

Marica Costigliolo. *The Western Perception of Islam between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Work of Nicholas of Cusa* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017). 180 pp. \$23.

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In *The Western Perception of Islam between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Work of Nicholas of Cusa*, Marica Costigliolo discusses interreligious dialogue in Nicholas of Cusa's work, focusing particularly on Islam. Her timely examination of interreligious dialogue involves a historically adept discussion of religious tolerance in the late medieval period, during which time the Catholic clergyman Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464 CE) lived through the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. Costigliolo's text is geared toward academic audiences, and in it, Costigliolo argues that Cusa's work witnesses a shift in the "Western perception of Islam" in terms of how the alterity of Islam is understood in the late medieval period (15). To make that case, she offers a close analysis of Cusanus's *De Concordantia Catholica*, *De Docta Ignorantia*, *De Pace Fidei*, and *Cribratio Alkorani*. Rather than focusing on the question of categorization—whether Cusanus fits in the middle ages or the early modern period—Costigliolo addresses the question of continuity in Cusanus's works. Costigliolo highlights the themes of difference and unity, showing how Cusanus builds unity out of (some) difference between Christianity and Islam rather than by erasing all difference entirely. Christianity is presented as supreme to Islam, but Cusanus explores their similarities. Costigliolo also traces commenters on the *Contra Legem Sarracenorum* of Riccoldo (1243–1320 CE), outlining three steps that she will take to demonstrate her thesis: to analyze Cusanus's listed works, to trace the genealogy of the themes of difference and unity in dialogues, and to compare Cusanus's texts to other Medieval or Renaissance texts (15). With this basic plan in mind, it is worthwhile to turn to the contents of each chapter. Because of the disparate nature of each of the chapters, I shall discuss each in more detail before addressing Costigliolo's success in completing those steps.

Costigliolo explains how medieval dialogues—at least the *Streitdialog*, a dialogue that uses conflict as a teaching method and may or may not have a formal resolution—thematized the problem of conflict. Thematizing the problem of conflict allows for direct comparisons and contrasts as well as for the possibility of a resolution being reached (2). Cusanus's work fits within a vein of interreligious *streitdialogen*. Using Jan Assman's approach to "textual coherence" and "canon," Costigliolo justifies her attention to the repeated themes of "unity, equality, and connection (multiplicity)" in each of Cusanus's texts that she studies (6). Cusanus's works are neither purely political nor purely theological, so Costigliolo applies the tools for both fields, studying how metaphors based on Scripture—the canon in question—are used for political purposes by Cusanus. By focusing on dialogue in terms of history instead of only as interreligious dialogue, Costigliolo is able to address how the themes of unity, equality, and connection arise in and relate to each of the successive texts she studies.

Costigliolo shifts her focus in chapter 2 to an analysis of Cusanus's *De Concordantia Catholica*, which he wrote while performing the role of "*nuncius et orator* of Count Ulrich of Mandersheid" at the Council of Basil in 1433; his purpose is to explain and restore harmony

(19). The church evinces the unity to which all humans are predisposed, and the church mirrors God in God's unity. Cusanus finds echoes of the Trinity in the created world, and these echoes are evidence of the world's inherent bend toward unity which the church hierarchy promotes. Cusanus applies metaphors of the body to explain how: the Pope is the head, the council is the body, and the body is a unity of distinct parts lead by the soul. Cusanus explains that without difference among the parts of the body, there is no need to discuss harmony and how to maintain it. Concordance for Cusanus does not erase difference, but instead enables it. Difference is not contrary to peace, but unity must be found *in* the difference: in the body of church, unity is found through the hierarchy, and in the body of the empire, unity is found through laws.

A similarly focused analysis of Cusanus's *De Docta Ignorantia* occurs in chapter 3. Costigliolo addresses the themes of identity, difference, and diversity in religion. The epistemological basis for Cusanus's approach to unity in diversity is the theory of conjecturality: the truth cannot be absolutely reached by humans, though at the theoretical level, there is only one truth. All humans have is a particular perspective, and the use of metaphor and conjecture to represent the world shows that the world cannot be known exactly. He applies Meister Eckhart's metaphor of the divine being as a sphere—in which the experience of a sphere varies based on one's perspective—to the entire universe. Learned ignorance is intimately related to the theory of conjecturality, for learned ignorance is the view that “[humans'] awareness of [their] inability to completely understand truth is the starting point for undertaking the way to knowledge” (11). *Coincidentia oppositorum* connects to learned ignorance, for it is the compossibility of opposites in one subject. For example, Cusanus links unity to absolute identity, defining it as the “limit of all coincidences” (36). The incarnation serves as an example of the claim that “God is simultaneously the absolute maximum and the absolute minimum,” for the divine-human Christ is a paradox of opposites (36). Although Cusanus does place definite limits on human knowledge, he is clear that while heathens provide error through positive theology, the philosophers grasp the few truths reachable by humans: the divine attributes of “unity, equality, and connection” (32).

The focus in chapter 4 is *De Pace Fidei*, which is a dialogue set in the “region beyond the world” where an assembly of heavenly beings is discussing possible agreement among all religions (54). Costigliolo reviews some of Cusanus's sources for the work, which include at least one Latin translation of the Qur'an. Costigliolo asserts that the “unity, equality, and connection” of God yield Cusanus's belief in “ritual-free expression” of religion through faith. Costigliolo's intimately close reading follows the heavenly discussion that identifies the paths people use to “seek the hidden God” as the source of disagreement (55). Difference or diversity are not painted as inherently incorrect, but the insistence on and practice of different rites often lead to war. Despite the danger different rites pose, Cusanus speaks of tolerance of rites (but not of faith). “One religion in a variety of rites” brings peace, and all are called to have faith like Abraham, which means Christianity for Cusanus (71, 74). A variety of rites persists because people are different—people in society have different roles, for example—and will have slightly different practices due to the *libertas spiritus*. Nonetheless, Cusanus holds on to the notion of hierarchical unity expressed in his *De Concordantia Catholica*, expecting all to be folded into the Christian religion. To that end, he employs the doctrine of learned ignorance to promote the *manuducto* method, by which a person is moved through an argument to a conclusion beyond the

language. The discussions of the Trinity in *De Pace Fidei* follow this *manuducto* method, such as when the Trinity is presented as akin to the triad of power (possibility), act (necessity), and connection (60). Cusanus uses the *manuducto* method to suggest that believers of Islam could adopt Christian faith. The promised peace comes from one true religion occurring in many various practices.

Cusanus's *Cribratio Alkorani* is examined in detail in chapter 5. In addition to the sources used in *De Pace Fidei*, Cusanus also uses works by Torquemada, Aquinas, and Riccoldo of Montecroce, whose *Contra Legem Sarracenorum* Cusanus "slavishly follows" (84). Cusanus shows considerable knowledge of the Qur'an, but his knowledge is subject to ideologically motivated translations of it. He sets out to show how the Qur'an confirms the Gospel, initially saying that any disagreement between the Qur'an and the Gospel are not of Muhammad. To examine these similarities (and reject the differences), Cusanus uses the *manuducto* method noted above by guiding the human mind "step by step" from "sensible knowledge to divine knowledge," which is Christianity (94). Cusanus uses the *pia interpretatio* to read the "Qur'an in sense close to the Christian doctrine" (94). The "theoretical affinities" between the Qur'an and Scripture found in his *pia interpretatio*—the one God being the creator, the importance of loving one's neighbor, death for God meaning eternal life for the believer, and basic ethical rules—feed Cusanus's use of the *manuducto* method, in which he uses analogies to show how the Trinity is not contrary to the Qur'an. The Father is the Creator, the Son is the art, and the Holy Spirit is the will, but God is undivided because the persons in the Trinity share one act. Many misunderstandings of the Qur'an stem from the metaphorical language it uses, such as sensual pleasures in heaven. In later chapters, Cusanus blames deviations in the Qur'an not only on errors of transmission but also on contradictions due to the influence of "cunning Jews" (87, 100, 122). Cusanus addresses Muhammad II, the Calif of Baghdad and a Christian convert to Islam, emphasizing the importance of Mary and how the Qur'an says that Jesus is the only person certainly granted eternal life to highlight ways in which Islamic doctrine supports Christian claims about Jesus. Cusanus uses the tools at his disposal to address the similarities between the Qur'an and the Christian scriptures, though he also highlights the violence of Islamic law and blames Jewish people for deviations between the Qur'an and the Christian scriptures, such as the Trinity. Costigliolo argues that the themes of difference and unity remain consistent through Cusanus's examined works, though he does more greatly emphasize the superiority of Christianity in *Cribratio Alkorani*.

Because of its significance as Cusanus's source for the *Cribratio*, Riccoldo's *Contra Legem Sarracenorum* and other writers who relied upon it are Costigliolo's focus in chapter 6. Costigliolo's goal is to show the slow change in the European view of Muslims, which moved from considering them the enemy to merely considering them 'other.' Riccoldo's influential and well known polemical work focuses on Muhammad, who is portrayed as a lecherous drunkard who persecutes Christians, and on the Qur'an containing contradictions. Fear of Islam as an enemy, the rhetorical use of defensive arguments, and arguments based on the irrationality of the Qur'an fill Riccoldo's work. Depictions of Muhammad as lascivious (in Uberti's *Dittamondo*) and Muslims as violent and all in error (Kydonos's and Ficino's works) persist in Europe, due in part to the influence of Riccoldo's work (127-132). Kydonos classifies Muslims as barbarians, which is different from Riccoldo's approach (131). Trebizond, a Byzantine author who was

living in Italy, writes to Mehmed II to try to convert him through flattery and detailed theological discussions—borrowed from Riccoldo—of the Trinity and the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Christ (133). Ficino calls the Turks barbarians and Muslims ignorant. Like Cusanus, Ficino uses the *praesuppositio* method, which states that all rational thought leads to Christianity because Christianity is true (135-137). Like Riccoldo, Pius II's letter to the Turks in 1460 discusses the Trinity and the afterlife, but it also discusses practical arguments for conversion, such as military and economic success. Costigliolo argues that this survey shows a shift from Muslims being enemies to Muslims being ignorant or even potential allies in the European imagination.

Costigliolo's conclusions, offered in chapter 7, address peace among Christianity and Islam. Cusanus relies on his *pia interpretatio* method, where he argues that the Qur'an, rightly understood, proves the truth of the Gospel. Some shifting occurs between *De Pace Fidei*, where Cusanus argues that Muslims can be made to see the truth of the Gospel through their own teaching, and *Cribratio Alkorani*, where Cusanus argues for rejecting Islam for the reasons he provides. While both works offer some comparison of holy texts, *De Pace Fidei* implies the ability to gain peace because of those affinities, and *Cribratio Alkorani* implies that the affinities are reasons to reject Islam. The superiority of Christianity is discussed in *De Pace Fidei* but shouted in *Cribratio Alkorani*; Islam is addressed with increasing hostility in Cusanus's works.

As Costigliolo wraps up, she considers whether *De Pace Fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani* are interreligious dialogues. The polemical nature does not set them apart from other interreligious dialogues of the time, and the comparison of essential texts and themes of Christianity and Islam in each qualify them as interreligious dialogues. Costigliolo asserts that she has shown a shift in the approach to Islam in European writing, one which starts with defenses of Christianity (including pointing out the mistakes in Islam) and moves to pointing out the falsity of Islam (due to a presupposition of Christian truth). The final move Costigliolo makes is a comparison of beliefs without apologetic aim, which reinforces the status of Muslims as 'other': to be Muslim is to be non-European, non-western, but not an enemy. Fear and hostility gives way to the notion of the supremacy of the western world.

Costigliolo promised an in-depth examination of several of Cusanus's works, of the genealogy of the themes of difference and unity in dialogues, and of a comparison of Cusanus's texts to other Medieval or Renaissance texts (15). She soundly delivers on the in-depth examination of Cusanus's texts, aptly supplementing her close reading with secondary sources and appropriate textual analysis. She defends these texts as interreligious dialogue using the standards of the time in which they were written, and she makes the case that the themes of difference and unity dominate the dialogues she analyzes. However, the promised genealogy of those themes is not fully developed. Several of the chapters adapt articles published elsewhere, and in the process of adapting them, additional consolidation of the analysis of themes was still required. A key term was occasionally defined or explained at an awkward or inopportune time; for example, the foundations of learned ignorance were explained either in the first chapter or several pages away from the introduction of those ideas. A concentrated discussion of the themes and their genealogy would make the analysis of them clearer for the reader. Costigliolo's strength lies in discussing the themes in each text separately, but a sustained analysis of those themes as a whole would have been helpful. The promised comparison of Cusanus's texts to texts of other

writers did not fully materialize. While tracing the usage of Riccoldo's *Contra Legem Sarracenorum*, Costigliolo mentioned Cusanus's work a few times in small-scale comparison, but the chapter on commonalities and diversities in medieval and renaissance approaches to Islam was centered on different uses of Riccoldo's work.

The Western Perception of Islam between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Work of Nicholas of Cusa offers a focused, detailed level of attention to Cusanus's work and reveals the influence of Riccoldo's *Contra Legem Sarracenorum* in the late medieval and early renaissance period. Costigliolo adeptly addresses how progressive (or not) Cusanus's views on Islam were, and she explains in detail the common methods of analysis and argumentation he uses. Costigliolo's very close reading of these texts leaves some analysis for the reader to do, and Costigliolo's attention to Cusanus and Riccoldo leaves many questions for larger claims about the Western perception of Islam in this time period. The bridge to the larger claims about the perception of Islam in the west is the work of Riccoldo. Costigliolo has made a nice case for the further study of the political dimension to interreligious dialogue, for the authors Costigliolo reads all have political dimensions to their work as well.

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