# MEISTER ECKHART
## Preaching the One to the Many

By OLIVER DAVIES

ANYONE WHO HAS SOUGHT TO COMPARE Christian spirituality with the spirituality of other world faiths will know that the Christian spiritual tradition is unusually resistant to the phenomenon of esotericism: a private or special knowledge. After all, not every one of us can be an Eckhart; it is not given to us all to see the divine light of a Gregory Palamas, nor to experience the startling and ravishing interior darkness of a John of the Cross. All of us, however, are called to a faith in Christ and to a sharing in the abundant life of the Church. Esotericism generally presupposes the acquisition by a few of knowledge which is not open to all. Knowledge separates, and as Foucault has reminded us, forms communities of those who know and for whom knowledge is a form of power over other communities who do not know, or at least do not know the right things in the right way. Christianity, on the other hand, proclaims openly the knowledge that Jesus is the Son of God. The few and the many must be distinguished in Christianity, therefore, not by the possession of some special knowledge but by the depth of understanding of the common knowledge: the degree of personal integration into the divine mystery that is proclaimed by the simple words that Jesus is God and humanity in one, and that salvation is through him.

But the coincidence of *esotericism*, which is the experience of the privileged few, and *exotericism*, which is popular or universal religion, in Meister Eckhart is complex. On the one hand, we may suppose that he was an individual whose life was touched by an experience of the divine in a manner which we normally associate with specialized mystics. On the other, the religion which he self-consciously propounded is an exoteric one, and proclaimed as being available for all. As a scholar he again belongs to the few, but as a Dominican, charged with evangelizing the people, his concern must be with the many.

The same paradox can be felt in his sermons, which combine a striking esotericism of mystical vision with a quite astonishing egalitarianism of presentation so that we genuinely feel he believes that this soaring vision is for everyone. This paradox is strikingly exemplified by the fact that he chooses to use everyday, vernacular German as the vehicle for expounding the exceedingly sophisticated concepts of the Latin philosophical systems of the Middle Ages. This can be explained, I would like to suggest, by the almost unique mix of mysticism and philosophy that we find in Eckhart's theology. In effect this means that Eckhart believes that the individual soul and God exist in an

essential relation one to the other, which we conventionally designate as the 'mystical', while also understanding this relation to be one that is entirely natural, the consequence of the structure of consciousness itself – and thus philosophical. Mysticism, of course, suggests esotericism, while philosophy is the language of the universal, and it is this tension that leads to the extraordinary linguistic and theological phenomenon of the body of works which we know as Eckhart's German sermons.

In the first place Eckhart wished to preach the One to the Many because scholastic philosophy in the Dominican school of which he was a part was powerfully influenced by Neoplatonic metaphysics of the One. Secondly, as a member of the Order of Preachers, he was called to evangelize the people. Thirdly, as a mystic who understood his mysticism in philosophical terms, he held the view that the direct relation with God, which is the basis of mysticism, is a universal condition of humankind and is part of the very structure of the self. What is most interesting in all this, however, is the question of how Eckhart enacts his vision, how he sets about the seemingly intractable problem of preaching a dynamic metaphysics of absolute oneness in the common tongue to audiences who, whatever their religious piety and background, were generally innocent of scholastic training.

A key part of the answer can be found in a short, possibly early sermon which has attracted little attention. I am referring here to Sermon 18.[1] The sermon begins with an account of the raising of the young man from the dead at the words of Jesus 'Adolescens, tibi dico, surge' ('Young man, I say to you "Arise" ') in the city of Naim (Luke 7:11–15).[2] Unusually for Eckhart, he goes on to comment upon the power of created things, including herbs, words and stones: '. . . the masters discuss which is better: the power of herbs or the power of words or the power of stones'. 'Stones . . . have great power through the likeness wrought in them by the stars and the might of heaven.' But words too 'have great power', Eckhart tells us, 'we could work wonders with words. All words have their power from the first Word.' This then is the crux of the matter: 'All words have their power from the first Word'. The sermon concludes 'there [in heaven] the eternal Word speaks life into [the soul], there the soul becomes living and replies in the Word. Thus may we reply in the Word, so help us God. Amen.'

Sermon 18 is a reflection upon the nature of the Word and the nature of human language; it tells us something of why and how Eckhart preached the One to the Many. The starting point, significantly, is in the Word of God, i.e. biblical revelation, in an account of how Jesus, the Word who dwelled among us, brought physical life by his own spoken words to one who was dead. The Word, or the words in their many forms, is the subject of Eckhart's own word, his sermon, which concludes with the hope that the 'natural light' of his listeners will unite with the 'divine light', and that they too 'will reply in the Word'. Rarely, if ever, has Eckhart compressed into a single sermon so many variations upon the theme of the Word and words, crucially including in this case a reference to human language itself as that which 'works wonders' and has its 'power from the first Word'.

It is evident that Eckhart's linguistic anthropology begins in a Christian account of cosmic origins strikingly like that of early Greek thinkers such as Origen and Maximus the Confessor. According to this view, the creation is through the Son, the Word, the second Person of the Trinity, who is the Image of the Father. We are part of that creation, of course, and are made in the image of God. We are also made in the image of the Image (that is, in the image of the Son or the Word). Here specifically Neoplatonic philosophical conceptions come into play, which are concerned with the priority of the intelligible over the material and the participation of the lower elements of the creation in those that are higher, and from which they ultimately derive. Thus through this Logos theology of creation it is possible to argue that there is something in us, in our mind or conscious being, which participates in the nature of the Godhead itself, specifically in Godhead as self-knowing image or Word. The German Dominican school of which Eckhart was a part laid great stress on this, particularly Dietrich von Freiberg, whose theory of intellect was a radical version of this model.[3] He clearly influenced Eckhart greatly. Thus the starting point for Eckhart's linguistic anthropology is his belief that our essence is in the image of God and is self-knowing mind, and that being an image, it participates in – or shares the nature of – that of which it is an image, namely God. Indeed, Eckhart will even argue, notably in Sermon 16a, that an image is identical with that of which it is an image, and so can argue that consciousness, or human essence (which he calls 'intellect'), is divine.

But what of language and the place of language in our spiritual experience? In the first instance it is evident that Eckhart frequently views language, particularly names, as being an obstacle to an understanding of the transcendent. Names denote specific and localized being, whereas the intelligible and divine realm is one of infinite and essential being. It is this kind of critique which underlies Eckhart's protestations that we must go beyond the Persons of the Trinity (God's existence as Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and attain a place which is 'more unknown than known', 'more nameless than with name'.[4] In a parallel movement, he tells us that we must transcend our own individual nature in which we are 'Tom, Dick or Harry' and attain essential human nature, which necessarily lies beyond the personal.[5]

If Eckhart feels that language, which engages or indeed reflects the created world, holds an ambiguous place in the spiritual universe, he is also adamant that the source of language gives language a privileged place in our experience. Adapting terminology which is strongly reminiscent of Augustine's discussion of words in Book Nine of *On the Trinity*, Eckhart argues that words are in some way essential to ourselves: they are both our own self-knowing, which is our spiritual essence, and the product or out-flow of our self-knowing. Without doubt, Eckhart is drawing upon a combination of patristic Logos theology and the Council of Nicaea here, as indeed did Augustine. The result is that he is able to argue that words, even when they flow forth from us, still *remain within*. Therefore words are the interface between ourselves, our spiritual essence, and the world. But, crucially, being 'words' they remain

within their source even when they are spoken and shared. Thus they can be said to retain something of their 'divine' character while still belonging in some way to the domain of the intelligible, the internal, the essential, the unified, the divine. Words are products of the intellect (Eckhart's favourite term for our intelligible and divine essence) and they remain within our spiritual centre even when they are generated from it. Here again Eckhart is developing and radicalizing the thought of Augustine in *On the Trinity*. There Augustine argues that our use of words, their truthfulness or otherwise, reflects the extent to which we remain in spiritual things or are bound to the world by the pursuit of appetites.[6]

For Augustine language is the medium of our relation to the world: it can either reflect its divine, inward source or, alternatively, it can all too easily be corrupted by our fallen tendency to desire the things of the world. For Eckhart, however, language is generally seen as retaining its original purity. This may reflect the stronger influence of the Gospel of John in him, where the Word, as the Son, proceeds from its source in the Father and is one with him. Thus, at the level of human language, words retain their divine character even when they enter the social realm. This unusually positive view of the potentialities of language, undiminished by the Fall (contrasting with Augustinian pessimism), may also be the reason why Eckhart was happy to preach in German, contrary to the thinking of the *Modistae*,[7] for whom Latin alone was the language which reflected the truth of reality. And not only German, but a highly individual kind of German, deeply marked by his own brilliantly creative imaginative powers.

We should also note that the effect of his linguistic imagination is to push language itself into its own inner sanctum. In his hands language is systematically stripped of its particularity and its own createdness. The language of Eckhart's German sermons is marked by the widespread use of abstract nouns and neuter adjectival forms, which lend his style a sense of pure, impersonal linguistic detachment. This is precisely the state of mind he wishes to produce in his listeners, who are to become detached from the particularities of self, from their own *eigenheit* or 'selfhood'.[8] Thus language becomes an adequate vehicle for the conveying of transcendent truth, not propositionally, but rather dynamically and transformationally, so that the linguistic horizons of his listeners are repeatedly punctured and ruptured by violent dialectical formulations. Eckhart hopes that finally breakage will become breakthrough, and that the minds of his listeners will be spiritually transfigured by their return to the source.

It is unexpected, to say the least, to find in the works of a medieval preacher an understanding of the power of preaching which is comparable to that of the modern Barthian tradition of revelation through the Word, although predicated on very different presuppositions. These turn on Eckhart's theory of language, in which, as we have seen, he is deeply indebted to the thought of St Augustine. His belief that the origin of words lies ultimately in the divine Word lends a necessary and abundant circularity to Eckhart's own preaching.

As words they are one with the divine unity of intellect, which is their source; at the same time they flow forth from Eckhart's own essence as preacher into the minds and the hearts of his many listeners. These in turn are stirred and moved to return to the divine source of their own being. Thus 'Adolescens, tibi dico, surge' is not just a sermon but is a sermon which is itself a metaphor for preaching, for the Word, and for the life which is founded upon the Word. The sermon opens with the saving words of Christ, the Word, by which life returns to the young man in Naim. By his own words which, again to quote this sermon, 'have their power from the first Word', Eckhart reaches out to his listeners in the hope that they too will 'reply in the Word', and shall do so 'in that place where the eternal Word speaks life to the soul'.

## NOTES

[1] That is, according to Quint's numbering in *Meister Eckhart: die deutschen und lateinischen Werke, hrsg. im Auftrage der deutschen Forschungdienst* (Stuttgart and Berlin: Kohlhammer Verlag), 1936ff. This sermon is not contained in any of the collections of Eckhart's work in English.

[2] Luke 7: 11–16 was the gospel reading for Thursday after the fourth Sunday of Lent and for the sixteenth Sunday after Trinity.

[3] Alain de Libera, *Introduction à la mystique rhenane* (Paris, 1984), pp 163–229.

[4] Quint 18.

[5] Quint 46.

[6] *De trinitate* 9, 14. For a comprehensive discussion of Augustine's theory of language, see J. M. Rist, *Augustine* (Cambridge, 1994), pp 23–40.

[7] *Modistae:* mainly Parisian masters of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries who wrote on grammar, logic and metaphysics. See *Cambridge history of later medieval philosophy*, eds Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinbourg (CUP, 1982), pp 255, 486–487.

[8] O. Davies, *Meister Eckhart: mystical theologian* (London, 1991), pp 179–194.