

Eckhart's Religious Philosophy

by W.R. Inge

Eckhart's sermon explores the nature of the Godhead, the relationship between God and creatures, and the role of reason and will in the union of the soul with God.

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, John 17:21, Galatians 5:22, Philippians 2:3, James 1:27, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "Trinity Theology", "Christian Mysticism"

Description

W.R. Inge preaches about Eckhart's teachings on the Godhead, emphasizing the unity and diversity within the Trinity, the eternal nature of God's creation, and the process of detachment from worldly desires to be united with God. Eckhart's focus on love as the principle of all virtues, the importance of humility, and the need for detachment from creatures to find blessedness are highlighted. The sermon also delves into the ethical implications of Eckhart's mysticism, cautioning against dreamy inactivity and Antinomianism, and stressing the balance between contemplation and works of charity.

Transcript

The Godhead, according to Eckhart, is the universal and eternal Unity comprehending and transcending all diversity. "The Divine nature is Rest," he says in one of the German discourses; and in the Latin fragments we find: "God rests in Himself, and makes all things rest in Him." The three Persons of the Trinity, however, are not mere modes or accidents,[9] but represent a real distinction within the Godhead. God is unchangeable, and at the same time an "everlasting process." The creatures are "absolutely nothing"; but at the same time "God without them would not be God," for God is love, and must objectify Himself; He is goodness, and must impart Himself. As the picture in the mind of the painter, as the poem in the mind of the poet, so was all creation in the mind of God from all eternity, in uncreated simplicity. The ideal world was not created in time; "the Father spake Himself and all the creatures in His Son"; "they exist in the eternal Now"[10] "a becoming without a becoming, change without change." "The Word of God the Father is the substance of all that exists, the life of all that lives, the principle and cause of life." Of creation he says: "We must not falsely imagine that God stood waiting for something to happen, that He might create the world. For so soon as He was God, so soon as He begat His coeternal and coequal Son, He created the world." So Spinoza says: "God has always been before the creatures, without even existing before them. He precedes them not by an interval of time, but by a fixed eternity." This is not the same as saying that the world of sense had no beginning; it is possible that Eckhart did not mean to go further than the orthodox scholastic mystic, Albertus Magnus, who says: "God created things from eternity, but the things were not created from eternity." St Augustine (Conf. xi. 30) bids objectors to

"understand that there can be no time without creatures, and cease to talk nonsense." Eckhart also tries to distinguish between the "interior" and the "exterior" action of God. God, he says, is in all things, not as Nature, not as Person, but as Being. He is everywhere, undivided; yet the creatures participate in Him according to their measure.[11] The three Persons of the Trinity have impressed their image upon the creatures, yet it is only their "nothingness" that keeps them separate creatures. Most of this comes from the Neoplatonists, and much of it through the pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a Platonising Christian of the fifth century, whose writings were believed in the Middle Ages to proceed from St Paul's Athenian convert. It would, however, be easy to find parallels in St Augustine's writings to most of the phases quoted in this paragraph. The practical consequences will be considered presently.

The creatures are a way from God; they are also a way to Him. "In Christ," he says, "all the creatures are one man, and that man is God." Grace, which is a real self-unfolding of God in the soul, can make us "what God is by Nature"--one of Eckhart's audacious phrases, which are not really so unorthodox as they sound. The following prayer, which appears in one of his discourses, may perhaps be defended as asking no more than our Lord prayed for (John xvii.) for His disciples, but it lays him open to the charge, which the Pope's bull did not fail to urge against him, that he made the servant equal to his Lord. "Grant that I, by Thy grace, may be united to Thy Nature, as Thy Son is eternally one in Thy Nature, and that grace may become my nature."

The ethical aim is to be rid of "creatureliness," and so to be united to God. In Eckhart's system, as in that of Plotinus, speculation is never divorced from ethics. On our side the process is a negative one. All our knowledge must be reduced to not-knowledge; our reason and will, as well as our lower faculties, must transcend themselves, must die to live. We must detach ourselves absolutely "even from God," he says. This state of spiritual nudity he calls "poverty." Then, when our house is empty of all else, God can dwell there: "He begets His Son in us." This last phrase has always been a favourite with the mystics. St Paul uses very similar language, and the Epistle to Diognetus, written in the second century, speaks of Christ as, "being ever born anew in the hearts of the saints." Very characteristic, too, is the doctrine that complete detachment from the creatures is the way to union with God. Jacob Böhme has arrived independently at the same conclusion as Eckhart. "The scholar said to his master: How may I come to the supersensual life, that I may see God and hear Him speak? The master said: When thou canst throw thyself but for a moment into that place where no creature dwelleth, then thou hearest what God speaketh. The scholar asked: Is that near or far off? The master replied: It is in thee, and if thou canst for a while cease from all thy thinking and willing, thou shalt hear unspeakable words of God. The scholar said: How can I hear, when I stand still from thinking and willing? The master answered: When thou standest still from the thinking and willing of self, the eternal hearing, seeing, and speaking will be revealed to thee, and so God heareth and seeth through thee."

In St Thomas Aquinas it is "the will enlightened by reason" which unites us to God. But there are two sorts of reason. The passive reason is the faculty which rises through discursive thinking to knowledge. The active reason is a much higher faculty, which exists by participation in the divine mind, "as the air is light by participation in the sunshine." When this active reason is regarded as the standard of moral action, it is called by Aquinas synderesis.[12] Eckhart was at first content with this teaching of St Thomas, whom he always cites with great reverence; but the whole tendency of his thinking was to leave the unprofitable classification of faculties in which the Victorine School almost revelled, and to concentrate his attention on the union of the soul with God. And therefore in his more developed teaching,[13] the "spark" which is the point of contact between the soul and its Maker is something higher than the faculties, being "uncreated."

He seems to waver about identifying the "spark" with the "active reason," but inclines on the whole to regard it as something even higher still. "There is something in the soul," he says, "which is so akin to God that it is one with Him and not merely united with Him." And again: "There is a force in the soul; and not only a force, but something more, a being; and not only a being, but something more; it is so pure and high and noble in itself that no creature can come there, and God alone can dwell there. Yea, verily, and even God cannot come there with a form; He can only come with His simple divine nature." And in the startling passage often quoted against him, a passage which illustrates admirably his affinity to one side of Hegelianism, we read: "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which He sees me. Mine eye and God's eye are one eye and one sight and one knowledge and one love."

I do not defend these passages as orthodox; but before exclaiming "rank Pantheism!" we ought to recollect that for Eckhart the being of God is quite different from His personality. Eckhart never taught that the Persons of the Holy Trinity become, after the mystical Union, the "Form" of the human soul. It is the impersonal light of the divine nature which transforms our nature; human personality is neither lost nor converted into divine personality. Moreover, the divine spark at the centre of the soul is not the soul nor the personality. "The soul," he says in one place, using a figure which recurs in the "Theologia Germanica," "has two faces. One is turned towards this world and towards the body, the other towards God." The complete dominion of the "spark" over the soul is an unrealised ideal.[14]

The truth which he values is that, as Mr Upton[15] has well expressed it, "there is a certain self-revelation of the eternal and infinite One to the finite soul, and therefore an indestructible basis for religious ideas and beliefs as distinguished from what is called scientific knowledge. . . . This immanent universal principle does not pertain to, and is not the property of any individual mind, but belongs to that uncreated and eternal nature of God which lies deeper than all those differences which separate individual minds from each other, and is indeed that incarnation of the Eternal, who though He is present in every finite thing, is still not broken up into individualities, but remains one and the same eternal substance, one and the same unifying principle, immanently and indivisibly present in every one of the countless plurality of finite individuals." It might further be urged that neither God nor man can be understood in independence of each other. A recent writer on ethics,[16] not too well disposed towards Christianity, is, I think, right in saying: "To the popular mind, which assumes God and man to be two different realities, each given in independence of the other, . . . the identification of man's love of God with God's love of Himself has always been a paradox and a stumbling-block. But it is not too much to say that until it has been seen to be no paradox, but a simple and fundamental truth, the masterpieces of the world's religious literature must remain a sealed book to us."

Eckhart certainly believed himself to have escaped the pitfall of Pantheism; but he often expressed himself in such an unguarded way that the charge may be brought against him with some show of reason.

Love, Eckhart teaches, is the principle of all virtues; it is God Himself. Next to it in dignity comes humility. The beauty of the soul, he says in the true Platonic vein, is to be well ordered, with the higher faculties above the lower, each in its proper place. The will should be supreme over the understanding, the understanding over the senses. Whatever we will earnestly, that we have, and no one can hinder us from attaining that detachment from the creatures in which our blessedness consists.

Evil, from the highest standpoint, is only a means for realising the eternal aim of God in creation; all will ultimately be overruled for good. Nevertheless, we can frustrate the good will of God towards us, and it is this, and not the thought of any insult against Himself, that makes God grieve for our sins. It would not be

worth while to give any more quotations on this subject, for Eckhart is not more successful than other philosophers in propounding a consistent and intelligible theory of the place of evil in the universe.

Eckhart is well aware of the two chief pitfalls into which the mystic is liable to fall--dreamy inactivity and Antinomianism. The sects of the Free Spirit seem to have afforded a good object-lesson in both these errors, as some of the Gnostic sects did in the second century. Eckhart's teaching here is sound and good. Freedom from law, he says, belongs only to the "spark," not to the faculties of the soul, and no man can live always on the highest plane. Contemplation is, in a sense, a means to activity; works of charity are its proper fruit. "If a man were in an ecstasy like that of St Paul, when he was caught up into the third heaven, and knew of a poor man who needed his help, he ought to leave his ecstasy and help the needy." Suso[17] tells us how God punished him for disregarding this duty. True contemplation considers Reality (or Being) in its manifestations as well as in its origin. If this is remembered, there need be no conflict between social morality and the inner life. Eckhart recognises[18] that it is a harder and a nobler task to preserve detachment in a crowd than in a cell; the little daily sacrifices of family life are often a greater trial than self-imposed mortifications. "We need not destroy any little good in ourselves for the sake of a better, but we should strive to grasp every truth in its highest meaning, for no one good contradicts another." "Love God, and do as you like, say the Free Spirits. Yes; but as long as you like anything contrary to God's will, you do not love Him."

There is much more of the same kind in Eckhart's sermons--as good and sensible doctrine as one could find anywhere. But what was the practical effect of his teaching as a whole? It is generally the case that the really weak points of any religious movement are exposed with a cruel logicity most exasperating to the leaders by the second generation of its adherents. The dangerous side of the Eckhartian mysticism is painfully exhibited in the life of his spiritual daughter, "Schwester Katrei," the saint of the later Beguines. Katrei is a rather shadowy person; but for our present purpose it does not much matter whether the story of her life has been embroidered or not. Her memory was revered for such sayings and doings as these which follow. On one occasion she exclaimed: "Congratulate me; I have become God!" and on another she declared that "not even the desire of heaven should tempt a good man towards activity." It was her ambition to forget who were her parents, to be indifferent whether she received absolution and partook of the Holy Communion or not; and she finally realised her ambition by falling into a cataleptic state in which she was supposed to be dead, and was carried out for burial. Her confessor, perceiving that she was not really dead, awoke her: "Art thou satisfied?" "I am satisfied at last," said Katrei: she was now "dead all through," as she wished to be.

Are we to conclude that the logical outcome of mysticism is this strange reproduction, in Teutonic Europe, of Indian Yogism? Many who have studied the subject have satisfied themselves that Schwester Katrei is the truly consistent mystic. They have come to the conclusion that the real attraction of mysticism is a pining for deliverance from this fretful, anxious, exacting, individual life, and a yearning for absorption into the great Abyss where all distinctions are merged in the Infinite. According to this view, mysticism in its purest form should be studied in the ancient religious literature of India, which teaches us how all this world of colour and diversity, of sharp outlines and conflicting forces, may be lost and swallowed up in the "white radiance," or black darkness (it does not really matter which we call it) of an empty Infinite.

The present writer is convinced that this is not the truth about mysticism. Eckhart may have encouraged Schwester Katrei in her attempt to substitute the living death of the blank trance for the dying life of Christian charity; but none the less she caricatured and stultified his teaching. And I think it is possible to lay our finger on the place where she and so many others went wrong. The aspiration of mysticism is to

find the unity which underlies all diversity, or, in religious language, to see God face to face. From the Many to the One is always the path of the mystic. Plotinus, the father of all mystical philosophy in Europe (unless, as he himself would have wished, we give that honour to Plato), mapped out the upward road as follows:--At the bottom of the hill is the sphere of the "merely many"--of material objects viewed in disconnection, dull, and spiritless. This is a world which has no real existence; it may best be called "not-being" ("ein lauterer Nichts," as Eckhart says), and as the indeterminate, it can only be apprehended by a corresponding indeterminateness in the soul. The soul, however, always adds some form and determination to the abstract formlessness of the "merely many." Next, we rise to, or project for ourselves, the world of "the one and the many." This is the sphere in which our consciousness normally moves. We are conscious of an overruling Mind, but the creatures still seem external to and partially independent of it. Such is the temporal order as we know it. Above this is the intelligible world, the eternal order, "the one-many," das ewige Nu, the world in which God's will is done perfectly and all reflects the divine mind. Highest of all is "the One," the, Absolute, the Godhead, of whom nothing can be predicated, because He is above all distinctions. This Neoplatonic Absolute is the Godhead of whom Eckhart says: "God never looked upon deed," and of whom Angelus Silesius sings:

"Und sieh, er ist nicht Wille,

Er ist ein' ewige Stille."

Plotinus taught that the One, being superessential, can only be apprehended in ecstasy, when thought, which still distinguishes itself from its object, is transcended, and knower and known become one. As Tennyson's Ancient Sage says:

"If thou would'st hear the Nameless, and descend

Into the Temple-cave of thine own self,

There, brooding by the central altar, thou

May'st haply learn the Nameless hath a voice,

By which thou wilt abide, if thou be wise;

For knowledge is the swallow on the lake,

That sees and stirs the surface-shadow there

But never yet hath dipt into the Abyss."

In the same way Eckhart taught that no creature can apprehend the Godhead, and, therefore, that the spark in the centre of the soul (this doctrine, too, is found in Plotinus) must be verily divine. The logic of the theory is inexorable. If only like can know like, we cannot know God except by a faculty which is itself divine. The real question is whether God, as an object of knowledge and worship for finite beings, is the absolute Godhead, who transcends all distinctions. The mediaeval mystics held that this "flight of the alone to the alone," as Plotinus calls it, is possible to men, and that in it consists our highest blessedness. They were attracted towards this view by several influences. First, there was the tradition of Dionysius, to whom (e.g.) the author of the "Theologia Germanica" appeals as an authority for the possibility of "beholding the hidden things of God by utter abandonment of thyself, and of entering into union with Him

who is above all existence, and all knowledge." Secondly, there was what a modern writer has called "the attraction of the Abyss," the longing which some persons feel very strongly to merge their individuality in a larger and better whole, to get rid not only of selfishness but of self for ever. "Leave nothing of myself in me," is Crashaw's prayer in his wonderful poem on St Teresa. Thirdly, we may mention the awe and respect long paid to ecstatic trances, the pathological nature of which was not understood. The blank trance was a real experience; and as it could be induced by a long course of ascetical exercises and fervid devotions, it was naturally regarded as the crowning reward of sanctity on earth. Nor would it be at all safe to reject the evidence, which is very copious,[19] that the "dreamy state" may issue in permanent spiritual gain. The methodical cultivation of it, which is at the bottom of most of the strange austerities of the ascetics, was not only (though it was partly) practised in the hope of enjoying those spiritual raptures which are described as being far more intense than any pleasures of sense[20]: it was the hope of stirring to its depths the subconscious mind and permeating the whole with the hidden energy of the divine Spirit that led to the desire for visions and trances. Lastly, I think we must give a place to the intellectual attraction of an uncompromising monistic theory of the universe. Spiritualistic monism, when it is consistent with itself, will always lean to semi-pantheistic mysticism rather than to such a compromise with pluralism as Lotze and his numerous followers in this country imagine to be possible.

But it is possible to go a long way with the mystics and yet to maintain that under no conditions whatever can a finite being escape from the limitations of his finitude and see God or the world or himself "with the same eye with which God sees" all things. The old Hebrew belief, that to see the face of God is death, expresses the truth under a mythical form. That the human mind, while still "in the body pent," may obtain glimpses of the eternal order, and enjoy foretastes of the bliss of heaven, is a belief which I, at least, see no reason to reject. It involves no rash presumption, and is not contrary to what may be readily believed about the state of immortal spirits passing through a mortal life. But the explanation of the blank trance as a temporary transit into the Absolute must be set down as a pure delusion. It involves a conception of the divine "Rest" which in his best moments Eckhart himself repudiates. "The Rest of the Godhead," he says, "is not in that He is the source of being, but in that He is the consummation of all being." This profound saying expresses the truth, which he seems often to forget, that the world-process must have a real value in God's sight--that it is not a mere polarisation of the white radiance of eternity broken up by the imperfection of our vision. Whatever theories we may hold about Absolute Being, or an Absolute that is above Being, we must make room for the Will, and for Time, which is the "form" of the will, and for the creatures who inhabit time and space, as having for us the value of reality. Nor shall we, if we are to escape scepticism, be willing to admit that these appearances have no sure relation to ultimate reality. We must not try to uncreate the world in order to find God. We were created out of nothing, but we cannot return to nothing, to find our Creator there. The still, small voice is best listened for amid the discordant harmony of life and death.

The search for God is no exception to the mysterious law of human nature, that we cannot get anything worth having--neither holiness nor happiness nor wisdom--by trying for it directly. It must be given us through something else. The recluse who lives like Parnell's "Hermit":

"Prayer all his business, all his pleasure praise,"

is not only a poor sort of saint, but he will offer a poor sort of prayers and praises. He will miss real holiness for the same reason that makes the pleasure-seeker miss real happiness. We must lose ourselves in some worthy interest in order to find again both a better self and an object higher than that which we sought. This the German mystics in a sense knew well. There is a noble sentence of Suso to the

effect that "he who realises the inward in the outward, to him the inward becomes more inward than to him who only recognises the inward in the inward." Moreover, the recognition that "God manifests Himself and worketh more in one creature than another" ("Theologia Germanica"), involves a denial of the nihilistic view that all the creatures are "ein lauterer Nichts." [21] It would be easy to find such passages in all the fourteenth-century mystics, but it cannot be denied that on the whole their religion is too self-centred. There are not many maxims so fundamentally wrong-headed and un-Christian as Suso's advice to "live as if you were the only person in the world." [22] The life of the cloistered saint may be abundantly justified--for the spiritual activity of some of them has been of far greater service to mankind than the fussy benevolence of many "practical" busybodies--but the idea of social service, whether in the school of Martha or of Mary, ought surely never to be absent. The image of Christ as the Lover of the individual soul rather than as the Bridegroom of the Church was too dear to these lonely men and women. Unconsciously, they looked to their personal devotions to compensate them for the human loves which they had forsworn. The raptures of Divine Love, which they regarded as signal favours bestowed upon them, were not very wholesome in themselves, and diverted their thoughts from the needs of their fellow-men. They also led to most painful reactions, in which the poor contemplative believed himself abandoned by God and became a prey to terrible depression and melancholy. These fits of wretchedness came indeed to be recognised as God's punishment for selfishness in devotion and for too great desire for the sweetness of communing with God, and so arose the doctrine of "disinterested love," which was more and more emphasised in the later mysticism, especially by the French Quietists.

I have spoken quite candidly of the defects of Eckhart's mystical Christianity. As a religious philosophy it does not keep clear of the fallacy that an ascent though the unreal can lead to reality. "To suppose, as the mystic does, that the finite search has of itself no Being at all, is illusory, is Maya, is itself nothing, this is also to deprive the Absolute of even its poor value as a contrasting goal. For a goal that is a goal of no real process has as little value as it has content." [23] But, as Prof. Royce says, mysticism furnishes us with the means of correcting itself. It supplies an obvious *reductio ad absurdum* of the theory with which it set out, that "Immediacy is the one test of reality," and is itself forced to give the world of diversity a real value as manifesting in different degrees the nature of God. Those who are acquainted with the sacred books of the East will recognise that here is the decisive departure from real Pantheism. And it may be fairly claimed for the German mystics that though their speculative teaching sometimes seems to echo too ominously the apathetic detachment of the Indian sage, their lives and example, and their practical exhortations, preached a truer and a larger philosophy. Eckhart, as we have seen, was a busy preacher as well as a keen student, and some of the younger members of his school were even more occupied in pastoral work. If the tree is to be judged by its fruits, mysticism can give a very good account of itself to the Marthas as well as the Marys of this world.

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