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Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckhart

David E. Linge

ABSTRACT

This paper interprets Meister Eckhart's mysticism as an integral part of a carefully worked out metaphysical scheme and as a theological response to the popular religious piety and the socio-economic expansion that transformed European society in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Both lines of interpretation bring Eckhart's concept of poverty into focus as they key to his thought.

After tracing the transformation of the older monastic ideals of the *visio dei* and cenobite poverty into popular mysticism and evangelical poverty in the new urban setting, the paper argues that Eckhart was the first major Christian thinker upon whom these ideals had a central and decisive impact. Thus Eckhart's concept of poverty must be understood on one level as a dissenting religious response to the effects of material prosperity on medieval society. On a deeper, but closely related level, Eckhart's concept of poverty must be seen in its *theological* significance as providing the mystical movements of the Rhineland with a reflective foundation. The paper argues that Eckhart developed a "metaphysics of intellection" that breaks with both Augustinian and Thomistic traditions in theology, and that correspondingly his mystical teaching breaks sharply with the love- or will-centered mystical tradition represented by Augustine, Bernard and the Franciscans. In his theology Eckhart affirms God to be the One, beyond being, and therefore to be unknowable through any kind of mediation. His mystical teaching posits a direct awareness of God when ordinary, mediated awareness of the world is stilled. Poverty is his term for this direct awareness of God. The paper suggests that this mystical experience of God is also an experience of the world and thus a self-identity *in* the world. In concluding, the relevance of Eckhart's notion of poverty to contemporary theology is briefly suggested.

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In his famous *History of Dogma*, Adolf von Harnack remarks that “the history of piety in the middle ages is the history of monasticism” (10). As a description of latin Christianity in the period before 1150, Harnack’s observation seems as valid today as it was when he made it near the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is based squarely on one of the fundamental and pervasive features of the Christian culture of the middle ages, the distinction between the religious and the secular life. Not only were the liturgy, the patterns of Christian life and experience and the religious expectations of Christians derived from the monastic context, but the theology of western Europe too was a virtual monopoly of the monasteries until their dominance was challenged by the universities. For monasteries were the haven for those in the society who desired to renounce the distractions and pursuits of the world and seek religious perfection in a well-ordered life of worship and devotion to God. The power of the monastic ideal of the Christian life is clearly seen in wave after wave of prophetic reform that continually renewed monastic life itself and also radiated outward from the monasteries to affect all the other social institutions of medieval Christendom.

When we turn our attention to the period after 1150, however, monastic spirituality seems to have lost much of its earlier influence. Social and economic historians in our own century have presented a detailed picture of a profound expansion of the population and economy of western Europe between 1150 and 1350 that is without parallel perhaps until the opening of the nineteenth century. In the face of this more complex situation, the older religious forces that had emanated from the monasteries and had shaped the ecclesiastical institution seem powerless and bewildered. “What was to be made of the towns,” says R. W. Southern, “—anarchic, engaged in pursuits doubtfully permissible in canon law, embracing extremes of wealth and destitution, subject to over-employment and unemployment, quite different from anything known in the rural community? To such a society the ecclesiastical organization had not yet, and perhaps never has, adapted itself” (274–75).

I

From the point of view of religious history this new situation is marked above all else by the rise of popular religious movements that represent the demand of the laity for access to the privileges of Christian life and experience hitherto available only to those within the religious orders. Popular religious fervor quickly burst the restriction of the laity to formal worship and the traditional *conversio ad succurrendum*—the retirement of the pious layperson to a cloister at the approach of death in order to die in monastic garb. The Cathari of northern Italy, the Humiliti of Lombardy, the Waldensies and Albigensies of southern France and the Beguines and Beghards of the Rhine valley are only the best known of a veritable deluge of pious associations of laypeople who voluntarily dedicated themselves to a simple life of evangelical poverty and common ownership. And these

movements grew up in a much more extensive atmosphere characterized by unauthorized lay preachers and missionaries and mass conversions of layfolk to a devout, but uncloistered life, an atmosphere that quite changes the religious tenor of medieval Christendom.

Yet as much as the presence of this new, often highly emotional, lay religiosity causes us to qualify Harnack's assertion, close examination of this new factor tends in a certain sense to confirm the continuing power of monastic spirituality as a profound influence on medieval Christendom after 1150. We can point to two principal elements of monastic spirituality that seem to carry over into these lay movements, finding a new embodiment in and deepening the religious aspirations of the laity.

The first such element is the vision of God, the experience of the direct presence of God which is granted to the self-disciplined and pure in heart. "Let us, therefore, gird our loins with faith and the performance of good works," says St. Benedict in the Prologue to his *Rule*, "and following the guidance of the Gospel walk in his paths so that we may merit to see him who has called us unto his kingdom." This desire for the direct, personal experience of God is one of the central aims of the monastic life, and particularly of the contemplative prayer of monks in their cells. Human life culminates in the direct vision of God and foretastes of that final beatific vision are possible even in this life. This mystical dimension of monasticism finds expression in St. Bernard's description of the contemplative devotion to Christ which moves the enraptured soul beyond the senses and beyond mere *scientia*—the knowledge of divine things—to *sapientia*, which is participation in the fullness of God.

Today we have largely lost our ear for the strikingly mystical quality of a host of biblical passages but their confirmation of mystical expectations was hardly lost on medieval hearers of the Word. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8). "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). ". . . that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:17–19). For people in the middle ages St. Paul's experience on the Damascus road was not a curiosity from an alien historical period but the very fullness of what God may provide for his lesser saints in lesser measure. Such experiences, however, are one thing when bound to the recitation of prayers, the psalter and the choir offices, and quite another when they pass beyond the monastery and into the mendicant orders and the secular life. In the latter context the highly emotional nature of popular religiosity was no longer guided either by theology or by traditional religious life-forms. My mention of the mendicant orders in this connection is not accidental, for as the history of the Inquisition shows, mendicant friars often turn up as abettors of religious irregularities and hysteria, even while the Dominicans and Franciscans were busy taking the helm of the Inquisition itself (Lea, II, 362; III, 1–89). As we shall see, Meister

Eckhart and his followers were themselves cited as a stimulus to Beghard and Beguine excesses, and many contemporaries regarded Eckhart's sermons as an inspiration to the Brethren of the Free Spirit.

The second element in the older monastic spirituality that, though transformed, played a vital role in the new situation is the ideal of poverty or renunciation. Benedict's insistence that monks own nothing was an affirmation of the Christian conviction, deeply rooted in the New Testament, that renunciation of worldly goods is the gateway to love of God and purification of self. In theory at least, the monasteries were the home of those who had abandoned earthly treasures and laid hold of things eternal. The fact that this was not particularly the case in the cloisters of the twelfth century, which were in fact an essential part of a wealthy ecclesiastical establishment, lends moral and reformist force to the model of poverty that seized the masses at that time. But St. Francis' empasioned and literal confirmity to the model of the naked and homeless Christ was never the image that moved the monks. Every order compensated individual poverty with corporate possessions, and in the course of time with institutional riches / 1/. The norm of monks and canons was Acts 4:32: ". . . no one said that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common." We should be wary, I think, of assuming that this moderate sense of poverty was totally eclipsed by developments in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There is ample evidence that the Brethren of the Common Life and many Beguine and Beghard houses revived and perpetuated this monkish ideal of poverty on the basis of voluntary vows.

Nevertheless, by the beginning of the thirteenth century this more moderate notion of poverty was receiving increasing competition in the imagination of the masses from a more radical and uncompromising sense of what poverty meant. St. Francis and Peter Valdez, founder of the Waldensies, were not converted to cenobite poverty, but to "apostolic" poverty—to an individual life-style characterized by destitution and begging. Not Acts, but the story of the rich young man and Christ's commission to his apostles point the way to a far more *mobile* notion of Christian perfection, better adapted to the rootless urban masses: "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics nor sandals, nor a staff" (Matt 10:9). "The voluntary poor," says Norman Cohn in his classic study of Christian chiliasm in the middle ages, "formed a mobile, restless intelligentsia, members of which were constantly travelling along the trade-routes from town to town, operating mostly underground and finding an audience and a following amongst the disoriented and anxious elements in urban society" (162).

It is this new and volatile sense of poverty as pure destitution and homelessness, in imitation of Christ and his apostles, that, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, becomes the rallying point for virtually every element of popular piety and lay dissatisfaction. Here is the fervent devotion to Christ cultivated by twelfth century monasticism translated into an active imitation of Christ in a secular, urban context. That older devotion is now grounded in lay study of Scripture and strict adherence to the letter of the

Sermon on the Mount that in effect bypasses ecclesiastical authority and direction. No wonder the Synod of Toulouse, meeting in 1229, found it necessary to forbid lay possession of the Scriptures! It was easy enough for these imitators of Christ to reach the conclusion that a life of poverty, marked by informal confession to one another and by Bible study was sufficient for salvation without the ministrations of the clergy, particularly when ecclesiastical authority was so often coupled with worldly luxury and display.

Now this widespread craving for poverty and the justifications given for it represent the earliest religious reaction to the growing material wealth that was beginning to appear in western Europe in connection with the general expansion of commerce and industry that took place in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In part, perhaps, it can be understood as a new ideology of resentment on the part of the lower classes, whose economic disadvantage stood out more clearly in contrast with the new wealth of the merchant classes. "Just as peasants and artisans could join a crusade or a flagellant procession," Cohn remarks, "so they could sometimes exchange their normal poverty, which was unavoidable, for a more extreme destitution which was voluntary and therefore felt to be meritorious" (162). But the fascination with apostolic poverty is by no means limited to the proletariat. Its most conspicuous representatives—again St. Francis and Valdez may be mentioned—came from the merchant class /2/. And the specutacular growth of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century brought thousands of persons from the upper social ranks into the lists of the apostolic poor.

It was to the new mendicant orders that the Church entrusted the task of bringing these new religious forces into acceptable, orthodox channels. To what extent they ever really succeeded in this, however, is problematic. In the first place, in their very constitutions the mendicant orders stood in such close proximity to the urban upheaval that the very topics we have been discussing—mysticism and the religious significance of poverty—became burning controversies within the orders themselves. Indeed, it is fair to say that these issues came very close to destroying the Franciscan order by the beginning of the fourteenth century. Pope John XXII's bulls *Ad conditorem canonum* of 1322 and *Cum inter nonnullos* of 1323, outlawing the Franciscan Spirituals and the radical Franciscan notion of apostolic poverty, drew both orders back toward the more conventional concept of individual poverty within the framework of institutional possessions. And though the friars may have had somewhat more success in organizing resistance to the mystical excesses that were abroad, the second order convents of nuns which both orders founded and the tertiary groups over which they excecised supervision remained hotbeds of mysticism throughout the fourteenth century.

Yet another factor enters this already complicated picture when we consider the fact that at the very time they were struggling with these issues the friars were also bringing philosophical and theological studies to a new level of power and sophistication. The connection of the mendicants with scholastic theology meant that their treatment of mysticism and poverty did not long remain restricted to a purely practical context. An important part of

the task assigned them by the Church in relation to the new piety was to work out a conceptual scheme which could accommodate the new factors and bring them into line with orthodox Christian thought. Mendicant dominance of theological studies at the University of Paris after the controversy with William of Saint-Amour and the secular masters was settled in 1257 and the establishment of the Dominican School in Cologne in 1248 provided the context for this work. The efforts of the friars to apply the tools of scholastic theology to the controversies surrounding poverty and mysticism met with mixed results. Both Aquinas and Bonaventure, for instance, discuss these topics, but neither thinker seems to be deeply influenced by the new possibilities inherent in them. At the risk of sounding somewhat cavalier, I think it may be fairly stated that Aquinas and Bonaventure succeed in blunting these notions. While both defend the virtue of imitating Christ's poverty as an essential doctrine of their orders, each is careful to limit its significance, first by restricting its relevance to persons of religious status, thus excluding the laity, and secondly by rejecting the absolutist interpretation of evangelical poverty and holding out for the communal possession of goods (Brady; Leff: I, 83–100; Weisheipl: 226–68). St. Thomas's hostility to mysticism is summed up in his assertion in the *Summa contra gentiles* that in this life the human intellect is as much adapted for the direct vision of God as an owl's eye for seeing the sun (1956: 98). Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, on the other hand, stands in the Augustinian tradition of contemplative mysticism, but aside from his greater attention to the reflection of God in the sensible world from which the contemplative starts, Bonaventure makes no real advance beyond the Christ-centered love-mysticism of St. Bernard and the Victorines. We must look elsewhere, then, to discover the full impact of these ideas on a major Christian thinker. My purpose in the remainder of this paper will be to examine the thought of just such a figure—Johannes Eckhart of Hoheim, called Meister Eckhart.

II

Meister Eckhart's vernacular sermons and extensive latin writings give clear expression to the new religious forces that appeared in the thirteenth century. The center of his teaching is the possibility of the individual Christian experiencing union with God, unmediated by likeness or concept, and the importance of poverty as the preparatory means for mystical experience. Yet he was hardly a wandering ragamuffin of the type Cohn describes. Born in 1260 near Gotha in Thuringia, Eckhart entered the Dominican order and rose to great prominence in it, serving as vicar general of the Dominicans in Germany from 1303 to 1311. What is more important, he was sent to the University of Paris by his order, where he became a Doctor of Theology and occupied the Dominican chair in theology in Paris from 1302 to 1303 and again from 1311 till 1313. His work as a preacher in the Rhineland undoubtedly brought him into contact with Dominican convents, where religious enthusiasm, marked by visions and mystical experiences, was very

much present, as the names of Mechthild von Magdeburg, Margarete Ebner and Gertrude the Great attest. Some scholars have suggested that this is the source of his doctrine of poverty or detachment (Leclercq: 373–84; Wentzlaff-Eggebert: 22–70; Taylor: 442–70). With the death of Duns Scotus in 1308, Eckhart stood without a peer in western Europe in his grasp of philosophical and theological traditions. His teachings do not constitute a merely practical mysticism, but are based on a carefully worked out metaphysical position. This is to say that reason does not play a merely secondary role in Eckhart's work, giving rational expression to an antecedent piety; his metaphysics is the basis of his mysticism and his mystical teaching is the religious answer to his metaphysics. Thus it is to his theology that we must look if we are to understand how he weaves together the various religious forces operative at the onset of the fourteenth century and how he came to have such an immense influence upon religious life in the generations that were to follow.

It has often been observed that Christian theology, from the fourteenth century on, stresses the absoluteness and transcendence of God in reaction against the mediating structures that had been developed earlier, first in the form of the sacramental apparatus of the medieval Church and the ecclesiastical elaborations that were attendant upon it, and secondly in the form of the natural theology represents a growing assertion, in various forms, of the inadequacy of all schemes that purport to mediate between God and human beings. God is unknowable in terms drawn from the world. From a theological point of view, then, the growth of mysticism, the direct appeal of the individual to Scripture and the nominalistic notion of faith unsupported by reason (fideism) all reflect the fact that the "natural world" was no longer felt to provide any point of intersection between the divine and the human.

This denial of mediation is evident in Meister Eckhart's earliest extant writings, the *Parisian Questions*, written during his first stay at the University of Paris. Here he denies the central tenet of Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics, the primacy of being (*esse*). In answering the question, Are existence and knowing identical in God?, Eckhart first states the position of Aquinas, that their identity follows from the fact that God is being (*Deus est esse*), and that as full and perfect being God's existence necessarily contains all perfections, including knowing. Eckhart declares that while this had been his own opinion he now holds that God is primarily intellect. "God is an intellect and understanding, and his understanding itself is the ground of his existence" (1974:45). The Evangelist did not say, "In the beginning was being and God was being," he said, "In the beginning was the word . . . and the Word was God." Similarly, Christ said "I am the Truth." Now Word and Truth relate primarily to intellect, not to being. Thus intellect is a higher perfection than being and belongs more properly to God. As Eckhart elaborates his new position, the gap between his view and Aquinas's widens: God is not being at all in any formal sense since he is the cause of being. As causes stand beyond their effects, God must be regarded as *beyond* being.

By placing God beyond being, Eckhart neatly undermines the entire structure of St. Thomas's natural theology in which being is the communal or

middle term linking God and world. God, as uncreated being, is the fullness and perfection of being, but creatures have their own proper and proportionate share in the very being which God possesses absolutely, thus making possible a careful and limited analogical predication from contingent to necessary being. Eckhart denies this possibility by identifying being with the creation, i.e., with determinate existence within species and genera. "As soon as we come to existence," Eckhart says, "we come to a creature. Existence, then, has primarily the nature of something creatable" (1974:45–46; see 47, 51 and 1957:218). It is instructive in a way we shall soon see that Eckhart appeals in support of his view, to the author of the Neo-Platonic *Liber de causis*: "The first of created things is existence" (1974:45) /3/.

If we look now at what Meister Eckhart is affirming—that God is intellect—rather than simply at his rejection of Aquinas, we see him moving deliberately toward the liberation of the very Neo-Platonic elements of western theology that Aquinas and Albertus Magnus had worked so untiringly to contain. In saying that God is neither a being nor the being of beings, Eckhart is not implying that God is less than being, but that he is higher than being. This is a constant theme of his sermons: "Before there was being, God was; and he is where there is no being. Great authorities say that God is pure being but he is as high above being as the highest angel is above a fly and I say that it would be as incorrect for me to call God a being as it would be to call the Sun light or dark" (1957:219). This assertion stands closer to Plotinus than to Augustine or Aquinas or the Christian tradition that stretches between them, for it is Plotinus who exalted the One above being, above all form or determinations. In the Neo-Platonic tradition God is utterly transcendent, without a nature, *and thus unknowable*. Of course Eckhart too finds it necessary to qualify this inheritance from Plotinus, for by identifying God with intellect he is bringing together in his doctrine of God the One and *Nous*—intellect—which Plotinus kept resolutely apart. In his *Parisian Questions* Eckhart argues that God does not have being but is the "purity of being" (*puritas essendi*), by which he means purity *from* being (48). And this purity of being is intellect. Aristotle had seen, Eckhart reminds us, that understanding is not being but that by which being is known. The intellect has no specific form of its own and precisely for that reason can apprehend the forms of all things. As the eye must itself be free of color if it is to perceive what is colored, so the intellect must be pure and unmixed with—separate from—what it knows. Hence understanding is superior to existence and belongs to a different order (1974:46).

Eckhart's reason for preferring this formulation over a metaphysics of being is not difficult to uncover. A metaphysics of intellection offers greater possibilities for protecting the absolute unity and oneness of God. It was precisely the unity of God that he saw threatened by Aquinas's identification of God with being. Aquinas's procedure of moving inferentially from beings to being in its purity involved predicating a multiplicity of perfections of God, and Aquinas apparently held that there is something in God corresponding to these divine names (1974:13). According to Eckhart, such predicates

correspond to nothing in God, who knows no limitations or restrictions. Not even negations point the way to God, since denials too imply otherness, division and thus plurality (1974:32–33, and 1956:410–11; cf. Gilson, 1952: chap. I).

By regarding God as intellect, Eckhart is attempting to avoid this difficulty. Hence he follows Plotinus in appropriating and modifying Aristotle's doctrine of God as *γνώσις γνώσεως*—thought thinking itself. Unlike Plotinus, however, who held self-thinking thought to be the first emanation from the ineffable One, Eckhart, as a Christian, considers the divine ideas—exemplars of the creation—to inhere in God himself: “God naturally precontains the forms of all things” (Eckhart, 1938:I, 195; Plotinus: V. ix. 6). In knowing his ideas God does not know something other than himself: indeed, Eckhart identifies the structure of divine knowledge with the Son, the eternal Logos eternally begotten by the Father. As a corollary of his view that God is beyond being, the divine exemplars too have no being, a view he takes to be corroborated by the nature of ideas generally. “A being existing in the mind,” he says, “as it exists in the mind, does not have the nature of being; as such it inclines to the opposite of existence. An image, as such, is also not a being: the more we think about its entity the more it distracts us from knowing the thing whose image it is” (1974:47). The mode of divine intellection is not discursive, as human knowledge is, moving from one intelligible fragment to another. Within the life of God all intelligible relations constitute a unity which is present at the same time, or rather in the same eternity, since all distinct consequences are present simultaneously in the unity of their common principle /4/. In a German sermon on Ecclesiasticus, Eckhart expresses his preference for intellect over being: “When we take God in his being we take him in the forecourt of his habitation. But where is God in his temple where he is shining in his glory? Intellect is the temple of God. Nowhere does God dwell more authentically than in his temple, in intellect. As other authorities say, God is reason, dwelling there in knowledge of himself, abiding alone in his stillness. In his knowledge of himself, God knows himself in himself” (1962:269–70). The intelligibility of Eckhart's mystical teaching depends on this doctrine of divine intellection, for in the mystical experience the Christian penetrates the inner stillness of God and participates in God's self-knowledge.

Yet even this formulation of divine unity within plurality did not seem finally to satisfy Eckhart. In his German writings, which are characteristically more daring and unguarded—but for that reason often far more revealing of his deeper intentions—he pursues Neo-Platonic metaphysics more thoroughly and distinguishes between two natures of God, or better, between two perspectives on the divine nature. Eckhart uses the term *Godhead* (*Gottheit*) to refer to God as he is in himself, in the stillness and hiddenness of his own unity, and the term *God* (*Gott*) to refer to the divine nature in its activity and relatedness. Godhead is the One, the negation of all multiplicity, preceding even the Persons of the Trinity which, in the second perspective, flow from it and manifest it. Beyond all names, beyond goodness, truth or

being, the Godhead is the *Abgrund*, the abyss of deity. Desert, wilderness, darkness, nothing are all terms he uses to point to the Godhead. Further echoes of Poltinus are to be heard when Eckhart declares that, in its fullness, the Godhead “overflows” and becomes manifest. Hence while the Godhead must be described as self-contained stillness, it is also dynamic plenitude, the life from which all being proceeds. “Life,” Eckhart writes in his latin commentary on the Book of Exodus, “signifies a kind of overflowing in which something wells up within itself, first pouring itself fully into itself and then overflowing into something external. In this way the emanation of the Persons in God is the reason and the preamble of the creation” (1938:II, 22; cf. Lossky: 115). Eckhart seems here to envision a twofold emanation from the Godhead, one the inner and eternal self-relation of the Trinity, and the second the finite actualization of the divine archetypes. “The eternal procession is the revelation of himself to himself. The knower being that which is known. This is the eternal flow no drop of which did ever fall into any created intelligence; it is the Son from the Father. In the temporal emanation things flowed forth finite. In the eternal emanation they remain infinite. The flow goes on in itself. As St. Dionysius puts it. “God is a fountain flowing into itself” (1956:I, 394).

Although the distinction between Godhead and God in the divine nature is not new with Eckhart—we find it also, for instance, in Gilbert de la Porrée in the twelfth century—Eckhart seems to be turning the distinction to a new and daring use (Gilbert de la Porée: 1268d–1269a). He is in fact struggling with the question of the relatedness or relativity of God, first in the form of God’s own inner self-relatedness and then in the form of God’s relation to the finite, temporal creation. “In his unity,” Eckhart asserts, “God is idle. The Godhead effects neither this nor that; it is God who effects all things. God in activity is manifold and knows multiplicity. God as One is absolutely free from activity. In this unity God knows nothing save that he superessentially is in his own self” (1956:I, 270). It would be tempting at this point to herald Meister Eckhart as the harbinger of Alfred North Whitehead, anticipating the doctrine of the primordial and consequent natures of God, but I shall resist the temptation /5/. While he is raising the question of divine relativity which western thought did not begin to face until process thought brought it to the center of philosophical attention in our own century. Eckhart has no real interest in developing a cosmological scheme. Rather, his efforts remained confined to the more Augustinian problematic of knowing God and the soul; more specifically, Eckhart wants to know how the soul issued forth from its home in the divine nature and how it may return there. It is strictly within this framework that he risks his statements regarding the relativity of God, as the following passage clearly illustrates:

God becomes as phenomena express him. When I existed in the core, the soil, the river, the source of the Godhead, no one asked me where I was going or what I was doing. There was no one there to ask me, but the moment I emerged, the world of creatures began to shout: “God!” If someone were to ask me, “Brother Eckhart, when did you leave

home?"—that would indicate that I must have been at home sometime. I was there just now. Thus creatures speak of God—but why do they not mention the Godhead? Because there is only unity in the Godhead and there is nothing there to talk about. God acts. The Godhead does not. It has nothing to do and there is nothing going on in it. It is never on the lookout for something to do. The difference between God and the Godhead is the difference between action and nonaction. . . . When I return to the core, the soil, the river, the source which is the Godhead, no one will ask me whence I came or where I have been. No one will have missed me—for even God passes away. (1957:225–26)

Often Eckhart seems to waver in his understanding of the role of the Trinity in this scheme, sometimes regarding the Persons as the unfolding of the Godhead, and at other times identifying the Father with the One (e.g., 1956:I, 379, 355, 388). But in any case, the triune nature of God is the “preamble” or “reason” of the creation, containing in one principle what becomes manifest in the multiplicity of the created order. And as Creator, God is described by Eckhart as the “great self-sharer,” endowing his creatures with their being (1957:220). Through all his shifts in terminology and formulation comes Eckhart’s clear asseveration that the passage of creatures from their uncreated, archetypal state to their finite, created state makes a difference within the divine nature itself.

I have said before and say again that God has wrought one act eternally in which act he made the soul in his own likeness, and out of which act and by means of which act the soul issued forth into her created existence, becoming unlike God and estranged from her own prototype, and in her creation she made God, who was not before the soul was made. At various times I have declared: I am the cause that God is God. God is begotten of the soul, his Godhead of himself; before creatures were, God was not God although he was Godhead which he gets not from the soul. (1956:I, 409–10).

Eckhart’s doctrine of the two “natures” of God—absolute and relative—and his understanding of the two natures of created beings—uncreated and created—sets the stage for the mystical teaching which is the essential content of all his sermons. In his theology, he draws generously on the Pseudo-Dionysius, on Plotinus and Proclus, showing that these Neo-Platonic thinkers continued to function as sources of theological inspiration even after their ideas had been differentiated from Aristotle’s. But Eckhart’s understanding of the relativity of God seems to be wholly original with him. Ironically, however, it is precisely this divine relativity that is the main casualty of his mysticism, for the highest religious experience, Eckhart tells us, is nothing less than union with the Godhead, the abyss of God, in which the soul surpasses even its uncreated nature. “Even God passes away.”

III

Meister Eckhart's development of what I have called a "metaphysics of intellection" is sometimes taken as a defense of the traditions of his order against the Franciscans, who asserted the priority of will and love in human life (Caputo: 486). This suggestion can be misleading, however, if it prompts us to understand Eckhart as elevating one faculty or power of the soul—namely intellect—over another. In fact, Eckhart the mystic is primarily concerned to lead his hearers (or readers) beyond all faculties and into the stillness or desert that lies buried in the depths of the individual soul. In this sense, Eckhart's mystical doctrine stands in sharp contrast to the western mystical tradition that stems from St. Augustine and finds its noblest expression in Cistercian piety as well as in the Franciscan movement.

An important part of the motive power of western mysticism, as Kenneth Kirk correctly sees, was "to hedge about the mystical experience of western Christendom with moral safeguards . . . [so] that the negative and ecstatic implications of the Areopagite tradition should be kept within their true bounds (Kirk: 354). Hence, starting from St. Augustine's affirmation of the priority of will, will- or love-centered mysticism led step by step through a graded cultivation or purification of love to a vision of God which conceived union as an agreement of wills. Although there is ecstatic union in this mysticism, and a transformation of self, there is never the confusion of God and human being that western theologians regarded as the underlying danger of Greek or Neo-Platonic speculative mysticism. "We are of the opinion," St. Bernard declares, "that God and man, because both their wills and substances are distinct, abide in each other in an altogether different way, that is, their substances are not fused but their wills are in harmony. And this union is for them a communion of wills and an agreement of love" (1126a–b). Bernard's caveat is repeated in the thirteenth century in Bonaventure's mystical masterpiece, *The Journey of the Mind to God*: "In this passage [to the height of contemplation], if it is perfect, all intellectual operations should be abandoned, and the whole height of our love should be transferred and transformed into God" (vii. 4).

In contrast to this tradition, Meister Eckhart's sermons are almost entirely devoid of this language of love and will. While his mysticism stands in the Christian tradition, unlike that of the Neo-Platonists, it is not *affective* mysticism, i.e., it is not a subjective mysticism of personal experience. Eckhart's language is that of the metaphysician, and the soul remains for him an object rather than a subject /6/. As his metaphysics describes the descent of the soul into its created state, so his mysticism, determined by this framework, plots the soul's course back to God.

That aspect of the soul by which it is able to return to God Eckhart describes as intellect. Just as God himself is to be understood primarily as Intellect, so Eckhart affirms that the soul "contains a drop of intelligence, a spark, a twig of it. . ." (1957:220). Intellect is the image of God in human nature; by the exercise of intelligence the soul gains union with God. Now this

starting point for the return to God certainly seems to place Eckhart in the Thomistic tradition over against the Augustinian-Franciscan focus on the will. "I say that intelligence is above will. Willing, man conceives God in the garment of goodness. Thinking, man conceives God naked, stripped of both goodness and being. Goodness is a cloak under which he is hidden and the will is content with God so clothed" (1957:221) /7/. In fact, however, Eckhart stands no closer to Aquinas than he does to the Franciscans, for what he calls intellect is to be distinguished just as sharply from discursive reason as from will. Will and reason are both powers of the soul that relate it to creatures, to multiplicity. Intellect is Eckhart's term for the ground of the soul, beyond sense and reason, by which it knows God directly. "I have said that there is one agent alone in the soul that is free. Sometimes I have called it the tabernacle of the spirit. Other times I have called it the light of the spirit and again, a spark. . . . It is free of all names and unconscious of any kind of forms. It is at once pure and free, as God himself is, and like him is perfect unity and uniformity, so that there is no possible way to spy it out" (1957:210–11; cf. Weiss). In this innermost ground, the soul is still and silent, absolutely discontinuous with the powers by which it acts in the world. "Here," Eckhart says, "the core of God is also my core, and the core of my soul the core of God's, and here I am independent as God himself is independent" (1957:126). In this hidden recess the soul is more like God than creatures. "God and the soul are so nearly related to each other that there is really no distinction between them" (1957:214). Consequently Eckhart attributes to this spark all the properties he attributes to God.

Let us turn briefly to the question of how Eckhart describes the experience of mystical union. To focus completely on the core or spark of the soul, abandoning all images and concepts, is to enter into an eternal stillness, beyond time and space. Here all pious talk of manifold heavens and angelic choirs is left behind. "You must know," Eckhart tells us, "that expressions of this sort, which conjure up pictures in the mind, merely serve as allurements to God. In God there is nothing but God; no soul gets to God until she *is* God as she was before she was made" (1956:I, 328). For the most part, Eckhart describes this experience as the soul's recovery of its uncreated nature, in which it is in God and knows all things in the unitative intellectual vision by which God knows himself. At other times, however, he seems to designate this as a preliminary state, one he characterizes as "equality with God," but not yet complete union with him. This distinction appears in the German treatise, "On the Vision of God," as well as in various sermons.

In my eternal prototype the soul is God, for there God works and my soul had equality with the Father, for my eternal prototype, which is the Son in the Godhead, is in all respects equal with the Father . . . however, where there is equality there is no unity, for *equal* is a privation of unity; and where there is unity there is no equality for equality resides in multiplicity and separation. Where there is equality there cannot be unity. . . . Hence the Son in the Godhead, inasmuch as he is Son, is equal with the Father but he is not one with the Father.

There is no equality where Father and Son are one, that is, in the unity of the divine essence. In this unity the Father knows no Son nor does the Son know the Father, for there there is neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit. The soul enters into the Son, her eternal prototype, where in she is equal with the Father, but then, breaking through her eternal prototype, she, with the Son, transcends and possesses unity with the three Persons in the unity of the essence. (Preger:I, 486) /8/

Eckhart provides us with no analytical typologies, no elaborate descriptions of various experiential stages on the mystic way, such as we find in St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross. Thus it is difficult, if not wholly impossible, to say whether the distinction he makes here points to two separate religious experiences or merely delineates two ways of expressing the same experience. Nor is it my purpose here to decide this issue, or to compare Eckhart's utterances with other Christian mystics. What is far more important is his disavowal of the language of love and his insistence that all emotions are absent when one passes into the un-selfconsciousness and unknowing of mystical union.

Now some people wish it to appear that the flower, the kernel of blessing is this awareness of the spirit, that it is *knowing* God. For if I have rapture and am unconscious of it, what good would it do and what would it mean? I cannot agree with this position . . . for the foundation of spiritual blessing is this: that the soul look at God without anything between; here it receives its being and life and draws its essence from the core of God, unconscious of the knowing-process, or love or anything else. Then it is quite still in the essence of God not knowing at all where it is, knowing nothing but God. When, however, the soul is aware that it is looking at God, loving him and knowing him, that already is a retrogression, a quick retreat back to the upper level of the natural order of things. (1957:79–80)

This spark in the depths of the soul can only be recovered by a total abandonment of the identity provided by the world of multiplicity. Since like God himself, the spark is absolutely discontinuous with the world, only by turning inward, away from creatures, can true salvation be found. It is here perhaps more than anywhere else in his thought that Eckhart breaks most sharply with western mysticism and religious piety. And it is here, therefore, that we can grasp most clearly the immense impact that he had on the religious situation we described earlier. For Eckhart's assertion of a total dichotomy between the God beyond being and the divine spark on the one hand, and the entire creaturely world on the other, leads to a religious view that relativizes in principle the traditional ecclesiastical distinctions and cherished religious practices of the context in which his hearers lived their lives. Not by conversion in any ordinary sense, or by a transformation or refashioning of the spiritual powers of the soul is contact with God established. Love and wisdom are the results of the operation of will and reason, powers that relate the Christian to creatures. Thus, while they are expressions of the Christian

life, binding Christians to the world of creatures, they are absolutely irrelevant to the mystical experience which arises from the ground of the soul alone. "If you imagine," Eckhart asserts, "that you are going to get more out of God by means of religious offices and devotions, in sweet retreats and solitary orisons, than you might by the fireplace or in the stable, then you might just as well think you could seize God and wrap a mantle around his head and stick him under the table! To seek God by rituals is to get the ritual and lose God in the process, for he hides behind it" (1957:127) /9/. Eckhart carries this evaluation through with ruthless consistency: humility, mercy, perseverance are all Christian virtues that orient the soul to the world. While his interpretation of them is respectful and, technically speaking, orthodox, he clearly regards them as biproducts of the "birth of the Word in the soul" (1957:82–84). And this quite alters their religious significance. They do not make us holy, but rather are themselves sanctified by us when we have made room for God in the center of the soul. "When a person has had a true spiritual experience," Eckhart says, "he may boldly drop external disciplines, even those to which he is bound by vows, from which even a bishop may not release him" (1957:116).

Now if we keep in mind that words such as these were spoken to unlettered nuns and to the urban poor, who were the primary audience of Dominican preaching, we can understand why Meister Eckhart became such a powerful stimulus to the popular religious movements that harbored all the resentments against the Church and all the other elements of the new religiosity we considered earlier on. Indeed, we can understand how his careful qualifications of these potentially inflammatory assertions were ignored when the assertions themselves were appropriated by the Brethren of the Free Spirit in Strassburg and Cologne and used in support of a libertinism that was far removed from Eckhart's own intentions. We come closer to his own intentions, however, by saying that Christian virtue is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for divine knowledge. These virtues are not simply to be jettisoned, as the radical Rhineland sects were doing, but are to be transcended "from within," as it were, not from without. "You should pass through and transcend all virtues," Eckhart declares, "and only receive virtue in the ground of the soul where it is one with the divine knower" (1938:I, 276; Kelley, 1977: 218) /10/.

But how can we unearth this spark in the depths of the soul? If all virtues and all particular orientations of the self are simply irrelevant or at least insufficient to bring this deepest religious state about, how does the "birth of the Word" take place? Is it purely the work of divine grace, entirely fortuitous and indifferent to any preparatory efforts of the individual? Eckhart's answer to this question brings us back at long last to the issue of poverty. The precondition of mystical union is the radical emptying of the self of all finite content—the silencing of all the faculties—an emptying that is the result of poverty or detachment. "I would have you know," Eckhart says, "that to be empty of creatures is to be full of God and to be full of creatures is to be empty of God" (1958:I, 343; see 1957:85). The soul must therefore lose its very

identity. Renunciation or detachment from creaturehood in its entirety—*Abgeschiedenheit*—is the constant theme of Eckhart's preaching and the most exalted of the virtues. Not even God can enter into the soul which is perfect in poverty or detachment. In detachment God passes away.

God himself cannot even peek into it for a moment—or steal into it—insofar as he has particular selfhood and the properties of a person . . . for the onefold One has neither mode nor properties. And therefore, if God is to steal into the little castle in the soul the adventure will cost him all his divine names and personlike properties; he would have to forego all these if he is to gain entrance. Except as he is the onefold One, without mode or properties—neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit in this personal sense, yet something that is neither this nor that—it is only as he is One and onefold that he may enter into that One which I have called the little castle of the soul. (1957:211)

For Eckhart the life of poverty is not the result of the quest for meritorious works of renunciation. Poverty is the highest "virtue" precisely because it is the *abandonment* of all such intentions and personal acquisitions. In renouncing all creatures and all conditions for creaturehood—space, time and self—poverty *has* no object. In poverty or detachment, therefore, we approach the state of pure, non-intentional experience. "What then," Eckhart asks, "is the object of absolute detachment? I answer that the object of absolute detachment is neither this nor that. It is absolute nothingness, for it is the culminating point where God can do precisely as he will" (1956:I, 345). Eckhart is perfectly aware that the apparently negative meaning of nothing—of "no-thing-ness"—harbors a deeper, positive sense as well. As nonintentional experience, poverty or detachment is the awareness of being in its purity and fullness, of what Eckhart, straining his native tongue to the utmost, calls pure "isness"—*Istigkeit* / 11/. Here, paradoxically, detachment, because it is nonpossessive awareness, is the awareness of everything, shorn of its "as-ness"—as being *my* object, *my* possessions, the instruments of *my* purposes. "This unity," Eckhart says, "which is in no way creaturely is poverty, for it is poor of creatures, its content being that of simple actuality" (1962:II, 519; see 1956:I, 360–61). Thus the experience of union is not a world-flight, not awareness of "another" realm or "another" thing, but the direct awareness of being. Often Eckhart refers to this intuitive, unitary awareness as the result of *Gelassenheit*, of resignation or letting-things-be; *Gelassenheit* opens up a nongrasping, nonassertive mode of apprehension / 12/.

All of these terms—poverty, detachment, letting-things-be—as Eckhart employs them, point to the inadequacy of interpreting Eckhart in terms of a distinction between ecstasy and its aftermath, between the moment of union and the return to the ordinary world in which the mystic resumes her life of ordinary experience, characterized perhaps by a certain lingering glow or numinous quality. To be sure, a distinction must be made between the experience of union, which Eckhart sometime describes as "unknowing" or spiritual "dementia," and life in the world of multiplicity. But poverty or

detachment is a way of life in which the mode of nongrasping, nonintentional apprehension endures, so that one is, as it were, both in and out of time.

I am often asked if it is possible, within time, that a person should not be hindered either by multiplicity or by matter. Indeed it is. When this birth really happens, no creature in all the world will stand in your way and, what is more, they will all point you to God and to this birth. . . . And so it is with all who experience this birth. They, together with all around them, earthy as you please, are quickly turned toward it. Indeed, what was formerly a hindrance becomes now a help. Your face is turned so squarely toward it that, whatever you see or hear, you only get this birth out of it. Everything stands for God and you see only God in all the world. It is just as when one looks straight at the sun for a while: afterwards, everything he looks at has the image of the sun in it. If this is lacking, if you are not looking for God and expecting him everywhere, and in everything, you lack the birth. (1957:122–23)

This consolidation of mystical experience in the life of poverty or detachment becomes clearer when we turn to what Eckhart considers the final, intractable impediment to genuine religious experience. This impediment is the self. Above all else, poverty is the abolition of the self. “Begin, therefore,” says Eckhart, “with self and forget yourself! If you do not first get away from self, then whatever you get away from you will still face obstacles and restlessness” (1957:5). To regard poverty as something to be willed or achieved is to miss what is really at stake, for willing and achieving are themselves symptoms of the self that is the problem. Poverty is thus the line of demarcation between self-filled, self-directed action and selfless activity. “To the extent that you eliminate self from your activities,” Eckhart counsels, “God comes into them” (1957:6). It is important to notice that Eckhart speaks here of eliminating self from activities, not of eliminating activity. Just as his mystical teaching does not entail world-flight, so it does not advocate quietism. Rather, “letting-things-be”—*Gelassenheit*—as he understands it, opens up for the first time the possibility of a genuinely Christian, *selfless* love. “To live by this pure essence of our nature one must be so dead to all that is personal, that he could be as fond of persons long dead as he is of familiar and homely friends. As long as you are more concerned for yourself than you are for other people you have never even seen, you are wrong, and you cannot have even a momentary insight into the simple core of the soul” (1957:125–26).

Eckhart’s concerted attack on the self is an essential aspect of his doctrine of poverty or detachment, and it distinguishes his teaching from the conventional medieval ideal of spiritual poverty. That ideal regarded detachment as the means for renouncing the things of the world and gaining a perfect self-possession, so that personal will could be conformed to the divine will (Kelley, 1956: 59). For Meister Eckhart, however, poverty means a more radical dispossession of the self. “As long as a person keeps his own will, and thinks it his will to fulfill the all-loving will of God, he has not that poverty of

which we are talking, for this person has a will with which he wants to satisfy the will of God, and that is not right. For, by the everlasting truth, as long as you will do God's will, and yearn for eternity and God, you are not really poor; for he is poor who wills nothing, knows nothing, and wants nothing" (1957:228). Willing nothing, knowing nothing and wanting nothing, the ego passes into oblivion; the "I" that constructs an economy of "self and other," dividing, manipulating and desiring, passes away and only God remains (Kelley, 1956:59). "Self is reduced to utter nothingness," says Eckhart, "and there is nothing left but God, for God outshines her as the sun the moon and she, with God's all-pervasiveness, streams into the eternal Godhead where God keeps every flowing into God" (1956:I, 362).

It may seem implausible that a mystical teaching as subtle as Eckhart's could have had much influence in the turbulent situation that prevailed in the Rhine valley at the beginning of the fourteenth century. But his influence is indisputable. In Strassburg and Cologne, where he spent most of his adult years, Eckhart was the most powerful and popular preacher of his time. His preaching and writing were the well-spring of that revival of genuine spiritual devotion in Germany that is associated with the mystical movement called the Friends of God (Clark, 1957:122–24; 1949:75–79; Kelley, 1954:1–50). Johannes Tauler and Heinrich Suso were only the most famous of his pupils. As a Dominican, Meister Eckhart was bound to the discipline of preaching, and his daring sermons were the ideal means of disseminating his doctrine of poverty. Despite the condemnation in 1329, two years after his death, of twenty-nine propositions taken from his sermons and writings, Eckhart's influence continued, and the formative role it played in the development of the *Devotio Moderna* as well as in the Friends of God is well documented in contemporary scholarship (Seesholtz; Lückert; Wentzlaff-Eggebert: 130–49).

Eckhart's efforts constitute a profound transformation and deepening of the mystical inclinations and practice of poverty that were already thriving in the German Rhineland and in the Low Countries in the fourteenth century. In Meister Eckhart poverty becomes more than a meritorious life of wandering, begging and preaching, or a mere glorification of the proletariat. It was indeed one of the earliest and deepest responses to the religious problem created by the new wealth and relative abundance that was becoming available to a growing class of people, a wealth that had deeply affected the Church as well as every segment of society. In this sense, Eckhart and his followers are quite clear that spiritual poverty—detachment from the things of the world—entails a life of physical, material poverty. "As far as the soul follows God into the desert of his Godhead," Eckhart preached, "so far the body follows the bodily Christ into the desert of his willing poverty" (1956:I, 145). And Eckhart's words are echoed by his anonymous Rhineland follower, the author of the fourteenth century *Book of the Poor in Spirit*:

Where there is genuine poverty of spirit there is also poverty of body. The highest always contains the lower, and what the highest does the lower should also do. If the spirit, which is the higher, is really poor,

then the body, which is the lower, should also become as poor as possible. For instance, as the servant must always do what his master requests, so also the body must do what the soul requests, and not the soul what the body desires. Hence it was not necessary for Christ to say: "Blessed are the poor in spirit and the body," since poverty of spirit includes poverty of body. (Kelley, 1954:115)

Hence Meister Eckhart's transformation of the ideal of poverty must be understood as a direct religious response to the historical situation in which he found himself—a direct response to the material wealth that had already begun to mesmerize the European spirit. And this is his principal value to contemporary theology, for we stand today at the other end of a long history of unprecedented economic development—in a time when the din of the vast machinery of prosperity has drowned out all else and absorbed all other human concerns. It is a vital theological problem for us to understand how and why this religious response to material wealth was smothered by the kinds of accommodations Western religious traditions have worked out in the modern period. If we do indeed face today, as a growing number of thinkers tell us, a crisis of industrial society brought on by a quest for material prosperity which threatens to exhaust our remaining natural resources and to undercut environmental conditions for our continued existence, then perhaps we are in a better position to hear what Meister Eckhart has to say from his vantage point in the fourteenth century.

The theological task which Eckhart's teaching puts before us, therefore, is to recover the positive religious ideal of poverty—an ideal of Christian asceticism. In an age that has come to pride itself in the proliferation of wants and "needs," Meister Eckhart speaks in the name of a religious insight that can begin to liberate us from the identification of human blessedness with unlimited material possessions. Such a Christian asceticism must rest on more than a reluctant resignation to a deteriorating standard of living. It must spring from the fundamental mode of religious apprehension which Eckhart describes in his notion of detachment or *Gelassenheit*—of "letting-things-be." The concept of detachment performs a twofold theological function. In the first place, it uncovers a mode of human self-identity that is beyond the identity provided by the things of this world. Secondly, it does this without falling into a *hatred* of this world. As Martin Heidegger has argued, *Gelassenheit* is precisely a releasement *towards* being, an openness to being that is affirmative of beings because it has transcended a merely grasping or instrumental relation to them. Until Christian theology can recall this insight it will remain enmeshed in things. To recover it is not to lose the world but to gain it, and to understand anew the simple words from which Meister Eckhart took Christian faith to begin: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God."

NOTES

- /1/ The monastic intention is set forth in St. Benedict's *Rule*, Chaps. 34 and 35; what was more often than not the monastic actuality is reflected, for instance, in St. Bernard's caustic denunciations of Cluniac opulence.
- /2/ Cohn's work tends to interpret the emergence of the medieval ideal of apostolic poverty in oversimplified terms, viz. as a sort of proletarian, urban movement. A far more adequate treatment of apostolic poverty and its relation to medieval society will be found in Grundmann: 13–169, and especially 29–38.
- /3/ Towards the end of his life—e.g., in his *Opus Tripartitum*—Eckhart abandoned the conceptual scheme which identified being with created being and affirmed God as beyond being. In place of that scheme he adopted a more Thomistic-sounding formulation in which God is being itself (Eckhart, 1974:87, 93, 94). But the change is more apparent than real since he now denies true being to creatures, who are “pure nothings” (1957:185). Throughout such terminological shifts Eckhart admits no scheme that threatens his *basic* teaching, viz. the unbridgeable chasm between God and the creation (Gilson, 1952:39; 1955:439).
- /4/ This distinction between intellect and reason, i.e., between unitative and discursive knowledge, is drawn from Aquinas, 1970:171–73.
- /5/ It is unfortunate that proponents of panentheism have apparently never considered Eckhart's philosophy. For instance, Hartshorne and Reece include no selection from Eckhart. Though elements of what would later be known as panentheism seem to be present in Eckhart's metaphysics, we may explain his failure to develop them in contemporary terms by saying that his primary concern is with the question of the “religious availability” of God, and this carries him beyond the relativity of God to his mystical teachings.
- /6/ By *affective* mysticism I mean to refer to the mystical tradition in which the focus of attention remains on the subject in its personal experience. Such mysticism often employs highly emotional, often erotic, language to express the experience of the subject. The clearest affective mystics can be highly analytical, and have undoubtedly produced the finest typologies of the various stages and nuances of religious experience as well as descriptions of the techniques and disciplines used to achieve mystical experience. But one finds no speculative or metaphysical framework of interpretation, such as Meister Eckhart (or Plotinus) provides, to explain what is happening (cf., e.g., Teresa of Avila, 122). After producing what is perhaps the more profound typology of mystical states, St. Teresa makes the following comment, which distinguishes her from what I am calling *speculative* mysticism: “How what is called union takes place and what it is, I cannot tell. It is explained in mystical theology, but I cannot use the proper terms; I cannot understand what mind is, or how it differs from soul or spirit. . . . What I want to explain is the soul's feelings when it is in this divine union.” It is significant that Meister Eckhart completely rejects the suggestion that *any feelings are present at all in mystical union*.
- /7/ Eckhart argues this point in detail against the Franciscan Gonsalvo of Spain in the third of the Parisian Questions, “Is the Praise of God in Heaven more Excellent than the Love of Him on Earth?” (1974:58–61). Thus Eckhart does in fact stand with Thomas Aquinas regarding the superior nature of reason, but that has nothing to do with what he means by intellect.

/8/ Kelley (1977:257) indicates that Josef Quint has authenticated this very important treatise, “Von dem Schauen Gottes durch die wirkende Vernunft,” as a genuine writing of Eckhart. Cf. also such assertions as the following: “. . . the soul enters the unity of the Holy Trinity but it may become even more blessed by going further, to the barren Godhead, of which the Trinity is a revelation” (1957:200–01).

/9/ Eckhart’s mention of the fireplace and the stable as over against conventional religious practices and expressions of piety is significant. Because the way to the ground of the soul does not lie in some particular orientation or direction of human living, its recovery occurs just as readily in the everyday world of ordinary people. It is perhaps paradoxical, then, but not contradictory, that Eckhart counsels “detachment,” but not flight from the world: “The more he regards everything as divine—more divine than it is of itself—the more God will be pleased with him. To be sure, this requires effort and love, a careful cultivation of the spiritual life, and a watchful, honest, active oversight of all one’s mental attitudes towards things and people. It is not to be learned by world-flight, running away from things, turning solitary and going apart from the world. Rather, one must learn to penetrate things and find God there, to get a strong impression of God firmly fixed in his mind” (1957:9).

/10/ The following observations serve to distinguish Eckhart’s thought from the assertions of the Brethren of the Free Spirit who heard his sermons in Strassburg and Cologne: “The kind of work we do does not make us holy but we make it holy. However ‘sacred’ a calling may be, as it is a calling, it has no power to sanctify; but rather as we *are* and have the divine being within, we bless each task we do, be it eating, or sleeping, or watching, or any other” (1957:6). “The utmost a spirit can attain in this body is to dwell in a condition beyond the necessity of virtues; where goodness as a whole comes natural to it so that not only is it possessed of virtues but virtue is part and parcel of it: it is virtuous not of necessity but of innate good nature. Arrived at this the soul has traversed and transcended all necessity for virtues: they are now intrinsic in her” (1956:i, 391).

/11/ The term “Istigkeit” undoubtedly represents a vernacular rendering of Thomas Aquinas’s term *esse*, and to that extent Eckhart is fully dependent on the revolution which Aquinas brought about in metaphysics by distinguishing *esse*, in the verbal sense of “the act of existing,” from Aristotle’s identification of being with substance, *οὐσία*. It is immensely important to see that Eckhart the mystic remains dependent on and true to the scholastic tradition in which he stood. His difference from Aquinas is that he carries Aquinas’s conceptual insight beyond metaphysics and into the realm of religious experience. See Aquinas, 1949:7–9, 15, 29; and Gilson, 1952:154–89.

/12/ In my judgment, no thinker in the West since Eckhart’s time has better understood or appreciated what Eckhart means by this nongrasping, nonintentional mode of thinking than Martin Heidegger, who in fact takes over Eckhart’s term in his development of a closely parallel distinction between “calculating thinking” (*rechendes Denken*) and “contemplative thinking” or “meditation” (*besinnliches Nachdenken*). See Heidegger: 11–14, 33–34.

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