

Morimichi Watanabe (1926–2012)

1. Leben und Werk

Morimichi Watanabe, president emeritus of the American Cusanus Society, passed away peacefully in his sleep on April 1, 2012 at his home in Port Washington, New York.

Watanabe was a retired Professor of History and Political Science from the C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University. He served as President of the American Cusanus Society from 1983–2008 and was also editor of the *American Cusanus Society Newsletter* from its debut in 1984 to the present. His research on the historical context of the life and political thought of Nicholas of Cusa set the standard for all work done in this field in the English language.

Watanabe's research grew out of a fascination with the historical shape of Western legal and political theory that started in his childhood in Japan. He straddled these two cultures his whole life. The obituary posted by the Institut für Cusanus-Forschung in Trier correctly opines that what weighs heavier even than the loss of an extraordinary scholar is »the loss of the man Morimichi Watanabe, who in his personality brought into harmony the most charming facets of Japanese and US-American tradition.« This all too true statement points nonetheless to a source of tension that Watanabe sensed in his own biography. In a collection of essays published in 2001, Morimichi Watanabe posed and answered the question of how a native of Asia became interested in the legal and political thought of a Western Cardinal from the late Middle Ages. His answer began with these characteristically simple words: »Born as the second son of a Protestant pastor in the capital of a rural province in Northern Japan.«¹ The autobiographical account highlights both his father as a convert from Buddhism to the Christianity of German Reformed Missionaries and his maternal grandfather, who »had become a Christian after the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1867 as a result of meeting a

1 This and what follows is taken from: MORIMICHI WATANABE, »Preface« in: *Concord and Reform: Nicholas of Cusa and Legal and Political Thought in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Thomas M. Izbicki and Gerald Christianson, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, xi–xvii.

Dutch Reformed missionary.«² His mother married a pastor and his three uncles on his mother's side were all Protestant pastors. This was his world as a child. His father's library was his introduction to, *inter alia*, both Confucianism and Calvinism. This coincidence of opposites awakened an intellectual curiosity, indeed a passion to grasp more deeply the arc of the Western intellectual and religious heritage that had made him and his family rather unique in his mid-twentieth century Japanese context. He quickly trained a critical eye on the categories with which this missionary intellectual heritage had been traditionally transmitted: »I began to have some doubts about the neat tripartite division of Western history into the exuberant Ancient Times, the dark Middle Ages, and the progressive Modern times after the brilliant Renaissance and the revolutionary Reformation.«³ The intentionally exaggerated adjectives in this sentence point indirectly to the very fissures in existing historiography that eventually intrigued and motivated his study as a scholar.

The educational path of this extraordinary man serves as its own fascinating, twentieth century novel of how migration and a passion for knowledge can create unique opportunities for learning. He describes an epiphany he received just after the end of World War II from Professor Sakae Wagatsuma, a noted legal scholar with whom he studied at the Law School of the University of Tokyo: »Gentleman, dig a well!« Morimichi took this admonition to heart. Where Watanabe dug, he always dug deep. He avoided superficial, ideologically motivated academic skirmishes in order to uncover unknown, or at least barely known, historical facts about Nicholas of Cusa and his contemporaries.

In his early years in Japan, he read *A Study of Medieval Political Thought* (Tokyo, 1932) by Toyohiko Hori. This led to an interest in the political thought of Marsilius of Padua. »That he had been condemned as a heretic,« he writes, »was no hindrance to my academic curiosity and pursuit.« After that he spent two years studying »Political Theory and Comparative Government« in a graduate program in Princeton but still did not encounter the desired path to shedding interdisciplinary light on the so-called Dark Ages.

2 Ibid., xi.

3 Ibid., xi-xii.

At Columbia University, at which he undertook doctoral studies from 1954–1960, he found »sympathetic, supportive professors in many fields.« In his latest book he took another opportunity to thank his professors from Columbia, noting that alongside their erudition »they paid almost no attention to my non-European background and treated me simply as a graduate student interested in Nicholas of Cusa and Europe in the fifteenth century.« He highlighted the contributions of Herbert A. Deane (his dissertation advisor), Dino Bigongiari (an expert on Aquinas), W. T. H. Jackson (his teacher in Latin Paleography), Paul Oskar Kristeller (Renaissance Philosophy), and Garrett Mattingly (Renaissance Diplomacy). Based on his earlier study of Marsilius, Watanabe set about writing a seminar paper for Mattingly on »The Influence of the Platonist Doctrines on Nicholas of Cusa.« Afterwards, Mattingly encouraged him to turn this initial effort into a dissertation topic on »The Political Ideas of Nicholas of Cusa.« That project naturally also sparked the avid interest and supportive gaze of Kristeller, a member of the Department of Philosophy at Columbia.

His teaching career included two years at a college in Tokyo after Princeton and later junior appointments at Kansas State College and Queens College. In 1963 he became a member of the faculty at the C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University and remained there until his retirement on August 31, 2009. Long Island University became his true academic abode and thereby the *de facto* center of operations for Cusanus Studies in the United States. Watanabe's reputation as a genteel scholar and popular teacher helped to solidify a crucial relationship of generous institutional support from Long Island University to the American Cusanus Society, one that has lasted several decades.

While on the faculty at Long Island University, Watanabe was a visiting professor at the University of Tokyo, Keio University, Himeji Dokkyo University and Seigakuin University in Japan. He also established an exchange program with Meiji Gakuin University in Tokyo.

Watanabe produced three books and numerous articles and reviews. His dissertation, *The Political Ideas of Nicholas of Cusa with Special Reference to his De concordantia catholica*, was published in 1963, the same year as the publication of Paul Sigmund's Harvard dissertation, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought*. Reviewers accordingly scrambled to show the complementarity of the two works, and the pure

coincidence solidified a life-long friendship between Watanabe and Sigmund. Watanabe's book dug deep into the medieval philosophical roots based on his quest to understand better the new and emerging multi-faceted points of entry to Western medieval political thought seen through the lens of Cusanus's early writings.

From the beginning, he depended greatly on European scholarship and made it more accessible to a non-European audience. His bonds of friendship and professional exchange with Professor Dr. Erich Meuthen, Dr. Hermann Hallauer, Dr. Hans Gerhard Senger, and Prof. Dr. Walter Andreas Euler are particularly noteworthy examples of how he utilized the best of European scholarship and commended it to the attention of other scholars in the U. S., even while continuing to refer to himself as an »outsider« to this world of Cusanus studies. This is not to say that he was just a passive conduit for European scholarship. He approached this world in the same way he approached his father's library as a young boy – as a highly curious and critically engaged discoverer of a new world of learning. This irenic but resolutely critical spirit is very much a part of his legacy. In print he showed the utmost admiration for finely crafted exchange of differences, even when spawned by Cusanus's critics. For example, in his »Preface« to his volume of reprints from 2001, *Concord and Reform*, he defends unapologetically his decision to focus on Gregor Heimberg, whom he labels »Cusanus's arch-enemy.« »Why not listen to the severest critic of Cusanus?« he writes. »After all, I have often tried to understand other writers and theorists, such as Marsilius of Padua, Panormitanus and Martin Mair, in conjunction with or in comparison with Cusanus.«⁴

A distinctive feature of Watanabe's scholarship was his journeying »in the footsteps of Cusanus.« These historical essays about the actual locations of Cusanus's life and career began as contributions to the *American Cusanus Society Newsletter* and were recently revised and collected together with other introductory essays in a beautiful and useful volume entitled: *Nicholas of Cusa – A Companion to his Life and Times*. The presence of Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki as the editors of this work speaks to an intense spirit of mutual collaboration with colleagues in the U. S. that was nurtured over many decades and in count-

4 *Concord and Reform*, xvi.

less other projects. The pieces that began in the *Newsletter* contained original research and extremely useful references to secondary literature. But they were also framed by charming vignettes about bus tours with English tourists, the »spooning white and black smoke« of Mount Aetna in the distance, and black and white photographs of »the editor« on location. As scholars we followed in these footsteps to gain secure knowledge about Cusanus's context, but we were also drawn not a little bit by the »editor's« palpable sense of adventure and wit.

A final noteworthy point about Watanabe's scholarship, especially in recent years, was his concern to make us more aware of what he termed the »globalization« of Cusanus studies.⁵ He judiciously records in his book introduction from 2011 how the current proliferation of events and societies extends from Buenos Aires to St. Petersburg. What he failed to note was his own quiet example in the middle of this revolution. He anchored the discipline in the United States even while lecturing frequently in Japan and attending conferences in Europe. Many factors contributed to the slow evolution of the new configuration, but the perpetual presence at international meetings of the American Cusanus Society's beloved »Shogun« was no small factor in its early maturation.

The American Cusanus Society mourns the loss of an always joyful friend, its most devoted member and wisest leader, a groundbreaking, productive, and exemplary scholar, its most accomplished foreign diplomat, and the ever present social glue that kept things together through and beyond our founding decades. His loss cannot be measured, and its brief impact has already resulted in letters of condolences from four continents. In solidarity with the »world« of Cusanus scholarship, we offer our most sincere gratitude for his selfless and singular dedication to promoting the study of Nicholas of Cusa on two continents. We also commit ourselves to seeking to assimilate according to our own capacity and mode of receptivity his remarkable legacy of critical scholarship, gracious friendship, and untiring service.

Peter J. Casarella

President of the American Cusanus Society

Mitglied des Wissenschaftlichen Beirats der Cusanus-Gesellschaft

5 Nicholas of Cusa: A Companion to His Life and Times, 7.

2. Verbindung zum Cusanus-Institut und zum Wissenschaftlichen Beirat der Cusanus Gesellschaft

Bereits 1964 hatte M. Watanabe an dem großen Jubiläumskongress in Brixen teilgenommen und dort auch einen Vortrag gehalten. 1965 arbeitete er dann für mehrere Monate im Cusanus-Institut in Mainz, das damals von Prof. Rudolf Haubst geleitet wurde. Seiner Korrespondenz mit Haubst entnehme ich, dass beide einander sehr geschätzt haben. Watanabe schrieb Haubst Karten von den verschiedenen Cusanus-Gedenkorten, die er besucht hatte, Haubst umgekehrt setzte sich für dessen Aufnahme in den Wissenschaftlichen Beirat ein. Am 6. Januar 1965 schrieb er ihm: »Ihr Buch (= über *De concordantia catholica*) und Ihr Vortrag in Brixen haben mir so gut gefallen, daß ich Sie neulich in Kues für die Aufnahme in den Wissenschaftlichen Beirat der Cusanus-Gesellschaft vorgeschlagen habe. Das wurde nur für vorerst zurück gestellt, weil zunächst ältere Herren berücksichtigt wurden. Wenn Sie in der Cusanus Forschung weiter arbeiten, kommt es sicher in einiger Zeit dazu.« Es dauerte tatsächlich nicht lange. Bereits am 24. Juli 1968 konnte Haubst Watanabe die Ernennung zum Mitglied des Wissenschaftlichen Beirats der Cusanus-Gesellschaft mitteilen. Haubst schreibt: »Sie dürfen darin eine ehrliche Anerkennung für Ihre Verdienste um die Cusanus-Forschung erblicken.«

Der kontinuierlichen Korrespondenz zwischen Watanabe und Haubst (später dann zwischen ihm und Prof. Kremer und schließlich mit mir) kann man entnehmen, dass Prof. Watanabe die Mitgliedschaft in unserem Beirat sehr ernst genommen hat; er hat auch regelmäßig an unseren Symposien teilgenommen, solange dies seine Gesundheit zuließ und immer wieder im *American Cusanus Society Newsletter* über die deutsche Gesellschaft informiert. Als M. Watanabe zum Präsidenten der American Cusanus Society gewählt wurde, gratulierte ihm Haubst, und er fügte seiner Gratulation folgende Bemerkung hinzu: »[...] ich weiß, daß mit Ihnen eine gute Zusammenarbeit leicht ist [...]« (Brief vom 21. Januar 1984). Haubst hat auch die besonderen Qualitäten der Arbeiten von M. Watanabe gut erfasst, obwohl er, wie er selbst bemerkt, nur schlecht Englisch verstand. Am 16. Dezember 1986 schreibt er mit Blick auf einen Artikel von Watanabe über die Bemühungen von Cusanus um die Reform der Klöster in Tirol: »Ich muß Ihre exakte Kenntnis der Tiroler

Verhältnisse, die Sie nun mit der Politologie verbinden, bewundern. Es sieht so aus, als seien Sie ein Professor der Kirchengeschichte in irgendeiner katholischen Fakultät, aber zugleich mit besonderen Cusanus- und Tirol-Kenntnissen. Die Literatur, die Sie heranziehen, ist auch für mich erstaunlich reichhaltig.«

Die Bemerkungen von Haubst können mühelos auf alle Veröffentlichungen von M. Watanabe übertragen werden, die kleinsten und scheinbar marginalsten Texte im *American Cusanus Society Newsletter* eingeschlossen. Er war kein Autor, dem es darum ging, spektakuläre Thesen in die Welt zu setzen. Man spürt seinen Texten an, dass er das, was er erforschte möglichst umfassend verstehen und erfassen wollte. Mich beeindruckten die Worte, die er im Vorwort von *Concord and Reform* schrieb: »It was not really my Protestant background and upbringing, but a strong sense of doubt about oversimplifying the complex historical processes and perhaps an intellectual curiosity about the medieval times that led me to pay an increasingly greater attention to the Middle Ages. How could there be a dark period that lasted over one thousand years? Was it true that the Catholic Church controlled everything in the Middle Ages?« (S. XII) – »A strong sense of doubt about oversimplifying« und »intellectual curiosity«: in diesen Worten spiegelt sich der Charakter seiner Arbeiten. Dass die von Watanabe angesprochene intellektuelle Neugier ein ungemein herausforderndes Programm darstellt, ergibt sich aus dem Vorwort zu seinem letzten Buch *Nicholas of Cusa – A Companion to his Life and his Times*: »The author believes that the serious researcher and student of Cusanus should seek not just an understanding of Cusanus' literary, intellectual expressions, such as ›the coincidence of opposites‹ (*coincidentia oppositorum*) and ›possibility itself‹ (*posse ipsum*), but the ›total view‹ of his thought and experience.« (S. IX) Um eine Gesamtsicht des cusanischen Denkens und seiner Erfahrung zu gewinnen, bedarf es eines lebenslangen Studiums, ja mehr als das: es bedarf eines lebenslangen Suchens »in the footsteps of Cusanus«, wie Prof. Watanabe dies zusammen mit seiner Ehefrau praktizierte, solange ihm die Gesundheit das Reisen in Europa ermöglichte. Watanabes *Companion* eröffnet der Cusanus-Forschung neue Perspektiven, weil er das Umfeld des Cusanus sowohl in sozialer als auch in geographisch-räumlicher Sicht in den Blick rückt, wie dies wohl noch nie geschehen ist. Watanabe schreibt, wie er selbst sagt, »[...] not only for advanced scho-

lars in the field of Cusanus studies, but also for beginners« (S. IX). Bei der Lektüre des Buches habe ich mich oft als »beginner« gefühlt, so viele mir unbekannte Dinge sind darin enthalten. Man wird immer und immer wieder darin lesen müssen, um all die darin enthaltenen Reichtümer und Schätze zu erfassen. Es ist ein Werk, das noch lange ein unverzichtbarer Referenzpunkt der Forschung sein wird.

Walter Andreas Euler

Direktor des Instituts für Cusanus-Forschung an der
Universität und der Theologischen Fakultät Trier
Vorsitzender des Wissenschaftlichen Beirats der Cusanus-Gesellschaft