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Mysticism and Meister Eckhart *

Frank Tobin

Mysticism, mystical, mystic: at times one might wish that these terms had never caught hold because they are used to describe such disparate phenomena, and because they often evoke an intimidating sense of reverence and mystery that inhibits analysis—as though one would be giving in to questionable voyeuristic tendencies, or committing a sacrilege if one were to expose the very core of it to the glaring light of critical investigation. The object of our present inquiry, the 13th and 14th century German Dominican preacher, professor, and provincial Meister Eckhart, has traditionally been spoken of as a mystic, and even as representing a high point in the Western mystical tradition. Thus, the editor of most of his German works, Josef Quint, in clarifying Eckhart's relationship to the terms scholasticism and mysticism, gives the palm to the latter term, declaring that the Dominican is rather a scholastic mystic than a mystical scholastic; that in the depths of his nature he possessed the mystical *intuitus*; that he possessed it, however, as knowledge rather than as feeling.¹ Another respected name in Eckhart scholarship, Hermann Kunisch, attempts to show that everything in Eckhart's works stems from "the experienced reality of the ground of his own soul" (*die erfahrene Wirklichkeit seines Seelengrundes*).² The British scholar, James Clark, adds his weight to this point of view with the following conviction: "That Eckhart had profound mystical experiences cannot be doubted by the serious student of his works"; however, he then adds the disquieting disclaimer, "but he never mentions them."³ Undaunted at the prospect of never being admitted to the circle of serious Eckhart scholars, Heribert Fischer has challenged this dominant point of view, questioning whether one should talk of an *intuitus mysticus* in the case of Eckhart, and suggesting that designating Eckhart a mystic comes from the murky waters of Germanistic and literary criticism, and not from the crystalline springs of

* This is a slightly revised version of a paper read at the eighteenth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 5–8, 1983.

theological classification.⁴ And C. F. Kelley rejects the title mystic for Eckhart, preferring to call him a pure metaphysician.⁵

Because the application of these terms is so varied, one could question just how profitable it would be to try to settle once and for all whether Eckhart was a mystic. The man and his contemporaries would find such an undertaking confusing since “mystical” had quite different meanings then. Mystics, whatever they are, were not grouped together as a kind of sub-category of *homo sapiens*—something we tend to do today. What may be of some profit is to explore three more definite factors usually considered to be central to mysticism and examine how operative they are in the case of Meister Eckhart. The three questions we can explore briefly are: 1) In what sense or senses can Eckhart’s thought be said to be mystical? 2) In what sense can one claim that his language is mystical? 3) Can we ascertain as the motivating or molding force for his thought and language something we can describe as a mystical experience?

Turning to the first point, I would like to put forth the thesis that Eckhart’s thought deserves to be called mystical because of the emphasis it puts on the union of God and creature, and because of how utterly one and united God and creature are perceived as being. That Eckhart’s works emphasize the union of God and creature more than most theological and ascetical writings is obvious to anyone reading them. The claim that he perceives this union to be more intimate than most Christian thinkers has to be justified. This can best be done by examining his doctrine of being.

Middle-of-the-road orthodoxy in interpreting, say, Thomas Aquinas, would approach the question of being (*esse*) by saying that God is being and creatures have being. Even though there is an infinite distance separating the infinite being which is God from the limited being possessed by creatures, creatures have a real being of their own. Granted that this being was created by God and needs his sustaining power to continue in existence, it is in some way similar to God’s being, and exists somehow truly independent from him.

Although much of what Eckhart writes often has a Thomistic ring to it, there is now little doubt that his approach to being is quite different. One must take seriously and not consider as rhetorical overkill his often repeated assertion that creatures are “a pure nothing.” The same is true for his equally uncompromising statement, which serves as the motto for his *Opus tripartum*, that being is (simply) God (*esse est deus*). If creatures are nothing and being is God, what are we to make of the being of creatures—a concept that does frequently appear in his writings? When speaking of it, he uses images which stress the insubstantiality of this being and the ambivalence of its existence. Instead of considering creatures in true

possession of their being, goodness, and other positive characteristics, he states that creatures have what they have from God “as a loan.”⁶ It does not really belong to them. Or he will use the example of a mirror to explain the existence of creatures: “One can ask where the being of the image most properly is: in the mirror or in that from which it originates? The image [of me] is in me, from me, to me. As long as the mirror stands exactly opposite my face, my image is in it; if the mirror were to fall, the image would cease to exist” (Pr.9; DW I 154, 1–5). Creatures are like mirrors, empty in themselves but capable of reflecting the image of something real as long as this reality is opposite them, informing them. They contain only the image of what is real. Thus the being of creatures is best described as a mere unreal image of the being of God. Little wonder that Eckhart felt justified in calling creatures pure nothing. A third way he describes the being of creatures is through an interpretation of the Johannine image of the light shining in darkness and darkness not taking hold of it (Joh. 1, 5). The light, which is God, illumines the darkness, which is creatures. But creatures cannot take hold of the light and grasp it as their own. The light does not inhere in the illuminated darkness nor take root in it. When the light ceases to shine, darkness (which is nothingness of creatures) returns to darkness.⁷

How does the nothingness of creatures possessing nothing of their own and best described as mere unreal images or illumined darkness indicate in Eckhart’s thought an overwhelming oneness of God and creature? When he calls creatures a pure nothing, he is not talking about the empirical reality we see around us. He is talking about creatures insofar as (*inquantum*) they are creatures, not creatures in the concrete as they live and breathe, but as logically distinct from all the divine reality which informs them. Creatures and God are intimately one because being is God. As beings, creatures are divine. They only contribute the nothingness which they are in themselves to their reality. The rest is God. This clearly goes beyond the unity implied in God’s being a creating and sustaining cause of creatures; so much so that one could ask whether this is not pantheism. The best answer seems to be that it does not have to be, and for the following two reasons. First of all, Eckhart at times uses dialectic to talk about this union of God and creature. As we would expect, he maintains that nothing is so distinct as God and creature. (In Sap. nn. 144–57; LW II, 481–94) Thus, while going behind scholasticism in his conception of the oneness of creator and creature, he exceeds traditional views of their separateness as well. Secondly, as Bernhard Welte has pointed out, there is a sense in which calling two things identical presupposes that they are two.⁸ One is usually speaking of two when one speaks of identity.

This realization that for Eckhart being is God in a more exclusive sense

than for most traditional orthodox theologians is necessary when interpreting a statement like the following: "Nothing is so close to a creature (*enti*), nothing so intimate to it than being (*esse*). But God is being and from him all being (*esse*) comes directly." Traditionally this would mean that God alone can create and sustain the being possessed by a creature. For Eckhart the being that comes from God directly is the divine being itself. This is the being that is united to creatures. This certainly makes the thought which follows truly mystical, for he continues: "He (God) himself *alone* penetrates to the essences of things" (In Joh. 238, LW III, 199, 3-5).

Turning to the preacher and professor's language, we seem to be within our rights in calling it mystical if we discover, first of all, an attitude stressing the insufficiency of concepts and the logical juxtaposition of their positive contents to express what God is, and how creatures are one with him; and, secondly, if we find a well-developed use of language following from this attitude. Regarding Eckhart's attitude toward language, we have already caught a glimpse of this in his use of dialectic. Eckhart uses dialectic not to describe adequately some real process going on in the divinity or between God and creatures, but because of the inadequacy of concepts and logic to deal with this reality. One can approach the truth more closely by contradictorily calling God and creature both distinct and indistinct than by trying to encompass their relationship in a single concept. This same attitude is apparent in his agreement with Moses Maimonides (In Exod. nn. 34-78 and nn. 143-184; LW II, 40-82 and 130-58) in saying that we learn more about God through negative attribution, *i.e.*, saying what God is *not*, than through the way of pre-eminence, *i.e.*, saying that positive attributes such as *good* and *just* which arise out of our experience of creatures can also be predicated to God as long as we understand that he is good and just in a more eminent way than creatures are. In siding with Maimonides, he is departing from Thomas, who stresses the higher value of the pre-eminent way. In giving his preference to the negative way, Eckhart is stressing how weak and inadequate philosophical concepts are in man's attempt to understand God and man's relationship to him. We know more accurately what God is not than what he is. To the philosophers and theologians God must thus remain cloaked in mystery. The "God" of the philosophers is a word best enclosed in quotation marks.

Moving from his attitude to his use of language, we discover the preacher's practice to be consistent with his theory. However, we must not belabor his view of the insufficiency of language excessively. He was, after all, by profession a scholastic theologian and clearly thought rational discourse was of professional value. It is a matter of degree. He clearly

stresses the relative impotence of language more than his most important contemporaries. We must remember, however, that a belief in the absolute and unconditional impotence of language would reduce one to utter silence. And Eckhart was certainly not silent about God and man's relationship to him. We shall limit ourselves to a few examples of how he employs negative language and antilogical juxtapositions of words to capture supra-conceptual reality.

Some aspects of Eckhart's negative language have caught the eye of several observers; for example, how he uses the prefixes *un*, *ent*, and *ab* and the suffix *los* to describe God or man's path to him. God is *unsprechlich* (inexpressible) and *ungeworlet* (unexpressed). The path to him is *wiselos* (directionless) and *bildlos* (without images). One must *abescheiden* (separate self from) and *abekeren* (turn away from) as well as *entbilden* (reject images) and *entwerden* (loss of identity). I would like to draw attention to his use of *niht* (nothing) and *nitheit* (nothingness). In interpreting Acts 9, 8, where the blind Saul arose from the ground and saw nothing, Eckhart twice (Sermons 70 and 71; DW III) takes this nothing that Saul sees to be God. God is nothing and is something, but because the something that is God is so different from other somethings, it is much better to say that God is nothing—a nothing infinitely surpassing all something as we understand it. It was the searing light of this nothing that so blinded Saul to all other somethings. In a similar vein, the preacher defines God as "*ein uberswebende wesen und ein uber wesende nitheit*" (that is, God is a being soaring above all things and a nothingness above being. Pr. 83; DW III, 442, 1–2). In other words, when one has exhausted all words to describe God, one can only go farther by calling him the nothing beyond.

Turning from negative to antilogical description, we can note Eckhart's penchant for paradox. Beside being a staple of the gospels, it was also an attractive means of expression for him because it is the rhetorical equivalent of dialectic. If paradox can be etymologically defined as a statement opposite the common opinion, Eckhart employs it more particularly as a statement defying normal logic. However, given the infinite nature of what he strives to capture and the finite nature of the means of capturing it—human language—, we can see easily why it appealed to him and permeates his works. How can one better describe God than by calling him *gesprochen* and *ungesprochen* (Pr. 73; DW 529–30)? Insofar as the Son is distinct from the Father, he is *gesprochen* by the Father. But since they remain one and the speaking never ends, the Son remains *ungesprochen*. And how better to describe this one action of God in which he both speaks the Word and creates the soul than to call it *uzvliezend–inneblibend* (flowing out–remaining within). (Pr. 24; DW I, 415, 14–17)? Man has an existence in

time that is dependent upon his existence in eternity in the mind of God. Eckhart conceives of temporal man's goal as a return to his timeless existence. The relation of time and non-time (eternity) must remain for us shrouded in mystery. The preacher therefore states that man's mystical goal is to become so free of his created self, "*als er tete, do er niht enwas*" (as he was, before he was. Pr. 52; DW II, 491, 8–9). In achieving this, man unites time with eternity.

Finally, how can the birth of the son in the soul better be described than by paradox? Eckhart says: The Father "... gives birth to me not only his son, rather he gives birth to me to himself and to himself to me, and to me his being and his nature" (Pr. 6; DW I, 109, 9–10). The Father gives birth to me, to his only son and to himself. Through the untranslatable identifying me and himself as the object the Father gives birth to, reinforced by the chiasmic repetition (*mich sich und sich mich*) the double paradox of God's dynamic union with himself and man's union with him receives far more apt expression than would seem possible through regular logic and grammar.

It is all well and good, one might object, to call Eckhart's thought and language mystical; but did he have mystical experiences? Are his works the project of a mind that has seen what is hidden from most of mankind, or is Eckhart simply a scholastic thinker more keenly aware than most of his contemporary colleagues of the limited results his profession could achieve, who then formulated his teaching and preaching accordingly?

Perhaps more troubling in this context than the word "mystical" is the word "experience." Eckhart, unlike many who have been labeled mystics, has left us no autobiographical writings. What we do have is impersonal in the sense that, aside from a rare peripheral reference, he tells us almost nothing about himself or the origins of his thought. Thus an approach like that of Carl Albrecht, which concentrates on the personal consciousness of the mystic as he approaches and experiences the state of mystical consciousness, is of little value here.⁹ If such episode played a part in the formulation of what he left us, at least he never saw fit to confide such things to his audiences. Nor does achieving such states of consciousness, which are experienced as ecstatic and are clearly distinguishable from the consciousness of everyday existence, assume any importance for the spirituality he advocates for his listeners. Richard Kieckhefer has convincingly shown that the goal he stresses is rather that his listeners become filled with the realization of their actual continuous state of union with God, a state they both possess and strive for.¹⁰

In view of the absence both of any clear evidence of ecstatic consciousness in Eckhart's life, as well as its lack of importance for the

spirituality he preached, what can one say about the experience at the base of his works? Certain characteristics of his thought and its expression, it seems to me, allow us to draw limited conclusions about the experience from which it sprang. Although they do not point clearly to a mystical experience in the sense of an ecstatic withdrawal from or heightening of normal states of consciousness, they do point to an experience which may be considered, in a broader sense, mystical.

First of all, he never tires of recalling to the minds of his audiences, both lay and professional, the truth and importance of the statement that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. An awareness of this permeates his works. Secondly, in a Latin sermon on prayer, he urges that the intellect must transcend not only *imaginabilia*, but also *intelligibilia* and God as *esse* or being. In prayer the intellect must transcend God under any name (Ser. XXIV, 2, n. 247. LW IV, 226). Such a comprehension of God in prayer certainly sounds mystical. And that he thought it possible would seem to be determined only by the preacher's having in some sense experienced it. Thirdly, the goal he seeks for the soul in his famous sermon on poverty of spirit can justly be described as mystical: For the truly poor in spirit is as free of his own intellect, will, and being, as he was when he did not exist (Pr. 52, DW II). At times, Eckhart's description of the path to union does seem to be colored by the psychological/experiential. Thus he says, for example, "When the soul enters into the pure light [of the divinity], it falls into its utter nothingness so far from its created somethingness in its utter nothingness that it cannot return of its own power to its created somethingness. And God supports its nothingness with his uncreatedness and holds it in his pure somethingness. The soul dared to become nothing and cannot on its own return to itself; so far did it go out of itself before God supported it" (Pr 1; DW I, 14, 2-8). Such passages at least hint at the dimensions of the consciousness which formulated them. Yet most of what Eckhart preaches and writes seems to resemble, as much if not more, a phenomenon much more central to the best in human existence than the unusual and peripheral phenomenon of mysticism understood as ecstatic consciousness. His works are more clearly the products of that level of insight achieved by intellectual and artistic geniuses who have explored uncharted worlds of the spirit and brought forth the best in our culture. That the insight he experienced was that of our oneness with God makes it mystical. The intensity of expression, the various images, and rich artistry he places in its service bear convincing witness to the intensity and clarity of the insight as he experienced it.

His grasp of its truth is too immediate and too secure to allow for doubt. He knows that he is one with the truth, and knows the difficulties his

hearers will have in realizing this in themselves. Thus, it is without arrogance, but with concern for them, that, in urging them to true poverty of spirit, he says: "Now I beg you that you be such that you understand these words; for I say to you in eternal truth: unless you are like this truth of which we now wish to speak, you cannot understand me." Such a declaration is not open to discussion. As the preacher himself assures us, we should not be troubled if we do not understand, for it is beyond the abilities of most to do so (Pr. 52; DW II, 488, 7-489, 1). Yet he cannot resist urging us on. For to the degree that one realizes the truth ("realize" in both its meanings), one is the truth.

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Notes

- 1 Quint. "Die Sprache Meister Eckharts als Ausdruck seiner mystischen Geisteswelt," *DVJS* 6 (1927): 674.
- 2 Kunisch. *Meister Eckhart. Offenbarung und Gehorsam*, Munich, 1962, especially 33.
- 3 Clark. *Meister Eckhart. An Introduction to the Study of His Works*. Edinburgh, 1957, 92.
- 4 Fischer. "Grundgedanken der deutschen Predigten." In *Meister Eckhart der Prediger*, U. Nix and R. Öechsli, eds., Freiburg, 1960; 58-59.
- 5 Kelley. *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, New Haven, 1977, 106-10.
- 6 Josef Quint, ed., *Die deutschen Werke* (Stuttgart), I (1958), II (1971), III (1979), and V (1963), hereafter cited as DW. This quotation *zur borge* is taken from DW V, 36, 16-20.
- 7 The Latin works (*Die lateinischen Werke*), which have had various editors and remain incompletely edited, will be cited as LW. This reference is to Eckhart's Commentary on the Gospel of John (In Joh. nn. 70-72; LW III, 58-60).
- 8 Welte. *Meister Eckhart. Gedanken zu seinen Gedanken*. Freiburg, im Breisgau, 1979, 90.
- 9 *Psychologie des mystischen Bewusstseins*. Bremen, 1951, Univer. Nachdruck Mainz, 1976.
- 10 Kieckhefer. "Meister Eckhart's Conception of Union with God." *Harvard Theological Review* 71 (1978): 203-25.