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THE GREAT GERMAN MYSTICS

ECKHART, TAULER AND SUSO

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE mystical movement of the fourteenth century in Germany was a remarkable, perhaps a unique, phenomenon in the history of mediaeval culture. It included three major writers: Eckhart, Tauler and Suso, and a host of others of lesser rank. What is more, it produced a reading public for their voluminous works. For the vast number of mystical sermons, tractates and anecdotes that were written in the vernacular at this time presupposes a large reading public. The latter were not confined to conventuals: communities of pious layfolk were also affected. Both in quality and in quantity the literary production is amazing: Eckhart and his compeers belong to the greatest mystics of all time. There has been much speculation as to the cause. How does it come about that at this particular time and in this particular country this phenomenon should have occurred?

It was a time of crisis, of violent upheavals in church and state, of bitter conflict. It began with the downfall of the powerful Hohenstaufen dynasty and the Great Interregnum (1250–1272). It continued through the 'Babylonian Captivity' of the papacy at Avignon and the struggle between the Pope and the Emperor from 1317 to 1347. This phase closed with the death of Ludwig the Bavarian in 1347. Civil war, anarchy, ban and interdict were followed by awe-inspiring natural calamities: pestilence, famine, earthquakes, and floods. The natural result of all this was to create a deep sense of the insecurity of human life and the evanescence of human happiness. The impending end of the world was a common theme in this troubled time.

Does this sombre background of crimes and calamities sufficiently explain the great diffusion of mystical experience and mystical literature in the Empire between about 1250 and 1370? Are we to consider that the temporal weakness of the Church, the exile of the Holy See, the undeniable corruption of morals in clergy and laity alike, caused the finer spirits of the age to take refuge in a spiritual religion, freed from the shackles of dogma and authority? Many writers answer this question in the affirmative. Was not Vienna the musical centre of Europe when Austria lay prostrate under the heel

of Napoleon? Were not the Germans a nation of poets and philosophers at the time when their political fortunes were at their lowest ebb? Can we infer that like music and literature, mysticism is the product of political disintegration and material chaos?

There is much to be said against this hypothesis. Spanish mysticism flourished not at a time of decline, but in the greatest age of Spain, the sixteenth century, when her power and culture were at their zenith. Moreover, there have been other periods in European history that were equally catastrophic without being productive in the religious field. Italy had anarchy and civil wars in plenty and the Black Death into the bargain, but they produced nothing parallel to the mystical movement in Germany. It is, therefore, difficult to believe that adverse conditions are essential to the growth of mysticism. Nevertheless, one might concede the point that about the middle of the fourteenth century the historical background is reflected in the works of the German mystics. But this would not apply to earlier writers and least of all to Eckhart, the greatest of them all.

According to another theory, the movement of mysticism is a reaction against the sterile discussions of the schools, the cold abstractions of theologians. This is a one-sided and superficial view. We cannot get over the fact that Eckhart himself was a product of scholasticism, a typical representative of metaphysical speculation. So far from rebelling against these traditions, he accepted them implicitly in all their main tenets. Never is he found in opposition to Thomas Aquinas or Albertus Magnus in an essential point of doctrine. He did not dislike syllogistic reasoning or even juggling with words. He was himself an arch-juggler. He did not object to theology, but considered it of supreme importance. Of all mystics of the post-classical era Eckhart is the most intellectual.

It is true that one must draw a distinction between the period up to 1328 and that which follows. After the death of Eckhart mysticism ceased to be speculative and became practical. This was due in some measure to the trial and condemnation of Eckhart, but there were other causes. Later Dominican writers were inferior in intellectual capacity or were too much occupied with other matters to devote themselves to philosophical problems. It has also been suggested that the victorious advance of Nominalism undermined confidence in human reason, allowed the will to take the place of the intellect as the highest human faculty and put ethics in the forefront instead of metaphysics.[1]

[1] Josef Quint, in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, Berlin, 1931, IV, 82–83.

Whatever the cause, it is certain that learning was discredited by Tauler and his contemporaries. They refer to reason in disparaging terms; the word 'master' often has a derogatory sound. Of the three stages of the mystic way: purgative, illuminative and unitive, it is now the first two, the preparatory stages, that are commended and explored, the final one recedes in importance.

Are we justified in regarding German mysticism as a kind of protest against institutional religion? The real leaders of the movement were priests and hence members of the hierarchy. They had no reason for rebellion against the established order, nor were they rebels by nature. The search for inner perfection meant more to them than the machinery of administration. As for the free congregations of women, that is to say the houses of Beguines or the groups known as Friends of God, they were not instituted in opposition to the Church as it then existed. In their origins they were a result of the conditions of the times and were, so to speak, a by-product of monasticism. The Beguines were candidates for the cloister who could not be admitted for pecuniary or other reasons. They had no grievance against organized religion and wished for nothing better than to be nuns in a regular order. If they, or some of them, later developed on particular lines and even acquired heretical opinions, that was in no way connected with their origins, but was due to other causes.

As a result of continual wars, tournaments and jousts, there were heavy casualties among the male population, particularly the nobles, and a surplus of women. The influence of the Crusades in this respect, as in so many others, has often been exaggerated. They were only one of several factors. Many of the unmarried women tended to enter convents, which increased as a result in size and importance. In Strasbourg alone there were six Dominican nunneries in the early fourteenth century. There were eight in the district of Constance. In 1303 there were only fourteen in the whole of France.[1]

Although the convents were so numerous, they were unable to cope with the applications for admission. The recognized orders could only found a new house or adopt an existing one under certain conditions. Official sanction usually required the intervention of an influential personage with the authorities. A convent had to be financially independent and free of the necessity of raising further funds. This meant a rich founder or wealthy inmates who could bring with them a dowry that would yield a substantial annuity. Hence the

[1] R. P. Mortier, *Histoire abrégé de l'Ordre de Saint-Dominique*, Tours, 1920, p. 75.

majority of the nuns were women of high rank, nobles, or patricians from the growing towns. Many of them were highly educated and knew Latin. Thus it came about that in the crowded Dominican nunneries there was an active intellectual life. We come across nuns who wrote original works in prose or verse and some who translated Latin passages into German.

If German mysticism can be explained at all, the true explanation is that of Denifle,[1] who connects it with two things: first the obligation imposed on the Dominican friars to supervise the nunneries of their Order, and secondly the reform of Dominican convents of nuns in Germany about 1286–7. In 1245 the Friars Preachers took over the pastoral care of Dominican nunneries in Germany, which included the hearing of confessions, administration of the sacraments, preaching and regular visitation. There were also heavy administrative duties involved. The nunneries benefited considerably because they enjoyed all the privileges of the Order and were protected against encroachments. As a result of regular supervision the discipline was maintained and the spiritual life of the convents was guarded against aberrations of all kinds.

There were, however, grave disadvantages for the friars. Those selected to undertake the pastoral care of nunneries were above all the learned brethren, the *magistri* and lectors. They found themselves unable to pursue their studies because of the perpetual interruptions. The rapid growth of the nunneries made it an ever increasing burden. In the Province of Theutonia there were some seventy at the beginning of the fourteenth century. In the whole of Europe, including the Province of Saxony, the Order had only about ninety converts of nuns. In Theutonia there were between forty-six and forty-eight friaries, and hence the latter were far outnumbered by the nunneries. Elsewhere the opposite was the case. In addition to the regular convents there were the houses of Beguines which needed careful supervision. Obviously the task of the learned friars was extremely onerous.

The Dominicans made repeated efforts to be released from their obligations in this direction, and in 1252 Innocent IV yielded to their solicitations. In view of the fact that they were impeded by their new duties in the performance of their main task, which was that of preaching, he exempted them from the care of nunneries, excepting those of St. Sisto in Rome and Prouille in the South of France, which had been founded by St. Dominic himself. Two years later the Pope rescinded the provisions of the Bull and instructed Cardinal Hugo de

[1] *Archiv*, II, 641. See also Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen*, 274–304, Berlin, 1935.

Cher to make out new regulations. In 1256 the German Provincial was ordered to take over responsibility for all the Dominican nunneries in his province, and in the following year, the General Chapter of Florence extended this obligation to include all nunneries that had been previously in possession of this privilege, that is to say, nunneries of other orders. This state of affairs continued practically unchanged till the Council of Trent.

The growth of mysticism was then due to the impact of scholastic philosophy on educated women in nunneries. The friars had to express theological and philosophical ideas in a garb that would make them intelligible to women. The nuns stimulated the pastoral work of the friars and the friars encouraged the nuns to press on in the search for spiritual perfection. Mechthild von Magdeburg heard sermons preached by the friars and she had a Dominican as her confessor. He encouraged her to write and assisted her in so doing. Suso's friend, Elsbeth Stagel, secretly wrote down what Suso had told her by word of mouth or by letter about his own life. She was his Egeira and no doubt inspired some of his noblest utterances. Adelheid Langmann cured a man in Nürnberg of suicidal mania as a result of her intercessions. He became an Austin friar and studied in Paris. Heinrich von Nördlingen corresponded with Margareta Ebner at Medingen and ascribed great importance to her visions and revelations.

Many of the finest mystical writings are sermons preached to nuns. Most of Tauler's sermons belong to this category. Many nuns wrote down afterwards what they had heard the preacher say in the pulpit and some of them had quite phenomenal memories. The preachers themselves sometimes wrote down their own sermons or composed treatises of a devotional nature in the vernacular. Scholasticism provided a philosophy of mysticism. The stages of the way that led towards union with God were mapped out and described. All this was in Latin. To make it intelligible to laymen or nuns it had to be translated into German. The technical terms were lacking; they had to be improvised. After passing through the crucible of translation, the thought was imperceptibly changed. It was simplified, and one might say coloured, both by the preacher and his congregation. There was a marked preference for certain Biblical passages: the opening words of St. John's Gospel, the Song of Songs considered as an allegory of the love for Christ and His Church, the scene of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus and his account of what then happened.

If we compare Eckhart's Latin works which are so learned and at

times so abstruse, with his German sermons, we see the effect of preaching to women. The learned tone becomes popular and homely. The enthusiasms which are restrained in the Latin treatises, burst forth freely. Abstractions tend to disappear and everything becomes more concrete and simple. There is more of the personal note. Here and there the preacher speaks in the first person to bring some point home. He introduces a vivid piece of dialogue, using the dramatic form to enliven his discourse. He is not now using the language of the learned, but his own mother tongue, and using it as it had seldom been used before.

It is a mistake to consider that German mysticism begins and ends with the three great names of Eckhart, Tauler and Suso. Certainly these giants tend to dwarf their contemporaries, but their predecessors were by no means a negligible quantity, if inferior to them in intellect and literary power. Later writers preserve the traditions of the past without notably enriching or extending them. There were minor mystics, chiefly Dominicans, such as Eckhart the Younger, Eckhart Rube, Franke and others. Very little of their work has been preserved: we have only a few odd sermons and sayings by them. As far as we can judge from the scanty material available, these writers are either contemporaries of Eckhart and kindred spirits, or they belong to an orthodox Thomist section without that strong strain of Neo-Platonism that distinguishes Eckhart and his disciples. One hesitates to speak of a school of Eckhart, because of the paucity of evidence, but there are excellent reasons for thinking that Tauler and Suso were by no means the only gifted pupils of the master, and that his fervid eloquence kindled a flame that long survived his condemnation and death.

It is customary to regard German mysticism as an entirely Dominican product and to ignore or minimize the Franciscan contribution. A reassessment is therefore necessary. David von Augsburg died about the time when Eckhart was born. Most of his works are in Latin, but his German prose is remarkable for its clarity and beauty. The greatest of Franciscan mystics is Marquart von Lindau, who kept alive in a dull and prosaic age the spirit of his predecessors.

CHAPTER II

ECKHART

ECKHART was born about 1260 at Hochheim, two miles north of Gotha, and was therefore, like Luther, a native of Thuringia. There is no foundation for the legend, first recorded in the sixteenth century, that he was born in Strasbourg. He was of noble birth, an Eckhart of Hochheim is mentioned in a charter dated 1251.[1] In 1305 a knight named 'Eckhardus de Hochheim,' who owned property in the neighbourhood of Gotha, transferred a plot of land to the Cistercian nuns of that town. Among the witnesses who signed the document was 'the venerable Friar, Magister Eckhardus of Paris, Provincial of the Order of Preachers in the Province of Saxony,'[2] This witness was no other than our Eckhart; he was the kinsman, probably the son, of the knight.

In the last quarter of the thirteenth century the Dominican Order was at the very height of its fame, and in Germany, as elsewhere, many youths of high rank and intellectual ability were attracted to it. Eckhart was among them and he became a novice at the nearest convent, which was that of Erfurt. Entrants to the Order had to be at least fifteen years of age and they were expected to have attained at least a competent knowledge of Latin, but this latter rule was not always rigidly enforced. After the preliminary course of instruction was completed, it was customary to send promising young friars from Erfurt to the *studium generale* at Cologne to study theology. It is highly probable that Eckhart studied in that city. His works show a close acquaintance with the writings of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, who had raised the reputation of the Cologne school to its highest point. But as St. Thomas Aquinas died in 1274 and Albertus in 1280, it is unlikely for chronological reasons that Eckhart knew either of these two great scholars personally.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century he was in Erfurt once more and was elected by his brethren as their prior.[3] About the year 1300 he was sent to Paris, first to learn and then to teach. It may seem strange that a friar who had been so highly honoured by his own

[1] *Thuringia Sacra*, Frankofurti, 1737, p. 486.
[2] Denifle, *Die Heimat Meister Eckeharts*, p. 355.
[3] Quétif-Echard, *Scriptores Ordines Praedicatorum*, I, 507.

convent should be relieved of his post in order to continue his studies. But it was by no means unusual for a friar to serve for a short time in the administration of the Order or in a teaching capacity before going to Paris, which was the centre of the educational system of the Dominicans. It was a high distinction to be chosen to go to the *studium generale* at Saint-Jacques in Paris; only three students from each province enjoyed this privilege. The course consisted normally of five years of theological study before the degree of Baccalaureus was taken. Then came three years' teaching under the direction of the Magister. At the age of thirty-five, or earlier if special dispensation was given, the candidate was presented to the Chancellor to receive the licentiate, which entitled him to teach as magister or doctor. Those who graduated at Paris in this way as Doctors of Theology (*magistri in sacra pagina*) formed the intellectual *élite* of the Western Church. Evidently in Eckhart's case the course of instruction was considerably reduced.

In an old history of the Dominican Order it is stated that in 1302 'Frater Aychardus Theutonicus' obtained the licentiate in Paris.[1] The doctorate was conferred upon him by Boniface, but it is unlikely that, as some have thought, the degree was conferred by the Pope in person or that Eckhart had to go to Rome to receive it. It should be remembered that a bitter struggle was going on between Louis-Phillipe of France and the papacy. The Dominicans were loyal to the Pope, while the University of Paris supported the King. Direct papal intervention was needed to secure the doctorate of Paris for Dominican Friars. The fact that Eckhart received the licentiate presupposes that he had lectured on the *Sentences* in Paris for at least a year as *Baccalaureus*, that is to say, that he had lectured on Aristotelian philosophy, as understood and expounded in the Middle Ages. This was confirmed by the discovery of some fragments of Eckhart's earliest known work, a commentary on the first four books of the *Sentences*,[2] written between 1300 and 1302.

The disputes between scholars, to which the outside public was admitted, were a well-known feature of the University of Paris. Eckhart was selected to defend the doctrines of his Order: a high distinction reserved for the ablest of scholars only. Two treatises have been preserved in which we see him engaged in vigorous controversy with a Franciscan friar.

From Paris Eckhart was recalled home to take part in administrative work. Germany formed originally one Dominican province, but it

[1] Denifle, *Archiv*, II, p. 211. [2] *Glorieux*, p. 180.

had now been divided into two: Saxony and Alemannia. Erfurt belonged to the former, and in 1303, at the Erfurt Chapter, Eckhart was appointed Provincial Minister of Saxony. On the expiration of this charge he was made Vicar General of Bohemia with full powers. He was thus entrusted with the difficult task of carrying through a reform of the Dominican convents of Bohemia. It has been suggested that his recall was due to his leniency towards the Brethren of the Free Spirit, a heretical sect that was widely spread in Bohemia, but there is no evidence for this.

At this time Eckhart was unquestionably one of the most eminent and respected members of his Order in Germany. His fame was not confined to his own native province of Saxony; he was also honourably known in the much larger and more important province of Alemannia, which included all the rest of Germany. In 1310 he was elected Provincial Minister of this vast and populous region, but the election was not confirmed by the General Chapter of Naples, apparently because a recent regulation forbade friars to hold administrative office outside their native province. Being thus unable to act as Provincial, he was sent to Paris to lecture at the *studium generale*. During this second stay (1311–12), he once more took part in public disputations with the Franciscans and among his Latin works we find three *Quaestiones* which represent his contribution to a controversy with a Minorite named Gonsalvus.[1]

Eckhart's stay in the French capital was of short duration. The next recorded fact in his life is his presence in Strasbourg in 1314;[2] he was apparently a lector in the Dominican convent. It was during this period that he preached to nuns and layfolk with such acceptance that he soon became the most popular preacher in Germany. Strasbourg was a great centre of religious life in the fourteenth century. In the pulpits of the cathedral and the numerous religious houses of the city great orators were to be heard. In the nunneries mysticism was cultivated with ardent zeal. There were besides the religious congregations, communities of pious laymen and women who although not tied by formal vows, devoted themselves to the practice of religion and good works. Eckhart's name is very closely associated with Strasbourg and this is no doubt the reason for the tradition, already mentioned, that he was a native of the place. Nowhere else had he so many devoted disciples, nowhere else was his name so highly honoured and his memory so faithfully preserved.

[1] A. Dondaine, *Magistri Eckardi Opera Latina*, p. xi. [2] Denifle, *Archiv*, II, 211.

But there are very few certain facts about this period of his life and the recorded traditions must be scrutinized carefully.

There is a gap in our information between the years 1314 and 1326, but a recent discovery throws some light on this obscure period.[1] There had been a dispute between the Teutonic Knights and the Dominicans of Mulhouse (Mühlhausen) in Alsace. A charter dated 1319, now in the archives of Mulhouse, indicates that the quarrel had been settled. The document is signed by Hartung, the Provincial Prior of Saxony, and Eckhart. The latter is designated as Vicar, and as his signature comes first, this leads to the conclusion that Eckhart was at this time Vicar General of the Province of Saxony. This at least is certain, Eckhart was in Mulhouse in 1319 and took part in the settlement of the local dispute.

Charles Schmid, and other writers after him, thought that Eckhart was in touch with the heretical Beghards at Strasbourg, but this is pure conjecture and is highly improbable. Eckhart's assertion before his judges on January 24, 1327, that no friar of his Order in Germany had ever been accused of heresy, rings true and was not contradicted by his accusers. A good deal of misunderstanding has been caused by a letter written by Herveus, General of the Dominican Order, to the priors of Worms and Mainz, relating to grave offences alleged against 'Friar Ekardus, our prior in Frankfort and Friar Theoderichus of St. Martin, suspected of evil communications.' It was ordered that an investigation should be made and the accused punished if found guilty. This passage led Preger and many subsequent writers to assume, first that Meister Eckhart was prior of Frankfort, secondly that he had associated with heretics, thirdly that he was convicted and punished for this offence. All these assumptions are false. Our Eckhart was never prior of Frankfort and was not qualified to act as such, since he was a native of the Saxon province. The similarity of names is a mere coincidence. There were at least three well-known friars called Eckhart in the Dominican Order at this time in Germany.[2] Moreover, our friar is usually called 'Magister Eckhardus.' The phrase 'suspecta familiaritas' is used, as Denifle has shown,[3] in the sense of improper familiarity with women and never of association with heretics. It is also impossible to believe that a man convicted of so serious an offence would be immediately afterwards sent to the leading educational centre of the Order of Preachers in the Empire, there to lecture as senior professor.

[1] E. Schröder, in *Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum*, 55 (1936), pp. 216–217.
[2] See Spamer, *Überlieferung der Eckeharttexte*, p. 396. [3] *Archiv*, II, 618–624.

He enjoyed an excellent reputation: of this there is abundant evidence. He is frequently referred to by contemporaries as 'holy master' or 'saintly man.' Never is there the slightest suggestion that his conduct was other than exemplary.

There is no documentary evidence to show that Eckhart had dealings with heretics at Strasbourg. On the other hand it is quite possible that in this period he came under suspicion of dealing in his sermons with abstruse matters which the common people could not understand. His words were written down by members of his congregation and were distorted and thus liable to misinterpretation. At the General Chapter in Venice in 1325 complaints had been made of certain German friars who preached about subtle and lofty matters to the people to the peril of their souls. It is by no means certain that these strictures were directed against Eckhart. Other delicate topics were in the air at the time, such as the quarrel between Ludwig the Bavarian and the Pope and the reference may be to them.

This is, however, not an isolated complaint. In Strasbourg itself the same accusation was made and this time directly against Eckhart. A Strasbourg devotional writer named Rulmann Merswin,[1] of whom we shall have more to say in a later chapter, tells us that a devout priest called on Meister Eckhart, to give him a friendly warning about his sermons, urging him to give up preaching of matters that very few people could understand or profit by and to consider Christ's preaching and teaching, which was directed to the call to repentance, to desist from evil and to do good. The only authority for this anecdote was Merswin, who was not a very reliable witness; the whole story may be apocryphal, but it seems to reflect the views of some sections of the public at the time.[2]

In the final phase of his career he was the senior lector at the Dominican *studium generale* of Cologne. But he was not destined to end his days in peace. In 1326 he was summoned before the archiepiscopal court to answer a charge of heresy. The remainder of his life was clouded by the trial but before the final verdict was passed Eckhart had died. Most modern authorities assign his death to the year 1327, but without sufficient reason. All that we know is he died between 1327 and 1329. A phrase in the papal bull of 1329 suggests that his death was then quite recent.

It was apparently as a result of the complaints made at Venice in 1325, and with the approval of the Order that the Pope appointed

[1] Jundt, *Essai sur le mysticisme populaire*, pp. 215–221.
[2] See also Grabmann, *Neue Eckhartforschungen*, p. 78.

Nicholas of Strasbourg, a Dominican friar and lector in the Cologne *studium generale*, as inquisitor of the Province of Germany, to inquire into and correct faith and morals. The new inquisitor examined Eckhart and exonerated him of guilt in July, 1326. At this point the Archbishop of Cologne opened proceedings against Eckhart. In the course of the process he called upon Nicholas of Strasbourg to communicate to him the findings of his court. Instead of doing so, Nicholas proceeded to the court to enter a formal protest on January 13, 1327.[1] He denounced the charges against Eckhart as calumnious and false, accused the Archbishop of acting without sufficiently hearing the other side, and moreover of acting illegally. He challenged the right of the Archbishop to summon him, Nicholas, before his tribunal. By virtue of the papal mandate conferred upon him Nicholas was inquisitor of the Province of Germany, and to question his authority was derogatory to the authority of the Pope. Quite apart from this, the Dominicans alone were competent in the matter, since the Church had entrusted them with full powers to investigate cases of alleged heresy. After elaborating these points, he appealed to the Pope. Nicholas repeated his protests, but the Archbishop took no notice of them and summoned Eckhart to appear before him.

Thanks to the investigations of Preger, Denifle, Théry and others and the discovery of new documents, it is now possible to reconstruct the trial stage by stage. A list of forty-nine articles purporting to be drawn from his writings or his sermons was presented to Eckhart on September 26, 1326, by the Inquisitors. He made a written reply. Expressing himself in firm, but courteous terms, he refused to acknowledge the competency of the court, asserting that as a Dominican he was not subject to the authority of the Archbishop. The Dominicans were responsible only to the Pope. He accused the Inquisitors of dilatory procedure. He urged that two of the witnesses who testified against him were men of his own Order who were notoriously immoral. Eckhart also claimed that there were irregularities in the accusation itself; he complained of false allegations and stoutly protested his innocence. Finally he appealed to the Pope.

Then the accusers returned to the attack. A new list of fifty-nine articles, more detailed than the first, was placed before him and again he replied at some length. On January 24, 1327 Eckhart appealed directly to the Pope. The appeal was rejected by the Inquisitors as 'irrelevant.' Feeling that he had been basely calumniated and that his

[1] Preger, *Meister Eckhart und die Inquisition*, pp. 29–31.

Order was also involved in the scandal, feeling in fact that it was the Order that was being attacked through him, Eckhart made a public declaration in the Dominican Church of Cologne on February 13, 1327. After the sermon he called upon another friar, named Conrad von Halberstadt, to read aloud a Latin statement from a scroll in his hand. Eckhart translated it sentence by sentence into the vulgar tongue. He affirmed in the presence of a large congregation and of several members of his Order that he had always abhorred all errors of faith and aberrations in morals. Further he retracted in advance any error that might be found in his writings or sayings.

Eckhart's appeal had been dismissed, but the trial had attracted attention elsewhere and the papal curia ordered that all documents should be sent to Avignon, where the trial was reopened. It has been asserted that at Avignon Eckhart's writings were examined and new propositions were taken from them, chiefly from the *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, but this view seems to be erroneous.[1] As Eckhart had admitted that a number of the suspect passages were to be found in his written works or had been used in his sermons, the papal curia only considered the question whether these passages were orthodox or not.

In 1329 Pope John XXII issued a Bull, entitled *In Agro Dominico*, in which twenty-eight propositions were condemned, seventeen of them as heretical and eleven as dangerous or suspect. On April 5th the Pope ordered the Archbishop of Cologne to publish the Bull in his diocese together with the condemned articles, lest Eckhart's errors 'should take deeper root in the hearts of those simple-minded persons to whom he had preached.' It was also stated in the Bull that before his death Eckhart had retracted twenty-six of the articles in question and everything which was capable of leading to error in his works 'as far as it can be so understood.' He submitted formally to the authority of the Apostolic See. As he had declared before the Inquisition, he was 'capable of error, but not of heresy, because the one depends on the understanding, the other on the will.'

We know that Eckhart went to Avignon to defend his convictions in person; the evidence is provided by a passage in William Ockham's *Dialogus*.[2] Ockham was in a position to know because he himself was tried at Avignon and moreover by Cardinal Fournier, who was one of the judges of Eckhart. We are told that 'A certain Master of Theology of the Dominican Order, Aycardus Theutonicus,' taught many absurd things. Ockham gives a sample by quoting five of the

[1] Pelster, *Ein Gutachten*.

[2] See *Alois Dempf*, p. 84.

alleged doctrines of Eckhart and then proceeds, 'First he was accused in the Court of the Archbishop of Cologne . . . later he went to Avignon; his judges were appointed and he did not deny that he had taught and preached the aforesaid doctrines. He was not convicted, nor were the propositions already cited and others immediately condemned, but they were handed over to the Cardinals to determine whether they were to be considered heretical. Also some Masters of Theology were commissioned to investigate them.'[1]

It seems remarkable that a man who had held high office in the Order of Preachers, who had been entrusted with the education of young friars and the pastoral care of nuns, should have been accused of false doctrine. Did not the Dominicans pride themselves on their strict orthodoxy? Was not the Order founded for the express purpose of combating heresy? It is still more remarkable that Eckhart should have been found guilty of the charges brought against him. Did he receive a fair trial? The question has been answered differently. It was the subject of violent controversy in his day and has been hotly debated in our own.

Let us deal first with the Cologne process. It is clear that the Ordinary, in this case the Archbishop of Cologne, was the proper authority to deal with matters of faith and doctrine in his diocese. Whether a Dominican friar was subject to his jurisdiction was a debatable point.[2] Inquisitors, whether papal or episcopal, were entitled to examine members of all religious bodies. But the Dominicans claimed exemption by virtue of special immunity granted them by the Pope. Where canon law was ambiguous, they appealed to common law in their support. Apart from this question, and here at least there was room for doubt, the trial observed the forms of law. Definite charges were made against Eckhart; they were substantiated by quotations from his sermons and books. The accusation was presented in writing. The accused was given the aid of two imperial public notaries to put the documents in proper legal form. He had the opportunity of preparing his defence and answering the charges point by point.

When all this has been conceded it must be admitted that the documents do not give us the impression of judicial impartiality. One suspects the desire to get an adverse verdict rather than the desire to get at the true facts of the case. Sentences were reported from sermons; was this evidence or mere hearsay? Is it credible

[1] In Goldast, *Monarchiæ S. Romani Imperii*, Francofordi, 1614, t. II, p. 909.
[2] H. C. Lea, *A History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages*, London, 1888, pp. 361–363.

that Eckhart had openly said that his little finger had created the universe? The friar himself strenuously denied it in the presence of his own congregation in his own church, explaining the charge as being perhaps due to a passage in which he was speaking of the Infant Jesus. At Avignon this particular article is not mentioned at all. What was the motive behind the trial? Let us consider some of the personalities who were involved.

Heinrich von Firneburg, Archbishop of Cologne, who presided over the court, had the reputation of being a stern man. During his tenure of office scores of Beghards were handed over to the secular arm.[1] He was, moreover, a partisan of Ludwig the Bavarian, and hence belonged to the anti-papal party in Germany. He had, therefore, no tenderness for the Dominicans, whose fidelity to the papacy was well-known. A dispassionate verdict could scarcely be expected from him. Among the witnesses we notice the names of two Franciscan friars, Magister Reyner and Friar Albert of Cologne, who testified against Eckhart. Here we have a clue to the origin of the process.

The two great Mendicant Orders had a great deal in common and the relations between them were as a rule cordial, but at this particular time and place there was unconcealed hostility between them. The long dispute about realism and nominalism had divided Dominicans and Franciscans and now a new grievance embittered their relationship. The canonization of Thomas Aquinas was felt to be a Dominican victory; his doctrines were officially adopted by the Church and the Franciscans had to submit. They took their revenge by striking at Eckhart, the outstanding Dominican in Germany, and striking him where they knew him to be vulnerable. It cannot be denied that the Franciscans bore the chief responsibility of the proceedings at Cologne.[2]

The attitude of some Franciscans towards Eckhart may be judged by a document expressing the views of four turbulent friars, of whom William Ockham was one.[3] They protested against the 'detestable heresies' of Eckhart and criticized the Pope for taking no action in the matter. This was in 1328, immediately before the opening of the Avignon process. Incidentally, this was not the only bone of contention between the 'Spiritual' Franciscans and John XXII. They denounced his views on the question of the poverty of Christ and

[1] Johannes Vitoduranus, *Chronicon*, p. 36 (in *Thesaurus Historiæ Helveticæ*, Tiguri, 1735).
[2] Théry, *Archives*, III (1928), p. 323.
[3] Printed in Preger, *Geschichte der deutschen Mystik*, I, pp. 483–484.

branded him as a heretic because of his teachings with regard to the Beatific Vision.

If the Franciscans took the initiative in the prosecution of Eckhart it must be added in all fairness that there seems to have been opposition in the Dominican Order itself. It remains to be proved that John XXII was influenced in his action by pressure from the Franciscans. He handed over the investigation to theologians of note and their decision was adopted.[1]

We cannot acquit the prosecution at Cologne of malice and wilful perversion of fact. Sentences were torn from their context, presented in a garbled state and thus a distorted impression was created.[2] It is noteworthy that the greater part of the propositions submitted at Cologne were absent from the papal bull. When viewed in a dispassionate light they were seen to be harmless.

Eckhart complained that one of the 'suspect' passages contained quotations from Seneca, Cicero and Origen. 'They can speak for themselves,' was his comment; he added that the remainder of the proposition was based on a text from the First Epistle of St. John.[3] Well might the good friar exclaim: 'Everything they do not understand they consider error, and what is more, they think every error is heresy.'[4]

In short, the proceedings of the Inquisition were not conducted in a manner that inspires confidence and Eckhart's protests seem well founded. But we cannot say the same thing about the Avignon process, which was impartially carried out. In accordance with the practice of the time, the condemnation only applied to the literal sense of the passages selected, not to the meaning that Eckhart may have intended. That these propositions, taken quite literally, are not in accordance with the official doctrine of the Church is beyond dispute. The only criticism that could be made is that the propositions were excerpts or translated passages, and not necessarily representative of Eckhart's writings taken as a whole.

It must be admitted that Eckhart had on occasion said things that were startling enough; taken from their context, they might seem pagan or even blasphemous, although the sense is always edifying if rightly understood. He was himself aware of the dangers that lurked in his writings. In the Prologue of the *Opus Tripartitum*[5] he warned his readers not to dwell on the apparent or literal sense of his words,

[1] Grabmann, *Neue Eckhartforschungen*, p. 81.
[2] See Karrer, *Meister Eckhart*, pp. 303–304, 313–315. [3] Ibid., p. 191.
[4] Ibid., p. 206. [5] Denifle, *Archiv*, p. 535. *Bascour* (1935), p. viii.

but to make every effort to apprehend his true meaning: 'It should be observed that some of the following investigations, propositions and expositions will appear at first sight monstrous, doubtful or false, but not if they are studied with understanding and care.'

He had a great love of paradox and was fond of using extreme or exaggerated phraseology in order to drive home his point. He had the imagination of the poet and the exuberance of the rhetorician. Is it strange that sometimes he is carried away by his own eloquence? How easy it was to give rein to his fancy when preaching to a devoted congregation who were filled with enthusiasm for his sermons. It was urged against him that the illiterate would take him too literally, that they would be unable to distinguish between what was rhetorically and what was literally meant. Eckhart does not seem to have been conscious of having deviated by one hair's breadth from the strict line of orthodoxy, but his critics were ever ready to pounce on an unguarded phrase or bold metaphor.

It has been suggested, and the suggestion is very plausible, that some of the Beghards charged with heresy at Cologne had quoted Eckhart in their own defence. This would explain Heinrich von Firneburg's attitude towards Eckhart. It is also noteworthy that in the attacks made on Eckhart by the Franciscans and in the text of the Bull of 1329, stress is laid on the fact that simple folk were led astray by his doctrines. 'Inasmuch as Friar Eckhart has led a large number of persons in the above-mentioned Province of Theutonia and in diverse other regions to believe and to publish abroad the same heresies,' say the four Franciscan firebrands to whom reference has already been made. It is interesting to note that Eckhart's adherents are said to exist in Germany and elsewhere in large numbers. This may be an overstatement, but it shows at least that his following was not negligible.

As an example of a bold statement that might easily be misunderstood, one might cite the last of the condemned propositions: 'God is neither good, nor better, nor the best. If anyone were to say that God is good, it would be as incorrect as to say that white is black.' Taken literally this is obviously heretical. At the same time anyone who has even a superficial acquaintance with scholastic philosophy, or who has a modicum of philosophical training, would see Eckhart's meaning, even without the context. All he is trying to do is to point out that we cannot apply finite predicates to God as to any finite creature. There is, of course, a sense in which we can say that God is good: it is of His essential nature to be good rather than evil. This is a

different kind of assertion from saying that a man is good. A man may, as it happens, be good in some respects, or on some occasions, but his essential nature is not goodness.

In his defence Eckhart did not deny having used the words quoted. He simply said: 'Certainly God, Who is above every name by which we might name Him, is as high above them as white is above black. And it is useful to explain and to represent this to the people in order to bring nearer to them the sublimity of God so that "at His name every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth." '

The main basis of Eckhart's doctrines was Scholasticism. He took over its dogmas, its phraseology, and its technique. He never opposed any of the essential teachings of Thomas Aquinas. But besides this stream of thought there is another which is in the main derived from Neo-Platonism. Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagitica and Augustine are his teachers. It is true that Thomas Aquinas himself frequently quotes these authorities, whom he held in high esteem, but in his later works he tends to emancipate himself more and more from their influence. Eckhart's predilection for the Neo-Platonic tradition is undoubtedly due to his strong mystical tendencies.

The dual origin of Eckhart's thought explains the paradox that this great mystic, whose speculations seek to penetrate as far as, or even beyond, the limits of the human intellect, this poet, whose intuitions flash upon the reader with the suddenness of inspiration, could also indulge in the subtle hair-splitting of the schools.[1] It is at first sight strange that a man such as Eckhart could spend so much of his time in the exercise of intellectual gymnastics. Were the mystic and the logician one and the same person? Had he a mystical and a scholastic period? This explanation is not possible because in his earliest writings we find both elements together, and we find them in every phase of his career, including the last. What satisfaction could he find in the arid disputations of the *studium generale*? They were not arid for him. He thought it supremely important to formulate the doctrines of the church, to find an intellectual expression for belief. The abstract terms of theology are for him pregnant with meaning, transfigured by living experience. In his ardent, vivid prose the dead bones are truly infused with life.

There are two main themes which Eckhart is never weary of discussing: God and the soul. The outer world, the sphere of nature,

[1] E.g., in the *Commentary on the Book of Wisdom.*

science and law, the political and social aspects of life, are only of interest to him in so far as they are linked up with the predominant trend of his thought. The starting-point of his system is that God is being, pure being, absolute being, the final ultimate reality. One of his favourite texts is 'I am, that I am': the name of God. If we wish to make a statement about Him, the first and most important thing that we can say is that He is, He exists. This is the orthodox scholastic teaching, but in Eckhart's philosophy the doctrine of being takes up a much larger place than in the systems of Thomas Aquinas or any other scholastic writer.

One of the charges brought against Eckhart in his own day was that he tended to obliterate the division between the being of God and that of man. On the other hand there are many passages in his genuine works in which he stresses the difference between the Creator and the creature in the traditional manner. As a scholastic philosopher, he laid great stress on the transcendence of God; as a mystic he firmly believed in the divine immanence, and indeed he needed no proof for the indwelling spirit whose existence he had himself so deeply and fully experienced. Combining the two doctrines, he develops the paradox that nothing is so dissimilar as God and the creatures, and at the same time nothing is so similar.

Eckhart distinguishes between the triune God and the Godhead. The former has three Persons, the latter is undifferentiated. This again is strictly orthodox. The Athanasian creed puts it quite simply: 'Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the substance.' In discussing the Godhead, Eckhart makes copious use of the phraseology of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagitica, who says that God is nothing, that He is darkness, and so on, meaning that to define Him, to predicate anything to Him, is to limit Him, Who is infinite. Eckhart states this doctrine on occasion in rather an extreme form, but it is only fair to say that he did not hold that God can only be described by negatives. On occasion he uses analogy to indicate the nature of God, thus following Thomas Aquinas.

Perhaps the most famous and at the same time the most characteristic of Eckhart's doctrines was that of the *Seelenfünklein*, or spark of the soul. Neither the word nor the idea was invented by him; the word *scintilla* is used by Plotinus and Hugh of St. Victor; Thomas Aquinas speaks of the *scintilla animae*. But Eckhart was the first to treat the subject in the vernacular and to coin a German word for *scintilla animae*. The *Fünklein* is that part or faculty of the soul in which, or by means of which, the mystical union of the soul with

God takes place. It is the seat of conscience and also of the religious consciousness, and has thus both an ethical and metaphysical aspect. It is indestructible; even in hell it speaks as the voice of conscience. Eckhart denied that he had ever asserted that the *Seelenfünklein* was uncreated; and as he believed in the doctrine of divine grace, it is difficult to see why his views on this subject are so often regarded as pantheistic.

When describing the mystic union between God and the soul, Eckhart often speaks of the Trinitarian procession in the soul, or to use the language of Neo-Platonism, which he himself employed, the emanations of God. Incidentally, this is a very different thing from 'emanationalism.' Eckhart's Neo-Platonism is here purely verbal; one must not be misled, as some have been by the mere use of the term.

Believing as he did, that God is eternal, that His actions, unlike human activity, are not subject to the limitations of time, he argued that the divine activity by way of procession or creation is one and indivisible. The begetting of the Son by the Father and the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and Son, are eternally taking place. Since God is in the soul through grace, the generation of the Son also takes place in the soul. This constitutes the sublimest experience of the mystic. The materials from which this doctrine is composed are scholastic, but the emphasis and the peculiar form of the statement are Eckhart's alone.

Of the historic Christ, who was born in Bethlehem and suffered under Pontius Pilate, Eckhart has not very much to say in his sermons. He has much more to say about the birth of Christ in the soul. It is in us that Christ is born, suffers, is crucified, dead and buried, and it is in us that He rises from the dead. The manner of His birth is a mystery, but Eckhart regards it as the most vital fact in human existence.

We cannot separate the generation of the Son and the creation of the world as two separate acts in time. From the point of view of God, they are both eternal, and both one. From the human point of view they are two and the first precedes the second, but with God there is no before and after. Eckhart is fond of quoting the text: 'God hath spoken once; twice I have heard this.'[1] This leads us to a consideration of Eckhart's doctrine of time, which is derived, in the main, from St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Eckhart accepts the fact of creation in the sense in which this means simply the utter dependence of the creature on the creator

[1] Psalm 62, v. 12.

at every moment of its existence, and also in the sense that there is a beginning of the world in time sequence. A certain wiseacre (sciolus) once asked him what God was doing before the creation of the universe. Eckhart replied that there was no 'before.' Time began with the creation of the world; there was no time before the creation.

The problem then arises: is the world eternal? Eckhart replies, in effect: 'No, not in the sense in which God is eternal.' The censors at Cologne took exception to a passage from the *Genesis Commentary*: 'The beginning, in which God created heaven and earth, is the first, simple "now" of eternity; that very "now," I say, in which God has been from all eternity.' In his defence, Eckhart commented: 'This by no means implies that the world has existed from all eternity, as ignorant people think. For the creation, in the passive sense, is not eternal, nor is what is created itself.'[1]

It is true that these statements do not square with the first two condemned propositions, in which Eckhart was alleged to have said that the world had existed from all eternity. There are good reasons for thinking that these passages had been taken from their context by the Cologne censors and were hence misunderstood at Avignon. When Eckhart asserted, in the words of the papal bull, 'It may be conceded that the world existed from all eternity,' he was admitting the point for the sake of argument. He was discussing the point with the wiseacre already mentioned, who had asserted the eternity of the world, whereas Eckhart maintained the opposite.[2]

In common with other mystics, Eckhart was inclined to despise the world. If he mentions it, it is to disparage it. Or he may use its phenomena as symbols of some great truth. One of the charges brought against him was that he denied the real existence of things. 'All things are a mere nothing; I do not say that they are slight or that they are anything, but that they are a mere nothing.'[3] But it would be a mistake to regard him as an unworldly dreamer. He led an extremely active life, busy with administrative duties, with preaching and teaching and the cure of souls. At the same time he found the leisure to write voluminous works, of which some account should now be given.

His writings fall naturally into two classes, according to the language in which they are written. The Latin writings[4] contain Eckhart's philosophical and theological system, and were intended for the learned. They represent his work as a teacher and lecturer.

[1] Théry, *Archives, Edition critique*, etc., 1926, p. 194. [2] Denifle, *Archiv*, II, p. 553.
[3] Article 26, Denifle, *Archiv*, II, p. 639. [4] See Bibliography for the editions.

The vernacular works were written for the laymen and nuns and are hence in a more popular style.

The most important of the former is the *Opus Tripartitum*, written about 1314. Only a fraction of this vast work survives. As the title indicates, it consisted of three parts. Each of these had its own prologue and there was a general introduction to the whole work. The three sections were entitled: *Opus Propositionum*, *Opus Quaestionum* and *Opus Expositionum*. The second is lost; of the first the *Prologue* alone has been printed. We gather that the plan was based on that of the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas. Considerable parts of the third section have been printed.

The first two sections dealt with systematic theology and philosophical problems. The third, the *Opus Expositionum*, was composed of sermons and biblical commentaries, two on *Genesis*, and one on each of the following: *Exodus*, the *Book of Wisdom*, and the *Gospel of St. John*. Two Latin sermons preached at the Provincial Chapter are expositions of passages from *Ecclesiasticus*. All these have been printed. Among Eckhart's earlier works are the *Quaestiones* written in Paris, fragments of his work on the *Sentences* of Petrus Lombardus, and a Latin sermon preached on St. Augustine's Day. Finally there are the documents relating to the process: Eckhart's defence at Cologne, his declaration in the Franciscan Church, his detailed reply to the accusations brought before him at Cologne and his defence at Avignon.[1]

The German works consisted largely of sermons; there are also a few treatises on devotional subjects. Few of the sermons were written down by the preacher himself. Most of them were either reported by members of the congregation or translated from Latin. The text is often very corrupt and should be used with caution. To base conclusions on these sermons as to Eckhart's opinions and doctrines without close consideration of their genuineness is hazardous in the extreme.

From the point of view of the history of literature, Eckhart's vernacular prose is of great importance. He is expounding to the people profound matters, and has to coin German words with which to express theological concepts. In particular, he has to create a new vocabulary of mysticism. The German language then consisted of a mass of dialects, spoken by people who were, for the most part, illiterate serfs. It was suitable for the purpose for which it was used, as a practical medium to express the ideas of the peasantry, their daily occupations and interests; but it lacked abstract words and was not

[1] Edited by Franz Pelster.

adapted for the use of a scholar. Eckhart therefore had to make new words. This he did either by adapting a Latin term, by creating a new German one, or by adding a new meaning to an already existing word.

He was a great master of prose. He wrote clearly and vigorously with due regard to the spirit of German, without pedantry. Such vernacular prose was scarcely to be found elsewhere in Europe at the beginning of the fourteenth century. His contribution to German prose may be assessed by tracing, as we shall now attempt to do, his legacy to subsequent writers, and also by considering the permanent gain to German vocabulary which resulted from his innovations.

Roma locuta, causa finita. The Supreme Pontiff had passed judgment and there was nothing more to be said about it. As long as Eckhart lived, he had staunch supporters in his own Order, such as Nicholas of Strasbourg, but the papal ban put an end to open support. After his death he had still warm, if secret advocates in his own pupils and penitents. Tauler mentions his name with deep respect and affection. Suso quotes him as 'a sublime master,' and in his biography we read that Eckhart appeared after his death in a vision to Suso, telling him that he was living in Paradise and in the presence of God.[1]

Whether this is to be taken literally or not is doubtful, but it is at least certain that Suso quoted his master very fully and fairly and defended him with great skill in one of his most important works.[2] Eckhart was well known and highly revered in two Swiss convents, Töss near Winterthur and Ötenbach near Zurich. At Töss the Dominican nun Elsbeth Stagel, the friend and confidante of Suso, asked for guidance about the teachings of Eckhart,[3] while at Ötenbach Elsbeth von Begenhofen recorded the fact that she had consulted Eckhart about her own personal difficulties.[4] Queen Agnes of Hungary enjoyed the friendship of Eckhart, who dedicated to her his *Buch der geistlichen Tröstung*, to console her in her bereavement. It is not clear whether the occasion was the murder of her father, King Albrecht I, in 1308, or the death of her mother, Queen Elisabeth, in 1313.

There are some charming little anecdotes written in Strasbourg and Cologne by friars and nuns who had known Eckhart personally or by repute, which show in what regard and veneration he was held.[5] It is evident that his contemporary fame owed much to the

[1] Des Dieners Leben, cap. vi (*Susos Werke*, herausg. Bihlmeyer, pp. 22–23).
[2] *Büchlein der Wahrheit*, cap. vi.
[3] Des Dieners Leben, cap. xxxiii.
[4] *Die Stiftung des Klosters Oetenbach*, p. 263.
[5] Pfeiffer, pp. 624–627.

power of the spoken word. The living presence of the teacher and preacher inspired his hearers, but when this generation had passed away his memory slowly faded. A century after his death he was remembered merely as a dangerous and suspect friar. In 1430 the Divinity Faculty of Heidelberg University solemnly condemned his 'errors.' They might have saved themselves the trouble: he was all but forgotten.

In the almost total eclipse that followed there was one short interlude. Johannes Wenck, Rector of the Divinity Faculty at Heidelberg, wrote a vigorous attack[1] on pantheists, heretics, Beghards and Lollards, among whom he reckoned Eckhart and Nicholas of Cues or Cusanus. Wenck charged Eckhart with several heresies, for example, with putting man and God on an equal footing. In support of his contention he quoted the passage 'The Father begets His Son in me and I am there the same Son and not another.' This is the first article from the sermons in the Cologne indictment, and it shows that Wenck drew his materials from the official documents of the process.

Nicholas of Cues replied in his *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*. In order to avoid direct controversy with his opponent, he made use of a device suggested by Plato's dialogues. He invented a disciple who writes to a fellow pupil, reporting how he went to his 'praeceptor' (i.e. Nicholas), to tell him about the accusation of Johannes Wenck. The 'praeceptor' defends himself, and since Eckhart had also been an object of attack, he includes him in his defence. He says that he has seen many of Eckhart's works, but that he never came across the statement that the creature was identical with the creator. He praises Eckhart's talents and zeal for learning, but there is a note of caution in his praise. He would like Eckhart's works to be removed from libraries; they are dangerous for the common people, since they go beyond accepted belief, 'but they contain subtle and useful things for the intelligent.'

Evidently Cusanus had a close acquaintance with the works of his great fellow Dominican. He discovered a copy of the *Opus Tripartitum* in the library of Cues. He had it copied and diligently annotated it with his own hand. This manuscript of Eckhart's Latin works is the completest and most accurate that has come down to us. It is interesting to note that Cusanus occasionally adds in the margin 'Cave' (beware) beside some of Eckhart's bold sayings. After this short-lived revival the Latin works of Eckhart fell into oblivion. They remained buried for four centuries in the libraries of Erfurt,

[1] *Ignota Litteratura.*

Cues and Trier. It is true that Trithemius saw them about the year 1493,[1] but he does not appear to have read them.

This does not mean that Eckhart's influence ceased. By many channels his thought proceeded down the ages and continued to bear fruit in other minds. The debt of Tauler and Suso to their master was immense. Marquard von Lindau owed much to him;[2] Jordanus of Quedlinburg plagiarized him copiously.[3] Less certain is the indebtedness of the great Flemish mystic Ruysbroeck and Thomas à Kempis. Some scholars have come to the conclusion that the former knew Eckhart's writings well and was profoundly influenced by them. But Ruysbroeck very rarely quotes other writers, and where his thought corresponds closely to that of Eckhart the indebtedness may be indirect, through Tauler, whom Ruysbroeck knew well. It must also be remembered that mysticism was 'in the air' at the time and similarity in expression is not enough to prove borrowing. In the *Imitation of Christ* we find many passages that remind us of Eckhart[4] but nothing that can be called an unmistakable case of literary influence.

The same explanation can be given for the similarities of ideas and general trend of thought shared by Eckhart and the English mystics, John Hilton and Julian of Norwich. Direct borrowing is very unlikely. Such influence as Eckhart had on Luther was largely indirect, through Tauler or Marquard von Lindau, for example. With regard to Angelus Silesius the position is quite different. His dependence on Eckhart has doubtless been exaggerated, but he knew some at least of Eckhart's sermons, and *Der cherubinische Wandersmann* (1657) has been aptly described as 'a seventeenth century edition of Eckhart.'[5]

The chief medium by which Eckhart's mysticism was transmitted to posterity was that of the German sermons and tractates.[6] Unlike the Latin works, these continued to be copied and quoted. Many of them were not written down by Eckhart himself, but were reported by others. Often they did not bear the author's name, or passed as the works of some other writer. Thus Eckhart's vernacular writings may be said to have led a kind of underground existence. The general fate of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sermons was to be edited,

[1] *De Scriptoribus Ecclesiasticis, Basileae*, 1494, fol. 78.
[2] J. M. Clark, in *Modern Language Review*, xxxiv (1939), pp. 72–78.
[3] R. Klibansky, *Magistri Eckhardi Opera Latina*, p. xiii.
[4] Karrer (1923), pp. 253–254, 258, 261–262, 265–270. [5] Ibid., p. 55.
[6] It was the German sermons that inspired Angelus Silesius, but he read them in the Latin translation of Surius.

cut up, excerpted and rearranged to form devotional manuals. There was a considerable demand for such literature in Germany. A new reading public had grown up in the towns and the demand was greater than the supply.

When the rediscovery of Eckhart came, it was the German sermons that first attracted attention. But before this could take place mountains of prejudice and ignorance had to be cleared away. In the Age of Enlightenment mysticism had fallen into disrepute. The word 'mystic' was synonymous with 'crazy dreamer.' Kant called mysticism 'Afterphilosophie,' which means as much as 'pseudo-philosophy' or 'sham philosophy.' There are a few notable exceptions to this general tendency. The Protestant theologian Gottfried Arnold in 1702 mentioned Eckhart as one of those 'pious and devout men who ought least of all to be compared with the Papists.'[1] But this was only a passing reference: Arnold knew very little about Eckhart. His knowledge was probably limited to what he had gleaned from the printed edition of Tauler's works.

In the early nineteenth century the reign of rationalism was drawing to a close. The die-hards still proclaimed the pre-eminence of reason, but a new conception of religion and a revival of religious consciousness were the order of the day. In some circles this revival assumed strange and eccentric forms. There was widespread interest in the phenomena of spiritualism, hypnotism, clairvoyance, somnambulism and 'magnetism.' Swedenborgianism and other strange new creeds became the fashion. Scholars began to study the problem of mysticism in order to combat it as irrational and unnatural.

There were two directions in which the newly aroused interest in mysticism found expression. First, there was an uncritical demand for reading matter, which led to new editions of Tauler and Suso and other mediaeval writers. Secondly, the rationalists and Lutherans wrote histories of mysticism in order to refute the claims of the mystics. The leading representatives of this school of thought were Docen (1806) and Heinrich Schmid (1824). For twenty years the attacks on the mystics continued, but meanwhile the opposition to rationalism gradually gained strength.

Among the pioneers was J. J. von Görres, the intellectual leader of the group of Heidelberg Romanticists. Görres was very strongly attracted to mysticism and found it congenial to his own cast of mind. Suso appealed to him in particular; of Eckhart he knew little. He described the latter as 'a wonderful, almost mythical Christian figure,

[1] *Historia et Descriptio Theologiæ et Mysticæ*, pp. 305–306.

half hidden in the mists of antiquity.'[1] As Eckhart's works were bound together with Tauler's, Görres thought that he was a pupil of Tauler's. The philosopher Friedrich von Baader discovered a manuscript of Eckhart in the Munich University Library, and it became clear to him that this was a mystic in his own right and no mere disciple of Tauler. 'Eckhart is justly called the Master,' he once observed, 'he surpasses all other mystics.' Baader called the attention of Hegel to Eckhart and proposed to edit his works.[2] He did not live to carry out the project, and it was left to Pfeiffer to be the editor of Eckhart.

Although Hegel's acquaintance with Eckhart was superficial, he regarded him as a predecessor and a kindred spirit.[3] It was naturally those passages that had a pantheistic tendency that pleased Hegel best, and he did not stop to inquire whether they were genuine or not. Schopenhauer was also an admirer of Eckhart, whom he quotes three times with evident approval.[4] 'It is probable that nowhere is the spirit of Christianity in this direction so completely and vigorously expressed as in the writings of the German mystics.' Schopenhauer conceived the identity of the worshipper and the God he worships, to be the very essence of religion and he found, or thought he found, this idea in Eckhart. It is curious to note that all the three quotations made by Schopenhauer are from treatises falsely attributed to Eckhart. The last, in which a nun is reported as saying to her confessor 'Sir, rejoice with me; I have become God,'[5] is from *Swester Katrei*, a composite work, of which one part (containing this passage) is apparently a tractate of the Beghards and entirely heretical. Eckhart himself never wrote anything of the kind.

It is astonishing to find that these philosophers, who claimed to be led by the light of reason alone and to be free from dogmatism, should be so uncritical. The theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, are more cautious. The very qualities that endeared Eckhart to the philosophers made him suspect to the divines. The orthodox Lutheran Franz Delitzsch (1842) denounced mediaeval theology and the 'Satanic abyss' of Hegelianism. He blamed Herder and others for identifying Christianity and mysticism. The philosophers had played off Eckhart against orthodox Protestant theology. This called for a considered reply from a real scholar. It came from Carl Wilhelm Adolf Schmidt, whose *Meister Eckhart* (1839) was

[1] *Seuse, herausg.*, Diepenbrock, p. 34.
[2] *Sämmtliche Werke*, XIV, 315, 159.
[3] *Werke* (1925), XII, 257.
[4] *Sämmtliche Werke*, München, 1924, I, p. 450, p. 457; II, p. 701.
[5] *Meister Eckhart*, ed. Pfeiffer, p. 465.

intended as a counterblast to the insults of Hegelianism. Here begins the scholarly approach to the study of Eckhart.

Before Schmidt's work appeared Eckhart's name had often been mentioned,[1] but next to nothing had been known of his life. Now, for the first time since Cusanus real light was shed on the historical facts. It was doubtless his Catholic teacher Baader who first drew his attention to Eckhart. The actual amount of facts discovered was small, but it was at least a beginning. As regards the texts, Schmidt was the first to ascribe to Eckhart fifty-five sermons and four shorter pieces in the Tauler edition. He clarified the chronological position of Eckhart, Tauler and Suso. Where he went wrong was in assuming a close connection between Eckhart and the Beghards, in casting doubt on the sincerity of his recantation, in identifying mysticism and pantheism and in separating Eckhart from scholasticism, of which he was entirely ignorant.

Schmidt was a native of Strasbourg and he wrote with equal facility in French and German. In his French writings he signs himself as 'Charles Guillaume Adolphe.' Interest in Eckhart in France began with his *Essai sur les mystiques du quatorzième siècle* (1836), in which it is claimed that Eckhart was a native of Strasbourg. A pupil of Schmidt, Auguste Jundt (1871, 1875), elaborated the conclusions of Schmidt and added considerably to our knowledge by the publication of new texts. Jundt's attitude, put briefly, is that Eckhart was a monist; 'Dieu seul existe, et que le monde n'a pas de réalité en lui-même.' He was, in fact, a pantheist, and was connected with the heretical Beghards.

Delacroix follows the same line of tradition. He gives a very fully documented account and sums up his opinion by the words 'Le fonds de l'âme est la divinité lui-même.' He does not accept the dependence of Eckhart on Scholasticism and denies that he held the doctrine of divine grace: 'Tout ce qui s'accomplit dans l'âme s'y fait par nature et par nécessité.' Where Eckhart is orthodox, Delacroix thinks he is afraid of his own audacity and tempers his doctrine to make it agree with dogma. His recantation only applied to two tenets. One might point out that many of the quotations of Delacroix are from spurious works. Perhaps he oversimplifies the problem.

Dr. W. R. Inge[2] agrees with the main contentions of Delacroix and states the view that Eckhart's doctrines were identical with those of Plotinus. Other notable French scholars who contributed to our

[1] For further details see the excellent account in *Gottfried Fischer, Geschichte*, pp. 15–21, 39–41.
[2] *The Philosophy of Plotinus.*

subject are Vernet, Puyol and Lichtenberger (1910). The latter places the German mystics in the history of Christian dogma and assesses their value from the theological and the literary point of view. But we are anticipating: let us return to the middle of the nineteenth century.

One of the earliest attempts to give a systematic account of Eckhart's thought is that of the Danish theologian, H. L. Martensen (1842). He points out that the condemned propositions were taken from their context, but thinks that they correspond in the main to the ideas expressed in the sermons. He does not hesitate to call Eckhart a pantheist, but qualifies the statement by saying that pantheism is the very basis of mysticism and speculative theology. He places mysticism and scholasticism in opposition to each other.

He denies that Eckhart was a member of a heretical sect, asserts that he did not wish to leave the Church or to attack it, but merely to renovate it from within. He was free from the antinomian doctrines of the heretics. Even more than Spinoza he deserved to be called a 'God-intoxicated man.' He did not succeed in resolving the inherent contradiction of revelation and mysticism, the divine transcendence and immanence, and hence the lack of unity in his system.

Martensen, who had passed through the school of Hegel, was aware that he only knew a small part of Eckhart's works, but he considered that this did not matter, because his ideas were all of a piece. He consulted the sermons by Eckhart in the Basel editions of Tauler (1521, 1522), which was really a better source than those used by many later writers. The value of Martensen's conclusions is somewhat impaired by the fact that he is in effect just writing a treatise on mysticism and taking Eckhart as its best representative. He assumes that there is no essential difference between him, Tauler, Suso and the unknown author of the *Theologia Germanica*, and quotes from them indiscriminately in proof of his assertions. But in some respects he anticipates the conclusions of modern scholarship.

In 1857, after eighteen years of concentrated labour, Pfeiffer published his edition of Eckhart's German writings. He enthusiastically hails Eckhart as 'one of the profoundest thinkers of all time.'[1] It is customary nowadays to stress the shortcomings of Pfeiffer's edition, the faulty texts, the inclusion of spurious matter, the uncritical attitude to the sources, and so on. But in all fairness one must concede that Pfeiffer must be judged by the standard of his own day as to

[1] *Vorwort*, p. iii.

scholarship. A vast impetus to the interest in Eckhart and the study of his works was given by the new edition.

Pfeiffer was more concerned with his great discovery, with making Eckhart available to the public as soon as possible than with making an absolutely reliable text. It did not occur to him, and it could not have occurred to him, that he was unconsciously falsifying the picture of the master by printing the genuine, the doubtful, and the spurious cheek by jowl. It may be added that Pfeiffer, with all his faults, was more critical than many of his readers. He recognized that the last few sermons, especially Nos. 105–110, are not in their original form, that they had been altered or tampered with, both as regards language and construction. He freely admitted that the later tractates in the book are not so well authenticated as those which precede them. He hints that some of them are rather in Eckhart's manner than genuine productions of the master. How many authors on mysticism, and among them some of the most eminent, have perused the book and extracted its contents without taking the trouble to read the preface? How many have assumed, quite wrongly, that everything in the volume is authentic?

So great was the admiration aroused by Pfeiffer's edition that no attempt was made to scrutinize the text. Eckhart was hailed on all hands as the Father of German philosophy, as a mystic of the foremost rank, as a great master of German prose, the greatest the Middle Ages had produced, and so forth. The name of these writers is legion; they are often exuberant in their praise and uncritical in their admiration. Among the most ambitious and the ablest contributions to the subject is that of the Hegelian philosopher Lasson. He describes Eckhart as 'the central spirit of all mysticism,' since in him all the elements of mysticism are found in the highest perfection. With the help of quotations from Pfeiffer he strives to construct a system. He considers Eckhart's basic assumption to be 'the divinity of the soul.' He recognizes his debt to Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus and Augustine, as well as to Avicenna, Plato and Aristotle,[1] and maintains that in his attacks on salvation by works, 'monkishness, Mariolatry,' etc., he was a forerunner of Protestantism. All this is highly controversial, but Lasson made some very valuable criticisms that have not lost their relevance to-day.

After the period of exuberant praise and uncritical admiration comes an age of ruthless destructive analysis. It was a strictly orthodox Catholic priest, and a Dominican friar to boot, who ushered in the

[1] Pp. 81–82, 86.

period of critical inquiry. Heinrich Seuse Denifle was a Tyrolean, a man of humble origin, who by dint of extraordinary ability combined with unusual industry had established himself as an eminent scholar. He had a first-class command of Latin, and being an Austrian, he was quite at home with both modern and mediaeval German. He joined the Dominican Order just at the time when the revival of Catholic theology, or Neo-scholasticism, had reached its culminating point, and was hence thoroughly grounded in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Denifle therefore approached German mysticism as a form of scholasticism. It was his great merit to discover in 1880 a manuscript containing some of the Latin works of Eckhart.[1] Later he brought to light other manuscripts and also documents relating to the trial.

Denifle struck a controversial note from the first.[2] The main object of his attack was Preger, the Protestant historian of German mysticism, who had proclaimed Eckhart to be an original thinker of the first magnitude. Preger knew little or nothing of scholastic philosophy. It was not difficult for Denifle to expose Preger's gross ignorance of mediaeval thought and to show that much of the vaunted wisdom of Eckhart was the common property of scholastic thinkers. Many of his profoundest utterances were seen to be taken over almost verbally from Augustine, Albertus Magnus or Thomas Aquinas. The effect of Denifle's criticism was devastating.

In establishing Eckhart's relationship to his predecessors and in particular to the Scholastic philosophers, Denifle made a real and substantial contribution to learning. But in his desire to discredit Preger and destroy the legend of Eckhart the original thinker and father of German philosophy, Denifle undoubtedly went too far. He was manifestly unfair to Preger, whom he treats both as a fool and a knave. With all his faults Preger was a scholar. He had the knack of ferreting out hitherto unknown facts. He found and edited many of the original documents. In another respect, also, Denifle overshot the mark. Not content with proving Eckhart's indebtedness to others, he sought to show that he is not a clear thinker, that he is far inferior to Thomas Aquinas in depth and clarity.

The criticism proceeds on two lines: first we are told that Eckhart is muddle-headed. He does not know the difference between one concept and another, or he does not use his terms carefully enough. He confuses his terms, using a word in different senses in the same paragraph, without making it clear which sense is applicable each to individual case. He does not distinguish carefully enough between

[1] *Archiv*, II, p. 419. [2] *Historisch-politische Blätter*, 1875.

truth and error, by anticipating wrong interpretations. Secondly Eckhart is, we are told, led astray by false doctrines inspired by Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius, adopting their terminology without realizing the dangers inherent in it. Preger made some show of defence, but it was an unequal struggle. Denifle smote him hip and thigh and damaged his reputation considerably. For some time Denifle held the field unopposed. No one dared to challenge the formidable Dominican on his own ground. The investigation of Eckhart came to a standstill.

After this epoch of destructive criticism when no reputation seemed safe, there came a reaction. It was seen that Denifle had overstated his case, that his views were not free from prejudice, that the manuscripts he had edited were occasionally corrupt and the conclusions he had drawn were sometimes unwarrranted. Scholars began to pluck up their courage and resume the formidable task of critical inquiry. The first steps were taken by Langenberg (1902) and Pummerer (1903). The former traced Eckhart's influence in the Low Countries, the latter surveyed the whole field of Eckhart scholarship and made some additions to it. More original documents were edited by Daniels, Bäumker and Théry. The publication of Eckhart's defence before his judges doubtless aroused sympathy for the friar. In fact, Eckhart came to be reinstated as a mystic, although as a philosopher he had suffered a certain loss of status.

Then from a new direction the critics made their voices heard. The object of their strictures was Pfeiffer's edition of the German sermons. Philologists began to raise doubts about the accuracy and dependability of Pfeiffer's text. Confidence in this work was completely undermined by the investigations of Spamer, Behaghel and Strauch, between 1908 and 1912. Spamer's investigations were carried out with characteristic German thoroughness. He consulted no less than 171 original manuscripts.

It was shown that in Pfeiffer's edition the same passage sometimes occurs twice on different pages; there are interpolations and corrupt passages; some of the sermons are careless translations of a Latin original, others are summaries of different sermons amalgamated and printed as one. Much of the work attributed to Eckhart could not be vouched for, and some of the treatises are not in his style at all. All the elaborate theories that had been built up on the basis of Pfeiffer's text now fell to the ground. It seemed as if the task of assessing Eckhart would have to begin all over again.

Some kind of order was finally restored in the chaos that ensued.

Positive criteria were brought forward for the identification of authentic works. It was shown that in the documents of the process the opening words, or *incipit*, of sixteen sermons were quoted, together with whole sentences from these and other sermons.[1] Here we have a reliable test to distinguish between the genuine and the doubtful. Many sermons bear the name of Eckhart either in one manuscript or in more than one. This is another guide. Further, there is internal evidence as regards style and vocabulary. In works that are recognized as authentic we come across certain peculiarities. Eckhart was very fond of rhetorical repetition for the sake of effect; and several turns of phrase recur continually. When these are entirely absent we may justly suspect the hand of another author. As a result of patient research a core or canon of genuine sermons and tractates has been established. It now remains to apply the results obtained to further material, always examining the manuscripts themselves to see if the work in question is ever attributed to Eckhart in an early and reliable text.

After the first World War, there was a certain vogue of mysticism in Germany. The pessimism that followed defeat and political disintegration fostered this tendency, which was loosely connected with the Expressionistic movement in literature. It was a reaction against materialism, an escape from depression, a release from the problems of the present.

The new fashion did not go very deep and left few traces behind it. Literature and philosophy were influenced by it to some extent, and it even affected scholarship for a time. Through the revival of interest in the great mystics of the East and West, Eckhart came into his own again. Much of the literature thus inspired was ephemeral, but there were some notable publications. There was, for example, a learned and earnest attempt on the part of Otto Karrer to reinstate Eckhart as a great thinker and moreover as a loyal son of the Church. Karrer was one of a long line of Catholic apologists of Eckhart, among whom we may reckon Baader, Joseph Bach and Linsenmann.[2] In the other camp we find men like Lasson, Hauck, Pahncke and Dittrich, who assert that Eckhart was at bottom a Platonist who tried ineffectually to make his real beliefs square with orthodox dogma. Even the psycho-analysts have delved in Eckhart. C. G. Jung quotes him on the subject of the Good,[3] and in his doctrine of the soul Jung seems to have studied Eckhart to some effect.

By the year 1930 it had become quite evident that the most impor-

[1] See Skutella for details.

[2] We may add one Protestant to the list, Heinrich von Ritter (1845).

[3] *Die Wirklichkeit de Seele*, Zurich, 1934, p. 210.

tant *desiderata* in Eckhart scholarship were, first a revision of Pfeiffer's version of the German works, or better still, a completely new edition, and secondly, the publication of all Eckhart's Latin writings. Until this was done it would be impossible to get a complete picture of the author's personality. The difficulties were formidable. The Latin manuscripts are written in a very abbreviated script, which can only be deciphered by the expert. It is not enough to be thoroughly versed in mediaeval Latin and its usual abbreviations, one must also be familiar with the special Dominican abbreviations of the early fourteenth century. A profound knowledge of Scholasticism is a *sine qua non*.

In 1932 the plan for a complete edition of the Latin works was submitted to the Heidelberg Academy by Dr. Raymond Klibansky, and he was entrusted with the execution of the project. In the following year the Santa Sabina Institute in Rome, the headquarters of Dominican historical scholarship, took over the direction of the work under the general editorship of Father Gabriel Théry and Dr. Klibansky. The individual volumes were to be produced by a group of distinguished scholars of British, Belgian, French, German and Italian nationality. The last volume was to contain a biography of Eckhart. Of the seventeen volumes that were envisaged only three appeared. The Nazi government sabotaged the scheme in every possible way, *inter alia* by refusing to allow rotographs to be sent from Germany to the editors and by threatening the German publisher in Leipzig with imprisonment.

An opposition venture, including both the Latin and the German works of Eckhart, was sponsored by the German government. The editors of the Latin works were Karl Christ and Joseph Koch; for the German ones Konrad Weiss and Josef Quint. Of the eight volumes that were planned, parts of three actually appeared. The outbreak of the war brought this enterprise also to a standstill.

Perhaps the strangest episode in Eckhart's posthumous fame was the attempt of the Nazis to annex him and exploit him. The remark in a sermon that the blood was the noblest thing in man[1] seemed to square with the National Socialist racial theories about blood and soil. They found additional arguments. Christianity is not, they said, a fixed and constant thing, but it exists in different forms, coloured by the nations that adopted it. It is, in fact, divided into a number of national churches or national religions, and its specific form is based on the racial qualities of the country in question. Eckhart was a representative of German Christianity or of German religion. If in

[1] Pfeiffer, No. 56, p. 179.

every individual the religious experience has a special, personal form why should not this be true of a nation? Are not Eckhart, Luther, and Fichte all representatives of German piety?[1]

Eckhart was coupled together with Luther as one of the heroic champions of the truth, men who would face martyrdom rather than renounce their faith. How are we to slur over the fact that Eckhart recanted? The Nazi argument is that his revolt was certainly not so obvious as Luther's, but it was an inner revolt. He is praised for his strong individuality and this is extolled as a German quality. 'No country has produced so many heretics as Germany,' proudly exclaims Walter Lehmann. Whereas Luther broke away from tradition with his eyes open, and did not shrink from the consequences of his action, excommunication, and so forth, Eckhart did not clearly realize the implications of his rebellion. He went on his way blindly, naïvely afraid at the results and the hostility of the Church.

Let us examine these arguments. The passage about the blood is torn from its context. The beginning of the sermon runs thus: '"Fear not those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul," for spirit cannot kill spirit. Spirit gives life to spirit. Those who wish to kill you, they are flesh and blood, and they die together. The noblest thing in man is the blood, if it wills good. But the vilest thing that is in man is the blood, if it wills evil. If the blood conquers the flesh, then the man is humble, patient and chaste and has in him all virtue. But if the flesh conquers the blood, the man becomes proud, angry, and unchaste and has all vices in him.' It is quite obvious that Eckhart is not using *blood* in the Nazi sense at all.

The Nazis never realized how much Eckhart owed to Jewish and Arabic writers, for example to Moses Maimonides and Avicenna. When Goebbels publicly referred to him as the greatest of German philosophers he did not mention that the main trend of his thought corresponds to that of an Italian, Thomas Aquinas.

The conflict between Eckhart and the Inquisition is, as we see, interpreted as a battle between a specifically 'German' religion and the Roman Catholic Church. This is patently absurd. No one was more international in the best sense of the word than Eckhart. He studied in Paris, the intellectual capital of Europe, and carried off high honours there. He wrote most of his works in Latin, the international language of the day. The one thing that mattered to him was the religious life; he was indifferent to politics or race. The Order to which he was proud to belong knew no national boundaries.

[1] Walter Lehmann, *Meister Eckhart*, pp. 5–14.