

# MEISTER ECKHART'S CONSTRUAL OF MYSTICISM

Louis Roy

**E**CKHART OF HOCHHEIM was born in Thuringia, Germany, in about 1260, joined the Dominicans around 1275 and died, probably in Avignon, in 1328. A master in theology, he taught in Paris and Cologne; he was also prior provincial in Germany and preached to nuns and beguines. He was thus both *lesemeister* ('master of lecturing', hence his academic title *Meister*) and *lebemeister* ('master of life', since he was recognised as a spiritual master). Nowadays, Eckhart has become more and more read in the West and even in Eastern countries such as Japan.<sup>1</sup> Numerous Christians—and Buddhists—rank him among the greatest mystics. It is my hope here to assist readers in exploring his complex set of themes.

Eckhart's theological writings, his biblical commentaries and quite a few of his sermons are in Latin, whereas his spiritual treatises (three of them) and most of his sermons are in German.<sup>2</sup> However, contrary to what several commentators have suggested, his shift from Latin to German did not entail a significant change in his theological thought.

In 1329 the papal bull *In agro dominico* listed seventeen articles from Eckhart's work that 'contain the error or stain of heresy', and eleven articles 'suspect of heresy, though with many explanations and additions they might take on or possess a Catholic meaning'.<sup>3</sup> Before his death,

I thank Jeremiah Bartram for offering me, at my request, remarks which have improved the style of this article.

<sup>1</sup> See Louis Roy, *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers* (Albany: SUNY, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Four treatises were included in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, edited and translated by Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist, 1981). Later, however, in *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 166, McGinn stated that the treatise *On Detachment* was 'not by Eckhart'.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Selections from Eckhart's Defense' and 'The Bull *In agro dominico* (March 27, 1329)', in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 71–82.

and hence before this condemnation was issued, Eckhart had theologically defended his orthodoxy, while submitting to the Church's eventual verdict. Consequently his person was never condemned and, over time, his significance has been reassessed. Indeed, in 1985, Pope John Paul II quoted from his work, declaring:

Did not Eckhart teach his disciples: 'All that God asks you most pressingly is to go out of yourself—and let God be God in you'? One could think that, in separating himself from creatures, the mystic leaves his brothers, humanity, behind. The same Eckhart affirms that, on the contrary, the mystic is marvellously present to them on the only level where he can truly reach them, that is in God.<sup>4</sup>

### **Detachment**

Undoubtedly Eckhart's principal theme is detachment (*abegescheidenheit*), that is, serenity in abandonment (*gelâzenheit*),<sup>5</sup> spiritual poverty, purity, bareness, the desert, emptiness—all terms he employs as symbols of non-reliance on external means. This mystical attitude consists in a letting-be, a letting-go, a complete receptivity to a self-giving God. 'As much as you go out in forsaking all things, by so much, neither less nor more, does God go in, with all that is his, as you entirely forsake everything that is yours.'<sup>6</sup>

Eckhart especially recommends detachment concerning sweet emotions felt in prayer: 'You must know that God's friends are never without consolation, for whatever God wills is for them the greatest consolation of all, whether it be consolation or desolation'.<sup>7</sup> He denounces,

... all those who are possessively attached to prayer, to fasting, to vigils and to all kinds of exterior exercises and penances. Every attachment to every work deprives one of the freedom to wait upon God in the present and to follow him alone in the light with which he would guide you in what to do and what to leave alone, free and renewed in every present moment, as if this were all that you had ever had or wanted or could do.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, audience, September 1985, quoted in *Osservatore Romano* (28 October 1985).

<sup>5</sup> The spelling is High Middle German, as with other key words.

<sup>6</sup> 'Counsels on Discernment', counsel 4, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 250. I have sometimes modified English translations from the German or the Latin, to make the language more inclusive.

<sup>7</sup> 'Counsels on Discernment', counsel 10, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 259.

<sup>8</sup> Sermon 2, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 178. All the sermons to which I shall refer in this article were written in German.

More than an ascetical renunciation—which Eckhart takes for granted on the part of his audience—detachment is the result of a philosophic awareness. In a disputed question debated at the University of Paris, he argues that the intellect, understood as Aristotle and Averroes understood it, must be empty so as to be able to receive representations: 'Aristotle says ... that the intellect is not a natural form so that it can know all forms'.<sup>9</sup> Thus, intellect amounts to an epistemological emptiness.

The innermost depths of the soul, underlying its potencies, are reached whenever the intellect's activities are suspended.

How much more then should we withdraw from all things in order to concentrate all our powers on perceiving and knowing the one infinite, uncreated, eternal truth! To this end, then, assemble all your powers, all your senses, your entire mind and memory; direct them into the ground where your treasure lies buried. But if this is to happen, realise that you must drop all other works—you must come to an *unknowing*, if you would find it.<sup>10</sup>

Eckhart equates the *intellectus* (which he translates as *vernünfticheit* in German) with Augustine's *ratio superior*—the higher reason that is directed towards eternal truths. He multiplies images, in Latin and in German, to designate this spiritual place in which the soul is united with God: 'the being of the soul' (*esse animae*), 'the naked essence of the soul' (*nuda essentia animae*), 'the ground' (*fundus, grunt*), 'the ground without a ground' (*gruntlôs grunt*), 'the intimate room' (*intimum*), 'the summit' (*superius, supremum*), 'the peak' (*apex, vertex*), 'the spark' (*scintilla, vinkelín*), 'the little fortress' (*castellum, bürgelín*), 'the secret alcove of the mind' (*abditum mentis*), 'the something' (*etwaz*) in the soul that is one with God.

While sometimes Eckhart considers the intellect as a power (or faculty) of the soul along with the will, he often declares that the intellect is the same as the soul, although distinct from the soul's powers. According to two different spatial representations, the intellect is alternately said to be 'above' or 'underneath' the soul's powers. God is met beyond the normal functioning of these two faculties, which, in fact, are inactive whenever the soul realises its identity with the Godhead.

<sup>9</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Parisian Questions and Prologues*, question 1, translated by Armand A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), 43–50, here 50.

<sup>10</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, translated by M. O'C. Walshe (Shaftesbury: Element, 1987), volume 1, 19 (translator's italics).

### ***The Re-formation of the Soul***

According to Eckhart, the human soul must be 'de-formed' (*entbildet*), then 'in-formed' (*ingebildet*) and finally over-formed' (*überbildet*) by acquiring a uniformity that allows it to be entirely one with God. These three verbs, which play with the word *bilde* (image, form), are found, for instance, in sermon 40: 'In joining himself nakedly to God in loving, a

person becomes unformed, informed, and transformed in the divine uniformity in which he is one with God'.<sup>11</sup> Mystics consent to let their self-image be totally remoulded, in order to conform to Christ. As St Paul wrote: 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:18). Eckhart referred to this text three times in his defence at Avignon.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, if Eckhart commends emptiness, it is for the sake of plenitude: letting God the Father engender the Son in the divinised soul, for Eckhart is bold enough to assert that the soul itself is the Word, from everlasting to everlasting. Eckhart's argument finds support first in a metaphysics: the eternal presence of creatures in God's mind. This view comes from Augustine, who had repositioned the seemingly independent Platonic forms into God's mind. The second support is eschatological: the believers' divinisation is envisioned as a return to the divine unity, as the Greek Fathers, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas taught. The third support is christological: halfway between the divine and the human, Christ, who possesses both divine and human natures, exercises the role of the Mediator.



Meister Eckhart, Town Hall, Cologne,  
1407–1414 (restored)

<sup>11</sup> Sermon 40, in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, edited by Bernard McGinn with Frank Tobin and Elvira Borgstadt (New York: Paulist, 1986), 302.

<sup>12</sup> See *Die lateinischen Werke* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936–), volume 5, 281, 314 and 340–341.

The Wisdom of God deigned to become flesh in order that Incarnation itself, being, so to speak, the middle between the procession of the divine Persons and the production of the creatures, could experience the two natures. As a result, the Incarnation images the eternal emanation and it is the exemplar of the whole inferior nature.<sup>13</sup>

### **Non-duality**

For Eckhart, mysticism consists in abolishing any duality, which, following Plotinus, he rejects as dualism. He frequently praises non-duality, or indistinction, between God and creation. He asserts not only that *Deus est esse* ('God is being'), but even that *esse est Deus* ('being is God'). Is this stance a kind of pantheism? It is not—provided we take into consideration its metaphysical, eschatological and christological frame of reference.

Let us see how he envisions non-duality between God and the soul:

As truly as the Father in his simple nature gives his Son birth naturally, so truly does he give him birth in the most inward part of the spirit, and that is the inner world. Here God's ground is my ground, and my ground is God's ground .... It is out of this inner ground that you should perform all your works without asking, 'Why?'<sup>14</sup>

This identification of the soul with God explains Eckhart's practice of talking about the soul and about God in the same fashion, that is, using the same terms. Indeed, for him there is identity, more than union, between the two. Thus, in 'The Book of Divine Consolation' he notes, 'Our Lord prayed his Father that we might become one with him and in him (John 17:11), not merely that we should be joined together'. Or again, in the same work: 'Heart to heart, one in the One, so God loves. Everything that is alien to the One and far from it God hates. God invites and draws to the One.'<sup>15</sup> Numerous mystics, including John of the Cross, report that *psychologically* they had the impression of being one with God, while adding that *ontologically* they were actually in union with God, as two distinct beings.<sup>16</sup>

Let us remember that Eckhart's conviction is mainly christological:

<sup>13</sup> Commentary on the Gospel of John, n.185; my translation, from *Die lateinischen Werke*, volume 3, 154.

<sup>14</sup> Sermon 5b, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 183.

<sup>15</sup> 'The Book of Divine Consolation', n.2, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 222 and 230.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance 'The Spiritual Canticle', 22.4 and 31.1, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. edn (Washington, DC: ICS, 1991).

The first fruit of the incarnation of Christ, Son of God, is that the human person be, by the grace of adoption, what he is himself by nature, according to what is said here: 'He gave them power to become sons of God' (John 1:12).<sup>17</sup>

### ***The Breakthrough to the Godhead***

Eckhart must be situated within the Neoplatonic tradition, both pagan (Plotinus) and Christian (Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite), that extols the apophatic (or negative) approach to the One, succeeding the kataphatic (or affirmative) approach. After the kataphatic and the apophatic, a third stage consists in entering into ineffability—into a state without language. This ineffability characterizes the soul as much as the Godhead.

This simple one [the soul] is without manner and without properties. And therefore, if God were ever to look upon her, that must cost him all his divine names and the properties of his Persons; that he must wholly forsake, if he is ever once to look into her. But as he is simply one, without any manner and properties, he is not Father or Son or Holy Spirit, and yet he is a something that is neither this nor that.<sup>18</sup>

Eckhart audaciously contrasts God (*got*, *deus*) with the Godhead (*gotheit*, *deitas*). He invites us to move beyond the affirmative stage—in which words such as 'God', 'the Father', 'the Son', 'the Holy Spirit' represent the ideas of God that a human being can obtain from the perspective of the world's relation to the Creator—and to move beyond the negative stage—in which the words we negate are still present. In the third stage, the Godhead designates God apart from the world before it was created, hence as unrelated to it.

Before there were any creatures, God was not 'God', but he was what he was. But when creatures came to be and received their created being, then God was not 'God' in himself, but he was 'God' in the creatures .... So therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of 'God', and that we may apprehend and rejoice in that everlasting truth.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Commentary on the Gospel of John, n. 106, in *Die lateinischen Werke*, volume 3, 90–91.

<sup>18</sup> Sermon 2, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 181.

<sup>19</sup> Sermon 52, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 200.

The soul's breakthrough (*durchbruch*) to the Godhead means that she (*anima, die Seele*)<sup>20</sup> goes down into her ground where the Godhead resides. Eckhart underlines the incomprehensibility of the undifferentiated Godhead. It is apprehended as nothing (*nihil, niht*)—that is to say, as non-being—because it is totally different from any being. Therefore, beyond our language about God, he recommends the silence thanks to which we identify with the Godhead. He prefers a non-conceptual unity to the plurality of our ideas about God, although he does not state that the Godhead is more perfect than the Trinity. We must guard against interpreting such considerations as ontological, since they are epistemological, that is, typifying the soul's passage from her own ideas about God to the unknown Godhead.

According to Eckhart, divine immanence is twofold. First, there is God's presence everywhere. 'People should accept God in all things, and should accustom themselves to having God present always in their disposition and their intention and their love .... To them God shines in all things.'<sup>21</sup> He adds:

In all their activities and under all circumstances they should take care to use their reason, and in everything they should have a reasonable consciousness of themselves and of their inwardness, and find God in all things, in the highest degree that is possible.<sup>22</sup>

Second, besides finding God in all things, Eckhart extols the possibility of finding the universe in God: 'If someone seeks nothing, that person will find God and all things in God, and they will remain with that person'.<sup>23</sup> Although, as a good Augustinian, Eckhart mentions the immanence of God in the human spirit, he prefers emphasizing the human spirit's immanence in God.

### **Eckhart's Limitations**

Eckhart's first limitation is the fact that his exegesis of the Bible is purely allegorical, not taking into consideration the literal sense and the context.

<sup>20</sup> The Latin and German words for 'soul' here are both feminine.

<sup>21</sup> 'Counsels on Discernment', n. 6, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 252 and 253.

<sup>22</sup> 'Counsels on Discernment', n. 7, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 254.

<sup>23</sup> Sermon 62, in Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, volume 2, 75.



Page from a manuscript of Eckhart's German sermons, 1484

Moreover, he is overwhelmingly interested in Christ's divinity and rarely mentions his humanity, apart from very few exceptions.<sup>24</sup> His second limitation is that, if we compare him with other medieval Dominicans, such as Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Henry Suso and Catherine of Siena, his thematic range is restricted. He does not talk about ethics, history, politics or about the dramas that affect individuals and societies; we can find in his works neither allusions to the deleterious effects of social disorders in his own time nor the idea that human beings contribute with the Holy Spirit in perfecting the world. Preaching in

<sup>24</sup> These are always very short passages, for instance, 'The Book of Divine Consolation', n.2, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 231–232, Latin sermon 12, n.1, in *Die lateinischen Werke*, volume 4, 11, and Latin sermon 45, nn. 461–464, in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, 231–232.



the fourteenth century, an epoch of immense distress, he sheds no light whatsoever that might alleviate the spiritual disarray of his contemporaries. He writes beautiful things about love of one's neighbour, which he identifies with the love of God, without ever addressing the concrete difficulties to be encountered in the practice of love and of the virtues.

Eckhart concentrates on the non-temporal, the eternal, the soul's entry into the Godhead. He adopts a Neoplatonic stance vis-à-vis multiplicity, which in his eyes amounts to a sort of Fall (as Plotinus and Proclus had taught). He states: 'Any sin is multiple in itself, even when it happens only once, because the multiple is a fall from the one and consequently from the good, which is convertible with the one'.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to Catherine of Siena and other exceptions, in this Eckhart is a man of his time; indeed, withdrawal from active participation in society is a characteristic of most mystical writings of the fourteenth century.

Although he follows Aquinas in his doctrine of grace, Eckhart's third limitation is that his conception of language regarding God—borrowed from Plotinus, Maimonides and Thomas, hence from disparate sources—lacks coherence and balance. He does not seem to have noticed that one cannot accept at the same time Maimonides' equivocality and Aquinas' analogy.<sup>26</sup> For the former thinker, when two senses of a word—for example a good person and the Good—are unrelated, human language always remains equivocal and consequently totally inadequate concerning God; whereas for the latter the two senses remain analogically connected and human beings can enunciate true statements concerning God.

In the fourth place, Eckhart's provocative declarations may raise misunderstandings if we do not grasp the role of his rhetorical strategy, which amounts to bewildering and shocking his listeners so that they realise the extraordinary grandeur of the divine gift. He was aware of effectuating this outcome:

It must be observed that some of the propositions, questions and expositions that will follow will seem strange, doubtful or false at first sight, but will appear differently if they are studied with subtlety and more carefully.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Commentary on the Gospel of John, n. 114, in *Die lateinischen Werke*, volume 3, 100.

<sup>26</sup> See his commentary on the book of Exodus, nn. 37–53 and nn. 70–84, in *Die lateinischen Werke*, volume 2, 43–57 and 73–88, where he refers to these two authors without discerning contradictions between them.

<sup>27</sup> 'General Prologue to the Tripartite Work', n. 7, in *Die lateinischen Werke*, volume 1, 36.

Interestingly, in 1325—when Eckhart was still alive—Barnabé Cagnoli, then Master of the Dominican Order, asked the friars not to preach ‘subtleties’ to ‘the uneducated’. Before this advice was uttered, Eckhart had written:

Saint John narrates his holy gospel for all believers and also for all unbelievers, so that they might believe, and yet he begins that gospel with the most exalted thoughts any individual could utter here about God; and both what he says and what our Lord says are constantly misunderstood.<sup>28</sup>

We must pay attention to Eckhart’s fundamental intention. He confides:

When I preach, I am accustomed to speak about detachment, and that we should be free of ourselves and of all things; second, that we should be formed again into that simple good which is God; third, that we should reflect on the great nobility with which God has endowed our soul, so that in this way we may come to wonder at God; fourth, about the purity of the divine nature, for the brightness of the divine nature is beyond words. God is a word, a word unspoken.<sup>29</sup>

Suso and Tauler, disciples of Meister Eckhart, while insisting that he is orthodox, bring in helpful nuances. On certain delicate points Ruusbroec is clearer than he. However, was it not easier for them, writing, as they did, in his wake? His genius was intuitive and original; he was the creator of spell-binding phrases. Without belonging to the genre of the Zen Buddhist *koan*, his aphorisms are close to it and they trigger similar personal insights.

### ***Eckhart’s Strengths***

Today’s readers are rightly impressed by Eckhart’s central theme of detachment from images, thoughts, desires and imaginative or bodily experiences (visions, auditions, ecstasies)—phenomena in which he was not in the least interested. Essentially, he stressed the divinisation of the believer through grace. He endeavoured to communicate his fascination for God and God’s project of divinisation by insisting on giving up

<sup>28</sup> ‘The Book of Divine Consolation’, n. 3, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 239.

<sup>29</sup> Sermon 53, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 203.

everything incidental that society might offer. He thus sent out a message addressed to,

... the good and perfect people who already have so absorbed and assimilated the essence of all virtues that these virtues emanate from them naturally, without their seeking; and above all there must dwell in them the worthy life and lofty teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup>

His mysticism is neither one of interpersonal love (*Minnemystik*) nor a nuptial mysticism (*Brautmystik*), but a mysticism of essence (*Wesenmystik*), which emphasizes the identity of essence between the human person and God. Consequently, he ignores the mysticism of an amorous love inspired by the *Song of Songs*. Whenever he evokes love, he does so by wishing that the human will might be one with the divine will. This wish is perhaps more disinterested than the prolonged complaint of the enamoured woman in the *Song of Songs*, who seems to be in a great measure the captive of her emotions. By contrast, according to Eckhart, mature love is steadily turned towards God alone, without concern for itself. This kind of love imitates a God who loves with no other motive than love itself. 'All things have a "why", but God does not have a "why". And the person who asks God for anything other than himself reduces God to a "why".'<sup>31</sup> In the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux had already glimpsed this possibility: 'For when God loves, he wants nothing but to be loved; he loves for no other purpose than to be loved, knowing that those who love him are blessed by their very love'.<sup>32</sup>

***Wishing that  
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To conclude, I would say that, despite his limitations, Eckhart's strengths ensure that he will remain very helpful to countless people in need of encouragement and spiritual guidance concerning God's presence in their lives, which may seem so obscure and puzzling at times. Although, in contrast to many mystics, he does not explicitly start from his personal experience, I am convinced, after having perused his writings for many years, that he knows by experience what he is talking about. His thinking is an original and incisive retrieval of the Greek Fathers'

<sup>30</sup> Sermon 101, in Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, volume 1, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Sermon 59, in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, 307.

<sup>32</sup> See sermon 83, n. 4, in Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, translated by G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist, 1987), 272–273.

apophatic tradition, handed on to the Middle Ages through Dionysius. Eckhart synthesizes Dionysius' view of mysticism and the German philosophical-theological current marked by the Neoplatonism of Albert the Great. Furthermore, the spiritual attitudes that he proposes are congruent with his vision of Christianity, and this is an advantage for those whose faith is in search of coherence.

**Louis Roy OP** holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge. After teaching for twenty years at the Jesuit university of Boston College, he is now professor of theology at the Dominican University College in Ottawa. He has published books in English and French, some of which have been translated into Spanish and Vietnamese. He is interested in intellectual, affective and mystical approaches to God in our contemporary world, in religious experience and revelation, and in interreligious dialogue.