

MEISTER ECKHART 1

Notes

Tonight we are going to look at the thought of Meister Eckhart (c.1260 -1327), Dominican philosopher, theologian and spiritual master. He wrote extensive Latin commentaries on the Books of Genesis, Exodus, and Wisdom, fragments exist of writings on the Song of Songs. From the NT the only exposition that survives is a lengthy commentary on John. This is described by scholars as his masterpiece. Some 56 of his Latin sermons have been authenticated. He also wrote the *Work of Questions*, a selection of disputed theological questions which follows the order of the *Summa* by Thomas Aquinas. And then there is his High German sermons; as I mentioned last week there are considerable difficulties with authenticity. More recent scholars go for style and content, since the Meister's vernacular preaching, like most preachers, centres around a few crucial, oft-repeated themes.

Meister Eckhart "The man from whom God hid nothing"¹ himself lay hidden for centuries to all but specialists. But in our own time his name, with the names of many other mystics of the 14th century, is heard with increasing frequency. What they had in common was the core of Christian spirituality: a deep passion for union with God in Christ.

LIFE

Meister Eckhart was born about 1260 in Hochheim, a village in Thuringia. Nothing is known of his youth, except that he entered the Dominican Order in Erfurt, not far from his home. In 1277 he was a student in the liberal arts and philosophy in Paris. He began his theological studies in Cologne about 1280, the same year that Albert the Great, the teacher of Thomas Aquinas, died there. He would have been well aware of the intense controversy surrounding the teachings of these two great masters. Later he would remind his own accusers that these men were also accused of heresy in their time. By 1293 he was back in Paris as a lecturer in theology. On his return from Paris he was elected prior of Erfurt and Vicar Provincial of Thuringia. In 1302 occupied Aquinas's chair of theology in the University of Paris. The following year he was elected Provincial of the new Dominican Province of Saxony, but the General Chapter of the Order

¹ Bernard McGinn *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500)* Vol 4 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* The Cross Roads Publishing Company 2005 pp 94- 194

instructed him to continue his work in Paris. During this time he mapped out his great academic work, the *Opus Tripartitum*, unfortunately incomplete; possibly due to his administrative duties for the Dominican Order. By 1314 he is teaching in one of the priories in Strassburg, a city of intense religious activity at that time. He was deeply involved there in preaching and spiritual direction. It was there that German mysticism reached its peak, and it was there that he won fame as a powerful and enigmatic preacher. By about 1323 he has moved up the Rhine to Cologne, to teach in the Studium Generale where Albert the Great had once taught, and also to preach and work with the many monasteries and movements caught up in the exploration of the spiritual life. It was there that this incredibly popular preacher felt the displeasure of the archbishop of Cologne, Henry of Virneburg, who accused him of heresy. Eckhart answered the charges but did not satisfy the archbishop who had a profound antipathy to mysticism. Eckhart appealed to the pope, resident at that time in Avignon. Accompanied by a few of his Dominican superiors he made his way there to answer the charges. The commission set up by the pope, John XXII, to investigate his teaching examined a list of propositions that had been taken (out of context) from his various writings and sermons. On 27th March 1329 the pope issued a bull '*In agro dominico*', (In the field of the Lord) in which seventeen of these propositions were declared heretical and a further eleven supportive of heresy. But Eckhart was already dead. Dominican convents along the Rhine were certainly commemorating his death as having taken place on 29th January 1329. Scholars are now virtually unanimous in believing that the process was faulty and the condemnation unjust; and besides, the bull was not addressed to the universal Church but only to the archbishop of Cologne.

ECKHARTIAN THEMES

The first thing that will strike you as you begin to read Eckhart is his depth and obscurity. Do not be disheartened by this; the darkness in him truly is light. St Augustine said that the mysteries of our Faith seem dark because they are an excess of light. Meister Eckhart is no light weight, he plunges into the mystery of God. Union with God was the passion of his life. It is the unifying theme of all his work, and so when you begin to grasp the meaning of any one of his sermons you are beginning to grasp the meaning of them all.

There are many themes in his work, but all flow into this single theme. In his own

words: “When I preach it is my wont to speak about detachment, and of how one should rid oneself of self and all things. Secondly, that one should be in-formed back into the simple good which is God. Thirdly, that we should remember the great nobility God has put into the soul, so that one may come miraculously to God. Fourthly, of the purity of the divine nature, for the splendour of God's nature is unspeakable.”

1. Detachment

True detachment is nothing else than for the spirit to stand as immovable against whatever may chance to it of joy and sorrow, honour, shame and disgrace, as a mountain of lead stands before a little breath of wind. This immovable detachment brings a man into the greatest equality with God, because God has it from his detachment that he has purity and his simplicity and is unchangeability²

“You must give up yourself, altogether give up self.” This is no more or less than the Gospel challenge to lose one’s life in order to find it (Mt 10:39). In today’s idiom it is to live from our true nature and not from the ego. If the word ‘detachment’ today suggests cold rejection, then a better translation would be ‘non-attachment’. Eckhart did not flee from ordinary life - among other things he was an able and busy administrator - but in everything and through everything he sought union with God: “God is in all things.”

2. Being in-formed back into God

This is the heart of the matter: union with God, or rather with the “Godhead”. The Godhead is not God as known by us, but as ‘Godself’. Eckhart uses a great variety of expressions for this: “the ground, the bottom, the river and fount of the Godhead.” To be in-formed into God is to “stand in that original unity.” The background to this teaching is this: All creatures exist from all eternity in the mind of God, according to the Platonic teaching (accepted also by Aquinas); but, according to the mediaeval axiom, everything in God is God; or as Eckhart put it, “in God there is nothing but God.” So, in the mind of God all creatures are one with God. “While I yet stood in my first cause [before he came to be], I had no [creator] God.” The “breaking-through” is when I “return” to exist fully from this my original nature. “This breaking-through guarantees to me that I and God are one.” (Note: when he uses the word ‘God’ throughout his work he sometimes means God and sometimes the Godhead; the contexts make it clear.)

² Meister Eckhart *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defence* Trans & Intro by Edmund College and Bernard McGinn N Y Paulist Press 1981 On Detachment pp 284-294

3. The divine spark ('scintilla animae')

There is in the human soul, he says, a divine spark that makes possible this union with the Godhead. "Sometimes I have called it the guardian of the spirit, sometimes I have called it a light of the spirit, sometimes I have said that it is a little spark....It is as completely one and simple as God is one and simple, so that no one can in any way glimpse it." Even if we understand little of God's speaking in us, he says, "there is a power [the spark] in the soul...detached and pure in itself and akin to the divine nature, and in that power it is understood."

4. The purity of the divine nature

"If one knows anything in God and affixes any name to it, that is not God. God is above names and above nature. We read of a good man who was praying to God and wanted to give God names. Then a brother said, 'Be silent, you dishonour God!' We can find no name that we could give to God, but we are permitted the names the saints called God by, whose hearts were consecrated by God and flooded with divine light." This is traditional teaching. It is what is called the 'via negativa', or the 'apophatic way'. Aquinas could say, for example, "In this life we cannot know perfectly what God is, but we can know what he is not, and in this consists the perfection of our knowledge as wayfarers in this world." Note the qualification Eckhart made, "We are permitted the names the saints called God by." In other words, his stance is not that of a philosopher, but of a pilgrim, a Christian disciple on "the Way."

5. Christ

Some readers (including, famously, Martin Luther) are puzzled at the scarcity of references to Christ. But Eckhart's teaching is profoundly Christological. How are we to understand this? In the same way, I would suggest, that we understand why there is no reference in the Lord's Prayer to any of the Christian mysteries. It is the prayer of Jesus, not a prayer to him. When a disciple prays this prayer, he or she is situated (so to speak) within Christ's spirit, looking out, not outside looking in. This is a deeper sense of the expression 'Christ-centred'. "*The Father bears the Son in the inmost part of the soul, and bears you with the only-begotten Son, no less. If I am to be the Son, then I must be Son in the same essence as that in which the Son is Son, and not otherwise..... St John says, 'You are the children of God' (1 John 3:1).*" Eckhart is speaking from inside the experience of sonship, he is not commenting from the outside. This is the also called the theme of 'the birth of God in the soul,' a fundamental one for all the Rhineland mystics.

Whoever now wishes to see properly what is the excellence and the profit of perfect detachment, let him take heed of Christ's words, when he spoke about his human nature and said to his disciples: 'It is expedient for you and that I go from you, for if I do not go, the Holy Spirit cannot come to you.' (Jn 16:7) This is just as if he were to say: 'You have taken so much delight in my present image, so that the perfect delight of the Holy Spirit cannot be yours. So detach yourselves from the image, and unite yourselves to the formless being, for God's spiritual consolation is delicate; therefore he will not offer it to anyone except to him who disdains bodily consolations!'

Now all you reasonable people, take heed! The fastest beast that will carry you to your perfection is suffering, for no one will enjoy more eternal bliss than those who endure with Christ in the greatest bitterness. There is nothing more gall-bitter than suffering, and nothing more honey-sweet than to have suffered; nothing more disfigures the body than suffering, and nothing more adorns the soul in the sight of God than to have suffered. The firmest foundation on which this perfection can stand is humility, for whichever mortal crawls here in the deepest abasement, his spirit will fly up into the highest realms of the divinity, for love brings sorrow, and sorrow brings love. And therefore, whoever longs to attain perfect detachment, let him struggle for perfect humility, and so he will come close to the divinity.

That we may all be brought to this, may that supreme detachment help us which is God himself. Amen.³

³ On Detachment