

Going deeper into God with the Rhineland Mystics

Notes

Preliminary remarks

The first thing to remember is that Medieval Europe is deeply alien to our modern mind set, but nevertheless fascinating and vibrant. Paris was the place to be, the centre of the arts and learning. Although not all were enamoured of this new learning; both the archbishops of Paris and Canterbury viewed much of it as paganism in disguise, and sought to suppress it. This so-called new enlightenment fed from Greek, Arabic and Hebrew sources; Toledo and Naples had become centres of translation. The Papacy and its curial officials had moved to Avignon and were frequently at loggerheads with the Holy Roman Emperor.

Introduction

Nowhere in late Medieval Europe was as prolific in the production of mystical literature as the German-speaking lands who flourished in Germany and northern Switzerland. The precedent had been set with notable female mystics such as Mechtild of Magdeburg¹, the Cistercian nuns of Helfta in Saxony, and the Dominican sisters of southern Germany. And although having lived in an earlier period, Hildegard of Bingen, the famous abbess was still an influential figure. These mystical currents, however, represent only one side of the German contribution. Another, even more powerful, flood of mystical writings became evident in the teaching and preaching of Meister Eckhart at the turn of the fourteenth century. As a movement it was to flourish for two hundred years and more in the sermons and writings written in German both by noted Dominican preachers, John Tauler and Heinrich Suso, and by lesser known figures and anonymous lay persons known as 'Friends of God', alongside that other amazing network of lay women, the Beguines. Clearly it would be a mistake to see these movements as wholly independent of one another, but what was begun by Meister Eckhart had a distinctive character and impacted in a way that was previously unknown.

Characteristics

So whilst The Rhineland Mystics embraces a long period of time and actually was quite disparate in its composition this broad movement shared a number of characteristics:

- A profound yearning for and awareness of the immediate presence of God within human consciousness and 'in all things';

¹ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism – 1200-1330* Vo3 *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co. 1998 pp 222-243

- An emphasis on simplicity of life, material and spiritual poverty, gospel preaching and active love for others, especially the poor, the sick and the suffering;
- A popular, urban-centred spirituality;
- Vernacular expression in preaching and writing;
- A tendency toward an inclusive and egalitarian model of human and ecclesial relations;
- Typical adherence to the Neoplatonic, ‘Dionysian’ spiritual doctrine re-introduced into Europe early in the thirteenth century.

Of course, Rhineland mysticism shares many of these features with the mystical spirit finding expression at the same time in England, France and Italy. But it is distinguished by its geographical locale, popularity, intensity and sheer influence.

The Rhine

Traversing the heart of north-western Europe for over eight hundred miles from the Rheinwaldhorn Glacier to the North Sea, the Rhine was the major line of commerce and communication from Switzerland through modern Liechtenstein, Austria, and Germany to the Netherlands. Along its banks and tributaries were found the most densely populated areas of medieval Europe, including the cities of Basel, Strassburg and Cologne. Even Augsburg, Magdeburg, Bingen, Trier and Erfurt, as well as parts of Flanders and Brabant, fell within its ambit spiritually as well as culturally and commercially. To such places were drawn the new mendicant Orders, especially the Franciscans and Dominicans.

Albert the Great

The fountainhead of the ‘golden age’ was Albert of Lauingen, ‘Albert the Great’ (c.1200-1280), the teacher of Thomas Aquinas and a host of German friars, perhaps including Eckhart. In 1248 Albert arrived from Paris, which was then the great cultural and intellectual centre in Europe, to establish the famous *studium generale* in Cologne. This new university grew famous because of the ambitious plans of its founder and his desire to forge a philosophical-theological synthesis of ancient Greek, Christian, Jewish and Islamic thought. Central to his vision was the integrating role of Christian Neoplatonism found in Augustine but especially in the newly rediscovered Dionysian corpus that had such a profound impact on the era with its emphasis on apophatic spirituality (‘unknowing’).²

² Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* Cambridge: C U P 1995. The Syrian Fathers Dionysius the Areopagite and Isaac of Nineveh have been the subject of a number of scholarly monographs in the last 20 years.

Albert's most famous students were more or less drawn into this amazing synthesis. As famous teachers, preachers and writers, their influence was enormous and spread far beyond the confines of Dominican houses and convents.

Three Dominican Friars

The most outstanding and lasting contributions to the tradition of Rhineland mysticism came from Eckhart (c.1260-1328) Heinrich Sus (Henry Suso) (1295-1366) and Johann (John) Tauler (c.1300-1361). Their ministry and personal friendships among the nuns, the Beguines and laity encountered in their work established the nucleus of the movement later called 'the Friends of God.' Sermons and letters were circulated among convents and houses up and down the Rhineland and beyond. And at least one copy of Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* was also being circulated by the priest Heinrich von Nordlingen.

The Avignon Papacy

In 1329 the Avignon papacy condemned seventeen of Eckhart's propositions.³ Certainly his followers seemed to diverge into opposing tendencies. Orthodox followers of Eckhart, Sus and Tauler, and in the Netherlands Jan van Ruusbroec and his disciple Gerard Groote, tempered the more extreme elements of Eckhart. The young and very bright Martin Luther certainly knew of Eckhart but preferred Tauler. The more radical 'Friends of God' found themselves being pursued for heresy, although their influence survived in the Anabaptists, the English Baptists, the Mennonites, the Amish and Hutterites.⁴

Modern Interest

In the mid nineteenth century, the recovery of authentic sermons and other documents of these men and women followed by the production of critical editions and studies led to a renewed interest in all aspects of two centuries of Rhineland mysticism which has continued to the present day⁵.

³ *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* Trans & Introd by Edmund College & Bernard McGinn New York: Paulist Press 1981 pp 71-81

⁴ Prof Richard Woods has devoted some time tracing these influences

⁵ Heinrich Denifle began publishing scholarly essays on the Rhineland mystics from the 1870s. Denifle also discovered writings by Martin Luther in the Vatican library and inadvertently set in train a revival of Lutheran studies. Some of Eckhart's work was known to the famous German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1830). In the 20th century the revival owes much to the German scholars Josef Koch Josef Quint.

An Extract of an Eckhart Sermon

“If you would start on a new life or work you should betake yourself to God, and beg Him with all your might and with total devotion to dispose things for the best, as shall best please and honour God, seeking in it nothing of your own but merely God's dearest will and nothing else. Whatever God then sends you, take it direct from God, regard it as best for yourself, and be fully content.

Though later on some other way may please you better, you should think: 'This is the way God has sent me,' and accept it as the best. You should trust God in this and bring all good ways into line with this, taking all things in and according to this, whatever their nature. *For whatever good God has done and given in one way, can be found in all good ways.* For in one way one should take all good ways and not cling to the peculiarities of the way. For one must always do *one* thing, one cannot do everything. It must always be one thing, and in that one one should take everything. For if you wanted to do everything, this and that, dropping your way for another's way, which you liked better, truly that would make for great instability.... Choose a good way and keep to it, introducing all good ways into it and bearing in mind that it comes from God, instead of starting one thing today and something else tomorrow; you need not worry that you are missing anything. For with God one can miss nothing. With God one can no more miss anything than God can miss anything. So, take one way from God, and embody in it all good things.”