

Meghann Robern

Professor Roland Faber

LPS 3008 Mysticism East and East

17 January 2014

The Vision of God in The Cathedral of the World:

Nicholas of Cusa in Dialogue with Forrest Church

Nicholas of Cusa was a Christian mystic, Catholic priest, and church leader who lived during the first half of the 15th century. His mystic experience included not just a vision of the incomprehensible divine, but also the language to talk about it—a concept he called the coincidence of opposites: “coincidence unites one thing with another so that it does not exclude another but rather includes all.”¹ While he is known for his contribution to non-dualism, he himself is an example of non-dualism: both mystic, with the personal experience, and activist, with outward participation in the hierarchy of the Church and its politics. H. Lawrence Bond provides an extensive list that illustrates how deeply the multitude of personality applies to Cusa:

“He has been characterized simultaneously as a humanist and a counter-Renaissance figure; as a heretic and a conservative; as a gnostic and an agnostic; as a scientist and a pseudo-scientist; as a papal monarchist and a conciliarist; as a reformer and an opportunist in need of reforming; as peacemaker and a belligerent; as a politician and a pastor; and as a philosopher and a theologian.”²

Bond also tells us that he refused to codify his thought into a system, and as we will see later, Cusa's vision of God was so comprehensive and yet limited at the same time as to provide a model both for explaining his vision in the language he knew while at the same time explaining that his language couldn't possibly encompass the true reality that takes into account everything both in and out of creation. Within his own Catholic, trinitarian orthodoxy, he writes about what would become the fundamentals of present-day Universalism, as most poetically voiced by Forrest Church, a modern-day mystic of Unitarian Universalism.

1 H. Lawrence Bond, “Introduction,” in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 25.

2 H. Lawrence Bond, “Introduction,” in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 15.

The late Forrest Church³ was similar to Nicholas of Cusa in many ways. They were both called to pastoring, although in different denominations. Despite their sometimes controversial views, they had devoted followings who respected their contributions to ministry and theology. As opposed to many of the mystics whom we discussed in class⁴ who were oftentimes rejected from their traditions for being subversive when speaking out about their mystical experiences, Cusa and Church are the exception to the rule of mysticism as an exclusionary state: both were highly regarded in their denominations and had leadership positions that allowed them to influence the power dynamics and theology of their communities. While Cusa devoted much of his time to developing and reforming the Catholic hierarchy, Church took over the UU church in Manhattan and proceeded to triple the membership over the course of his leadership, making All Souls New York one of the largest UU congregations in the world. They were both prolific, with Church publishing a dozen books while maintaining his full-time post as pastor. His status as a mystic, however is my claim, as the last portion of his writing was done as he was dying from terminal cancer. In the opening to *The Cathedral of the World*, he describes the period of time between getting his death sentence and the temporary reprieve offered by his chemotherapy as living “in a kind of suspended animation. My death interrupted, life became timeless.”⁵ This is inline with the class discussion about the death of the self in order to obtain union with God.⁶ First, Church crashes the abyss with his impending death, and then, when given an unexpected reprieve, after he has already accepted the loss of his existence, his identity as a participant in creation, he opens up a new abyss from his point of self-death. It is from there that he gives us his vision of Universalism: *The Cathedral of the World*.

But why is Universalism so important? What was Nicholas of Cusa peering at a half-century

3 All biographical information not otherwise cited from his own writings is from “In Memoriam: Rev. Dr. Forrest Church: Theologian, Author,” *UUA.org* (25 September 2009) <<http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/151146.shtml>> .

4 Class lecture, 4 September 2013.

5 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) x.

6 Class lecture, 20 November 2013.

ago, through the veil of time and his own Catholic theology? Church tells us that “Universalism speaks with particular eloquence to the challenge of our times. Today our neighbors live not only across the street, but across the world as well. During an age when we share a global economy and communications system in addition to nuclear and environmental threats, universalism addresses our era's most dangerous dysfunction: theological parochialism.”⁷ Monica Coleman agrees, saying that “[w]hen I think about what a 'theology for today' must do [...] my attention is immediately drawn to the issue of religious pluralism”⁸ and that “[t]he consequent nature of God also receives the multiplicity of the world and holds it in a unity.”⁹ John Berthrong claims that “The mark of any viable philosophy or theology is to demonstrate a width of civilized experience beyond the confines of cultural parochialism,”¹⁰ so if Cusa's excellent work is to remain relevant to the needs of modern society, it must necessarily be opened up the pluralistic requirements of allowing different faiths and traditions to exist and learn from each other. As we will see, he does this repeatedly, without diluting the intensity of individual attention we each receive from God. Grace Janzten asks us “What does mysticism have to do with justice? Is mystical experience private and subjective, or does it have political and social implications?”¹¹ Both Cusa and Church offer us a mysticism that is highly relevant to issues of justice, as they use the coincidence of opposites to create space for differences and multiplicities within one unity of creation, that also allows God to be transcendent outside of creation as well as immanent within it.

In her essay on pluralism, Diana Eck tells us that “[p]luralism takes the reality of difference as its starting point.”¹² This is not to subsume those differences into a homogenous existence, but rather

7 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xi.

8 Monica A. Coleman, “From Models of God to a Model of Gods: How Whiteheadian Metaphysics Facilitates Western Language Discussion of Divine Multiplicity,” in *Philosophia* 35 (2007): 329.

9 Monica A. Coleman, “From Models of God to a Model of Gods: How Whiteheadian Metaphysics Facilitates Western Language Discussion of Divine Multiplicity,” in *Philosophia* 35 (2007): 336.

10 John Berthrong, “A Whiteheadian Interpretation of Interfaith Dialogue,” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26 (Winter 1989) 1.

11 Grace M. Janzten, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 1.

12 Diana L. Eck, “Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion,” in *Journal of the American Academy*

to take what appears to be opposing sides and link them together into a third space¹³ that is larger, and can account for a truth that encompasses both things in tension with each other. Roland Faber argues that this larger, third space must also apply to our models of God, for “[t]he conceptualization of God, rather, must have the capacity for God's radical otherness, even if God represents the principle of the world.”¹⁴ Coleman agrees with this assessment, claiming that Western Christianity (and therefore Cusa's work, and Church's by virtue of UU's derivation from Christianity) is “challenged to account for more than the postmodern context”¹⁵ in which it finds itself.

This not simply an exercise in navel-gazing, either. Eck reminds us that “Powerful extremist movements of various kinds have seized the headlines, to be sure; they have created the polarizations, the turbulence, and the instability that belligerent rhetoric and enactments of violence so effectively precipitate.”¹⁶ Polarizations are created by systems that rely on dualisms, and when dualism is systemic in the way that our society is now, “We are far more aware of the forces of violence that tear communities apart than we are of those practices and movements that knit them together. [...] we have a harder time maintaining steady focus on the ways people have maintained vibrant connections across religious, cultural, and ethnic differences.”¹⁷ And, because this dualism is deeply embedded in our culture and our ways of thinking about everything—it is a lens that infuses every single thing we do, even if we are aware of it—we must be especially cautious of allowing dualism that favours our point of view without careful consideration of what the “other” may have to offer creation. This is a key point made by Church as he develops his model: “To fulfill its promise, modern universalism must

of Religion 75, no. 4 (December 2007): 745.

13 Class lecture, 20 November 2013.

14 Roland Faber, “Trinity, Analogy, and Coherence,” *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*, ed. Joseph A. Bracken and Marjorie H. Suchocki (New York: Continuum, 1997) 148.

15 Monica A. Coleman, “From Models of God to a Model of Gods: How Whiteheadian Metaphysics Facilitates Western Language Discussion of Divine Multiplicity,” in *Philosophia* 35 (2007): 329.

16 Diana L. Eck, “Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 4 (December 2007): 744.

17 Diana L. Eck, “Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 4 (December 2007): 745.

witness against fundamentalists on the left as well as those on the right. By definition, 'universalism' is not the property of any discrete religious body, including those that include it in their names."¹⁸

Textual Analysis: Cusa's Vision of God and Church's Cathedral of the World

The models of God presented by both Cusa and Church are deeply relevant to the development and perception of ethics and relationality in modern society. The models are so similar, in fact, that some direct comparisons can be made in addition to individual analyses.

Church opens with an example outside of his Cathedral in order to demonstrate the variances of point of view:

“In the moonlight, we experience a like illusion, as do the man and woman to our right and left, who share our vision though we perceive them to be in darkness. Judging only by what they see, they, too, may feel themselves uniquely illumined. To their eyes, it is we who appear to languish in darkness. Expressive of both the wonder and danger of religion, on the one hand, the moon's golden light extends a path across the lake to the feet of everyone who stands under the spell of its supernal glow; on the other, given that each onlooker sees only his or her own golden pathway, all others standing in apparent darkness, we are left with the impression that we walk the one true path alone, whereas those who fail to join us are lost. Here nature can serve as our theological tutor. She reminds us that, in almost every way that matters, we and our most distant neighbor, sprung from a single source and sharing the same destiny, are one. This revelation encapsulates the essence of universalist theology. To perceive things as they are, not merely as they appear, we must view them with parallax vision. We must imagine seeing them through others' eyes as well as through our own.”¹⁹

Cusa also opens with a example of human vision to explain the Vision of God, explaining to his Catholic brothers that what he has been given from the divine source, which reveals itself and can not be accessed any other way, is “the wonders which are revealed beyond all sensible, rational, and intellectual sight” and that he is going to attempt to cross the barrier created by the ambiguity of language in order to place these wonders “according to your grasp.”²⁰ Both use images of darkness in positives ways, with Cusa choosing “sacred darkness”²¹ and Church “the profound comforts at the heart

18 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xi.

19 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xii.

20 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 235.

21 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 235.

of darkness".²²,

Cusa must, of course, find a way to explain his mystic vision in terms of human experience, however limiting that may be, and so he says he has "found no image more suitable for our purpose than that of an all-seeing figure. Through the painter's subtle art its face is made to appear as if looking on all around it. Many excellent pictures of this kind may be found"²³ Here the connection to Forrest Church's Cathedral of the World takes shape within Cusa's own model of Contraction of Opposites. Cusa's model for the vision of God is a myopic, personal one that points out how easy it is to not see that the painting is also looking upon everyone else with the same loving gaze. Church's cathedral is broader, pluralistic, while still hiding the divine source behind walls and windows of human construction just as Cusa's model uses a human painting. Together, however, the single-focus and the multi-focus models (like the square and the circle) create a third space of existence in which they are both describing the same thing, and our human capability of understanding their mystics experiences is increased with the multitude of languages as art forms as well as their words.

The face in the painting

"beholds a single movement in such a way that it beholds all movement simultaneously. And while the brother observes how this gaze deserts no one, he will see that it takes diligent care of each, just as if it cared only for the one on whom its gaze seems to rest and for no other, and to such an extent that the one whom it regards cannot conceive that it should care for another. He will also see that it has the same very diligent concern for the least creature as for the greatest, and for the whole universe."²⁴

Here, Cusa expands the focus of the gaze in the painting from myopic, single-vision, to the multiplicity of vision as presented by Church. And while Cusa was writing from the perspective of a Catholic, who believed that his vision was of the specifically Catholic God-as-trinity, the very words he uses betray an acknowledgment of a divinity bigger than Catholicism, that loves everyone and everything, and is distinctly akin to the all-encompassing light that illuminates the multiple windows in Church's

²² Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xv.

²³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 235.

²⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 236-7.

cathedral, which Church describes as “[a] twenty-first-century theology based on the concept of one light and many windows” that “offers to its adherents both breadth and focus. Honoring multiple religious approaches, it only excludes the truth-claims of absolutists. That is because fundamentalists claim that the light shines through their window only.”²⁵

Cusa, Chapter One: That the Perfection of the Appearance of Is Verified of God, the Most Perfect

“[I]t should be presupposed that nothing concerning the gaze of the icon of God can be apparent that is not truer in the true gaze of God. For God, who is the very summit of every perfection and greater than can be thought, is called *Theos* because of the fact that God looks on all things.”²⁶ By this account, Cusa's vision of God that sees everything, and everyone, with full devotion that is so encompassing that it is difficult to see how that same loving gaze is transferred to others, is ontologically pluralistic by its very function as an aspect of God's communication out of the sacred darkness and across the abyss. When Cusa adds that “God is true uncontracted sight,”²⁷ that means that we must contract our own vision and language to see the square and the circle as the same²⁸ in order to even begin to comprehend the magnitude of God's existence as the square and the circle together, in addition to being neither: transcendent and immanent together and apart, both waves and particles and all the empty space between. “There is no doubt,” Cusa reminds us, “that what appears to exist in the image exists more excellently in absolute sight.”²⁹ Church also works with visuals of size and contraction, telling us that being halfway in size between the creation itself and our body's smallest constituent part, that we can encompass with our minds the universe that encompasses us is a cause for great wonder. Awakened by the light, we stand in the cathedral, trembling with awe.”³⁰

25 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xvi-xvii.

26 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 237.

27 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 237.

28 Class lecture, 20 November 2013.

29 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 238.

30 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xvii.

Cusa, Chapter Two: Absolute Sight Embraces All Modes of Seeing

“As a second premise, observe that sight varies in those who see because of the variety of its contraction. For our sight follows the dispositions of the organ and of the spirit.”³¹ Cusa sees perfection and devotion in Catholic God-as-trinity because that is the disposition of his eyes and his spirit. His vision of God, however, leaves room for how others view the divine through their own eyes and spirit, and validates those visions as well. Church develops this room further, as he is able to see past the limits of his personal theology, and he describes the variety of sights as

“windows beyond number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of grime, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational; some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each window tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death.”³²

Cusa continues: “Sight that is absolute embraces in itself all modes of seeing, and it embraces all modes in such a way as to embrace each, and it remains entirely absolute of every variety.”³³ The divine cannot be limited to one belief system, creed, or gaze because the divine is absolute, beyond our human understanding, and therefore must encompass not only all that we can construct as human beings but also all that we have not yet constructed. For Cusa, this would include Church's vision of God centuries later—a vision that includes atheism in the fullness of the divine—and models that have yet to be developed as our world gets smaller through new technologies and new theologies, like the God of Process, emerge into our cultural consciousnesses.

Cusa, Chapter Four: That God's Vision Is Called Providence, Grace, and Eternal Life

“because the icon's gaze regards you equally everywhere and does not leave you wherever you may go, a contemplation will arise in you, and you will be stirred saying: [...] I now behold your providence by a certain sensible experience. For if you do not abandon me, the vilest of all, you will

31 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 238.

32 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xvi.

33 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 238.

never abandon anyone.”³⁴ Now, this particular interpretation is highly dependent on Christian anthropology of humans being stuck inside sinful bodies, an anthropology that Thomas Merton believed “gets in the way of things”.³⁵ That said, Cusa's model has the brother to whom he is speaking move around the room, from location to location, while still experiencing an unchanging, unmoving gaze. While Cusa concentrates on the gaze not leaving when the object of the gaze is in a vile state that others would abandon, what I read between the lines is that the gaze of God is the same regardless of the state of the object—that God's loving gaze remains upon us regardless of whether we are in a state of grace or of sin. This, logically, means that even if Christian thought determines that non-Christians are sinful, and “other”, that by definition of Cusa's vision they are still included in the loving gaze of God. But here is also where Cusa brings up the difficulty of God's vision that appears to be hyper focused on the subject of the gaze to the exclusion of others:

“For you, Lord, so look on anything that exists that no existing thing can conceive that you have any other care but that it alone exist in the best manner possible for it and that all existing things exist only for the purpose of serving the best state of the one which you are beholding. By no imagining, Lord, do you allow me to conceive that you love anything other than me more than me, for it is I alone that your gaze does not abandon. And since the eye is there wherever love is, I experience that you love me because your eyes rest most attentively on me, your humble servant.”³⁶

We must, therefore, hold this myopic image that is blind to other's viewpoints, or how they see God, in tension with Church's metaphor of the moonlight path, and how some can appear to be blind when in fact all are illuminated.

“If therefore, I render myself similar to your goodness in every way possible, then according to the degree of the likeness, I will be capable of truth.”³⁷ Like Church's Cathedral model, which requires one to step back and see the whole cathedral in order to expand one's human limits of encountering God, here Cusa is pointing out that since God sees everyone with equal, uninterrupted devotion, so

34 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 239.

35 In-class video, 18 September 2013.

36 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 239.

37 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 240.

should we imitate this manner of viewing the world in order to become more like, and therefore closer to, God and God's intention/vision for us. This is a rejection of the us-them dualism that informs so much of modern religious constructs.

Cusa, Chapter Five: That Seeing Is Tasting, Seeking, Having Mercy, and Working

“Your seeing is your moving. Therefore, you are moved with me and never cease from moving so long as I am moved. If I am at rest, you are with me. If I ascend, you ascend, and if I descend, you descend.”³⁸ Here is where the burden of responsibility falls upon the subject of God's gaze, for if God seeing us means that God moves with us, and that God will never abandon us, that that means we take God with us even when we are doing things that are not aligned with the vision that God has presented to us. And while that may not matter to God, how God is presented to the rest of humanity is a concern for those in a proselytizing faith who wish to celebrate God's power, grace, and wonder, and believe that their path is the only road to salvation. When we consider Diana's Eck's assessment of the polarizing groups that have captured the media cycles with their exclusion, it is important to remember that Cusa's vision of God must, by necessity include gazing upon them and their dualistic, othering modes of thought, and “descending” with such negative actions. Therefore, they bring God with them into their destructive ideology, theology, and outward expressions of their exclusionary thought processes. If we want to attempt to love God and much as God loves us, we must venture into the contradiction of both loving the these extremist groups (on both “sides”), however hard that task may be, and understand how their association with God, as being part of God's creation, descends God down to their level. It is therefore necessary to promote God's all-encompassing vision of inclusion in an attempt to fulfill God's vision for creation. In the words of Church, “When we kill or hate in God's name, we blaspheme creator and creation alike.”³⁹

38 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 242.

39 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) 4.

Forrest Church. *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (p. 4). Kindle Edition.

Cusa, Chapter Six: On Facial Vision

This chapter is where Cusa examines the problem of how upon first look, we only see ourselves in our vision of God: “Every face, therefore, which can behold your face sees nothing that is other of different from itself, because it sees there its own truth. Moreover, the truth of the exemplar cannot be other or different, but otherness and diversity happen to the image because the image is not itself the exemplar.”⁴⁰ This is a tricky passage that turns its own imagery back on itself. Because the truth of the example we see in our vision of God part of what God is sharing with us, it by definition cannot be considered as an “other”, or different from someone else's perception of God. Likewise, we cannot “other” someone else vision of God, as that was also given from God and is therefore another truth. It is only the limits of our humanity that cause us to see any difference between the vision at all. Church follows up on this idea of having to share God with others we don't like: “Some people have trouble believing in a God who looks into any eyes but theirs. Others have trouble believing in a God they cannot see. But that none of us can look directly into God's eyes certainly doesn't mean God isn't there, mysterious, unknowable, gazing into ours through the windows of the Cathedral of the World.”⁴¹ Cusa once again agrees with Church, claiming that “[o]ne must leap beyond the forms of all formable faces and beyond all figures,” and that “this very cloud reveals your face to be there beyond all veils, just as when our eye seeks to view the light of the sun, which is the sun's face, it first sees it veiled in the stars and in the colors and in all the things which participate its light.”⁴² Church also uses a veil metaphor, embodied in the construction of the building not just as a piece of fabric, but as a work of art forged by humanity:

“Search for a lifetime (which is all you are surely given) and you shall never know its limits, visit all its transepts, worship at its myriad shrines, nor span its celestial ceiling with your gaze.

40 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 243.

41 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xvii.

42 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 244.

The builders have worked from time immemorial, destroying and creating, confounding and perfecting, tearing down and raising up arches in this cathedral, buttresses and chapels, organs, theaters and chancels, gargoyles, idols, and icons. Not a moment passes without work being begun that shall not be finished in the lifetime of the architects who planned it, the patrons who paid for it, the builders who constructed it, and the expectant worshippers.”⁴³

And yet, we are reminded that no matter how beautiful the veil, or the cathedral, what remains on the other side is the very thing for which we truly strive: “We shall never see the light directly, only as refracted through the windows of the cathedral. Prompting humility, life's mystery lies hidden. The light is veiled.”⁴⁴

Cusa, Chapter Eight: How God's Vision Is the Loving, Causing, Reading, and Holding in Itself of All Things

In this section, Cusa begins to examine the concept of free will, saying that “because of the liberty granted us, since we are the children of you who are liberty itself, you, Father, allow us to depart and to squander our liberty and our best substance in accord with the corrupt desires of our senses.”⁴⁵ This not, however, the end of God's participation, as He does “wholly forsake us, but you are present continually urging us. And you speak within us and call us back to return to you, always ready to look on us as before”⁴⁶ This is a place where Church and Cusa differ, for while Church acknowledges that there are skeptics who “draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshippers, they conclude that there is no light,”⁴⁷ his imagery does not include a God within the cathedral calling back those who have turned away. Church's model allows for the skeptics to remain, and exist within the large picture, but the onus is on them to return to the windows to see the light that they are currently not-seeing: “the windows are not the light. They are where the light shines through.”⁴⁸

43 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xv-xvi.

44 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xvii.

45 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 248.

46 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 248.

47 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xvii.

48 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xvii.

“Oh, how wonderful to all those who examine it, O God, is your sight, which is *Theos*! How fair and lovely it is to all who love you! How terrible it is to all who have forsaken you, O Lord my God!”⁴⁹Forsaking God also means forsaking the all-seeing, all-loving, never-abandoned concept of God within our human limitations. So the creation of an “other” who is not universally and equally loved by God as “us” is, in fact, forsaking God itself. Church asserts that “In contests with underlying religious motivation, it seems that we and our enemy cannot both be right. Too often what escapes us is that we both may be wrong.”⁵⁰ By claiming that God is on *our* side, we are in fact forsaking God altogether.

Cusa, Chapter Nine: How God's Seeing Is Both Universal and Particular, and the Way to Seeing God

“If, therefore, I consider humanity, which is simple and one in all humans, I find it in all and in each. [...] humanity does not desert humans whether they are moved or not moved and whether they sleep or rest.”⁵¹ Here is a profound, and dare I say outright universalist, borderline humanist statement from a Catholic priest. We have already established that God is everything, and if this vision of humanity is something, then therefore it falls within Cusa's orthodoxy... at the same time it by itself encompasses a vision of divinity to which a majority of atheists could ascribe. This chapter is where Cusa is beginning to engage his own understanding that his revealed orthodoxy is both exactly right and not enough at the same time, and he willingly accepts his vision at this point as clouded: “I experience how necessary it is for me to enter into the cloud and to admit the coincidence of opposites, above all capacity of reason, and to seek there the truth where impossibility confronts me.”⁵²

Cusa, Chapter Ten: How God Is Seen Beyond the Coincidence of Contradictories, and How Seeing Is Being

49 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 249.

50 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) 4.

51 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 250.

52 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 251.

“I preach only one word, and with this one word, I speak to each person individually.”⁵³ Here we are pulled back to Church's cathedral, in which there is one light, but many windows through which that light shines and is interpreted into meaning. With the power of creation, in both words and in light illuminating picture windows, “things exist always because you tell them to exist, and they do not exist earlier because you do not earlier speak.”⁵⁴ Cusa's vision and Church's vision must both be compatible, because according to Cusa they were both spoken into existence by God when God determine that it was their time to be spoken. It is up to us, within our limited human understanding, to determine how the two visions fold into and out of each other in the larger vision of God that sees and loves everything even that which we cannot comprehend.

Cusa, Chapter Eleven: How in God Succession Is Seen Without Succession

“I enter when I find you as power that enfolds all things. I go out when I find you as power that unfolds.”⁵⁵ Here Cusa offers us a metaphor for interpreting his own work, his own vision of God, as well as that of others. Cusa's and Church's models of how to view, how to experience God, are both complete and made even better when we enfold and unfold them into and out of each other over and over again.

Cusa continues his construct of enfolding and unfolding:

“For the creature's going forth from you is its entering into you, and to unfold is to enfold. When I see you, O God, in paradise, which this wall of the coincidence of opposites surrounds, I see that you neither enfold nor unfold, whether disjunctively or together. For disjunction and conjunction alike are the wall of coincidence beyond which are you, absolute from all that can be spoken or thought.”⁵⁶

This can also be linked to Church's inclusion of atheists in the cathedral, and how he places them inside the structure with the rest of humanity instead of outside of it. The human concept of not-God is therefore just as essential to our human understanding of the divine and/or holy as what we think of

53 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 252.

54 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 254.

55 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 255.

56 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 255-6.

when we consider God. Atheists are required as part of the equation for greater understanding, and necessary in order to gain access to see into the sacred darkness and beyond the walls and windows of the cathedral. If we cannot enfold the entirety of humanity into ourselves and our vision, then we cannot unfold into a union with God.

Cusa, Chapter Twelve: That Where the Invisible Is Seen, the Uncreated Is Created

“You, therefore, my invisible God, are seen by all, and in all sight you are seen by everyone who sees. You who are invisible, who are both absolute from everything visible and infinitely superexalted, are seen in every visible thing and in every act of vision.”⁵⁷ This is another example of Cusa's coincidence of opposites: an invisible God who is visible by everyone who can see, which implies that only sight is required and not the intentional act of looking, which has interesting implications for atheists, especially if we continue to enfold Cusa's model into Church's cathedral. The superexalted God is also seen in every visible things, which is enfolding an exalted state in creation—once again, transcendence and immanence held together in a larger space that somehow both contains them and does not.

Now we have Cusa's engagement with infinity as an experience, in order to move beyond the veil: “when I see you as absolute infinity to whom is suited neither the name of creating creator nor that of creatable creator, then I begin to behold you in an unveiled way and to enter the garden of delights.”⁵⁸ Then there is Church's vision of infinity: “Because the cathedral is so vast, our life so short, and our vision so dim, over the course of our pilgrimage we are able to contemplate only a bit of the cathedral, explore a few apses, reflect on the play of light and darkness through a few of its myriad windows. Yet, by pondering and acting on our ruminations, we discover insights that will invest our days with meaning.”⁵⁹ His infinity exists as part of the cathedral's construction in itself—is it built by

57 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 256.

58 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 257.

59 Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009) xvi.

humanity and God together?—and his equivalent to the garden of delights is already here and now that we must discover as opposed to a place into which we must move. That said, both men tell us that it is necessary to make ourselves smaller in mind in our concept of self in order to grow larger in relationship with God.

Cusa, Chapter Thirteen: That God Is Seen to Be Absolute Infinity

“Should anyone express any concept by which you could be conceived, I know that this concept is not a concept of you, for every concept find its boundary at the wall of paradise. Should anyone express any likeness and say that you ought to be conceived according to it, I know in the same way that this is not a likeness of you. So too if anyone, wishing to furnish the means by which you might be understood, should set forth an understanding of you, one is still far removed from you.”⁶⁰ This is, by far, one of the most significant, and relevant, parts of Cusa's vision of God for the modern world and its ethical structure. In a nutshell, those who claim to *know* God and God's intent/purpose/whatever, by Cusa's definition, simply *cannot* know. This *must* necessarily include Cusa himself and the limitation of his Christian theology, which leaves room for broader, more pluralistic interpretations of his vision. When applied to our present day, pluralistic world, this concept becomes the mystery that can unify a multiplicity of faiths and not-faiths into a stable, working world community.

60 Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 258.

Works Cited

- Berthrong, John. "A Whiteheadian Interpretation of Interfaith Dialogue." In *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26 (Winter 1989).
- Bond, H. Lawrence. "Introduction." In *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Writings*, 3-70. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.
- Church, Forrest. *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009. Kindle edition.
- "Class Lectures." *Mysticisms East and West*. Claremont, CA, Claremont School of Theology. September-December, 2013.
- Coleman, Monica A. "From Models of God to a Model of Gods: How Whiteheadian Metaphysics Facilitates Western Language Discussion of Divine Multiplicity." In *Philosophia* 35 (2007): 329-340.
- Eck, Diana L. "Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion." In *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 4 (December 2007): 743-776.
- Faber, Roland. "Trinity, Analogy, and Coherence." In *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*, ed. Joseph A. Bracken and Marjorie H. Suchocki, 147-171. New York: Continuum, 1997.
- "In-class video." *Mysticisms East and West*. Claremont, CA, Claremont School of Theology. 18 September 2013.
- "In Memoriam: Rev. Dr. Forrest Church: Theologian, Author." *UUA.org*. 25 September 2009
<<http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/151146.shtml>> .
- Janzten, Grace M. *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Nicholas of Cusa. *Selected Spiritual Writings*. Trans. H. Lawrence Bond. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.