

MEISTER ECKHART 2

Notes

As will have been apparent from last Sunday the fourteenth century is utterly different from our own, not least their understanding that human persons were little less than the angels, the goal of human life union with the divine, whereas the prevailing view today is that we are but naked apes, a mere evolutionary accident heading into the abyss of nothingness. And where they were massively conscious of God, inhabiting a world shaped as it was by the rhythms of worship and the Liturgy of the Hours, we are much more conscious of ourselves as autonomous beings, the heirs of a spiritual decline in the West that began with the Deists – the eclipse of God leading to the death of God.

The other things to remember is that the universities did not have the same level of access to classical texts that are now available to any of us in the Loeb edition. We also need to recall that their access to the writings of the Church Fathers was equally limited. In fact, had they had access to such things the canonists and theologians in Cologne and Avignon would have been even more nuanced in their treatment of Meister Eckhart, for example, for they would have been aware that in the language of apophatic theology the highest form of knowing is unknowing.

There are other startling differences: a highly politicised papacy at the pinnacle of a feudal society, a society which was itself beginning to face challenges with the arrival of urban life and the city state. To say nothing of failing harvests and localised famine, troubling levels of infant mortality and disease, the rise of appalling anti-Jewish sentiments and a high degree of violence in societies generally.

When Ursula Fleming abandoned her Catholic faith in her teenage years, intending to become a Buddhist, she turned for spiritual guidance to a man called Marco Pallis – mountaineer, musician and philosopher as well as a Buddhist himself – but he told her: “Go back to the religion of your birth. Go back to the Sacraments. And read Eckhart.” When, having done what her spiritual guide told her, she said to him: “I like Eckhart but I only understand fragments of what he is saying,” Marco Pallis replied: “Don’t try to understand him. Just go on reading him.” Years later, the English Dominican Friar John Orme Mills notes on the Eckhart Society website that “we find her repeating this very same advice to all sorts of groups of people – saying, for example, ‘Don’t try to understand Eckhart too much. Don’t try to work it all out. Just read it.’”

Again, as I said last Sunday, Meister Eckhart was a really able professional theologian, and administrator, as his writings in Latin and German attest survive attest. I have

drawn on translations of his German sermons to plot some of the key themes in his theology. Generally speaking, sermons, as a genre, are not ideal for instructing people in spiritual development in a simple systematic way, unless they are being given to a regular audience. And Eckhart's sermons, however substantial, were always sermons, not lectures, and few were composed as a series. The theology in Eckhart's German sermons has foundations as solid as the theology in his Latin works, but tracing ideas in Eckhart's German sermons usually involves going back and forth between them.

What I wish to focus on this evening is how Eckhart understands God as the hidden source from which all things proceed and all things return. In this he is following St Augustine, he cites *Christian Doctrine* 1:6 on a number of occasions, and is aware of both pseudo- Dionysius, the Syrian monk theologian whose writings had only recently re-entered the West. He was also aware of and possibly influenced by the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, and the Islamic philosopher Avicenna, and he cites his own teacher Thomas Aquinas, although not always accurately, and he makes reference to the founder of the Dominican Study house in Cologne, Albert.

Meister Eckhart was fully aware of the paradox involved in attempting to speak about what by definition could not be spoken about, God. This paradox did not reduce him to silence, rather the absolute centrality of negative theology in Meister Eckhart's thought, expressed particularly in the German sermons, is one of the keys that allows us to enter into his thought. For Meister Eckhart the theological task is not so much to reveal a set of truths about God as it was to frame the appropriate paradoxes that would serve to highlight the inherent limitations of the human mind. For Meister Eckhart it is only when we have come to realise what it is that we cannot realise that we can begin to live out of the unknowable divine ground of our being.

Sermon 15 *The last end of being is the darkness or the unknownness of the hidden divinity, in which this light shines that the darkness does not comprehend. Therefore Moses said, "He who sent me" (Ex 3;14), he who is without a name, who is in denial of all names and who never acquired a name; and therefore the prophet said, "truly you are the hidden God", in the ground of the soul, where God's ground and the soul's ground are one ground*

Sermon 22 *What is the last end? It is the hidden darkness of the eternal divinity, and it is unknown and it was never known and it will never be known. God remains there within himself, and the light of the eternal Father has eternally shone there, and the darkness does not comprehend the light (Jn 1:5)*

Sermon 53 *In Scripture God is called by many names. I say that whoever perceives something in God and attaches thereby some name to him, that is not God. God is above names and above nature...we should learn not to give any name to God, lest we imagine that in so doing we have praised and exalted him as we should; for God is above names and is ineffable.*

Sermon 83 *Now pay attention: God is nameless, because no one can say anything or understand anything about God....If I say: "God is being," it is not true; he is being transcending being and a transcending nothingness....And he goes on "...do not understand the God who is beyond words. "Then what ought I to do?" You ought to sink down out of all your your-ness and flow into his his-ness, and "yours" and "his" ought to become one...so completely that you with him perceive forever his uncreated is-ness, and his nothingness, for which there is no name."*

The most controversial part of Meister Eckhart's preaching is possibly his continued reference to the birth of the Son in the soul in his sermons. I think even he would have realised that speaking of the birth of Christ in the believer's heart was not a common theme in teaching and preaching in the thirteenth century. However, it was an expression with good Patristic precedents. It has since been shown that the notion that Christ is born in the believer's heart through baptism has deep roots in the Greek fathers, and from the time of Gregory of Nyssa the birth of Christ in the believer was also used to express the mystical union of the soul and the Logos. As we would expect Meister Eckhart has his own spin on this.

So he preaches that since the Father gives birth to the Son in eternity, and since there can be no temporal dimension to God, he is always giving birth to the Son within the ground of the soul. This is developed at some length in his Latin commentary on Chapter one in John's Gospel, but also in the German sermons.

Sermon 6 *The Father gives birth to his Son in eternity, equal to himself. 'The Word was with God, and God was the Word' (Jn 1:1); I say more: He has given birth to him in my soul. Not only is the soul with him, and he equal with it, but he is in it, and the Father gives his Son birth in the soul in the same way he gives him birth in eternity and not otherwise. He must do it whether he likes it or not. The Father gives birth to his Son without ceasing; and I say more: He gives me birth, me, his Son, but he gives birth to me as himself and himself in me and to me as his being and nature...*

Or in **sermon 22** *'He everlastingly bore me, his only Son, into that same image of his eternal Fatherhood that I may be Father and give birth to him of whom I am born...and he gives birth to his Only Begotten Son into me, so that I may give him birth again into the Father...*

However, it is important to remember that Eckhart is not peddling some form of paththeism. He is very well aware that the Word is Son by nature, we are children of God by adoption; the Word is the true image of the Father, we are made to that image; furthermore, we are members of Christ, which suggests he knows of Thomas' teaching on the subject.

This is but skimming over Meister Eckhart complex thought patterns, a teacher and preacher from another age, who despite the enormous differences can help us see that God is God and a human person a human person, and yet God's ground and the soul's ground are one ground. As Prof Bernard McGinn argues, Meister Eckhart is pleading with us to open our eyes and see what has always been the case, that God and the soul are truly one in their deepest level.

Sermon 66 *I say yet more, do not be startled, for this joy is near you and is in you. There is no one of you so crude, or so small in understanding or so removed, that he cannot joyfully and intelligently find this joy within him in the truth in which it exists...He can as truly find it and live it and possess it within him as God is God and Man is man.*

Bibliography

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