Michael R. Kearney

A Communication Ethic of Dialogic Reformation

Nicholas of Cusa on Care for Communities in Crisis



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Nikolaus von Kues founding the St. Nikolaus-Hospital/Cusanusstift for the poor, oil on canvas, 1756.
Photo: Erich Gutberlet / St. Nikolaus-Hospital/Cusanusstift, Bernkastel-Kues

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To my parents.

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My mother copyedited this text, and my father reminded me why the project was worthwhile through his own example of dialogic leadership.

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Preface

By Ronald C. Arnett

Michael Kearney's creative dialogic work on communication ethics provides both historical and contemporary implications for understanding the demands of human and institutional responsibility. Kearney turns to a fifteenth-century priest, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), known for his contributions in philosophy and theology. Cusa witnessed premonitions of the Protestant Reformation and the continuation of the Hundred Years' War between France and England. Shortly thereafter, Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517, making Germany the center of a religious and cultural revolution. During this time of turmoil, Cusa stressed what we would now term a dialogic ethic, composed of a unity of contraries: what Cusa termed a *coincidentia oppositorum*. In an era of constant conflict and polar opposition, Cusa charted a path toward a dialogic ethic of responsible decision-making willing to embrace a unity of contraries over a world torn by great schisms.

This historical nature of Kearney's thesis offers a long-term examination challenging a Western prejudice that seeks to view existence in opposition. Kearney reminds the reader that Cusa was historically followed by Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher and theologian (1878–1965) and Ronald C. Arnett, a philosopher of ethics, dialogue, and conflict (1952–). The fulcrum of Kearney's contribution, however, does not rest with Buber or Arnett, but with the fact that the emphasis on the unity of contraries has a long tradition envisioning a world contrary to an either/or mentality.

Kearney's contemporary dialogic project centers on agreement dwelling more often in the mud of everyday life than in a clear exposition of "my" sense of right defying the wrong that another embraces. A unity of contraries, on the other hand, presupposes recognition of differences as the key to diffusing single-minded certainty. A unity of contraries displays the power of phrases such as sweet and sour, the interplay of past and future, and hope and despair. A unity of contraries is a dwelling skeptical of a single position held in smug opposition to all other positions. Kearney reminds us of a dialogic ethic contrary to polarized communication that dominates contemporary discourse, which forsakes the unity of contraries for acts of dominance that discount all but a singular assurance of "me," "my," and "ours." An unrestrained confidence in direction misses an ontological space composed of the "between" of contending accounts, which gives birth to revelation without falling into a realm of unthinking compromise.

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The foreshadowing of a dialogue ethic comes with the church's commitment to councils as a bulwark against conflict and schism. Conversation and the uniting of contrary views offered pragmatic hope for the church. Both support of the faith and institutional care guided this movement. Kearney notes scholars who considered Cusa the greatest of all conciliar theorists, and, consistent with Cusa's unity of contraries position, he later became a major advocate of the authority of the pope. Embracing contending positions is consistent with a unity of contraries, which, again, is not an act of compromise, but leans toward one position more than another within a given context. A unity of contraries offers insight into differing positions but ultimately requires one to make a temporal stand on a given issue. Cusa's commitment to consent and unanimism was not a simple expression of majority rule or domination but something more akin to what centuries later guided Quaker efforts of discernment, which permitted silent disagreement as a decision-making body moved in a direction divergent with one's own position.

Cusa worked from a trinitarian understanding of the faith: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together forge a communitarian life among the people. The Holy Spirit guides in decision-making, bringing past and future conceptions of the church together in acts of discernment. The Holy Spirit transports the historical church into direct encounter with shifting historical moments, permitting a creative dialogue that is far more complex than compromise. Kearney stresses Cusa's attentiveness to historicity, which suggests that given periods of time offer unique questions that give rise to unique and particular responses. Historicity implies the ability to discern a question of a given time and to deduce appropriate responses. Such an ability aids an institution to endure; institutions that fail to prosper and grow become locked into static responses, no longer attentive to the distinctive questions emerging in a historical moment. Cusa understood the power of both responsiveness and tradition in guiding institutions as an active display of a unity of contraries. Recognition of institutional impurity and flaws reside in tension with love of the church, working together as a guiding light of a unity of contraries.

Throughout the insights of Cusa one witnesses a mystical theology and a scholastic tradition in conjunction, illuminating a path for the church through the interplay of the philosophical and the practical. Cusa's discernments counter that of medieval Aristotelianism; he recognized that the revelatory does not live within an either/or but within a recognition of competing and differing positions. The unity of contraries has an inherent dialogical cast that makes conviction without recognition of the Other a form of domination, which is consistent with the dialogic philosophy of Martin Buber.

Kearney describes how the connection between Buber and Cusa begins with Buber's dissertation. Buber emphasized Cusa's "coincidence of opposites" as key to the "I–Thou" relationship. For Buber, everyday lived experience was an interplay of the unity of contraries if one attends to the demands of the moment with one's

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whole being rather than imposing an abstract conception upon reality. Attentiveness to historicity keeps one alert to changing historical moments and their unique questions, while being wary of abstract truths imposed upon a people. God's world is not static, but living within creation and in partnership with God, which requires our participation in our responses to emerging issues and challenges. Kearney cites Arnett's emphasis on tenacious hope, as opposed to optimism, as an exemplar of commitment of one's whole being.

Optimism places one squarely within a consumer culture where one expects and demands that the world conform to one's expectations and wishes. Tenacious hope requires one's participation and involvement, no matter the outcome, with or without the results one demands. Tenacious hope is a dialogic commitment with existence. One brings tenacious hope to the world in dialogic interaction with life. One cannot ensure an anticipated outcome; however, one can safeguard a dialogic ethic engagement with tenacious hope propelled by one's whole being.

A dialogic meeting of existence situates tenacious hope within a perspective and a vision. Hans Gadamer exemplified this orientation in his emphasis on philosophical hermeneutics, where one's standpoint shapes what one envisions without discounting the event being met; the encounter is dialogic, neither objective nor purely subjective, but a dialogic rendering of existence. Human understanding is metaphorical, signifying power tied to dialogic meeting with outcomes more akin to confession than an impartial rendering of existence. The dialogic manner of communicative understanding makes doubt a constant companion in the pursuit of truth, calling into question singularity of conviction that discounts all other considerations. Dialogic commitment to a unity of contraries is far from the act of compromise and equally far from unquestioning assurance.

Scholars have sought to tie Cusa to a medieval or a modern perspective; they are unable to agree, which is consistent with a perspective driven by a unity of contraries. A unity of contraries rejects the assurance of a single perspective and embraces differences—the pragmatic reality of competing perspectives. Within Cusa's work, one finds consistent recognition of complexity consistent with his interest in mystical theology and practical charge as a bishop. A unity of contraries acknowledges historical moments that form the landscape of our insight, accompanied by situated understanding that shapes what one sees and understands. Both a medieval world and a modern worldview bring natural bias to observation. One can understand only what one can comprehend. Yet, one is not limited by the moment alone; there is a dialogic value inherent in a unity of contraries orientation. A dialogic ethic permits one to witness the "not yet." Emergent insight finds birth in dialogue, which dwells in the "between" of the unity of contraries, yielding insight of new possibilities. Novel insight from the "between" of a unity of contraries makes what Martin Buber termed "imagining the real" possible. What many, bound by

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the cultural limits of a given historical worldview, might understand as fantasy is, in dialogic eyes, a concrete understanding of the "not yet."

Imagining the real goes beyond convention and is dialogic in character; in everyday life, it is the difference between excellence and genius, an expert and a standard bearer, and hope that goes beyond all optimism. Cusa opened the door to a future without ignoring the past and without fantasizing about the unknown. Such insight emerges in genuine leadership, friendship, and creative discovery, moving persons from the everyday to a realistic imagination tied to tenacious hope. It is a vision that does not rest in me or you, but between persons, and between a unity of contraries where one finds a tenacious hope that pragmatically meets the reality of disappointment. Kearney stresses the power of a broken covenant as a unity of contraries, in that both a sense of home and its lack guide understanding. Cusa understood the importance of limits and mistakes in making genius possible. Perfection does not lie in an avenue consisting of no errors, but in grace and courage that continually respond to the unexpected with one's whole being. The goal of life is not a journey without missteps, but a tenacious hope that does not falter when all optimism fades. Kearney gives us a picture of dialogic courage, a tenacity unwilling to take a road that refuses to learn from opposition. A dialogic ethic embraces a unity of contraries, accepting pragmatic learning from the unexpected that goes beyond our optimistic prospects and demands, calling forth a dialogic courage that does not rest in "me" but is discovered in the meeting of unexpected places, persons, and moments in human history.

Ronald C. Arnett
October 4, 2024

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Introduction

As I prepared this book for publication, my wife asked me to recount what had sparked my interest in Nicholas of Cusa, and I realized that I did not have a good answer. I never expected to write a dissertation on Nicholas of Cusa. One thing simply led to another. Perhaps I encountered what the purpose statement of the Reformation Research Consortium (REFORC) calls "the joy of scholarship": the discovery of neglected paths that lead to surprising places but become difficult to retrace once traversed.

Hans-Georg Gadamer stated that the biased question an interpreter brings to a text opens up the text differently. My bias is that of a Reformed Christian with family roots in Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and evangelicalism. My appreciation for the legacy of the Protestant Reformation grew during my time at a Protestant college and was constructively challenged during my graduate studies at a Roman Catholic institution. I now have the privilege of teaching at a university in the Dutch Reformed tradition. That juxtaposition of narrative grounds makes the early modern era a time of tremendous interest for me both academically and personally.

Studying rhetoric and communication offers insight into what people believe and are willing to lay down their lives for. In Chapter 1, I provide an introduction to the field of communication and the subfield of communication ethics. This book presupposes that rhetoric emerges when fundamental beliefs, attitudes, and actions that center our senses of selfhood and meaning in the world are called into question. Historically, moments of crisis are moments in which the study of rhetoric and communication has flourished. Needless to say, I believe that the third decade of the twenty-first century is rife with incentives for such study.

My interest in communication also relates to a gnawing but less articulate conviction that the institutions of the Western world are in grave crisis. From the decline of organized religion to shrinking enrollments at colleges and universities to a lack of vigor in civic participation and voluntary associations, the communal structures that help to build and maintain our collective senses of identity are in danger. Perhaps this academic impulse is inherently conservative, but it is progressive too—progressive in the sense that I hope our institutions can adapt to meet the demanding changes of this era without forgoing their founding commitments. I care deeply about the places in which I have lived, studied, and worshipped, and communication scholarship for me often feels like a querulous inquiry into whether and how these places can be kept healthy for future generations.

I suppose my initial interest in Nicholas of Cusa can be traced to two discoveries in my readings for the PhD program in rhetoric at Duquesne University. The first

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was a remark near the end of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. Amidst a torrent of names and ideas spanning the course of Western intellectual history, Gadamer commented that Cusa offered a distinctive Christian philosophy that moved past the confines of scholastic renditions of Aristotelianism and Platonism. Then, somehow, I learned that Martin Buber had studied Nicholas of Cusa in his dissertation. With a comparative dearth of communication scholarship on Cusa, yet two very different thinkers of the twentieth century stressing the significance of his philosophy of language, my interest was piqued.

Nowhere was the idea of reformation present in the initial conception of the work. I was interested in Nicholas of Cusa's rhetorical alternative to the scholastic debates over realism and nominalism, although I suppose I had a vague sense of the implications of that alternative for educational and religious institutions. Only later did I discover Cusa's contributions to the conciliar movement in the fifteenth-century Roman Catholic Church. As I struggled to articulate Cusa's place in the history of philosophy of communication, I could not avoid the obvious disjuncture between his early support for conciliarism and his later allegiance to the pope. That disjuncture, in turn, allowed me to glimpse something of the turbulence of pre-1517 attempts at church reform. I saw that Cusa contended earnestly for reformation, but I could not rest in identifying him as either a proto-Reformer or a renegade freethinker cowed into submission by the enticements of the medieval papacy. Eventually I began to wonder whether my discomfort with historical labels of reform had any corollary in Cusa's own intellectual life and career. I realized that reformation can describe a wide range of institutional shifts beyond the realm of a single religious body or historical moment. Gradually, reform came to the foreground along with dialogic communication ethics as an interpretive key to Cusa's nuanced project.

"Dialogic reformation" is a phrase I am not entirely comfortable with. In a clumsy way, it pays homage to two Arnett titles that were staples of my graduate education—*Dialogic Education: Conversation about Ideas and between Persons* and *Dialogic Confession: Bonhoeffer's Rhetoric of Responsibility*. As unwieldy as it may be, I can think of no better phrase to juxtapose the themes of community, communication, and the ongoing renewal and health of institutions.

This book has five chapters. The first chapter situates dialogic communication ethics as a response to crisis in the public sphere in postmodernity, understood as an era in which multiple historical moments are copresent. The second chapter provides a narrative background for Nicholas of Cusa by examining the interplay of communication ethics perspectives in the Great Schism and the conciliar movement of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. The third chapter examines Cusa's doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, or unity of contraries, and Martin Buber's extension of this doctrine into the interhuman. The fourth chapter focuses on Cusa's doctrine of learned ignorance as interpreted through philosophical hermeneutics, yielding

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a manifestation of communication ethics literacy. The final chapter illuminates intersections between Cusa's career and the scholarly career of Ronald C. Arnett, centered on creative communication ethics leadership in the service of dialogic reformation. The book closes with a reflection on Cusa's scholarly legacy as a unity of contraries: upholding local narrative ground with tenacious loyalty while working in an increasingly large world.

I am grateful for the chance to contribute this study on an overlooked thinker from an underrepresented disciplinary vantage point to the Refo500 Academic Studies series. Medieval and modern, conservative and progressive, Catholic and Protestant, dialogue and reformation—I hope that this attempt to combine perspectives of difference may, in some way, suggest a unity of contraries that may spur greater insight into an incomprehensible whole.

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For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice,
and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.
—Zechariah 4:10, English Standard Version

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