

HENRY SUSO

Notes

Tonight we will look at the second of the Rhineland mystics, Henry Suso, (ca 1295-1366), among the most influential of late Medieval mystics. Given that there are over five hundred manuscripts of his works, it is safe to say that no fourteenth-century mystic was more widely read and none more representative of the many strands of the mystics of the century than this Dominican friar. Suso's masterpiece is considered to be his *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* (c. 1328), which subsequently became possibly the most popular religious work until Thomas à Kempis' (died 1471) influential *Imitatio Christi*. Although containing some mystical topics and theological reflections, *Eternal Wisdom* is essentially a practical work written in simple language.

Suso was born Heinrich von Berg; he changed it for his mother's maiden name, Sus or Süss. Suso described his father as "a child of this world," while his mother was "full of God." She suffered greatly "because of a vexing dissimilarity between her and her husband;" she wanted to live in a religious manner, but he "was full of the world and opposed this with unrelenting severity."

At the age of thirteen Suso entered the Dominican Order in his native Constance. The real beginning of his religious life, however, he places in his eighteenth year; it was then he had his conversion to a life with God.

The first beginnings of his life as the servant began when he was eighteen years old...It seemed to him that there must be somehow something else that would calm his undisciplined heart and his restlessness caused him torment. He continually felt something nagging at him, but did not know how to help himself until God in his kindness freed him from this by causing a sudden conversion.

This profound religious experience is described in great detail in a collection, the *Life of the Servant*, which has often been read as an autobiography. We need to exercise a certain caution if only because Suso never names himself in the text, the protagonist is the anonymous "Servant of Eternal Wisdom", a figure who shares some biographical details with what we know of the historical Suso, but who cannot be totally identified with him in a simple and straightforward way.

Part of Suso's genius lay in his ability to synthesise a number of important aspects of late medieval German spirituality. The so-called "spiritual philosophy" of the desert fathers which was being handed on through the monastic tradition; what is often today referred

to as the *Sayings of the Fathers*. Secondly, the imitation of the passion of Jesus, often understood as a literal following of Christ's suffering. In chapter thirteen of *The Life of the Servant* he tells us how the Servant accompanied Christ on his wretched way of the Cross when he was led out to die. He begins by telling us that he was *severely scolded by God, and he heard it being said inside him: "Don't you know that I am the gate through which the true friends of God must force their way if they are to achieve true blessedness? You must fight your way through by means of my suffering humanity if you are really to come to my pure Godhead.* In some respects his practices are a precursor to the later devotion that has revived in recent years, *The Stations of the Cross*.

Thirdly, he uses motifs from courtly literature to describe the soul's love of God:

"Eternal Wisdom (a feminine noun in German, as in most languages with noun-gender) offers herself in the Holy Scriptures very affectionately, as a fair beloved who adorns herself beautifully in order to be well pleasing to all men, speaking gently in the guise of a woman, in order to incline all hearts to herself."

The servant of Eternal Wisdom once made a journey from the high country down to Aachen to our Lady. When he returned home, our Lady appeared to a very holy woman and said to her, "Look, the servant of my Child has come and has zealously spread the sweet name of Jesus far and wide, just as my Son's disciples spread it in their time. And just as they had the desire to proclaim the name to all men of faith, so he too works diligently to enkindle with new love all cold hearts with the same name of Jesus. Therefore after his death he shall receive with them eternal reward.

Finally, the mysticism of the ground of being created by Meister Eckhart is evident in the book known as *The Little Book of Truth*, "You must realise that inner detachment leads one to perfect truth, but Suso distances himself from aspects of Eckhart's thought. As for the man, Suso had nothing but admiration. For Suso as for his Eckhart, God the origin and goal of all things, is nameless, infinite, beyond the grasp of logical concepts. Since all names are incorrect when attributed to God, better to call God non-being or nothing. He sounds just like Eckhart when he says, "The actions of those who are truly abandoned to God are their inaction...for in their actions they remain at rest, and in their work they remain at leisure." Of course rather than quoting Meister Eckhart, he uses a supposedly unimpeachable source, Pseudo Dionysius, whom everyone in the thirteenth century assumed to be a disciple of St Paul. These four elements all play a role in his thought and in his life.

Between c. 1319 and c. 1327 Suso was a student in the Dominican study houses at Strassburg and then at Cologne for philosophical and theological studies. In both houses he would have met Meister Eckhart, whom he referred to as “Blessed Meister Eckhart”, and who appeared to the Servant in a dream after his death. There is no question of the profound influence of Eckhart on his life and teaching, like Meister Eckhart, conversion and inwardness, silence and self knowledge, detachment and letting go, are the essential practices for finding God. but details about the historical relationship between the two men are lacking.

When Suso returned to teach at Constance, his teaching aroused criticism, most likely because of his connection with Eckhart in the wake of the latter’s trial and condemnation at Cologne and Avignon, although it must be remembered that Avignon was essentially upholding Eckhart’s condemnation by the Archbishop of Cologne. Suso’s first work, *Little Book of Truth*, a short defence of Eckhart’s teaching dates from this period. By 1330 this book and another (the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* or an early version of it) was denounced as heretical by his enemies. *Suso* was summoned to appear before a Dominican chapter held in Maastricht:

Once he travelled to the Netherlands to a chapter. Suffering was being prepared for him in advance. Two important members of the order attacked him there and were very diligent in their efforts to try him sorely. With a trembling heart he was called before a tribunal where many different things were imputed to him. One of them was that he wrote books containing false teaching that were soiling the whole country with their heretical rubbish. Because of this he was badly treated with verbal attacks and threats of great suffering, though God and the world recognised his innocence in the matter.. . .

The upshot was that Suso seems to have been relieved of his teaching duties, though not personally condemned. Abandoning hopes of an academic career that Eckhart enjoyed he turned wholeheartedly to the life of inner devotion and spiritual guidance of others. For a time Suso’s work was teaching, then preaching and giving individual guidance. He seems to have been especially gifted in his apostolate to women – much of his work was with Beguines, Dominican and Cistercian nuns and laywomen. The *Life* is full of stories

of unforgettable tenderness. One of the most interesting friendships was with Elsbeth Stigel, an aristocrat and spirited Dominican nun with whom he remained friends till her death (c.1360). It was she who collected 28 of his letters which circulated between convents as the *Great Book of Letters*. Carefully written these letters form a practical instruction in the spiritual life from conversion to Christological union. They also circulated in a smaller collection *The Little Book of Letters*

Suso died in Ulm on 25 January, 1366, and was buried in the Dominican church there. He was referred by many in the Rhineland by the time of his death. His tomb was opened in the eighteenth century and the contents lost.

Two of his books are written as dialogue, a favourite literary form in the 14th century. The dialogue is between himself ('the disciple') and God ('Eternal Truth', which, like 'Eternal Wisdom', is a feminine noun). The theme is the death of the ego.

Disciple: Lord, what is true detachment?

Truth: Take note with careful discrimination of these two words: oneself and leave. If you know how to weigh these two words properly, testing their meaning thoroughly to their core and viewing them with true discernment, then you can quickly grasp the truth. Take, first of all, the first word -- oneself or myself -- and see what it is. It is important to realise that everyone has five kinds of self. The first self we have in common with a stone, and this is being. The second we share with plants, and this is growing. The third self we share with animals, and this is sensation. The fourth we share with all other human beings: we possess a common human nature in which all are one. The fifth - which belongs to a person exclusively as his or her own - is one's individual human self...

Now what is it that leads people astray and robs them of happiness? It is exclusively this last self. Because of it a person turns outward, away from God and toward this self, when he or she should be returning inward. Thus they fashion their own selves according to what is accidental. In their blindness they appropriate to themselves what is God's. This is the direction they take, and they eventually sink into sinfulness...

Disciple: The truth be praised! Dear Lord, tell me, does anything (of this self) still remain in the happy, detached person?

Truth: Without a doubt it happens that, when the good and loyal servant is led into the joy of his Lord, he becomes drunk from the limitless overabundance of God's house.

What happens to a drunken man happens to him, though it cannot really be described, that he so forgets his self that he is not at all his self and consequently has got rid of his self completely and lost himself entirely in God, becoming one spirit in all ways with him, just as a small drop of water does which has been dropped into a large amount of wine. Just as the drop of water loses itself, drawing the taste and colour of the wine to and into itself, so it happens that those who are in full possession of blessedness lose all human desires in an inexpressible manner, and they ebb away from themselves and are immersed completely in the divine will. Otherwise, if something of the individual were to remain of which he or she were not completely emptied, scripture could not be true in stating that God shall become all things in all things. Certainly one's being remains, but in a different form, in a different resplendence, and in a different power. This is all the result of total detachment from self.

Bibliography

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