

## Meister Eckhart

1260–1328

### The mystery of Godness

Who was Meister Eckhart? We don't know a great deal about his career. He appears to have come from somewhere in mid Germany, where he returned later in life. We know that he studied at the University of Paris for a while, and that he taught there. We know also that for quite a period he was the head of the Dominican Order in Saxony. Here and there in his writings we pick up some hints of his reputation: he knows that he's sounding controversial and makes a bit of a joke of it. He died in 1327 with trouble gathering around his head as the more fussy orthodox of the day tried to have him condemned for heresy, poring over his published sermons and treatises with high hopes of a spectacular condemnation.

His subsequent reputation in the history of the Church has always been a bit ambiguous. He's difficult, he's controversial and he often gives the impression of not taking your worries quite seriously. And yet, indirectly, he had a huge influence on both sides of the Reformation, though it sounds rather curious to put it

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that way. Luther had read, if not Eckhart, many of Eckhart's pupils, and we can see that in some of Luther's own writing about the spiritual life. Equally, by complicated and roundabout routes, he had an influence on the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century, right at the other end of the spectrum.

Since the sixteenth century, he hasn't been read a great deal and hasn't always been read very intelligently. He was edited extremely badly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He appealed to some people who thought he was a kind of Buddhist in a Dominican habit and was the subject of some slightly muddled research that suggested he was really someone who believed simply in the absorption of the created spirit in God.

Better editions of his work followed in the mid-twentieth century along with some very serious research – including an epoch-making book by the great Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky – with the result that, slowly but surely, Eckhart's reputation has begun to emerge again from the shadows. Attention has been paid not only to the German sermons, where he tends to be at his least guarded, but also to the Latin works – his professional philosophical treatises – as well as some of the Latin sermons, so as to produce a more

balanced picture of someone who certainly *thought* he was an orthodox Catholic.

However, if you were to pick him up at random and read a paragraph, you might well be forgiven for thinking that 'orthodox Catholic' is not the first phrase that would spring to mind. He has one sermon entitled 'How creatures are God', which doesn't sound very promising to a nervous Christian temperament, and his style is an unusual mixture – both very colloquial and relaxed and extremely intricate and technical. We can just about see why he was a popular preacher, and he's one of the few great medieval theologians to have written and preached regularly in the language of the common people.

This is actually not a minor point about him. We don't know, for example, whether Thomas Aquinas ever uttered a word in public in any language other than Latin. We do know of Eckhart that he preached regularly in the local language to the parishes of central Germany. We know too that he was the spiritual director of a number of small lay communities, and that he was quite influential in the formation of lay common life for women in his period. The beginnings of the Beguine movement in the Low Countries owe something to the inspiration of people like Eckhart, who were prepared to act as mentors and guides for these

communities of lay people living together under a loose shared rule of prayer. So, in spite of the technicality, Eckhart is not a 'remote and ineffectual don'; but this still doesn't mean that he is ever easy reading. So let me plunge in and try to explain one of Eckhart's central ideas about how we conceive of God. More than once, Eckhart suggests that we have to draw a distinction between God and what he calls *Gottheit* – a German word meaning 'Godhead' or 'Godness'. 'God', for Eckhart, is the name we give to the action that reaches to us from the divine mystery. But *Gottheit*, 'Godness', is really something about which we can say absolutely nothing and know absolutely nothing. Godness, *Gottheit*, is the utter mysteriousness of what it's like to be God. It's variously described by Eckhart in terms of an ocean, of cavernous depths and, most attractive of all perhaps, of a pot of water boiling over. The divine life is a boiling pot and it spills over into creation. Eckhart likes to use the Latin word *ebullitio* – God boiling over. The being that surges up from these mysterious depths overflows into creation and we are always and already included in the life and the being of God in some mysterious way.

So *Gottheit*, Godness, is that strange, mysterious level at which everything is already in the mind of God – but

not only in the *mind* of God: it's somehow in – and here we have to search for words – the heart; the being; the surging, active, unfathomable depth of God. The possibility of everything is there in this deep, mysterious interior.

And then comes the specific divine action that emerges from this tumultuous interior divine life. 'Godness' is something about which we can say nothing whatsoever, but about *God* we can say, first of all, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and then we can also say Creator and Redeemer. Here's an example of what Eckhart says about this:

I take a bowl of water and put a mirror in it and set it under the disc of the sun. The sun sends forth its light-rays both from the disc and from the sun's depth, and yet suffers no diminution. The reflection of the mirror in the sun is a sun, and yet is what it is. So it is with God. God is in the soul with His nature, with His being and with His Godhead, and yet He is not in the soul. The reflection of the soul in God is God, and yet she is what she is. God *becomes* when all creatures say 'God' – then God comes to be.

When I subsisted in the ground, in the bottom, in the river and fount of Godhead, no-one asked me where I was going or what I was doing: there was no-one to ask me. When I flowed forth, all creatures said 'God.'<sup>1</sup>

So we all begin swimming around indeterminately in the mind of God, in this mysterious depth of 'Godness', and then God acts. And God distinguishes God from creation, and there I am, and *I* can say 'God' because now I'm separate from God, I'm distinguished from God. Eckhart offers us the beautiful and rather Buddhist image of the mirror: the sun is in the mirror, but the mirror is not the sun. Does he mean by this that somehow or other God starts off as a great, undetermined soup of existence and then 'turns into' the Trinity and the creator? I don't think so, though it does sound like it sometimes. I think what he means is that we're not talking about stages in a kind of sequence; we're talking about *levels of understanding*.

His Latin texts help us a bit here, because in the Latin he distinguishes between two ways of thinking about God. God is, he says, *innominabilis*, 'unnameable', and also God is *omnominabilis*, 'all-nameable'. God has no name and God has every name. God is so mysterious that no word can apply to him; God is so full of the richness and the variety of being that any word can apply to him. At one level of understanding there's nothing we can say, there's just that infinite life which is both infinite darkness and infinite light about which we are totally at a loss to speak. And yet that life exists concretely

and really as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as a life that creates and redeems. And because God establishes and engages with a created world whose life is completely shaped by what God is, all names and all realities flow to God and point to God.

That, as I said, is probably the most difficult of Eckhart's teachings, but also his most important: the difference between Godness and God – between that mysterious inner life about which we can't find any words that are any use, and *God*, which is the action by which creatures come to be distinguished from God and by which God appears to us, revealing himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It's a crucial distinction to bear in mind as we seek to serve and pray to God today. We can talk about what God does; we can't talk about what God is. Not that there is something secondary or superficial about God's life as Trinity or as creator – a sort of outward appearance of something behind which is a hinterland of complete obscurity (though, as I've said, Eckhart can give that impression at times). It's more that *what God knows the divine life to be* is something which we absolutely never have available as some sort of object for our thought. We meet God as God 'activates' all this ocean of divine life in the life of Trinity and creator and

redeemer: that is what we can form some kind of picture of. But if we come to live in the eternal reality of the divine Word that flows out from the Father, we are simply carried on the wave of God's inner contemplation of and delight in what God is. How could we possibly stand to one side and turn this into an object?

*From 'The Spiritual Writings of Meister Eckhart', a lecture given on 27 June 2000 to the Church Union, All Saints Church, Clifton, Bristol.*