

MEISTER ECKHART

LITTLE is known about the outer life of Meister Eckhart. Born somewhere in Thuringia about 1260, he probably entered the Dominican Convent at Erfurt as a youth. His great intellectual gifts were soon recognised, for he was sent to Paris to complete his education at the fount of medieval scholarship. On his return to Germany he was elected Provincial of his Order. As such he was entrusted with the supervision of all Dominican convents in Northern Germany, and, after some time, with the reform of the houses in the Bohemian Province as well. About 1310 he was relieved of these administrative duties, and again sent to Paris as teacher of his Order. Three years later he returned to Germany, living first at Strasbourg and afterwards at Cologne, where he became one of the most influential preachers. As, at that time, one of the chief duties of the Dominicans was the spiritual direction of numerous communities of religious women, Meister Eckhart's sermons were mostly addressed to them. In these communities an exuberant inner life had sprung up, and Eckhart, reared in the intellectual discipline of St. Thomas, brought his great learning to the task of leading the devout women away from visions and ecstatic experiences to the heights of mystic contemplation.

But in these heights human language becomes sadly inadequate. It was Meister Eckhart's tragedy that he tried to express the inexpressible, and in doing so had to use paradoxical statements that savoured of false doctrine. So the last years of his life were overshadowed by a trial for heresy, which eventually led to the condemnation of twenty-six of his theses, though most of these were admitted to be susceptible of an orthodox interpretation.

'In my sermons,' Meister Eckhart once said, 'I usually speak about four things. Firstly of abandonment, and that man should get rid of himself and of all things. Secondly that we should again be formed into the one good, which is God. Thirdly that we should all remember the noble quality which God has laid in the soul, through which man is meant to enter into the marvellous life of God. Fourthly I speak of the purity of the Divine Nature.'

This ascending scale which begins with the creature and ends with the Creator is, as it were, the structure which supports the edifice of Meister Eckhart's doctrine.

If man would then climb into these heights the first thing Meister Eckhart bids him do is to go out from himself. It is not enough that he should leave the good things of this world. For abandonment, the ground-work of Eckhart's mystic spire, means poverty of spirit, the complete giving-up of one's own will. If the soul is to know God she must lose herself, accepting with joyful gratitude whatever God may lay upon her, though it be nothing but ignominy, pain, and sorrow, and living untouched by emotions, 'as though she were dead.' Yet this detachment from self is not Stoic insensibility. 'No Saint is too great to be moved,' said Meister Eckhart, and again, with a touch of dry humour that is characteristic of him: 'I could never reach a stage where an unpleasant noise would sound as lovely in my ears as string-music.'

But is not this frank admission of normal reactions incompatible with the stern demand that man should be 'altogether dead' to natural inclinations? Eckhart himself provides the solution of the difficulty. 'This we should attain: that a true will, formed by God, free itself from all natural desires. If then wise insight would see occasion to order the will to turn away, that will should speak: I do it willingly.'

Here, indeed, is the Key to Eckhart's so-called 'dialectical' mode of thinking, which has often so puzzled his interpreters that they do not know whether to call him a quietist or an activist, a Theist or a Pantheist. But he cannot be thus conveniently labelled, for the simple reason that he sees man as he is, a being between heaven and earth, with reason to govern his instincts, yet subject to them through sin. Thus he has to live in constant tension; yet as the will is more and more trained to follow the superior faculty of the soul, the inner man becomes detached from self, resting in that peace that 'passes all understanding.'

It is at this stage, when she has emptied herself of the world and of self, that the soul climbs higher, and begins to be 'in-formed' into God. When God finds her perfectly detached he cannot but attach himself to her. This work of union which God performs in the soul is entirely a work of his grace. Seeing that she has given up everything for his sake, he 'lifts up our humanity above all that belongs to us as creatures, and brings it higher than the nature of all angels into the unity where God and man are One.' This is the true end of man, this is the purpose of the Incarnation, this the joy and glory of creation, that man be 'converted' into God, that the Son of God be born in his soul, that the creature be perfectly united to him who created it.

This 'Birth of the Son' in the soul is one of Meister Eckhart's most characteristic conceptions. It is the most hidden work that God performs in the depth of man's nature. 'In this hour of birth,' says Meister Eckhart, 'the soul refuses everything that is not God, for God leads his bride away from all creatures into himself . . . In this my eternal birth I am born from eternity, and shall abide eternally.' For in this new birth God and the soul become One: 'God in his grace has made the soul like unto himself.'

Eckhart here uses bold language, indeed, raising man to a height from whence even wars and rumours of war seem insignificant. Timid souls have asked themselves whether this can still be called Christianity, and audacious ones deny it, only to proclaim that Meister Eckhart is the founder of a higher, pantheistic 'German' religion. But when the Dominican author of a Commentary on the Fourth Gospel, preached on the Mystic Union in words that seemed almost to annihilate the frontier between God and man he but followed his Master who had once prayed:

For them also [do I pray] that shall believe in me . . . that they all may be one; as thou, Father, in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us . . . and the glory which thou hast given me I have given to them; that they may be one, as we also are one; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one. (John xvii. 20ff.)

It is no less than unity between God and man for which St. John's Incarnate Logos prayed in his High-priestly Prayer, ringing the changes on the tremendous word 'One.' Eckhart, the metaphysician of the *Unio Mystica*, takes up the theme; for it is his most assured conviction that God has made man in order that he might become One with him, and was himself made man in the person of the Son.

Eckhart never tells us whether he himself has experienced this highest state of union. He, like his master St. Thomas, belongs to those rare religious personalities who keep almost unbroken silence on their own spiritual life. It matters nothing whether this particular 'Brother Eckhart' has been vouchsafed the grace of 'infused contemplation'; what alone concerns him is that man should come to know his own soul and its relationship to his Maker.

Thus, with the utmost care and yet with the glowing passion of a soul freed from all earthly desires, Eckhart, in his doctrine of the human soul, raises the next arch of his mystic spire to still greater heights. When man has once grasped what union with God means his own soul becomes a mystery to him, and he asks with the Psalmist: 'What is man that thou art mindful of him: and the son

of man that thou visitest him? ' Where, in the intricate structure of the human being, is the point at which he is capable of God, '*capax Dei*,' as St. Augustine calls it ?

' What the soul is in its ground,' answers Eckhart, ' no man can know. What we may know about it is supernatural, and this knowledge can be caused only by grace. There works the mercy of God.' Here we have definitely left the realm of philosophical conception, and are in the sphere of Revelation, where every statement should be prefaced: ' By the grace of God.' Whatever Meister Eckhart will have to say about the grandeur of the human soul, this grandeur is no achievement of man, but the free gift of God.

' What the soul is in its ground. . . . ' That is the centre of Meister Eckhart's teaching. The ground of the soul, *Scintilla animæ*, is the divine principle in man, the source of reason and love, though higher than either of these, so that neither reason nor love can know it, since the higher cannot be known by the lower. *Scintilla*, the ' spark,' is that quality in the soul which always points to God as the magnetic needle points north. It is so closely related to, yet so decidedly different from, him, that Eckhart could express this extraordinary relationship only by a paradox: ' God is the soul--and yet he is not the soul.'

It is Eckhart's peculiar greatness that he had the courage to leave this contradiction as it stands without solving, and thereby dissolving, it. ' God is the soul—yet God is not the soul ' ; this indeed defies what Cardinal Newman called ' paper-logic.' For it is expressive of the higher logic of the living relationship between God and his creature. God, in his grace, has raised the soul to such a degree of likeness with himself that human language breaks in the attempt to define it. Divine Revelation itself hints at the mystery by calling man created '*ad imaginem Dei*.' Meister Eckhart's ' ground of the soul ' is nothing but a paraphrase of this '*ad imaginem*,' divine yet not God, created yet reflecting the uncreated Deity. ' This,' he says, ' is a natural image of God, which God has impressed upon every soul. I cannot say more, else it would be God himself and this it is not, or God would not be God.'

For he never loses consciousness of the essential difference between God and the soul. He may exalt the ' spark ' to the closest kinship with God, yet always with the tacit presupposition that what belongs to God by nature belongs to the soul by grace. Thus the soul depends upon God for her very God-likeness, and the more she receives the more dependent she becomes. He, therefore, who has penetrated to his own ground and knows himself to be ' God, yet

not God,' will bear this knowledge with the deepest humility. For above the soul, moulded in the image of God, is he who made it, for whom it is for ever longing. He, however, as Eckhart well knew, 'never reveals himself completely in this life, so that even his revelation is as nothing compared with what he really is.'

Eckhart was, of course, familiar with the teaching of his great master, St. Thomas, about God. With a disciple's reverence he follows the crystal-clear thought of the *Summa*: God is absolute Being and Immutable Perfection, Being and Intelligence are, in him, one, to him alone belong Unity and Simplicity. He only is good. All this is true of God—and yet, is it really the truth? Are our little conceptions of Being, Perfection, Goodness, applicable to God, who is above even our most exalted thought of him? Is there no other way of expressing his transcendence? Centuries before Eckhart the same question had confronted that mystic thinker who is known to us under the name of Dionysius Areopagita. His answer was the *Via Negativa*, i.e., the definition of God by negations. Thus, when Meister Eckhart had exhausted the Thomistic affirmations without finding satisfaction in them, he turned to Dionysius for his passionate negatives.

'No tongue,' Eckhart says, 'can devise a word to define God, because of the highness and clarity of his being. God is the No of God, the No of Spirit, the No of Person, the No of every image.' He even goes so far as to say that God is not Being, not Goodness, but he immediately adds: 'In denying him this, I have not denied him Being, but exalted it.' For all these negatives, piled one upon the other in insatiable thirst for expression, are not meant to take anything away from God, but to increase his transcendent Majesty. They flow from the humility of the creature that knows that whatever words it may use they will but touch the hem of the garment of the incomprehensible Godhead.

Yet despite this humility Eckhart is too great a thinker to end with negation. In a last magnificent effort to grasp what, by its very nature, must for ever elude human thought, he dares to do once more what he did before, in his teaching on the soul. Side by side, without any attempt at reconciliation, he places thesis and antithesis: 'God is wroth without wrath, extensive without extension, good without quality—always one *and* the other of two contradictions.' God is all these dialectical opposites, yet he is One, is indeed so much One that man cannot even form a conception of this Oneness.

This is the last tension to which his dialectical thinking leads

Meister Eckhart on his mystic way. Beyond that, 'What is the last end?' he asks, 'It is the hiddenness of the darkness of the eternal Godhead, and is unknown, and has never been made known, and will never be known.'

The mystic spire has at last reached the cloud of Divine darkness—or is it Divine Light? Here human eyes can no more distinguish between Darkness and Light, but the cloud is the same that overshadowed the Tabernacle of the Israelites in the wilderness, and that hid the glorified Christ from his disciples.

But it is a perilous task to build as high as the clouds. Meister Eckhart's daring dialectic, preached to congregations of women, might, indeed, lead a chosen few into the highway of contemplation, but how should ordinary souls understand his passionate antitheses? He himself was aware of the peril, for more than once he told his hearers not to be troubled if they did not understand his meaning. The Church, however, commanded by her Master not to 'offend one of these little ones,' condemned what sounded most dangerous in his teaching.

For dangerous it undoubtedly was, and only too easily misunderstood. One glance at the subsequent history of Meister Eckhart's thought will afford sufficient proof. For not only has he been invoked as the forerunner of Luther's Reformation, but also as the father of Kant's Critical Idealism, of Hegelian Pantheism, and, lastly, as the ancestor of the Nazi '*Deutsch-religion*.'

Yet he is none of these. Born into a world full of strife and unrest, his soul found the way out of selfhood into its real self, where man, made in the image of God, is caught up into the life of the Deity. From this hidden centre he lived a life as active and as suffering as any human existence must necessarily be, in the sure knowledge that the insoluble antinomies, the Yes and No of all earth-bound thought, have their solution in the Mind that is the Cause both of them and of those who are for ever trying to solve them.

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