

II: Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–1999

The Medieval Rhineland: Eckhart and Popular Theological Preaching

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1. Why Eckhart?

Thirty years ago the very idea of including the Rhineland mystics in a series of articles on the role of the Dominicans in the promotion of peace and social justice would have been seen as intolerably bizarre. At that time it was still widely taken for granted that mysticism and dedication to the promotion of social justice were irreconcilable: that they belonged to profoundly different ways of understanding the world and understanding the teaching of Jesus Christ. There were, of course, some remarkable people who seemed to be able to keep a foot in both the camps, but lesser mortals who attempted this were in danger of not being taken seriously by the occupants of either.

In spite of the massive changes which have taken place since then in politics, the culture and the Church, even today the presence of the Dominican Rhineland mystics in this series demands some explanation. By 'the Dominican Rhineland mystics' we mean, first and foremost, three friars of the Dominican Province of Teutonia: the brilliant but controversial Meister Eckhart (c.1260-c.1328) and two of his disciples, Johannes Tauler (c.1300-1361) and Henry Suso (1295-1366). At first sight the only things which these men seem to share in common with, for instance, the French Dominican worker-priests of the 1950s or the Brazilian Dominican liberation theologians of the 1970s are membership of the same religious order and considerable strength of character.

After all, Frank Tobin has said that Eckhart's sermons 'center so exclusively on what is within and are so utterly devoid of any comments that might be used as references to time and place that they might just as well have been delivered on the moon as in turbulent fourteenth-century Strasburg or Cologne.'

And Eckhart himself says in his Latin work *The Book of the Parables of Genesis*:

It is order that makes something good, so that it is impossible for there to be good outside order and conversely for there to be evil where order exists. A natural order is one in which the highest point of what is

inferior touches the lowest point of its superior... In the contact, meeting and union of what is essentially superior with the highest point of its inferior both sides kiss each other and embrace in a natural and essential love that is inward and very delightful.²

So inequality is an essential constituent of perfection; it is our duty to remain where God has put us. Not, of course, that there is anything particularly original about what Eckhart is saying here. He was a medieval man. He accepted uncritically the general neo-Platonic notion of a divinely-willed hierarchical order of the cosmos, and, like many other learned men of his age, he saw the feudal system as exemplifying it. As Richard Woods has said: 'His harshest detractors never accused him of fomenting insurrection or even mouthing social criticism.'³

It is, of course, well to bear in mind the argument of the Russian historian Aron Gurevich that it is 'much more productive to interpret medieval culture as "another" culture, admitting that it is not our culture and that the criteria for evaluating it must be sought within itself.'⁴ Also, for that matter, Richard Finn's remark in the first article in this series—namely, that we must recognise

that what we regard as wrong *and unjust* may have struck medieval men and women as wrong but vicious in some other way and vice versa. What we regard as an infringement of human rights might have been repugnant as an act of cruelty. What we see as selfish, they might consider a failure to give others their due.⁵

However, even assuming we do take on board what Aron Gurevich and Richard Finn are saying to us, this does not lead us suddenly to see that Eckhart was a campaigner for social justice after all. It is just possible to put up an argument that Tauler had a social conscience (much depends on how one reads some of his sermons)⁶, but not Eckhart and not Suso.

Why, then, are Eckhart and his followers here? To answer that, we must first put these men in their context.

2. Eckhart's world

Ever since the publication in 1979 of *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, Barbara Tuchman's study of the similarities between the disasters of the 14th and 20th centuries, popular interest in the world of the Rhineland mystics has grown.

Eckhart and his followers lived in an age of turmoil, uncertainty, scandals and fiascos. While the towns were still steadily increasing in power and importance, Central Europe's overall population and productivity had already begun to decline even before the Great Famine

of 1315-17. The collapse of the Hohenstaufen dynasty and the Interregnum of 1254-73 had severely weakened the Holy Roman Empire as a political force. In 1307, in the face of political upheaval in Italy, the papacy withdrew to Avignon, and it had lost much of its moral leadership. The feudal system respected by Eckhart was beginning to break up, and chivalry declined as the knightly class became economically weaker—many knights were having to take up trades in the towns or become outlaws. The Black Death of 1347-9 wiped out approximately one-third of the population.

Confronted as they were by so much insecurity and so little promise, it is not surprising that the interior life became of immense importance to a relatively large number of people, both clerical and lay. However, it would be unwise to make a simple connection between the crises just listed and the growth of mysticism. The tendency to 'turn inward' was part of a bigger social development which the crises promoted. In the opinion of some modern historians⁷, it was during the two centuries in which the lives of Eckhart and his followers fall, the 13th and 14th centuries, that—at least partly as a result of the growth of urban life and of the arrival of the mendicant orders—Western Christianity changed from being predominantly 'a religion of the churchmen', of a minority of the population, to being a 'religion of the masses'...by which is meant one more extensively adapted to the spiritual needs and aspirations of ordinary lay people.

A remarkably large number of outstanding mystical writers were alive in the 14th century, scattered right across Western Europe (in England were Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*). However, quite exceptional was the popular wave of religious fervour of this kind which spread through the regions adjacent to the Rhine—along its upper reaches (Suso spent much of his life at Konstanz⁸, in the neighbourhood of Strasburg and Cologne (cities where both Eckhart and Tauler lived), and in the Low Countries.

Those three Dominicans directly or, more often, indirectly influenced the lives of thousands, for at least three categories of people were being drawn to that fervent and profoundly inward spirituality. The first of these were members of the mendicant orders, and particularly Dominican nuns. The next, Beguines and Beghards—in other words the large number of women and smaller number of men who could not enter an ecclesiastically-approved religious house with a formally constituted rule but lived a vigorous spiritual life in communities loosely affiliated to one or other of the mendicant orders. Lastly, many laypeople, most of them living in towns. The potential audience was not an elite clique.

The basic contention of this article is that, although they did not offer

a programme of social reform, Eckhart and to a lesser extent his followers were concerned with transforming the quality of people's lives, with changing them—not only the lives of clerics but also of women religious and of laypeople (including laypeople who were not wealthy).

3. The Preaching

'Medieval popular preaching' is a loose term covering all preaching other than the preaching done in Latin by theologians in a clerical milieu. We find among the surviving collections of sermons of parish priests and missionaries of the earlier middle ages some impressive attempts to transform Christian doctrine into the world-view of the mass of the people. This was achieved by avoiding any kind of abstract reflection, using simple language and keeping to subjects within the mental horizon of the audience.⁸

Long before Eckhart's time the medieval preacher had been equipped with guides to effective popular preaching, and firmly in this tradition is the compendium called *Memorable Histories*⁹ written in Eckhart's own time by Rudolph of Schlettstadt, a Dominican of Eckhart's own province. It was written to help priests teach the faith to the uneducated, largely with the aid of entertaining examples from ordinary life and stories about saints and visits to the Other World. It presupposes both readers and listeners who are totally unfamiliar with theological literature.

In the 13th century the sermon in the German vernacular was, then, flourishing. Yet were the preachers reaching everybody's needs? In 1266 appeared the first systematic listing of different kinds of audiences: *De eruditione Praedicatorum* by Humbert of Romans¹⁰. His writing of it is an indication of the new social reality and awareness which the Dominican preacher was facing in later medieval times.

In the province of Teutonia shortly after 1300 there were seventy convents of Dominican nuns, seven of them in Strasburg alone. Each convent contained about fifty women, and in a few cases nearly eighty, some of them very intelligent and with a knowledge of Latin. The dramatic growth in the number of these convents had stirred up a lot of unease at the highest level in the Church. The outbreak of antinomianism among the so-called Brethren of the Free Spirit was soon to reveal the problems that could arise when the serious pursuit of the interior life became popular among people with no formal education in theology. Also the nuns themselves had stressed their need for spiritual instruction. Primarily to instil order and control among the nuns, Pope Clement IV in 1267 officially commanded the Dominican Order to provide preachers and confessors for the spiritual welfare of these women. Later their

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responsibility was extended to women of other religious orders also.

Nobody at the time would have guessed that almost certainly this was the decisive event which led to the flowering of mysticism in the Rhineland. To quote Frank Tobin: 'This combination of enlightened spiritual advisers and recipients who were both eager and qualified provided the basis for much of the intense spiritual activity of the times.'¹¹

In 1313 Meister Eckhart, then about fifty years old, was assigned to Strasburg as Vicar-General with oversight of the many women's convents in south-west Germany. He had already twice held a chair in theology at the University of Paris (the only other person to achieve that honour was St Thomas Aquinas) and been a very successful first Provincial of the new Dominican province of Saxonia. He was appointed to Strasburg almost certainly because the Council of Vienne (1311-12) had accused Beguines in that area of heresy. He was now more closely involved than he had ever been with the problems of this multitude of religious women, but, far from ruling them with a rod of iron, he displayed a very real sympathy for them... and thirteen years later was to be accused of heresy himself.

Inevitably, because the movement was a popular one, most of the writing and preaching on 'the God within' had to be done in the vernacular, and erudite thinkers and deeply sensitive spirits—of whom by far the most prominent was Eckhart—had to struggle to put into their native language ideas which hitherto they had assumed could only be satisfactorily expressed in Latin. In the words of Bernard McGinn: 'It was in the creative turn to the vernacular that the German mysticism found its distinctive voice.'¹² We may call the German sermons of Eckhart 'popular theological preaching' or 'mystic sermons', but this certainly does not mean they avoided the serious questions. Loris Sturlese has said they 'may be regarded as an attempt to convey in German to a German audience a sophisticated philosophy which had as its goal a redefinition of the relationship between God and humanity'¹³.

The effect which Eckhart had on the lives of those women and, for that matter, their influence on him, is difficult to gauge. We are dependent for our information largely on what we find in the one hundred or so authentic German sermons of Eckhart, nearly all of them taken down by the nuns themselves. In 1329, one year after his death, the highly controversial papal bull *In agro dominico* was published, condemning twenty-eight propositions based on his teaching. It had a disastrous effect on his reputation, which has only very recently fully recovered from it. Tauler and Suso kept his memory alive for a while and copies of a few sermons went on circulating, usually anonymously, but whereas Tauler's sermons were widely read and studied right down

through the centuries and, of all devotional books, Suso's *Horologium sapientiae* was surpassed in international popularity in the late middle ages only by the *Imitation of Christ*, Eckhart was a half-forgotten figure until the mid-19th century. Fragments of his teaching continued to be remembered, but out of their context. Recovering his thought in its integrity has been a big scholarly exercise, and there is still work to be done.

4. The teaching

Eckhart opens sermon 53 (22 in the Walshe translation)¹⁴:

When I preach, I am accustomed to speak about detachment, and that a man should be free of himself and of all things: second, that a man should be formed again into that simple good which is God; third, that he should reflect on the great nobility with which God has endowed his soul, so that in this way he may come to wonder at God; fourth, about the purity of the divine nature, for the brightness of the divine nature is beyond words.

What we have here is in fact not merely an outline of how Eckhart presented his ideas in his preaching, but a very brief summary of his spiritual doctrine.

In it he says that he usually begins by urging his listeners to free themselves of themselves and of everything. One of the things which is striking about Eckhart's spirituality is how liberating it is, compared with most late medieval spirituality. This is the characteristic of it on which this article is focussing, and we will consider it under three headings.

First of all, note how Eckhart helps us to be aware of our limitations. As Bernard McGinn has pointed out¹⁵, for Eckhart theology's task was not so much to reveal a set of truths about God as to frame the paradoxes that would highlight the inherent limitations of our minds and mark off the boundaries of the unknown territory where God dwells. 'Only when we have come to realize what it is that we cannot realize can we begin to live out of the unknowable divine ground of our being.'

Secondly, he makes bold claims about our accessibility to God. For example, in sermon 26 (W58), on the relationship between God's goodness and human goodness, he says:

There is no-one here so coarse-grained, so ignorant or unprepared but if, by the grace of God, he can atone his will purely and totally with the will of God, then he need only say with desire: "Lord, show me your dearest will and strengthen me to do it!" and God will do so as truly as he lives, and God will give to him in as bounteous fullness and in every way as perfectly as He ever gave to that woman [by the well in John ch.4]. So you see, the most

benighted of you, the most insignificant of you all might have got all this from God before he leaves this church today, in fact before I have finished preaching, in very truth as surely as God is God and I am a man.

Ultimately any way can be the way to God and every way is also a nonway, because we can break through simply by detaching ourselves and being completely open to God.

Thirdly, it is for this reason important for us to understand what precisely Eckhart means by *abegescheidenheit*, usually translated from Eckhart's Middle High German as 'detachment'. It is one of his most central teachings, and also one of the most difficult. He does not mean by this word a cold withdrawal, a negative world-rejection, but a stripping of the self, a freeing of the self. For him, all moral and ascetical advance is rooted in a sovereign and grace-filled intervention of God in the depths of our being. In the treatise *On Detachment* he says:

You should know that 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 immovable detachment that he is God, and it is from his detachment that he has his purity and simplicity and his unchangeability.

In sermon 52 (W87) he argues that 'A poor [i.e. detached] man wants nothing, and knows nothing, and has nothing.'

'People should not worry so much about what they should do; rather about what they should be,' he insists elsewhere¹⁶. At the level of ordinary living, the process of detachment begins with the giving up of our own will, the giving up of the sense of being in possession of things. And, surprisingly, one of the things that being 'detached' in the Eckhartian sense does to us is to make us care more for other people, not less. We will care for them more like God does. 'You must,' he tells us in sermon 5a (W13a), 'make no distinctions in the way you relate to people, being no closer to yourself than you are to anyone else.' Richard Woods has even gone so far as to claim: 'Eckhart calls us freshly to transformation, to a rebirth into God-centred contemplation of the world's weals and woes, to a greater, freer commitment to social justice, inclusive love, and effective action.'¹⁷

Important consequences followed from the teachings reviewed above.

Firstly, to quote Richard Kieckhefer: 'Eckhart did not view ecstasy or abstractive union with God as integral to the life of the soul, or even as a goal to be sought or particularly treasured'¹⁸. He encouraged his

listeners to cultivate a habitual awareness of God continuous and compatible with ordinary experience in the world. In fact, he glorified the everyday life of active service, infused with consciousness of God's presence, as the highest ideal, and applied to this life the mystical terminology hitherto reserved for distinctive forms of experience.¹⁹ He was not particularly interested in discussing ecstatic states.

Secondly, Eckhart recommends the dropping of particular devotional practices, if these are felt to obstruct our union with God. 'Our blessedness does not lie in our active doing, rather in our passive reception of God,' he says in sermon 24 of Oliver Davies's Penguin Classics translation (W2). As he rather tartly remarks in sermon 5a (W13a): 'We are the cause of all our obstacles.' When he was Prior of Erfurt and still in his thirties, in talk 2 of his *Talks of Instruction* he tells his young Dominican brothers:

A free mind can achieve all things. But what is a free mind? A free mind is one which is untroubled and unfettered by anything, which has not bound its best part to any particular manner of being or devotion.

More bluntly, in an often-quoted extract from sermon 5b (W13b) we hear him saying to his audience:

If a man thinks he will get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies or by special infusion of grace than by the fireside or in the stable—that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak around his head and shoving him under a bench. For whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way but misses God, who lies hidden in it. But whoever seeks God without any special way gets him as he is in himself, and that man lives with the Son, and he is life itself.

He is equally blunt talking about external observances in the much less well-known sermon 30 in the Davies translation:

I will not say that those who hold external observances to be the best shall be damned, but only that they shall not come to God without great purification in Purgatory. For these people do not follow God if they do not abandon themselves; rather they follow the self-esteem in which they hold themselves.

Neither has Eckhart much room for intercessory prayer as that term is ordinarily understood, insisting in sermon 65 (W5):

When I pray for aught, my prayer goes for naught; when I pray for naught, I pray as I ought. When I am united with That wherein all things are existent whether past, present or future, they are all equally near and equally one; they are all in God and all in *me*. Then there is no need to think of Henry or Conrad [in other words, Tom, Dick or Harry].

What, though, did Eckhart's audiences think of the things he was telling them?

5. The audience

Eckhart believed that what he was offering people was 'freedom'—that they should be 'free of themselves and of all things'. His popular theological preaching was consistent with this aim, and he clearly had a respect for the intelligence of the people whom he preached to, and especially the women religious. He did not equate lack of education with lack of intelligence, and in reply to the criticism that he should not preach on such elevated topics to unlearned audiences he replied:

If we are not to teach people who have not been taught, no one will ever be taught, and no one will ever be able to teach or write. For that is why we teach the untaught, so that they may be changed from uninstructed into instructed.²⁰

Nevertheless, some of the most basic ideas in Eckhart's preaching seem to be attacking the religious practices of his hearers.

The increasing literacy in late medieval Europe, and the spread of lay piety which was partly a result of that, brought about what Kieckhefer has called 'a democratisation of mysticism', with broader audiences not only reading about the mystics but also emulating them.²¹ Yet this was at the same time a period when women, particularly religious women, were finding themselves increasingly constricted—when there was a tightening-up of clerical control over them. The spiritual life of the 14th-century devout person, and particularly of the devout woman, was a world made up of scores of observances: of devotions and ascetic practices and affective prayer. Furthermore, among devout women in particular a lot of importance was placed on mystical visions—not only on hearing and reading about them, but on actually being granted them. Mystical and paramystical experiences were attributed to women much more often than to men. In the words of Grace Jantzen:

if women were to have or exercise spiritual authority, it would have to be grounded somehow; and the grounding which was available to religious men—good Latin education, ecclesiastical validation—was largely and increasingly not open to religious women. At least from the time of Hildegard of Bingen [1098–1179], women were consciously grounding their religious authority on their visionary experience.²²

There is no doubt, though, that Eckhart felt that what he saw as excessive emphasis on particular devotions or particular ascetical

practices could positively hamper an individual's union with God, and so could reliance on mystical visions. In sermon 16b (W14b) he says:

Some people want to see God with their own eyes, just as they see a cow; and they want to love God just as they love a cow. You love a cow because of the milk and cheese and because of your own advantage. This is how all these people act who love God because of external riches or because of internal consolation. They do not love God rightly; rather they love their own advantage.

What kind of impact would this have had on the nuns and Beguines whom he was preaching to, for whom quasi-sensory religious experience was so important? It is Grace Jantzen's conclusion that Eckhart's writings 'do not offer the resources for a liberating spirituality'²³, by which she means a spirituality which confirmed women as being in no sense inferior beings to men. However, other scholars would say that what Eckhart was criticising was not *all* the devotions or ascetical practice or quasi-sensory religious experience of the women he was counselling but their *excessive* reliance on these.²⁴

None of the feedback from Eckhart's audiences has survived. On the other hand, it was members of his audiences, and above all religious women, who took down those sermons (including ones criticising some of their religious practices) and preserved them in their houses. In fact, Saskia Murk Jansen has only very recently shown that good copies of Eckhart's works continued to circulate in women's religious houses in the Low Countries despite the condemnation of him.²⁵

Furthermore, recent scholarship has revealed just how much respect Eckhart and his followers had for outstanding religious women and for the women in their charge, in spite of the negative attitude to women of so many senior ecclesiastics of their time, Inquisitors particularly. These Dominicans were open to learning from them, and did so. As John Coakley has put it, in the women they found the charismatic gifts they themselves lacked.²⁶ There are grounds for thinking Eckhart read some of the writings of Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Margaret Porete.²⁷ Tauler visited a number of times the mystic Margareta Ebner, a Dominican nun. Elsbeth Stagel, another Dominican nun, contributed to the composition of Suso's masterpiece, *The Life of the Servant*.

There is no doubt at all that the Dominican mystics of the Rhineland profoundly influenced some aspects of the spirituality of the late middle ages, but this is not our concern here. We have argued here that themes in Eckhartian theology led these Dominicans to attempt through their teaching to make at least some of the people living in that stifling and

insecure world freer in spirit. It could be said that Eckhart's teaching on 'inwardness' was an early contribution towards the making of the modern identity. It did not endure: it was swallowed up in the maelstrom of high ecclesiastical politics, and for long was almost forgotten. If, however, we only wrote about Dominicans whose contributions to the cause of social justice succeeded, this series of articles would be brief indeed, surely?²⁸

- 1 Introduction to *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with two German sermons*, Paulist Press, New York 1989, p.15.
- 2 nn. 139, 146. Augustine discussed the relation of the good to order in *The Nature of the Good* 3qq., and Thomas in e.g. ST 2a2ae.81.2. Eckhart's direct source for the notion of the concatenation of all reality into the great chain of being appears to be the Pseudo-Augustinian *The Spirit and the Soul*.
- 3 *Eckhart's Way*, Darton Longman & Todd, London 1987, p.216. Cf also Bernard McGinn, 'Meister Eckhart: An Introduction', Paul E. Szarmach ed. *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1984, p.238.
- 4 *Medieval popular culture: Problems of belief and Perception*, Cambridge 1988, p.216.
- 5 *New Blackfriars* Vol 79 No. 927 May 1998, 'Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–1999: I—Early Voices for Justice' p.215.
- 6 See, for example, the loving respect he shows in sermon H47 for cobblers and ploughmen, his statement in sermon H40 that 'an uncouth peasant' will be a thousand times more welcome at the heavenly banquet than 'vain worldlings', and his criticisms in sermons H23 and H27 of 'great lovers of themselves' who 'will rob one another of their rights by injustice, fraud and violence' and 'dominate' their neighbour.
- 7 See, for example, Georges Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals*, Chicago 1981, p.268.
- 8 cf. G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, Oxford 1961, *Preaching in Medieval England*, Oxford 1965; M. Richter, 'Kommunikationsprobleme im lateinischen Mittelalter', *Historische Zeitschrift* 1976, 222:43–80.
- 9 E. Kleinschmidt ed., *Rudolf von Schlettstadt: Historiae Memorabiles. Zur Dominikanerliteratur und Kulturgeschichte des 13. Jahrhunderts*, Cologne-Vienna 1974.
- 10 Simon Tugwell, *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, Paulist Press, New York 1982, pp.201–3.
- 11 op. cit. p.16.
- 12 ibid. p.3.
- 13 'Mysticism and Theology in Meister Eckhart's Theory of the Image', *Eckhart Review* 2 (1993), p.30.
- 14 The first number is of the sermon in the Quint edition of the German works, *Meister Eckhart: die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart and Berlin 1936–; the second number is of the translation in M. O'C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises*, Element Books, Shaftesbury 1979–87.
- 15 Edmund College & Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, Paulist Press, New York 1981, p.31.
- 16 *Meister Eckhart: die deutschen Werke* vol V p.192.
- 17 op. cit. p.219.
- 18 'Meister Eckhart's Conception of Union with God', *Harvard Theological Review*, 71 (1978), p.224.
- 19 Richard Kieckhefer: *Unquiet Souls—Fourteenth-Century Saints and their Religious Milieu*, Chicago U.P., 1984, pp.150–1.
- 20 Colledge & McGinn, op. cit. p.239.

- 21 *Unquiet Souls*, p.150.
- 22 'Eckhart and Women', *Eckhart Review* 3 (Spring 1994), p.41.
- 23 op. cit. p.46.
- 24 See e.g. Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language*, Philadelphia 1986, pp.116f; Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian*, London 1991, pp.76–8.
- 25 'Apocryphal Followers of Meister Eckhart?', *Eckhart Review* 7 (Spring 1998) pp.3–13.
- 26 'Friars as Confidants of Holy Women in Medieval Dominican Hagiography', Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski & Tímea Szell, ed.: *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, Cornell U.P. 1991, p.225.
- 27 See Oliver Davies: *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian*, SPCK London 1991, ch.3: 'Meister Eckhart and the Religious Women of the Age.'
- 28 Translations from Eckhart's Middle High German and Latin are taken from M. O'C. Walsh: *Meister Eckhart: Sermons & Treatises I–III*, Element Books, Shaftesbury 1979–1987; Edmund College & Bernard McGinn: *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, Paulist Press, New York 1981; Bernard McGinn: *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Paulist Press, New York 1986; Oliver Davies: *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, Penguin Classics, London & New York 1994.

Difference and Otherness: A Non-Western Conversation

Andrew Dawson

In the opening chapter of the book *On Naming the Present*, David Tracy engages with three “conversations” upon “difference and otherness” currently on stream in the West.¹ Reflecting upon the “bourgeois subject” of modernity, the “communal subject” of anti-modernity and the “non-subject” of post-modernity, Tracy concludes that the wealth of insight offered by these conversations still falls short of supplying the “Western centre” with the hermeneutical perspective necessary to a contemporary discernment of God’s presence among us. Holding such a perspective to be had subsequent to a multiplicity of conversations taking place, Tracy remarks upon the West’s need to “listen to other [i.e., non-western] conversations” which transcend the interpretative framework of our modern, anti-modern and postmodern narrative *traditions*. Only by opening ourselves to the discourse of those engaged “in the concrete struggle for justice against suffering and oppression and for total liberation” will we in the West be allowed “once again” to hear “the healing and transformative message of the Christian gospel.” (p. 18)

Responding to the findings of Tracy, and guided by his subject-