

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Jakob Boehme (1624-1677)

Christian tradition in early German literature. Meister Eckhart, Erasmus, Luther, now Jakob Boehme the true Christian mystic, and not much later Angelus Silesius (1624-1677), who was born in the year Boehme (1515-1624) died: however shaky the engagement of early German literature with Christianity, one can say that by the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance there is complete entanglement between German literature, the topic of this part of our Encyclopedia, and the Christian tradition. The just named authors would be at the top of any reading list of German literature through the seventeenth century.

Jacob Boehme the individual. Jacob Boehme was born near Goerlitz, in present day Poland, in what was then the Holy Roman Empire. His father was a well to do Lutheran peasant, but the boy's circumstances dictated a modest career, and he was first assigned to cattle herding, until it was found that his health would not permit such exertions. He then took up shoemaking, was assigned to live with a supportive family, but they were not Christian and Boehme left them, in need of spiritual nourishment. In 1599 he got this nourishment, married, and went on to have four children. But he was no candidate for a settled bourgeois life. In 1600 he had the first of many visions. Though he would live and write profusely around those visions he would continue, for the rest of his life, to reside and work in the communities where he was born.

Boehme's visions and thought. The first of Boehme's visions occurred in 1600, when he was watching a beam of sunlight on a pewter dish, and in that perception had a vision of the structure of the universe, and of its inherent order. (He will come to write, at length, about evil as essentially disorder, as nothing but absence of order.) Despite warnings that he should desist from the direction of his thoughts—for Boehme began rapidly to write down and disseminate his visions—Boehme persisted from 1602 on with the text, *Aurora*, which was going to be his first shocking appearance on the religious stage of his time. There was much uproar against what appeared to some to be the pantheism of this early thought, and the uproar grew. Among the notions assuming thematic form in Boehme's extensive writings—particularly in the *Mysterium magnum* and *De signatura Rerum*-- are many which, in the sensitive new religious climate of Reformation, when new movements and affiliations were shaping in the wake of Luther, were extremely unnerving to orthodoxy. Boehme's notion that the Fall (and the Devil) are necessary parts of the Creation touched the Christian sensibility forcefully. Is God then partly evil? Was Christ's sacrifice necessary and 'good'? The counterpart idea that man can become 'as god' by divesting himself of humanity and seeing the world as God sees it, is equally disturbing, and confusing to the orthodox. We are reminded of the daring conflation, in Meister Eckhart, of the perceptions of human and the existence of God. In all of these realms of thought, whether seeing the creation as a vast birth giving field of suffering, or seeing mankind as evil struggling toward the light, and doing so with the power of free will, given by God, Boehme's often 'daring' thought put him at odds with the newly established Lutheran church, and yet his thinking remains inscribed inside the theology of Luther.

Is Meister Eckhart a literary creator? Is this work German literature? As we track the development of German literature, from *The Niebelungenlied* to the Reformation, we see that the German cultural imagination staged its first efforts in terms of what we would call religion imagination. Whether we consider this imagination purely fictive, or part of another reality discourse, will depend on the viewpoint toward religion which we bring to reading visionaries like Boehme.

Reading

Primary source reading

An Introduction to Jakob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception, ed. Hessayon and Apetrei, 2013.

Secondary source reading

Goodrick-Clarke, N., *Jacob Boehme and Theosophy*, 2008.

Further reading

Weeks, Andrew, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the 17th century Philosopher and Mystic*, 1991.

Original language reading

Kemper, Hans-Georg, *Deutsche Lyrik der fruhen Neuzeit*, 3 vols., 1986-7.

Suggested paper topics

Does Boehme seem to you to break from the spirit of Luther's movement, or to exceed Luther in giving the individual free and direct access to the experience of god? Had the churches, both Catholic and Lutheran, reason to fear the thought of a 'maverick' genius like Boehme? What has been the history of church response to mysticism?

What relation do you see between the mystical imagination and that of the great (but not mystical) writer, like Shakespeare? When Boehme sees the order of the universe in a bowl of water is he having a 'poetic vision'? Consult, in answering, the work of William Blake, who was one of the 'writers' most profoundly indebted to Boehme.

Excerpt The Way to Christ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/boehme/waytochrist.ii.ii.html>

Showing how Man should consider himself.

CHRIST said, Except ye turn and become as Children, ye shall not see the kingdom of God. Again, he said to Nicodemus; Except a Man be born again, of Water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God; for that which is born of the Flesh is Flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

2. Also the Scripture positively declareth, that the fleshly natural Man receiveth not the Things of the Spirit of God, for they are Foolishness unto him, neither can he know or conceive them.

3. Now seeing that all of us have Flesh and Blood and are mortal, as we find by Experience, and yet the Scripture saith, that We are the Temples of the Holy Ghost, who dwelleth in us, and that the Kingdom of God is within us, and that Christ must be formed in us; also, that He will give us his Flesh for Food, and his Blood for Drink: And that, Whosoever shall not eat of the Flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his Blood hath no Life in him. Therefore we should seriously consider, what kind of Man in us it is, that is capable of being thus like the Deity.

4. For it cannot be said of the mortal Flesh that turneth to Earth again, and liveth in the Vanity of this World, and continually lusteth against God; that it is the Temple of the Holy Ghost; much less can it be said that the New Birth cometh to pass in this earthly Flesh, which dieth and putrifieth, and is a continual House of Sin.

5. Yet seeing that it remaineth certain, that a True Christian is born of Christ, and that the New Birth is the Temple of the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us, and that the New Man only, that is born of Christ, partaketh of the Flesh and Blood of Christ; it appeareth that it is not so easy a Matter to be a Christian.

6. And that Christianity doth not consist in the mere knowing of the History, and applying the Knowledge thereof to ourselves, saying that Christ died for us, and hath destroyed Death and turned it into Life in us, and that He hath paid the Ransom for us, so that we need do nothing but comfort ourselves therewith, and steadfastly believe that it is so.

7. For we find of ourselves that Sin is living, lusting, strong, and powerfully working in the Flesh, and therefore it must be somewhat else, which doth not co-operate with Sin in the Flesh, nor willeth it, that is the New-Birth in Christ.

8. For St. Paul saith, There is no Condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. And further, Should we that are Christians be yet Sinners? God forbid, seeing we are dead to Sin in Christ.

9. Besides, the Man of Sin cannot be the Temple of the Holy Ghost; and yet, there is no Man that sinneth not, for God hath shut up all under Sin. As the Scripture saith, No one living is righteous in thy Sight, if thou imputest his Sins to him. The righteous Man falleth seven Times a Day; and yet it cannot be meant that the righteous falleth and sinneth, but his mortal and sinful Man. For the righteousness of a Christian in Christ cannot Sin.