

Meister Eckhart (1260-1325)

Christianity in Germany

The challenge of Eckhart

The Christian theme foregrounded in the legends of *Parzifal* and King Arthur, and more or less shallowly foregrounded in the poetry of a Minnesinger like Walther von der Vogelweide, is evidence of the subtle pervasion of the new Christian faith into a German culture which is still, in the thirteenth century, in transition from a version of the Middle Ages in which are embedded many elements of the ancient pagan world. The monastic tradition still provides the energy for the evolution of the Christian perspective in Germany, though it needs adding that the whole Christian project, the making of a new mind, was far less quickly developed in Germany than in England or Italy, where the bonds between late Roman and early Christian culture were formed by the first centuries after Christ's death.

Eckhart's Personal background

Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) was born of a simple tradesperson family in Thuringia, during a period when a vocation in the church was one of the most promising career paths, but one made especially difficult at Eckhart's time, by the split in the Catholic Church, whereby the power of the Papacy had shifted between Avignon, in France., and Rome. (The subsequent conflicts, which swirled around Eckhart, were in part byproducts of a deeply insecure Papacy, split down the middle by history.) At the age of eighteen Eckhart entered the Dominican order and became a monk. By taking this step he took a career decision which would lead to an active institutional role, in his order, to conflict of life-importance for this monk, and to adventures in theological/philosophical thought which would render Eckhart a figure of influence not only in German religious history but in the wider history of both his world and ours. Through his sermons, philosophical position papers, and public debates, Eckhart was to become a widely known representative of his order, teaching, preaching and writing intensively. He was twice invited to a seminary lectureship in Paris, an honor previously bestowed only on Thomas Aquinas. As a teaching monk, Eckhart was an active scholar and preacher, who left behind him a great number of scholarly-passionate sermons and articles of discussion—both in Latin and in the vernacular.

Meister Eckhart's career

As a member of the Dominican order Eckhart was soon recognized as of remarkable intellectual power. He was sent to lecture in Paris—a center of high intellectual debate among theologians, the intellectual elite of the time—then moved from one seminary or pulpit to another. All this time he was concerned not only with theology, in which his thought grew increasingly bold, but with administrative matters, like convent management, which keep him fully involved in the world. As he develops his own original thought, however, Eckhart moves increasingly into considerations which before he knows it—indeed we don't know just when—begin to attract serious critical concern from certain of his superiors. At stake in this development is what will ultimately turn into a papal accusation of heresy.

The thought of Eckhart

It is impossible to encapsulate the metaphysical thought that Eckhart now enters in his forceful determination to further the speculative traditions Catholic orthodoxy found itself in. In any case we know that by 1326 some of Eckhart's superiors have begun to support an inquisitorial campaign against his teaching and writings. The essence of their concern is Eckhart's promotion of the idea of direct access to God. The essence of their concern is the implication, considered embedded in his developing thoughts, that a direct and 'mystical' access to God is possible, and that it is grounded in the nature of our thought.

The implications of such a position, for the organized church, are plainly immense. By this kind of suggestion Eckhart would seem to take the experience of *God directly onto the individual*, and, although remaining a monk, and belonging to the Church, which viewed itself as a uniquely fitting vehicle of the divine, he seemed to be adopting an independent, directly mystical relation to God, which would bypass the institution of the Church. (Martin Luther, the driving force behind Protestantism, is one of many who were struck with the force of Eckhart's thought, and by its relevance to the simplification of the Church. Significant, that, for it indicates Eckhart's 'dangerous' proximity to the thought of the Reformation.)

Our knowledge of God

Eckhart formulated his concept of our knowledge of God, in ways that involved more than the perils of threatening the unique claims of the church, as an (at the time) all-dominating institution. When one enters the charges against Eckhart the entire matter of heresy appears highly complex, and there are reasons to suppose that the inquisition into Eckhart's thought, before the conclusion of which he died, was driven by inner factional rivalries as much as by genuine intellectual insight. The charge against him is based on an interpretation of his view of the nature of thinking, which Eckhart thought to be presuppositionless, identical with its own thought, while God, as the ultimate thought, was the base from which we are as we begin to think. Whether or not this perspective entailed assuming a direct, mediation-free address to God remains open to discussion to this day. Discussion of the topic quite naturally encompasses the self-reflection of many in post-mediaeval spiritual cults, both within and outside of Christianity.

Eckhart and Saint Thomas Aquinas

The heart of the conflict, between Eckhart and the orthodoxy of his time, comes down to his relation to St. Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* (1265-73) represented the dominant orthodoxy of mediaeval Christian theology—and one of the giant achievements of world philosophy. Aquinas held that the human mind is aligned to the nature of things, so that by following its course upward, from the awareness of the daily, to and through the ascendingly 'spiritual' or 'abstract' stages of knowledge, we make our ways to God, the source of all intelligibility. The order of things is the backdrop to the order of thoughts. (One sees the harmony between this kind of early systems thinking and the orderliness of orthodox Christian worship, not to mention the hierarchical organization of orthodox Christian church administration. (The coherence, of this ordered thinking, on its highest level, is the subject of the book, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, by Jacques Maritain, a French theologian and profound student of Thomas; an intellectually available text of introduction to the intricate thought of Saint Thomas. The reader wanting to unfold the present setting for the difficulties of Eckhart could profitably start on the background Maritain provides, for the understanding of Thomas.)

Eckhart's dangerous position

Eckhart was a great admirer of the thought of Saint Thomas, and may be considered a rare intellectual contemporary of Thomas. But the position Eckhart adopted, toward the knowledge of God, grew increasingly conflictual with that of Thomas, and thus with Church authority. It can be seen that any appeal to the direct knowledge of God is dangerous from the viewpoint of a clerical hierarchy considering itself the consecrated path for reaching God. We are with Eckhart not yet on the outskirts of the Reformation, which will pitch its tent on the idea of 'direct access to God,' for Eckhart works insistently inside the frame of the Church as his time knows it. Eckhart's thought perspectives, which threaten his time's orthodoxy, are much wider than those that link him with the Protestant challenge, two centuries farther down the road. Those affiliations are with aspects of the global thought of our own time, with trends in Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as with trends of trans national meditational practice—Zen, for example—which unashamedly address the source of being, through positing the knowing self as mutually inclusive of the Source of All Being.

Study Questions

Reconstruct, in your own language, the thinking of Meister Eckhart which brought down on him at least the initiation of inquisitorial charges. Can you see the view point of the administrative forces aligned against Eckhart? Can you understand] defense Eckhart gave of himself? What is that defense? Was Eckhart's thinking a danger to the organized Church of the Middle Ages?

Does the Christian thinking of Meister Eckhart seem to you to resemble the thinking of the German literary thinkers one encounters among the Minnesingers or in the legend of Parzifal? Does Eckhart, for that matter, seem to you have a literary imagination as well as a strong philosophical mind? Would that be one reason for his continuing influence, to our day, over writers of diverse orientations?