



Meister Eckhart and German Mysticism Maurice de Wulf

Life and Works.

The Dominican, MEISTER ECKHART OF HOCHEIM, born about 1260, studied successively at Cologne and Paris, where we find him in 1302 and 1311. His life was given to preaching and contemplation. He had gathered around him, at his convent in Cologne, a large crowd of followers, when the archbishop of Cologne took proceedings against his doctrines in the year 1326. The following year, which was that of his death, Eckhart appealed to the Holy See. But in 1329 John XXII. condemned twenty-eight propositions taken from his Latin writings. Eckhart has left numerous sermons in German as well as an important Latin work called the *Opus Tripartitum* (comprising a *liber propositionum*, a *liber quaestionum* and an *opus expositionum*).

Philosophical Teaching.

Eckhart propounded an equivocal sort of mysticism which it is not easy to absolve from the charge of pantheism. Before attempting an outline of it, let us glance at the *metaphysical system* which permeates it and supports it on all sides. Eckhart is thoroughly imbued with the doctrines of scholasticism, save on the one question of essence and existence; and here we get a full view of the characteristic — and fundamental — error of his whole philosophy. God alone, the *Actus Purus*, is His own being. In the creature, on the contrary, the essence or quiddity is distinct from the *existence*. Yet, an intimate bond attaches the creature to God, *for God is the existence of the creature; the latter has no being (existence) other than God in Whom it subsists (Esse est Deus)*. God, therefore, constitutes the actuality of the world (*Deus est primus actus formalis in omni opere artis et naturae*); He is to the contingent essence or quiddity what act is to potency, what form is to matter, what unity is to number. Since the created *essence* is held to be distinct from God (*esse rerum extra, in rerum natura*) and has corresponding to it, as such, an idea in the Divine Mind of the Creator (*omnis creatura habet esse unum in causis suis originalibus, scilicet in verbo Dei*), Eckhart's is not a system of pantheistic emanation wherein all things would be reduced to mere phenomena or moments of the Divine Life. But still, the identity of existence which envelops Creator and creature, and in which Eckhart finds a proof of the Divine Ubiquity and of the eternity of Creation (*quod enim est in quantum hujusmodi, non fit, nec fieri potest*), seems to compromise the distinction between finite and Infinite: Eckhart, to say the least of him, borders perilously on pantheism. But let us add that he himself did not consider his theory as leading to those serious consequences. *Cum dicitur Deum in omnibus nosse et amare solum esse et seipsum, quod est esse, hoc inquam dicentes non destruimus esse rerum, sed constituimus*. Let us remember, too, that the German Dominican built on the basis of tradition, that he took from scholasticism his ideas, his terminology, and even his faults of method, and we will agree that Eckhart was not a renegade, but a scholastic of enlightened though unusual tendencies, who failed to free himself from an unfortunate confusion and misapplication of ideas.

This confusion is perceptible in his *psychology* also. The human soul is the being of God; in

loving man, God loves Himself; He could not do without man, any more than man could do without Him. We must aim at freeing ourselves from ourselves and at being swallowed up in the abyss of the Deity; in this “deification” we shall find perfect happiness.

Eckhart and German Mysticism.

Eckhart is not the great man of genius it has been customary to represent him. History of course gives a large place to his name, but chiefly as the promoter of a national literature and of a new mystical movement called “German Mysticism”.

This new mysticism was popular in its appeal. It was embodied mainly in sermons and was characterized by the language it made use of no less than by the teaching it contained. It created a German terminology and carried over the scholastic vocabulary into the language of the people: therein lay its great merit. Its favourite themes also were borrowed from the treasures of scholasticism: over and over again the German mystics studied the Deity in the majestic tranquillity and impenetrable mystery of His Being: exalted outpourings of the soul in the contemplation of the Divine Life, the Divine Knowledge and the intercommunications of Divine Love in the Blessed Trinity, are the constantly recurring subjects of their writings and discourses.

Eckhart was not the founder of this mystic school, but he is its first great representative. His Latin works were forgotten even by his own contemporaries, but his sermons in the vernacular were carried far and wide beyond the cloisters of the convent in which they were originally composed.

German Mysticism after Eckhart.

Eckhart formed a school in this sense that his successors were deeply influenced by the study of his writings. This is particularly noticeable in the BLESSED HENRY Suso (about 1300-1366), in TAULER (1290-1361), and in the author of the *German Theology*. While Eckhart was more brilliant than his successors, many of the latter succeeded better than he did in defining the relations between Creator and creature. But on the other hand, however, his mystical teaching was exploited and exaggerated by many popular sects in support of the growing practice of a pantheistic morality. In this way it contributed *indirectly* to that debasement of religion which culminated in the Reformation.

Maurice de Wulf. *History of Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907.

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