13 (1976), 1.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas of Cusa: Trinity, Freedom and Dialogue} (Munster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2016), 102.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Erich Meuthen, \textit{Sketch}, 80 & 126.
\end{itemize}
has since gained respect and received scholarly attention as a rare example for its time of a Christian leader advocating for inter-religious understanding in a time of suspicion and violence.

Following his long period of service in Germany, Cusa completed his ecclesial career as Vicar-General of Rome and the Papal States. That appointment, when made in 1459, elevated him to become the Pope’s most senior administrator. His responsibilities included Rome and the curia, the provinces to the west of the Apennines and a vast swathe of church ‘properties and possessions’.²⁹ He is said to have done an exemplary job while in charge of Rome when the Pope was away from the city for long periods of time.³⁰ Yet, notwithstanding his very senior position, Cusa was nevertheless regarded in Rome as a poor Cardinal and lived in relative humility.³¹ He died on 11 August 1464 while travelling, ironically, to meet with his life-long friend, Aeneas Sylvius, now the new Pope Pius II, at the start of the Pope’s crusade to reclaim territories to the east which had been lost to the Muslim Ottomans. Ernst Cassirer describes the irony of Cusa, the seeker of unity, losing his life on a journey toward the new Pope and his crusade.

Thus, the opposing forces that Cusanus tried to reconcile intellectually diverged in his life. What he tried intellectually to bring together into systematic unity and harmony fell apart in the immediate reality in which he stood. In the midst of these disappointments Cusanus remained the great optimist and the great irenic spirit, always continuing to believe in the necessary and possible “coincidence” of opposites.³²

This remarkable list of accomplishments on behalf of the church represents only a portion, in fact, of Nicholas of Cusa’s life. When looked at in its entirety, his extraordinary career

²⁹ Eric Meuthen, Sketch, 125.
³⁰ Pauline Moffit Watts, Nicolaus, 9.
³¹ Pauline Moffit Watts, Nicolaus, 134.
³² Ernst Cassirer, Individual, 60. Emphasis in the original.
resembles the achievements of two people compressed into the lifetime of one. Along with attending to his many tasks as a papal legate and Cardinal, and the vast amount of associated travel, Cusa was a prolific author, writing extensively in the fields of theology, philosophy, mathematics, and political theory. Chief among that collection of publications is *De docta ignorantia* (*On Learned Ignorance*, 1440), a work of interest to this thesis for it is here that we encounter for the first time Cusa’s signature use of the philosophical concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of opposites. In grasping this idea, we grasp much about Cusa’s mind and the motivations of his bridge-building life.

The doctrine of coincidence occupies an ‘utterly pivotal position’ within Cusa’s system of thought and may be summarized as follows. The principles of reason call on us to distinguish between opposites. A red light is not a green light, a circle is not a square, a liquid is not a solid, and so on. In this way, we delineate between one thing and another in order to define it and, thereby, know what it is. To *de-fine* is ‘to make finite’, to discriminate between one thing and another by comparing, distinguishing, and defining, in order to provide precise knowledge regarding what a particular thing *is* (and what it *is not*).

Yet this method of comparing and distinguishing in order to define is precisely why reason breaks down in the course of any attempt to attain knowledge of that which transcends all limits, that which cannot be ‘made finite’ - namely, that which is infinite. Fundamental to Cusa’s understanding of God, as we will discover, is God’s absolute infinity. Knowledge of God may be attained only when we apprehend that God, who is beyond definition, is encountered only as we transcend finite limitations. It is only as we transcend knowledge as distinction and definition, as applied by the methods of reason, that we may also begin to

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34 ‘The concept of *infinitas absoluta* is the primary perspective of all Cusanus’ decisions attempting to express God’s being as an absolute.’ David Monaco, *Nicholas of Cusa: Trinity, Freedom and Dialogue* (Munster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2016), 121.
perceive God at a point of mystery within which distinctions coincide. Then, and only then, have we begun to perceive the path to the knowledge of God. In apprehending this place, as if entering into a cloud or a mist, we begin to perceive a path to the knowledge of God as the One in whom all ‘contradictories’ are enfolded (*complicata*). Here, where the mystery seems most impenetrable, at a place Cusa describes as ‘beyond the wall of Paradise’, we approach God. As we read in *De visione Dei*,

Hence, I experience the necessity for me to enter into obscuring mist and to admit the coincidence of opposites, beyond all capacity of reason, and to seek truth where impossibility appears. And when - beyond that [rational capacity] and beyond every most lofty intellectual ascent as well – I come to that which is unknown to every intellect and which every intellect judges to be very far removed from the truth, there You are present, my God, You who are Absolute Necessity. And the darker and more impossible that obscuring haze of impossibility is known to be, the more truly the Necessity shines forth and the less veiled it draws near and is present.

Hence, this distinction – which is inside the wall of coincidence – where the distinct and the indistinct coincide – precedes all comprehensible otherness and diversity. For the wall is the limit of the power of every intellect, although the eye looks beyond the wall in to Paradise. But that which the eye sees, it can neither speak of nor understand.

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35 *DVD*, chapter 9, paragraph 39.

36 *DVD*, chapter 9, paragraph 38. Further, from *DVD* chapter 3, paragraph 9, ‘But since God is the Absolute Form of all formable forms, he enfolds in Himself the forms of all things … So although on the basis of one form we ascribe to Him moving and on the basis of another form we ascribe to Him remaining-at-rest, nevertheless because He is Absolute Form in which all otherness is oneness and all diversity is identity, there cannot be in him a diversity of forms; for his diversity, as we conceive it, is not identity itself.’

37 The full section reads, ‘Hence the plurality which I see in You my God is otherness without otherness, because it is otherness which is identity. For when I see that the Loving is not the Loveable and that the Union is neither the Loving not the Loveable, then it is not in the following manner that I see the Loving not to be the Loveable: viz., as if the Loving were one thing and the Loveable another thing. Rather, I see that the distinction between the Loving and the Loveable occurs on the inner side of the wall of the coincidence of oneness and otherness. Hence, this distinction – which is inside the wall of coincidence – where the distinct and the indistinct coincide – precedes all comprehensible otherness and diversity. For the all is the limit of the power of every intellect, although the eye looks beyond the wall in to Paradise. But that which the eye sees, it can neither speak
Although we can never define God using the principles of reason, Cusa believed that we may attain knowledge of God as the coincidence of opposites through this form of mystical apprehension.\(^{38}\) Knowledge of God comes by mystical apprehension to the seeker who is able to see this path that surpasses all distinction; a knowledge of the infinite God who encompasses all our finite conjectures.\(^{39}\)

Cusa’s embrace of the knowledge of God as coincidentia oppositorum does not mean that he failed to respect reason. Rather, he believed he understood the limits of reason, and sought to limit over-confidence in its application when the knowledge being sought was knowledge of God.\(^{40}\) Cusa’s mind would proceed, writes Michel de Certeau, ‘on the basis of theoretical excesses: conceptual “flashes” outrun, overflow, and disrupt the formal course of reasoning; they have the capacity of bringing surprise into the analysis and thus of renewing

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\(^{38}\) It is important to understand that God is not the coincidence of opposites. Rather, what Cusa describes as coincidentia oppositorum is that place where knowledge of God becomes a possibility. This in fact represents a significant change in Cusa’s use of the term. Within De docta ignorantia, God is the coincidence of opposites. However, by the time Cusa writes De visione Dei, he has developed a nuanced understanding whereby coincidentia oppositorum becomes a point, a breakthrough locus, beyond which human knowledge of God is possible. See Nancy Hudson, Becoming, 103 ff.

\(^{39}\) Louis Dupre observes, ‘Yet that mystical quality receives a solid intellectual foundation in his purely theoretical works. The mind’s cognitive conatus [effort] that results in a coincidentia oppositorum, a collapse of its distinctions, methods and powers, underlines from the beginning an implicit drive towards a vision of God, an obscure encounter with the One who is beyond all distinctions, methods, and human potential.’ Luis Dupre, ‘The Mystical Theology of Nicholas of Cusa’s De Visione Dei’ in Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church, edited by Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 207.

it’. Acknowledging our inability to comprehend God does not denote a lack of enlightenment. On the contrary, it is a sign of wisdom, namely, the wisdom Cusa called learned ignorance - *de docta ignorantia*, the title of that famous work. For this and his other contributions to Western intellectual history, Cusa has been described as Germany’s finest fifteenth century philosopher, ‘one of the most original intellects of the fifteenth century’, and ‘the first great modern thinker’.

While assessments such as these indicate Cusa was indeed a person who spent a great deal of time engaged by intellectual endeavour, and expressing that endeavour in written and spoken word, he was not content with the labours of the mind alone. He also turned his hand to cartography, producing what is now considered the second oldest map of Europe. He also invented instruments for measuring the depth of water and the amount of moisture in the air. It is not without warrant, then, that Nicholas is often called a Renaissance man; ‘one of those few people to whom the typical Renaissance idea of *uomo universale* may apply.’ George Sarton, in his study of the early scientists of the Renaissance, has captured Cardinal Cusa well

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45 Ernst Cassirer, *Individual*, 15 & 36. While it does not diminish Cassirer’s assessment of Cusa’s mind, Johannes Hoff’s important concern about the notion that Cusa was a ‘modern’ thinker should be noted. ‘Nothing justifies the assumption of Ernst Cassirer – which informed his ingenious (mis-) reading of Nicholas of Cusa – that every paradigm-shifting artistic or philosophical mind of the early Renaissance can be interpreted as a forerunner of Kant and the modern philosophy of subjectivity.’ Johannes Hoff, *Analogical*, xxi.  
48 Pim Valkenberg, ‘Sifting the Qur’an: Two forms of Interreligious Hermeneutics in Nicholas of Cusa’ in *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe*, edited by David Cheetham et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 28.
in describing him as ‘a Prince of the church but also a philosopher; a man of science with bold ideas, a forerunner of Erasmus.’

Despite the high regard in which his intellectual legacy is held, neither Nicholas nor his writings have been widely studied in the period since his death, and his followers have been a relatively small number of mainly Catholic theologians and philosophers, along with a handful of scientists and, of course, historians of the Renaissance. One might say that Cusa’s light has been hidden under a bushel. Hidden until now, that is, for the times may be turning to suit Nicholas of Cusa once more.

It was Edmund Burke wrote that the study of history unrolls a great volume of instruction replete with future wisdom. The future has unfolded after Nicholas’ death in ways that he could not, of course, have imagined. Yet our context now holds striking resemblances to his own. Indeed, as we will discuss in chapter four, when we outline the contextual warrant for proposing De visione Dei as a resource for theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, the resonance between Cusa’s time and today is striking. That contextual comparison will lead us directly to the defining event of Cusa’s time, the fall of Constantinople, and to what is perhaps the defining event of our own, the attacks on New York on 11 September 2001 and their aftermath. The echoes from the time in which Cusa wrote De visione Dei to our post-9/11 era are intriguing. Yet that discussion will come later, as it is now time to examine the work that Cusa wrote in the immediate aftermath of Constantinople’s demise, a text he often called his Libellus iconae, the ‘little book on the icon’.

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51 Johannes Hoff, Analogical, 27.
If we are to make a case for the potential that *De visione Dei* presents as a resource to theological and practical engagement with religious diversity, it is important to establish why the book was written. We need to ensure that our intention, which is to propose *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, does not clash with Cusa’s intentions in writing the text in the first place. We have set out, in our Introduction, the questions we are seeking to answer in this thesis: are there warrants to justify placing *De visione Dei* into conversation with this field, and what resources might the text contain for this area of theological work? We should first of all ask, which questions were on Nicholas of Cusa’s mind as he set out to write the text, and how does he go about answering them? It is to those questions that we now turn.

During the early 1450’s, Cusa was engaged by regular correspondence from the monks at Saint Quirin’s Monastery in the Bavarian town of Tegernsee, which is located not far from the border that today separates Germany and Austria. Cusa is thought to have held a special affection for the Tegernsee monks, as their monastery was located within his diocese and he had stayed with them during his travels. Their correspondence with Cusa indicates that the monks were wrestling with questions about the nature of mystical theology. This is not surprising. The

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52 Four hundred and fifty-four of the letters between Cusa and the monks at St Quirin’s have been preserved in Munich’s Staatbibliothek. Andrea Hollingsworth, ‘Nicholas of Cusa’s Mystical Theology in Theological and Scientific Perspective’ in *Theology as Interdisciplinary Inquiry*, edited by Robin W. Lovin and Joshua Mauldin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 70.

53 Cusa’s letter of 16 September 1454 to the Abbott of St Quirin’s, Gaspar Airmdorfffer, reveals there were times when he longed to join the quiet life of his friends at the Tegernsee monastery. Noted in Cassirer, op. cit., 38 n. 40 and Hollmann, *Religious Concordance*, 192. Jasper Hopkins writes of the relationship between Cusa and the St Quirin’s Abbey, ‘With the Tegernsee monks, and in particular with their abbott, Caspar Aynndorff, Nicholas enjoyed exceptionally cordial relations … The Tegernsee monks, for their part, avidly solicited new works from Nicholas, works which they diligently copied and intently studied.’ Hopkins, *Nicholas*, 3.
monks and Cusa were living through an era of renewal in vernacular mysticism, seen most clearly in the ideal of the *devotio moderna*. Cusa may have personally known of the *devotio moderna* because he is thought to have received his early education from the Brothers of the Common Life at Deventer, the community in which the movement was born. Furthermore, in addition to mysticism’s popular form, there was at the same time an emerging scholarly interest in mysticism, which saw texts and handbooks written to establish methods designed to place mystical theology on a rigorous intellectual foundation. Thus, mystical experience and mystical theology were gaining attention and interest among both the laity and the clergy throughout Germany. As Meredith Ziebart has observed,

Fifteenth-century theological debate witnesses an intensification of concern regarding the relation between faith and reason and the compatibility of philosophy with Christian theology. In the universities, this expressed itself in the virulent conflicts between followers of the *via antiqua* (old way) and followers of the *via moderna* (modern way) that came to be known as the *Wegestreit* (dispute over the ways). In the monastic realm, it manifested in debates over the nature and practice of mystical theology. A prominent example of the latter is the Tegernsee Debate over mystical theology.

54 Bernard McGinn explains a significant problem for modern interpretations of mysticism. ‘For those who view mysticism as primarily a matter of personal accounts of ecstatic experiences of God, Nicholas of Cusa can hardly merit more than a footnote in this story. From this perspective, Nicholas (by self-confession) appears to have been a failed mystic. If, however, mysticism is more than purportedly autobiographical accounts of such a kind, but rather involves serious intellectual consideration of how contact between God and human transforms the awareness of the human subject - from the data of external and internal perception, through the subject’s attempts to understand and evaluate what these mean in terms of affirmation of truth and commitment to action - then mysticism takes on a different character.’ McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany, 1300-1500* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2005), 108.


It was within that ‘Tegernsee debate over mystical theology’ that Cusa became entangled, and it was as a contribution to that debate that *De visione Dei* was written.

Mystical theology is a tradition of Christian thought that explores how to obtain knowledge of God through practices that encompass and yet reach beyond cognitive understanding - beyond the intellect alone.\(^{58}\) Apophatic theology, although distinctly its own tradition, resonates within mystical theology. Seeking to preserve the idea that the nature of God is a transcendent mystery, apophatic theology employs ways to speak of God, and practices to contemplate God, which look beyond created categories of thought and sensation to the One who simply cannot be comprehended.\(^{59}\) Thus, apophatic theology ventures to speak about the nature of God only by stating what God is not. It is clear from their correspondence with Cusa that the monks had already studied his book *De docta ignorantia* (On Learned

\(^{58}\) Jean Gerson (1363-1429), a near contemporary of Cusa, whose writings were significant within the fifteenth-century controversy, is a helpful example from whom to sample what was meant by the term mystical theology. Of Gerson and mystical theology, Jasper Hopkins writes, ‘Mystical theology, then, is not theology in the sense of being a series, or a system, of theological propositions. Rather, for Gerson, it is theology in a twofold sense: primarily in the sense of being a knowledge of God, where the word “knowledge” has reference to the soul’s experiencing the unitive embrace of the one whom it recognizes to be incomparably desirable - and secondarily in the sense of being instruction about what this experience of God is and about how it is attainable.’ Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas*, 5. Emphasis in the original.

\(^{59}\) Roberta C. Bondi, ‘Apohatic Theology’, in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1994), 32. Apophatic theology speaks of and approaches God only by first acknowledging that human thought can never conceptualize God; thus God is *life* and yet is beyond our human concept of life. An interesting recent example of apophatic theology prepared, unusually, by a Western theologian, is Douglas John Hall’s *What Christianity is Not: An Exercise in ‘Negative’ Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013). Hall writes, ‘In its quest for religious certitude and political ascendance, Western Christianity in particular has too often ignored or obscured the transcendent mystery that gave and gives rise to faith in the first place. “Negative” or *apophatic* theology aims to preserve that mystery through the development, in the Christian community, of a critical vigilance against that tendency of the penultimate to claim ultimacy.’ xvii.
Ignorance) and, therefore, they knew Cusa to be well-versed in mystical and apophatic theology.60

Among the central ideas the monks had encountered in De docta ignorantia was the concept of learned ignorance. As a consequence of their study of De docta ignorantia, a question had been provoked yet remained unresolved for the monks at Saint Quirin’s. What is this ‘learned ignorance’ that enables a union with God, and how may we achieve it?61 That question, and their debate about the nature of mystical theology, located the monks within this wider controversy of the fifteenth century. The controversy was focused, as we have noted, on the methods of mystical theology. That controversy, too, may be summarised in the form of a question. Is it the cognitive power of the intellect or the affective desire of the will that allows union with God? Put another way, is the mind or the heart the place at which we are open, or opened, to an encounter with God? Further, if our answer should be that it is a combination of both, does the head or the heart take the lead?

Cusa himself took an intellectual approach to mystical theology, yet he also recognised the integrity of mystical experience, thus making him an unusual blend of the scholastic and mystical strands of late medieval theology.62 Cusa was sensitive to the fine line between the mind and heart, and his approach to the central conundrum of this fifteenth century controversy

60 Joshua Hollmann, Religious Concordance, 193 n.94. One member of the Tegernsee community, Bernard of Waging, was sufficiently inspired by De docta ignorantia that he wrote his own response entitled Laudatorium doctae ignorantiae (In Praise of Learned Ignorance, 1452).


over mystical theology was nuanced and innovative.63 His answer therefore emerges as a combination of both mind and heart, with the intellect at the lead. As Ernst Cassirer observes:

In the mystical theology of the fifteenth century two fundamental tendencies stand sharply opposed to each other; the one bases itself on the intellect; the other considers the will to be the basic force and organ of union with God. In this dispute, Cusanus sides emphatically with the former. True love of God is \textit{amor Dei intellectualis}: it includes knowledge as a necessary element and a necessary condition. No one can love what he has not, in some sense, known.64

The true vehicle of human apprehension of God, for Cusa, is the \textit{visio intellectualis}, an intellectual vision understood to be an amalgam of the cognitive and the senses, which leads the believer into the ‘density and darkness where contradictions coincide.’65 Put another way, the human capacity to apprehend God comes in a vision that stands beyond the rational theology of the scholastics and beyond the sensual theology of the mystics, and yet it is enabled by both. Importantly for Cusa, the intellect is the foundation. Cusa believed that the will, the desire of the heart, must presume upon a cognitive knowing, because it is impossible for the heart to desire something it does not know. ‘All true love is based on an act of knowledge.’66

This fifteenth-century controversy over the means by which we may obtain knowledge of God, whether via the mystical, or scholastic, or a convergence of the two, was the context in which Cusa received the aforementioned correspondence from the monks at Tegernsee, which outlined their confusion about mystical theology. While the precise date is unknown, some time prior to 22 September 1452 the Abbott of St Quirin’s, Caspar Ayndorff, wrote to

\begin{itemize}
  \item 63 ‘With this, indeed, a new path was taken in theo-logy’, Ernst Cassirer, \textit{Individual}, 15.
  \item 64 Ernst Cassirer, \textit{Individual}, 13.
  \item 65 ‘According to mystical theology, maintains Nicholas, the soul rises upward unto God not by altogether suspending the operation of the intellect (\textit{non linquendo intellectum}), as Vincent (of Aggsbach) would have us believe; rather, the intellect must discern that the soul is entering into the density and darkness where contradictions coincide.’ Jasper Hopkins, \textit{Nicholas}, 16.
  \item 66 Ernst Cassirer, \textit{Individual}, 52.
\end{itemize}
Cusa on behalf of all the Tegernsee brothers to seek the Cardinal’s advice on mystical theology. Ayndorffer asked,

Whether the devout soul, without the exercise of the intellect or even without a preceding or simultaneous exercise of it, could attain God by affection alone or by the summit of the mind which they call *synderesis* and be moved or carried immediately within Him.  

Cusa replied,

Everything that is loved or chosen by reason of the good is not loved without any knowledge of the good, because it is loved by reason of the good. There is therefore in all such love by which one is conveyed to God, *knowledge*, although we may be ignorant of what it is that we love. It is therefore the coincidence of knowledge and ignorance, or learned ignorance.

As Cusa and Ayndorffer continued to write to one another on this subject, their correspondence was soon enlivened by the intervention of additional correspondents who wrote to Ayndorffer to strongly oppose Cusa’s view, and against whom Cusa was drawn to defend himself in yet more letters to the Abbott. Cusa continued to reiterate in those letters his view that those who seek unification with God through love can only do so on the basis of some type of knowledge. Without that founding knowledge, how may we be assured that the mystical seeker would not be led astray? ‘It is necessary’, Cusa wrote to Ayndorffer on 14 September 1453, ‘that every lover, rising ignorantly to union with the beloved, attain some knowledge first, because the inwardly unknown is neither loved nor found, and even if it is found, it is not grasped.’

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69 Vincent of Aggsbach, in particular, ‘locked horns’ with Cusa over the roles of love and knowledge in the process of mystical ascent. Vincent’s *Treatise by a Certain Carthusian on Mystical Theology* was written in June 1453 as a direct contradiction of Cusa’s advice to the Tegernsee monks. See Meredith Ziebart, ‘Laying Siege’, 41-48.
In what was to mark a significant escalation to the ‘Tegernsee debate’, Cusa announced to Ayndorffer, in that same letter of 14 September 1453, that he would send the brothers a copy of a painting by Roger van der Weyden, along with a book, which was to serve as a guide to mystical theology and the desire to attain knowledge of God. A little later still, in a letter dated 23 October 1453, Cusa confirmed to Ayndorffer that the text was complete and would be sent as soon as it can be copied.71 The precise date of the arrival of Cusa’s book at St Quirin’s is not known.72 However, records show that the book itself was being copied by the monks, and then circulated to other interested readers, in the first half of 1454.73 The book now being copied was the treatise which Cusa called his ‘little book on the icon’, and which is commonly known today as De visione Dei.74

Cusa addressed the first lines of De visione Dei to the importance of the questions which had prompted him to write the treatise, and his fond regard for those who had sent them.

I will now make known the things I previously promised you, beloved brothers, regarding the ready accessibility of mystical theology. For I esteem you, whom I know to be motivated by zeal for God, to be worthy of having disclosed to you this assuredly most precious and most abundant treasure. First of

71 Meredith Ziebart, ‘Laying siege’, 62 n. 49.
72 Jasper Hopkins believes ‘we may judge reliably that Nicholas was finished with De Visione Dei by the end of 1453’. Hopkins takes as his guide the fact that, although we do not have the date of Ayndorffer’s letter thanking Cusa for the treatise, we do know it was sent well before February 12, 1454, for that is the date of Cusa’s letter in reply to Ayndorffer’s note thanking him for De visione Dei. Hopkins, Nicholas, 17.
74 Louis Dupre writes ‘De visione Dei constitutes the more extensive answer Cusanus had promised in his reply of September 14. Vincent of Aggsbach, who had attacked Gerson and was to attack De visione Dei, had correctly perceived that the entire issue turned around the interpretation of Dionysius’ “dark contemplation”. How could what surpassed all understanding be cognitive? On the other hand, how could one love without knowing what to love? For Cusanus, as for Denys the Carthusian, who may have influenced his position, intellectual apprehension precedes unitive love. What renders this apprehension “dark” is that knowledge at its highest point destroys all its own distinctions and becomes a conscious not-knowing. The intellect discerns that it enters a region where contradictories coincide, and hence the usual clarity of knowledge no longer pertains.’ Dupre, ‘The Mystical Theology of Nicholas of Cusa’s De Visione Dei’ in Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church, edited by Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 206.
all, I pray the Heavenly Word and Omnipotent Expression, who alone can make Himself known, that I be given the ability to explain – in proportion to your ability to comprehend – the wonders which are revealed beyond all sensible, rational, and intellectual sight. But I will attempt to lead you – by way of experiencing and through a very simple and very common means – into most sacred darkness.\textsuperscript{75} Cusa’s desire to lead the monks into that sacred darkness, ‘by way of experiencing and through a very simple and very common means’, prompted him to provide them with not only a treatise but also a practical experience. It was, in fact, an experimental exercise. Therefore, this little book on the icon is both a written explanation of how knowledge of God may be obtained as well as an experimental exercise designed to demonstrate the deeper insights of that explanation. The monks had approached Cusa seeking an elaboration of his writings on the meaning of learned ignorance, a concept they had first encountered in \textit{De docta ignorantia}. They were now in possession of a theological explanation and a prayerful meditation about how the many - Cusa’s readers - may obtain an intellectual vision of the One, all of which is prefaced by an experimental experience in which they were asked to take part before reading the book.\textsuperscript{76} It is to that exercise that we now turn.

\textit{Libellus Iconae}

Of all his writings, it is \textit{De visione Dei} that epitomises Cusa’s dedication to the epistemological importance of particularity when seeking to apprehend universal truth and, secondly, to the value and indeed necessity of taking account of multiple perspectives when seeking to understand that which is infinite. Further, it is this treatise that best demonstrates experientially Cusa’s assertion that the knowledge of God comes as \textit{coincidentia oppositorum}, the coincidence of opposites, and, in so doing, \textit{De visione Dei} exemplifies what Cusa means when

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{DVD}, preface, paragraph 1.

\textsuperscript{76} ‘How the many come to “see” that they are all “seen” by that One and, finally, that which leads to a deepened vision of the One who sees them all.’ Jasper Hopkins, \textit{Nicholas}, 16.
he speaks of the mystical apprehension of God as a visio intellectualis. To appreciate the ideas and insights of the text itself, it is especially important to visualise and hold in one’s imagination the exercise with which it begins. The exercise and the text that follows are complimentary components of a single learning experience. Therefore, albeit as an inadequate substitute for the exercise itself, we will take a moment to describe and reflect on the exercise set out by Cusa in those opening pages.

As the centrepiece for De visione Dei’s exercise, Cusa sent a large painting that he described as figura cuncta videntis, a ‘figure of the all-seeing’; a figure from which there emanated a gaze so all-encompassing that it appeared to follow all of its viewers at the same time. It is intriguing, first of all, to ponder what that all-encompassing gaze looked like. Cusa placed clues within the text that invited the monks to draw certain conclusions about the nature of the figura.

In describing his choice of the image, Cusa referred, firstly, to a Brussels painting by Roger van der Weyden, in which Cusa himself had found an example of an all-seeing gaze. More pointedly, however, Cusa then also referred to the Veronica painting in his chapel in Koblenz, which he explained was a replica of the famous vera icona, or ‘true icon’, displayed and venerated in Rome during the Middle Ages. It was popularly believed that Rome’s vera icona was identical to the cloth into which, according to Christian tradition, Jesus pressed his bloodied and sweaty face as he walked to the cross. Veronica, later Saint Veronica, of whom tradition holds that it was she who was healed of haemorrhaging after touching the cloak of Jesus, as recorded in chapter nine of St Matthew’s Gospel, was thought to have handed the
cloth to Jesus in the streets of Jerusalem. By connecting the figura he had sent to Tegernsee with the vera icona in Rome, Cusa will have brought to mind for the monks an image they all would have heard about, if not seen with their own eyes.

It is further significant that Cusa specifically referred to the painting he had dispatched as, not only an all-seeing gaze, but also ‘an icon of God’. Thus, we are also able to glean that this figure of the all-seeing was not an artistic image of an eye alone but, rather, an image of a human face. It was a face likened, by reference to the vera icona, to the face of Christ. Furthermore, it was a face precisely described, as we have noted, as an icon. Icons are associated today with the worship and practices of the Orthodox Church, yet they were more widely known across the entirety of the church in the fifteenth century. Icons were images painted, typically, on wooden pallets and were believed, based on a long-honoured though contested theology of incarnation, to provide access to that which was painted upon them. That is to say, the icon provided access to a reality in the form of an image; the presence of truth incarnate in the icon.

Constantine Cavarnos describes the traditional uses of icons as beautifying churches, instructing the faithful, a challenge to imitate ancestors in the faith, all of which is intended to transform and sanctify the character of the contemplator. Thus, the icon is a symbol ‘leading the soul from the visible to the invisible, from the material to the spiritual, from the symbol to the prototype or original which it represents.’ Cusa, by referring to Roger van der Weyden’s all-seeing face and Rome’s vera icona, and by naming the dispatched image as an icon, will

80 DVD, chapter 1, paragraph 6. 
82 Constantine Cavarnos, Orthodox Iconography (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Greek Studies, 1977), 30-33. 
83 Constantine Cavarnos, Orthodox, 33.
have aroused an expectation among the monks at Tegernsee that the exercise they were about to undertake was designed to enable a beatific vision of God.

If I strive to convey you by human means unto divine things, then I must do this through a likeness. Now, among human works I have not found an image more suitable to our purpose than the image of someone omnivoyant, so that his face, through subtle pictorial artistry, is such that it seems to behold everything around it.  

With his introductory remarks about the figura complete, and hoping the monks would now be ready not only to see the icon but also pass deeply into the truth it would incarnate, Cusa asked the brothers at Saint Quirin’s to set that icon against a wall and form a semi-circle around it. The exercise designed to demonstrate how it is that we may obtain knowledge of God begins. ‘Hang this icon somewhere, e.g., on the north wall’ Cusa wrote, ‘and you brothers stand around it, at a short distance from it, and observe it.’ Cusa then instructed the monks to undertake his exercise, which unfolds in three distinct phases.

1. The monks were first of all asked to look upon the icon in silence, as if looking upon the face of God, while standing motionless in a semi-circle formation. In this first phase, Cusa hoped that each participant would perceive ‘how diligently [the gaze] is concerned for each one, as if it were concerned for no one else, but only for him who experiences that he is seen’.

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84 *DVD*, Preface, paragraph 2.
85 *DVD*, Preface, paragraph 3.
86 *DVD*, Preface, paragraph 4.
‘To the brother who is situated in the east it will seem that the face is looking toward the east; to the brother in the south, that the face is looking toward the south; to the brother in the west, that is it looking westward.’

2. The monks were next asked to walk from west to east, and back again, still holding their silence, while keeping their eyes fixed at all times upon the gaze of the icon. In that second phase, Cusa hoped that each participant would perceive that the gaze never leaves him, for ‘the icon’s gaze proceeds continually with him’ and ‘does not desert him’ even while he is moving.

‘Next, let the brother who was in the east situate himself in the west, and he will experience the [icon’s] gaze as fixed on him in the west, just as it previously was in the east.’

3. In the third and final phase of the exercise, the monks were asked to break their silence and speak to one another of their experience. In this third phase, the moment of dialogue, Cusa hoped that the monks would discover that which is most extraordinary of all, namely, that the gaze had followed each one of them simultaneously and had never left any one of them, even those walking in contrary directions.

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87 DVD, Preface, paragraph 3.
88 DVD, Preface, paragraph 4.
89 DVD, Preface, paragraph 3.
‘And so, through the disclosure of the respondent [each monk] will come to know that the face does not desert anyone who is moving - not even those who are moving in opposite directions’.\textsuperscript{90}

It is the third phase of the exercise that releases Cusa’s deceptively simple yet profound insight. Whereas each monk could see, while silently standing still, or silently moving from side to side, that the gaze of the icon was always resting upon him, the insight that the gaze is simultaneously also resting upon them all is dependent on the final phase in Cusa’s exercise, in which their silence is broken. This is the phase of listening to their fellow brothers and trusting what they hear.\textsuperscript{91}

And suppose he asks the approaching brother whether the icon’s gaze moves continually with him. Thereupon he will be told that the gaze is also moved in this opposite manner; and he will believe his fellow-monk. And unless he believed, he would not apprehend that this simultaneous opposition of motion was possible. And so, through the disclosure of the respondent [each monk] will come to know that the face does not desert anyone who is moving - not even those who are moving in opposite directions.\textsuperscript{92}

Johannes Hoff has examined the insights made available by Cusa through \textit{De visione Dei}’s exercise around the icon with an unusual depth of feeling and understanding. Hoff focuses our attention on the interplay of perspectives, and on the importance to the exercise of sight, hearing, and trust in Cusa’s experiment.

Our visual perception is always linked to a specific perspective: I can never see directly from my perspective what another might see from hers. That my perception is ‘subjective’ might appear to be the most evident common knowledge in our post-modern world. But how did I learn to know that I cannot see what other individuals see? My ability to know that my ‘subjective perception’ is ‘contracted’

\textsuperscript{90} DVD, Preface, paragraph 4.

\textsuperscript{91} Johannes Hoff, \textit{Analogical}, 30.

\textsuperscript{92} DVD, Preface, paragraph 4.
(limited) to an individual perspective presupposes that I have learned to believe what other people have revealed to me in words. It is for this reason that Cusa exhorts his monks to listen and to believe.93

Only the dialogue of perspectives can disclose for us both the contracted nature of our subjective perception and the seemingly limitless opportunity to expand that perspective found in the habit of listening to those who stand elsewhere. It is here that we begin to perceive the imaginative wisdom of Cusa’s speculations around the icon, both in their theological and epistemological implications. The gaze of God is so generous upon us that we can mistakenly assume we are its sole recipients. However, as we listen with trust to the witness of other perspectives, and learn through that dialogue about the limitations of our own perspective, we begin to attain an even fuller vision of the One we see. The One we now believe, in fact, sees us all. By listening to the witness of sisters and brothers who stand in another place, who see the all-seeing from a different point of view, we begin to perceive that there are things invisible to us that are yet visible to them. In fact, our very awareness of the possibility and presence of the invisible comes only through listening to those who speak to us from different perspectives.

If I am looking at someone who reveals to me that she is seeing something that I cannot see from my perspective (e.g., myself), I am starting to perceive that there is something invisible to me. Cusa’s conviction that the invisible is visible is related to this experience. I am familiar with the reality of the invisible since I have learned to listen to other people. I do not know that the viewpoint of other people is inaccessible to me; I can see the invisible whenever I look at a face that is able to look at me.94

H. Lawrence Bond has explained the significance of Cusa’s iconic exercise in De visione Dei by studying the patterns of the use of icons in Cusa’s context. Bond writes,

Cusanus’ treatise seems to join a western and Benedictine spirituality of lectio to a Byzantine spirituality of gazing. Cusanus’ icon becomes text; his text and the reader become icons. Not only does Cusanus supply a material icon for the monks to use, but he makes both text and the contemplator iconic. De visione Dei is

93 Johannes Hoff, Analogical, 30 and 31. Emphasis in the original.
94 Johannes Hoff, Analogical, 31.
intended to be read much in the way an icon is to be ‘read’ but requires such a hermeneutical shift in the reader that the contemplative reader also becomes figura, icon, and text. The text is crafted to ‘picture’ by its own rhetorical form and within a variety of linguistic devices so as not merely to ‘signify’ but, in the manner of icons, to transpose the reader from the experiential state of a contemplator to that of one who is himself contemplated and to convey the reader from one contemplative state to another.95

The unifying thread throughout Cusa’s treatise is this visio Dei, the vision of God. That phrase refers both to the mystery of God’s gaze, which, though unlimited and ungraspable, nevertheless enfolds all things, as well as the mystery of the human gaze, which, though finite and contracted, begins itself to participate, or share, in the divine sight when it turns toward the infinite loving face in and by which each life is continually brought into being. In God’s infinite vision are enfolded the coincidence of subject and object, such that God’s gaze turns out to be the true meaning of the self’s own act of gazing upon God. Thus, within the exercise and remaining text of De visione Dei, gazing and being gazed upon become ‘a sort of possibility space in which the contemplator is guided to enter more and more into his best potential mode of existing.’96

How foolish is he who seeks You, who are Goodness, and yet while seeking You departs from You and turns away his eyes. For everyone who seeks seeks only the good, and everyone who seeks the good and departs from You departs from that which he seeks. Therefore, every sinner strays from You and goes

95 H. Lawrence Bond, ‘The “Icon” and the “Iconic Text” in Nicholas of Cusa’s De visione Dei’, in Nicholas of Cusa and His Age: Intellect and Spirituality, Essays Dedicated to the Memory of F. Edward Cranz, Thomas P. McTighe, and Charles Trinkaus, edited by Thomas M. Izbicki and Christopher M. Bellitto (Boston: Brill, 2002), 182. Further insight into the icon is offered by Tamara Albertini: ‘As in the Eastern iconography that was certainly known to Nicholas of Cusa the visitor to Constantinople, the concept of an icon is incomplete without its invisible side, extending in the realm “behind” it’. Tamara Albertini, ‘Mathematics and Astronomy’ in Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man, edited by Thomas M. Izbicki, Christopher M. Bellitto and Gerald Christianson (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 392-393.

farther away. But when he turns back to You, you cast Your eyes of mercy upon him with fatherly affection. Your showing mercy is nothing other than Your seeing. Hence, wherever any man goes Your mercy follows him for as long as he is alive, just as Your gaze, too, does not desert anyone … You, O Lord, are the companion for my journey; wherever I go Your eyes are always upon me. But Your seeing is Your moving. Therefore, You are moved with me; and You never cease moving as long as I am moved. If I am stationary, You are with me; if I ascend, You ascend; if I descend, You descend. In whatever direction I turn, You are present. And you do not desert me in the time of tribulation. As often as I call upon You, You are nearby; for to call upon You is to turn toward You … You, then, are my God, who sees all things.97

A Theological Vision

Having asked the brothers at Tegernsee to undertake this exercise around the icon, Cusa draws them back to a reconsideration of their experiences throughout the remainder of the text. By doing so, he uses the ‘paraliturgy’ of finite human sight and the infinite all-seeing gaze to develop his key theological and epistemological insights.98 The early and middle chapters of De visione Dei offer extended meditations on the seemingly opposing yet coincidental relationship between, on the one hand, the limited perspective of finite creatures and, on the other, the all-encompassing and infinite perspective of their Creator, ‘whose providential life-giving Face and gaze never abandons anyone.’99 The later chapters of De visione Dei develop Cusa’s theology of the incarnation, and consequently the Trinity, with an emphasis characteristic of Cusa on divine love, and theosis or divinization.100

97 DVD, chapter 5, paragraphs 16 and 17.
An especially important step is taken toward understanding the theological infrastructure of *De visione Dei* when we grasp the theological significance of two signature Cusan terms, *explicatio* (unfolded) and *complicatio* (enfolded). Both terms relate, in the first instance, to the manner in which Cusa understands God as creator. However, that understanding of unfolding and enfolding relative to God as creator also flows to Cusa’s Christology, and other significant features of his theology.\(^{101}\) Both *explicatio* (unfolded) and *complicatio* (enfolded) are crucial, for example, to Cusa’s affirmation that it is in fact possible for finite human beings to apprehend the infinite truth of God.\(^{102}\) Given their significance to Cusa’s theology as a whole, and to our appreciation of *De visione Dei*, a proper understanding of both terms is an important next step in this study of Cusa’s *visione*.

For Cusa, God the creator has unfolded (*explicatio*) all of creation in its plurality, diversity, and its many contradictions and yet, at the same time, that wondrously diverse unfolding of creation also remains enfolded (*complicatio*) in God. Therefore, all that God the creator has unfolded, in its rich differentiation, also coincides within God as an undifferentiated unity. Further, God is encountered within the unfolded diversity of life and yet is nevertheless transcending and embracing it; beyond it, within what Cusa mystically describes as ‘the wall of coincidence of enfolding and unfolding’ or, sometimes, ‘the wall of paradise’. A sample of Cusa’s theology of ‘unfolding’ and ‘enfolding’ is encountered within *De visione Dei* at chapters eleven and twelve:

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\(^{101}\) ‘[Cusa’s] view of the relationship between God and the world – between the One and the many – is shown through a close examination of the two most representative terms of the German philosopher’s speculation – *complicatio* and *explicatio*.’ Davide Monaco, *Nicholas of Cusa: Trinity, Freedom and Dialogue* (Munster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2016), 89.

\(^{102}\) Both *explicatio* and *complicatio* are also central ideas within Cusa’s pioneering work of inter-religious dialogue, *De pace fidei*, enabling him to conclude that the one God is worshipped in a variety of rites.
O Lord God, guide me unto Yourself by these pathways. For unless you guide, I cannot stay on the pathway - on account of the frailty both of my corruptible nature and of the earthen vessel that I carry about. Trusting in Your help, O Lord, I turn once again in order to find you beyond the wall of coincidence of enfolding and unfolding. And when at one and the same time I go in and out through the door of Your Word and Concept, I find most sweet nourishment. When I find you to be a power that enfolds all things, I go in. When I find you to be a power that unfolds, I go out. When I find you to be a power that both enfolds and unfolds, I go in and out. From creatures, I go in unto you, who are Creator - go in from the effects unto the Cause. I go out from you, who are Creator - go out from the Cause unto the effects. I both go in and out when I see that going out is going in and that, likewise, going in is going out. (By comparison, he who counts unfolds and enfolds, alike: he unfolds the power of oneness and he enfolds number in oneness.) For creation’s going out from You is creation’s going in unto You; and unfolding is enfolding.¹⁰³

O depth of riches, how incomprehensible You are! As long as I conceive of a creating creator, I am still on this side of the wall of Paradise. Similarly, as long as I conceive of a creatable creator, I have not yet entered in but am at the wall. But when I see You to be Absolute Infinity, to which belongs neither the name ‘creating creator’ nor the name ‘creatable creator’, then I begin to behold You unveiledly and to enter unto the source of delights. For You are not at all something such that it can be spoken of or conceived but are absolutely and infinitely exalted above all such things. Therefore, although without You nothing is made or can be made, You are not creator but are infinitely more than creator. To you be praise and glory forever and ever.¹⁰⁴

Against charges of pantheism, it should be noted that Cusa holds to an asymmetry between unfolding and enfolding. While not perfect, the manner in which Cusa uses the terms, and understands their imbalanced relationship, can be described relatively simply as follows. An unfolded thing cannot be directly derived from an enfolded thing, while that which is enfolded necessarily derives from a prior unfolding. Thus, that which is unfolded (creation) is derivative; it is the result of an unfolding from the One who first and thereafter enfolds it. This imperfect yet nevertheless rich interplay of terms and relations enables Cusa to use expressive language and imagery in order to describe, symbolically, the profound relatedness of creator


¹⁰⁴ DVD, chapter 12, paragraph 51.
and creation while still defending the freedom and infinity of God. Davide Monaco observes that, by describing creation as the enfolded unfolding of God, ‘Cusanus manages to defend both God’s freedom and omnipotence, along with the significance of the world and it being a theophany, trace, and manifestation of its creator.’\textsuperscript{105} Knut Alfsvag summarises Cusa’s theology of the unfolded creation, which remains enfolded in God, is a similar way:

\begin{quote}
God unfolds the world and the world enfolds in God. What happens is thus enclosed in God’s providence, but in a way that entails human freedom; it is at the same time necessary and contingent. The unfolded presence of God in the world allows for worship and praise as long as the unfolding is not conflated with God’s uncontracted reality, an error that lands the worshipper in the twin errors of pantheism and idolatry. God is present in all there is, but his eternal presence is still not identical with anything definable.\textsuperscript{106}
\end{quote}

Cusa’s theology of creation as the enfolded unfolding of God is the foundation of his understanding that, firstly, the transcendent and infinite God may be encountered and known in creation, secondly, that the transcendent and infinite truth may be known to finite humanity and, thirdly, it is also to these ideas that we may trace Cusa’s trust in the significance of dialogue, a topic we will address later in this thesis. Of current interest is the fact that these ideas also lead us to the explicitly Christological focus of \textit{De visione Dei}, for ‘the Christology of \textit{De visione Dei}, far from being an appendix, is crucial for the argument of the entire work.’\textsuperscript{107}

Cusa’s Christology plays a crucial role in his answer to the question from Tegernsee: How may we know God? We know God, Cusa believed, by becoming one with God. Nancy

\textsuperscript{105} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 89.
Hudson has described this understanding of knowing as participation in her work on the doctrine of theosis in Nicholas of Cusa.\(^\text{108}\) In proposing knowledge of God as union with God, as a process of becoming one with God, Cusa was adhering to a long-standing Christian tradition which has its roots in Greek philosophy.

Beginning with Aristotle and Theophrastus and developed by Plotinus and later Neoplatonists, true knowledge of something, especially of immaterial things, was not mere sensation but union with it. The modern assumption that knowledge of one thing by another requires a distance between the two, a distance allowing for observation and measurement, was unheard of. To know something was to encompass it completely, not to observe it dispassionately.\(^\text{109}\)

If knowledge of God is achieved for Cusa by becoming one with God, how is such a union possible? Cusa’s Christology now becomes integral to how this knowledge-as-union is achieved.

Unity with God is possible through our participation in the divine, the possibility of which we apprehend with the intellect and then make manifest in love. It is a unity which has been perfectly present in creation through Jesus Christ. The union of creator and creation is first of all the activity of God in Christ, and then of the loving response of humanity to God’s

\(^{108}\) ‘The origins of theosis, variously defined as becoming divine, identifying with God, and similitude or being closely united with the divine, can be traced to Neoplatonic philosophy. By the time of Nicholas of Cusa, however, it was not unprecedented in the Christian tradition. The Greek fathers had employed the concept, and it has enjoyed a long history in the Eastern Church ever since. From whom Cusanus himself acquired the notion is unknown.’ Nancy Hudson, *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 3.

grace. Cusa’s Christology, marked by these ideas of unfolding, enfolding, and participation, comes to the fore in *De visione Dei*. A concise articulation is found in chapter twenty-three:

O Jesus, most delectable food for the mind, when I behold You on the inner side of the wall of Paradise, You appear to me to be wonderful. For you are the humanified Word of God; and you are the deified man. Nevertheless, You are not ‘composed’, as it were, of God and man. Between components a comparative relation in necessary; without it there can be no composition. But there is no comparative relation of the finite to the Infinite. Furthermore, You are not the coincidence of creature and Creator in the way in which a coincidence causes one thing to be another thing. For the human nature is not divine, and vice versa. For the divine nature is not changeable or alterable into another nature, since it is Eternity itself.

Cusa describes the divine Word as the manner of God’s speaking to all creation, and as the concept through which God unfolds God’s divine reality within creation. This unfolded presence of God in the world is the loving activity of God the Father, which is lovable to those who behold its grace, and draws love itself as a response from those who behold and are enlivened by the reality of God’s presence among and within them. Yet for this speaking and unfolding of the divine Word to be more than mere word-play, it must have an unmistakeable manifestation, a union between creator and creation in which divinity is perfectly present within creation, and in which creation, too, is known in its ultimately perfected state.

Such a union would transcend all understanding, of course, for it would be a union between that which is infinitely different from all we know and that which is no different to what we know. Yet any union of Creator with creation cannot be a blending of the two. Such

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110 Nancy Hudson, *Becoming*, 106-107, pointing to the similarity of Cusa’s understanding of the Trinity to that of Augustine.

111 DVD, chapter 23, paragraph 100.


113 Knut Alfsvag, ‘*Explicatio* and *Complicatio*’, 305.
a mixture would place a limitation on the infinite - an impossibility in Cusa’s philosophy and a heterodoxy to the Christian tradition. Accordingly, Cusa wrote in his *De docta ignorantia*, ‘The realization of perfect createdness as the unlimited manifestation of the infinite in the finite would thus have to be conceived as a union of Creator and creature without confusion and composition and beyond all understanding.’\textsuperscript{114} Cusa believed the realization of this union to be present in Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus are met both the unfolded divine Word and the enfolded perfection of humanity; in him is found the *coincidentia oppositorum* of finitude and the Infinite. Cusa continues in *De visione Dei*:

Nor would any nature on account of its union to the divine pass over into another nature (as when an image is united to its truth). For in the case of that passing over, the nature could rightly be said to recede from otherness but could not rightly be said to be altered, because it would be united to its own Truth, which is Unalterability itself. O most sweet Jesus, You cannot be said, either, to be the uniting medium between the divine nature and the human nature, since between the two natures there cannot be posited a middle nature that participates in both. For the divine cannot be participated in, because it is completely and absolutely most simple. Moreover, in such case, Blessed Jesus, You would not be either God or man.\textsuperscript{115}

This is Cusa’s way of articulating what has been described as his essentially classic Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ.\textsuperscript{116} Knut Alfsvag summarises the Christological foundation of

\textsuperscript{114} Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* (On learned ignorance), translated by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001), Book III, chapter 2, 194, discussed in Alfsvag, ‘*Explicatio* and *Complicatio*’, 305-306.

\textsuperscript{115} *DVD*, chapter 23, paragraph 100.

\textsuperscript{116} ‘Nicholas follows the classic Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ. The unity of God and man in the person of Christ must not be viewed in such a way that it is God alone, for what is contracted does not change its contractedness. That is, union does not remove the particularity of humanity. Neither must it be viewed as purely man, because God does not let go of His divinity. It is also not true that the unity is a composite, for the essence of God and man cannot mingle with one another. According to Nicholas, “This union would be greater than all intelligible unions”. The incarnation is a mystery. But it is a mystery that is central to knowledge of
De visione Dei and Cusa’s characteristic emphases on coincidence and participation in the following way:

It is Christ who manifests and prefigures this coincidence. As a human, he demonstrates that the goal of human liberty is humanly achievable; as divine, he demonstrates that it is only achievable through participation in divinity. As the enfolded of all contractedness, Christ manifests the possibility of transcending the limitation of createdness. The full realization of human participation in divinity is therefore given with the perichoretic unity of God and a human in Christ.117

Thus for Cusa, knowledge of God comes through union with God, and the possibility of such a union has been made a reality in Jesus Christ. As the enfolded unfolding of the divine reality that is the Word of God, heard and met in creation, Christ manifests the fulfilment of our true humanity. He further opens the potential of such fulfilment, through participation, for us all. How, then, is our own union with God, and thereby our own knowledge of God, achieved? For Cusa, that the divine Word is unfolded in creation and met in Jesus of Nazareth is a concept understandable to the human intellect and, in that moment of understanding, faith becomes possible. Yet faith established in the intellect alone will not suffice, for the intellect simply prepares us for our union with God, a union which is then achieved through participatory love. When we love the one in whom the two natures are found in hypostatic union, we are united with God and, through that participatory love, in Cusa’s sense of knowledge of God as union with God, we know God in and through that loving participation.118 Our loving is our seeing, and our being seen is our being loved.

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118 Nancy Hudson, Becoming, 90, 109, and 120.
Introduction

We have thus far outlined the objective of this thesis, which is to advocate for Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. We have also introduced the academic field known as theology of religions, familiarized ourselves with Nicholas’ life, and introduced the content of *De visione Dei*.

The objective of the current chapter is two-fold. Firstly, we will seek to contextualise Cusa’s use of the symbols of light and vision in *De visione Dei* within the Christian tradition and, secondly, we will also provide a survey of current literature that is relevant to the purposes of this thesis. In so doing, we will gain an understanding of the manner in which *De visione Dei* has traditionally been interpreted, deepen our understanding of Cusa’s theology as expressed within *De visione Dei* and, in addition, we will note which of the writings of Cusa have been used as resources for the work of Christian theology of religions, and how they have been interpreted.

Our literature survey will show that *De visione Dei* has not yet been examined as a potential resource for theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. In fact, the text has rarely been engaged and only then to note that it does appear well-suited to making such a contribution. The present chapter will therefore set a foundation for the remaining chapters of the thesis, in which we will propose a series of warrants for engaging *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, take up once again our
discussion of the contemporary state of theology of religions in order to determine how Cusa’s vision might be of value, and then highlight two of the book’s central concepts as a way of demonstrating its potential for this arena of theology and practice.

**De Visione Dei and Mystical Theology**

*De visione Dei*; ‘On the Vision of God’. Where does such a treatise, with such a title, sit within the Christian theological tradition? Visions of the divine are prominent symbols within the Christian tradition. They are the legacy of Christianity’s Hebrew inheritance, along with that of the Greek world into which the movement swiftly spread from the middle of the first century onwards. Thus, in describing the possibility of a beatific vision of God, Cusa is the inheritor of an ancient tradition of Judaeo-Christian thought, the textual origins of which can be traced to the biblical witness.

The witness of the Old Testament is ambiguous regarding whether a vision of God in this life is possible and, if so, how that vision may be achieved. Texts can be located that affirm the possibility, and deny it. Nevertheless, evocative language about visions of the divine, and divine sight, are prominent when we explore the biblical record of the human-divine encounter. For example, at Exodus 33:20 we read of God telling Moses that ‘You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live.’ Yet Jacob, who claimed to have wrestled with God, is heard to say in Genesis 32:30, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ Isaiah 6:5 records that the prophet Isaiah had a vision of the Lord sitting on a lofty throne in the Temple and said, ‘my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’ Yet we read later at Isaiah 45:15, ‘Truly, you are a God who hides himself’. Toward the end of the ever-intriguing story of Job we read of Job saying to the Lord, at 42:5,

119 All biblical references drawn from *The Holy Bible* (New Revised Standard Version).
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you’.

It is in moving to the New Testament that the legacy of Greek ideas to the biblical witness becomes most evident. Along with stories of human vision of the divine, images of the divine as light also begin to feature. The significance of light and vision in Greek thought is frequently traced to Plato’s Republic, in which the source of all earthly being, knowledge, and beauty is described as the Good, and the Good is then equated symbolically with the Sun. This is significant because the light of the Sun, via this analogous link between Plato’s the Good and the Sun, is metaphorically endowed by Plato with metaphysical properties. It is the light which makes vision possible and therefore, through his analogy, Plato places vision superior to all other human senses. It is peculiar to our eyes, he claimed, that they sense things through an intermediary – the intermediary of light. The world becomes visible to us only because of the light. Further, just as our eyes link us through light with the source of all light, the Sun, so too the eyes of our mind link us, through contemplation, to the source of all knowledge, the Good.120

Perhaps the most readily recognised New Testament inheritor of the Greek symbolism of light and vision is John’s Gospel, where the divine Word is itself equated with light. At John 8:12 we read, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life’, and at 1:5, ‘The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.’ A further interesting New Testament example of the power of light is found in the story of Saul’s famous conversion on the road to Damascus, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, which followed a dramatic experience in which ‘a light from heaven flashed around

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him’. It was a light through which Paul encountered ‘the Lord’.\footnote{Acts 9: 3-5.} In addition, Matthew’s Gospel promises to those who are pure in heart that which was thought to be impossible, namely, a vision of God, when we read at Matthew 5:8, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God’.

Among the letters of the early church, First Timothy draws on the symbolism of light and vision in claiming of the Father, and of the Son, that ‘It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see’.\footnote{1 Timothy 6: 16.} First Corinthians also reflects these symbols when it speaks of our presently incomplete vision of God, which will one day be fulfilled; ‘For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully’.\footnote{1 Corinthians 13: 12.} As a final example, we may also note the beautiful affirmation at 2 Corinthians 4:6, ‘For it is God, who said “Let light shine out of the darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’

Thus, it is to biblical images such as these that we may trace the origins of the prominent place that vision, light, and the possibilities of seeing the Lord ‘face-to-face’ hold within the Christian tradition. The imagery of light and vision have become abiding symbols of the metaphysical connection of humanity, through the presence of the light, to the ‘Father of lights’\footnote{James 1: 17.}. Further, those same symbols have been deployed as an analogy to illustrate how cognitive contemplation may be endowed with metaphysical powers that connect our search for knowledge to the One who is the source of all knowledge. It was Plato’s followers, Plotinus most notably among them, who expanded this analogy into a metaphysics linking God with
humanity and the natural world. Plotinus developed the idea that Plato’s Good was also the absolutely unitary, self-caused cause of all that is, and that all life was inert until it received light from the Good; until it received its light from the source of all life.

Metaphors and metaphysical conjectures about transcendent light and vision flowed from the biblical witness into the traditions of the church. Augustine’s early writings, in particular, exhibit the contrast between the goodness of the light, and the evil darkness of this world, and later thinkers as diverse as the philosopher Scotus Eriugena, the mystic Meister Eckhart, the poet Dante Alighieri, and Saint Francis of Assisi, all considered the special relationship between light and knowledge, and seeing and thinking, as central to their understanding of reality. So, too, did Dionysius the Areopagite, who appears to have been ‘the most formative influence in [Cusa’s] way of thinking’. In the Neoplatonic tradition, within which we are now able to situate Cusa, and in which he follows his theological mentor Dionysius, beauty is regarded as edifying to the soul, and God’s beauty is seeable by the mind only insofar as the mind transcends itself. That is, God’s beauty is not able to be seen by the human mind; it is not conceivable. The beauty of God, the beatific vision of God, it is able to be seen only in so far as the mind comprehends it as something un-seeable; in the ‘sense’ that God is in fact seen as inconceivable.

Nevertheless, although Cusa followed this Neoplatonic tradition and believed that Christ, and God in Christ, will be truly seen only in the eschaton, he also taught that an

128 Pauline Moffit Watts, Nicolaus, 154.
129 Johannes Hoff, Analogical, 9.
intellectualis visio of Christ is symbolically available to the practitioner of mystical theology. In this, Cusa carries the legacy of the symbolism of light and vision from the tradition, Hebrew and Greek, in which he stands.

Accordingly, this name [Christ] leads the one who is speculating beyond all the senses, all reason, and all intellect unto a mystical vision, where there is an end to the ascent of all cognitive power and where there is the beginning of the revelation of the unknown God. For, having left all things behind, the seeker-after-truth ascends beyond himself and discerns that he still does not have any greater access to the invisible God, who remains invisible to him. (For God is not seen by means of any light from the seeker’s own reason.) At this point the seeker awaits, with most devout longing, the omnipotent Sun - expecting that when darkness is banished by its rising, he will be illuminated, so that he will see the invisible to the extent that God will manifest himself.131

And from chapter six of De visione Dei:

Therefore, as regards whoever sets out to see Your Face: as long as he conceives of something, he is far removed from Your Face. For every concept of face is less than Your Face, O Lord; and all beauty that can be conceived is less that the beauty of Your Face.132

De Visione Dei and Theology of Religions: A Literature Survey

With those introductory remarks about De visione Dei and the mystical tradition in mind, we turn to the main objective of this chapter, which is to offer a literature survey that assesses the extent to which scholars have engaged De visione Dei as a resource for inter-religious engagement. As the conclusions of this survey are important in determining the novelty of this thesis, we will state them briefly now. Firstly, the literature survey that follows indicates that scholars seeking to understand Cusa’s thought on the non-Christian religions, and inter-

132 DVD, chapter 6, paragraph 21.
religious relations, have been predominantly focused on two of his other works, *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*. Secondly, the survey also highlights the fact that *De visione Dei* has received only ancillary attention from scholars in the field of theology of religions. Finally, the survey establishes that, while the potential of *De visione Dei* as a resource for inter-religious engagement has been identified by some scholars, that potential has not yet been the focus of a sustained study seeking to establish the warrant and value of engaging this particular text within this arena of scholarship.

Along with the above summary of our conclusions, an initial qualification should also be registered before moving to the survey. It was not Cusa’s explicit concern to address the presence and purpose of the multiplicity of the world’s religions when he wrote *De visione Dei*. The omission of such considerations is explained, as we have discussed, by the nature of the question Cusa had been asked by the monks at Tegernsee. Cusa was asked how it is that we may know God, within the context of a debate about the methods of mystical theology. The question had come from a community of Christian monks who sought the guidance of their Bishop regarding a specifically Christian controversy. Therefore, that question and debate gave an intra-religious focus to Cusa’s thinking as he wrote this treatise in response to the Tegernsee request. Cusa had a limited agenda. His original readers, those first participants in the experimental exercise around the icon, were a cloister of Christian monks.

The qualification to be registered at this point is, therefore, that it is understandable that historians studying Cusa’s approach to the non-Christian religions are not likely to be drawn to *De visione Dei* as a primary text. It would be unfair, in fact, to disregard any historical study of Cusa’s writings about inter-religious matters for failing to include consideration of *De visione Dei*. Nevertheless, while it is important to acknowledge why historians may not have been drawn to *De visione Dei* as a first-tier work in the development of Cusa’s thought on inter-
religious relations, we will still identify in this literature survey how those historical studies might have been enhanced by a consideration of the text.

Secondly, while the lack of attention given to *De visione Dei* by historians studying inter-religious relations is understandable, the lack of attention from theologians working on inter-religious questions is surprising. Historical scholarship is expected to adhere methodologically to questions about a text’s origin and audience, along with its context and content. However, the imaginative scope of the theologian is far more broad. In addition to these significant historical questions relating to origin and context, a theologian will also creatively appraise where and how the theological and philosophical content of a particular writing might engage with the abiding themes of the Christian tradition.

To use a visual analogy, the historian will hold an historical lens between his or her eyes and the text being studied. The theologian, in addition to that historical lens, will also hold a hermeneutic lens up to a text, through which she or he will extract, engage, and then interpret the key themes and questions the text raises for theology’s spacious task of speaking meaningfully about the nature of God, and of God’s ways with the world, using the resources of the Christian tradition.

Theological interpretations of *De visione Dei* certainly have been rich. However, there is no Christian theological account of the presence and purpose of the world’s non-Christian religions, that is to say, no Christian theology of religions, which has engaged *De visione Dei* as a resource for this constructive theological task. Thus, while the same caveat we raised against applying judgements to historians should also apply to theologians, the creative and constructive agenda of the theologian, relative to the more contextually constrained agenda of the historian, does lend itself to the conclusion that the lack of attention given to *De visione
Dei by theologians of the religions and inter-religious dialogue represents an opportunity missed.

As Davide Monaco has remarked, in analysing a passage from De visione Dei to which we will turn our attention in the next chapter, ‘It is not possible to read these passages from De visione Dei and forget that it was written only a few months after De pace fidei, or that there is a relationship between the Cardinal’s words and the multiplicity of religions.’133 The four warrants this thesis will present in the next chapter for the merit of deploying De visione Dei in the field of inter-religious engagement, when added to the observations of our literature survey below, are intended to support our conclusion that the lack of attention from theologians of the religions is an omission worth correcting. It is to that survey of relevant literature that we now turn.134 We will commence with shorter works, in the form of book chapters, journal articles, and brief references to Cusa in larger works, then progress to recent monographs on Cusa’s work.

James E. Biechler

James E. Biechler’s essay ‘Interreligious Dialogue’ features in one of the few primers to the life and work of Nicholas of Cusa,135 and the essay is cited among contemporary monographs on Cusa as a significant summary of the Cardinal’s writings on inter-religious dialogue.136 The

133 Davide Monaco, Nicholas of Cusa: Trinity, Freedom and Dialogue (Munster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2016), 99.
134 In keeping with the scope of this thesis, this literature review is focused specifically on authors who have written about Cusa’s understanding of inter-religious relations and / or De visione Dei.
136 For example, Davide Monaco, Nicholas, 86.
essay examines Cusa’s writings on non-Christian religions in order to summarise Cusa’s approach to inter-religious relations. Biechler examines references to non-Christian religions within Cusa’s sermons, his letters to John of Segovia, a correspondence in which both Nicholas and John sought to understand what might be the correct Christian approach to Islam, *De pace fidei* and, finally, *Cribratio Alkorani*. Biechler views *De pace fidei*, in particular, as emblematic of Cusa’s unusually irenic approach to non-Christian religions and, with the following observation, links that book to what he observes as Cusa’s increasingly expansive understanding of God.

Inherent in such a broadening awareness [of religion] is a correspondingly altered conception of divinity. Tensions within the work [*De pace fidei*] dramatically illustrate the struggle between the old world feudal-lord God who holds his heavenly court, makes decrees, sends out messengers and the like, and a God as yet ineffable, hidden, infinite reason, eternal wisdom. Doubtless Nicholas was not fully aware of the radical discrepancy of these images and yet his notion of God as encompassing contradictions, ‘the coincidence of opposites’, surely suggests at least an implicit recognition of such discrepancy. Nicholas had developed the main lines of his theological vision of God as the ‘enfolding’ of all things in his earlier works *On Learned Ignorance* and *On Conjectures*.138

Biechler perceptively observes here that *De pace fidei* is evidence of Cusa’s expanding understanding of religion and, beyond that, the work also points toward a ‘correspondingly altered conception of divinity’ in Cusa’s thought. Biechler leaves his observation at that point, however, and it is here that he might have made a fruitful connection to *De visione Dei*. As we

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137 John of Segovia (c. 1393-1458) was a Spanish theologian who initiated correspondence regarding Islam, and what might be the proper Christian response to Islam, with several leading church figures during the 1450’s, including Nicholas of Cusa. See Jesse D. Mann, ‘Juan de Segovia on the Superiority of Christians over Muslims’, in *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages*, edited by Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtkovic, and Donald F. Duclow (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 145-159.

138 Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtkovic, and Donald F. Duclow (eds), *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 274-275.
will explore in our next chapter, when we address Davide Monaco’s work on Cusa, *De visione Dei*, written almost in parallel with *De pace fidei* during late 1453, exhibits the broadening conception of God to which Biechler refers. Furthermore, Biechler helpfully points to the formative role of *De docta ignorantia* (*On learned ignorance*) and *De coniectures* (*On conjectures*) in the development of Cusa’s ‘theological vision of God’ without noting, however, that both books had a formative influence, not only on *De pace fidei*, but also on *De visione Dei*. In particular, the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, which is a key concept within *De visione Dei*, was also foundational for Cusa in *De docta ignorantia* and *De coniectures*.

Biechler’s essay is important because it identifies Cusa’s broadening approach to inter-religious relations. It is also valuable in signalling a correspondingly broadened approach in Cusa’s ‘conception of divinity’, even though it does not go on to identify the evidence of that broadening awareness. Biechler’s essay is a fine summary of Cusa’s expanding, innovative thinking about the non-Christian religions, yet it misses an opportunity to address a connection between *De pace fidei* and the text which does exhibit Cusa’s expanding vision of God, the text he wrote within those same few months after the fall of Constantinople, *De visione Dei*.

**Jacques Dupuis**

Jacques Dupuis’ *Toward a Theology of Religious Pluralism* is a truly magisterial historical study of Christian approaches to other religions, born of Dupuis’ personal quest to answer the question, ‘on what foundation can it be maintained that the existence of a plurality of ‘ways’ has in itself a positive significance?’ In Dupuis’ chapter titled ‘No Salvation Outside the

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139 Connections between these works are demonstrated well in Joshua Hollmann, *The Religious Concordance: Nicholas of Cusa and Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

Church?’ he traces how the theology exemplified in the chapter title took its place in the official teaching of the church, from the early church fathers through to the fifteenth century. Dupuis then also casts an eye toward authors who took a contrary stand; those who asked whether in fact the non-Christian religions may contribute positively to the purposes of God.\footnote{Jacques Dupuis, \textit{Toward}, 84-109.} Put another way, Dupuis’ own sympathy is for those figures who sought to establish a positive attitude toward non-Christian religions and, in so doing, challenge the notion that there is no salvation outside the church. It is here that Dupuis addresses Cusa’s ideas on non-Christian religions and inter-religious dialogue.

Dupuis discusses Peter Abelard (1079-1142), Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), Ramon Llull (1232-1316), and Nicholas of Cusa as theologians who, he argues, either held or were sympathetic toward an understanding of the non-Christian religions that distinguished them from the prevailing direction of ‘no salvation outside the church’. Among their collected works, Dupuis views Cusa’s \textit{De pace fidei} as ‘probably the most important.’\footnote{Jacques Dupuis, \textit{Toward}, 107.} Dupuis admires Cusa as one who ‘may be thought to have opened the way to such questioning in adverse circumstances. His theological view was, perhaps at the least likely time, an unfinished attempt at proposing a universal convergence of religions in Christ, ‘the omega point.’\footnote{Jacques Dupuis, \textit{Toward}, 109.} Dupuis summarises Cusa’s conclusions in \textit{De pace fidei} as follows:

If beliefs differ, the ultimate reason is that in himself God remains unknown and is ineffable. All historical religions then, Christianity included, reflect the transcendent reality only imperfectly; none possesses the absolute truth, even if Christianity approaches it most closely with its explicit Trinitarian and Christological faith.\footnote{Jacques Dupuis, \textit{Toward}, 108.}
Four observations may be made about Dupuis’ analysis of Cusa. Firstly, we should note that Dupuis echoes the frequently made remark that Cusa was a pioneer of inter-religious relations, providing a significant historical legacy to future scholars. Affirmed here again is the fact that Cusa was among the first Christian theologians to engage non-Christian religions through reasoned consideration of their respective doctrines and practices. Secondly, Cusa was radical in concluding that all religions, Christianity included, offer only an imperfect reflection of ‘the transcendent reality’. It is this particular feature of Cusa’s thought, his acknowledgement that a reflection of the transcendent may indeed be found in non-Christian religions, that sets Cusa apart from his contemporaries.

The third observation that may be drawn from Dupuis’ discussion of Cusa is the loss to his own project in not providing any consideration, at this or any other point in his book, of *De visione Dei*. Dupuis’ project is one that sets out in search of an answer to the question, ‘on what foundation can it be maintained that the existence of a plurality of ‘ways’ has in itself a positive significance?’145 The value that *De visione Dei* places on a dialogue of perspectives, an imaginative construct that could complement Dupuis’ ‘plurality of ways’, may have provided Dupuis with an additional resource in proposing an answer to the question he himself poses to theology of religions. Is there a positive significance to be found in the presence of a plurality of perspectives? Dupuis considers Cusa’s inter-religious imagination as expressed in *De pace fidei* yet does not look sideways from that work to the book Cusa wrote in that same year, *De visione Dei*. He therefore misses an opportunity to enrich this discussion of Cusa’s legacy and his own project for, as will be discussed in our next chapter, *De visione Dei* presents a theological and practical model for dialogue, and offers also a theological and epistemological grounding for the importance of dialogue, which may have helped Dupuis to answer his own research question.

Fourth, and finally, Dupuis’ book is significant for this thesis because it highlights one of the ways in which *De visione Dei* may prove a helpful resource to theology of religions, namely, it points in the direction of how a Christian theologian might account for non-Christian religions in a manner which affords the ‘many’ a positive role in the purposes of God. Dupuis’ question is one way to articulate an abiding issue for this field of theological work: How can a commitment to the beliefs and practices of one’s own religion, and an openness to the possibility of God’s presence and purposes being met in other religions, be held together in a manner which is coherent with the Christian tradition? Cusa’s conjectures on how we may obtain knowledge of God draw on his exercise around the icon, in which different perspectives engage in dialogue. Dupuis’ complementary analogy, as we have noted, is that of different paths. Dupuis could have drawn resources from Cusa’s vision to assist him to propose a positive epistemological significance for the non-Christian religions by arguing that more than one perspective is necessary for any one of us to become aware of the possibility and presence of that which is invisible, an issue to which we will address in our final chapter with the help of *De visione Dei*.

**Knut Alfsvag**

Knut Alfsvag’s essay ‘Divine Difference and Religious Unity: On the Relation between *De Docta Ignorantia*, *De Pace Fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*’ examines why Cusa, almost alone following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, advocated for dialogue among the religions. Further, it asks whether signs can be found in Cusa’s intellectual history pointing to why he took ‘this alternative path’.  

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Alfsvag is intrigued by the courageous stand Cusa takes post-Constantinople and wants to know whether Cusa’s writings show consistency in this alternative path of tolerance or if 1453 marked a significant change. In addition, he asks whether the body of work that Cusa has left us represents ‘a theological and philosophical approach to the problem of religious diversity that could be of interest even in contemporary perspective.’ Alfsvag observes,

The problem of religious pluralism has not left us, and neither has the danger of it being exploited by violent extremists of differing persuasions. 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?

Alfsvag’s essay examines some of Cusa’s writings in search of the building blocks of his pacific approach to inter-religious engagement. As indicated by Alfsvag’s title, his search focuses on *De docta ignorantia*, *De pace fidei*, and *Cribratio Alkorani*. Alfsvag begins by extracting from those three works the ideas that he considers central to Cusa’s approach to the study of other faiths. It is, effectively, a helpful summary of certain of Cusa’s key theological positions.

The first such central position is the abiding connection for Cusa between the nature of God and the idea of infinity. By definition, there can be only one infinity, as entities must be limited in relation to each other. Two infinities are simply impossible. Thus, given Cusa’s belief in the infinity of God, there can be only one God and, therefore, monotheism is established for Cusa as the only feasible foundation for the doctrine of God.

The second position Alfsvag argues is central to Cusa’s theology is the concept that there is no proportionality between the infinite and the finite. This rules out arguments for the relationship between Creator and creature that presuppose any proportionality, such as purpose or causality. For example, God must not to be considered the cause or end of worldly events,

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for that would place that which is infinite (God) in proportion to that which is finite (creation). This second central idea also establishes for Cusa that there is no means by human cognition alone of comprehending the relationship between God and the world. That is to say, we have no cognitive means of applying any proportion to the two (God and creation) in order to comprehend how the one is related to the other. Here we meet again Cusa’s theology of creation as the enfolded unfolding of God, which gives rise to Cusa’s understanding that the nature of our relation to God is one of participation - an idea to which Alfsvag himself turns next.

The third position that Alfsvag identifies as central to Cusa’s theology is this concept of participation. Cusa’s emphasis on participation derives from his second idea regarding the lack of proportionality between that which is infinite and that which is finite, God and creation. Alfsvag reads Cusa as arguing that the relationship between the finite and the infinite can only be understood, in a manner that enables the integrity of both to be maintained, as a relationship of participation. The finite creation participates in the infinity of God, in that creation’s finitude is defined by the infinite. Further, the infinite God participates in the finite creation in that it is by God’s very being that the finite world is determined and defined.

Why are these three theological concepts important to Alfsvag’s essay about Cusa’s approach to the non-Christian religions? Because these concepts provide the bedrock for Cusa’s commitment to biblical monotheism and the Christian doctrines of incarnation and Trinity. The most compelling form of theology for Cusa, the most convincing teaching on the nature of God, and of God’s relation to the world, is a theology aligned to these concepts: first, the infinity of God; second, the lack of proportionality between the finite and the infinite; and third, the relationship of the infinite to the finite, and vice versa, is that of participation.

For Cusa, God is infinite, ineffable, and beyond comprehension, and God is one. Yet space is made within Cusa’s theology for finite humanity, and all creation, to participate in the infinite God. Here, Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity become significant. While for
Islam, the religion with which Cusa involved himself most frequently apart from his own, Christian teaching about the triune nature of God is incompatible with monotheism, it is in fact trinitarianism alone that Cusa’s beliefs can provide the theological means for a coherent monotheistic doctrine of God. A trinitarian theology of God allows the relationship of the created order to its creator to be intelligibly explored in a manner that preserves the integrity of the one infinite God, doing so through the mutual participation of Creator and creation in Christ the incarnate mediator. Thus is the manner, the theological framework, in which Cusa is able to affirm the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity as being, among all the religions, the most convincing explanations for the nature of God and how it is that humanity may have communion with God.

Alfsvag moves to the final section of his essay with one eye on what he has learnt from Cusa’s theology and the other on contemporary theology of religions. His final research question is to ask whether or not Cusa has a contribution to make to theology of religions today and, if so, whether or not it is possible to align Cusa with one of that field’s leading approaches. Alfsvag names those approaches as models, and they are familiar constructs to us arising from our discussion in chapter one. There is a difference, however, for Alfsvag outlines the shape of the field of theology of religions by drawing on four models proposed by Alister McGrath, which are exclusivism, inclusivism, universalism, and incompatibilism. McGrath’s models are similar to the three-fold typology we have already introduced. However, he includes the novel category of incompatibilism, to which will turn in a moment. Alfsvag concludes that Cusa should not be thought of as an exclusivist (Christianity is the only valid religion), nor a universalist (all religions are more or less equally valid). He further observes that Cusa does not sit readily, in fact, in any one of McGrath’s models. ‘Exactly where on this axis Cusanus should be positioned may well remain open to question.’

Notwithstanding that caveat, Alfsvag decides to explore whether Cusa’s ideas on the religions relate constructively to the model which McGrath names as ‘incompatibilism’. Alfsvag’s motivation is not to place Cusa in a box. Rather, he wants to determine whether or not Cusa can be creatively engaged with this model. Alfsvag explains that incompatibilism is also known as ‘parallelism’ and, further, it is by holding the meaning of both words in mind – incompatible and parallel - that we are able to gather a clear sense of what scholars are proposing with this approach. Specifically, incompatibilism / parallelism proposes that it may be possible to theologically affirm the validity of more than one religion without recourse to constructing a false compatibility, or manufacturing an uncomfortable unity, between those two or more religions.  

Alfsvag believes a plausible argument could be made for Cusa’s placement within McGrath’s incompatibilism / parallelism model, even though he ultimately decides not to argue for that conclusion. Rather, Alfsvag delivers what we might call an open finding. Based on the three ideas that are central to Cusa’s theology, that God is infinite, that there is no proportionality between the finite and the infinite, and participation as the true means of the relationship of creator and creation, Alfsvag concludes that Cusa is a worthy interlocutor for theology of religions, and might be a particularly useful resource for theologians who view the religions as ‘parallel paths’. ‘The question of the relation between Cusanus’ approach and that of incompatibilism’, Alfsvag concludes, ‘remains an intriguing one.’

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149 Knut Alfsvag, ‘Divine Difference’, 64. What is here named by Alfsvag, on McGrath’s foundation, as incompatibilism / parallelism is in fact the model more widely known as Particularism, which we discussed in chapter two. This would appear to be McGrath’s unusual way of naming that model. See Alister McGrath, Christian Theology: An Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 457-463.


Also intriguing for this thesis is the way in which Alfsvag might have drawn on *De visione Dei*, especially yet not only the opening exercise around the icon of God, to further his consideration of Cusa’s ideas about the finite and the infinite, and whether those ideas might form a creative legacy for the work of contemporary theology of religions. As we have seen, Alfsvag ponders the possible placement of Cusa among the models, or approaches, to theology of religions. In conclusion, he observes that the Cardinal’s writings give indications that one could align him with those who assert that the religions are parallel yet incompatible paths to the divine. As we have introduced, and will later return to in this thesis, *De visione Dei* constructs a dialogue among participants through which they come to realize that they need each other’s particular and distinctive perspective in order to more fully comprehend the One in whose gaze they feel enthralled. The participants find they must listen to each other, and trust one another, in order to apprehend the fuller possibilities of what they are seeing.

There is a theoretical framework here within Cusa’s *visione* which makes it possible to offer practical observations and theological proposals about the relation of the finite (the monks) to the infinite (represented by the icon). Further, it is a framework that retains the importance of the distinctive particularity of each participant while drawing all participants into a universal awareness. The experiment does not ask that they all stand in the one place to view the icon in order to affirm the universality of the gaze. Put another way, Cusa’s experiment does not seek to demonstrate or affirm the universality of the gaze by moving its participants to a common view-point, or the common ground of a single perspective, as if this were a valid way to affirm their unity. Rather, the universality of the gaze is affirmed by the fact that the gaze is received and reciprocated from many particular perspectives, none of which is elided by another. That is not to say that each particular and distinctive perspective is as an equally clear apprehension of the One. It is, however, an affirmation that all who participate do in fact see, and are seen.
Alfsvag’s essay sought to understand whether Cusa’s writings on dialogue and inter-religious relations offer ‘a theological and philosophical approach to the problem of religious diversity that could be of interest even in contemporary perspective.’ By not considering the opening exercise of *De visione Dei*, Alfsvag missed an opportunity to draw on the rich potential of these Cusan resources.

**Rita George-Tvrtkovic**

Rita George-Tvrtkovic compares and contrasts the writings of Nicholas of Cusa and Riccoldo da Montecroce in her article ‘After the fall: Riccoldo da Montecroce and Nicholas of Cusa on religious diversity.’ The study was undertaken in order to exemplify, through these two authors, the diversity of medieval Christian responses to religious diversity. Cusa and Montecroce are selected because both were personally affected by a similar event, the fall of a Christian capital to a Muslim militia. For Montecroce, it was the fall of Acre, a Crusader stronghold overrun by the Mamluks in 1291. Montecroce’s response to the fall of Acre is found in a series of letters, a form of medieval epistolary known as ‘letters to heaven’, in which he asks tortured questions of God about the reason for, and meaning of, the calamity at Acre. He earnestly pleads for guidance in what George-Tvrtkovic describes as a ‘tension-filled, ambivalent struggle.’ George-Tvrtkovic concludes that the fact that his letters display no resolution to Montecroce’s distress is testimony, in itself, to his unwillingness to foreclose on the deep questions posed by religious diversity.

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154 Rita George-Tvrtkovic, ‘After the fall’, 642.
155 Rita George-Tvrtkovic, ‘After the fall’, 661.
For Cusa, the calamity was the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and George-Tvrtkovic examines his response to that event through a study of *De pace fidei*. She concludes that Cusa is by far the more confident of the two authors about the possibility of unity and peace among religions and, consequently, an end to Christian-Muslim hostility. In fact, George-Tvrtkovic thinks Cusa may be over-confident, observing that Montecroce’s uncertainty about a peaceful inter-religious future may well be ‘a useful temper’ to Cusa’s confidence.\(^\text{156}\) Contrasting the two, George-Tvrtkovic surmises that it is Montecroce’s radical openness to ‘alterity’ that can highlight for us a danger in Cusa’s search for unified faith, the danger being that Cusa’s *De pace fidei* risks an erasure of religious difference for the sake of religious unity.\(^\text{157}\) She further observes that traces of today’s approaches to theology of religions can be found in nascent form in Cusa and Montecroce. Specifically, she finds that *De pace fidei*’s central idea regarding the hope for inter-religious unity, namely that there is ‘one religion expressed in a variety of rites’, echoes Karl Rahner’s ‘anonymous Christians’.\(^\text{158}\)

It is pertinent to note briefly a contrast here between the conclusions of Rita George-Tvrtkovic and Knut Alfsvag, and what we may learn from that contrast. We recall it was Alfsvag who decided that, if he were to align Cusa to a particular approach or model for theology of religions, he would stand him nearest to that which McGrath calls the incompatibilism model, where more than one religion is affirmed as a parallel, valid, albeit incompatible path to God. In contrast, George-Tvrtkovic sees in *De pace fidei* indications of the inclusivist model, in which one religion alone represents the valid path to God, yet expressions of that one valid path may also be identified in the beliefs and practices of other religions. The contrasting conclusions of Alfsvag and George-Tvrtkovic are a witness to two

\(^{156}\) Rita George-Tvrtkovic, ‘After the fall’, 661.

\(^{157}\) Rita George-Tvrtkovic, ‘After the fall’, 661.

\(^{158}\) Rita George-Tvrtkovic, ‘After the fall’, 660. We will dicuss Rahner’s concept in chapter 5.
important issues. First, that Cusa’s writings resist easy categorization among today’s standard approaches to theology of religions. Inclusivism and incompatibilism are, ironically, precisely that - incompatible. Yet two well-regarded scholars have concluded to place Cusa in one or the other. Secondly, these contrasting conclusions are also a reminder that the categorization of the work of any theologian in this field should be offered cautiously and respectfully, with careful regard for each author’s theological integrity.

Returning to Rita George-Tvrtkovic, her article is helpful in a number of ways. It directs us to the historical significance of De pace fidei, it is a reminder that this work is a sign of Cusa’s abiding personal hope in the prospect of inter-religious understanding and peace, and is an indication that the tension between unity and particularity in inter-religious dialogue is evident in Cusa’s own writings. Finally, George-Tvrtkovic also points to Cusa’s ‘religio una in rituum varietate’ (one religion in a variety of rites) as one idea through which he might be compared to more recent theologians, such as Karl Rahner.

Notwithstanding the value of these outcomes, Rita George-Tvrtkovic does not include De visione Dei in her study, which is surprising as it would have given the essay a more comprehensive scope. As mentioned, George-Tvrtkovic’s stated agenda is to examine those writings authored by Montecroce and Cusa in the wake of the respective city ‘falls’ to which they were privy (Acre and Constantinople) and to assess, through those writings, each author’s ‘perspectives on religious plurality’.159 As we have noted, Cusa wrote De visione Dei in the months immediately following Constantinople’s demise, thus it would seem to sit well within the scope of her essay. However, it was not studied. In fact, five works by Montecroce are considered yet only one by Cusa is examined. Even if the addition of De visione Dei in this article led only to the conclusion that the text had nothing at all to contribute to a picture of

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159 Rita George-Tvrtkovic, ‘After the fall’, 641.
Cusa’s response to religious diversity then, at the least, the essay’s scope will have been more comprehensive, and its assessment more conclusive.

**Pim Valkenberg**

Pim Valkenberg examines Cusa’s ‘interreligious hermeneutics’ in his article ‘Sifting the Qur’an: Two forms of Interreligious Hermeneutics in Nicholas of Cusa’. Valkenberg’s aim is to test his thesis that it is reasonable for theologians engaged in inter-religious dialogue to employ different, even conflicting hermeneutical strategies within a single work. Valkenberg observes that there will very likely be a time to defend one’s own understanding of truth during any inter-religious dialogue and, therefore, there is a legitimate place for ‘polemical dialogue’ in such encounters.161 Valkenberg examined *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani* and concluded that Cusa deployed hermeneutic techniques in both works that are dialogical, on the whole, yet occasionally apologetic and polemic.

Valkenberg argues that the ‘predominant paradigm’ of inter-religious relations in Cusa’s context was one of Christian-Muslim suspicion and violence, which meant Cusa ‘could not escape polemical strategies, even if he wanted to approach Islam in a different way.’162 Valkenberg demonstrates that Cusa’s polemical strategies are at work, most notably, in *Cribratio Alkorani* and concludes that, given that text was written for Pius II in order that the Pope may have theological resources for his famous letter to Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II,163

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161 Rita George-Tvrtkovic, ‘After the fall’, 29.

162 Rita George-Tvrtkovic, ‘After the fall’, 27.

163 For an interesting discussion of *Cribratio Alkorani* as Cusa’s contribution to Pope Pius II as he sought appeasement with Mehmet II, see Andrea Moudarres, ‘Crusade and Conversion: Islam as Schism in Pius II and Nicholas of Cusa’ in *MLN* vol. 126 no. 1 (2013), 40-52.
proposing his conversion to Christianity, Cusa’s use of such polemic within it is unsurprising.\footnote{Pim Valkenberg, ‘Sifting the Qur’an’, 27-28.}

Valkenberg also concludes, however, that Cusa has in fact ‘hidden some nuggets’ throughout 
\textit{Cribratio Alkorani}, and that those nuggets highlight the presence in that work of a new method for the interpretation of non-Christian religions and their texts. Valkenberg observes that Cusa invented ‘a new form of theological hermeneutics which he calls 
\textit{pia interpretatio}, which can be translated as “faithful interpretation”’. Those nuggets of faithful, charitable, or considerate interpretation must be sifted like a prospector, according to Valkenberg, from the prevailing apologetic content of Cusa’s text.\footnote{Pim Valkenberg, ‘Sifting the Qur’an’, 28. The term 
\textit{pia interpretatio} is subject to varying translations. Some like Hagemann (1999) point to the dialogical intent of the phrase in determining that its meaning is well rendered by ‘charitable interpretation’ or ‘favourable interpretation’. However, Hopkins, \textit{A Miscellany}, argues that neither does justice and that ‘devout interpretation’ is the proper translation as it does not allow the same liberal understanding. Valkenberg himself seeks to take account of both in opting for ‘faithful interpretation’.}

Valkenberg draws on the five exegetical rules that Jasper Hopkins has concluded are evident in 
\textit{Cribratio Alkorani} in order to summarise Cusa’s hermeneutic method of 
\textit{pia interpretatio}:

1. Interpret the Qur’an in such a way that it is compatible with the Christian Scriptures;
2. Try to interpret the Qur’an in such a way as to render it self-consistent;
3. Where the Qur’an contradicts the Gospel, look for the author’s (Muhammad’s) true intention;
4. Interpret the Qur’an as intending to give glory to God without detracting from Christ;
5. Wherever possible, work with the interpretations that the wise among the Muslims have assigned to the Qur’an.\footnote{Pim Valkenberg, ‘Sifting the Qur’an’, 46, drawing on Jasper Hopkins, \textit{A Miscellany on Nicholas of Cusa} (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994), 45-50.}

Valkenberg finds in Cusa’s new method of 
\textit{pia interpretatio}, most especially in rules four and five, a ‘faint prefiguration’ of the inter-religious studies method known as
Comparative Theology. Valkenberg further deems rule four, ‘Interpret the Qur’an as intending to give glory to God without detracting from Christ’, to be the most theologically significant aspect of Cusa’s method because it allows for a Christian reading of the Qur’an that honours the monotheism of both Christianity and Islam without imperilling the foundational place of Christology for Christianity. Furthermore, rule five, which reads ‘Wherever possible, work with the interpretations that the wise among the Muslims have assigned to the Qur’an’, is an affirmation of the Qur’an as the revealing Word of God for Muslims, and it also acknowledges that no Christian interpretation will do justice to the Qur’an if it is offered without first becoming thoroughly cognizant of the history of Muslim interpretation.

Of particular interest, once again, is the absence of *De visione Dei* from this otherwise thorough examination of Cusa’s hermeneutical framework and interpretative practices when approaching non-Christian religions. Especially as Valkenberg set out to research Cusa’s method of interpreting differing religious perspectives, and develops a particular interest in Cusa’s charitable approach toward Islam, an appraisal of the opening exercise of *De visione Dei* would have been helpful, notwithstanding that it was an intra-religious dialogue, in disclosing the breadth of Cusa’s engagement with the question of how different perspectives may enhance human knowledge of the divine.

**Morimichi Watanabe**

Nicholas of Cusa was the focus of Morimichi Watanabe’s research for many decades. Watanabe’s knowledge of Cusa’s writings on Islam and religious tolerance is summarised in

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167 The debate around whether comparative theology is distinct from theology of religions or related to theology of religions need not engaged us here. For a thorough examination of that debate see Kristin Beise Kiblinger ‘Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology’ in *The New Comparative Theology: Thinking Interreligiously in the 21st Century*, edited by Francis X. Clooney (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 21-42, and Clooney’s ‘Response’ at pages 191-200.
his essay ‘Cusanus, Islam, and Religious Tolerance’, in which Watanabe sets out to ‘explore [Cusa’s] ideas on religious tolerance, as expressed in his writings as well as in the activities throughout his life.’ Watanabe begins by observing that the nature of Christian relations with non-Christian religions, and Islam in particular, was of great interest to Cusa from the earliest stages of his career. It is an issue that featured, for example, among Cusa’s sermons as early as 1428 and 1430, and Cusa owned and was evidently studying a copy of the Qur’an by 1433. Watanabe notes that, as Cusa’s career matured, his analysis of Christian-Muslim relations deepened. This is evident in the fact that Cusa wrote De pace fidei in the wake of the fall of Constantinople, as ‘one of his responses to that catastrophe’, and near the end of Cusa’s life in writing, at the request of Pope Pius II, Cribratio Alkorani. Cusa’s concern for inter-religious questions was, Watanabe observes, an abiding one.

Like Valkenberg, Watanabe gives special attention to Cusa’s method of pia interpretatio, which Watanabe translates as ‘generous or sympathetic interpretation’. Notwithstanding the fact that Cribratio Alkorani exhibits a more critical stance toward Islam, Watanabe believes this new proposal for reading the Islamic holy text was emblematic of the

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172 Morimichi Watanabe, ‘Cusanus’, 14-16.
174 Watanabe writes, ‘There is no doubt Cribratio Alkorani is much more critical of Islam compared to the harmonious attitude shown in De pace fidei’ and offers four possible reason for that change: Cusa’s study of Islam in the intervening years may have hardened his opinion against some doctrines; his increased leadership of the church, and residence in Rome, may have increased his sense of obligation to defend Christian faith; his personal friendship with Pope Pius II may have provoked a desire to support the Pope’s call for a crusade; the Latin translation of the Qur’an used by Cusa contained errors which may have led to misunderstanding of some of its teachings. Morimichi Watanabe, ‘Cusanus’, 13-14.
fact that Cusa’s attitude toward Islam as a whole remained ‘generous, harmonious and friendly’. Of special interest to Watanabe is the fact that Cusa genuinely appears to have practised the art of careful textual study and interpretation of the Qur’an himself. Scholars have noted the presence of three distinct sets of marginal notes, written in Cusa’s own hand, within his personal copy of the Qur’an. Watanabe surmises that the first marginal notes are likely to have been made around 1433 at the Council of Basel, during which time we know Cusa acquired this copy of the Qur’an. The second set of margin notes were probably made during 1453 when he wrote De pace fidei, and the third set is most likely to have been added during the writing Cribratio Alkorani in 1460 and 1461. The picture of Cusa that emerges from Watanabe’s essay is of a man for whom the question of how the people of one religion may reach an understanding of other religions, and turn that understanding into tolerance and respect, was of central and life-long significance. Further, Watanabe finds that, where Cusa addressed inter-religious relations directly, he did so seeking ‘a theology that is meant to continue dialogue’.

Watanabe’s essay is insightful, grounded in years of admiration for the Cardinal, yet it may well have been enhanced by offering an introduction to the contents of De visione Dei. As we have noted, Watanabe set out to ‘explore [Cusa’s] ideas on religious tolerance’. While Cusa’s visione is focused on intra-religious rather than inter-religious understanding, it may nevertheless still be fruitfully read as a resource for understanding why Cusa valued a diversity of perspectives and, therefore, why the tolerance of religious differences is constructive for inter-religious harmony. In fact, Watanabe even provided an opening for himself during the

175 Morimichi Watanabe, ‘Cusanus’, 14.
176 Cusa’s copy of the Qur’an is held today in the St Nicholas Hospital Library in Bernkastel-Kues.
177 Morimichi Watanabe, ‘Cusanus’, 15.
178 Morimichi Watanabe, ‘Cusanus’, 18.
essay to transition to an exploration of *De visione Dei* when he observed that Cusa wrote *De pace fidei* in the wake of the fall of Constantinople as ‘one of his responses to that catastrophe’. Cusa wrote only one other work that could be considered in any way proximate to the fall of Constantinople, and it was *De visione Dei*. Watanabe’s use of the phrase ‘one of his responses’ even implies, therefore, that *De visione Dei* may have been another of Cusa’s responses. However, the reader remains unsure and can only speculate on this point as this otherwise helpful study does not include a consideration of the other treatise Cusa wrote in 1453.

**Fred Dallmayr**

The use of the word *imagination* in the title of Fred Dallmayr’s essay ‘Desire and the Desirable: Nicholas de Cusa’s Interfaith Imagination’ suggests a study that will search widely for indications of Cusa’s imaginative thought regarding the significance of the non-Christian religions. The paper explores Cusa’s personal ‘search for truth and goodness’ because Dallmayr believes Cusa has managed to forge a pass-way between desire and the desirable, the finite and the infinite, in a manner that maintains the integrity of desire itself. Desire is not relegated as a means to an end for Cusa, Dallmayr observes. Rather, desire is understood as integral to the connection between human life and that which transcends it. As Dallmayr puts it, ‘sensation remains the preamble or gateway to learned ignorance or “unknowing knowledge”’.  

Dallmayr focuses especially on Cusa’s ‘concrete emphasis on experiential learning and his concern with interfaith imagination as a pathway to peace’. He observes that the

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dimension of Cusa’s work which has the potential to speak with greatest eloquence today is where he addresses ‘the domain of interfaith harmony and cross-cultural understanding’. Dallmayr writes,

In our age of globalization when different faiths and cultures are more and more closely pushed together, cultivation of mutual understanding and respect is urgently required to counteract the danger of civilizational (and sometimes religiously inspired) violence. Cultivation of such harmony was one of Cusa’s central, life-long commitments – a commitment fuelled by multiple tensions and antagonisms festering during his own time. The basic motivation undergirding this commitment was his philosophical and theological ‘relationism’ (not relativism): the conviction that truth or true knowledge cannot be seized or monopolized by dogmatic authority, but is best promoted through the interrelation between distinct perspectives (with each sincerely searching for the truth). The upshot of this conviction is an unorthodox and innovative conception of the relation between the ‘one’ and the ‘many’, where the ‘one’ serves only as a common loadstar but not as the domineering master of the ‘many’.  

Dallmayr draws on De concordantia catholica and De pace fidei in order to demonstrate what he calls Cusa’s ‘relationism’. Surprisingly, however, he makes no mention of De visione Dei until the final paragraph of the essay. Yet that closing reference is an intriguing one. Dallmayr writes,

Another one of his later writings, titled De visione Dei (On the Vision of God) offers a ‘non-dualist’, or perhaps ‘modified non-dualist’ formulation of relation between humans and the divine. As the text points out, we are only able to ‘see’ or have a vision of the divine because we are first of all seen or ‘envisaged’ by the divine. ‘You, Lord’, we read, ‘are where speech, hearing, taste, touch, reason, knowledge and understanding are the same and where seeing is one with being seen, and hearing with being heard, tasting with being tasted, and touching with being touched.’ This relation between seeing and being seen, desiring and being desired is equivalent to the bond of love – which is a proper point on which to conclude

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Dallmayr’s essay is of interest here for a number of reasons. He introduces the significance of embracing the imagination when engaging theology to questions of inter-religious relations and develops that observation into a curiosity about Cusa’s own inter-religious imagination. This leads Dallmayr to *De visione Dei* as a Cusan treatise he considers worthy of further examination when addressing Cusa’s inter-religious imagination, yet he does not proceed to a deeper study of that theme himself. Dallmayr has named, if only in closing, the potential of Cusa’s *visione*, yet the citation is cursory and the potential is not pursued. Especially in light of Dallmayr’s statement, in the passage quoted earlier, that ‘true knowledge cannot be seized or monopolized by dogmatic authority, but is best promoted through the interrelation between distinct perspectives’, it is surprising that he did not deploy *De visione Dei*’s ideas about a dialogue of perspectives in this essay on Cusa’s inter-religious imagination.

**Marica Costiglioli**

Moving now to monographs about Nicholas of Cusa that are relevant to a literature survey seeking to determine whether or not *De visione Dei* has featured in the area of theology of religions, there are four recent works that merit particular attention. The first is Marica Costiglioli’s book *The Western Perception of Islam between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Work of Nicholas of Cusa*, in which she studies Cusa’s writings on Islam and the nature of dialogue.¹⁸⁴


Costiglioli firstly establishes that a distinction should always be made between dialogue as understood through the modern concept of *religious tolerance*, and dialogue as it was understood and practised in the late medieval time of Cusa. According to Costiglioli, the medieval dialogue is a form of writing that permits and includes dispute, interpretation, and commentary about and between participants. Medieval dialogue was a robust space, in which interlocutors contest over ideas, as opposed to the gentler context of a modern dialogue which is guided, above all, by the idea of toleration toward difference.

Costiglioli next examines the manner in which Cusa deploys the metaphor of the body in his *De concordantia catholica* as a means of harmonizing dispute within and beyond the church. For Cusa, the church is the mystical body of Christ and is at its best in exercising power through a representative organism, such as a council, that is an expression of the consent of its members. The dialectic of unity and difference in the church is played out, and harmonized, through a hierarchy of ecclesial councils, which allow for the expression of the varied voices and traditions within the church; within the body of Christ. Costiglioli observes here that Cusa looks for a parallel to this conciliar concept in the activity of empires, for he believed there can be no peace within the church or in the realm of empire without recognizing differences and establishing a concord through conciliar structures of dialogue.

*De docta ignorantia* is also discussed here, especially Cusa’s use of mathematical metaphors to describe God, whom Cusa names there as the Maximum in which opposites

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186 Marica Costiglioli, *Western Perception*, 12.
Costiglioli notes that this coincidence of opposites does not equal, for Cusa, an erasure of opposites, for he sees the richer concepts of integration and concord in God. An interesting link is established between *De docta ignorantia* and *De pace fidei* when Costiglioli notes the practical application of the idea of *coincidentia oppositorum* in the later of those two writings; applications that reach into the multiplicity of faiths, names for God, and ways of worship, which are all central ideas within *De pace fidei*.190

In chapter four, *De pace fidei* is studied in depth, first by tracing the origin of Cusa’s thought on the relationship between Christianity and Islam in the earlier works of Riccoldo da Montecroce, Peter Abelard, and Ramon Llull. Recounting *De pace fidei*’s scene of a heavenly council of creeds and cultures, Costiglioli locates the problem of difference and diversity as the central theme of the dialogue. It is a dialogue aimed at addressing a scenario in which people have come to regard their beliefs and customs as superior to others, with conflict the almost inevitable result. Cusa’s response is to seek ‘one religion in a variety of rites’, believing that there can be a tolerance in rites, even if it may not be possible to achieve unity in the sphere of faith.191 Costiglioli observes that Cusa examines this diversity from both the perspective of doctrine and also from a social and political point of view. That, she argues, is a mark by which one could argue for Cusa’s modernity.192

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190 Marica Costiglioli, *Western Perception*, 42.
192 Marica Costiglioli, *Western Perception*, 56. The question about Cusa’s modernity runs through Cusan scholarship. Does Cusa’s philosophy locate him as a medieval or modern thinker? Although that question does not fall within the scope of this thesis, it is nevertheless of general interest to any study of Cusa. It is addressed again in note 312. Here it may be of interest to note the observation of Jasper Hopkins that ‘Nicholas is indeed a transitional figure, whose thought belongs to the larger cluster of intellectual boundary points that marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of Modernity.’ Jasper Hopkins, *A Miscellany*, 51. In naming Cusa as a
Costiglioli finds that the ‘one religion’ at which Cusa’s dialogue concludes is palpably Christian, and she therefore considers this a mark of the limitations of the dialogue he has constructed. ‘[I]t is also unquestionable that Nicholas does not grant an identical status to Christianity and to other religions. The superiority of the Christian religion being undisputed, *De pace fidei* cannot be easily classified as a work really focused on interreligious dialogue.’\footnote{193 Marica Costiglioli, *Western Perception*, 76.}
That judgement is both helpful, in correctly naming Cusa’s intent, and yet, ironically, it also reflects the modern view of dialogue that Costiglioli criticizes earlier in her book. Cusa in fact gives meaningful expression to the medieval form of dialogue by entering the inter-religious dialogue he has constructed in *De pace fidei* from a particular perspective, and then disputing, commenting upon, and interpreting all other religions from precisely from that distinctive perspective - Christianity. Cusa’s Christian perspective does not work against the classification of this work as an example of inter-religious dialogue, it simply locates his writings as examples of the medieval form dialogue. Helpfully, Costiglioli later amends her judgment in describing *De pace fidei* as a ‘hermeneutic dialogue’.\footnote{194 Marica Costiglioli, *Western Perception*, 80.}

The analysis shifts in chapter five to *Cribratio Alkorani*, where Cusa’s unique form or interpretation, *pia interpretatio*, is examined. As we have noted, this is Cusa’s method of pious or faithful interpretation, which we encountered earlier in the essay by Pim Valkenberg, through which readers are to offer a careful comparative exegesis of the Qur’an, as Cusa did in his ‘sifting’, that draws out traces of the Christian Gospel within it.\footnote{195 Marica Costiglioli, *Western Perception*, 93-94.} Costiglioli believes that

\footnote{transitional thinker who exhibits a continuance of medieval thought as well as some of the innovation that comes to be called modern, Hopkins is in agreement with Frederick Copleston, who writes, ‘Nicholas of Cusa is not an easy figure to classify … but it seems to me preferable to see in him a transition-thinker, a philosopher of the Renaissance, who combined the old with the new.’ *A History of Modern Philosophy Vol III* (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1953), 231.}
Cusa identifies two levels of communication in the Qur’an, and this identification allows him to do two things: judge the Qur’an as not divinely revealed, yet elevate it as an instrument to bring direction to the ‘uncultured and idolatrous’.\textsuperscript{196} Cusa credits Mohammad with the wisdom of speaking in metaphors about a truth which is yet greater than he knew. For example, at one level the images of paradise appeal in a base manner to the uncultured, and yet the metaphor also points toward a greater truth that may be comprehended by intellectuals.

Costiglioli concludes her book with a discussion about how the very copying and circulation of texts in late medieval Europe created, in itself, a form of dialogue among their readers. Further, that process of circulating texts slowly developed a body of mutual knowledge among Christians monks and scholars about the non-Christian religions, especially Islam. Costiglioli argues that this contributed to ‘the formation of a Christian and Western identity which saw itself as the center of Roman and Greek culture, in opposition to the “uncivilized Turk”’.\textsuperscript{197}

Costiglioli states her aim at the commencement of the book as two-fold: to present a fresh study of Cusa’s two famous works on Christian-Muslim relations, \textit{De pace fidei} and \textit{Cribratio Alkorani}, and to link them to his political and theological writings. That two-fold aim is achieved, but with an exception. The connection of Cusa’s work on Islam and dialogue in \textit{De pace fidei} and \textit{Cribratio Alkorani} to the ideas contained in two of his theological writings, \textit{De concordantia catholica} and \textit{De docta ignorantia}, is well-made. However, there is no analysis of an actual or possible connection from either work to the ideas in \textit{De visione Dei}, a treatise about how different perspectives contribute to the knowledge of God, which is based upon an exercise that established a framework for the theological merit and epistemological value of

\textsuperscript{196} Marica Costiglioli, \textit{Western Perception}, 99.

\textsuperscript{197} Marica Costiglioli, \textit{Western Perception}, 149.
dialogue. Costiglioli has offered a fascinating study, yet it would have been enriched by a consideration of Cusa’s mystical *De visione Dei* and how that text might offer evidence of his ideas on dialogue among differing religious perspectives. Costiglioli might have drawn valuable observations for her study by giving consideration, for example, to the nature of the intra-religious dialogue that features in *De visione Dei* and how that dialogue models the inter-religious dialogue which Cusa imaginatively describes in *De pace fidei*. This thesis will seek to develop that analysis of intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue further in the next chapter.

**Gergely Tibor Bakos**

A second recent monograph to consider is by Gergely Tibor Bakos, who has provided an important study of the methodological aspects of Cusa’s approach to Islam. Along with a careful reading of Cusa’s writings that specifically address Islam, including various of Cusa’s sermons, *De pace fidei*, his correspondence with John of Segovia following completion of *De pace fidei*, and *Cribratio Alkorani*, Bakos also gives particular attention to extracting and explaining from that collection of writings the method Cusa deploys to instruct others regarding Islam. Bakos describes that Cusan method as ‘manuductive’, which means ‘leading by the hand’.

The term manuductive is found in several medieval authors and its ultimate source for Cusa appears to have been Pseudo-Dionysius. The term is helpfully explained by analogy to a *Manuductor*, the name given to an experienced priest who stands beside a newly ordained priest.

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during the new priest’s first celebration of the Mass. The Manuductor’s task is to assist the beginner by speaking, guiding, and supporting him to find his way.²⁰⁰ Bakos observes that Cusa’s method is just such a leading by the hand, in which he takes his readers from the sensible to the intelligible, the material to the spiritual, the visible to the invisible.²⁰¹ Within this broad study of Cusa’s methodology, Bakos briefly surveys *De visione Dei* as one example of Cusa’s manuductive method of instruction. Bakos first notes the chronological proximity of the 1453 authorship of *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei*, then points to the possibility of a deeper connection.

Chronologically speaking, the compositions of *PF* [On the peace of faith] and *DVD* [On the vision of God] are only separated by some months. While Nicholas had been speculating on the themes of mystical theology and after hearing the news from Constantinople, he composed the *PF* in a rush. Later, he returned to actually writing *DVD*. *This may indicate more than a mere temporal coincidence of the two works, but only a closer examination of both texts can adequately demonstrate the existence of a thematic connection* between Nicholas’s mystical theology and his approach to Islam.²⁰²

Having made the observation that there may be ‘more than a mere temporal coincidence of the two works’ and that ‘only a closer examination of both texts can adequately demonstrate the existence of a thematic connection between Nicholas’s mystical theology and his approach to Islam’, Bakos goes on to summarise the staging and interpretation of *De visione Dei*’s exercise around the icon. It is within that exercise that Bakos finds Cusa’s method of ‘leading by the hand’ most clearly evident in *De visione Dei*. He offers one general observation and then several particular interpretative comments about the meaning of *De visione Dei*’s iconic exercise. ‘To make a general point’, Bakos initially observes, ‘one can say that Nicholas’s

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speculations based on seeing as a paradigm for human knowledge make understandable that human knowledge of the Divine necessarily comes from a particular and limited perspective.\textsuperscript{203} With that general observation made, Bakos then offers three additional interpretative comments which point to a set of conclusions the reader is expected to draw from Cusa’s exercise. The first observation is that each person is attached to his or her ‘otherwise justified religious images concerning the Divine’.\textsuperscript{204} The second is that Cusa’s use of the phrase ‘all intellectual spirits are useful to each intellectual spirit’ in the following passage from \textit{De visione Dei} elevates the role each and every person plays as a witness to God ‘because they can reveal to one another what they respectively see of the Divine.’\textsuperscript{205} In Cusa’s own words,

\[\text{[God] makes many figures, because the likeness of His infinite power can be unfolded in the most perfect way only in many figures. And all intellectual spirits are useful to each [intellectual] spirit. Now, unless they were countless, You, O Infinite God, could not be known in the best possible way.}\textsuperscript{206}\]

The third and final of Bakos’s interpretative comments about \textit{De visione Dei}’s exercise points to the manner in which Cusa’s framework might be deployed as a resource for considering the positive value of a diversity of perspectives on God. Bakos writes, ‘Furthermore, if different images, names or concepts are necessarily articulated from different perspectives, their diversity can even have a positive role, namely, that of pointing toward God’s infinite mystery (as seen) from different perspectives.’\textsuperscript{207}

\textsuperscript{203} Gergely Tibor Bakos, \textit{On Faith}, 175.
\textsuperscript{204} Gergely Tibor Bakos, \textit{On Faith}, 172.
\textsuperscript{205} Gergely Tibor Bakos, \textit{On Faith}, 172.
\textsuperscript{206} \textit{DVD}, chapter 25, paragraph 111.
\textsuperscript{207} Gergely Tibor Bakos, \textit{On Faith}, 172.
Bakos concludes the brief section of his book in which he analyses *De visione Dei* with two further remarks that are significant for the present thesis. First, he writes that ‘I will withstand the temptation of explicitly relating these points to the question of different religions. Such a reading of *DVD* must necessarily go beyond the letter of this work.’ In other words, to study how *De visione Dei* might be read in relation to theological and practical inter-religious engagement would be beyond the scope of the project that Bakos himself is undertaking. Secondly, however, Bakos does allow himself a moment to speculate further on the idea that *De visione Dei* may provide a helpful resource for theology of religions.

As its opening passage demonstrates, Nicholas addressed this treatise on mystical theology to a group of Christian contemplative monks. Small wonder then that *DVD* contains no explicit reference to people not sharing Christian faith. On the other hand, against this *caveat* it can be pointed out that the account of *DVD* can be fairly called ontological. This ontological character is observable in the employment of such general terms as, for instance, ‘thing’ (*res*), ‘being’ (*esse*), ‘whatever that exists’ (*quodlibet quod est*) and ‘creature’ (*creatura*). Even though this account of being was inspired by and is actually written from a Christian perspective, it is presented as applicable to the entire universe (*totus universi*). Therefore an interpretation developing further the aforementioned points is in principle not impossible.208

Bakos then speculates even further that ‘It is possible to relate [*DVD*’s] account of different human perspectives and self-love to the problem of different religions.’209

In a manner similar to Fred Dallmayr, Gergely Tibor Bakos has offered us a tantalizing observation because he identifies the inter-religious potential of *De visione Dei*. Furthermore, he asserts that this potential is worthy of fuller attention. Yet, like Fred Dallmayr, Bakos also does not proceed with a deeper evaluation because, in this case, such a study was beyond the scope of his work. We ourselves will endeavour to deepen that evaluation and, in so doing, will

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208 Gergely Tibor Bakos, *On Faith*, 176-177. The emphasis here is in the original.

return to Bakos’ observations in chapter four, especially as we consider the textual warrant for proposing *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions.

**Joshua Hollmann**

Joshua Hollmann’s monograph *The Religious Concordance: Nicholas of Cusa and Christian-Muslim Dialogue* argues that the imaginary inter-religious dialogue at the centre of *De pace fidei* can be interpreted as a statement of Cusa’s Christology and, further, that the Christology at the heart of *De pace fidei* forms a link from that work to four other Cusan books.\(^{210}\) Hollmann’s study is significant to the field of Cusan studies because, firstly, it argues for the presence of a well-developed metaphysics in *De pace fidei*, which Hollmann describes as an ‘all-embracing metaphysics of the Word of God’. Secondly, Hollmann’s work is also important because he argues that this metaphysics of the Word of God forms a previously unidentified connection between *De pace fidei* and a number of Cusa’s other writings, including *De visione Dei*.\(^{211}\) In making this argument, Hollmann presents a corrective to previous scholarship about both *De pace fidei* and Cusa’s Christology.

Drawing upon the paradigm of Cusanus’s own metaphysical claim concerning the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*), the Christocentric arguments of four of his major treatises - *De concordantia catholica*, *De docta ignorantia*, *Cribratio Alkorani*, and *De visione Dei* - may be seen to fit together in relation to the keystone of Cusanus’s Christology and *Logos* theology as articulated and globally expanded in *De pace fidei*.\(^{212}\)

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Hollmann’s work constructively contends with other scholars who have argued for the absence of metaphysical categories in *De pace fidei*. An influential example is Thomas P. McTighe who writes, ‘the ambiguities in the *De pace fidei* concerning unity of religion and diversity of rites, or diversity of religions, arise not because of the presence (as some commentators claim), but precisely because of the absence of metaphysical categories.’\(^{213}\) Hollmann carefully traces Cusa’s personal search for religious concordance and concludes differently to McTighe, and other similar assessments, by demonstrating the philosophical and theological grounding within *De pace fidei* of Cusa’s theology of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Wisdom and Word of God, who is ‘the ultimate revealer of one religion in a variety of rights.’\(^{214}\)

Hollmann thoroughly examines how the structure of *De pace fidei*’s imaginary inter-religious dialogue between the peoples of the world progresses dialectically from the Word of God (the ‘one’) outward to the representatives of the religions of the world (the ‘many’), and then back again from the many to the Word. Hollmann argues that this dialectical structure of the dialogue serves to focus the reader on the fact that Cusa’s Christology is in fact the ‘keystone’ of his entire theology in *De pace fidei*. Put another way, each stanza of the dialogue begins with and returns to the Word of God and, in so doing, Cusa draws the reader’s attention toward the one who is central to Cusa’s theology. Furthermore, and most specifically in chapter six, Hollmann analyses how this Christological ‘keystone’ connects *De pace fidei* to the four other Cusan treatises he brings under consideration. It is within this chapter that Hollmann gives consideration to a possible connection between *De pace fidei* and *De visione Dei*.


Hollmann observes that we should note, firstly, the importance of the fact that the image in the centre of *De visione Dei*’s opening exercise is ‘an icon of the face of Christ’. It is through the eyes of Christ that all the monks are seen and, in turn, it is into the eyes of Christ that they all gaze. Christ enfolds each one who stands before him with an all-embracing vision.

*De visione Dei* paints the vivid palette of Cusanus’s Christology as the all-seeing Word of God from whom all things are unfolded and in whom all things are enfolded. This same universally unfolding and enfolding Word of God becomes globally focussed in Cusanus’s dialogue in *De pace fidei*.

Hollmann’s work points us toward the fact that Christology is central to both of the books that Cusa authored in 1453, and that his Christology is demonstrated in different yet complementary ways in both works. That which is evident in *De visione Dei*, that the gaze sees all and is seen by all, becomes ‘globally focussed’ in *De pace fidei*. Looked at in this way, the complementarity of the two works is quite beautiful. In *De pace fidei*, Christ is shown to be the incarnate Word of God who enfolds all through a dialogue of words, within which Christ is the centre of all listening and speaking. In *De visione Dei*, Christ is shown to be the incarnate icon of God who enfolds each one who stands before him through a dialogue of perspectives, a dialogue of visions, within which Christ is the centre of all seeing, and all that is seen.

Christ’s centrality in *De pace fidei* is demonstrated by his presence as the focus of words, and in *De visione Dei* by his presence as the focus of sight. Around Christ, the Word and the words, the icon and the viewers, the one and the many, all coincide and are held together. Thus Hollmann concludes, ‘While *De pace fidei* and *De visione Dei* are often interpreted as unrelated in style and substance, we see concordance between Cusanus’s

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understanding of the Word of God in *De pace fidei* and the icon of Jesus in *De visione Dei*.  

Hollmann further remarks, ‘Two other major writings of Cusanus, which are categorized by Nicholas of Cusa scholars as dissimilar in style and content to *De pace fidei* - namely, *Cribratio Alkorani* and the mystical treatise *De visione Dei* - are closely related in substance to the dialogue of religious peace through their shared emphasis on the primary principle of the concordant ‘Word of God’.  

Hollmann’s work is valuable to scholars of Cusa’s inter-religious thought, and to those who specialize on *De visione Dei* in particular, because it points to the complementarity of structure and theology between the two works that Cusa wrote in 1453. In addition, and equally significant, Hollmann also demonstrates that the convergence of the two books centres in Christ as the fulcrum of the one and the many; the one who unfolds and enfolds all, in both word (*De pace fidei*) and vision (*De visione Dei*).  

Hollmann’s reading of Cusa is reminiscent of James E. Biechler’s observation, discussed earlier, that *De pace fidei* exemplifies a two-fold broadening in Cusan thought: his broadened approach to the place of non-Christian religions and his broadened approach to the nature of the divine. Hollmann steps more knowledgably into this idea than Biechler and identifies a connection between Cusa’s broadening inter-religious imagination, displayed in *De pace fidei*, and the ‘all-embracing metaphysics of the Word of God’ on display in other Cusan works, including *De visione Dei*. In so doing, Hollmann has pointed to a bridge between the two 1453 treatises. Hollmann does not cross the bridge himself, to deepen his observations about *De visione Dei*, because the scope of his study requires that he keep traveling in an alternative direction. Nevertheless, Hollmann’s work provides encouragement to our own

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219 James Biechler, ‘Interreligious Dialogue’, 274
research. Given the complementarity we have now observed that a number of scholars identify between *De pace fidei* and *De visione Dei*, might there be fruitful outcomes from an exploration into whether *De visione Dei* can be read creatively as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, just as *De pace fidei* has? *De pace fidei* has always been regarded as a pioneering work, and the most widely studied of Cusa’s writings, on inter-religious relations. In light of their chronological proximity, and the evidence of their thematic complementarity, there may in fact be warrants for proposing *De visione Dei* as a resource for this area of scholarship; a potentially valuable site for contemporary theology of religions.

Davide Monaco

With that question we turn to a fourth recent monograph, Davide Monaco’s *Nicholas of Cusa: Trinity, Freedom and Dialogue*, in which Monaco examines the key themes named in his title in Cusa’s writings. These three themes, Trinity, freedom, and dialogue, are an interconnected hermeneutical key, Monaco argues, from which we may gain an understanding of Cusa’s thought as a whole. Monaco focuses his study on the dialogue of *De pace fidei*, yet we will also note that he makes an additional connection to *De visione Dei*, regarding the relationship of intra-religious dialogue and inter-religious dialogue.

In studying Cusa’s writings on the Trinity, Monaco traces how Cusa develops an understanding of the One who is triune in critical dialogue with the work of Plato and Proclus, as well as the Christian Neoplatonism represented in Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena, and Meister Eckhart. Monaco concludes that, in Cusa, Trinity and free will combine to define the very essence of the one God, with Cusa’s conception of the free will of God being

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expressed in, firstly, God’s determination to create\textsuperscript{221} and, secondly, to the Trinitarian generation of God’s own self.\textsuperscript{222}

The second of Monaco’s themes, freedom, is found to be the hinge in Cusa’s thought between the first (Trinity) and third (dialogue). It is freedom that provides for the unfolding and enfolding triunity of the divine, and it is that same freedom which is imprinted upon the image of the divine in creation. That is to say, Monaco argues that it is humans of free will that are, for Cusa, the \textit{imago Dei}. Trinity and freedom denote both the being and the actions of God and, from this, Cusa views dialogue, understood as a free activity undertaken in relationship, to be the manner in which women and men give expression to the \textit{imago Dei}. Monaco writes, ‘For the Cardinal, the Trinity is not to be understood as the mere summing of three units, nor simple repetition of the identical, but dynamically self-unfolding of the One; as self-relationship in which Oneness is constituted as Trinity.’\textsuperscript{223}

Before we move into Monaco’s examination of Cusa’s ideas about dialogue, it is important to pause again over these two significant Cusan terms, \textit{explicatio} (unfolded) and \textit{complicatio} (enfolded), for they feature here in Monaco’s analysis, as they did in Joshua Hollmann’s. It will be recalled that both terms relate, in the first instance, to the manner in which Cusa understands God as creator. However, that understanding of unfolding and enfolding relative to God as creator is also found in other aspects of Cusa’s theology. We noted that those additional aspects include how it may be affirmed that an infinite and transcendent truth can be apprehended in finite human expression and, further, how an infinite and transcendent God may be expressed and worshipped in a variety of ways. God the creator has unfolded (\textit{explicatio}) all of creation in its diversity and yet the full breadth of creation remains

\textsuperscript{221} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 55.

\textsuperscript{222} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 66.

\textsuperscript{223} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 22.
enfolded (complicatio) in God. All that God the creator has unfolded coincides as one within God.224

Monaco observes, in analysing Cusa on this theological pattern, that by describing creation as the enfolded unfolding of God, ‘Cusanus manages to defend both God’s freedom and omnipotence along with the significance of the world, and it being a theophany, trace, and manifestation of its creator.’225 Having reminded ourselves of this framework, it is now important to note that Cusa’s theology of creation as the enfolded unfolding of God is also the foundation to which we may trace his understanding of the significance of dialogue; both intra-religious dialogue within one religion, and inter-religious dialogue among multiple religions. It is here that we return to Monaco’s third key Cusan theme, dialogue.

As we have already described, Cusa believed that God cannot be objectified, for God is infinite and transcendent and, therefore, beyond human comprehension. However, Cusa’s theology of creation, which contains this dialectic of a unity unfolded into multiplicity which yet remains an enfolded unity, is the ground upon which Cusa allows for, if not human comprehension of God then, at least, human apprehension of God. The wisdom Cusa believed is achieved when we perceive that it is possible to catch a glimpse of the unbounded universal truth of God, even via the bounded particularity of our finite point of view, is based upon this

224 We encounter Cusa’s theology of ‘unfolding’ and ‘enfolding’ within De visione Dei, at chapter 45 for example, ‘Trusting in Your help, O Lord, I turn once again in order to find you beyond the wall of coincidence of enfolding and unfolding … When I find you to be a power that enfolds all things, I go in. When I find you to be a power that unfolds, I go out. When I find you to be a power that both enfolds and unfolds, I go in and out. From creatures, I go in unto you, who are Creator - go in from the effects unto the Cause. I go out from you, who are Creator - go out from the Cause unto the effects … For creation’s going out from You is creation’s going in unto You; and unfolding is enfolding.’ See also H. Lawrence Bond, ‘Mystical Theology’ in Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man, edited by Christopher M. Bellitto, Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 209-214.
225 Davide Monaco, Nicholas, 89.
idea that creation is the enfolded unfolding of God. Put more simply, God can be perceived and known ‘from particular points of view which, rooted in finiteness, can convey the infinity of truth’ because that which is particular has been unfolded from that which is universal.226

It is here that dialogue takes an especially creative and formative role in Cusa’s theology. A deepening vision of the infinite God can be achieved only by engagement with the multiplicity of the unfolded, particular, singular points of view that surround us. This deepening of knowledge and understanding is enacted through dialogue with our fellow human beings. That engagement, that dialogue, makes previously unrecognised vistas, unrecognized understandings, available to us. Through dialogue, those previously unrecognized vistas become available by an attentive listening which, when joined to our seeing, leads to a broadened vision (knowledge) of God. It is highly significant to Cusa, in fact, that it is only this theology of creation as the enfolded unfolding of God that allows for the affirmation that the multiplicity of particular points of view does not contradict the abiding unity at the midst of them all. Rather, multiplicity is the best expression of infinity within the realm of the finite.227 As Cusa has written in *De visione Dei*,

[God] makes many figures, *because the likeness of His infinite power can be unfolded in the most perfect way only in many figures*. And all intellectual spirits are useful to each [intellectual] spirit. Now, unless they were countless, You, O Infinite God, could not be known in the best possible way.'228

‘Now, unless they were countless, You, O Infinite God, could not be known in the best possible way’. Where this insight is ignored or forgotten, and a full comprehension of truth is claimed

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226 Davide Monaco, *Nicholas*, 90.
227 Davide Monaco, *Nicholas*, 98.
228 DVD, chapter 25, paragraph 111. Emphasis added.
from a single perspective alone, the claimant no longer exhibits learned ignorance. Rather, they remain only in ignorance.

It is Cusa’s theology of the relationship of the One and the many, which begins with the unfolding of creation, and exhibits a dynamic interplay of particularity and universality, along with his declension of that theology into epistemological insights about the significance of particularity in apprehending knowledge God and the universality of truth, that Cusa places into practical form in his treatise about inter-religious dialogue, *De pace fidei*.\(^{229}\) It is Cusa’s theological grounding in teaching that the unfolded *many* are enfolded as *one*, and multiplicity and diversity are the very expression of infinity among the finite, that form the scaffolding within which Cusa’s imaginary inter-religious dialogue among creeds, *De pace fidei*, is constructed in search of religious peace. Further, it is this theological grounding which guides the imaginary participants in the dialogue toward Cusa’s proposal that they are, as representatives of all known cultures, emblematic of the variegated expression across humanity of ‘one religion in a variety of rites’. The participants in the dialogue are the manifestation of an unfolded multiplicity that remains enfolded in unity.

The dialogue in *De pace fidei* revolves around the Word and is grounded in Christian doctrine. Yet it would be a mis-reading of that text, and Cusa’s thought *in toto*, to conclude that

\(^{229}\) ‘Cusanus’ dialogical perspective, which he proposes as a sort of response to the question already existing in his day, namely that of the clash among the various cultures and religions, thus finds its roots in his vision of the divine and of man. If in the Trinity, the distinction among people is determined through freedom in that each is *alias* [another] than the other, but the coessentiality of essence in that each is also *non aliud* [not another] than the other, in the same way men are able to recognise their brotherhood and communion through freedom, albeit within the sphere of reciprocal differences and distinctions between religions, cults, cultures, and ways of living. Through freedom, the Trinity becomes the possible model, at the same time both speculative and practical, for dialogue. It is not by chance that in the history of Western thought Cusanus was among the first to put aside the merely denigratory and condemnatory designs against Islam and to wish for a pacific attitude of greater conciliation through theorization’. Davide Monaco, *Nicholas*, 6.
this was done to privilege Christianity. The reply to those who read *De pace fidei* as privileging Christianity is found by understanding Cusa’s insights about the significance of particularity within dialogue. His insight is that each person must inevitably speak and listen from a particular perspective in any dialogue, for our human finitude makes that particularity inescapable. Furthermore, it is impossible to attain a universal perspective, as if one could sit above all individual points of view and gather an all-seeing vision. Therefore, Cusa’s use of the Word of God as the hub around which the dialogue revolves, and his housing of *De pace fidei*’s dialogue in a discussion of the doctrines of his own Christian faith, is the logical outcome of Cusa’s theology of creation, and its consequent conclusions regarding how knowledge of God may be obtained. Namely, it is only the particular that provides our access to the universal.

By commencing with Christianity, Cusa’s own particular expression of the *una religio*, then moving outward to a dialogue with other religions, and then circulating back from that dialogue to address his own Christian beliefs again, Cusa is giving practical expression to a formulation or method of dialogue which respects the dignity of each particular perspective and retains the integrity of his theology of creation. It is not intended as a manifestation of Christian imperialism. It is intended as a demonstration of the theological and epistemological integrity of inter-religious dialogue. The dialogue is one of outward movement from, and then return to, a particular religious perspective. Inter-religious dialogue, and the theology of religions, can really only ever be thus:

Every attempt to solve the problem of religious pluralism and the dialogue between different cultures and religions is an attempt set within a particular conjectural perspective, a finite one. However, it is exactly in its contraction, historicity, and particularity that Cusanus’ proposal reveals its universal meaning, showing the universality of every answer’s particular condition. Cusanus’ search, since it is a deep analysis of a potential Christian way to dialogue, reveals how interfaith and intrafaith dialogue penetrate each other in a circularity, opening up an ulteriority of sense. The encounter with the other
stimulates us to deepen our individual and personal views as well as our religious, cultural and personal perspective, which can provide reasons for the dialogue to take place.230

Davide Monaco’s analysis of De pace fidei provides an entry point to understanding the value that Cusa places on dialogue, and the theological foundation Cusa provides for dialogue via his teaching on creation. Of special interest to the present thesis is the fact that, toward the close of this discussion, and flowing from the observation in the passage above about the mutuality of intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue, Monaco points to a connection between De pace fidei and De visione Dei, a connection that we will take a moment to expand upon now. Monaco writes,

In order to illustrate this passage, it is useful to recall the experiment of the all-seeing portrait, the image of the divine face, illustrated by Cusanus in his De visione Dei. In this speculative masterpiece - rarely and delicately beautiful, and with a mystical afflatus - which was written shortly after De pace fidei, Cusanus proposes an experiment to the addressees of the text - the Tegernsee monks.231

Having made this opening observation, Monaco sets out to establish the presence of a complementary theology of the one and the many in both De visione Dei and De pace fidei. It is a complementarity located, as we have seen, in Cusa’s theology of creation as the enfolded unfolding of God. Having noted the chronological proximity of Cusa’s authorship of the two 1453 works, Monaco then proceeds to deploy De visione Dei’s experiment around the all-seeing icon as an intra-religious example of the dialogue that De pace fidei demonstrates for inter-religious relations. The exercise undertaken by the Tegernsee monks is offered as a template for the widening dialogue evident in De pace fidei.

230 Davide Monaco, Nicholas, 92-93.
231 Davide Monaco, Nicholas, 93.
Monaco firstly notes that the aim of *De visione Dei*’s iconic experiment is for the participants to learn, in turning to each other in dialogue, that it only becomes possible to apprehend infinite truth, and experience the infinite God, when they listen to those who stand at different places. A single perspective will allow them a particular understanding; a dialogue of perspectives will allow insight into the fact that there is always an *excess* of the One they perceive. This awareness that God and truth are inexhaustible, and therefore infinite, arises as the dialogue begins. In a related observation, Monaco also notes that the experiment is designed to lead its participants to an understanding that God and truth are always *other* with respect to each finite perspective. Put another way, God and truth are available to, and yet always beyond, ‘every historically and personally determined position or point of view.’

Secondly, Monaco notes that *De visione Dei* provides, in a manner that compliments *De pace fidei*, practical clarity of Cusa’s understanding that the activity of dialogue is not ancillary to the apprehension of truth; that dialogue is not simply a means to an end. Rather, there is an essential sense in which the dialogue is an end in itself. The infinite God of whom participants seek knowledge is known, in the logic of knowledge as communion or participation, *in* the dialogue, rather than being known as a result of knowledge gained *by* and taken *from* the dialogue. God is known in the dialogical encounter.

Of course, the role of dialogue in ending religious conflict, securing peaceful co-existence, and deepening understanding and respect among people of different religious perspectives is imperative because these are all noble goals for such dialogue; noble ends, for which intra- and inter-religious dialogue is a means. The fulfilment of those goals is called for

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232 Davide Monaco, *Nicholas*, 94.

233 There is a resemblance here to Karl Barth’s theology of revelation as an event and, further, to Barth’s theology positing that revelation does not make something available, for example knowledge, but rather makes someone available, namely God. For a helpful introduction see Trevor Hart, ‘Revelation’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37-56, esp. 45-49.
within the religions, and between the different religions. For Cusa, however, the well of
dialogue’s possibilities is far deeper. More than a means to an end, dialogue is ‘an essential
moment of faith itself, and of the search for divine truth’.\textsuperscript{234} According to Cusa’s exercise in
\textit{De visione Dei}, dialogue among multiple perspectives is not only valuable for the practical
outcomes it hopes to produce; outcomes such as respect, harmony, and peace where there has
been disrespect, discord, and conflict. Beyond these practical outcomes, dialogue is in fact also
a necessity grounded in the transcendence of truth, the infinity and freedom of God, and the
mystery of God’s ways with the world. ‘The infinity and freedom of God and truth require a
never-ending search which coincides with dialogue.’\textsuperscript{235}

Third, Monaco also writes of a double register to be followed in Cusa’s advocacy for
dialogue in both \textit{De visione Dei} and \textit{De pace fidei}, a double register in which Cusa records
both a negative and a positive reason for the significance of dialogue.

On the one hand the negative register, according to which God’s transcendence and unobjectability lay
the foundations for dialogue among different positions as a common search for the divine that is always ulterior, since none of these positions is his precise expression, and on the other hand the positive register,
according to which the variety of expressions of God who, as infinite and inextinguishable, is expressed and revealed in individual ways by each particular position and therefore is an encouragement toward dialogue as the way of understanding its singularity and uniquely revealed truth.\textsuperscript{236}

Put simply, God’s transcendence, God’s ‘unobjectibility’, is the reason why intra-religious dialogue (\textit{De visione Dei}) and inter-religious dialogue (\textit{De pace fidei}) are necessary. That God is encountered, apprehended and ‘known’, by individuals from particular perspectives, albeit imperfectly, should encourage the positive realization that dialogue among

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{234} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 94.
\item \textsuperscript{235} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 94.
\item \textsuperscript{236} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 95.
\end{itemize}
particular perspectives holds enriching possibilities for those who desire to deepen the encounter, and their knowledge.

Fourth, Monaco also explains that the aim of Cusa’s dialogue of perspectives is not to persuade anyone to abandon their faith in order that all may become adherents of a single correct religion. Individual expressions of belief, and the plurality of religious traditions, should not be viewed as a hindrance to respect, harmony, or peace. Nor, indeed, should the diversity of human perspectives be viewed as a problem to overcome if a unified vision of God and truth is to be achieved. Rather, dialogue itself serves as a reminder that each perspective is formed from a human point of view. Each perspective is historically bound and, therefore, represents a finite attempt to respond to an infinite truth. The hidden God is beyond every possible human attempt to give positive expression to God. Therefore, a single correct perspective should never be the aim of religious dialogue, nor could it never be the outcome. If dialogue were to arrive at a single ‘correct’ perspective, that perspective would necessarily be mistaken. It could only ever be a finite form. Here we are drawn again to Cusa’s double-register for the significance of dialogue. The negative register, that God is beyond every individual perspective, is coupled with the positive register, that each individual perspective is as expression of an infinite truth and, in bringing those diverse perspectives together in dialogue, a space is created in which God and truth may be known, albeit through a glass dimly.

Fifth, and finally, Monaco reiterates that Cusa’s advocacy for the epistemological value of intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue highlights the relationship of the One and the many within Cusa’s theology. This is a relationship founded, as we have noted, in Cusa’s theology of creation as the enfolded unfolding of God. Thus, Cusa’s advocacy for dialogue is

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a theological commitment which comes to practical expression in *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei*.  

As in the sphere of knowledge the plurality of conjectures does not deny the uniqueness of truth, and in the metaphysical and ontological spheres the plurality of the many does not deny the uniqueness of the One, so in the same way, from a theological-religious point of view, the variety of rituals and of confessions does not deny or contradict the one God, but reveals his incommensurability and his inextinguishable power. Not only is the multiplicity of religious cults legitimated, but it also acquires an essential positive value for its manifestation and evidence of the revelation of God’s infinity as well as his transcendence.  

Monaco concludes his analysis of the link between *De pace fidei* and *De visione Dei* with the intriguing observation mentioned in the previous chapter. He notes the often-quoted passage from *De visione Dei* below and writes, ‘It is not possible to read these passages from *De visione Dei* and forget that it was written only a few months after *De pace fidei*, or that there is a relationship between the Cardinal’s words and multiplicity of religions.’  

[God] makes many figures, because the likeness of His infinite power can be unfolded in the most perfect way only in many figures. And all intellectual spirits are useful to each [intellectual] spirit. Now, unless they were countless, You, O Infinite God, could not be known in the best possible way. For each

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238 In an echo of his discussion in *De visione Dei* that God makes many figures in order that God may be known in the best possible way, Cusa draws upon the Qur’an (Surah 5:48) in *De pace fidei*, chapter 1, paragraph 6, in speaking of the plurality that God has established among creatures as being one possible means by which devotion to God may be increased. He writes, ‘But perchance difference of rites cannot be eliminated; or perhaps it is not expedient [that it be eliminated], in order that the devotion may make for an increase of devotion, since each religion will devote more careful attention to making its ceremonies more ‘favorable’, as it were, to You, the King’.  


In this chapter we have noted the place of *De visione Dei* within the tradition of Christian mystical theology, and how its symbols of light and vision, traced to the Hebrew and Greek inheritance to Christianity, are characteristic of that tradition and also evident in Cusa’s thought. Further, we have also offered an interpretive essay on a series of prominent journal articles, book chapters, and monographs that study Cusa’s writings on inter-religious relations and the theological foundations of his approach to inter-religious dialogue. That literature survey has revealed that scholars seeking to understand Cusa’s theology of the religions have been predominantly focused on *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*, while *De visione Dei* has received only supplementary attention. Importantly for this thesis, however, a number of those scholars have in fact identified the potential of *De visione Dei* as a resource for theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, even if they themselves have not pursued that prospect.

While these findings about the potential held by *De visione Dei* are promising, as are the excurses we have taken into his theology of creation, of particularity, universality, and the knowledge of God, and the practice of dialogue, it will now be important to establish if there is any justification for deploying *De visione Dei* toward theological and practical engagement

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241 *DVD*, chapter 25, paragraph 111. The emphasis is in Cusa’s original text. Further, the following example from *DVD*, chapter 4, paragraph 10 is included at length simply to note, again, how frequently the language is encompassing of all things and of all beings: ‘You [God] are present to each and every thing. For You who are the Absolute Being of all things are present to each thing as if You were concerned about no other thing at all. Consequently, there is no thing which does not prefer its own being to everything else and does not prefer its own mode of being to all the modes of being of other things; and each thing so cherishes its own being that it would let the being of all other things perish rather than its own. For You, O Lord, behold each existing thing in such a way that no existing thing can conceive that You have any other concern than (1) that this very thing exist in the best manner it can and (2) that all other existing things exist only in order to serve the following end: viz., that this thing upon which You are looking exist in the best way’.
with religious diversity. This next step is central, in fact, to this thesis. It may be that the relative inattention given to *De visione Dei* by Christian theologians of the religions and religious dialogue is a natural consequence of there being little about the text to commend it to them. Thus we need to ask, are there in fact any warrants for proposing *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue? We attend to that question in our next chapter.
Chapter 4

WARRANTS FOR *DE VISIONE DEI’S*

INTER-RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Having acquainted ourselves with Nicholas of Cusa and *De visione Dei*, and discovered through our literature survey that the inter-religious potential of that treatise has been recognised yet not investigated, we are now in a position to consider whether or not there are warrants for proposing Cusa’s *visione* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. It is one thing to notice potential in this book, it is yet another to establish a justification for pursuing that potential.

Whether or not *De visione Dei* may be deployed by theologians working on theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue is a question that must be carefully addressed. As we have noted, *De visione Dei* was written from a Christian perspective, for a Christian community, and speaks to a specifically Christian fifteenth-century controversy about how knowledge of God may be obtained. Given those origins, Cusa did not directly address the presence of the many world religions, or their possible purpose within the plan of God, in the book. Therefore, warrants must be provided to establish why this text, with those origins, may be creatively engaged for a purpose that, to the best of our knowledge, was not intended by its author. A case needs to be made for why the originally intra-religious focus of the book need not prevent us from proposing it as a resource for theologians working with an inter-religious agenda. It is the aim of this chapter to provide that platform.
Four warrants will be presented in order to justify proposing Cusa’s vision as an interlocutor for inter-religious engagement. Those warrants provide four pillars of a platform which would support the engagement of *De visione Dei* within the ongoing theological conversation regarding the relationship of Christianity to the non-Christian religions, and with the question of whether the multiplicity of religions may have a purpose within the plan of God. The first warrant is contextual, introducing points of resonance between the context in which Cusa wrote *De visione Dei* and the context in which theologians work today. The second warrant is epistemological, outlining how germane Cusa’s key theme of perspectives-in-dialogue appears to be for the task of theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. The third warrant is philosophical and illustrates how the common theme of dialogue provides a fundamental complementarity between *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei*, the two books that Cusa wrote ‘almost in parallel’ during 1453. The fourth warrant is textual and will examine the expansive nature of the language of *De visione Dei* and the experimental nature of its exercise around the icon which, together, form a textual platform on which to position an expanding reading of the treatise.

To offer an insight now into where this chapter will conclude, Cusa’s *De visione Dei* presents a rich resource for twenty-first century theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue as long as it is acknowledged that this text would join theology of religions, to employ a metaphor, as guest rather than host. That is to say, just as inter-religious theologians consult with and draw upon, for example, methodological, philosophical, and theological works from beyond their own field to support their investigations and proposals, so too may *De visione Dei* be drawn upon to perform the same creative role; as an interlocutor to pose questions, stimulate...

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ideas, offer theoretical structures, and so on. So, in order to demonstrate that *De visione Dei* holds the potential to be just such a resource, we turn firstly of all to our contextual warrant.

**Contextual Warrant - The Towers of Constantinople and New York**

The siege and eventual fall of Constantinople during April and May of 1453 was the defining event of inter-religious strife of Cusa’s lifetime. In September of that same year he completed *De pace fidei*, a pioneering example of advocacy for inter-religious dialogue,² and then in October he wrote *De visione Dei*, a work addressing questions about the knowledge of God supported by an exercise established on a dialogue among diverse perspectives.³ Of particular interest for this thesis is the fact that, notwithstanding the chronological proximity of the two books and the complementarity of their ideas, to which we will return shortly, *De pace fidei* has received significant attention in the field of theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue while *De visione Dei*, as our literature survey revealed, has received very little.

Cusa’s life and work, and his previous writings, had given indications of his instinct for unity; of his desire to build bridges across religious divisions. The fall of Constantinople seems to be the event that crystalized that desire, for its aftermath saw Cusa commit to writing two imaginative works centred on the value of dialogue. The first is a dialogue designed to bring peace among people of different creeds, the second is a dialogue designed to illustrate the value of many perspectives when seeking to obtain knowledge of God. Both *De pace fidei* and *De visione Dei* feature a dialogue of differing perspectives as their central motif. The following introduction to the context in which Cusa authored *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei* is presented as our first warrant for proposing *De visione Dei* as a resource for inter-religious

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engagement. What was it about the context in which Cusa composed his vision that drew him to reflect on dialogue as method to engage and value difference? Further, are there echoes of Cusa’s context in our own day? That question leads us to focus now on a seminal event of Cusa’s life-time, the fall of Constantinople, and a defining event of our own, the events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath.

In the fifteenth century, Constantinople was one of the most famous cities in the world. It was the Rome of the East, celebrated as an imperial capital since its consecration by Emperor Constantine in 330 CE. It was the heart of the Byzantine empire, the gateway to Europe from the east, a centre of politics, trade, culture, and religion. Constantinople was the focus of Eastern Christianity and so it was to this city, as we have noted, that Nicholas of Cusa was sent by Pope Eugenius IV in 1437 to work on his behalf for a reunion between the Western and Eastern imperial capitals of the Christian faith. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman army dealt a massive blow to Christendom. So consequential was Constantinople’s fall that, in the mind of many historians, it is one of the distinguishing marks defining the beginning of a new era in Europe - the end of the Holy Roman empire and the dawn of the era of nation states.

Constantinople was protected in 1453 by four huge towers. The destruction of those towers by the Ottoman army and the surrender of the city was the result of a novel form of military weapon. It was something new and something shocking: the cannon. Gunpowder had

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been used in Europe for over one hundred years to little effect. At Constantinople, it became devastating. The Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed II, had engaged a Hungarian to construct several huge cannon, weaponised by gunpowder, the size of which had never been imagined let alone seen. These new weapons struck a chord of vulnerability and fear among all who saw them, or heard about them. Two thousand soldiers and sixty oxen were required to move the largest cannon into place. One cannon was positioned outside the city walls directly opposite Emperor Constantine’s palace. There is a contemporary account which records the cannon balls as having a sixteen foot circumference and weighing nineteen-hundred pounds.\(^7\) While that account is very likely to be exaggerated, the exaggeration itself is a sign of the mood of fear which followed the destruction of the city’s defences. Despite committed resistance, the towers of Constantinople could not withstand the assault. Once the towers of Constantinople had collapsed, Muslim soldiers swept through the city. Emperor Constantine removed his imperial regalia and met the victors near the Gate of Saint Romanos. He was never seen again. Although no reliable account exists it has been estimated that around 4,000 people were killed.\(^8\)

The psychological blow struck at Constantinople was as profound as the military calamity.\(^9\) The siege began during the Christian festival of Easter Monday, 2 April 1453, and ended fifty-three days later when a Muslim cleric ascended the pulpit in Saint Sophia, the Great Church of God and cathedral of the city, to recite an Islamic prayer. Constantinople was renamed Islambol, ‘where Islam abounds’, and a wave of fear about Muslims swept into Europe. The towers of Constantinople had crashed, metaphorically, upon the entire Western world.

\(^8\) Timothy E. Gregory, *A History*, 336.
Reports emanating from Constantinople ‘both enraged and terrified the Christian world during that fateful summer and, indeed, for years thereafter’.\(^{10}\) The Pope declared a crusade to reclaim the city.\(^{11}\) Fighting between Christian armies raised in Europe and Muslim armies raised by the Ottoman Turks persisted inexorably until the middle of the sixteenth century when Suleyman the Magnificent ‘was finally stymied at the outskirts of Vienna’.\(^{12}\) Inter-religious suspicion, anger, and conflict raged and ‘a wave of horror swept across Europe.’\(^{13}\) The fall of Constantinople, and tales told of violent attacks by Muslims upon Christians, were considered confirmation of ‘the essentially diabolical nature of Islam’, and in that climate ‘voices urging a peaceful approach to Muslims were truly rare’.\(^{14}\) Nicholas of Cusa learned of these events on 28 June 1453, not long after returning to Brixen following a trip to Rome.\(^{15}\) As we have noted, Cusa soon took to writing two of his most famous works and, in so doing, became one of those rare voices calling for dialogue as a path toward peace.

As with Constantinople in 1453, New York in 2001 was one of the most famous cities in the world. A thriving centre of trade, politics, and culture, it was the commercial heart of the industrial empire of the United States of America. New York’s great towers were the skyscrapers which line every street; the towers of enterprise. They are the city’s most recognisable


\(^{11}\) James E. Biechler and H. Lawrence Bond (eds.), *Nicholas*, ix.


\(^{14}\) Jos Descorte, ‘Tolerance and Trinity’, x.

\(^{15}\) Prasad J. N. Theruvathu, *Ineffabilis in the Thought of Nicholas of Cusa* (Munster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2010), 52.
feature. It therefore sent a shockwave through the United States and much of the Western world when, on 11 September 2001, nineteen men hijacked four passenger planes mid-flight and flew two of those planes into the most famous towers in New York city, the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Weakened by the massive amount of heat created from the consequent fires, both towers came crashing down. A third hijacked plane was flown into the headquarters of the United States Department of Defence, the Pentagon, and a fourth plane, intended for the White House, crashed into an empty field in Pennsylvania. The hijackers were carrying out a plan coordinated by al-Qaeda, a militant organisation whose leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri had declared it the duty of all Muslims to kill Americans wherever the opportunity arose.16

As with the cannon used against the towers of Constantinople in 1453, a new form of weapon was used against the towers of New York during the September 11 attack: commercial jet aeroplanes. Film footage of two aeroplanes flying into the World Trade Center Towers, and the subsequent implosion of those towers, became the most famous footage since Abraham Zaprunder’s home movie recording of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This new form of weapon struck a chord of vulnerability and fear among all who saw it. Thereafter, it was conceivable that each time a person boarded a passenger flight they may be boarding a loaded weapon. The images from New York that day resembled those of a city under siege. A total of 2,996 people died and an estimated 6,000 were injured on a day known thereafter as ‘9/11’. The collective psyche of the West shook with an existential earthquake. It was as if the World Trade Center Towers had fallen upon the entire Western world.

Following the fall of Constantinople, the Pope declared a crusade and, following the fall of the World Trade Center Towers, so too did the President of the United States. ‘This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while’, President George W. Bush told

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16 The *fatwa* was issued in February 1998.
reporters at a press conference on 16 September 2001.\textsuperscript{17} It was a crusade that began with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The combat that followed exceeds the length of World War I and World War II combined. A jihadist group named Islamic State, arising as a descendent of al-Qaeda out of the chaos wrought by these two invasions and the ensuing years of warfare, then declared a caliphate over territories it had captured in Iraq and Syria in mid-2014. Despite the President of Iraq’s declaration of victory over Islamic State in December 2017, the people of the Middle East and South Asia, in particular, continue to experience the devastating consequences of that post-9/11 crusade.\textsuperscript{18}

The coincidence of violent events in two contexts far removed from each other, fifteenth-century Constantinople and twenty-first century New York, is only an historical curiosity; a curiosity awakened by the destruction of great towers, in two world-famous cities, by Muslim militias, using novel forms of weaponry, both of which had repercussions across the West and beyond. Of itself, that coincidence does not link one context, 1453, to another, 2001, and the historical curiosity should not be overstated. However, that coincidence of events is emblematic of that which does form a significant link between the context in which Cusa wrote \textit{De visione Dei} and our own, namely, heightened inter-religious suspicion and religiously-implicated conflict.

It risks over-simplifying the causes of 9/11 and the ensuing wars to say that religion is to blame, or to speak of the conflict in binary terms such as ‘Islam and the West’. Nevertheless, there is evidence to support the observation that religion has been substantially elevated since 2001 in the collective consciousness of the United States and Europe, along with allied


countries like Australia. For example, many notable assessments of geopolitics in the last twenty years have identified the rise of religious violence and religious identity politics as one of if not the most destabilising factor in post-Cold War global politics.¹⁹

Images of religiously-implicated violence are ever present in the media, occasionally to the point of saturation. Religious themes and rhetoric have featured consistently in political discourse surrounding the ‘war on terror’, and religious violence has seized the collective imaginary. Constantinople’s fall ‘both enraged and terrified the Christian world during that fateful summer and, indeed, for years thereafter.’²⁰ An echo has been experienced in the post-9/11 West. We have noted the remarks made by President Bush to the White House media on 16 September 2001 when he spoke of the long crusade ahead. Those remarks included a total of twenty-six sentences within which Mr Bush used the word faith seven times and evil four times. They included the following statement:

¹⁹ For example, Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ian Goldin and Chris Kutarna, *Age of Discovery: Navigating the Risks and Rewards of our New Renaissance* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2016); Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). Huntington is the best known of such assessments: ‘The great religions of the world are all products of non-Western civilizations and, in most cases, antedate Western civilization. As the world moves out of its Western phase, the ideologies that typified late-Western civilization decline, and their place is taken by religions and other culturally based forms of identity and commitment. The Westphalian separation of religion and international politics, an idiosyncratic product of Western civilization, is coming to an end …The intracivilizational clash of political ideas spawned by the West is being supplanted by an intercivilizational clash of culture and religion.’ Huntington, *op. cit.*, 54. Further, Francis Fukuyama writes, ‘One of the striking characteristics of global politics in the second decade of the twenty-first century is that the dynamic new forces shaping it are nationalist or religious parties and politicians, the two faces of identity politics, rather than the class-based left-wing parties that were so prominent in the politics of the twenty century.’ In *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (London: Profile Books, 2018), 74.

My administration has a job to do, and we’re going to do it. We will rid the world of the evil-doers. We will call together freedom loving people to fight terrorism. And on this day - on the Lord’s Day - I say to my fellow Americans, thank you for your prayers, thank you for your compassion, thank you for your love for one another. And tomorrow when you get back to work, work hard like you always have. But we’ve been warned. We’ve been warned there are evil people in this world. We’ve been warned so vividly - and we’ll be alert. Your government is alert. The governors and mayors are alert that evil folks still lurk out there. 21

The United States and its allies have claimed that the ‘crusade’ President Bush initiated against al-Qaeda has been undertaken to advance a civilization marked by respect for individual liberty and the democratic rule of law, described as the core values of the ‘Christian West’. 22 The leaders of Islamic State, for their part, declared that they fight for a civilization where governance is in accordance with Islamic Law under the authority of a Caliph, a righteous descendent of Muhammad. 23 Some scholars argue that signs of religious intent such as these, at or near the centre of conflict today, are consistent with a broad shift in the nature of global conflict since the end of the Cold War.

Samuel P. Huntington, for example, set off a now famously significant debate in 1996 with his book The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order. 24 Huntington argued that, whereas the conflicts which had dominated the globe during the Cold War were

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22 ‘Historically, from the sixteenth century onward, the spread of Christianity into many parts of the world was associated with colonial expansion of the West into the rest of the world. More recently, and especially in the twenty-first century, the success of mission is attributed to the Christian West’s strategic accomplishment with the forces of aggressive globalization that is calculatingly infiltrating the whole world.’ Sathianathan Clarke, Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 16.
ideological, political, and economic, the conflicts that will dominate after the Cold War will be between civilizations. To be specific, Huntington divided the post-Cold War globe into Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic/Orthodox, Latin American and, possibly, African civilizations. He added that a civilization is defined by ‘ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions’, then went on to conclude that ‘of all the objective elements that define civilizations … the most important usually is religion.’

It is surprising that Huntington did not make more of his remark about the significance of religious identity in the post-Cold War world. He described religion as ‘usually’ the most important ingredient in shaping a civilization yet offered little further analysis of that point. Huntington made ‘a connection between cultural patterns and religion’, yet prioritized ‘the lens of culture’. Yet as the distinguished scholar of religions Morimichi Watanabe has identified, ‘aside from the question of whether Confucianism can be considered a religion, it is possible to divide Huntington’s classification into Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu religions’. In other words, using his own metric, Huntington was essentially arguing that we no longer live in an age dominated by economic conflict but, rather, an age where conflict centres on civilizational differences that are founded in religious differences.

25 ‘Throughout Africa tribal identities are pervasive and intense, but Africans are also increasingly developing a sense of an African identity, and conceivably sub-Saharan African could cohere into a distinct civilization, with South Africa possibly being its core state.’ Huntington, Clash, 47.
26 Huntington, Clash, 21.
27 Huntington, Clash, 42.
Huntington’s thesis met with a fresh wave of attention after the attacks on New York in September 2001. Edward Said’s sharp critique, delivered in the wake of 9/11, is among the most well-known of all. \(^{30}\) Said argued that in Huntington’s thesis, the personification of enormous entities called ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’ is recklessly affirmed, as if hugely complicated matters like identity and culture existed in a cartoon like world … ‘The Clash of Civilizations’ thesis is a gimmick like ‘The War of the Worlds’ … better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time.\(^{31}\)

Regardless of whether it is Huntington or Said who is correct, or neither, their debate itself is an indication of the focus that had fallen on religion, particularly Islam, from September 2001 onward. As Donald Freeman observed in a 1998 symposium regarding Huntington’s thesis, ‘The sole point on which I agree with Huntington’s analysis of contemporary geopolitics is that the major fault lines follow religious divisions.’\(^{32}\) Either as a presumed villain attracting suspicious looks, or an unfairly stereotyped innocent in need of an advocate, religion had moved to centre stage. An ambience of fear about religiously-motivated violence has been pervasive ever since, just as it was in Europe after 1453. That fear today has been manipulated and turned by some in politics and the media into an almost pathological insecurity about Muslims. Furthermore, those who seek to promote inter-religious grievances for their own purposes have used the intermingling of religions across an increasingly globalized world as a means to stoke their own rhetorical fire.

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Rising suspicion about the ‘religious other’ has come, ironically and perhaps as a consequence, as religious diversity becomes increasingly familiar. Globalization\textsuperscript{33} has made inter-religious encounters a daily reality in ways not experienced a generation ago. ‘Danish cartoons are seen in Islamabad and Cairo, Illinois, and Sarajevo. A joke made by a German commentator is heard in Istanbul. A speech by George W. Bush to veterans in Cincinnati plays the following day in Baghdad on Al Manar TV.’\textsuperscript{34} Furthermore, inter-religious encounters are not only experienced through the media, for ‘globalization’s transnational dynamic has brought religious difference close to home. The religious other is neighbour, colleague and friend, whom we meet in our complex hybridity.’\textsuperscript{35}

The compression of the world, through global systems of trade, migration, media, and technology, has made the experience of living alongside neighbours of various religious traditions a daily reality.\textsuperscript{36} Linell Elizabeth Cady has observed that ‘a major response to the increased pluralism and globalization of life in the late twentieth century has been a reassertion of tightly bounded personal and communal identities, what some have called tribalization.’\textsuperscript{37} Here is an echo, perhaps, of Huntington’s thesis. Are we living in an era of renewed religious conflict, bounded and tribalized as a consequence of the dynamics of globalization?


\textsuperscript{34} Jan Nederveen Pieterse, \textit{Ethnicities and Global Multiculture: Pants for an Octopus} (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 179.


\textsuperscript{36} Jeannine Hill Fletcher, ‘Religious Pluralism’, 395.

Huntington’s thesis has been critiqued as an example of what sociologist Ulrich Beck has called the container theory. Container theory ‘constructs history as the encounter of different bounded wholes and reads globalization as the transgression of the boundaries of these wholes.’ Within the intellectual landscape created by container theory, nations are the container for culture, culture the container for religion, and a religion (almost always in the singular) is the container for identity. Beck, and other globalization theorists, argue that religion and culture are not in fact held by the boundaries of nations. Rather, they flow and intermingle, and have influence beyond any perceived containers. Nevertheless, much of mainstream politics since 9/11 has focused on the containers – and on containment.

Strident rhetoric about containment of refugees and, in some countries, immigration policies that are increasingly marked by a disposition to exclude Muslims, are a sign of increased suspicion and an increasing desire to exclude and contain. A Gallup survey focused on the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, and Germany, from 2008 to 2011, found that ‘within key Western societies, there are genuine negative perceptions, prejudices, and discriminations targeted against Muslims’, and that ‘seeing Muslims as not loyal, voicing prejudice against Muslims, and avoiding Muslims as neighbours are all symptoms of Islamophobia that exist in the West’.

The campaign that persuaded the majority of the electorate in Great Britain to vote in 2016 to leave the European Union, for example, was dominated by immigration issues, along

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with the argument that Brexit would better allow Britain to secure its borders.\textsuperscript{42} Across the Atlantic, the successful candidate in the 2016 election for President of the United States campaigned on a ban against Muslims and a wall against Mexicans. In office, President Trump then set about implementing a ban on people travelling to the United States from selected Muslim-majority countries.\textsuperscript{43} As Francis Fukuyama has observed of both the election of Mr Trump and the ‘Brexit’ vote:

In both cases, voters were concerned with economic issues, particularly those in the working class who had been exposed to job loss and deindustrialization. But just as important was opposition to continued large-scale immigration, which was seen as taking jobs from native-born workers and eroding long-established cultural identities.\textsuperscript{44}

Domestic politics in the United States and Europe in the years since 9/11 have seen an intense focus on religious radicalization and the politics of cultural identity. On the other side of the world, in a nation where less than 3\% of the population are Muslim,\textsuperscript{45} One Nation Party parliamentarians in Australia have called for a complete ban on immigration from majority-Muslim countries, and seek not only a ‘Muslim ban’ but also a Royal Commission, a powerful


form of Commonwealth judicial investigation, ‘to determine if Islam is a religion or a political ideology.’

Globalization and religious diversity bring positive experiences for many. For others, increasing religious diversity is now associated with a perceived increase in religiously-motivated violence, digested via the intense media attention and political demagoguery it attracts, which then perpetuate the spiral of suspicion. For people of religious faith, a world now saturated with inter-religious encounters raises fundamental questions. Douglas John Hall wrote as the phenomenon was becoming prevalent in his own North American context, ‘Nothing is more frequently discussed in Christian academic circles today than the pluralistic character of our society. Religious plurality is particularly conspicuous.’ Twenty years later, that discussion has only intensified:

Various factors of a political, economic, ethnic, legal, and historical nature, and so on, often play a crucial role when religious diversity turns into interreligious conflict. But the religious factor is undeniably part of the complex situation.

With globalization and religious diversity now a fact of life, what ideas and which people can resource us to deepen respect among those who hold to different and even conflicting religious teachings and practices? How are we to build bridges of inter-religious understanding and respect in the world of 9/11, President Bush’s ‘crusade’, ‘Muslim bans’, and lone-wolf suicide bombers? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks captures something of the post-9/11 mood and its challenges for religious scholars and community leaders in his book The Dignity of Difference.

Religions were humanity’s first global phenomena. Biblical monotheism represents the moment when mankind first lifted its sights beyond the tribe, the city and the nation and thought of humanity as a whole. To this day, more than any other actor on the international stage, the great religions fulfil the twenty-first-century imperative: ‘think globally, act locally’. Their vision is global but their setting is local – the congregation, the synagogue, the church, the mosque. The question is: are religions ready for the greatest challenge they have ever faced, namely, a world in which even local conflict can have global repercussions? It was one thing for Christians and Muslims to fight one another in the age of the Crusades; quite another to do so in an age of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. It was one thing for wars of religion to take place on a battlefield, another when anywhere – a plane, a bus or an office block – can become the frontline and a scene of horror.49

We have observed that the context in which Nicholas of Cusa wrote *De visione Dei* was beset by inter-religious tension and violence. In the fall of Constantinople, the Roman Empire to the East was collapsing, and a fear of ‘diabolical’ Islam swept across Europe. ‘A world is coming apart’ and, all the while, Nicholas was watching and writing about the value of dialogue.50 Addressing inter-religious understanding and tolerance, and writing about the value of a dialogue of different perspectives, became a particular focus for Cusa’s work in late 1453. As we will discover in now moving to discuss our epistemological warrant, Cusa revealed himself through those 1453 works to be an eloquent advocate for the positive role that different points of view can play in furthering peace among the religions, and in broadening the knowledge that those engaged in dialogue may attain of God. Nicholas of Cusa, the boatman’s son who grew up crossing the waters of the Mosel River, and who went on to bridge many religious divisions in his own context, can speak to our post 9/11 context of inter-religious suspicion and violence. The context that ignited his visionary imagination of two complementary dialogues, one among religious brothers around an icon of an all-seeing gaze,

and the other of representatives of the world’s religions around the Word of God, can be a rich inter-religious resource our day.

**Epistemological Warrant - Perspectives in Dialogue**

Having highlighted some of the contextual resonances between the climate in which Nicholas of Cusa wrote *De visione Dei* and our own post-9/11 context, we move now to a second reason for proposing *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, that which we are naming an epistemological warrant.

One way to read *De visione Dei* is as a reflection on the epistemological limitations and possibilities of human perspective.\(^51\) What do we mean by that? Epistemology is that area of philosophy which enquires into what may be known, and how we may know it. Scholars engaged in the field of epistemology are essentially seeking to answer the question, is there a reliable way to acquire knowledge of the truth, and to eliminate false beliefs?\(^52\) Epistemology is therefore often called the theory of knowledge.

Cusa’s agenda in *De visione Dei* can be described as epistemological because his attention is focused on how we may obtain knowledge of God.\(^53\) The treatise is his articulation of a theory about how to acquire true knowledge of God. Framed epistemologically, the questions at the heart of *De visione Dei* are: What can be known of God, and how may we know it? That agenda was set for Cusa by the monks at St Quirin’s Monastery, and their enquiry led him to send the monks an exercise and a text designed to deliver epistemological insight about the scope of the knowledge of God that we may aspire to obtain as *individuals*, and the

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\(^{51}\) Davide Monaco, *Nicholas*, 89-90.

\(^{52}\) Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 118.

scope of the knowledge of God that we may aspire to obtain with the help of others. What may we know of God? Cusa’s answer is that we may apprehend the oneness of God and the infinity of God. How may we know it? Through the witness of others. With this warrant we will explore those outcomes and their contemporary implications further.

As we have seen, the Tegernsee monks were invited to trust that the path to the knowledge of God is a mystery analogous to their contemplation of the icon. Their experience of seeing and being seen around the icon symbolises the path to that knowledge. Cusa’s exercise is designed to lead the monks by the hand, his manuductive method, toward critical epistemological insights about that path to the knowledge of God, in which that knowledge is understood as analogous to vision - to seeing. ‘The question that must have been uppermost in Cusa’s mind as he sat down to write De visione Dei was how to teach these monks the concept of learned ignorance as a way to the vision of God.’54 The method of instruction Cusa selects is to design an exercise that demonstrates the significance of dialogue. As we have noted, that exercise and the treatise which follows provide several insights into the epistemological value of a dialogue involving many people from different perspectives.

The first such insight is that, while contemplating the icon in silence, each brother comes to the realization that he both sees and believes himself to be seen by the gaze of God, regardless of where he stands. This insight is of course profoundly special in itself. Yet the same insight is gained by all of the brothers, even those standing diametrically opposite to each other. Thus, each monk apprehends that there is more to be discovered here than he at first realized. Other insights might also be available.

Thus, a second insight follows. On hearing their fellow monks witness that they too have been held by the gaze, regardless of where they stood, and regardless of how far they have

54 M. Fuhrer, ‘The consolation’, 222.
moved, each monk comes to the realization that there is a deeper wisdom available than he had initially been able to comprehend. The gaze in which they all feel held is one and the same gaze, and it sees them all regardless of their location. Although all see, and feel themselves seen, the vision of God that each one obtains from a single point-of-view might in fact be a contraction of the whole; a limited perspective. Only in that moment, as the monks begin speaking with each other, and in which we might imagine each monk responding to the testimony of his fellow experimenters by exclaiming ‘You too?’, do they come to the realization that the gaze falls simultaneously upon them all. There may in fact be an excess; an excess that, by his sight alone, no single one of the monks can comprehend. It is only as this dialogue among the monks begins that each brother comes to register that he has seen merely a part of the whole.

A third insight follows as a consequence of the second. Only when the monks understand that the gaze simultaneously sees and is seen by them all, regardless of their location, do they apprehend that the One in whose gaze the many feel held may be infinite. This precious insight into the nature of God, and this deepening understanding of one’s own faith, comes as a gift of the witness of people standing at a different place. It is a gift gleaned from the testimony of those whose vision of God is granted and gathered from a different perspective. Each brother catches a glimpse of the One for whom he feels this love and desire for communion - the One in whose gaze he feels held no matter where he moves. However, it is through the witness of the other that each brother also registers the possibility that the one he beholds may indeed be the universal and infinite gaze that encompasses each and every particular finite love and desire.

*De visione Dei*’s most compelling insight is found here. It forms the basis of this second warrant for proposing the book’s potential as a resource for Christian theology of religions. The insight is two-fold. First, it consists in establishing the epistemological significance of the
Each monk in the exercise is drawn to reflect, through both the exercise and its explanatory text, on the part played by his fellow monks in deepening his knowledge of God. So, too, are we who are later readers of this book. Secondly, in establishing an awareness of the epistemological significance of the other, the second aspect of *De visione Dei*’s most compelling insight is that it also establishes the epistemological significance of dialogue; the significance and value of listening to other points-of-view.

That our search for knowledge of God and communion with God is enhanced by drawing differing perspectives into a dialogue is the central lesson of Cusa’s experiment, and of the treatise as a whole. In becoming aware of the different perspectives held by those who see and feel themselves seen by the One, each participant becomes aware of the merit of establishing the *habit of dialogue*. The search by those who are finite for an understanding of the One who is infinite is never-ending, for God is ineffable and inexhaustible. Yet moments of deep insight, sometimes affirming our point of view and sometimes calling it into question, come in the experience of dialogue. To consider one’s particular position as the only reservoir of truth not only checks our search for true knowledge of God, it also in fact jeopardises that search. For in placing our trust in a single point-of-view alone, we assume the status of the absolute for a posture which is finite and, therefore, inherently and always limited.

These insights into the epistemological significance of the other and, secondly, the value of dialogue, can lead to a third insight, namely, the potential inherent in the expansion of

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55 My use of the term ‘the other’ is more pragmatic than the occasionally obsessive engagement with alterity in, for example, Focault’s search for that or those being repressed by hidden power structures or Derrida’s excavation of textual *differance*. Rather, my use of the term is simply to acknowledge that, in the face of the other, we become relational and responsible, are made aware of our contracted place and of the risk of betraying our perspective, along with that of others, should we pretend to have a totality of vision or knowledge and, finally, it is also in the face of another that we become open to the possibilities vested in the idea of infinity. See ‘Facing the Other’ in Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 65-96.
the dialogue. Cusa crafted in 1453 an exercise to enable a dialogue among Christian monks. It was an intra-religious dialogue. He sought to lead his fellow Christians to the understanding that they all behold and are beheld by God, that their knowledge of God is always limited by their finitude, and yet their knowledge may nevertheless be expanded by listening to the witness of their fellow Christians. With that epistemological method or framework established, it may also be proposed that *De visione Dei* can lead people of faith to the following additional understanding: the knowledge of God held and demonstrated by each religion is always limited by its finitude, yet the vision or visions of God held by each religious tradition may nevertheless be expanded by listening to the witness of other traditions. Could the epistemological value of the religious other to each particular perspective, as demonstrated by Cusa’s dialogue in *De visione Dei*, also ‘lead by the hand’ those engaged in theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue?

By demonstrating the epistemological significance of the other, and the consequent value of an intra-religious dialogue, it may also be proposed that Cusa’s *De visione Dei* could be read as exhibiting the value of an expanding circle of dialogue. Along with the value of intra-religious dialogue, Cusa’s vision also reveals the potential that inter-religious dialogue holds as a method to broaden and deepen our vision, our knowledge, of God. Cusa’s *De visione Dei* demonstrates for its readers that the oneness and infinity of God are truths that can be apprehended, even if not fully comprehended. Furthermore, it also demonstrates that this knowledge requires a never-ending search; a search which coincides with the value of dialogue – an expanding search.

The witness of those who speak from another point-of-view, encountered through the practice of dialogue, provides both affirmation and challenge to each finite perspective. Put another way, dialogue will both comfort and discomfort. Each monk learns, for example, that he is not mistaken or deluded about the wonder of being held by the gaze no matter where he
moves, for others have this experience too. However, each monk is also drawn to reflect on the reality that the gaze encompasses all, and is seen from many perspectives, and to reflect therefore on the challenge that this knowledge necessarily presents to any assumptions he may have entertained about how much he may have seen from his point of view; how much knowledge and understanding of God he may have obtained from his particular perspective. The path toward knowledge of God may be walked alone, but it is best undertaken in the company of another; a shared pursuit of the knowledge of God, a journey toward the clearest possible vision. This ‘little book on the icon’ may have expanding value arising from these insights about the epistemological significance of dialogue, and there may be significant warrant for engaging its insights for inter-religious engagements.

It is important to address here the possibility of a mistaken understanding of Cusa’s thought on the epistemological role of dialogue. The dialogue Cusa advocates does not acquiesce to relativism. It is not an affirmation of the relative truth of all perspectives. We recall that the question which came from Tegernsee was occasioned by the monks’ desire to understand how knowledge of God may be obtained. Thus it set for Cusa what we are naming as an epistemological agenda. We also noted the definition of epistemology, which enquires into whether there are reliable ways to acquire true knowledge and to eliminate false beliefs. Cusa did not, of course, work from any definition of epistemology. Clyde Lee Miller reminds us that it is anachronistic to imagine Cusa working to a philosophical agenda that post-dates him:

The separation of conscious thought from everything else (into self-enclosed representation) would never have seemed plausible to someone who believed that all created things made up a whole. After all, human beings and their ideas and thought processes and social formations were creaturely parts of the whole, indeed, microcosms of the whole, fashioned in God’s image and likeness. To distinguish epistemology from ontology, or metaphysics-knowing from being, is therefore an artificial way of approaching Cusan
thought that reflects the ways of thinking that come after the Renaissance and particularly after Descartes.\footnote{Clyde Lee Miller, ‘Knowledge and the Human Mind’, in \textit{Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man}, edited by Thomas M. Izbicki, Christopher M. Bellitto, and Gerald Christianson (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 300.}

Nevertheless, if we allow ourselves to recognise that Cusa was working with what we today would name as an epistemological agenda, we may also observe that he did not ignore the second aspect of epistemology regarding methods for the elimination of false belief. It is folly to think that we can arrive at a comprehensive answer to how true knowledge of God is obtained. Nevertheless, in keeping with the two-fold nature of epistemology’s task, we can draw findings from Cusa’s experiment involving perspectives-in-dialogue about how true knowledge of God is unlikely to be obtained. The \textit{via negativa}, so to speak, can lead to a partial wisdom; a learned ignorance. The false belief that \textit{De visione Dei} ensures we recognize may be summarized as: my perspective alone can encompass all truth.

Cusanus does not seek to deny the various historical and finite forms by which divinity is expressed, conceived or worshipped in order to favour a non-temporal, undifferentiated faith in the hidden God. Instead, he seeks to reconstruct the original dimension of mystery, ineffability, and obscurity that is always perceived in every form of ritual. It is not about removing or overcoming single beliefs and religious traditions by branding them as wrong or inappropriate, but remembering their historical and human formation and understanding that it is starting from this finiteness and historicity that they might become the revelation of divine transcendence.\footnote{Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 96.}

Self-reflection plays an important role in \textit{De visione Dei}. The monks, and we who are its later readers, are called by the treatise to reflect on the limitations of human perspective. The different perspectives of the monks are presented as relative to each other, yes, but not necessarily equal to one another. By reflecting on the understanding that our sight, for which
we may read *our knowing*, is contracted and limited, we are also drawn to acknowledge the fact that, with limitation comes the possibility and indeed likelihood of error. No person can pretend to step outside his or her own perspective. Thus, the risk inherent in contracted sight (knowledge) must be accepted: we have not seen the whole. Therefore, we may need to rethink our point-of-view on the basis of what we hear from others. Yet the positive inherent in even contracted knowledge can also be embraced: each particular perspective has value. Cusa does not allow the monks to conclude that their contracted knowledge is not, in some way, participating in God’s presence to creation. ‘Human truth (ie) truth in relation to humans, is always and necessarily seen from a perspective, but this does not entail a thoroughgoing relativism. This fact and its full meaning can only be recognized with the help of (self-) reflection.’58 Here again is a sense of what Cusa understood by learned ignorance. There is wisdom in recognizing our limitations and the meaning of those limitations.59

Cusa’s answer to the question he received from the Tegernsee monks about how knowledge of God may be obtained pointed to a unity of mind and heart, of intellect and experience, when the knowledge being sought is knowledge of God. We recall that Ernst Cassirer and others have placed Cusa at a sophisticated mid-point within the fifteenth-century controversy over the methods of mystical theology. Cassirer wrote,

> In the mystical theology of the fifteenth century two fundamental tendencies stand sharply opposed to each other; the one bases itself on the intellect; the other considers the will to be the basic force and organ of union with God. In this dispute, Cusanus sides emphatically with the former. True love of God is *amor Dei intellectualis*: it includes knowledge as a necessary element and a necessary condition. No one can love what he has not, in some sense, known.60

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So for Cusa, precisely how we may obtain true knowledge of God is a process that involves both a cognitive knowing and an emotive will. We must allow space for this ambiguity, however disconcerting it is to those who wish to privilege the *ratio*. Knowledge of God is not secured by empirical methods. Yet it also needs to be emphasized that Cusa’s dialogue of perspectives is not a drifting post-truth ambiguity. Cusa’s epistemological framework of a dialogue of perspectives calls for an ongoing interrogation of our personal and collective religious vision. That is to say, *De visione Dei* ‘leads us by the hand’ so that we may see how the continuous questioning of our finite understanding of God, and the manner in which that finite understanding is expressed in our personal faith, as well as the collective witness of our religious tradition, will enable us to broaden and deepen that vision.

Dialogue is a method by which we revisit and refine our knowledge of God. It will also lead us to acknowledge where our vision is incomplete or found wanting; where and when we may not have seen as clearly as others. Cusa’s dialogue of perspectives is not an epistemological framework that can be summarised as ‘your vision and my vision are equally true’. Rather, it is an epistemological framework that may be summarised as, ‘I need your vision, as indeed you need mine, in order that we may focus more clearly, together, toward the infinite truth’. That interrogation is made possible through dialogical encounter with others.61

Not only *De pace fidei*, which is more commonly studied by practitioners of dialogue and theologians of the religions, but in fact both of Cusa’s 1453 works establish a framework in which to explore how it is possible that the one God may be encountered in a multiplicity of ways, and understood from a multiplicity of perspectives. Both works do so through an epistemological framework that we might describe as perspectives-in-dialogue. Cusa’s organising dialectic of the one and the many is seen most clearly within *De pace fidei* in the

61 Davide Monaco, *Nicholas*, 94-95.
formula *religio una in rituum varietate* (one religion in variety of rites) and in *De visione Dei* through the many particular visions and their relation to the universal gaze that beholds them all. An important distinction between the texts must be acknowledged once again, namely, that *De pace fidei* explicitly addresses inter-religious understanding while *De visione Dei* is focused on intra-religious understanding. However, it appears increasingly possible to name that relation between the works as complementary rather than contradictory.

As noted, given the Christian nature of the community and question to which Cusa’s *visione* was a response, it is unsurprising that he did not focus in that work on the different religions. Rather, he focused specifically on the different Christian perspectives of the monks, for they were his particular audience. Nevertheless, if practitioners of inter-religious dialogue and of Christian theology of religions were to attend to Cusa’s *visione*, as they have his *De pace fidei*, they will find a creative interlocutor for a theology addressing the presence of the world’s many religions and their possible significance within the purposes of God.

**Philosophical Warrant - The One and the Many**

Having considered the epistemological warrant for proposing *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, we now move to our third warrant. In so doing, our interest is focused on the fact that a thematic complementarity has now been identified in both *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei*, namely, that both propose the epistemological value of dialogue. Deepening that insight further, it is possible to extract a
complementary philosophical foundation within both works. Specifically, both *De pace fidei* and *De visione Dei* exhibit an organizing dialectic of the one and the many.\(^{62}\)

Cusa completed *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei* ‘almost in parallel’\(^{63}\) within months of the devastating inter-religious crisis known as the fall of Constantinople, in 1453. It was one of the salient moments of inter-religious violence in European history, for the fall of the imperial capital of Eastern Christianity to the forces of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II sent shockwaves throughout Christendom. ‘Christian Europeans felt a deep sense of existential threat which continued well into the eighteenth century.’\(^{64}\) The Muslims now ruling Constantinople were widely considered to be ‘legions of the Antichrist’ and their presence on Europe’s doorstep brought waves of apocalyptic speculation.\(^{65}\) That was the atmosphere in which Cusa completed *De pace fidei*, in September 1453, and *De visione Dei*, in October 1453.\(^{66}\) Both books were written amidst widespread inter-religious strife. Michel De Certeau sets the scene by observing that, in 1453, ‘a world is coming apart’.

To the West, the Hundred Year’s War (1337-1453) between France and England has ended. A period of nations is beginning. To the East, the Eastern Roman Empire is collapsing as Constantinople is taken by the Turks (1453). Nicholas of Cusa, who had been there in 1437, had just brought the frightful news back

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\(^{62}\) While not our focus here, it is interesting to note that Cusa names both *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei* as visions. The title of *De visione Dei* alone makes clear the centrality of vision to that work and Cusa opens *De pace fidei* with the following reference to himself and the vision that gives rise to the treatise: ‘It came to pass that after a number of days – perhaps because of his prolonged, incessant meditation – a vision was shown to this same zealous man.’ *De pace fidei*, chapter 1, paragraph 1, in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1986).


\(^{64}\) Albrecht Classen, ‘Early outreaches from Medieval Christendom to the Muslim East: Wolfram von Eschenbach, Ramon Llull and Nicholas of Cusa explore options to communicate with representatives of Arabic Islam: Tolerance already in the Middle Ages?’ *Studia Neophilologica* vol. 84 no. 2 (2012), 159.


from Rome, and amidst the rumours of horrors, violence and blood everywhere, he wrote, one month before *Icona* (On The Vision of God), his *De pace fidei* (The Peace of Faith), an anti-Babelian ‘vision’ of a heavenly ‘theatre’ in which, one after another, a delegate from each nation gets up to bear witness to the movement which supports it. Greek, Italian, Arab, Indian, Chaldean, Jew, Scythian, Gaul, Persian, Syrian, Turk, Spaniard, German, Tartar, Armenian, and so forth, each one comes to attest in the language of his own tradition to the truth which is one: this harmony of ‘free spirits’ answers the furies of fanaticism.⁶⁷

That both *De pace fidei* and *De visione Dei* were authored in a time of inter-religious conflict and anxiety following Constantinople’s demise is intriguing, and we have noted its relevance for this thesis. An equally intriguing element of both works supports our third warrant for proposing *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions. The parallel between *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei* extends beyond their chronological proximity to a philosophical complementarity. As Gergely Tibor Bakos notes,

Chronologically speaking, the compositions of PF [*De pace fidei*] and DVD [*De visione Dei*] are only separated by some months. While Nicholas had been speculating on the themes of mystical theology and after hearing news from Constantinople, he composed PF in a rush. Later, he returned to actually writing DVD. This may indicate more than a mere temporal coincidence of the two works, but only a closer examination of both texts can adequately demonstrate the existence of a thematic connection between Nicholas’s mystical theology and his approach to Islam.⁶⁸

While Bakos does not develop the closer examination he believes is warranted, commenting only of *De visione Dei* that ‘It is possible to relate the earlier account of different human perspectives and self-love to the problem of different religions’,⁶⁹ Davide Monaco does deepen the examination of this thematic complementarity. Monaco finds that *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei*, along with a shared context, also share the same philosophical foundation.

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Specifically, they both exhibit an organizing dialectic of the one and the many. When read with this dialectic of oneness and multiplicity in mind, *De pace fidei* presents as a demonstration of Cusa’s desire to reconcile how many religions can relate to one faith, and *De visione Dei* presents as a demonstration of Cusa’s desire to reconcile how the many individual perspectives held by the Tegernsee brothers can relate to the one God. With Monaco’s assistance, we will explore this philosophical complementarity further.

*De pace fidei* is the most widely cited Cusan text among scholars addressing questions about the presence and purpose of religious diversity in the world, which is to be expected given its significance as a pioneering example of a Christian theologian advocating for inter-religious understanding and dialogue. The dialogue Cusa constructs in *De pace fidei* has been the subject of various interpretations, particularly as to whether the one religion of Cusa’s famous formula *religio una in rituum varietate* (one religion in variety of rites) is Christianity, or a meta-religion that transcends Christianity and all other religions represented in the dialogue. Monaco’s careful study shows that it is not possible to draw a line of interpretation through *De pace fidei* without taking account of the explicit philosophical foundation which undergirds the text, and then how that same philosophical foundation is exemplified in Cusa’s second text of 1453, *De visione Dei*. That philosophical foundation, Monaco argues, is ‘a dialectic between the One and the many, and that between the uniqueness of truth and the variety of its expressions.’ He observes, ‘The dialectic between oneness and multiplicity –

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70 Gergely Tibor Bakos, *On Faith*, 274.

71 *De pace fidei*, chapter 1, paragraph 6.

72 That the centre of the dialogue is held by the Word, first, and then afterwards by Peter and Paul, added to the concentration of the dialogue on Christian doctrines, lends weight to the interpretation that Cusa’s *una religio* is Christianity. Yet there is no attempt within the to-and-fro of the dialogue to convert participants to Christianity, and Cusa makes no attempt therein to equate his *una religio* formula to Christianity. Thus, there are at least two tenable interpretations of the place Cusa intends for Christianity among the religions. See Davide Monaco, *Nicholas*, 86-88.
which had already appeared in other texts prior to *De pace fidei* and was completed in his last work – is a necessary premise for understanding the theoretical proposal outlined in the work from 1453’.  

Monaco first establishes that Cusa’s position toward inter-religious dialogue can only be properly grasped if it is set against the full horizon of Cusa’s philosophy and theology. That broad agenda finds expression here as Cusa engages his theology of creation, the enfolding and unfolding of creation, to the theme of the special relationship between oneness and multiplicity in order to develop a ‘perspectivistic view’ of human knowledge. The outcome is that Cusa connects his theological premise that truth is one and infinite with his philosophy of human knowledge to argue that human knowledge is made up of many finite conjectures that all participate in one unified infinite truth.

It is important to pause here for a moment so that we understand what Cusa meant by *conjecture*. We generally contrast conjecture with truth. Conjecture carries a sense of speculation, and even guess-work. Indeed, the first four words displayed by the Oxford Online Thesaurus against a search for conjecture are: guess, speculation, surmise, fancy. However, for Cusa, a conjecture is a judgement about reality that does not and cannot attain complete precision unto truth, yet which does participate in the truth. Thus for Cusa, human ‘conjectural knowledge’ is a mode of knowing. Indeed, Cusa saw all forms of human knowledge as conjecture because only God has absolute and precise knowledge of the truth. Thus, to name human knowledge as finite conjecture does not remove that form of knowledge from the realm

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74 Davide Monaco, *Nicholas*, 90.

75 https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/thesaurus/conjecture

76 Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis II* (On Conjectures, Book 2) 1442, paragraph 17.
of truth. Rather, ‘Nicholas regards a coniectura as participating in the truth, as being partly (but never precisely) true.’

Cusa’s stress on the limits of human knowledge is often seen as an anticipation of the modern epistemological turn, paradigmatically expressed in Immanuel Kant. However, it is also profoundly traditional in following the Pauline and Augustinian tradition that sees all human reasoning as conjectural and failing to achieve oneness with the object. There is a certain modernity in Cusa’s recognition that perceptual knowledge is always perspectival; that sight, for example, presents one side to us, and only under a certain aspect, which brings a recognition of otherness into our knowledge. However, Cusa’s interest ‘does not seem to accord with the later modern adventure into a multiplicity of subjective perspectives but, rather, is in the essentially Neoplatonic project of overcoming perspectival limitations in order to more closely access oneness with the object itself.’

Returning to Monaco, we have gleaned that Cusa’s position toward dialogue needs to be understood against the full breadth of his thought, particularly his theology of the unfolding of the enfolded creation, which develops into his understanding that truth, which is one and infinite, may nevertheless be apprehended by the many, who are finite. Monaco argues that Cusa then takes this position one step further. Cusa believes, in fact, that it is only due to the many finite expressions of truth that we are ever able to conjecture about the possibility of there being a single infinite truth. ‘Truth, in its unobjectability, unlimitedness and transcendence

79 Davide Monaco, Nicholas, 98.
can be accessed and expressed by man only within certain singular and particular points of view which, rooted in finiteness, can convey the infinity of truth’.

This conjecture is given practical expression in the approach Cusa takes to the existence of many religions. ‘The variety of religious cults is not a limit and does not come with a negative value, but with a positive one, since it represents a manifestation of God’s intelligibility and transcendence, as well as the best way man has to understand and prove [God’s] infinity.’ It is a conjecture that is also given practical expression in the insight gained by the monks around the icon, namely, that there is an excess to this gaze which they cannot perceive alone. It is summarized in the following manner by Johannes Hoff, ‘If I am looking at someone who reveals to me that she is seeing something that I cannot see from my perspective (e.g., myself), I am starting to perceive that there is something invisible to me.

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80 The question of Cusa’s modernity is also addressed at note 196. Does Cusa’s thought locate him as a medieval or modern thinker? It may be of interest to those concerned with that question if we offer the full passage from Monaco quoted above, which neatly summarizes how it is possible to read Cusa as a harbinger of ‘the turn to the subject’: ‘Truth, in its unobjectability, unlimitedness and transcendence can be accessed and expressed by man only within certain singular and particular points of view which, rooted in finiteness, can convey the infinity of truth. In this scheme, the mind (mens) has a central and essential role within the variety of creation, from an ontological point of view and because it is God’s and the One’s first self-manifestation. The mens and the One are the two fundamental principles in the German philosopher’s speculation as a whole. It is not by chance that they represent the axis around which his later philosophy rotates - the complete expression of his thought over the years. Only the mens can know the One or posse [potential], for it is the living image of God (viva imago Dei), unlike the rest of created things, which are merely an unfolding of God (explication Dei). Thus the cognitive power of the mind is the image of the infinite divine posse it bears. In this way, Cusanus represents a historical turning-point: the centre of the universe is no longer the earth, but the mind as God’s living image in its creative power with regard to the world of knowledge. According to a leitmotiv in the cardinal’s thought, in the same way as God creates the world of being and the real entities, so man produces the world of knowledge and the entities that are part of it, in the image of the divine creation and the created being.’ Davide Monaco, Nicholas, 90-91.

81 Davide Monaco, Nicholas, 97
Cusa’s conviction that the invisible is visible is related to this experience’.\textsuperscript{82} It is through the many that we are able to apprehend the possibility of the One.

The apparent contradiction between a universal that is available only through the witness of the many runs as a bass note throughout Cusa’s philosophy.\textsuperscript{83} So, for example, Monaco highlights the presence of that bass note in both works of 1453. With regard to \textit{De pace fidei}, the universality of the solution to inter-religious strife proposed by Cusa in that book, that there is one religion in a variety of rites, and the particular perspective from which it is proposed, Cusa’s own Christianity, is a view only made possible, tenable, and understandable, when set within the broad agenda of Cusa’s philosophy of the one and the many.\textsuperscript{84} In \textit{De visione Dei}, the apparent contradiction of a universality made available only through particularity is demonstrated by the manner in which the monks may only apprehend the universality of the icon’s gaze, which beholds them all exclusively yet simultaneously, because they listen with trust to the witness of each of the many particular points-of-view.\textsuperscript{85}

It is a further and significant aspect of Cusa’s thought that he does not seek to elide or reconcile these apparent contradictions. That is because, for Cusa, they are contradictions only at the level of finite reasoning, not within the transcendence of infinite truth, which stands beyond all rational endeavour. Here we recall again Cusa’s ‘learned ignorance’ and his use of the philosophical concept \textit{coincidentia oppositorum}. Both concepts are reliant on the wisdom of our apprehending that the universal and infinite truth of God is beyond human comprehension. Yet Cusa believed that we may seek and see truth in a place where contradictories coincide, rather than where contradictions are avoided or empowered. The law

\textsuperscript{82} Johannes Hoff, \textit{Analogical}, 31.


\textsuperscript{84} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 91.

\textsuperscript{85} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 93-94.
of non-contradiction may function within the limits of human cognition, where it serves a purpose to distinguish and define, as they are in the Aristotelian-Scholastic model, but is transcended by the sheer otherness of Cusa’s visio.86

We introduced the work of Joshua Hollmann in our literature review. Here we return to his The Religious Concordance: Nicholas of Cusa and Christian-Muslim Dialogue in order to grasp its relevance to this philosophical warrant for proposing De visione Dei as a resource to Christian theology of religions. Hollmann’s research places into theological perspective the philosophical observations Monaco has made regarding the thematic complementary of De pace fidei and De visione Dei.

Hollmann argues that the imaginary inter-religious dialogue at the centre of De pace fidei is a development of Cusa’s Christology. Further, he argues that the Christology at the heart of De pace fidei connects that work to four other Cusan books, including De visione Dei.87 Hollmann’s study highlights, firstly, the presence of a well-developed metaphysics in De pace fidei, which Hollmann describes as an ‘all-embracing metaphysics of the Word of God’ and, secondly, that this metaphysics of the Word forms a previously unidentified bond between De pace fidei and De visione Dei.88 Christ’s centrality in De pace fidei is demonstrated by his presence as the Word who is the focus of words, and in De visione Dei by his presence as the face who is the focus of sight. Around Christ, the Word and the words, the Icon and the witnesses - the one and the many - are held together and participate one in the other. Thus Hollmann concludes, ‘While De pace fidei and De visione Dei are often interpreted as unrelated

86 Davide Monaco, Nicholas, 91.
88 Joshua Hollmann, Religious Concordance, 9.
in style and substance, we see concordance between Cusanus’s understanding of the Word of God in *De pace fidei* and the icon of Jesus in *De visione Dei.*\(^89\)

Our own observation arising from Hollmann’s work was to note the splendour in this concordance. In one of the works of 1453, *De pace fidei,* Christ is shown to be the incarnate Word of God who enfolds all religious creeds through a dialogue of words, in which he is the fulcrum of all listening and speaking. In the other, *De visione Dei,* Christ is the incarnate icon of God who enfolds each witness who stands before him through a dialogue of perspectives, in which he is the focus of all seeing and all that is seen.

One further way to illustrate the philosophical complementarity we have been discussing is to read a synopsis of *De pace fidei* and then *De visione Dei,* by authors who have carefully examined each work. Their respective summaries are revealing. Pim Valkenberg summarises *De pace fidei* as follows:

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\text{[N]o human being is able to comprehend God’s infinite being and, therefore, all human beings seek God in different rites and call him by different names. Since we are human beings, we all have our different rites and images concerning God. But underneath these differences, there is one faith, and as soon as we become aware of that, we will be able to live in peace and harmony.}^{90}\]

Secondly, Johannes Hoff summarises *De visione Dei* in the following way:

\[
\text{It is a gift of divine providence that there are many perspectives on the invisible and that every human being is gifted with the freedom to develop his or her individual perspective on this mystery. For only}
\]

\(^89\) Joshua Hollmann, *Religious Concordance,* 195.

\(^90\) Pim Valkenberg, ‘Sifting the Qur’an: Two forms of Interreligious Hermeneutics in Nicholas of Cusa’ in *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe,* edited by David Cheetham *et. al.*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 29.
the free play of individual perspectives enables us to discover the visibility of the infinite in God’s creation.91

The symmetry evident in the summations by Valkenberg and Hoff reflect the philosophical symmetry evident in the respective books they have studied. When viewed through the lens of Cusa’s dialectic of the one and the many, and recalling James E. Biechler’s observation about how De pace fidei demonstrates Cusa’s broadening awareness of religion as well as a correspondingly altered conception of divinity,92 De pace fidei appears even more clearly as a sign of Cusa’s broadening awareness of the religions and, complementarily, De visione Dei emerges as an indication of Cusa’s broadening awareness of the divine. The complementarity evident in this shared philosophical foundation offers an opportunity to read both works as significant statements about the value of dialogue, both intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue, and is a further platform on which to propose De visione Dei as a resource for the work of Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. As Jozef Matula has written:

The idea of ‘unity in diversity’ presented in the works of Cusanus is not restricted to the historians of philosophical-theological thought only; his vision can serve as an inspiration for a re-thinking of the serious questions of modern time. Reading of his works stimulates contemporary discussions on unity and diversity (alterity, otherness) in connection with serious problems, such as the recent discussion on the institutional crisis in Europe and certainly the inter-religious and multicultural animosities.93

**Textual Warrant - An Expanding Vision**

The fourth and final warrant for proposing *De visione Dei* as a resource for Christian theology of religions relates to the expansive nature of the language used in the text and the experimental nature of the exercise around the icon. As we have noted, Gergely Tibor Bakos’ 2013 study pointed to the fact that Cusa’s ontological language invites a broader reading of *De visione Dei*. Although Bakos himself did not build on that conclusion, because it fell outside the scope of his research, he remarked:

Nicholas addressed this treatise on mystical theology to a group of Christian contemplative monks. Small wonder then that *DVD* contains no explicit reference to people not sharing Christian faith. On the other hand, against this *caveat* it can be pointed out that the account of *DVD* can be fairly called ontological. This ontological character is observable in the employment of such general terms as, for instance, “thing” (*res*), “being” (*esse*), “whatever that exists” (*quodlibet quod est*) and “creature” (*creatura*). Even though this account of being was inspired by and is actually written from a Christian perspective, it is presented as applicable to the entire universe (*totus universi*). Therefore an interpretation developing further the aforementioned points is in principle not impossible.⁹⁴

Ontology is the study of *being* and engages a rich use of the word ‘being’, such that it implies a focus on the totality of existence. Therefore, to observe that Cusa’s *De visione Dei* presents an ontological vision is to register that the text has both a particular focus and a universal scope. As a consequence, it is possible to read the text as addressing not only a particular context, the monks at Tegernsee, but also a broader context. In this final section we will therefore propose a two-fold warrant for why it is possible to approach *De visione Dei* as an expanding vision; a vision that offers the capacity for an expanding application of its wisdom. We will consider, firstly, the language of the text and, secondly, return to the visual space around the icon to offer a new insight regarding Cusa’s exercise with the all-seeing gaze.

⁹⁴ Tibor Gergely Bakos, *On Faith*, 176-177. The emphasis is in the original.
If the deployment of Cusa’s *De visione Dei* as a resource for the Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue is to be meaningful, there must be scope in the language of the text itself to broaden its horizons beyond the Christian community - scope to expand the application of the philosophical and theological imagination it offers beyond Christianity alone. The language Cusa uses within the text is the first way in which the treatise provides that expansive scope.

Here is an example of *De visione Dei*’s expansive language, from a portion of the book where Cusa is moving between address and prayer, for such is the nature of his writing. The emphasis on ‘all’ is found also in the original text.

[God] makes many figures, because the likeness of His infinite power can be unfolded in the most perfect way only in many figures. And *all* intellectual spirits are useful to each [intellectual] spirit. Now, unless they were countless, You, O Infinite God, could not be known in the best possible way. For each intellectual spirit sees in You-my-God something [without] which the others – unless it were revealed to them – could not in the best possible manner touch unto You-their-God.95

We recall that Davide Monaco observed, with the regard to the paragraph quoted above, that ‘It is not possible to read these passages from the *De visione Dei* and forget that it was written only a few months after the *De pace fidei*, or that there is a relationship between the Cardinal’s words and multiplicity of religions.’96 The language ‘of all intellectual spirits’ and ‘each intellectual spirit sees in You-my-God something [without] which the others – unless it

95 *DVD*, chapter 25, paragraph 111. The emphasis is in Cusa’s original text.

were revealed to them – could not’ is indicative of Cusa’s expansive language, and the potential of the text for a broader application.

A further passage to exemplify the frequency with which Cusa employs language that encompasses ‘all things’ and ‘beings’ is found in chapter nine, which is headed ‘God’s vision is both universal and particular’.

You are present to each and every thing. For You who are the Absolute Being of all things are present to each thing as if You were concerned about no other thing at all. Consequently, there is no thing which does not prefer its own being to everything else and does not prefer its own mode of being to all the modes of being of other things; and each thing so cherishes its own being that it would let the being of all other things perish rather than its own. For You, O Lord, behold each existing thing in such a way that no existing thing can conceive that You have any other concern than (1) that this very thing exist in the best manner it can and (2) that all other existing things exist only in order to serve the following end: viz., that this thing upon which You are looking exist in the best way.97

Even though Cusa originally applied his observations to a particular community, the Tegernsee monks, his language offers a universal trajectory. That universal trajectory of language is also exhibited within De visione Dei’s preface. In his opening paragraphs, Cusa introduces the exercise around the icon along with his intention in writing the text. His all-encompassing scope is symbolized by the four points of the compass, and by the reference to ‘least of creatures’, ‘greatest of all creatures’, and ‘the whole universe’.

Therefore [each monk] will experience that the unmoveable face is moved toward the east in such a way that it is also moved at the same time toward the west, that it is moved toward the north in such a way that it is also moved toward the south, that it is moved toward one place in such a way that it is also moved at the same time toward all other places, and that it observes one movement in such a way that it observes all other movements at the same time. And while he considers that this gaze does not desert

97 DVD, chapter 9, paragraph 10.
anyone, he sees how diligently it is concerned for each one, as if it were concerned for no one else, but
only for him who experiences that he is seen by it. This is so strong that the one who is being looked
upon cannot even imagine that [the icon] is concerned for another. [The one who is pondering this] will
also notice that [the icon] is most diligently concerned for the least of creatures, just as for the greatest
of all creatures, and for the whole universe. On the basis of such sensible appearance as this, I propose
to elevate you very beloved brothers, through a devotional exercise, unto mystical theology. 98

Jasper Hopkins makes two observations that are additionally important here. The first
directs us toward to the fact that the very title of the treatise has a fascinatingly open meaning.
Hopkins observes that the book title De visione Dei ‘has a deliberately twofold meaning’
arising from Cusa’s use of the genitive case of deus. 99 On first reading, the book’s title can be
construed as relating to God’s vision of all creatures. On the second reading, however, the title
can also be construed as relating to all creaturely vision of God. Yet both meanings can be
correct. 100 Further, an additional indication of the open meaning of the title ‘De visione Dei’ is
also found when Cusa writes in chapter ten,

You are seeable by all creatures, and You see all creatures. For in that You see all creatures You are seen
by all creatures. For otherwise creatures could not exist, since they exist by means of your seeing. 101

This symbolism of seeing and being seen, of creatures and creator, provides further
potential on which to creatively expand Cusa’s intra-religious reflections toward the questions

98 DVD, Preface, and paragraphs 4-5.
99 Jasper Hopkins, Nicholas of Cusa’s Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation and Interpretative Study of De
100 There are also additional emphases given to the open meaning of the title in chapter 4, entitled ‘God’s Vision
is said to be Providence, Grace, and Eternal Life’, chapter 8, entitled ‘God’s Vision is Loving, Causing,
Reading, and the Having within Itself of All Things’, and chapter 9, entitled ‘God’s Vision is both Universal and
Particular: And what the Way to Seeing God is’.
101 DVD, chapter 10, paragraph 41.
which focus the minds of theologians working on inter-religious questions. The expansive language, and the interplay of subject and object, allow for the application of expanding theological referents for this text.

Hopkins’ second textual insight draws our attention to the interaction between Cusa’s dialectical thought, which we have examined above in our discussion of the one and the many, and a typically Cusan linguistic technique, namely, his frequent use of paradoxical language. An example is found in chapter twenty-one where Cusa writes,

Every happy spirit sees the invisible God and is united, in You Jesus, to the unapproachable and immortal God. And thus, in You, the finite is united to the Infinite and Ununitable, and the Incomprehensible is apprehended with eternal enjoyment.\(^{102}\)

It is easy, on a first reading of Cusa, to become confused as to whether he is affirming here that God is visible or invisible, unapproachable or ‘unitable’, incomprehensible or able to be comprehended? The net effect of passages such as this, however, is that Cusa creates a series of images and word-plays that intentionally draw his reader firstly to one conclusion, then to another, and then finally to a realization that, in all likelihood, Cusa wants the reader to reflect on the possibility that both meanings might be true, and yet neither might be true, and yet then again both meanings may in fact be true. Hence, for example, the paradox is embraced that the invisible God may, in some sense, be ‘seen’. The unapproachable God may, in some sense, be

\(^{102}\) DVD, chapter 21, paragraph 94. When Cusa speaks of uniting finite to the infinite he is not contradicting his philosophy that there is no proportion between the finite and the infinite. The unity here is in Christ, and is that unity is of participation. Hopkins, Nicholas, 36-37.
approached. Therefore, the incomprehensible God may, in some sense, be apprehended. Cusa’s language and imagery concocts an expanding circle of meaning.

Cusa’s expansive language, and his paradoxical and even playfully open-ended use of words and images, provides an opportunity to read Cusa’s visione as addressing not only a particular group of Christian monks but, more broadly, the nature of the human-divine relationship for all beings. To use Cusa’s own words, it does seem possible, and meaningful, to approach his visione with the inter-religious questions that are of interest to ‘all intellectual spirits’, even if those questions were not his own original focus in writing this text.

In addition to its expansive language, there is a second textual aspect which provides warrant for proposing the inherent potential of De visione Dei to expand into inter-religious engagements. We have already discussed the treatise’s exercise around the omnivoyant face in setting out our epistemological warrant. There we noted that Cusa’s dialogue of perspectives establishes an epistemological framework that is germane to the tasks associated with theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. We now return to the all-seeing gaze in order to highlight a further insight, one which provides additional support for this final textual warrant.

103 Hopkins discusses this Cusan technique at greater length, observing that ‘Nicholas, in De Visione Dei, works certain of these expressions into a dialectical line of reasoning, i.e., into a line of reasoning that draws its main impetus from the conceptual opposition that underlies the paradoxical expression. In De visione Dei the primary oppositions are between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, the imaging and the exemplifying, the creatable and the uncreatable, the unequal and the nonequal, the immanent and the transcendent, the seeable and the unseeable, the revealable and the unrevealable, the contractible and the uncontractible, the mutable and the immutable, that which is able to satisfy and that which is not able to satisfy.’ Hopkins, Nicholas, 37.

104 A further recent study of interest is Andrea Hollingsworth, ‘Nicholas of Cusa’s Mystical Theology in Theological and Scientific Perspective’ in Theology as Interdisciplinary Inquiry, edited by Robin W. Lovin and Joshua Mauldin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2017), 68-90. Hollingsworth offers a reading of De visione Dei in light of Patrick McNamara’s theory of transformation of the self in religious experience and draws the category of ‘texture’ from cognitive poetics to describe how Cusa’s writings have an experiential or affective nature. ‘To say that a text has ‘texture’ is to say that what a text means is intricately tied to what is does in the mind of a reader.’
The potential to apply *De visione Dei*’s epistemological insights about the significance of dialogue in seeking knowledge of God to theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue is also opened to us by the experimental nature of Cusa’s exercise around the icon. That the activities around the all-seeing gaze are an open experimental exercise provides both a framework for dialogue and also a warrant for the fresh application of its wisdom. What do we mean by the openness of the exercise? Specifically this: it is important to recognise that the exercise around the icon provides an *experimental experience*. In using an experiment as a learning experience, Cusa has shared responsibility for what is learned with those who are his learners. Put another way, an experiment by its very nature is not a closed form of pedagogy with a pre-defined result. This is not a closed learning experience. As Louis Dupre has observed, ‘What he [Cusa] has left us would appear to be primarily a treatise about the theological-philosophical foundations of mystical knowledge. Against such a purely theoretical reading, however, stands the cardinal’s clear word: his *manuductio* will itself be *experimentalis*.’ The semi-circle of monks gathered around the icon’s gaze creates an open space, both literally and figuratively, which, rather than defining an outcome of the exercise, invites *open learning*. Michel De Certeau describes it this way:

The preface of the treatise *On the image or On Pictures [De visione Dei]* aims precisely at opening up for the treatise a space which escapes both the indefinite preliminaries of a technical competence and from the privilege, in the last analysis positivist, of ‘experience’ … [The exercise] is the zero degree of the treatise. It precedes and permits speech: *præ-fatia*. It is presented as a ‘perceptible experimentation’ (*sensible experimentum*) which, by dislodging its addressees from their prejudicetal position, ‘makes way’ for the Cusan theory. It is a question of an ‘exercise’ (*praxis*). A *doing* will make possible a *saying*. This propedeutics is moreover customary in spiritual development and in the relations between master and disciple: ‘Do it, and you will understand afterward’. It also has the import of a laboratory observation

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whose theoretical interpretation will come later. It plays on the double register of a ‘spiritual exercise’ and a scientific experiment.\textsuperscript{106}

This significant factor in the origins of \textit{De visione Dei} and especially of its opening exercise, namely, its experimental nature, is detailed in Michel de Certeau’s essay under the sub-heading ‘The geometry of the gaze’.\textsuperscript{107} Cusa had been writing during 1453 a book which he named the \textit{Mathematicis Complementis} (\textit{On Complementary Mathematical Considerations}). Addressed to his friend Pope Nicholas V, it was a book devoted to the application of geometry to theology; geometry having become one of Cusa’s great passions.\textsuperscript{108} \textit{De visione Dei} was originally, in fact, to be a chapter of that \textit{Complementis}.\textsuperscript{109} However, on receipt of Caspar Ayndorffer’s letter from Tegernsee, in which the Abbott sought Cusa’s help in settling ‘whether the devout soul can attain God, either by intellect or affection’, Cusa saw an opportunity to deploy in a practical way, to the benefit of the brothers at Tegernsee, the thoughts he had been mapping for that chapter in his book of geometry for theology. Thus, in response to a current need, Cusa’s plans for the text were changed.

These origins of \textit{De visione Dei} are evident in Cusa’s letter of 14 September 1453, in which he makes an initial reply to the first query from Ayndorffer. Cusa writes that he will

\textsuperscript{106} De Certeau, ‘The Gaze’, 11. Emphasis is in the original. De Certeau uses differing possible titles of the work, and translations of those titles, throughout his essay, while all the time referring to what we are naming and is almost universally called \textit{De visione Dei}.

\textsuperscript{107} De Certeau, ‘The Gaze’, 13-20.

\textsuperscript{108} Cusa wrote several treatises that exhibit his interest in whether mathematical speculations might be an effective approach to penetrate the mysteries of God; \textit{De mathematicis complementis} (On Complementary Mathematical Considerations) 1453, \textit{Caesarea circuli quadratura} (On Squaring the Circle) 1457, \textit{De mathematica perfectione} (On Mathematical Perfection) 1458, \textit{In mathematicis aurea propositio} (The Golden Mean in Mathematics) 1459. See Erich Meuthen, \textit{Nicholas of Cusa: A Sketch for a Biography}, translated by David Crowner and Gerald Christianson (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 2010), 130-133.

send for him what was to be a chapter of the Complementis that includes an ‘experimental procedure’ (praxis experimentalis). Cusa developed the proposed chapter independently from the Mathematicis Complimentis where, upon publication of that treatise in 1453, it no longer appeared. Instead, the now independently prepared chapter became his ‘little book on the icon’ and was sent to the Tegernsee monks.

Cusa’s visione was completed with a fresh purpose, yet it retains the marks of its mathematical origins. Those marks can be seen, for example, in the geometrically ordered space defined by the placement of the icon against the wall, the semi-circle of monks around it, and by its experimental nature; a sensible experimentum and manuductio. Certeau quotes from the preface to the Mathematicis Complementis in observing the continuity between Cusa’s original idea that the iconic exercise might be placed in that book, and its ultimate placement in De visione Dei.

Thus it [De visione Dei] belongs to that cascade of complements, the applications of geometry to theology … separate though it is when it is finally sent in 1453, it remains defined by the program of the Theological Complement: ‘I shall strive to make the figures of this book theological, in such a way that, with God’s help, we may see with the sight of the mind how true, sought in all knowable things, shines the mathematical mirror not only without similitudes, but in glittering proximity’ … Hence [for Cusa] the privilege of ‘seeing’ as a means of access to the true, but through the ‘mathematical mirror’: this conviction that marked the last twenty-five years of Nicholas of Cusa’s life, from De docta ignorantia [1440] onward, establishes the objective for De Icona, and the preface that introduces it, its scientific status.

That the iconic exercise within De visione Dei is to be understood as an experiment highlights a feature of Nicholas’ writings that should not be over-looked. Readers should approach Cusa’s work with a ‘broader agenda than can be captured by intellectual analysis of

the text alone. Reasoned analysis of his work is legitimate and important, however, to undertake an intellectual analysis alone is to fall short of encountering all that Cusa intends his readers to experience. Cusa sought in his life and writings to hold contradictories in unity, and his texts provide an arena in which readers may experience not only intellectual engagement but spiritual instruction. His writing style includes prayer, prose, mathematics, mystical conjecture, and experiment. Cusa’s texts are intended to open the reader to an encounter with the grace and mystery of God, and they typically do so via the medieval manuductive method discussed earlier in this thesis.\footnote{See ‘On the Manuductive Strategy of Nicholas of Cusa’s Mystical Theology’ in Gergely Tibor Bakos, \textit{On Faith}, 142-204, esp. 165-178 relating to \textit{De visione Dei}.} That method, we recall, is one in which Cusa leads his readers from the sensible (experience) to the intelligible, the material to the spiritual, and the visible to the invisible, via a ‘leading by the hand’.\footnote{‘If the aim of every kind of knowledge was the \textit{visio Dei} then Nicholas’s manuductive concern can be hardly underestimated to his intellectual project.’ Bakos, \textit{On Faith}, 306.} Here it may be helpful to note Pierre Hadot’s work on \textit{Philosophy as a Way of Life} if seeking to understand Cusa’s approach, as at least one recent study of Cusa’s writings has set out to do.\footnote{Loretta Anne Myler, ‘Unraveling the Intellect: The Mysticism of Nicholas of Cusa as Foundational to his Trinitarian Theology’, MA Thesis, Regis College, University of Toronto, 2008, esp. 10-15.} Hadot has argued that philosophy is too frequently mistaken to have been a means of intellectual argument and engagement alone, whereas ancient philosophy was in fact understood then as a way of life that was intended to perfect the soul.\footnote{Arnold I. Davidson, \textit{Philosophy as a Way of Life} (Cambridge, MT: Blackwell, 1995), 21.}

Rather than aiming at the acquisition of a purely abstract knowledge, these exercises aimed at realizing a transformation of one’s vision of the world and a metamorphoses of one’s personality. The philosopher needed to be trained not only to know how to speak and debate, but also to know how to live. The exercise of philosophy was therefore not only intellectual, but could also be spiritual. Hence, the teaching and training of philosophy were intended not simply to develop the intelligence of the disciple, but to transform all aspects of his being - intellect, imagination, sensibility, and will. Its goal was nothing less than an art of living, and so spiritual exercises were exercises in learning to live the philosophical life.\footnote{Arnold I. Davidson, \textit{Philosophy as a Way of Life} (Cambridge, MT: Blackwell, 1995), 21.}
Cusa’s *sensible experimentum* around the all-seeing icon, which has been described as ‘A doing [that] will make possible a saying’\(^\text{116}\) reflects this understanding of philosophy and offers a further reason to look afresh at *De visione Dei* as a text with the potential to inspire contemporary work in theology of religions and inter-religious relations.

While continuing to honour the original intention and audience of *De visione Dei*, we have sought to establish in this chapter a series of warrants that justify proposing this text as a resource for Christian theology of religions and inter-religious engagement. We first detailed a contextual warrant by focussing on the historical resonance evident between Europe immediately after the fall of Constantinople, when Cusa wrote the text, and the atmosphere of inter-religious suspicion in the era increasingly known as ‘post-9/11’. We then detailed a second warrant based on the insights *De visione Dei* offers into the limitations and possibilities of human perspective. In particular, we examined the way Cusa establishes the epistemological significance of an expanding habit of dialogue. Those insights, in turn, lead to our discussion of a third warrant, which recognized a deeper philosophical foundation within *De visione Dei*, namely, a dialectic of the one and the many; the see-er and the seen. We also noted that this philosophical warrant, along with the epistemological warrant, offered further evidence of a thematic complementarity between *De visione Dei* and *De pace fidei*, the other text Cusa wrote in 1453. Indeed, these two warrants are inter-related and, taken together, recommend *De visione Dei* as offering a promising framework for theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue, a framework that we have named perspectives-in-dialogue.\(^\text{117}\) Finally, we offered a

\(^{117}\) ‘Cusanus’ dialogical perspective, which he proposes as a sort of response to the question already existing in his day, namely that of the clash among various cultures and religions, finds its roots in his vision of the divine and of man.’ Davide Monaco, *Nicholas*, 6.
fourth, textual warrant by discussing examples of the expansive nature of the language Cusa employs within *De visione Dei*, and by detailing the fact Cusa’s exercise around the all-seeing icon is an experiment that provokes open learning. The expansive nature of these textual elements provide grounds from which the wisdom of Cusa’s *visione* may be creatively applied to all beings, not only those who were its first recipients. In our next and final chapter, we will provide further evidence of the potential we now feel confident this text holds for inter-religious engagement.
Chapter 5

THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS, INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, AND CUSA’S PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

In earlier chapters we introduced Christian theology of religions, along with Nicholas of Cusa and his mystical treatise *De visione Dei*. We also offered a survey of relevant literature and found that scholars have noted, without pursuing the prospect, that Cusa’s ‘little book about the icon’ may contribute to inter-religious engagement. In the preceding chapter, we outlined four warrants to justify deploying this text toward Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. Having detailed those four warrants, the task of this final chapter is to provide evidence of *De visione Dei*’s potential. Therefore, and in order to demonstrate the value the text holds, we will first deepen our understanding of that significant issue for inter-religious engagement introduced earlier, namely, the fault-line between those who approach their task by prioritizing commonality or ‘common ground’ and those who prioritize the distinctiveness or particularity of each religious tradition. This is the debate between pluralism and particularism. Secondly, we will examine how a leading scholar in the field, Catherine Cornille, has summarized the rationale and necessary conditions for inter-religious dialogue. We will then offer Cusa’s epistemology of perspectives-in-dialogue, along with his conceptualization of the visibility of the invisible, and the value of the particular in disclosing the universal, as interlocutors for these issues. By applying Cusa’s wisdom to both the theory and the practice of inter-religious engagement - to theology of religions and its expression in dialogue - our goal
is to demonstrate that this visionary text is a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners who seek to deepen inter-religious understanding and respect.

**Contemporary Challenges to the Three-fold Typology**

The introduction to this thesis initiated our discussion of the fact that many surveys of the field of theology of religions identify three main models, types, or approaches to the task. Those leading approaches have become known as exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. Exclusivist approaches assert that Christianity is the only valid religion and there is no salvation other than through Jesus Christ. Inclusivist approaches assert that Christianity is the normative religion, Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God and God’s will for creation, and that salvation is accomplished through Christ alone. Nevertheless, inclusivist approaches also hold that salvation may ultimately be available to those among the non-Christian religions. The pluralist approach asserts that all religions mediate a relationship with God and are more or less equally valid paths toward the mystery of ultimate salvation.

In chapter one, we discussed Kenneth Surin’s criticism of theology of religions. In particular, we addressed Surin’s political-ideological appraisal of the exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist approaches. Surin’s is not the only critique.¹ Others have shown that while the

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¹ The three-fold typology has been criticized for various reasons by a number of scholars. The following is a summary of those concerns by Perry Schmidt-Leukel, who in fact goes on to defend the typology. He includes in brackets the name or names of scholars he associates with each vein of criticism: ‘(1) The typology has an inconsistent structure, because the positions are not of the same genre and do not address the same questions [Markham, Tilley]; (2) the typology is misleading, because it obscures or misses the real issues of a theology of religions [DiNoia]; (3) the typology is too narrow [Markham, Ogden]; (4) the typology is too broad [D’Costa]; (5) the typology is too coarse or abstract and does not do justice to the more complex and nuanced reality of real theologies [Ariarajah, Tilley]; (6) the typology is misleading, because it does not do justice to the radical diversity of the religions [Heim]; (7) the typology is offensive [Neuhaus]; (8) the typology is pointless, because we are not in a position to choose any of these options and therefore have to refrain from all of them [Clooney].’ Schmidt-Leukel, ‘Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology - Clarified and Reaffirmed’, in
simplicity of this three-fold typology is attractive, and appears to offer a neat system of categorization, it is not without limitations. Christoph Schwöbel, for example, has argued in his essay ‘Particularity, Universality, and the Religions: Toward a Christian Theology of Religions’ that among the problems with the three-model typology is the way in which inclusivism becomes a poorly defined catch-all for approaches that do not hold to the straight-lines of either exclusivism or pluralism. The three model analysis tends to make an inclusivist of those scholars who do not hold strictly to salvation through Christianity alone (exclusivist) or salvation being available through all religions (pluralist). As such, inclusivism may be perceived as ‘a hopeless effort to construct a mediating position. Critics on the right complain that its universalist leanings make it a compromise with pluralism, while critics on the left charge that its Christocentric commitments show that it is simply a variant of exclusivism.’

Inclusivism thereby becomes a default category and the debate polarizes and stalemates between the exclusivist and pluralist trenches. Yet Schwöbel demonstrates that neither the exclusivist nor the pluralist positions take seriously the abiding concern within the Christian tradition for both the particularity and the universality of God’s grace. We will return to Christoph Schwöbel’s essay shortly.

Among other criticisms of the three-fold typology is the view that it is too clean cut; that it ignores the overlap between positions and does not give satisfactory attention to the sometimes significant differences between theologians who are nevertheless placed in the same category. This debate about the three-fold typology is being carried forward among scholars

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2 Important recent analysis and discussion of the three-fold typology can be found in David Pitman, *Twentieth Century Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2014) and Elizabeth J. Harris, Paul Hedges and Shanthikumar Hettiarchchi (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

who see a form of typology as intrinsically helpful, for it is a useful descriptive and heuristic tool, yet consider it unsatisfactory to narrow down this creative field of endeavour to only three models.4

Daniel Migliore’s recent analysis of the state of Christian theology of religions is representative of this view that the three-fold typology is restrictive and unrepresentative.5 By examining Migliore’s work, we will gain an appreciation for the fact that theology of religions is too broad to be captured by the three-fold typology alone, that we must take proper account of a distinctive and recent approach commonly named particularism and yet, nevertheless, even when the models are broadened in the manner achieved by Migliore, the significance of the issue of particularity versus plurality remains.6 It is to Migliore’s analysis that we now turn.

In reading the seven ‘Types of Christian theologies of the religions’ that Migliore identifies within the field, it is interesting to hold in mind that Migliore believes, if they were still housed under the three-fold typology, that the approaches he names as Type One and Type Two could both be categorized as exclusivist, Type Three to Type Six would all be categorized

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6 Paul Knitter is another theologian to have proposed a fresh set of models for theology of religions which has been widely discussed in this field. Knitter describes four types of Christian theology of the religions, as follows. Firstly, the replacement model, which asserts that Christianity will completely or partially replace the non-Christian religions. Second, the fulfilment model, which asserts Christianity as the fulfilment of all religions. Third, the mutuality model, which asserts that there are many true religions and they are called to come together. Fourth, the acceptance model recognizes the particularity and incommensurability of the religions, and the likelihood that many are true. Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005).
as inclusivist, and Type Seven would be the pluralist option. Building upon earlier formulations, therefore, Migliore’s analysis represents an attempt by a widely respected Reformed theologian to articulate a more sophisticated set of positions, and signifies the growth and increasing complexity of the field. What follows is a brief summary of Migliore’s formulation. Migliore’s Type Five is a statement summarizing that approach which is now typically identified as particularist. Of special significance for this thesis is the fact that, in presenting and deepening the debate around typologies, Migliore highlights the relationship between particularism and pluralism as an abiding issue for theology of religions and, thereby, directs the focus of this thesis to an aspect of current debate where Cusa’s visione may be of value.

Migliore’s Type One theology of religions declares that ‘Christ alone is Savior and Lord of all and that salvation is possible only through explicit faith in him’. Other religions are the source of neither revelation nor salvation, both of which are found in Christianity alone. Therefore, engagement with other faiths is down-played if not rejected by theologians asserting this type of theological response to the non-Christian religions. While Migliore does not offer a specific theologian as an example of this Type One, he references particular Christian missionary attitudes and methods that demonstrate this position.

While preserving the confession that the only saviour and Lord is Jesus Christ, Migliore’s Type Two differs from Type One in that theologians who hold this position claim that some knowledge of God is found in the non-Christian religions. Accordingly, there is

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merit in cautiously engaging in dialogue with other religions, as long as the Christian confession is not compromised. Migliore points to the Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten as an example of this type of Christian response to religious diversity. The key to Braaten’s theology is his argument that, in any theological response to religious diversity, there is an important distinction to be kept between revelation and salvation, on the one hand, and law and gospel on the other. Braaten argues ‘God reveals himself in many ways’, for example, in nature, the human conscience, and the world religions. However, ‘there is salvation in the name of Jesus Christ alone.’ Other religions may know something of the law of God yet this is not saving knowledge, as it is not knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Migliore’s Type Three Christian theology of religions is epitomized by Nostra Aetate, the ‘Document on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions’ adopted by the Second Vatican Council. That document, and broadly those theologians representative of this approach, affirm that Jesus Christ is the saviour and Lord of the world, he is the fullness of God’s truth and grace, and that all religions find their ultimate fulfilment in Christ. Yet the non-Christian religions can be reservoirs of authentic truth about God, however, and can be vehicles to, or a preparation for, an ultimate reception of the fullness of God’s truth which is known only in Jesus Christ. Engagement by Christians in dialogue with followers of other religions is encouraged here in order that common cause may be found in seeking justice and peace, and in fostering freedom among all people. According to this approach, the grace of God made known in Christ does not replace the truths that are available through the non-Christian religions. Rather, the grace made known in Christ will be their ultimate fulfilment. Further,

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11 For example, Carl E. Braaten, No Other Gospel! Christianity Among the World’s Religions (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).
Migliore observes of *Nostra Aetate*, and more generally of his Type Three among theologies of religions, that ‘whereas types 1 and 2 emphatically deny that salvation is possible through other religions, type 3 leaves the door slightly ajar or remains silent.’\(^{14}\) This is the first approach to theology of religions in Migliore’s system which he says could be categorized as inclusivist within the traditional three-fold typology.

Migliore’s *Type Four* is coherent with the first three in retaining the confession that Jesus Christ alone is the saviour of all. It differs, however, by affirming that the grace of God made known in Christ is present to all humanity, whether or not that presence is recognized and understood. ‘[T]he saving grace of God decisively known in Christ is in some manner present to all people whether they have heard the Christian gospel or not.’\(^{15}\) The significance of this difference may be summarized in the following simple terms: while the previous Type Three theology, represented in Migliore’s analysis by *Nostra Aetate*, leaves the door open to the possibility of salvation through the non-Christian religions, Type Four positively affirms that salvation can be attained through non-Christian religions. While still upholding that salvation is available only in Christ, theologians who adopt this approach affirm that salvation is available through non-Christian religions due to the universal presence of Christ to humanity.

Migliore nominates the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner as the scholar with whom this approach to a Christian theology of religions is most frequently associated. Further, Migliore identifies this way of understanding the relationship of Christianity to the world religions as the classic version of the model which has most frequently been called inclusivist. Rahner developed a theology of religions which, in essence, affirmed the presence of the saving grace of Jesus Christ within all religions, rather than arguing that the gracious presence of

\(^{14}\) Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 322.

\(^{15}\) Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 322.
Christ comes to non-Christian religions from without, for example, via the missionary activity of the church. Nevertheless, rather than rejecting mission altogether, Rahner recasts missionary activity. While he concludes that non-Christians who are faithful to the truth made known to them by their religious tradition may be known as ‘anonymous Christians’, and that salvation is attainable through that faithfulness to their own tradition, the desire of God that all anonymous Christians become knowingly Christian, provides both the reason and motivation for the missionary activity of the church. While critics of Rahner’s theology have argued that no support can be found in scripture or tradition for his category of anonymous Christians, and that it represents a subtle form of Christian imperialism, his thought was a major influence on the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council and, more broadly, on Christian theology of religions since the late 1960s.

Migliore’s Type Five is characterized by an abiding emphasis on the particularity of each religion and the differences between religious traditions and still holds, nonetheless, to the possibility that salvation may be attained by those who have not known Jesus Christ. This openness extends even to the possibility that those who have heard and rejected the church’s confession that the grace of God is known in Christ will nevertheless receive salvation in him. This theological approach to the relationship of the world religions has come to be known as particularism.

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20 See page 17 of this thesis for an introduction to the particularist approach to Christian theology of religions.
Migliore exemplifies the particularist approach to the theology of religions with the work of George Lindbeck, whom he describes as the ‘leading representative of this type.’ Lindbeck argued that each religion is comprised of a unique and irreducible language, and a unique and irreducible form of religious life. It is therefore a mistake to try and build metaphysical bridges between religions, for common ground cannot be reached between these unique communities and traditions; unique linguistic systems. Lindbeck criticized Rahner’s inclusivist approach, for example, for neglecting the real differences among the religions in an attempt to establish the category of anonymous Christians.

This particularist model of theology ‘underscores the radical particularity and otherness of the religions’ as opposed to any method that seeks out commonalities and links between the religions - seen or unseen. Further, Lindbeck considered that this emphasis on the radical difference between religions made for a distinctive yet no less meaningful rationale for inter-religious dialogue. Lindbeck argued that dialogue, especially around issues of shared importance in societies, provides the means whereby a Christian can become a better Christian. Likewise, ‘one of the ways in which Christians can serve their neighbours may be through helping adherents of other religions to purify and enrich their heritages, to make them better speakers of the languages they have.’ Further, Lindbeck sees no reason why salvation may not be available to those adhering to non-Christian religions, either at the time of death or soon after, and inter-religious dialogue may in fact be instrumental to that salvation experience.

22 Daniel L. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 324.
25 Daniel L. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 324.
26 Lindbeck, Doctrine, 61-62.
27 Daniel L. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 324-325.
Type Six in Migliore’s evaluation describes those forms of Christian theology of religions that seek to highlight the indispensability of inter-religious dialogue itself. Those who follow this approach argue that dialogue must be central to the theological process if an adequate theology of Christianity’s relationship to other religions is to be offered at all. More so than any of the previous approaches, Christian engagement and dialogue with the non-Christian religions is fundamental here. Migliore cites Paul Tillich, Hans Kung, John Cobb, and Jurgen Moltmann among his examples of theologians who approach religious diversity with this central emphasis on dialogue. Each of those theologians aligns with all five previous types in affirming the saving significance of Jesus Christ, yet each one would also contend that knowledge of Christ, and of the salvation available in him, is ‘augmented, corrected, and to some extent completed in the encounter with other religions.’

Critics of this dialogical approach struggle with a perceived risk here of abandoning the centrality of Christ to human knowledge of God, and the grace of salvation in Christ. Yet Jurgen Moltmann, for example, rejects this criticism and argues instead that dialogue with adherents of other religions is not a missionary technique or theological strategy, rather, it is a concrete expression of a Christian life formed by the gospel. Moltmann writes that Christians place their trust

… in a God who can suffer and who in the power of his love desires to suffer in order to redeem. Therefore in their dialogue with people of a different faith, Christians cannot testify through their behaviour to an unalterable, apathetic and aggressive God. By giving love and showing interest in others, they also become receptive to the other and vulnerable through what is alien to them. They can bear the otherness of the other without becoming insecure or hardening their hearts. The right thing is not to carry

on the dialogue according to superficial rules of communication, but to enter into it out of the depths of the understanding of God.\(^{30}\)

This style of statement is a hallmark that distinguishes Migliore’s sixth type of theological response to the non-Christian religions: inter-religious dialogue is intrinsic to the Christian life as an expression of the Christian understanding of God. In other examples, Hans Kung sees dialogue as challenging and clarifying Christian faith,\(^{31}\) and John Cobb writes from the conviction that ‘the more deeply we trust in Christ, the more openly receptive we will be to wisdom from any source.’\(^{32}\)

Migliore’s *Type Seven*, his final form of Christian theology of religions, is that which is commonly known as pluralist. This form of theology is distinctive in its intentional dislocation of Jesus Christ as the central focus of a Christian theology of religions and his replacement with what John Hick has described as a theocentric approach. Hick, as we have noted, is the preeminent example of the pluralist model. In his *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Hick called for a ‘Copernican revolution’ in theology, for what he believed the field requires is ‘a shift from the dogma that Christianity or Christ is at the center to the realization that it is God who is at the center, and that all the religions of humanity, including our own, serve and revolve around God.’\(^{33}\) We have already given attention to an analysis of Hick earlier in this thesis and so, at this point, it is significant that we simply note how Migliore describes Hick’s contribution to the field.

Hick’s pluralist approach to the theology of the religions focuses not on the particularity of the religions but on what they are thought to hold in common. According to Hick, the religious traditions are like

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pilgrims climbing to the top of the same mountain but from different sides. Pluralism in this sense seeks to relativize the historical particularities of the individual religions and tries to identify the ‘theocentric’ or ‘ultimate reality-centred’ core in all of them … Hick interprets Christian affirmations about Christ, such as the uniqueness or ‘finality’ of Christ as Savior and Lord, not as ontological truth claims but as the poetic or exuberant language of love for the one through whom Christians have come to know God.\footnote{Daniel L. Migliore, \textit{Faith Seeking Understanding}, 327. Following his description of Hick’s approach, Migliore also offers a critique which echoes the concerns which were highlighted earlier in this thesis: ‘Hick’s position raises the truth question in an acute form and leads to thin generalities that fail to represent well any particular religious tradition. For Christians, it is not a ‘supreme being’ or ‘ultimate reality’ as such who is worshipped as God but the one who covenanted with the people of Israel and who in sovereign grace became a humble servant in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world.’, 327-328.}

Migliore’s analysis of the field, and his partition of representative theologies into seven types, provides evidence for the fact that Christian theology of religions has become more nuanced since Alan Race’s initial proposal of three models into which all theology in the field could be categorized. However, what is retained as one of the significant delineating features in any representation of the field, whether it be Race’s three-fold typology or a longer schema like Migliore’s, is how each form of Christian theology of religions attends to the complex troika of the particularity of the Christian confession, the universality of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and the plurality of religious traditions. For example, Migliore closes his study by concluding that the mark of a proper Christian theology of religions is the form in which a theologian preserves and articulates the abiding connection between the distinctiveness of the Christian gospel and the cosmic scope of the activity of God.

A Christian theology of the encounter between Christianity and the other religions will emphasize both the particularity and the universality of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Its task is to do that without falling into a narrow Christocentrism on the one hand or an abstract theocentrism on the other.\footnote{Daniel L. Migliore, \textit{Faith Seeking Understanding}, 343.}
Particularism vs. Pluralism

Two recent books reinforce the observation that the contention between pluralism and particularism is a complex issue for the field. Paul Hedges introduces his *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* with the following statement:

We begin by setting out what many regard as the fundamental issue in the theology of religions today, the impasse between liberal and post-liberal approaches. This contrasts understandings of other religions under the tropes of, respectively, ‘similarity’ or ‘difference’. In other terms, it explores the impasse between ‘pluralisms’ and ‘particularities’ … or what I will term the Christian theological approaches to other religions of ‘radical openness’ and ‘radical difference’. Negotiating a way beyond this impasse is the work of the whole book.  

Hedges’ charts his own course through the impasse via intercultural theology, which holds that religions are not ‘closed monolithic blocks’ but, rather, are marked by fluid edges and hybridity. Religions are different, yes, however they have always been interwoven and are increasingly so today. Intercultural theology, Hedges believes, can assist theologians to meet ‘the need to balance both the pluralist and particularist standpoints.’

Hedges himself prefers the radical openness of the pluralist approach, and argues for it, yet also recognises that there are strengths within both the particularist and pluralist types of theology of religions. For example, the openness of pluralists to the universal presence of God among the religions is not an expression of modern liberality and tolerance, rather, it is a fundamental theological commitment of Christian faith. Further, particularism ensures we do not ignore the distinctive nature of each religion, nor the fact that, for any dialogue to be a true dialogue among the religions, ‘we need to stand within a particular tradition if we are to talk

37 Paul Hedges, *Controversies*, 229.
from anywhere meaningful to others. Drawing on the biblical theme of hospitality, and the ideas of symbiosis and hybridity to describe the inter-relation of religions, Hedges aligns his theology of the religions to an approach that Paul Knitter describes as mutual fulfilment. The proposal is that we should not see religions as marked by radical difference, but as mutually related realms of cultural activity. Moreover, this mutuality means that each should learn and be inspired and be changed by the others.

A second recent book to highlight the centrality of the issue of particularity and plurality for theology of religions is Jenny Daggers’ Postcolonial Theology of Religions: Particularity and Pluralism in World Christianity. Daggers seeks a different way to forge beyond the particularity-plurality impasse than Paul Hedges by giving priority, not to the mutuality or commonality of the religions but, instead, to their distinctiveness and particularity. Daggers defines her particularist approach to theology of religions broadly by drawing into her analysis of particularism a number of theologians who might otherwise have been thought of as pluralists, including Aloysius Pieris and Stanley Samartha. In so doing, Daggers seeks to advance her argument that the three-fold typology has privileged the pluralist approach by making pluralism appear the only approach among the three which has not foreclosed on the integrity of non-Christian religions. She contests this privileging of the pluralist approach by

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39 Paul Hedges, Controversies, 229.
41 Paul Hedges, Controversies, 244.
arguing that there are theologians, Pieris and Samartha included, who locate their theological engagement with non-Christian religions squarely within the distinctive parameters of received Christian doctrine. In this way, they exhibit a particularist approach, yet they engage the non-Christian religions with the same ‘whole-hearted irenic, respectful and harmonious’ intent as has been associated with pluralists.

Daggers argues that Christian theology of religions should commence from and uphold the distinctive particularity of its received tradition, and that of others, because the pluralist approach presents, problematically, what she calls a form of ‘Christianity transcended’.

A prominent theme in this book is the relation - in the EuroAmerican arena - between theological debate that relies on received terms of classical doctrine, and forms of Christianity transcended, whether within or without Christianity. Christianity transcended uses ideas crafted in Modern European thought - and thus entangled with European cosmopolitanism - including concepts of religion and religions.45

Daggers’ critique of the reified category of Christianity transcended resembles the criticisms made by Kenneth Surin, upon whose analysis she draws,46 along with that of Kwok Pui Lan.47 In developing her own post-colonial particularist proposal for a Christian theology of religions, Daggers also draws on George Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic analysis of the Christian tradition,48 which we have noted as a signature foundation for post-liberal particularism, Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s feminist approach to religious pluralism, in which Hill Fletcher focuses especially on individual identity formation,49 and Kathryn Tanner’s

45 Jenny Daggers, Postcolonial, 159.
46 Jenny Daggers, Postcolonial, 95.
47 Jenny Daggers, Postcolonial, see especially pages 137-143
48 Jenny Daggers, Postcolonial, 161-165.
49 Jenny Daggers, Postcolonial, 165-167.
theological application of cultural theories. Unlike Hedges, who views particularism as founded upon an outdated ‘orthodoxy’, Daggers argues instead that

Particularist approaches to theology of religions disrupt the hegemony of the exclusivist / inclusivist / pluralist typology. In disagreement with Paul Hedges’ judgement that particularism is reliant on ‘outdated, monolithic notions of “orthodoxy” and must therefore be challenged, the model offered in this chapter sees a particularist theology of religions as a viable means of re-centring Christian theology at a time of postcolonial disentangling from Eurocentrism.

The recent work of Paul Hedges and Jenny Daggers thus makes us aware that the contrast between particularism and pluralism appears at or near the heart of much contemporary debate among theologians and practitioners addressing the encounter between Christianity and the non-Christian religions.

This point of tension between particularism and pluralism is unsurprising, for it is complex theological ground. On the one hand, the Christian confession of the universality of God’s freely given and abundant grace should not be allowed to dissolve into a spiritual pluralism, as if universal salvation were a divine necessity, and thereby be absorbed uncritically into the plurality of ‘ways’, to call again on the phrase from Jacques Dupuis. This would allow and promote a theology that curtails the sovereign freedom of God which, therefore, is not Christian theology. On the other hand, the proper emphasis in the teaching and preaching of the church on the scandalous confession that God’s salvation of all creation is proclaimed and

50 Jenny Daggers, Postcolonial, 167-171.
51 Paul Hedges, Controversies, 194.
52 Paul Hedges, Controversies, 161.
achieved in the life of a particular man from Nazareth, whom the Father raised from the dead and is Lord of all creation, should not be hardened into a stance that ignores the working of the Word and Spirit of God beyond the boundaries of those communities that worship, break bread, and serve their neighbour in the name of that particular man from Nazareth. That, too, would allow and promote a theology that curtails the sovereign freedom of God and, therefore, is not Christian theology. Where might Christian theology today find wisdom to address the impasse between particularism and pluralism named by Paul Hedges and Jenny Daggers?

Christoph Schwöbel, as we noted earlier, identifies the fault line in the three-fold typology and, in so doing, further directs our attention to a perennial issue for which Cusa’s De visione Dei makes a constructive contribution. The fault line between particularism and pluralism, as Schwöbel describes it, is the manner in which the exclusivist - inclusivist - pluralist metric results in a triangulation whereby the exclusivist and pluralist positions square off against each other and all other positions tend to be assigned to inclusivism. Schwöbel writes, ‘One of the characteristics of the belated recognition of the relation among the religions as a theological issue of primary importance is the danger of a growing polarization among theologians in their response to the new situation of religious encounter.’54 We are now familiar with the polarization to which Schwöbel refers. What is of interest is the dynamic Schwöbel observes within that polarization, and the theological critique he applies to it.

At one end are the exclusivist theologies that hold salvation is known in Christianity alone. At the other, the pluralist approach which affirms that salvation is known in each of the world’s religions. The theological concern Schwöbel holds regarding exclusivist approaches is that, the deeper one reads into them, the more one feels compelled to ask whether this form of theology might contradict the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ it actually seeks to serve,

namely, ‘the message of God as all-encompassing, creative, reconciling, and redeeming love.’

The question that arises when God is presented as being exclusively at work in Christianity is whether this does not reduce the universality of God to such an extent that God is made to appear as the tribal deity of a rather imperialistic form of Western Christianity.

At the other polar end, the theological concern Schwöbel holds on closer examination of the pluralist approach is that it, too, endangers its own program. ‘This conception [pluralism] seems in danger of undermining what it sets out to preserve, that is, the plurality of religions as it is grounded in their distinctive and concrete particularity.’ We are familiar with this criticism through our reading of Kenneth Surin, who spoke of the homogenous logic of the pluralist approach, and Jenny Daggers, who raised concerns that pluralism results in a form of ‘Christianity transcended’.

Given the questions Schwöbel raises regarding the uncertain theological foundations of both the exclusivist and the pluralist approach, he finds that their plausibility appears to be built, in fact, on that which each position seeks to undermine in the other. Put another way, the appeal of exclusivism and pluralism to their respective supporters, rather than being secured by a constructive theological foundation, in fact ‘depends very much on the weakness of their respective opposites.’ Schwöbel writes,

Those who defend an exclusivist position have no difficulty in rallying support against what they see as the ‘relativistic pap’ to which, in their view, the pluralist conception boils down. The pluralists can easily defend their case by a strategy of negative apologetics, pointing to the weakness of what is seen as the imperialistic attitude of exclusivist absolutism. This polarization has not only the effect of deterring a

55 Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Particularity’, 31.
56 Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Particularity’, 31.
57 Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Particularity’, 32.
58 Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Particularity’, 32.
large number of theologians from many denominations who feel unable to identify with either of the two extremes from participating in reflection on a theology of religions, but it also disguises the difficulties of both the exclusivist and the pluralist approach in dealing with central issues of the present situation of religious encounter.  

Schwöbel also questions whether either exclusivists or pluralists are capable of establishing an adequate rationale for inter-religious dialogue. Provision of an adequate basis for inter-religious dialogue falters for exclusivism because it either rejects the activity altogether or construes it as a means for proselytizing. In the pluralist approach, inter-religious dialogue appears problematically conflated with the pluralist project. The dialogue has an a priori agenda, which is to filter out difference and prioritize commonality, and any apparent commonality is often found by bracketing, reinterpreting, or relativizing the particularity of the contrasting truth claims of different religious traditions. The pluralist approach provokes the danger of a dialogue that suspends religious truth claims and, therefore, no truly religious dialogue can develop. Instead, it becomes a dialogue of cultural traditions; a dialogue based on the principles that different cultural traditions might be deemed to hold in common, such as universal tolerance and respect. Thus, the engagement by Christians with non-Christian religions, as theorized and enacted in both the exclusivist and the pluralist approaches, is either no dialogue at all (proselytizing) or a dialogue that cannot be described as religious (the pursuit of tolerance and harmony). The latter, like the former, ‘can all too easily turn into a new guise of Western imperialism where subscribing to the principles of the Enlightenment becomes a precondition for participation in dialogue.’  

Schwöbel concludes that the theological and dialogical shortcomings of the polarized field may be the result of its inadequate engagement with the fundamental issue now becoming familiar to us:

59 Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Particularity’, 32-33.
60 Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Particularity’, 33.
These difficulties can be traced to a common problem that both approaches share: the failure to come to terms with the complex relationship of particularity and universality in the religions, and especially in Christianity. The exclusivist view can give strong expression to the particularity and distinctiveness of the Christian faith while calling the universality of the activity of the God it proclaims into question. The pluralist approach, contrary to its avowed intentions, seems to tend to develop a picture of the universal and ultimate noumenal focus of all religions … but it also means all other religions lose their distinctive particularity and become examples of a general abstract notion of religion or instantiations of a general religious metaphysics.\textsuperscript{61}

The challenge presented by this ‘common problem’ Schwöbel has identified is, first of all, how to address the relationship of particularity and universality within theology of religions. We may also add another issue now evident from our discussion of the contemporary field. Namely, the artificial reduction of the complexity of this field by the tendency to resolve questions posed for Christianity by the non-Christian religions by securing for oneself a fixed position at one of the two extremes - salvation in one religion alone (exclusivist) or salvation in all religions (pluralist) - and consequently designating the non-absolute theologies ‘in the middle’ (inclusivism) as either a disguised form of one of the extremes or a weaker option. Yet theologies that resist the seemingly stronger options at either end of the field are not the weaker position. They may, in fact, be the most challenging to maintain. This conundrum calls to mind again the observation of Michael Barnes in his \textit{Theology and the Dialogue of Religions} that ‘the greatest temptation faced by the theologian’ is ‘the tendency to seek premature closure.’\textsuperscript{62}

\textbf{Particularism, Pluralism, and \textit{De visione Dei}}

With that summary in mind, an observation can now be made of \textit{De visione Dei} and the question of particularity and pluralism for theology of religions – for the bifurcation between

\textsuperscript{61} Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Particularity’, 33.

\textsuperscript{62} Michael Barnes, \textit{Dialogue}, 6.
approaches that emphasise the distinctive particularity of religious traditions and those which emphasise perceived commonalities among them. The proposal is not that Cusa’s *visione* can be applied in order to solve this issue. Rather, the proposal is that the treatise offers insight which, along with the warrants established in the previous chapter, contribute further support to the thesis that *De visione Dei* can be a valuable interlocutor for those working in the field of Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. So, to employ Walter Brueggemann’s phrasing once more, let us pick up some of ‘the pieces, materials and resources’ we have gleaned in *De visione Dei*, not in a vain attempt to offer a solution to this issue, but to enlighten our thinking.

What is the relative significance for a Christian theology of religions of that which is distinctive to Christianity, its particularity, and those beliefs and practices it is perceived as sharing in common with other religions? We noted in our introduction that Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen has defined theology of religions as

That discipline of theological studies which attempts to account theologically for the meaning and value of other religions. Christian theology of religions attempts to think theologically about what it means for Christians to live with people of other faiths and about the relationship of Christianity to other religions.\(^64\)

Are theologians and practitioners who ‘attempt to think theologically about what it means for Christians to live with people of other faiths and about the relationship of Christianity to other religions’ best served by establishing their endeavour within the particularity of

\(^{63}\) According to Brueggemann, the task of the theologian ‘in this new interpretive situation after Modernity is not a grand scheme or a coherent system’. Instead ‘the task is to *fund* – to provide the pieces, materials and resources out of which a new world can be imagined.’ Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation. The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 20. Emphasis in the original.

Christian belief and practice, or should those Christian particularities be transcended in order that scholarly and practical engagement can be established on areas of perceived common ground among the religions? Having found these questions are alive and significant in the field, we may pause to highlight the fact that *De visione Dei* may be deployed to strengthen the conviction that a Christian theology of religions can start, and perhaps should start, with the belief and practices of Christian faith – with particularity.

Cusa’s *visione* provides insight into the fact that, those who commence and develop their theology of inter-religious engagement from within the very particularity of Christian doctrine not only ensure the integrity and authenticity of the Christian witness but also establish, by this focus on the particularity of their belief and practice, a fruitful means to argue for the universality of God. Put another way, the philosophical and epistemological apparatus Cusa provides in *De visione Dei* demonstrates that the most conclusive foundation of a shared witness by the *many* to the existence of the *one* is, in fact, a foundation resting in distinctive perspectives rather than common perspectives. The particularity of the religions is more significant than their perceived commonalities in bearing confident witness to the universal presence to them, and among them, of the one God of all. Ironically, the universality of God may be proclaimed more convincingly by Christian particularity than a pluralizing, common ground logic, which seeks to transcend particularity on the mistaken assumption that the universal is proved only by transcending the particular. For Cusa, wisdom is located in the opposite perspective.

Cusa’s *De visione Dei* provided the conceptual apparatus with which he addressed the ‘two paradigmatic simplifications of the emerging modern age’. Those simplifications may be summarized as follows: that precise knowledge of an object is possible from a single point of view, and secondly, that knowledge of an object may only be attained by the *via negativa* of

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65 Johannes Hoff, *Analogical*, 73-74; 139-142; 143-147.
apophatic or mystical experience.\textsuperscript{66} Hoff observes of the ‘paradigmatic simplifications’ Cusa addresses with \textit{De visione Dei}:

Eventually, these simplifications turned out to be two sides of the same coin: on one face, the fiction of a new mathematical concept of precision that played down the constitutional limitations of proportional knowledge; and on the other, the obsession with new experientialist or fideist accounts of these limitations that divested itself of the philosophical commitment to truth in favour of an unreflecting attachment to revelations or immersion into mystical experiences.\textsuperscript{67}

As we have seen, Cusa’s engagement with these issues emerged during the Tegernsee debate over how knowledge of God may be obtained, and his thinking found practical expression in his experimental exercise around the all-seeing icon. In the embodied physicality of that experiment Cusa’s theme is \textit{seeing} and how it is that we become aware of the presence of that which is invisible. Epistemologically, his theme was \textit{knowing} and how it is that we who are finite may attain knowledge of the infinite God. How may we know the One who is hidden from sight?

Cusa seeks a way between the simplifications Hoff identifies; between assuming, on the one hand, that those who conclude all knowledge is necessarily imprecise must also have conceded to a conceptual vagueness or, on the other, that those who propose a representationalist commitment to truth are somehow able to transcend their subjectivity. Cusa believed a more subtle view is possible, in which uncertainty is the hallmark of a commitment to the truth. We are able to know that precision in truth cannot be achieved, for we are unable to access a universal yardstick of rational comparisons. However, Cusa deploys an epistemology in \textit{De visione Dei} that allows him to propose that, while precise knowledge of

\textsuperscript{66} Johannes Hoff, \textit{Analogical}, 73.

\textsuperscript{67} Johannes Hoff, \textit{Analogical}, 73.
God cannot be attained, proximate knowledge of God does reach us via a most unexpected means. The unexpected means is the witness of the other.

Cusa asks the Tegernsee monks to listen to each other while, simultaneously, looking at a single image. Through this symbolic manifestation of, firstly, the simplicity of the all-seeing God and, secondly, the complexity of the many seen witnesses, that which is hidden from sight reaches out from the One to the many. At one level, it is by sight that a vision of the invisible is enabled for the monks. Yet, in actual fact, they would not have known what they were seeing if not for the additionally sensorous experience of speaking and listening. Their ability to perceive the invisible among the visible arises only as they dialogue and trust from their particular perspective on the icon.

This is the reason why Cusa favors paradoxical visual metaphors in *De visione Dei* such as ‘darkness’ and ‘mist’, combined with erotic imagery that focuses on the shining of human faces, when he talks about the untouchable touching point at which individual creatures touch each other. The seeker of wisdom and truth has to go beyond the visible light of created faces if he wants to touch the superabundance of the invisible face in which the perspectives of all created faces meet. But when he enters the ‘obscuring haze’ of this light he will discover that the aura of vagueness that made the visible faces appear misty and enshrouded is nothing other than the shining of the invisible face itself.68

The interplay of seeing and hearing is crucial. Cusa’s experiment proposes that the universality of the one God is made known through the encounter of particularity; through a diversity of unique points-of-view. A footing in particularity makes such knowledge, and such a collective witness, possible. This is distinctly different from the notion that the universality of the one God is made known through the similitude of a manufactured commonality. Cusa does not ask all the monks to stand in one place, and view the icon as one, in order that they might identify the one who sees them all. This would have obscured the identity of the

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68 Johannes Hoff, *Analogical*, 75
omnivoyant one by counteracting any opportunity for the monks to become aware of the presence of the invisible. It would contract rather than enhance their knowledge of God.

Despite the relative invisibility of each perspective to the other, the speaking and listening - the dialogue of perspectives - directs attention to the excess that no single point of view could ever behold. This is not a pantheist conflation of the universal and the particular. Rather, ‘the world becomes essentially theophany, revelation, image, mirror, participation, unfolding of God, without nullifying or consuming divine transcendence.’ The One who unfolded creation is ontologically different to the many who are enfolded. The invisible gaze of Cusa’s all-seeing One is entwined with the unique view-points of the many, who by their witness make that which is invisible visible.

Our finite acts of vision are consistently accompanied by the realization that something is no longer visible or not yet visible; we can even see that the temporarily invisible is simultaneously visible in the real space that we inhabit. ‘For each intellectual spirit sees in You-my-God something [without] which others could not in the best possible manner touch unto You-their-God’. Every other individual makes manifest to me that she sees by her own power of vision things that are invisible to me. Therefore, the greater my appreciation of the presence of other individuals, the greater becomes my realization that the invisible is more than an obstacle that blocks my access to the no-longer or not-yet visible. It is admirable for its own sake. Hence, the phenomenon of multiple-perspectivity demonstrates that the desire to see God is more than an add-on to our scientific or artistic desire for knowledge and vision. It demonstrates that the invisible is visible, and this confirms Cusa’s pre-modern conviction that every creature reveals its creator.

Cusa’s nuanced understanding of conjectural knowledge is such that God is not entirely obscured by the rationalist desire to establish an analytically precise representation of the unseen among that which can be seen. Nor does his epistemology support the opposite; that God can be known without the individuality of particular perspectives. The particularity of

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69 Davide Monaco, Nicholas, 121.
70 Johannes Hoff, Analogical, 78-79.
71 Johannes Hoff, Analogical, 101.
human creatureliness enables awareness and knowledge of the universality of the Creator. As with Cusa’s analogy of the see-er and the seen, the particular and the universal interpenetrate each other in a relationship of participation, through which knowledge of God may be attained.72

72 In chapter seven of De visione Dei, entitled ‘What the fruit of our vision of God’s Face is And how that fruit will be obtained’, Cusa uses the example of a seed to illustrate this interpretation of that which is contracted and finite with that which is uncontracted and infinite, and how the contracted (the seed) reveals the power of that which is uncontracted (the Creator). Again, Cusa also uses the image of the face, the image which he believes displays the meeting point of the visible and invisible better than any other: ‘Since You, O Lord, are the Power, or Beginning, from which all things derive, and since Your Face is the Power and Beginning from which all faces are that which they are, I turn toward this large and tall nut tree, whose beginning I seek to see. And with the sensible eye I see that it is large, spacious, colored, laden with branches, with leaves, and with nuts. Then with the mind’s eye I see that this tree existed in its seed not in the manner in which I here behold it but potentially. I consider attentively this seed’s admirable power, wherein were present the whole of this tree, all its nuts, the entire seminal power of the nuts, and, in the seminal power of the nuts, all [the derivative] trees. And I discern that this power is never at any time fully unfoldable by the motion of the heavens. Yet, the seed’s power, though not [fully] unfoldable, is nevertheless contracted, because [the seed] has power only with respect to this species of nuts. Hence, although in the seed I see the tree, nevertheless [I see it] only in a contracted power. Next I reflect upon the entire seminal power of all the trees of various species – a power that is contracted to each species, and in the seeds I see the trees in potency. If, then, I wish to see the Absolute Power of all the powers of such seeds … I must pass beyond all seminal power that can be known and conceived and must enter into that ignorance wherein remains no seminal power or seminal force at all. Thereupon I will find amid obscuring mist a most stupendous Power, accessible by no conceivable power. It is the Beginning, which gives being to every power, whether seminal or non-seminal. This absolute and superexalted Power gives to each seminal power the power whereby it enfolds a tree potentially, together with enfolding all that is required for a sensible tree and all that follows from the being of a tree.’ The ontic difference between the seed and its unfolding into a vast tree serves as an example, not of the precise nature of the relationship between ‘the Absolute Power of all powers’ and all seminal power but, rather, of the ontological difference between those powers that we can nevertheless come to know by its mirror in creation. God’s enfolding (complicatio) of the unfolding (explicatio) creation is ontologically different to all else and yet reflected by the ontic differentiation among that which God unfolds: ‘In this way I see that this Power is the Face, or Exemplar, of every arboreal face and each tree. In this [Power] I see this nut tree not as in its own contracted seminal potency but as in the Cause and Maker of that seminal power. And so, I see that this tree is a certain unfolding of the seed’s power and that the seed is a certain unfolding of Omnipotent Power.’ DVD, chapter 7, paragraph 23-24.
It was Daniel Migliore who concluded, ‘A Christian theology of the encounter between Christianity and the other religions will emphasize both the particularity and the universality of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.’ Perhaps Cusa’s *visione* can provide resources for those who wish to retain that abiding concern, from within the belief and practice of the Christian tradition, for both the particularity and the universality of God’s grace. The impasse between particularism and pluralism might be fruitfully engaged, with Cusa’s help, by exploring the possibility that it is a mistaken bifurcation.

**The Rationale and Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue**

Theology of religions is not a purely theoretical discipline and involves significant inter-religious engagement. Dialogue among participants from different religious traditions is itself the work of theology of religions placed into practice. Inter-religious dialogue is one of the sites where inter-religious theological reflection occurs and so practical engagement with other religious scholars and practitioners through dialogue is a source, along with texts and other media, for the ongoing theological reflection and writing that are the work of theology of religions. Put another way, there is a form of praxis to be followed within this scholarly discipline as well as the applied activity of the discipline. Engagement with other religious traditions leads to theological reflection on the beliefs and practices of one’s own tradition, which leads to further and deepened inter-religious dialogue. That renewed dialogue then becomes the source of further theological reflection and, through this habit of dialogue and reflection, the work of theology of religions is prospered.

Our study thus far has highlighted the fact that *De visione Dei* holds in prospect a contribution to those who seek to expound a rationale for inter-religious dialogue, and so it is to that prospect that we now turn. That potential can be highlighted by considering the work of

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Catherine Cornille, who has written extensively on the conditions necessary for inter-religious dialogue, and then finalizing our observations about Cusa’s dialogue of perspectives.\(^{74}\)

While there are a number of scholars who have addressed the rationale and conditions for inter-religious dialogue,\(^{75}\) Cornille’s work is of special interest because, firstly, she is a leading scholar in this field and, secondly, she establishes the rationale and conditions for dialogue specifically on religious grounds, rather than methods or virtues that seek to transcend religion.\(^{76}\) Cornille speaks of dialogue as ‘a conversation or exchange in which participants are willing to listen and learn from one another’, and it is this possibility of mutual learning that makes inter-religious dialogue ‘more than a luxury or benevolent pastime for the curious’.\(^{77}\) Rather, it is ‘a matter of religious necessity or opportunity’.\(^{78}\) Cornille’s engagement in dialogue is grounded in her Christian faith, and she defines inter-religious dialogue as


\(^{77}\) Cornille comments that ‘One of the most common and innocuous fruits of dialogue is that of remembering or rediscovering neglected or forgotten dimensions of one’s own tradition.’ Further, this can lead to ‘renewed commitment to particular teachings and practices. This may arise from an experience of contrast or from inspiration in which engagement with another religion serves to reinforce particular religious beliefs and practices. Here, the other thus serves as a mirror offering a new lens through which to understand one’s own religion.’ Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 31.

\(^{78}\) Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 20.
a constructive engagement between religious texts, teachings, and practices oriented toward the possibility of change and growth. To be sure, far from every dialogue between religions will actually yield religious fruit. But it is the very possibility that one may learn from the other which moves religious traditions from self-sufficiency to openness to the other.\textsuperscript{79}

With that understanding of the nature of inter-religious dialogue established, Cornille argues that the conditions needed for fruitful dialogue are epistemological humility, commitment to a religious tradition, interconnection in the form of trust that other religions address similar fundamental questions, empathy and, finally, hospitality. We will briefly describe each of Cornille’s conditions.

The first necessary condition for inter-religious dialogue is epistemological humility, which Cornille describes as an openness among participants to the possibility of change; change in their own faith and within their own religious tradition. There is a need, in other words, for a humble acknowledgement of the finite way that each religion, including one’s own, grasps and expresses truth.

Such epistemological humility goes against the grain of most religious self-understanding. Religions tend to claim the fullness of truth and the definitive and unquestionable way to the highest goal … As such, the reality of change and growth tends to be minimalized, ignored or effaced, as every new tradition or school of interpretation claims to offer a more authentic or faithful interpretation of the original revelation.\textsuperscript{80}

Cornille believes that religions are nevertheless capable of epistemological humility and contain within them the resources for that stance. Illustrating that potential for change from within her Christian tradition, she writes that ‘Christianity’s notion of the eschatological proviso should, at least theoretically, guard against identifying any historical forms with

\textsuperscript{79} Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 20.

\textsuperscript{80} Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 21-22.
ultimate reality. \(^{81}\) She also points to the tradition of Christian mysticism, and mysticism in the non-Christian religions, as offering a foundation for the epistemological humility she argues is required for meaningful inter-religious dialogue. Mysticism, as we have noted, is characterized by a recognition of the impossibility of ever attaining a comprehensive understanding of God. Mystical texts uphold God’s unreachable transcendence, and the impossibility of fully understanding or explaining God or God’s ways in human terms. In the context of this thesis, it is interesting that Cornille particularly notes it is those who promote a pluralist theology of religions

who have mined those [mystical] traditions to argue for the unity of all mystical experiences and/or to call for an abandonment of all religious claims to absolute truth … While one need not go so far as to abandon all religious claims to superiority or exclusivity, this affirmation of the transcendence of ultimate reality may at least serve as the basis for doctrinal humility. \(^{82}\)

Along with the eschatological proviso and the wisdom of the mystical tradition, Cornille also observes that a further catalyst to the epistemological humility necessary for meaningful dialogue has been the development of historical-critical studies of religion. This has brought awareness of the historical and cultural particularity of religious teachings and practices. ‘This also accords with the cultural-linguistic understanding of doctrine which, in the words of George Lindbeck, opposes “the boasting and sense of superiority that destroys the possibility of open and mutually enriching dialogue”.’ \(^{83}\) Yet Cornille is mindful of the wariness about historical critical methods among those who seek to safeguard firm adherence to the teachings of a particular tradition. Pressed to their extreme, historical critical methods can lead

\(^{81}\) Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 22. Emphasis is in the original.

\(^{82}\) Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 22.

to a certain relativism. However, Cornille points out that acknowledging the finite and relative nature of religious language need not lead to relativism, nor should it lead to the reduction of the confession of faith to little more than a historical and cultural construct. ‘One may recognize the limitation of religious experiences while still holding on to their truth, and even superiority. As such, religious conviction does not preclude doctrinal humility, nor does doctrinal humility erode religious conviction.’

The second condition for inter-religious dialogue is commitment to a religious tradition. It is the very fact that participants are committed to a particular religion that distinguishes inter-religious dialogue from personal exploration of the religions for spiritual enrichment. Inter-religious dialogue necessarily involves witnessing to a particular tradition. Only then can the event of dialogue become an occasion to gain a deeper knowledge of one’s own tradition, as participants attempt to answer probing questions raised by others. Cornille writes, ‘In so far as its ultimate goal is the advancement of truth, dialogue may be regarded as a form of mutual or reciprocal witnessing’. Further, ‘In its ideal form, dialogue involves a back and forth between engaging in dialogue with the other and with one’s own tradition’. This inter-play of witnesses and learning is only made possible by a dialogue among people committed to their tradition, yet also holding the humility required in order to learn from another.

The third factor Cornille proposes as necessary for fruitful inter-religious dialogue is interconnection. She writes, ‘Inter-religious dialogue also presupposes belief that religions actually do have something to do with one another, that they deal with some of the same fundamental questions or that they somehow connect in common concerns or on some higher plane.’ Put another way, the condition, on the one hand, that inter-religious dialogue be a

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84 Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 23.
85 Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 24.
86 Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 24.
conversation among participants committed to their respective religious traditions, who witness to the teachings and practices of their tradition in its particularity, needs to be matched, on the other hand, by a willingness to acknowledge that the different religions do hold some things in common. They are not so distinct, so particular, as to have no meeting place.

Interconnection across the religions can be found, and frequently is, through co-operation in a common cause. Yet Cornille argues that the interconnection needed for fruitful inter-religious dialogue should be intrinsic to the religions, and not only extrinsic. Examples of extrinsic points of connection might be a common commitment to support refugees or a joint social service program for the homeless. As worthy as such common actions may be, they alone do not form the interconnection needed for inter-religious dialogue. A deeper intrinsic interconnection between people of different religions is reached, for example, when they recognise they are ‘engaged with the same or similar religious questions and desires’. Recognition of a common search, for example, ‘offers a basic foundation as well as a starting point for inter-religious dialogue’. This interconnection does not prevent a theological contest over where that search might lead. A willingness to acknowledge an intrinsic interconnection allows an enduring inter-religious dialogue focused on the content of different tradition, rather than their expression alone.

Cornille sounds an important note of caution here. She observes that Pluralist theologians like John Hick have argued for the existence of ‘a common ultimate reality’ as the rationale for dialogue between religions. Yet she writes that ‘While these notions of an interconnection between religious traditions in a spiritual experience or transcendent reality common to all religions may represent an important impulse and ground for dialogue, they also

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87 Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 25.
contain some limitations. The idea of a transcendent reality beyond all religious traditions has long been subject to critique in the area of theology of religions, as we have discovered. One problem for such a stance is found by observing that, not only do most religions uphold a continuity between their conception of God (or gods) and the very reality of God, they also uphold the truth of those claims even if they conflict with other claims to ultimate truth. Thus, the pluralist pursuit of a reality transcending all religious expressions can be fraught. Furthermore, such a search would seem to withdraw genuine interest in the specific beliefs and practices of the religions. If all religious teachings and practices are ultimately regarded as pointing to an experience or goal which is radically transcends all of them, then the expressions which make up the particularity and the identity of religious traditions would no longer seem to matter. The idea that there is a common spiritual ground or goal constitutes an uncompelling basis for dialogue among the religions. Cornille writes:

Rather than attempting to establish interconnection in a ground or goal common to religions, I would argue that what is required for dialogue is a sense of interconnection grounded in the concrete beliefs of any particular religion. It is not the belief in a common experience, but the conviction that all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature which will form the basis for engaging other religions from a Buddhist perspective, just as Christians will need to believe that the Biblical God is also revealed (in some form or to some degree) in the texts and teachings of other religions. The possibility of constructive inter-religious dialogue requires that every religious tradition involved develop a religious self-understanding in which (at least some of) the teachings of the other religions are somehow related to or relevant for one’s own religious conception of truth.

Cornille’s fourth condition for inter-religious dialogue is the need for a basis of understanding across religious traditions. She names it as empathy. Inter-religious dialogue

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88 Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 25-26
cannot require nor deliver a perfect understanding of the teaching and practice of fellow participants. Yet it does call for a willingness to extend the individual imagination beyond the scope of one’s own faith in order to gain an appreciation for, and a modest understanding of, the teachings and practices of those with whom we are in dialogue. This condition acknowledges that, while gaining an intellectual understanding of other religions is possible, there is a special need for empathetic understanding if we are to gain personal insight into their experiences and expressions.

While I may understand devotion to the Hindu Gods Krishna or Ganesha by way of analogy with my own devotion to Jesus Christ, I will never gain full access to the content of the other’s faith, insofar as it is essentially shaped by the object of that faith. However, participation in Hindu devotion may still reveal levels of intensity of love of God and ritual expressions hitherto unknown, and positively inspiring.91

Cornille’s final condition for dialogue involves the need to acknowledge the presence of truth in other religions, and the attending hospitality to integrate such truth, when recognized, into one’s own belief and practice. Significantly, she qualifies this condition by stating that ‘Generosity or hospitality toward recognizing and integrating truth found in another religion does not necessarily require recognition of truth in all religions, or in every dimension of a particular religion.’92 This is a significant issue. In this challenging commitment to discern truth in other religions, it is understandable and right that one’s own tradition should serve as the norm for all such discernment. While some pluralists involved in dialogue between religions may reject altogether the use of religion-specific norms as patronizing, and propose instead more generic or neutral norms agreed upon by all participants,93 these are not satisfactory as

91 Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 28.
92 Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 28.
substitutes for what a religious tradition will hold as the revealed criteria of truth, albeit finitely construed.

Cornille draws on Roger Haight’s *Jesus, Symbol of God* to propose that it is constructive to view one’s own religion operating in either one of two ways in this process. First, we may elect to view our own tradition as a positive norm, whereby *only* those beliefs or practices of other religions that are identical to our own are admitted as true. Alternatively, we may elect to view our own tradition as a negative norm, whereby it becomes the basis on which we exclude *only* those beliefs and practices which are irreconcilable with one’s own. In both formulas proposed by Haight, hospitality toward the truth of another religion is meaningfully offered, while still holding to the integrity and particularity of one’s own tradition.

**Inter-religious Dialogue and De visione Dei**

With Catherine Cornille’s summary in mind, an observation can now be made of *De visione Dei* and inter-religious dialogue. Again, the proposal is not that Cusa’s *visione* should be applied here in an unqualified way. Rather, the proposal is that this treatise offers significant insight into the epistemological value of dialogue, and those insights can constructively contribute to the task of establishing the theological rationale and conditions for inter-religious dialogue.

The monks at Tegernsee wrote to Nicholas of Cusa in the hope that he may help them to understand how knowledge of God is obtained. As we have explored in earlier chapters, Cusa’s *De visione Dei*, and especially its experimental exercise, called on the brothers at Tegernsee to listen to one another and trust in something that cannot be guaranteed by the

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evidence of our visual perceptions alone, namely, that it is possible to ‘see’ the invisible in the midst of the visible if one is willing to listen with trust to the witness of others. Now that we have outlined the nature of inter-religious dialogue, we are able to see the relevance of Cusa’s concept of perspectives-in-dialogue for that arena. Michel de Certeau has written of Cusa’s ideas about dialogue as both ‘derangement’ and ‘madness’ when they are compared to the analytic logic that was coming into its reign just as Cusa’s life was coming to its end.

To believe in what others say is what gives access to a thought of the One. This initial derangement makes theory possible. Conversely, the theory turns out to be affected, and its social functioning determined, by the madness that authorizes it in the name of a belief in the crowd. To be sure, the echo of others that is brought to the intimate experience of each individual by the testimony of the crowd – an oceanic rumour of ‘me too’ – changes the private hallucination into a thought of the infinite; but the infinite is not ‘visible’, it is only ‘audible’.95

While Certeau’s conclusion that the invisible is not visible but only audible has been challenged as not entirely compatible with Cusa’s view,96 for the visible is indeed significant to Cusa’s theory, Certeau nevertheless highlights the crucial role of the witness, and of dialogue, to De visione Dei’s illumination of how the monks become aware of the presence of that which is unseen. The dialogue of differing perspectives, speaking with and listening to those in other places, is of central importance to attaining knowledge of God. It is Davide Monaco who has most carefully analysed Cusa’s philosophy of dialogue, in both De visione Dei and De pace fidei. As Monaco has observed, to Cusa, it is only in openness to each other, and in the commitment of faith, that it becomes possible to grasp the infinite and inexhaustible truth of God. ‘The encounter with the other increases our awareness of the singularity of every

95 Michel de Certeau, ‘The Gaze’, 34.
concern and expression of truth and – through dialogue, collaboration and attention towards the other – it helps us grasp the transcendence and infinity of truth.\textsuperscript{97}

Further, it was Monaco and Joshua Hollmann who have highlighted the expanding benefit of dialogue in Cusa, whose 1453 treatises covered both an intra-religious dialogue of Christian monks around an icon of God at Tegernsee (\textit{De visione Dei}) and an inter-religious dialogue of different creeds gathered around the Word of God in an imaginary heavenly council (\textit{De pace fidei}). ‘We are driven from interpersonal and interfaith dialogue to intrapersonal and intrafaith dialogue, and then, in a roundabout manner, back from intrafaith and intrapersonal dialogue to interfaith and interpersonal dialogue.’\textsuperscript{98} This free dialectic between intra- and inter-religious dialogue calls for trust, and recognises that truth always exceeds any single perspective, just as it also exceeds circularity. Listening to and learning from the other who says ‘I see it too’ is not a secondary or extrinsic element of faith to Cusa. Rather, it is an essential moment of faith itself, and of the search for God and truth.

We additionally discovered from \textit{De visione Dei} that dialogue is a habit founded in a recognition of the infinity and freedom of God, that creation is the unfolding of the God who enfolds all, and the transcendence of truth. The infinity and freedom of God require a never-ending search which coincides with dialogue.\textsuperscript{99} We concluded that Cusa’s dialogue of perspectives is not about overcoming or transcending particular perspectives. Rather, the dialogue makes participants aware of the contracted nature of their understanding. Yet when dialogue is commenced from a particular contracted perspective, it may nevertheless become a site for the revelation of divine universality. As Cornille argued, rather than attempting to establish interconnection for dialogue ‘in a ground or goal common to religions’, what is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{97} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 94.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 94.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Davide Monaco, \textit{Nicholas}, 95.
\end{itemize}
required ‘is a sense of interconnection grounded in the concrete beliefs of any particular religion’. The multiplicity of diverse perspectives does not contradict the possibility of unity among participants, nor does it contradict the possibility of witnessing to the reality of one God. Rather, the very multiplicity of perspectives is, for Cusa, an expression, and indeed the best expression, of infinity in the finite world.

He makes many figures, because the likeness of His infinite power can be unfolded in the most perfect way only in many figures. And all intellectual spirits are useful to each [intellectual] spirit. Now unless they were countless, You, O Infinite God, could not be known in the best way possible. For each intellectual spirit sees in You-my-God something [without] which the others – unless it were revealed to them – could not in the best possible manner attain unto You-their-God. Full of love, the spirits reveal to one another their respective secrets; and, as a result, their knowledge of the one who is loved and their desire for Him is increased; and the sweetness of their joy is aflame.

We noted that among Catherine Cornille’s conditions for inter-religious dialogue is the need for epistemological humility, a humble acknowledgement of the finite manner in which each religious perspective grasps and expresses truth. Further, there is need for a commitment to a particular tradition, for only then can dialogue become an occasion to deepen knowledge of both that tradition and, hopefully, others as well. ‘In so far as its ultimate goal is the advancement of truth’, Cornille proposed, ‘dialogue may be regarded as a form of mutual or reciprocal witnessing’. She also observed that ‘In its ideal form, dialogue involves a back and forth between engaging in dialogue with the other and with one’s own tradition’. We might put this another way and say that dialogue, as we have noted with Cusa, has an expanding potential, moving from the intra-religious to the inter-religious, and then back again. This inter-

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100 Catherine Cornille, ‘Conditions’, 26.
101 DVD, chapter 25, paragraph 111.
play of witnesses and learning is made possible by a dialogue among people committed to their
tradition, yet holding the humility required to learn from the other.

*De visione Dei* offers a rationale for and model of dialogue that constructively supports
Christian theological engagement with other religions. Cusa asks the Tegernsee monks, and
those who are his readers now, to recognize that it is impossible to comprehend God from any
single point-of-view, and yet a multiplicity of perspectives enhances the opportunity to deepen
one’s knowledge of God and increases awareness of the universality of God. Speaking and
listening is the path. Perspectives-in-dialogue bears witness to the infinity of the One who
unfolded many finite expressions of creativity. Thus, while the many religions bear variable
witness to God, they nevertheless may be viewed as a manifestation of God’s intelligibility and
transcendence, and the actual variability of their witness may indeed be a manifestation of the
simplicity and infinity of God.

Cusa’s model does not say ‘Your perspective and mine are equal and need no
improvement’. Rather, it says ‘I need your perspective, and you mine, to deepen knowledge of
God’. Cusa’s *visione* is about enlarging one another’s perspective, and how truth is sharpened
in community. Davide Monaco has observed, ‘Therefore the plurality of positive expressions
of religions finds its foundation in God’s transcendence. Although [God] is always revealed as
ulterior, infinite, and to be found, God inspires an inexhaustible search for new ways of
expressing his mystery.’ It is that search which Nicholas of Cusa proposed is best undertaken
through perspectives-in-dialogue; seeing, speaking, listening, and trusting in the company of
others.
CONCLUSION

*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you.*

Rowan Williams delivered an address to the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre in 2006, entitled ‘Christian Identity and Religious Plurality’, in which he observed:

If we are truly learning how to be in relation with God and the world in which Jesus of Nazareth stood, we shall not turn away from those who see from another place. We must ask not ‘How do we convict them of error? How do we win the competition of ideas?’ but, ‘What do they actually see?’ And, ‘can what they see be a part of the world that I see?’ These are questions that can only be answered by faithfulness - that is, by staying with the other… To work patiently alongside people of other faiths is not an option invented by modern liberals who seek to relativize the radical singleness of Jesus Christ and what was made possible through him. It is a necessary part of being where he is.

Nicholas of Cusa sent a treatise to the monks of St Quirin’s Monastery in Tegernsee in 1453. In it, he invited the monks to hang an icon of an all-seeing face on a wall and form a semi-circle around it. They were first asked to look at the icon in silence, perceiving ‘how diligently [the gaze] is concerned for each one, as if it were concerned for no one else’. Next they were asked to walk from side to side in silence, keeping their eyes fixed upon the gaze, noticing that the all-seeing face does not leave them, even while they are moving. Finally,

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103 Job 42: 5.
105 DVD, Preface, paragraph 4.
106 DVD, Preface, paragraph 4.
the monks were asked to speak to one another of their experience. In that moment of dialogue, they discovered the gaze had followed each one of them simultaneously, and had never left any one of them.

And suppose [the monk] asks the approaching brother whether the icon’s gaze moves continually with him. Thereupon he will be told that the gaze is also moved in this opposite manner; and he will believe his fellow-monk. And unless he believed, he would not apprehend that this simultaneous opposition of motion was possible. And so, through the disclosure of the respondent [each monk] will come to know that the face does not desert anyone who is moving - not even those who are moving in opposite directions.107

Cusa had revealed for the monks that a dialogue framed around their particular perspectives will disclose both the contracted nature of their own subjective perception and the seemingly limitless opportunity to expand that perspective found in the habit of speaking with those who stand elsewhere. He understood that the participants need not be looking from the same place in order to enhance their shared knowledge of, and devotion to God. In fact, it is better that they are not. Their distance is bridged, and their distinctive perceptions are enriched, by speaking and listening. They then achieve, through their dialogue, a new way of seeing. For Cusa, both the finite contraction of their particularity and the infinite possibility represented by their multiplicity have their foundation in the universality of God - the one who sees all.

The questions posed by Rowan Williams about Christian identity in a world of religious plurality in 2006, ‘What do they actually see?’ and ‘Can what they see be part of the world I see?’ open an inviting path toward the knowledge of God. The imaginative wisdom of Cusa’s reflections on the exercise around the icon offered a similar inviting path in 1453. The gaze of God is so generous that we can mistakenly assume we are its sole recipients. Yet by listening to the witness of other perspectives, we may attain an even fuller vision of the one in whose

107 DVD, Preface, paragraph 4.
gaze we feel held. By listening to the witness of sisters and brothers who stand in another place, who see the all-seeing from a different point-of-view, we begin to perceive that there are things invisible to us that are yet visible to them.

Christian theology of religions, both in scholarly and dialogical engagement, asks how we are to approach, understand, and regard people adhering to a religion other than our own, and what might be the purpose, if any, of the many religions within the plan of God. Daniel Migliore has written of the contemporary task of Christian theology of religions that

Christian theology of religions has the distinctive theological task of asking about the place of the plurality of world religions within the purposes of God made known in Jesus Christ … Serious reflection on the relationship between Christian faith and other religions is one of the most important tasks facing the church and theology in the twenty-first century. With the relentless advance of globalization in economy, culture, and communication, and with increasing awareness of the religious factor in national and international tensions and conflicts, the need for Christian theology to engage in the development of a theology of the religions is both real and urgent. A theology of the religions will be undertaken from a particular perspective and will necessarily involve critical judgement.108

This thesis set to advocate for Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei* as a resource for a Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue. We have outlined four warrants to justify utilizing *De visione Dei* within the field - the historical resonance between the circumstances in which Cusa wrote the book and features of our own time, the relevance of Cusa’s epistemology of perspective to inter-religious scholarship and dialogue, the complementarity of his ideas about the one and the many, found in both *De visione Dei* and the other pioneering treatise he wrote on dialogue wrote in 1453, *De pace fidei*, and, finally, the expansive nature of Cusa’s language and his exercise around the all-seeing icon. Along with those warrants, we also examined the contested issue of particularism and pluralism within theology of religions, outlined a rationale and conditions for inter-religious dialogue, and then

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highlighted Cusa’s epistemology of perspectives-in-dialogue and the theological and epistemological significance he places on particularity to enable knowledge of that which is universal, in order to highlight the constructive contribution that *De visione Dei* can make to the contemporary agendas of inter-religious engagement.

Gergely Tibor Bakos summarized the wisdom of *De visione Dei* with the following insights:

God is radically transcendent, (ie) different from creatures, at the same time as He is radically immanent as the Creator of the very same creatures. In the former sense, he is nothing since there can exist no proportion between His infinity and finite Creation. In the latter sense, however, God can be said to be everything. This means that he is visible and invisible at the same time. Precisely because God is fundamentally visible in and to all creation, there can be no *a priori* objection to seeing Him through different images taken from this Creation, provided one does not forget the epistemological ambiguity of the particular image in question. Furthermore, if different images, names or concepts are necessarily articulated from different perspectives, their diversity can even have a positive role, namely, that of pointing towards God’s Infinite Mystery as seen from different perspectives. Nicholas thus refers to God as the Divine Painter wanting to produce an image of Himself. It can be argued that the likeness of God’s Infinity cannot be unfolded in any other way than in creating many mages.109

Nicholas of Cusa’s vision of the Divine Painter, his inspiring and expansive theory about a dialogue of particular perspectives, and the abiding wonder of his description of the all-seeing gaze that never leaves anyone, offer rich and enduring wisdom for those engaged with Christian theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue today. To quote Bernard McGinn, ‘The Cardinal’s treatise was larger than its times.’110


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