

Meister Eckhart

by W.R. Inge

Meister Eckhart was a 13th-century Dominican friar and philosopher who promoted a deep understanding of the nature of God and the human soul, but whose teachings were condemned as heretical by the Catholic Church.

Scripture: Matthew 7:15, 1 Timothy 6:20, 2 Timothy 4:3, 2 Peter 2:1, 1 John 4:1

Topics: "Mystical Theology", "Christian Mysticism"

Description

W.R. Inge delves into the life and teachings of Meister Eckhart, a prominent philosopher-mystic born in Thuringia. Eckhart's journey in the Dominican Order led him to various leadership roles, including preaching in Strassburg and Cologne. Despite his popularity among devout women and the mystical movement, Eckhart faced accusations of heresy and was posthumously condemned for several erroneous teachings, leading to a long neglect of his writings until a revival in the 19th century.

Transcript

It was in 1260, when Mechthild of Magdeburg was at the height of her activity, that Meister Eckhart, next to Plotinus the greatest philosopher-mystic, was born at Hocheim in Thuringia. It seems that his family was in a good position, but nothing is known of his early years. He entered the Dominican Order as a youth, perhaps at sixteen, the earliest age at which novices were admitted into that Order. The course of instruction among the Dominicans was as follows:--After two years, during which the novice laid the foundations of a good general education, he devoted the next two years to grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, and then the same amount of time to what was called the Quadrivium, which consisted of "arithmetic, mathematics, astronomy, and music." Theology, the queen of the sciences, occupied three years; and at the end of the course, at the age of twenty-five, the brothers were ordained priests. We find Eckhart, towards the end of the century, Prior of Erfurt and Vicar of Thuringia, then Lector Biblicus at Paris, then Provincial Prior of Saxony. In 1307 the master of the Order appointed him Vicar-General for Bohemia, and in 1311 he returned to Paris. We find him next preaching busily at Strassburg,[4] and after a few more years, at Cologne, where the persecution of the Brethren of the Free Spirit was just then at its height. At Strassburg there were no less than seven convents of Dominican nuns, for since 1267 the Order had resumed the supervision of female convents, which it had renounced a short time after its foundation. Many of Eckhart's discourses were addressed to these congregations of devout women, who indeed were to a large extent the backbone of the mystical movement, and it is impossible not to see that the devotional treatises of the school are strongly coloured by feminine sentiment. A curious poem, written by a Dominican nun of this period, celebrates the merits of three preachers, the third of whom is a Master

Eckhart, "who speaks to us about Nothingness. He who understands him not, in him has never shone the light divine." These nuns seem to have been fed with the strong meat of Eckhart's mystical philosophy; in the more popular sermons he tried to be intelligible to all. It was not very long after he took up his residence at Cologne that he was himself attacked for heresy. In 1327 he read before his own Order a retraction of "any errors which might be found" (si quid errorum repertum fuerit) in his writings, but withdrew nothing that he had actually said, and protested that he believed himself to be orthodox. He died a few months later, and it was not till 1329 that a Papal bull was issued, enumerating seventeen heretical and eleven objectionable doctrines in his writings.

This bull is interesting as showing what were the points in Eckhart's teaching which in the fourteenth century were considered dangerous. They also indicate very accurately what are the real errors into which speculative mysticism is liable to fall, and how thinkers of this school may most plausibly be misrepresented by those who differ from them. After expressing his sorrow that "a certain Teuton named Ekardus, doctor, ut fertur, sacrae paginae, has wished to know more than he should," and has sown tares and thistles and other weeds in the field of the Church, the Pope specifies the following erroneous statements as appearing in Eckhart's writings[5]:--1. "God created the world as soon as God was. 2. In every work, bad as well as good, the glory of God is equally manifested. 3. A man who prays for any particular thing prays for an evil and prays ill, for he prays for the negation of good and the negation of God, and that God may be denied to him.[6] 4. God is honoured in those who have renounced everything, even holiness and the kingdom of heaven. 5. We are transformed totally into God, even as in the Sacrament the bread is converted into the Body of Christ. Unum, non simile. 6. Whatever God the Father gave to His only-begotten Son in His human nature, He has given it all to me. 7. Whatever the Holy Scripture says about Christ is verified in every good and godlike man. 8. External action is not, properly speaking, good nor divine; God, properly speaking, only works in us internal actions. 9. God is one, in every way and according to every reason, so that it is not possible to find any plurality in Him, either in the intellect or outside it; for he who sees two, or sees any distinction, does not see God; for God is one, outside number and above number, for one cannot be put with anything else, but follows it; therefore in God Himself no distinction can be or be understood. 10. All the creatures are absolutely nothing: I say not that they are small or something, but that they are absolutely nothing." All these statements are declared to have been found in his writings. It is also "objected against the said Ekardus" that he taught the following two articles in these words:--1. "There is something in the soul, which is uncreated and uncreatable: if the whole soul were such, it would be uncreated and uncreatable: and this is the intelligence."[7] 2. God is not good or better or best: I speak ill when I call God good; it is as if I called white black."[8] The bull declares all the propositions above quoted to be heretical, with the exception of the three which I have numbered 8-10, and these "have an ill sound" and are "very rash," even if they might be so supplemented and explained as to bear an orthodox sense.

This condemnation led to a long neglect of Eckhart's writings. He was almost forgotten till Franz Pfeiffer in 1857 collected and edited his scattered treatises and endeavoured to distinguish those which were genuine from those which were spurious. Since Pfeiffer's edition fresh discoveries have been made, notably in 1880, when Denifle found at Erfurt several important fragments in Latin, which in his opinion show a closer dependence on the scholastic theology, and particularly on St Thomas Aquinas, than Protestant scholars, such as Preger, had been willing to allow. But the attempt to prove Eckhart a mere scholastic is a failure; the audacities of his German discourses cannot be explained as an accommodation to the tastes of a peculiar audience. For good or evil Eckhart is an original and independent thinker, whose theology is confined by no trammels of authority.

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