Dangerous Mystic
Meister Eckhart's Path to the God Within

JOEL F. HARRINGTON
Table of Contents

PROLOGUE 1

PART I
Letting Go of the World
The Friar

1. THE NOBLE HEART
Young Eckhart absorbs the chivalric ideal of higher love 15

2. HEROIC CHRISTIANITY
Young Eckhart seeks a pure spirituality within the world of late medieval religion 39

3. THE DOMINICAN WAY
Eckhart enters the Order of Preachers at Erfurt 63

4. THE RIGHT STATE
The prior Eckhart teaches young friars the interior nature of true religion 89

PART II
Letting Go of God
The Scholastic

5. THE SCIENCE OF GOD
Eckhart begins graduate study of theology at the University of Paris 109

6. MASTER OF LEARNING
Eckhart becomes adept as a scholastic theologian 135

7. KNOWING THE UNKNOWABLE GOD
Eckhart embraces negative theology and intuitive knowledge 157
PART III
Lettng Go of the Self

The Preacher

8. PERNICIOUS FEMALES
Eckhart encounters the nuns and beguines of Strasbourg

9. MASTER OF LIVING
Eckhart adapts his scholastic teachings for a popular audience

10. THE WAYLESS WAY
Eckhart preaches on achieving divine union

11. LIVING WITHOUT A WHY
Eckhart preaches on life and ethics after divine union

PART IV
Holding On to Religion

The Spiritual Icon

12. DEVIL'S SEED
Eckhart struggles with inquisitors in Strasbourg and Avignon

13. THE MAN FROM WHOM GOD HID NOTHING
Eckhart's reputation and legacy up to the present day

EPILOGUE 315

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 323

RECOMMENDED READING 327

ABBREVIATIONS 331

NOTES 331

INDEX 351

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS 363
There are those who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; that is curiosity. There are those who seek knowledge to be known by others; that is vanity. There are those who seek knowledge in order to serve; that is love.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153)
THE WORLD OF MEISTER ECKHART

circa 1300

Denmark

England Channel

Atlantic

Ocean

Vienne

Savoy

Po

Venice

Bologna

Florence

Papal

States

Corsica

Rome

Adriatic

Sea

Tyrrenian

Sea

Mediterranean

Sea

Ionian

Sea

Map by Gov. Tracy

Scale of miles

10 20 30 40 50

Hannover

Magdeburg

Hochheim

Tambach

Martin

Prague

Hamburg

Leipzig

Thuringia

Saxony

Brandenburg

Poland

Hainault

Flanders

Bruges

Brabant

Cologne

Leipzig

Silesia

Bohemia

Hungary

Austrian

States

ustria

Sicily

Sardinia

Corsica

Mediterranean

Sea

Ionian

Sea

Scale of miles

10 20 30 40 50

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34
Key Names and Terms

ALBERT THE GREAT: aka Albertus Magnus; ca. 1200–80, a Dominican and the greatest German philosopher of his day

AVERROËS: aka Ibn Rushd; 1126–98; Aristotelian philosopher from Muslim Andalusia

AVICENNA: aka Ibn Sinā; 980–1037; influential Islamic philosopher from Persia

BEATIFIC VISION: In Christian theology, the face-to-face experience of God; highly disputed whether possible before death

 Beguine: A member of a community of religious women who do not take formal vows

DIETRICH OF FREIBERG: ca.1250–ca. 1310; Dominican scholar and administrator, also mentor of Eckhart

DISPUTATIO: A formal scholastic debate on a specific theological question

DIVINE BIRTH: aka the eternal birth; according to Eckhart, the direct experience of divine essence in the soul

DIVINE SPARK: According to Eckhart, the piece of divine essence found in every soul

DOMINICANS: aka the Order of Preachers, a religious order founded by Dominic de Guzmán in 1215

ERFURT: Thuringian city and home to Eckhart for most of his life

ESSENCE: In scholastic philosophy, the necessary or defining properties of a thing

FRANCISCANS: aka the Order of Friars Minor, a religious order founded by Francis of Assisi in 1209

FRIENDS OF GOD: Fourteenth-century Rhineland followers of Eckhart's mystical teachings
HEINRICH OF VIRNEBURG: 1245–1322; archbishop of Cologne from 1304 on

INTELLECT: In scholastic terms, the power for conceptual thought, located in the soul

JOHN XXII: Born Jacques Duèz; reigned as pope in Avignon 1316–34

LATERAN IV: Universal church council convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215

LETTING-GO-NESS: Translation of gelassenheit, the necessary precondition to the divine birth

MAIMONIDES: aka Moses ben Maimon; 1135–1204; Sephardic Jewish philosopher from Cordova

MARGUERITE OF POGETE: Beguine author of The Mirror of Simple Souls; burned as a heretic in 1310

MECHTILD OF MAGDEBURG: ca. 1208–92; beguine and author of mystical Flowing Light of Divinity

MENDICANT: aka friar, a member of one of the "begging orders" of Franciscans or Dominicans

MYSTIC: An individual who has directly experienced the divine or ultimate reality

OPUS TRIPARTITUM: The three-volume theological summa planned by Eckhart but never completed

PHILIP THE FAIR: aka Philip IV, reigned as king of France 1285–1314

PRIORY: A mendicant or monastic house, headed by an elected prior

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS: Anonymous Christian theologian of the late fifth and early sixth century; a major source of medieval mystical thought

ST. JACQUES: The Dominican priory in the Latin quarter of Paris

SCHOLASTIC: A "schoolman" trained at a university, typically in philosophy or theology

SENTENCES: The influential four-volume theological handbook compiled by Peter Lombard (ca. 1096–1160)

SPECIES: The scholastic definition of any kind of cognitive representation of a group
KEY NAMES AND TERMS

SUMMA: A summing up of theological knowledge in one work

HEINRICH SUSO: aka Heinrich Seus; ca. 1295-1360; a prominent Eckhart disciple

TALKS OF INSTRUCTION: Excerpts from Eckhart's discussions with Dominican novices during the years 1294-1298

JOHANNES TAULER: 1300-61; a prominent Eckhart disciple

TERTIARY: A layman or laywoman who attaches to a religious order without taking permanent vows

THOMAS AQUINAS: aka the Angelic Doctor; 1225-74, supremely influential Dominican Theologian, canonized in 1323

THURINGIA: Landgraviate in central Germany; during Eckhart's lifetime ruled by the Wettin dynasty of Meissen

UNIVERSAL: A common concept, like a Platonic form, whose reality scholastics debated

UNIVOCITY: Among scholastics, a property of words whose meanings are identical; an essential component of "scientific" theology

VIA NEGATIVA: The theological method of "knowing" God by what he is not
Dangerous Mystic
Prologue

The contrast between the setting and the message could not have been starker. The year was 1318; the location, the cathedral of Our Lady in the German city of Strasbourg, during a typical Sunday morning mass. The man about to speak was Eckhart von Hochheim, better known to posterity as Meister (German for “Master”) Eckhart. Some three hundred men and women sat silently in the wooden pews. A few of them whispered Latin prayers while fingering the recently invented prayer beads known as the garland of roses, or rosary. Most waited in an anticipatory hush, focused on the middle-aged priest solemnly seated on the left side of the altar, the top of his head shaved in the distinctive tonsure of monastic orders, the man himself extravagantly robed in the embroidered green vestments of the liturgical season.

During the extended pause for reflection after the gospel reading, some members of the congregation must have let their eyes wander to the surrounding wonders of the magnificent cathedral. For nearly a century, the earlier church, built in a style later called Romanesque, had been slowly transformed into “the French style,” known today as Gothic. External flying buttresses and other engineering marvels had enabled the cathedral’s builders to shift to tall arches and thin, largely ornamental columns, giving the interior of the church a steep and dramatic thrust upward, toward God. Brightly colored stained glass windows told stories of the saints and martyrs, while casting rainbow-colored shafts of morning light onto the congregation. The smoke of incense from the mass’s opening procession lingered in the streaming sunshine, filling the air with its mildly sweet, otherworldly odor.

Still waiting for the celebrant to address them, some members of the congregation might have surveyed the wall coverings and statuary on the
sides of the nave that also called to mind holy predecessors. The most prominent of these was "Our Lady," the Blessed Virgin Mary, patroness of the cathedral, but not all the images were comforting. Many portrayed terrifying agonies suffered in the service of God, beginning with the large crucifix suspended above the main altar. One column—known locally as the Angels Pillar—reminded those assembled of their own imminent demise and afterworldly fate. On it were larger-than-life-size figures of the four evangelists, crowned by four angels blowing the trumpets of judgment, with three angels and a suffering Jesus atop, prepared to pass sentence on departed souls.

In contrast to this unsettling image, the altar glittered with jeweled reliquaries, each displaying a shard of bone or miraculously preserved body part of a revered saint, a sight that, though grisly by today's standards, conveyed to the medieval Christian an unmistakable aura of safety and holiness.

![Image of Angel Column]

The pillar of angels column from the south transept of Our Lady of Strasbourg cathedral. The angels blow the trumpets announcing the Final Judgment of the living and the dead and the ultimate fate of eternal reward or punishment for every soul.

Finally, Meister Eckhart rose, and all eyes returned to the priest as he slowly mounted the steps to the pulpit. He was a stranger to most in the congregation, a specially invited guest, but virtually everyone present knew of his remarkable reputation. Rigorously trained in the clerical Order of Preachers, commonly called the Dominicans or Blackfriars, the learned
priest had studied the Bible and theology for decades and served two tenures as a chaired professor at the University of Paris, home to the most esteemed theological faculty in Christendom. He was indisputably a man of great learning, but Eckhart was also reputed to be an especially engaging speaker, one capable of making the wisdom of the ages accessible to even the simplest listener. Most enticingly, according to his admirers, the slightly stooped friar about to address them could guide the truly pious among them to an immediate, personal experience of God Himself.

The biblical text that served as the basis for the sermon was from the book of Wisdom (8:14–15): “For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half-gone, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne.” After translating the verse from Latin into German, the language of his listeners, the preacher proceeded to speak to them in the vernacular about the birth of the Word, a common reference to Jesus’s appearance on earth. But Eckhart made no mention of donkeys, stables, shepherds, or angels. The birth that this preacher described was “the eternal birth,” God coming to earth not just in the person of Jesus or in the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist, but as a palpable presence entering into the soul of any believer who was sufficiently prepared. One did not need the priest to transform bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus, he explained. One did not have to be a monk or a nun or even an educated person. No, Eckhart insisted, anyone who was spiritually ready could experience the birth of God directly within his or her own soul.

How could this be, most of his listeners must have wondered. To their knowledge, only a very few holy people since the days of the Savior had been blessed with genuine visions or other direct encounters with God. But Eckhart insisted: The authentic experience of the divine he described did not depend on apparitions, special powers, or extraordinary acts of piety. It was not partial to certain holy places or rituals. What the “eternal birth” did require was a proper mental attitude, a soul that had learned to let go of all worldly things, all desires and preconceptions, even the image of God Himself. The more completely you are able to draw in your powers to a unity and forget all those things and their images which you have absorbed, and the further you can get from creatures and their images, the nearer you are to this and the reader to
receive it. Then, he said—*in the midst of silence*—God would come within your soul.

After speaking for more than twenty minutes, the preacher neared his conclusion. *The Son of the heavenly Father, he repeated, is not born alone in this darkness, which is his own: You too can be born a child of the same heavenly Father and of none other, and to you too He will give power. The key lay in divesting yourself of everything external. And in very truth, he continued, I believe, nay, I am sure, that the man who is established in this cannot in any way ever be separated from God. I say he can in no way lapse into mortal sin ... such people cannot willingly commit or consent to even a venial (lesser) sin in themselves or in others if they can stop it.* The preacher surveyed his audience. *May the God who has been born again as man assist us to this birth, eternally helping us, weak men, to be born in him again as God. Amen.* He turned, walked down the pulpit steps, and made his way to the seat side of the altar. The church remained engulfed in deep silence.

This sermon was unlike any that had ever been heard within the cathedral’s walls. After forty years of contemplation and study, the esteemed friar and theologian was taking advantage of his assignment to this important city to preach his spiritual philosophy to the common people. Merely speaking in this way to ordinary women and men about “elevated matters” was remarkable, a practice scorned by most priests and scholars of the time. But more provocative still was the radical message that Eckhart delivered. Although he did not denigrate the external forms of piety around him—indeed he was in the midst of celebrating a mass—Eckhart’s focus on the internal, on thought, was highly unusual, perhaps even unsettling to many of his listeners. The church they knew preached that each person’s salvation depended on the performance of good works and penitential acts of contrition—yet these were absent from Eckhart’s teaching. The church they knew revolved around the veneration of saints and the celebration of sacraments—yet these played no apparent role whatsoever in the internal self-transcendence Eckhart described. The church they knew esteemed monks, nuns, and other contemplatives as closer to God—yet Eckhart preached that direct experience of God was accessible to any true seeker, regardless of social or religious status. More surprising still, he seemed to
say that the effect of this divine union was permanent, that it guaranteed the believer who experienced it an eternal state of sinlessness and bliss.

This may have come as inspiring news to the congregation that day, but it was unlike any description of salvation they had ever heard. Although Eckhart himself saw his teachings as completely congruent with those of the church, others within that institution did not. In the years to follow, this learned monk and gifted preacher would eventually see much of his theology condemned by a papal inquisition, his teachings formally suppressed, and his followers dispersed.

Fast forward seven centuries, however, and Meister Eckhart—after languishing many centuries in relative obscurity—has emerged as something of a spiritual celebrity. Millions of Roman Catholics and other Christians have claimed the rehabilitated preacher as one of their own, not to mention many Zen Buddhists, Sufi Muslims, Advaita Vedanta Hindus, Jewish Cabalists, and a wide variety of other seekers who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. Even many avowed atheists, including Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, have admired the Master’s speculative philosophy and helped spread his insights among their own generations of disciples. Composers John Cage and John Adams have each written musical works inspired by the teachings of Meister Eckhart. On the Internet, quotations attributed to Eckhart (many of them spurious) proliferate, as do sites devoted to his teachings. More than a hundred publications on his life and teachings (not counting blogs) appear annually, and there are now three international Meister Eckhart societies, as well as two scholarly journals devoted to the once-condemned friar.

In the United States, the works of Eckhart owe much of their recent popularity to the master’s namesake, Eckhart (born Ulrich) Tolle, a spiritual teacher and author whose beliefs weave together the medieval monk’s teachings with an eclectic blend of contemporary Eastern and New Age concepts. “In essence,” writes Tolle, “there is and always has been only one spiritual teaching, although it comes in many forms.” That one teaching, Tolle maintains, is nowhere better encapsulated than in the insights of Meister Eckhart, whose key concepts shape his own belief system. Thanks in large part to the massively influential endorsement of Oprah’s Book Club, the modern
Eckhart's *The Power of Now* (1997) and *A New Earth* (2005) each enjoyed several months on the *New York Times* bestseller list and together have been translated into thirty-three languages and sold more than ten million copies worldwide. And Tolle is not the only one. Other contemporary spirituality authors—from a wide variety of traditions—make similarly extensive use of the Meister's various sermons and philosophical writings.

What is it that all these people see in the words of this medieval sage? The most common denominator appears to be an attraction to Eckhart's revolutionary method of direct access to ultimate reality (aka God)—a profoundly subjective approach that is at once intuitive and pragmatic, philosophical yet nonrational, and, above all, universally accessible. Many modern Christian authors, such as the Catholic Richard Rohr—who calls Eckhart "a mystic's mystic"—view his teachings as part of a long and ancient Christian contemplative tradition. Yet while Eckhart's path never opposes or denigrates religious rituals or church authorities, it also does not rely on them. This makes him equally appealing to individuals and groups who reject the Christian notions of both God and the soul. Buddhists and existentialists, for example, appreciate the master's distinction between the artificial "I" or "false self"—the constructed individual identity of each person—and the authentic self, the common nature that we all share. At the same time, Eckhart's embrace of meditation and mindfulness anticipates by seven centuries the popularity of both practices among people of faith and the ever-growing number of New Age seekers, agnostics, and avowed atheists who list their religious affiliation as "none." Marginalized in his own time, Meister Eckhart seems to have been made, in fact, for ours, an age with a penchant for spirituality that is customized, experiential, and doctrine-light.

But in our eagerness to embrace this "forgotten heretic," to find in his teaching the fulfillment of our own needs and to appropriate him for our own uses, we risk seriously distorting the historical man and his thought. The label "mystic," for instance—a concept invented in the seventeenth century—calls to mind a secluded, otherworldly sage, caught up in the throes of divine rapture. But Meister Eckhart was no recluse and never wrote of any special visions, miraculous events, or ecstatic physical experiences. He lived, in fact, as a person immersed in the activities of the external
world, a wide-traveling preacher, university professor, confessor, administrator, and diplomat. He saw himself first as a Dominican friar, dedicated to spreading the gospel, and second as a religious philosopher, a scholar determined to bring together all types of knowledge—Christian and pagan, intuitive and scientific, general and personal—and to assemble from them a coherent, comprehensive whole that led back to God.

The divine union he preached did not in fact require any suspension of rational thought nor did it entail any special individual powers. On the contrary, it was the universal accessibility of the experience he described that made him simultaneously popular with his audiences and dangerous to his clerical opponents. The internal transformation itself, he conceded, was difficult to describe with language, and thus appeared “mysterious” to human thinking. But reaching this point was a straightforward matter of intention and attitude, a process described by Eckhart in practical terms. And the divine birth in the soul, once achieved, always produced a life devoted to others, not retreat from the world. If Meister Eckhart was a mystic in the modern sense of the word, he was a profoundly antiobscurant, egalitarian, and down-to-earth one.

Similarly, the image of Eckhart as a misunderstood visionary, a man who would have been more at home in our modern progressive era than in his own narrow-minded age, ignores the richness and spiritual dynamism of medieval European society. In fact, Meister Eckhart attracted a significant following in his own day, clear evidence that he was not the lone and disregarded man-ahead-of-his-time we might assume. In fact, many people in the fourteenth century shared his desire for a direct experience of the divine in their lives, beyond what conventional religious practices offered. There were of course the thousands of ordinary Christians who flocked to hear his sermons. But many of Eckhart’s fellow religious scholars also shared his radical reimagining of “God” and “heaven,” as well as his focus on the divinity within each person, what Eckhart called the divine spark. What most distinguished him from other theologians of his day was Eckhart’s willingness to take the learning of the universities to the pulpit and to teach a practical kind of mysticism that was accessible to all those with the proper intention and attitude. The fact that a papal commission later condemned some of his
teachings should not be construed to mean that all or even most of his contemporaries rejected Eckhart’s approach to God.

In fact, when we put aside modern misperceptions about medieval Christianity itself, we discover an unexpectedly vibrant period in Western history, when new ideas and practices abounded among a population hungry for more meaningful spiritual experiences. Might that history have unfolded differently if Eckhart’s teachings had not been stifled by a church hierarchy fearful of spiritual anarchy? If the few ecclesiastical authorities in question had embraced (or at least not condemned) Eckhart’s teachings, could many of the later ecclesiastical abuses that led to the Protestant Reformation have been avoided? With that question, we contemplate a hidden watershed moment and a viable alternate world history. Most aspects of Eckhart’s teachings were in fact thoroughly compatible with both Catholic and later Protestant doctrine. How might Christianity today look if the Reformation itself had amounted to what one historian has characterized as “a passing breeze rather than a hurricane”?

Obviously it is just as perilous to separate the man from his times as it is the teachings from the man. An anachronistic Eckhart, however personally satisfying, is a distorted and misleading Eckhart. Before we attempt to adapt his ideas to our needs, we must make a genuine effort to understand their author within the context of his own life and his own world. Most literate people—including those who count themselves among his admirers—know very little if anything about the man himself. Until now, the individual often described as “the most influential mystic in Christian history” has been scrutinized mainly by theologians, philosophers, and German literary scholars, producing a rich but often daunting body of scholarship, focusing overwhelmingly—and often in very demanding prose—on Eckhart’s teachings. Among popular authors, the social milieu and biographical aspects of the revered teacher receive even shorter shrift, rendering Eckhart himself a shadowy and ethereal figure, prone to gnomic declarations such as “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.” Without any historical context, the master sounds more like a cartoon guru on a mountaintop than an accomplished theologian and philosopher.

Yet Meister Eckhart, like all of us, was the product of a particular place
and period. It is meaningless to talk about the "timeless" nature of his teachings unless we first understand which aspects of them were in fact timely—shaped by his own life experiences and environment—and in which ways. We must come to know the vibrant character of his social and intellectual world, his distinctive voice as a preacher and thinker, and the diverse ways that he was understood in his time. Do this and we can't help but better understand his relevance in our own time.

Why has so little been written about Eckhart the man? Perhaps it is because the scarcity of resources available to the would-be Eckhart biographer presents a steep, though not insurmountable, challenge. None of Eckhart's correspondence or personal writings has survived the seven centuries since his death. Certain Latin documents related to his heresy trial have been preserved, providing insight into the points of greatest controversy, but, although there are at least two dozen mentions of him in other documents written during his lifetime, none of these is more than a passing reference. What does remain are Meister Eckhart's own theological teachings. As of this publication, we know of at least 128 authenticated German sermons (plus two dozen more under consideration), fifty-six Latin sermons, three German discourses, seven Latin commentaries, and a handful of short academic pieces, none of them actually written in the master's hand, but instead transcribed by followers who heard him speak and in some cases approved by Eckhart for publication. This book draws heavily on the outstanding edited collections of Eckhart's Latin and German writings that appeared between 1936 and 2007 (see "Recommended Reading"), as well as the careful scholarship of several generations of Eckhart scholars, particularly during the last four decades.

My approach is both chronological and thematic, combining the key steps in Meister Eckhart's lifelong pursuit of God with the various identities he accumulated over the years: friar, scholar, preacher, and spiritual icon. All four sections of the book have been framed around what I find to be Eckhart's most important concept: gelassenheit (Gelassenheit in modern German), a word he coined and that I translate as "letting-go-ness." I devised this intentionally awkward translation to distinguish it from such conventional—but misleading—English renderings as "detachment," "releasement," or "abandonment." The implicit trust involved in "letting go" of desire itself was
for Eckhart the essential precondition to achieving divine union, a realiza-
tion that he reached only after many years of practical devotion and reflec-
tion. Only after he had first learned to let go of the external world (Part I) as
well as all of his preconceived notions of "God" (Part II) did Eckhart feel
ready to let go of his very self, including his pursuit of God, and thereby al-
low God to come to him (Part III). The implications of this realization for
organized religion, which he by no means intended to "let go," are described
in Part IV.

This narrative of Eckhart's own internal, spiritual evolution is closely
interwoven with the story of his experiences in the wider world. Unlike
most descriptions of Meister Eckhart—which present his teachings as fully
formed, coherent, and static—this chronological perspective allows us to
witness the evolution of Eckhart's thinking over the course of his life. How
and why did a seemingly conventional young German noble youth become
the radical spiritual thinker of legend, questioning not just much of the or-
thodox approach to God but the prevailing notion of God itself? First we
dive into the dynamic world of thirteenth-century Germany, discovering
the origins of Eckhart's lifelong quest and his formative embrace of the Do-
minican life (Part I). Here we witness his gradual transformation from a
traditional spirituality based on external acts to one based on contempla-
tion and mindfulness. His identity as a professional preacher in turn gives shape
to his subsequent development as a renowned scholar (Part II), where Eck-
hart's increasing exposure to philosophical thought eventually moved him
toward a still more radically intuitive approach to God and spirituality. Most
of these earlier years, until his mid-fifties, were spent in his native Thuringia,
based in the Dominican priory at Erfurt. He traveled widely, though, including
many years of advanced study in Cologne and Paris, several years of
work as an administrator for his order, and three years as a professor at the
University of Paris. Part III describes the acclaimed theologian's subsequent
efforts to distill his complex and unorthodox ideas into sermons that ordi-
ary women and men could understand. Most of this popular preaching
took place in the German cities of Strasbourg and Cologne, during the last
quarter of his life. It was the resulting controversy over his provocative
teachings there that eventually transformed Eckhart into a spiritual icon,
with his admirers and detractors struggling to define his legacy for centuries to come (Part IV).

The spectacular rise and fall of this prescient spiritual teacher carries important ramifications for the perennial debate over religious authority, even today. Church leaders' concerns during Eckhart's lifetime that simple people might misunderstand the master's words and reject all religion may appear at first as mere self-justification for their own authoritarian agenda. Yet as the later Protestant Reformation and subsequent schisms have made clear, the appeal to individual conscience as the ultimate arbiter of spiritual truth invariably leads to ever more interpretations, ever more denominations, ever more religious conflicts. What might a fuller embrace of Eckhart's teachings mean for the doctrine, structure, and rituals of today's Catholic and Protestant churches? For organized religion itself? Eckhart did not consider himself a radical opponent of traditional religion, but his effect on the same remains in dispute. Meanwhile, many modern readers, who prefer a more individualistic approach to spirituality, welcome the skepticism of institutional religious authority that they infer from Eckhart's teachings. But is theirs the type of individual enlightenment Eckhart himself imagined? Is the relativism of today's customized spirituality the inevitable outcome of the subjective approach taught by Eckhart and his modern successors?

It's obvious why fourteenth-century defenders of religious orthodoxy and order considered Meister Eckhart a dangerous mystic. But many twenty-first-century Christian leaders likewise fear the moral relativism and spiritual chaos unleashed by "religionless spirituality." Does a revived Eckhart still pose a threat to established churches or does he offer a bridge between new spirituality movements and older traditions? To answer that question, we must first be willing to see Meister Eckhart with fresh eyes, meeting him again for the first time.

Note on Usage:

All direct quotations from Meister Eckhart have been placed in italics. For the German sermons, I have relied mostly on the excellent English translations of Maurice O'C. Walshe (see "Recommended Reading"), while still
providing in endnotes the sermon number from the standard Middle High German edition (Die Deutschen Werke) for those readers interested in consulting the original. Most of my translations from Eckhart's Latin writings come from two works edited by Bernard McGinn: Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense; and Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher. All other translations from German, French, or Latin are my own, unless otherwise cited. For the purposes of clarity (Eckhart loved ambiguous pronouns) I have capitalized He, Him, and His in references to God the Creator (even though the mature Eckhart rejected any human gendering of the divine except for the convenience of language).

During Eckhart's lifetime, most people reckoned the beginning of the new year at Easter, or some close approximation (e.g., March 25). I have followed the modern dating of the New Year as starting at January 1.
PART I

Letting Go of the World

The Friar
The Noble Heart

Some people are half raised up: they practice one virtue but not another. Some, ignoble by nature, covet riches. Others of a nobler nature care nothing for possessions but are bent on honor.

GERMAN SERMON 25

A World Without Love

Meister Eckhart lived from about 1260 to 1328. By our modern reckoning, his lifetime straddled the High Middle Ages (ca. 1000–1300) and the Late Middle Ages (ca. 1300–1500). Of course these concepts would have been completely alien to Eckhart and his contemporaries, who—like all people who have ever lived—considered themselves “modern.” To enter his world’s notion of modernity and its struggles, we must first unburden ourselves of most twenty-first-century connotations of the very word “medieval.” From its late fifteenth-century origins, the designation has been mostly pejorative, lumping together the roughly thousand years following the demise of the Western Roman Empire. Proponents of the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment particularly delighted in envisioning a “bad” Middle Ages to contrast with their own notions of human progress: a violent, dirty, and backward time when superstition and cruelty reigned supreme. Nineteenth-century Romantics countered with a “good” Middle Ages: an era of simple and joyous vitality and pageantry, dominated by the virtues of loyalty,
bravery, and courtesy. More recent imaginings—from *Lord of the Rings* to *Game of Thrones*—have creatively combined different aspects of these two stereotypes, but with the same implicit contrast to our own more sophisticated age.

"Medieval," consequently, has today become a synonym for inferior—whether in discussing criminal justice, sanitary conditions, social attitudes, understanding of the natural world, or virtually any aspect of contemporary life viewed as lacking. And certainly in structural terms, the modernity of thirteenth-century Europe more closely resembles the modernity of a twentieth-century developing country, such as Afghanistan or Somalia: weak central governments, roaming warlords, no clear division between secular and religious spheres, patriarchal social systems, low literacy rates, high infant mortality, and an overall low standard of living.

Yet the material constraints of Eckhart’s world did not impair an explosion of artistic, literary, and intellectual creativity. Shorter life expectancies than today did not prevent parents from loving their children; recurrent natural and man-made hardships did not stop frequent public celebrations of life. Intelligence, if not education, was just as evenly distributed among the population as in any human society. And, as many recent studies of well-being have indicated, happiness and depression do not correlate directly to material standard of living (and in many instances poorer societies fare better). This is not an endorsement of bad hygiene and pandemic violence but rather an attempt to break free of Western technological determinism that equates material progress with social, psychological, and spiritual development. Eckhart’s relatively rudimentary living conditions no more restricted his insights into the human spirit than plentiful food and advanced technology have guaranteed superior understanding to any modern Westerner.

The modernity of Eckhart and his contemporaries differed from our own in another important way, namely their concept of history. Not only was there no medieval era for thirteenth-century Europeans, there was no such thing as an era in terms of anything but political regimes (e.g., “the age of Emperor Charles the Great,” aka Charlemagne). Obviously the glories of ancient Greece and Rome were long past, but they did not seem distant
culturally. One quick glance at the period’s paintings or sculptures of Jesus and the apostles reveals an imagined bygone world that looked indistinguishable from their own, in clothing, movements, and emotions. The Western Roman Empire was still alive and well—albeit dominated by German kings for more than two centuries—and the church founded by Jesus still used Latin liturgies and Roman clerical dress. Individual emperors and popes came and went, but the institutions seemed to remain constant. Above all, no one in the thirteenth century imagined human history in terms of progress—a completely alien notion in a society ruled by the cyclical rhythms of the agrarian year and the liturgical calendar of annual feasts.

This does not mean that they had no notion of social change. To the contrary, most of Eckhart’s contemporaries were convinced that their world was becoming worse, was perhaps even on the eve of the Last Days. Of course they were hardly unique in this conviction. It is one of the oldest truisms, repeated ad nauseam by historians, that every society in every age (including our own) perceives itself as declining. Children are growing ever more ungrateful and unruly, youths ever ruder and lazier, adults more selfish and self-absorbed. Politicians are always becoming more corrupt, religious leaders more hypocritical, and businesspeople more dishonest. Whether this broader perspective brings one comfort or despair, the universality of this lament throughout human history is hard to refute. What differs throughout specific cultures and eras—sometimes to a remarkable degree—is the perceived nature and source of that disintegration from a previous golden age. And that is where we start to understand the world of Meister Eckhart and the appeal of his teachings.

The greatest single subject of all thirteenth-century literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, and sermons was love. Again, hardly a unique phenomenon in any human society, but it is the way this topic was portrayed that is most revealing. Love, everyone agreed, was indispensable for happiness in this life and the next. Love between family members, friends, neighbors, and fellow Christians (caritas) was the glue that held society together and helped one in times of trouble. “There is nothing on this earth to be prized more than true friendship,” wrote the theologian Thomas Aquinas.
(1225–74), echoing a common sentiment. Love and trust between a lord and
vassal, between trading partners, between allies of all sorts (fides) ensured
peace and justice. (Only Jews and Muslims remained outside this exclusively
Christian circle of mutual interdependence and charity.) Love of God, the
Virgin Mary, and the saints (religio or pietas) inspired a virtuous earthly life
that would end with a heavenly reward. Eckhart’s exact contemporary
Dante Alighieri marveled at the human network woven by “the love of God,
unutterable and perfect... the more souls who resonate together/the
greater the intensity of their love/and, mirror-like, each soul reflects the
other.”

Virtually everyone also agreed that love, at the time of Eckhart’s birth,
was under siege. The perceived breakdown in personal relationships of all
kinds threatened not just individual happiness but the social order itself.
Knight Wirnt von Grafenberg bemoaned that “the world has changed; its
joyousness is in a wretched state. Justice has fled, violence is arising. Loyalty
has become brittle, disloyalty and hatred are prevailing. Times have changed
completely, and every year it gets worse.” “Formerly, the world was so beau-
tiful,” sighed the poet Walther von der Vogelweide, “now it is wretched.” In
a world with weak institutional confidence, personal trust and mutual reli-
ability were indispensable and a world without them too terrifying to
contemplate.

Explanations for the decline of love were myriad, ranging from bad po-
itical leaders to irresponsible parents to the direct influence of Satan and his
numerous human allies, most notably emboldened criminals, bloodthirsty
soldiers, and Jewish financiers. In every instance, culprits placed their own
personal gain before the duties of Christian charity, wreaking havoc on the
larger society. “Worse morals” was a convenient catchall characterization
of social decline, generalizing the blame without offering any specific
causation. Some religiously minded people saw their collective suffering as
God’s deserved chastisement of such widespread sinful behavior, but again
focused on selfish individual choices rather than systemic problems. Only
one common nonpersonal catalyst emerged in virtually every lamentation
about the sorry state of affairs in mid-thirteenth-century Europe—the cor-
rupting and insidious dominance of money.
The Root of All Evil

Money, of course, is as old as human civilization. What was novel in Eckhart's world was the degree to which many of the elements of what we now call "the consumer mentality" had permeated popular attitudes and beliefs. Not since the days of ancient Rome, seven centuries earlier, had money assumed such a prominent role in ordinary Europeans' everyday lives and imaginations. The new ubiquity of cash was above all the product of escalating consumer demand, in turn driven by several generations of steady demographic growth throughout most European lands. The five centuries following the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire—what we now call the Early Middle Ages—had been a period of widespread political and economic instability. Once greater order returned around the year 1000, the population of the continent proceeded to grow steadily, more than tripling by the time of Eckhart, to more than seventy million people.

While this expansion took place over the course of several generations, many dramatic changes would have been evident even within the lifetimes of Eckhart's own parents and grandparents. Just within his own century, the population of German lands—usually defined as east of the Rhine, north of the Danube, and west of the Elbe—surged from eight to fourteen million. Eckhart's home territory of Thuringia experienced at least tenfold growth over the same period, spurred by the "push to the east" that saw hundreds of thousands of German settlers moving into Slavic areas, resulting in the foundation of more than 250 towns east of the Elbe and Saale and nearly 200,000 new communities overall. Human settlements encroached on formerly "vast empty spaces" dominated by wild animals—dense forests, forbidding swamps, sprawling meadows—adapting these "deserts" to their own needs.

Of course the diverse societies of Europe were still overwhelmingly rural—and would remain so well into the nineteenth century. Within German lands, at most one fifth of the population lived in towns of more than three thousand people, and even among the fifty or so towns passing this threshold, few held more than ten thousand inhabitants. Cologne, where Eckhart would end his long career, was the largest German city, with a
population of forty thousand—about the size of contemporary London and one fifth the size of the sprawling metropolis of Paris. Eckhart's own tiny home village of Tambach, with a population of a few hundred, remained by far the more typical experience for most denizens of premodern Europe for centuries to come.

Yet what they lacked in numbers, urban residents made up for in economic and cultural influence, particularly in giving birth to the new money mentality. The marketplaces that towns and cities provided for agricultural and manufactured goods thrived on the exchange of cash. Both farmers, who brought their produce to market for sale, and urban artisans, who worked for wages, relied on an ample supply of currency. Bankers and merchants involved in long-distance commodities exchanges likewise required still larger amounts of gold and silver for payments, even with the rise of various credit arrangements during the thirteenth century. Growing urban populations also drove the need for expanded investments in infrastructure, leading to large publicly financed construction projects, ranging from roads, bridges, and canals to paved or covered marketplaces and new town halls. And invariably all of this spending accelerated a spiral of more demand for skilled workers, an expanding array of consumer goods, ever more building, and ever more money.
THE NOBLE HEART

Many of these products of thirteenth-century consumer demand remain with us today, most famously the massive castles commissioned by wealthy aristocrats and the majestic cathedrals constructed over the course of generations with church and town funding. The stunning cathedral at Chartres was dedicated about the time of Eckhart's birth; the colossal structures of Notre-Dame de Paris, Strasbourg, and Cologne remained sprawling, multilingual construction sites throughout his lifetime. Other specimens of rising consumerism at the elite level are also still visible in modern museums: magnificent linen and silk mantles trimmed in gold and fur, exquisite rings and necklaces, elaborate customized personal armor. Most of the objects for spending among the rich, though, have passed from memory. We know only through contemporary accounts of the frequent sumptuous banquets that required enormous outlays of cash, even more than knightly tournaments and countless other noble diversions.

By far the greatest expense of the landed aristocracy was the cost of maintaining and expanding a family's own territorial holdings. Soldiers needed to be paid, conquests required expensive military equipment, and other nobles required large gifts to ensure their loyalty, with cash increasingly preferred to real estate. Even allegedly high-minded enterprises such as crusades to the Holy Land could not function on faith alone. "We are in desperate need of money," the emperor Frederick II had lamented more than once in his efforts to organize the sixth crusade a few decades earlier. It was a refrain that future planners of crusades would repeat for centuries to come.

Land remained the most valuable commodity of all in the thirteenth century, but the newly pervasive influence of money affected some important political and economic changes, what historians used to call "bastard feudalism." Desperate to raise funds for their military ventures and luxurious lifestyle, monarchs and other aristocrats scrambled to monetize many of their seigniorial rights. Many converted property holdings and privileges (such as control over certain forests or springs) through rent or sale to banks, corporations, other nobles, or virtually anyone who could pay. In some German lands, feudal dues paid almost exclusively in agricultural produce at the end of the twelfth century had within fifty years shifted to over 90 percent cash rents. Sometimes entire lordships or high ecclesiastical offices were sold
outright, or at least decorously transferred in the company of very large monetary "gifts." Kings and emperors in particular relied on large cash bribes to secure noble support at crucial times, and in turn were occasionally forced to levy taxes on certain sales and products. Towns and marketplaces likewise increasingly turned to public financing to pay for infrastructure costs.

From a twenty-first-century perspective, the new money culture of Eckhart's day was not without some positive developments. The simultaneous expansion of long-distance trade brought an ever greater variety of consumer goods to those same towns, mainly at the luxury end: pepper, cloves, and other rare spices from Asia; exquisite woolen cloth and elaborate tapestries from Flanders; fine linen from Champagne; silk from China; superior leather from Pisa; elegant furs from northern Russia; precious stones from India; pearls from the Persian Gulf. While such items remained out of reach for the great majority of the population, their very visibility helped fuel general consumer desire, spurring greater production of more affordable products such as shoes, tools, and a range of fabrics.

As is true today, money promised to provide more choices and opportunities overall, hence its tremendous allure. The urban marketplace, chief metaphor of twenty-first-century capitalism, embodied that assurance of freedom. Here many individuals, particularly immigrants from the country, converged, hoping to improve their quality of life, typically through unskilled labor. Some sons of newcomers might even enter into craft apprenticeships, providing other opportunities for advancement. Economic independence in German towns gradually translated into political independence from local lords. Finally, as in any society, greater affluence spurred patronage of the arts and, among the artisan and burgher class, stimulating still another sector of the economy, including teachers for both boys and girls (although nothing like modern mandatory schooling). In all these respects, the medieval town seems to deserve its designation by some historians as "the cradle of modernity" (meaning our current version of modernity).

Yet when people in Eckhart's day referred to "urban values," they rarely intended it as a compliment. The potential commodification of everything
struck many contemporaries as unnatural and dangerous. Basic human relationships built on trust or kinship, they argued, should be more important than trying to fulfill all the desires and appetites that consumerism had unleashed. What looks to us like individualism—a cherished Western value—looked to Eckhart and many of his contemporaries like selfishness at the expense of communal caritas and divine religio. Proliferation of money also invariably led to proliferation of theft, robbery, prostitution, and organized crime—further signs of social decay. With labor so plentiful, unemployment and begging surged, triggering further conflict and divisiveness.

Social change is always unsettling and confusing, even to those who benefit the most from it. In general, the economic status quo seems to have been generally preserved: most thirteenth-century aristocrats in fact prospered amid the new money economy, and rags-to-riches stories of immigrants from the countryside remained rare. Only occasionally might a cash-poor knight on the way down in social status pass an enterprising peasant on the way up. Yet such episodes sufficed to fuel universal uneasiness at the apparent rapidity and scope of cultural transformations under way, in turn giving rise to perceptions of a decline in basic morals and decency, largely tied to the rise of money. "All over the world," mocked the Spaniard Juan Ruiz, "money does marvelous things... its itch and scab infests the whole earth... making a lord out of a servant and a servant out of a lord."

Born into this "world without love," a society widely perceived as in steep political and moral decline, the future Meister Eckhart might have grown up consumed in either cultural despair or nostalgia for a lost golden age. Instead, the noble youth from Thuringia would join those who sought to redeem their troubled world and themselves in the process. For inspiration, they looked to their own mythic past, seeking examples of men and women worthy of admiration and emulation. Disdain for personal enrichment was understood; strength, constancy, and courage were indispensable; but the most esteemed common feature of these thirteenth-century heroes was their selfless and unquestioned service to a cause greater than themselves. For Eckhart and other boys of his social status, the search for a higher purpose amid the superficial ephemera of the day continually returned to two heroic types: the brave warrior who sacrificed everything, sometime
including his life, for a sacred cause, and the equally pure and devoted saint, who had likewise renounced the seductions of the material world for a higher love. Both figures directly repudiated the loveless materialism of the day. For a young Eckhart, tales of selfless warriors and intrepid saints were more than nostalgic entertainment: they were lights in the darkness of an increasingly loveless world.

A Noble Childhood

The first written mention of the Thuringian hamlet of Tambach, dated December 13, 1251, appears in the recorded donation of sixty acres of land to the Cistercian monastery at nearby Georgenthal by the Duchess Heilwig von Berka, in the memory of her late husband Dietrich. One of the witnesses present was a knight, "Eckehard de Hochheim," resident in Tambach, serving as voigt (district governor, or castellan) of the nearby castle of Waldenfels. By this time, there were perhaps ten thousand "castles" of diverse description in German lands, many of them built during the construction boom of the previous half century. Most were unremarkable structures, far from the massive fortresses or elaborate palaces that word conjures today. No trace remains of the original Waldenfels. Its seventeenth-century successor was a modest structure about forty feet high, built on a bluff overlooking a creek, near a lake known as the Schmalwasser ("narrow water"), about ten miles south of Tambach. Most likely the thirteenth-century version was a rudimentary timber and mortar structure typical of such toll outposts, perhaps surrounded by a fence, palisade, or even a moat. By law it could not have been more than three stories high, and even if that substantive it would not have been large, ornate, or otherwise impressive by the standards of the few major structures that have survived from the period.

The knight Eckehard of Hochheim's employer was the patriarch of the Wettin dynasty, Heinrich III ("the Illustrious"), margrave of Meissen and of Lusatia and putative landgrave of Thuringia. Both lord and vassal were considered noble, but they found themselves situated at different ends of a steep hierarchy of nobility that, taken together, encompassed at most 2 percent of
the general population. Landgraves such as Heinrich were the equivalent of
dukes, a princely status higher than all but kings and emperors. Many of the
twenty or so German aristocrats of this level traced their families' privileges
back four or five centuries, to the time of Charlemagne—often with the help
of fictionalized genealogies.

Eckehard von Hochheim, by contrast, was one of the numerous "new
nobles" of the preceding half century known as ministerials, former house-
hold servants to kings and other aristocrats who had ascended through gov-
ernmental work or by virtue of their accomplishments on the battlefield to
become both free and noble (although their lords still maintained some pre-
rogatives over them). Ministerials tended to be educated and many worked
as stewards, judges, toll collectors, market overseers, treasurers, or heads of
mints. Eckehard performed one or more of these duties for Landgrave Hein-
rich. Some of the new nobles took on still greater administrative roles in
their lords' service, while simultaneously accumulating wealth of their own
and entering into commercial ventures. Although still viewed warily in older
aristocratic circles, ministerials such as the knight Eckehard von Hochheim
and his family enjoyed the same privileges and standard of living as most
noble households.

Around 1260, the knight's wife gave birth to a son, subsequently baptized
with the name of his father. This likely indicates that the younger Eckhart
was the oldest boy of the household, but it's possible that older siblings had
not survived infancy and that the name—an ancient Teutonic appellation
derived from ekke ("edge of a sword's blade") and hart ("brave; hardy")—
remained available. Christian saints' names were not yet common among
German nobility. The family's ancestral home in Hochheim, about twenty
miles north of Tambach, provided the family name, in the tradition of many
nobles of the period. Eckehard and his household, however, resided not in
Hochheim or at Waldenfels, which served as an administrative outpost, but
rather in Tambach or perhaps in nearby Gotha. Five years later, another doc-
ument refers to Eckehard as the "previous castellan of Waldenfels," having
been succeeded by Bertold von Siebeleben. Thirteen years later, by which
time the younger Eckhart had already moved out, the knight was still living
in the Tambach area, suggesting a continuing family presence there.
Like most of Germany, Thuringia was a predominantly wooded land, shaded by vast forests of towering beech, spruce, and pine trees. Even today, after centuries of clearance, the region is known as "the green heart of Germany," situated in the center of the post-1990 Federal Republic. At the time of Eckhart's birth, the territory constituted the northeastern frontier between traditionally Germanic and Slavic areas. The hamlet of Tambach, just inside the dense Thuringian Forest, lay only a dozen miles south of the Via Regia, the main east-west highway between Paris and Frankfurt am Main in the west and Cracow and Kiev in the east. Nearby Gotha, a town of some four thousand inhabitants and possibly a residence for Eckhart's family during his youth, saw a variety of merchants, pilgrims, and eastbound settlers pass daily through its gates. Thus while surrounded on all sides by mountain ranges and situated far from the great seats of power, young Eckhart's youthful home was neither socially nor culturally isolated.

At the same time, it's impossible to know how much Gotha and the Via Regia exposed young Eckhart to the wider world. We also know nothing of his mother or siblings, and he would only mention his father four times in the sermons that have survived. The adult Eckhart's tone in these references is consistently affectionate. In describing the powerful attraction of human relationships, he turns to his own experience as a son: Why do I love my father more than another man? Because he is my father and my own . . . that is my all, my very own. This is an unusual and unexpected—but apparently genuine—display of familial love for a sermon of the era. Eckhart's point in describing his own filial devotion, however, is to underscore the still greater allegiance to his heavenly father. [My] bodily father, in other words, whom Eckhart loved more than any other man, is not my real father except for one tiny bit of his nature, and I am distinct from him: he can be dead while I am still alive. Both Eckhardt the father and Eckhart the son were truly offspring of the same divine father, bound together by nature and affection but equally dependent on their common creator.

Eckhart also left no record of his experiences as a noble youth in Tambach and Gotha, but the contours of such a life are familiar to us today. Embracing the aristocratic culture established in royal and princely courts, a lesser noble such as the knight Eckehard von Hochheim would likely have
employed one or more tutors to school his son in the ways and expectations of his social estate. For Eckhart the son this invariably included training in horseback riding and hunting with hawks and hounds, sometimes at the expense of basic Latin grammar and other book learning. He might have also learned to play backgammon and chess. Some musical literacy was expected and ideally the youth would have developed skill with one or more instruments (although the adult Eckhart makes no mention whatsoever of any musical topic or term). Manners, or courtly etiquette, was another area of careful schooling, particularly among “new nobles” anxious about their precarious status. Aptitude in the social graces clearly served the adult Eckhart well in his work as an administrator and occasional diplomat.

And of course as a typical aristocratic youth, Eckhart became acquainted early on with the various courtly rituals of conspicuous consumption. From a child’s perspective, he observed how much time and money noblemen and women spent acquiring colorful, precious fabrics, especially silk and fine wools, often ornamented with expensive gold or silver trimmings or buttons. Aristocratic identity itself hinged on such extravagant self-fashioning, with the latest styles always in demand. In Eckhart’s youth, noble fashion favored tight-fitting clothing that accentuated the wearer’s body—a vivid contrast to the coarse and heavy wool robes he would later wear as a Dominican friar.

In addition to large expenditures for clothing, furnishings, and horses, his father’s social status obliged him to spend significant amounts of money on the various social occasions that required copious amounts of food and drink: weddings, knightings, ceremonies, tournaments, and of course a great number of religious holidays. When the knight Eckehard hosted such gatherings, sometimes lasting several days, he was expected to arrange and pay for diverse forms of entertainment, possibly including a poetry recital, piping or fiddling, singing, performances by acrobats or jesters, games, or athletic competitions, such as javelin throwing, stone hurling, sword fighting, wrestling, running, or jumping. Finally, like his own lords, a lower noble such as Eckehard regularly displayed his magnanimity in the bestowing of luxurious clothing, precious objects, or other gifts on friends and subordinates. Noble life, Eckhart the son quickly learned, was expensive, competitive, and relentless in its demands of money and time.
Even years into his life of voluntary poverty as a friar, Eckhart would continue to draw on the language of his aristocratic background in his sermons and writings. In that sense, his self-identification with noble culture never disappeared entirely. Like all of his contemporaries, though, there was no "political" aspect to this noble identity. "Europe" in the thirteenth century did not exist, or rather was known to its inhabitants as "Christendom"—a patchwork of several hundred dynastic territories ranging in size from several thousand square miles to a crumbling manor (designated a "castle" by its proud owner) and its neighboring village. National identity as such was a foreign concept to Eckhart and his contemporaries. Instead this political allegiance consisted mainly of a personal obligation to the local landowner, typically a wealthy family such as Eckhart's own lords, the Wettins of Thuringia, who continually strove to expand their territorial possessions through marriage, purchase, and war.

"Germany" itself was more than six centuries away from becoming a nation-state; the designation in Eckhart's time served mainly as a loose linguistic one, encompassing the dozens of dialects that peppered the lands in the heart of the European continent. Throughout his life, the Thuringian Eckhart remained deeply cognizant of this linguistic identity, both as a frequent traveler to "lands of other tongues" and in his own preaching, where he translated Latin theological terms and also coined neologisms in his
native dialect. Latin remained the language of scholarship, prayer, and often diplomacy, and Eckhart's mastery of it was unquestioned, but German would always provide the Thuringian with a more intimate and comforting personal bond, evident in both his friendships and his popular preaching.

There was admittedly a German monarchy, but its claimants fashioned themselves as Roman emperors above all else, not more accurately specifying "of the German nation" until two centuries after Eckhart's day. The resurrected Western "Roman" Empire was a hard-fought creation of the Frankish king Charles, known to history as Charlemagne, and remained a contested entity from the time of its proclamation in the ninth century to its dissolution a thousand years later. In theory, the supreme authority of the Holy Roman Emperor, himself elected by seven of the most prominent princes and archbishops, served as a check on the political ambitions of the continent's constantly feuding noble families. He ruled in principle as supreme judge and highest feudal lord over a vast empire of more than 600,000 square miles and roughly twenty million inhabitants, ranging from northern Italy to the Baltic Sea and from France to Bohemia and Silesia in the east. In practice, even the strongest rulers—including Charlemagne himself—spent much of their reigns negotiating with competing nobles to maintain a semblance of peace. By the thirteenth century, the German kingdom had become "a thoroughly feudal monarchy," with an array of nearly twenty "princes" (dukes, landgraves, counts), some eighty high church leaders (archbishops, bishops, abbots), and thousands of other nobles, all proclaiming fealty to the king but still expecting frequent gifts to ensure that allegiance.

But even by the low standards of feudal monarchies, the empire at the time of Eckhart's birth was suffering a profound crisis of political authority. For more than a century, emperors of the Hohenstaufen dynasty had overseen alternating waves of prosperity and political instability. Before, during, and after Eckhart's lifetime, almost all threats to imperial authority and ambitions resulted from long-standing conflicts with the papacy, the other great political power of the day. The long reign of Emperor Frederick II (1220–50), while artistically and intellectually glorious, failed to reverse the slide into political chaos and in some ways accelerated it, especially after continued conflicts with Pope Gregory IX culminated in Frederick's formal
excommunication and deposition in 1239. The premature death of Frederick's successor, Conrad IV, in 1254, launched nearly two decades of bloody conflict over the throne, an era later known as the Great Interregnum. By the time all the wearied combatants finally came to an agreement on the elderly Swabian count Rudolf of Habsburg in 1273, the empire itself was saved but at the cost of strong central authority for the remainder of its existence.

The collapse of an already dysfunctional imperial order had wide-ranging political and social repercussions throughout the various duchies, counties, and many smaller territories that made up the empire. In Eckhart's own Thuringia, twenty-five-year-old Albrecht II, also known as "the Degenerate," upon assuming the landgraviate in 1265 swiftly proceeded to drive his own wife into exile (where she died within a few months), foist his three sons on a relative, marry his mistress, and legitimate his two previous children by her. His older sons, aided by their uncle, promptly declared war on the young landgrave, and even succeeded in capturing and imprisoning their estranged father in his own castle—before he escaped and resumed hostilities. Only after another four decades of sporadic violence and destruction did Albrecht ultimately reconcile with his oldest legitimate son Friedrich (the latter's rival halfbrother having since died), and Thuringia welcomed a new lord, who was himself already involved in another conflict with neighboring Brandenburg.

Of course by modern standards most medieval "wars" are more accurately called feuds. The numbers of combatants in skirmishes and battles were typically reckoned in the dozens and hundreds, respectively, and the numbers of combat fatalities were accordingly low. Prolonged sieges of castles and other strongholds were more common than open-field engagements, lightning raids more frequent than full-scale invasion. Targeted assassinations and lynchings were also familiar tactics. Yet the relatively small scale of the warfare flowing from the absence of a strong central authority did not diminish the profound psychological effect of such instability on the society as a whole. Feuding nobles and their roaming entourages had the same terrorizing effect on local populations as modern "warlords" and their heavily armed bands in today's developing countries.
THE NOBLE HEART

Marauding troops, in fact, often directly targeted farmers and townspeople to exert pressure on their lord, to generate "protection money" and food, or more simply to satisfy a primal bloodlust. Arson and pilfering of livestock, devastating to small property holders and tenants, were standard military tactics.

The Quest for Honor

Among nobles themselves, the openly cynical nature of all this incessant feuding fed a particular type of identity crisis. Buffeted by the sordid and often petty reality of violence in their day-to-day lives, Eckhard von Hochheim and other thirteenth-century nobles embraced the literature and culture of chivalry with a fervor that yielded a golden age for the genre. The broad appeal of courtly epics, especially among aristocrats themselves, is not difficult to grasp. The exploits of selfless military heroes from the past offered at the very least a welcome escape from the materialism and violence of Eckhart’s day, a glimpse of a golden age when “higher values” mattered. Then, unlike “our current sad times,” the epics proclaimed, love, loyalty, and self-sacrifice reigned supreme.

Not surprisingly, the nature of “true nobility” was the topic of endless discussion in the German literature of Eckhart’s youth. As a child, he listened intently at banquets and other gatherings as bards dramatically recited heroic epics, sometimes to music. Most of the material troubadours performed was recent, composed by one of more than 130 distinctive German poets in the time of Eckhart alone. Drawing on a tradition dating back more than a century earlier in southern France, German court singers and poets performed not in the Latin of clerics and scholars but in the vernacular of ordinary people, and boasted diverse repertoires, ranging from lofty celebrations of pure love to earthy and humorous satires. The one thing uniting the various genres and styles was their common reverence for “true nobility,” however elusive the quality proved in real life.

The thirteenth-century flood of noble epics was characterized by three overlapping varieties of the genre, each more highly idealized than the
other. The tales most popular with Eckhart and other noble boys were the stories of pagan, Germanic heroes: most famously the Niebelungenlied (inspiration for Richard Wagner’s nineteenth-century operatic cycle) and the Dietrich Cycle. Like modern accounts of superheroes, these stories inspired various versions and spin-offs that frequently varied in specific plotlines but relied on the same character mythology and themes.

Young Eckhart was evidently also a fan of a second, closely related genre: chivalric romances centered on the court of the legendary King Arthur of ancient Britain. The basic plotline was a foreign import, dating back more than a century to the first narrative account of Arthur’s life by Geoffrey of Monmouth and the even more famous romantic dramatizations of Chrétien de Troyes. Like their counterparts throughout Christendom, German noblemen and youths were captivated by the legend of a good and successful ruler surrounded by brave and honest knights, united in their pursuit of a just and peaceful society.

![Image of the Round Table](image.png)

The legendary Round Table of King Arthur, with the Holy Grail as a centerpiece. The thirteenth century witnessed numerous variations and offshoots of this chivalric tale of noble comradeship and devotion to a higher purpose.

Based on his subsequent sermons, the chivalric romance that most clearly resonated with Eckhart himself was the most celebrated Arthurian work of the period, perhaps in all medieval German literature: Wolfram von
Eschenbach’s Parzival, a greatly expanded version of Chrétien de Troyes’ Perseval, the Story of the Grail. Parzival was both a coming-of-age tale and a thoughtful exploration of the meaning of “true nobility.” Its initially secluded and naïve young protagonist learns the ways of Arthur’s court and of battle, before embarking on a quest to recover the Grail—in this instance not the holy chalice of Christ but a magical precious stone. Like his pagan counterparts, the Christian Parzival struggles with pride and self-mastery and is not always the victor in his various exploits. Most significantly, he suffers from a profoundly spiritual alienation that is only resolved by his submission to the divine will. The nobility he achieves, in other words, is measured not only in terms of courtly manners and fighting prowess, but in self-sacrifice toward an explicitly religious goal.

Parzival’s gradual transformation into a humbler and more compassionate protagonist also involved the love of a strong and beautiful woman—a feature many chivalric romances shared with a third, more sprawling genre of noble literature: courtly love poetry. Whatever the literary form, all focused on a quest for love, a trait shared by some Arthurian romances, such as Parzival, but less so with pagan epics. Often this love involves a man’s admiration for a woman of high nobility, for both her physical beauty and purity of character, although sometimes the object of desire is lowly born.

Thirteenth-century German celebrations of minne (originally “a friendly thought,” but by Eckhart’s time meaning “love”) were also initially imitations of much older French and Provençal traditions. “To love wisely” long remained the ostensible goal of German Minnesänger; but by Eckhart’s day, poets relied increasingly on allegorical language to blur the boundary between “high,” or spiritual, love and “low,” or carnal, love. Here too, the overlap with the adult Eckhart’s description of his own spiritual journey is significant. As in Wolfram’s Parzival, chivalric quests of love began with physical desires but during a period of suffering and tribulation evolved to become quests for spiritual redemption. Courtly and hunting terms mixed freely with explicit references to souls, heaven, and salvation. Many “dawn songs,” a favorite motif, took the form of prayers to the divine sunlight, about to “break through” to the petitioner below—another common Eckhartian theme.
Wooing scene from a tale of courtly love. By the time of Eckhart's youth, the theme of a male pursuer suffering in the name of lady love had taken on ever-greater religious symbolism.

As in any society, noble epics and love poems resonated differently with individual listeners and readers. The combined impact of all three overlapping genres on the imaginations and behavior of German nobles of the thirteenth century was nevertheless palpable. Eckhart's contemporary, poet Hugo von Trimberg, complained that most people knew more about epic heroes and their adventures than about the saints and their miracles. Visual representations of Arthurian figures, in paintings and tapestries, easily competed in number with their religious counterparts. Tournaments, those staples of the noble life, increasingly took on Arthurian themes, with recreations of the famed Round Table or even special grail competitions (i.e., jousts). Professional combatants roamed the tournament circuit of Christendom in the guise of King Arthur or "the new Parzifal." Children, especially among nobles, were increasingly named after their parents' literary heroes, including one Thuringian noble from Eckhart's time known as "Conrad, called Parzival."

Not everyone considered the examples of legendary warriors especially
salutary for the woes of the day. Hugo of Trimberg expressed the minority opinion that the epics actually exacerbated the worst tendencies of already ambitious nobles: “The way I see it, the teachings of these German books have already cost many a man his life and soul, his possessions and reputation . . . for many a man thinks he would be nothing if he did not become like [Tristan and Parzifal].” Most people, however, apparently agreed with the poet Thomasin von Zirclaere that “even if the invented stories are not true, they do show symbolically what every person who aspires to an exemplary life should do.” In some ways this courtly model of nobility matched the Christian ideal for all individuals, emphasizing such virtues as humility, generosity, and fidelity. Traditional knightly attributes such as great physical strength and skill in combat, by contrast, obviously remained practically important but carried no religious value.

The most dramatic real-world embodiment of the Christian knight ideal throughout Eckhart’s lifetime remained the crusader. Nearly two hundred years had passed since Pope Urban II’s initial call to rescue the Holy Land from the infidel, yet the ideal had retained a surprising amount of its vigor among the nobility of Christendom. As a boy, Eckhart heard of the heady launch of the eighth crusade, led by Louis IX of France, perhaps witnessed his own father make some financial contribution, and shared in the widespread dismay when the sainted monarch’s death led to the campaign’s abortion in 1270. Although fund-raising campaigns continued for years to come, especially in the wake of the 1291 fall of Acre, the last crusader state in Palestine, there would be no more sustained efforts during Eckhart’s lifetime, no further opportunities for a young nobleman to fight and die for the faith in the Holy Land.

Yet even in the absence of crusades Christendom remained filled with crusaders. Thousands of young noblemen, sometimes inspired by heroic epics, regularly joined one of the military religious orders established during the previous century. The most remarkable repurposing of crusader energy took place within the Order of Brothers of the German House of Saint Mary in Jerusalem, more commonly known as the Teutonic Knights. The German Lords, as they were also called, had been founded in Acre to provide hospital services to fellow Germans serving in the third crusade (1189–90). Early in
the next century, they were summoned by King Andrew II of Hungary to help fight against the invading Kipchaks. When that alliance quickly soured and Andrew expelled the order, the Teutonic Knights dedicated themselves to a new campaign of nearly five decades to defeat and Christianize the pagan Old Prussians, east of the Vistula River. By the war's end, the Knights had become a formidable economic and political power, establishing their own state in Prussia before proceeding to do the same in Livonia. Soon they were battling Christian Slavs as well as pagans, earning the wrath of a series of Polish kings.

A Higher Love

The Teutonic Knights' Prussian campaign was still under way throughout Eckhart's youth. The order had established an especially strong presence in Thuringia early on, including castles at Nägelstädt and Mühlhausen in the west and a house in nearby Gotha. Eckehard von Hochheim's social status and political connections frequently brought him into contact with local leaders of the order, who may have regaled young Eckhart with tales of their military exploits.

Yet teenaged Eckhart von Hochheim did not join the Teutonic Knights or any other military order. Like all Christians of the day, he was aware of the crusading ideal's continuing appeal among many of his noble contemporaries. But there are no military terms, concepts, or metaphors in any of his surviving writings. Whether the child Eckhart's enjoyment of the chivalric adventures of Parzifal and other knights of the Round Table ever inspired him to consider the life of a crusader is unknown. Even if he was once tempted to join the Teutonic Knights or another military order, it's difficult to imagine the adult Eckhart considering the exploits of literary warriors as more than diversionary entertainment at best.

This did not mean that he remained untouched by the thirteenth-century obsession with the topic of "true nobility." The language and images of courtly literature clearly influenced Eckhart's perception of his own spiritual quest. Like the Minnesingers he knew as a youth, Eckhart the preacher
would often rely on allegorical language in describing the soul as a lover or bride. Reason and the Intellect, too, frequently appear as highly idealized—usually feminine—figures from courtly love poetry, with Eckhart employing the same language of unfulfilled desire, in this instance for God Himself. Knowledge, he preaches on one occasion, *is a princess, seeking her dominion in the highest and purest realms, and she conveys it to the soul and the soul to nature and nature to all the bodily senses. The soul, he continues, is so noble at her highest and purest that the masters cannot find any name for her.*

Most strikingly, the adult Dominican friar, long absent from the courtly life and its pleasures, instinctively used "noble" in the same heightened manner as courtly love poetry. For Eckhart, the term no longer meant just "superior" in the conventional social sense, but also in a moral and spiritual sense. As in a contemporary work such as the *Romance of the Rose,* his later sermons imagine a universal continuum for such virtues as love and mercy, with humans becoming progressively nobler the closer they came to the ultimate, divine Minne, or love. Of course the seeker must proceed slowly and with great care. Individual human beings are carnal and thus farther from God than angels, but *Humanity in itself is so noble that the highest peak of humanity is equal to the angels and akin to God.* In other words, all humans are naturally endowed with what Eckhart would later call a *divine spark,* and have at least the potential of attaining true spiritual nobility. Their thoughts and actions as flesh-and-blood beings are deemed more or less noble, depending on whether they bring an individual closer to the love object, God.

Eckhart's version of the noble quest was in that sense radically egalitarian, with success based on individual perseverance, not the manners or innate superiority of high social status. It is unlikely to have endeared him to many of his aristocratic peers, but it was a logical extension of the most spiritualized aspects of courtly love poetry itself. What mattered most, for both the Minnesingers and Eckhart, was not the lover's birth status but his desire and the willingness to undergo hardship in attaining the ultimate goal. The path of the true spiritual quest, as Parzival and other literary seekers learned, was solitary and difficult. Like the knight of romances, the Christian in pursuit of his love object *must leave the crowd* and learn self-denial in order to become receptive to true love and mercy. I *extol detachment above any love,*
preached Eckhart, because at best, love constrains me to love God, but detachment compels God to love me. Such complete surrender to the divine will, in Eckhart's view, was a far nobler sacrifice than the simple suffering extolled by the poets of courtly love.

This version of the chivalric quest, he preached, was the true meaning of the gospel passage, “There was a nobleman who went out of his own accord into foreign parts and returned home richer” (Luke 19:12). In one of his most telling tracts, entitled simply “The Nobleman,” Eckhart recounts at length the prolonged struggle between the “inner man” (noble and spiritual) and the “outer man” (carnal, transient, sinful). Full of scriptural references, “The Nobleman” provides one of the most concise and colorful descriptions of the mature teacher's key insights. It makes no explicit references to the literature of courtly love, yet the affinity is unmistakable. How could a man know that he knows God if he does not know himself? The greatest conquest of any life, as all Arthurian heroes learned, is defeat of the foe within. Only then, writes Eckhart, can the Christian seeker obtain the object of desire. That object—symbolized by the riches bestowed upon the journeying nobleman—is nothing less than union with God.

At some point in his youth, certainly before the age of sixteen, Eckhart von Hochheim decided on his own life's quest. Later in life, in his mid-fifties, he compared his chosen path with the other two likeliest career choices of an ambitious youth of his social status: merchant or knight. Both of these professions involved great self-sacrifice and hardship, in the case of the merchant, frequently going on long journeys and perilous ways through mountains and valleys, wildernesses and seas, braving robbers and killers of his life and property, enduring great privations of food and drink, sleep, and other discomforts. Meanwhile, a knight in battle risks property, body, and soul. Yet in the end, all of this suffering achieved only the possibility of a small profit for the merchant and fleeting and brief honor for the knight. The son of knight Eckehard von Hochheim, onetime castellan to the Wettins of Thuringia, aimed much higher, and was more than willing to endure a little suffering for the sake of God and eternal blessedness.
CHAPTER TWO

Heroic Christianity

Nothing is so cheap as heaven, when it is for sale and nothing is so
glorious and precious a possession, when it has been earned. It is
called cheap, because it is on sale to everybody for as much as he can
afford. Therefore a man should give all he has for heaven—his own
will. As long as he keeps any part of his own will he has not paid
for heaven.

GERMAN SERMON 58

The Path to Heaven

The boy Eckhart likely dreamed of enduring more than a little suffering in his
quest for salvation. Reaching heaven, as everyone knew, was a painful
ordeal—much more so for a youth who set his sights on spiritual greatness.
The bloody stories of the ancient martyrs were almost as common as tales of
chivalry in his world. Saints books, sermons, and various paintings and stat-
ues all vividly conveyed the agony of Saint Apollonia as her persecutors tore
out her teeth one by one, or the intense suffering of Saints Bartholomew and
Laurence as they were flayed alive. All educated children knew that Saint
Agatha was tortured extensively on the rack and taunted with fire before her
breasts were cut off, or that when Saint Sebastian survived an attempted
execution by arrows, the outraged emperor Diocletian had him clubbed to
death. Accounts of more recent saints were less gruesome but still involved
impressive feats of fasting, flagellation, and tremendous endurance of physical and spiritual trials.

By the time of Eckhart's youth, stories about the apostles and other saints had become a virtual industry, long before the printing press would make these tales even more readily accessible to the reading public. Hunger for edifying (and entertaining) accounts of their exploits appears to have been formidable, spurring a number of popular collections during the thirteenth century. The most famous compilation of saints' lives of the entire Middle Ages actually began to appear in manuscript copies about the time of Eckhart's birth, in 1260. The Genoan Dominican Giacomo da Varazze (better known as Jacobus da Voragine, ca. 1229–98) intended his encyclopedic Legends of the Saints, later renamed The Golden Legend, as a source book for his fellow Dominicans and other sermon writers. Its colorful stories of more than three hundred saints and their miracles, however, rapidly attracted a number of clerical and lay admirers. At times Voragine's collection more resembles the later Grimm's Fairy Tales than a sober supplement to the Bible. Later Renaissance humanists would mock the work's chunky style and naive credulity, but sermon writers in Eckhart's day found the collection an endless source of reliable anecdotal material.

The common message of the saints' stories to the youthful Eckhart was clear: getting closer to God was a hard-won triumph of spirit over body, a steady resistance of all the physical comforts and temptations this life offered. All quests for holiness were thus essentially internal in nature. Yet the spirit, like the church itself, remained embedded in the material world. And it is these external forms of religion in Eckhart's day that come most readily to the twenty-first-century mind: elaborate rituals, intricate clerical vestments, saints' relics, shrines, and of course the massive Gothic cathedrals that still attract countless photo-snapping tourists. Even more superficially, we imagine popes and bishops ruling the millions of faithful like absolute monarchs, imposing uniform religious standards—which they themselves regularly violated—and ruthlessly punishing dissidents through inquisitorial courts and public burnings. To modern eyes, medieval religious practices—attending mass, receiving the sacraments, collecting holy objects, praying, going on pilgrimage—appear almost like business transac-
tions, spiritual payments aimed at countering the deficit created by individual sins. We assume that for medieval Christians, the only thing that mattered was the afterlife, and even there the clergy had constructed an intermediate waiting place between heaven and hell known as purgatory, where tainted souls relied on the intercessions of their living friends and relatives—aided by priests—for reduction of their lengthy sentences. In the modern imagination, medieval religion was, in short, an externally practiced, clerically dominated mechanism for getting to heaven. Genuine concern for the internal spiritual life seems virtually nonexistent, an anomaly practiced by a pious few.

Of course this parody distorts a much more complex range of beliefs and experiences, and it is further warped by the hostile filters of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and the still later Enlightenment. Until recently, historians have also been hampered by an overreliance on clerical documents for understanding this largely illiterate society, accordingly exaggerating the role of the hierarchical Church and its leaders in the everyday lives of most people and minimizing the extent of true spiritual yearning across all levels of society. We now know that religion during this period was remarkably diverse in beliefs and practice, varying by region, social status, age, gender, education, individual preferences, and a number of other factors. Not everyone in the "Age of Faith" was pious (by any definition), and among those who were, there could be a stunning divergence in the very interpretation of what piety meant.

All myths have some basis in fact, of course, and in this instance it is the average Christian’s reliance on external help—especially priestly and saintly intercession—in ultimately going to heaven rather than hell. This was a lesson imparted to Eckhart at an early age. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, he learned, human nature had been inherently inclined toward selfish and otherwise sinful behavior. Only Christ’s incarnation and sacrificial death made some kind of reconciliation with God the Father possible, but even then humans—fatally addicted to sin—required constant counseling and other assistance from the divinely ordained vehicle of God’s grace, the universal Church.

While “the Church” in fact comprised the community of all baptized
Christians, only a small proportion of the whole, roughly one tenth, devoted
themselves exclusively to this mission of individual and collective redemp-
tion. Known as clerics, or canons, these Church leaders made special vows
(typically poverty, chastity, and obedience) that separated them from the re-
mainder of their fellow Christians, the laity. Like his parents and all other
laypeople, young Eckhart relied on the mediation of members of the clergy
with God, through sacraments and other means. Not until the Protestant
Reformation two and a half centuries later would some European Christians
talk about “a priesthood of all believers,” requiring no intermediaries be-
tween the individual believer and the sovereign of the universe.

Christians in Eckhart’s day were surrounded with frequent reminders of Christ’s agonizing
death on the cross as atonement for the original sin of Adam and Eve. Only baptism and other
interventions of the institutional church made personal salvation possible, and even then great
personal suffering was considered integral to reconciliation with God.

The clergy were in turn separated into two general groups. The first,
known as pastoral, or “secular” clergy (because they worked in the world),
was charged with administration of the institutional church and spiritual
care of the laity. Secular clergy were all men, usually ordained, and included
leaders such as the pope, cardinals, and bishops, as well as canons and priests assigned to cathedrals and parishes. Clerics of this kind in theory all reported up the chain to superiors, starting at the parish level with pastors, who were accountable to archdeacons, then bishops, then archbishops, and finally the pope and his court (curia).

Popes were powerful political figures as well as church leaders, ruling as princes over a large part of central Italy known as the Papal States. But despite the notable growth of the bureaucracy of the pope's curia during the time of Eckhart, we must not exaggerate the extent of papal authority or centralized control, especially on questions of religious belief or practice. Nor was there any notion of papal infallibility during this time; popes regularly reversed the proclamations of their predecessors on doctrinal matters. The greatest institutional power, rather, remained at the local level, in the hands of the bishops who oversaw large districts known as dioceses, or sees, and both ordained and disciplined all priests within their jurisdiction. Selection and appointment of bishops was thus the most common source of conflict between popes and secular rulers throughout the Middle Ages.

The second type of clergy, known as "cloistered," or "regular," were men and women who lived in closed communities under specific vows and followed a detailed constitution and daily plan, or Rule (Latin regula, whence "regular"), usually either the Rule of St. Benedict (ca. 480–543) or that of St. Augustine (354–430). Before the twelfth century, most of these monasteries and convents operated as independent entities, with all authority invested in the head of each house, the abbot or abbess. Between 1100 and 1215, there was an explosion of new regular orders, each comprising several houses collectively governed by a superior general.

Regular clergy also prayed daily for their fellow Christians, offering their own sacrifices and hardships in hope of divine forgiveness and favor. Life within the walls of a monastery or a convent was devoted exclusively to the contemplation and worship of God. Male communities, governed by abbots, defined "work" in a variety of ways (manual, artisanal, academic, liturgical), but all agreed with St. Benedict's ideal of a daily routine balanced between prayer and work, ora et labora. Female communities, led by abbesses, tended to define work in terms typical for women (washing, cooking, weaving,
spinning, embroidery) but also provided opportunities for study between
periods of private and collective prayer. Preaching by nuns was nonexistent,
except for the instruction of novices, and even monks focused such efforts
within the confines of the monastery. Ministry to laypeople, except among
the Cistercians, remained a minor part of the monastic vocation.

Together, secular and regular clergy routinely interceded with God on
behalf of their lay brothers and sisters. Ordained priests enjoyed special pow-
ers, confirmed by the 1215 church council Lateran IV, most notably the abil-
ity to forgive sins (in the sacrament of confession) and the ability to transform
bread and wine into the body and blood of the Savior (in the sacrament of
the Eucharist). They also typically administered the sacrament of baptism to
infants (although this could be validly performed by any Christian), blessed
various undertakings and special occasions, gave dying Christians a final
infusion of grace with last rites, and prayed for the souls of the departed in
purgatory. All of these acts, young Eckhart learned, were intended to help
compensate for his sins and move him closer to ultimate redemption. None
of this activity obviated the need for good deeds and prayer on his own part,
but clerical intervention remained indispensable to all salvation efforts.

Like most laypeople, Eckhart’s parents and their friends accepted their
spiritually inferior status as the price of living in the world amid all its tem-
pitations and cruelties. However minimal their understanding of doctrinal
matters, virtually everyone knew and accepted their own sinful nature and
need for salvation. But the contemplative life remained a rare full-time pur-
suit for laypeople. Unlike monks and nuns, the great majority of the popula-
tion had to earn a living, raise a family, struggle with neighbors, and look to
their own material interests. Accepting the assistance of religious profes-
sionals in exchange for small donations struck most people as a sound pro-
tession. After all, who would be more likely to sway the heavenly judge’s
ultimate decision, an average sinner whose commitment to the Creator had
been less than unwavering or someone who had devoted his or her life to
divine service (and was possibly invested with supernatural powers)?

This does not mean that the lay approach to salvation Eckhart learned
was entirely passive. There were many options for pious believers to supple-
ment whatever grace they received from the sacraments and other clerical
interventions on their behalf. Alms to the poor, or to any philanthropic endeavor, would surely count in any sinner's favor at the Final Judgment, as would generous public acts of any kind. Many wealthy individuals accordingly made provisions in their wills for ecclesiastical foundations, such as hospitals, orphanages, schools, and charities for the local poor. During Eckhart's lifetime, postmortem endowments of annual masses offered on behalf of departed souls (presumably in purgatory) became increasingly common, generating opportunities for posthumous intercession while at the same time providing much-needed supplemental income to local pastors and their small churches. Over the subsequent two centuries, such commemorations grew numerous enough to employ several cathedral priests full time to say daily obit masses in side chapels, or chantries.

All Christians, regardless of income, could also earn spiritual merit from fasting or other deprivations, as well as more extreme forms of self-mortification. Punishing one's own body not only supposedly kept carnal temptations at bay but also represented a self-sacrifice that would be viewed favorably by the divine judge. The most dramatic example of a meritorious hardship was the undertaking of a pilgrimage to a regional or distant shrine. Shrines themselves could range from a simple roadside cross, perhaps with the statue of a saint, to an ornate cathedral. The site was typically considered hallowed based on the presence of one or more relics from a saint—a skull, bones, hair, nail clippings, even in one instance a piece of intestine (also clothing, shoes, hats, and combs). Even Jesus and the Virgin Mary, though believed to have ascended bodily into heaven, allegedly left behind many relics, ranging from vials of Christ's blood and the Virgin's milk to the umbilical cord and circumcised foreskin of the baby Jesus. Sometimes a pilgrimage was performed as penance for a great sin; other times it was considered an act of special piety, perhaps with a specific goal in mind. A pilgrim who undertook an arduous journey to the famous Spanish shrine of Santiago de Compostela, for instance, might be rewarded with a healing miracle, the divine granting of another request, or at the very least much spiritual merit to be applied at the time of final judgment (not to mention several blessed souvenirs).

The most obvious and ubiquitous self-help for any Christian anxious
about his soul was simple prayer, and not necessarily in any sanctified space.
Prayer was the principal "public service" offered by monks and nuns, but
it was also something anyone in Eckhart's world could do, in a variety of
ways for a variety of purposes. Some prayer, particularly liturgical, was
aimed at worship, but most prayer, particularly by individuals, appears to
have been votive, or specific in intention. A merchant setting out on a jour-
ney might pray for safe passage, a farmer for the end of a drought, an adoles-
cent girl for a suitable husband, a mother for the health of her sick child.
Prayers on behalf of souls in purgatory were believed capable of reducing the
sentence of the sinner in question, not unlike appealing directly to a judge in
an earthly criminal case. Other prayers sought less elevated objectives, such
as finding a lost object. Few prayers—at least according to the adult Meister
Eckhart—were completely selfless, and therein lay the fundamental prob-
lem in his eyes.

Even when the prayer was not delivered via a clerical intermediary,
young Eckhart is unlikely to have ventured a direct appeal to God the Fa-
ther, or even to Christ. Just as no commoner would ever dare to petition the
emperor himself, the average Christian turned instead to a well-placed inter-
cessor in the heavenly court. Most commonly this was the Virgin Mary, re-
cently proclaimed the "Queen of Heaven." The more emotive religiosity
of the thirteenth century elevated Mary, "the Mother of God," as the sub-
ject of intense veneration. Countless statues and other images of Jesus's
mother emphasized her maternal kindness and generosity, a stark contrast
to forbidding portrayals of a stern Creator or Final Judge. During the decades
leading up to Eckhart's birth, several devotions had developed around Mary:
she now enjoyed her own special prayers and hymns (the Ave Maria and
Salve Regina, utilizing the newly developed rosary), her own feast days (Pu-
ification, Annunciation, Visitation, Assumption, Nativity, Immaculate Con-
ception), her own churches (Notre-Dame de Paris, among many others), and
numerous shrines dedicated to her glory (with numerous attested miracles).

The other frequent recipient of a votive prayer was one of the multitude
of saints recognized in the church's liturgical calendar (more than 4,500 by
the thirteenth century). The great majority of figures came from antiquity
and were male, although the number of recent, female saints was on the rise
in Eckhart's day. A new papal canonization process in the thirteenth century recognized twenty-two new saints between 1200 and 1275, including the founders of the Dominican and Franciscan orders and the local Thuringian saint, Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–31). In searching for a heavenly patron among this multitude, petitioners were often guided by a saint's geographic origin, name, or traditional area of expertise, such as St. Christopher for travelers or Saints Peter and Andrew for fishermen. Many saints developed their own special followings, or cults (in the medieval sense of the word).

Four years after her death at the age of twenty-four, with great support from the Teutonic Knights, Elizabeth of Hungary was canonized. In addition to more than one hundred miracles, some described in The Golden Legend, the saint was credited with feeding the poor and bathing (as well as sleeping alongside) lepers. Her ascetic merits included meekly suffering frequent beatings at the hands of her confessor Conrad, pictured here.

Spirituality in a Materialistic Age

Whether or not young Eckhart prayed to any saints, he could not help but be influenced by their models of spiritual success. But following the path of the saints in the thirteenth century was no easy feat. There were no more deadly persecutions as in Roman antiquity and the dangerous missions to pagan Asia and the Americas remained centuries away. The surest and swiftest path to achieving eternal blessedness, if not sainthood, lay not in the piecemeal
effort of the layman but in the complete devotion of the monk. Only here, his society told him, in his extended contemplation, might he encounter God directly, and only here, through his various ascetic sacrifices, was he likely to endure the suffering that would allow him to reach his goal.

Eckhart’s choice of a religious vocation over military honor, commercial prosperity, or (like his father) government service represented an obvious repudiation of the glories of the world. In this respect he was embracing the Church’s long-standing aversion to secular values. Jesus and his apostles had been poor and the Savior himself had often spoken critically of wealth, contrasting the material success of the world with the heavenly rewards of the spirit. Both the martyr and ascetic ideals of the ancient church represented dramatic rejections of earthly desires and possessions. The supreme monastic virtues of poverty, chastity, and obedience represented the best path to spiritual perfection because they recognized the emptiness and futility of their worldly counterparts of wealth, lust, and power. The original Christian ethos was not just neutral about the pursuit of profit and wealth; it was diametrically opposed to it.

At least that was the message preached from the pulpits. In reality, the church of Eckhart’s day faced a conundrum with the new money economy. The problem had been simmering for nearly a thousand years, since the disparate, otherworldly, charismatic cult of Christianity was transformed into the official religion of the Roman Empire. During the intervening centuries, the church’s new institutional status had frequently come into conflict with the gospels’ clear “contempt of the world.” Most obviously, as the result of countless donations from the faithful, the pope and his bishops now controlled extensive landholdings and other wealth, collectively more than any of their secular counterparts. Thousands of monasteries and convents, likewise devoted to spiritual poverty, had similarly accrued considerable property. And by the time of Eckhart, the recently reorganized administrative arm of the papacy, the camera apostolica, had begun collecting an extraordinary range of tithes and ecclesiastical fees that provided the pope and his curia with the resources not only to run the institutional church, but to maintain a magnificent residence and deploy large armies as needed.

The disjunction between the teachings of the gospels on wealth and the
real reality of the institutional church struck many of Eckhart’s contemporaries as contradictory, even hypocritical and corrupt. Satires such as the Gospel of the Mark of Silver and the Romance of Charity openly mocked the moneymaking machinery of the papacy, long before the more formidable attacks of Protestant reformer Martin Luther three centuries later. The buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices and privileges, a practice known as simony, posed an even more direct challenge to church teachings on wealth. Though officially condemned, simony was in fact a routine matter for noble families seeking appointments to bishoprics or abbeys, just like the buying, selling, and trading of secular titles. Critics could not imagine a more obvious repudiation of Jesus’s original injunction to his followers.

But remarkably no Christians in the thirteenth century questioned the legitimacy of the papacy itself, any more than complaints about tyrannical lords challenged the feudal order at its core. Individual popes could be considered corrupt (and indeed Dante placed most of the pontiffs from his own day in The Divine Comedy’s Hell), but that was a different matter from questioning the institution proper. Nor did most people consider money evil in itself. It was the love of money, an individual failing, that plagued all levels of society, thus requiring individual repentance and conversion.

Greed, or avarice, already had a long history as one of the Seven Deadly Sins familiar to all Christians. Some modern historians have argued that during the thirteenth century it became the most prominent deadly sin decried by preachers and other moralists, far outstripping sloth, gluttony, lust, anger, envy, and even pride. Many preachers stressed how the infectious nature of the desire for money—itself the very embodiment of desire—inevitably led to other deadly sins, thus earning its oft-repeated characterization as “the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). Bodily appetites (lust, gluttony, sloth) required ever more money to be satisfied; the desire to accumulate material goods resulted in envy or pride; inability to obtain enough money generated angry conflicts. Often the language used to describe love of money is reminiscent of modern characterizations of addiction. The celebrated quotation from 1 Timothy refers to avarice as a “craving,” and Pope Innocent III compared the insatiability of avarice to hell itself, in that “both consume but do not digest.”
Avaricious moneylenders, both Christian and Jewish, were considered the epitome of the selfish and loveless behavior promoted by the new consumer culture.

The adult Eckhart shared many of his age’s concerns about the pervasiveness of a consumer mentality, particularly among leaders of Christ’s church. He too thought in terms of personal rather than institutional problems and solutions. But he also perceived a less obvious and more dangerous cultural transformation under way. Treating money like God was bad enough; treating God like money, he later preached, threatened to undermine the very essence of true religion. The commercial revolution had already experienced alarming success in recasting all human experience in its own image, so that not only manufactured goods, produce, and livestock, but also land, water, and the rest of the natural environment were increasingly viewed primarily in terms of their market value. Like the commodification of nature or time (in charging interest), the commercial approach to the divine reduced every interaction with God to instrumentalist terms—what can I give God in order to get what I want?

The adult Eckhart would warn his listeners about succumbing to this mentality of commerce (Kaufmensch,), approaching all human and divine relationships in transactional terms. Basing supposedly pious actions on self-interest (Eigenschaft) was the opposite of the self-surrender proclaimed in the gospel. In preaching on Jesus’s clearing the temple of merchants and money-changers (Matthew 21:12), Eckhart would go beyond the obvious criticism of
money and greed to get at what he considered to be the fundamentally un-Christian assumption of all commerce, namely the desire for personal gain. This attitude afflicted everyone, even "good" people as they sought redemption:

Who were they who bought and sold there, and who are they still? Take proper note: I will speak now in this sermon of none but the good people.... Those are all merchants who, while avoiding mortal sin and wishing to be virtuous, do good works to the glory of God, such as fasts, vigils, prayers, and the rest, all kinds of good works, but they do them in order that our Lord may give them something in return, or that God may do something they wish for—all these are merchants.... Anyone who desires something from God is a merchant.

Eckhart’s radical interpretation of common antimercantile sentiments stemmed from a broad and profound disenchantment with the values of the new money culture, particularly evident among many nobles and urban residents most exposed to it. As in any commercial expansion, rising material expectations had provoked an antimaterialist counterreaction. Greater financial security and education, particularly in towns, typically spurred greater desire for personal advancement, but also, for many, a yearning for deeper and more lasting bonds with other people and for higher and lasting meaning in their lives. The paramount question was whether they could find such spiritual fulfillment within the strictures of an institutional Church immersed in the politics and business of the day.

The New Apostles

The teenage son of the knight Eckehard von Hochheim was far from the only Christian of his day seeking a pure, unmediated, authentic religious life. In fact, he lived during the second wave of a European-wide spiritual movement. For over a century, thousands of laypeople of all social backgrounds, alienated by the materialism of their loveless age and dissatisfied
with the religious options before them, had been seeking a more intimate
awareness of God at work in their everyday lives—more internal, more emo-
tional, more visceral than what they encountered in conventional religious
practices. Some historians in fact refer to the period 1100–1300 in Europe as
an “axial age in spirituality,” comparable in significance to the doctrinal and
structural upheavals of the Protestant Reformation era a few centuries later.
For the first time since antiquity, significant numbers of laypeople—not just
monks or nuns—valued individual subjective spiritual experience over out-
ward piety and sought fulfillment by a variety of new or established means.
Surely, many pious laypeople (including Eckhart) thought, there must be
a way to combine elements of the active and the contemplative life, a third
way between the isolation of the cloister and submersion in the cares of the
world. Surely there must be a more direct way to draw closer to God. The
result was a stunning array of new, grassroots religious movements, each
pursuing its own vision of “apostolic perfection.” As in the instance of mili-
tary religious orders, the new apostolic groups drew their inspiration from
stories of past heroes and their exploits. And just as Arthur and his knights
suddenly seemed to be everywhere in the art and literature of the twelfth
and thirteenth centuries, the apostles and early martyrs experienced a new
and unprecedented prominence in the period’s sermons, paintings, sculp-
tures, and popular story collections. Like their chivalric counterparts, Peter
and the other earliest followers of Jesus often experienced doubt and suffering,
but ultimately overcame all obstacles, sometimes with the help of mi-
raculous powers, all the while serving the cause of their Lord and Savior.
Above all, they rejected the wealth and fame of the world, joyously embrac-
ing the miseries endured for their noble choices. And in the end they were
recognized by their divine king with the reward of eternal redemption.
Of course venerating the vita apostolica and defining it were two different
things. It was also far from a novel concept: both secular and regular clerics
saw themselves as heirs to Jesus’s earliest followers. Many members of the
clergy were accordingly suspicious of the new apostolic movements popu-
lated by laymen and women who had worldly occupations and often spouses
and children. Many of these individuals came from propertied backgrounds,
making their rejection of consumer values and embrace of “apostolic
Monumental sculptures of the apostles, from the Gothic portal of the north transept of Dax cathedral in France. Each carries the attribute or symbol that would allow worshippers to identify him based on various popular stories about their exploits before and after the death of Jesus.

poverty” even more dramatic. The people denigrated by some clerical opponents as “rustics,” “idiots,” and “illiterates” in fact appear to have been typically nobles, burghers, former merchants, and occasionally even educated clerics. Like the original apostles, the new apostles deliberately chose to be in the world but not of the world, sacrificing some but not all of their personal attachments. In this sense they appropriated what they considered the best parts of clerical life—the simplicity and poverty of monasticism and the worldly activity of secular clergy—while emphatically shunning special vows of any kind. They claimed no special office or authority, calling themselves “simple Christians,” “Good Men/Good Women,” or sometimes “Friends of God.”

In everyday behavior, the new apostles were often difficult to distinguish from other pious laypeople involved in traditional charitable and devotional practices. What most set them apart was their attraction to the written Word of God (another by-product of the commercial revolution). Relying on either Latin Bibles or vernacular translations of individual books, mixed groups of men and women met regularly to discuss the significance of scriptures for
their own paths to God. By the time of Eckhart, there were translations of all or most of the Bible available in most European languages, including his own, Middle High German. Initially priests or other educated individuals took the lead in scriptural readings, but increasingly average laypeople dominated discussions, even preaching publicly to large audiences on religious themes.

To modern eyes, all of these tendencies look, frankly, Protestant, and we might be quick to attribute subsequent clerical opposition on these anachronistic grounds. A few scholars have even called the phenomenon a “medieval Reformation.” But the new apostolic movements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—with the distinct exception of the Cathars (also known as the Albigensians)—were not schismatic groups with alternate doctrinal agendas. They attended mass regularly, participated in the sacraments, and prayed to the saints for intercession. Popular preaching and Bible reading were not unprecedented, but rather longtime staples of mainstream Christianity, with the latter more limited during Eckhart’s day by low literacy rates and the great expense of manuscript Bibles than by any official prohibitions. The new groups were admittedly more egalitarian, even individualist, in their approach to the divine but not necessarily anticlerical.

The chief concern of some bishops and other clerical opponents was organizational chaos and the potential for errant teachings, especially among lay preachers. Since we are limited to documents written by such adversaries, it’s difficult to know how many people truly claimed to have achieved “evangelical perfection” or “the merits of the apostles” or openly challenged the authority of the formal successors to the apostles—the bishops. The great majority of apostolic movements—again, excepting the Cathars—claimed to follow the precepts of the gospels and apostles, and appear to have been fairly orthodox on doctrinal matters.

Even those clerics more wary of the new apostles conceded that their hunger for spiritual knowledge and experience appeared both genuine and insatiable. One thirteenth-century critic marveled that “men and women, great and small, day and night, do not cease to learn and teach; the workman who labors all day teaches or learns at night. . . . Whoever excuses himself, saying that he is not able to learn, they say to him, ‘Learn but one word each
day and after a year you will know three hundred, and you will progress.”
By most accounts they also appeared saintly, one otherwise unsympathetic
friar conceding, “We know that they suppose this behavior to be virtuous
and do many things that are in the nature of good works; in frequent prayer,
in vigils, in sparsity of food and clothing and—let me acknowledge the
truth—in austerity of abstinence they surpass all other religions.”

Of course highly visible, even extravagant, acts of piety could cut two
ways. Clerical observers less sympathetic to such lay movements deemed the
holier-than-thou demeanor an implicit criticism of their own behavior as
well as a trick to attract unsuspecting new members. “Wolves in sheep’s
clothing,” spewed one especially vituperative opponent, “seducing others by
their false piety.” Bernard Gui, the most famous inquisitor of the Middle
Ages, likewise accused the most prominent groups of fraudulent self-
righteousness: “[They] commonly say that they occupy the place of the
Apostles, since they alone imitate their poor, itinerant, and preaching life-
style.” Tellingly, Gui chose not to dispute the new groups’ reputations for
pious acts, just their claims to uniqueness and special authority.

And herein lay the greatest distinctiveness of the new apostolic move-
ments and thus their greatest danger in the minds of some church authori-
ties: the desire for a less mediated experience of religious life. Yet even then,
formal marginalization was not inevitable. Only when the Lyons merchant
Valdes (aka Peter Waldo) and his followers, known as Waldensians, defied a
papal prohibition of lay preaching was the group formally excommunicated
in 1184. “One must obey God more than people,” Valdes responded, quoting
Acts 5:29 and standing by his conviction that all Christians should be able to
preach freely. From that point on, the so-called Poor Men of Lyons contin-
ued their apostolic mission as an underground movement, wandering the
towns of southern Europe, meeting with secret congregations, and occasion-
ally performing penitential rites.

For the first few generations of the new movements, widespread confu-
sion about their orthodoxy allowed most (again, not the Cathars) to operate
in a gray area of popular toleration, or at least indifference. Local priests and
other clerical opponents, frustrated by their own impotence in preventing
the groups’ spread, appealed to their superiors for clearer guidance and
decisive actions. At the dawn of the thirteenth century, sixty years before Eckhart's birth, their pleas were finally heard. The diverse apostolic movements still sprouting up across the continent finally collided with the greatest administrator the papacy has ever known, Lotario dei Conti di Segni, who at his ascension to the throne of St. Peter took the name Innocent III (r. 1198–1216).

Innocent III was one of the most powerful and influential leaders the papacy has ever known. His signature church council, Lateran IV, attempted to reestablish firm boundaries between the respective roles and abilities of clerics and laypeople.

Reclaiming the Apostolic Ideal

Trained as a theologian and a jurist, the ambitious thirty-eight-year-old Innocent spent nearly two decades attempting to transform Christendom itself. Most medieval historians consider him the most influential pope since Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604). When not enmeshed in imperial politics or coalition building for the fourth crusade (1202–4), Innocent devoted considerable attention to the question of religious orthodoxy. On the question of the new apostolic movements, the pontiff quickly concluded that a coordinated response was essential. Innocent viewed the new apostolic movements as symptomatic of a more general failure in clerical leadership. Groups like the
HEROIC CHRISTIANITY

Waldensians and the Cathars, he believed, took root among the laity only because of neglect by both the regular and secular clergy, denounced by the pope as "dumb dogs who do not bark." His subsequent doctrinal reforms accordingly focused primarily on an enhancement of the powers and roles of priests.

In 1215 Innocent summoned more than 1,200 bishops, abbots, and nobles from around Europe to participate in the assembly thereafter known as Lateran IV, the most important ecumenical council of the entire Middle Ages. Under the pope's guidance, the council painstakingly delineated the respective religious demands on the clergy, establishing rigorous behavioral standards but also reinforcing their religious authority. The notion of a celibate, politically independent, nonhereditary priesthood was still far from universally accepted in the parishes of Christendom. Lateran IV reiterated the clerical ideal sought by the last four generations of religious reformers, empowering bishops to discipline and dismiss priests who retained common-law wives or charged fees for the administering of sacraments. At the same time, Innocent's council elevated the spiritual status of ordained clergy, recognizing their exclusive power to summon Christ to earth in the sacrament of the Eucharist (transubstantiation) and their ability to forgive sins as His vicar. Just as crucially, only ordained priests had the authority (and sacred duty) to preach the gospel and explicate the Church's interpretations of God's Word.

Above all, Innocent and his successors sought to reestablish a firm boundary between the religious activities of clergy and laity. Lay piety was vigorously encouraged, but along the conventional lines of good deeds and relying on clerical intercession. Spontaneous, loosely organized, lay communities of like-minded Christians did not fit neatly into his conceptualization of these two categories and had a genuinely befuddling effect on church leaders in general. Often ecclesiastical officials exaggerated not just the perceived threat of a rival "church," but its actual coherence in teachings or organization. Incapable of imagining any communal religious activity outside of a clearly ordered structure, the average bishop or his theological adviser frequently perceived more of a full-fledged rival clergy and alternate doctrine than really existed. They also could not resist linking virtually every contemporary movement deemed suspicious to an ancient (and supposedly
equally well-organized) heresy, such as the fourth-century Manicheans or
fifth-century Pelagians. Other times—contradictorily—it was a grassroots
movement's very lack of rules and proper authority that raised the specter of
radical individualism and religious chaos. Either way, without the steadfast
guidance of church tradition, as defined by popes and councils, clerical re-
formers considered the average Christian at the mercy of a panoply of erro-
neous and dangerous ideas, many of them both highly contagious and fatal
to the soul. Lay apostolic groups who recognized clerical authority were
subsequently assimilated; those who resisted were persecuted, particularly
with a new legal procedure known as inquisition.

By far the most significant outcome of Innocent's response to the lay ap-
ostolic movements—especially for the career of Meister Eckhart—was the
birth of two new religious orders that embraced the most prominent fea-
tures of the earliest groups—poverty and preaching—but required the usual
religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, as well as a special oath
of obedience to the pope. The new orders, in other words, represented a
clerical appropriation of the lay apostles' combination of the active and con-
templative lives. Like the lay groups they hoped to supplant, both Giovanni
di Pietro di Bernardone (aka Francis of Assisi; 1181–1226) and Dominic de
Guzmán (1170–1221) sought to escape the binary of the active/contemplative
model of spirituality. Like their Waldensian rivals, they rejected the isolation
of the cloister as well as the lukewarm conventionality of much lay piety.
Their common and oft-stated ideal was to be in the world but not of the
world. Because they and their followers initially lived by begging, they were
known as mendicants. Their principal differences from one another, at least
in the beginning, were in degrees of emphasis. The followers of St. Francis,
who especially valued poverty and humility, called themselves the Order of
Friars (Brothers) Minor, but were better known as the Franciscans, or Grey-
friars (because of the color of their habits). St. Dominic and his brothers fash-
ioned themselves as the Order of Preachers, based on their chief ministry,
and were otherwise known as Dominicans, or Blackfriars (again, based on
their clothing). Together, the new mendicant orders would transform not
just lay piety movements but Christianity itself. They would also determine
the life choices of a certain young nobleman from Tambach.
Although Innocent played no direct role in the formation of either the Franciscans or the Dominicans (and actually died six months before papal recognition of the latter), he would have been delighted at the efficient way both orders undercut the appeal of the remaining independent apostolic movements. Both mendicant groups quickly established widespread reputations for upright character and piety. Each established its own constitution and monastic rule, carefully adapted to the needs of their preaching and other worldly ministries. Franciscans and Dominicans in short embodied the very apostolic ideal that many others merely aspired to—endowing them with considerable credibility vis-à-vis heretics and lax parish priests alike. At the same time, their prioritization of preaching addressed many of the lay desires that had given birth to the apostolic movements, bringing the teachings and spiritual experiences of the monastic world to the population of non-clerics. Men and women attracted to the apostolic life could now either join one of the new orders (both had female versions, known as second orders), attach themselves as a lay follower (known as a tertiary), or otherwise conform their everyday lives to the ideals preached. Best of all, from a
church leadership perspective, both Dominicans and Franciscans maintained good training and disciplinary control of their friars so as to ensure completely orthodox messages.

The spread of the new mendicant orders had a curiously contradictory effect on lay spirituality. Thanks in part to Pope Gregory IX's 1231 commissioning of several Dominicans as heresy inquisitors—a new title and a still rudimentary procedure—the confusion of the previous era subsided. By the time of Eckhart, the boundaries between officially sanctioned apostolic orders and their heretical rivals were well established, at least among church officials.

At the same time, Dominican and Franciscan preaching in no way dampened the spiritual yearnings of many laypeople, but to the contrary, fanned the flames. Heroic Christianity was a hard idea to kill, and could no longer be contained to monks and nuns, even with the addition of the mendicants. The impact of both orders was especially evident in the cities and towns of Europe, where the friars counseled lay audiences struggling to adapt traditional Christian values to the challenges of the new money culture. Both of the new religious orders arose as reactions against the growing culture of consumerism, but it was the Franciscans who most explicitly defined the apostolic ideal against the values of the marketplace. The earliest followers of St. Francis were as much penitents in this respect as mendicant preachers. Following the example of their founder, they not only forswore all possessions but displayed a deep-seated, almost pathological contempt for money itself.

Dominicans, who called themselves "men of the gospel" (vir evangeli), shared the goal of apostolic poverty, but pursued it in what they considered a less theatrical manner than their Franciscan counterparts. Money and wealth were not necessarily bad in themselves, they preached, but presented many temptations that often led to sinful desires and actions. Many Dominican (and some Franciscan) theologians devoted enormous amounts of energy to developing sophisticated interpretations of such concepts as just price and usury, or charging interest for a loan. Ordinary Christians should not seek wealth, scholars wrote, but neither should they be ashamed of it, especially if they spent it in generous ways, such as the support of mendicant missions.
The sermons and counseling of preaching friars fed the lay hunger for spiritual fulfillment beyond the usual devotions and sacraments offered by the church, but otherwise offered few new options. The new orders did not resolve, for instance, the active-contemplative dilemma for most laypeople, who at most might attempt the halfway life of a Franciscan or Dominican tertiary: attending daily mass or other devotions, participating in scriptural readings and discussions, fasting or self-flagellating, or perhaps even living part time at a convent. Others might seek spiritual fulfillment through an active life of caring for the sick, assisting with burials, caring for the poor, and a wide range of other charitable activities. Voluntary religious associations offered still another devotional option, particularly in cities, with or without the oversight of a member of the clergy.

Eckhart thus came of age in a world still enthralled with the apostolic ideal and still searching for greater spiritual fulfillment. The majority of his lay contemporaries ultimately satisfied themselves with their existing religious options. But for the noble youth from Tambach, tales of the saints and martyrs represented direct challenges to a life of self-sacrifice that he could not resist. The only remaining question was which form his own path of heroic Christianity would take.
CHAPTER THREE

The Dominican Way

Why am I more glad that something good happens to my brother or
to myself rather than to another? Because I love my own more than
another’s. But if I love him as myself, as God’s commandment ordains
that I should love God, then it will seem all the same to me whatever
the commandment says.

GERMAN SERMON 74

A Call to Glory

The thirteenth-century Dominican cloister of Erfurt is one of the city’s for-
tunate few medieval buildings to have survived nearly eight hundred years
of religious upheaval, urban renovation, and modern aerial attacks. An Al-
liebom dropped on November 26, 1944, destroyed most of the city’s Fran-
ciscan church, fewer than a hundred yards away, but Eckhart’s longtime
home escaped untouched. The church and cloister buildings now belong to
the Evangelical (Lutheran) diocese but the layout of the former Dominican
compound has remained unchanged. The spacious refectory, with its stun-
ing spired ceiling and numerous lofty windows has been fully restored, as
has the adjacent chapter room (still used for meetings) and its neighboring
library/sacristy chamber (now a children’s nursery). The sprawling attic dor-
mitory remains exposed to thick-beamed roof rafters, as it was in the thir-
teenth century. The magnificent Gothic church, which today dominates the

9781101915668_Dangerous_TX.indd 53
9/26/17 10:35 PM
surrounding landscape, was still under construction during Eckhart's time, with the choir and high stone altar only fully roofed a year or two before his arrival. The cloister's courtyard, roughly sixty by eighty yards, remains enclosed on all four sides, preserving for modern visitors the sense of an entirely self-contained and independent world.

Layout of the Dominican cloister of Erfurt. Amidst his frequent travels and reassignments as an adult, Eckhart spent more of his life here than anywhere else. In that sense, it was his home from his teenaged years until his death.

Sometime around the age of fifteen (ca. 1275), with his father's permission (and, possibly, encouragement), Eckhart von Hochheim entered into this alien community. With a population of more than twenty thousand, Erfurt was Thuringia's biggest city, at least five times larger than Gotha,
which lay about a day's journey west by foot along the Via Regia. Erfurt also intersected the principal north-south artery of the region that linked the Baltic seaports with the Italian city-states of Venice and Florence, thus drawing significant traffic of people, livestock, produce, and especially manufactured goods. Unlike the provincial village and regional town of his youth, the "gateway to the east" was a cosmopolitan community, thriving on all kinds of trade, particularly textiles and woad (the most popular source of blue dye until the sixteenth-century proliferation of Indian indigo). The town—or more precisely, the Dominican cloister within it—would be Eckhart's home for most of the next forty years. He lived here longer and more continuously than anywhere else during his lifetime.

Eckhart's first extended exposure to the Dominicans had likely come a few years earlier, either in the Order's house at nearby Gotha or at the priory in Erfurt, some thirty miles from his home in Tambach. By then, the Order of Preachers had enjoyed nearly a half century of growth in Thuringia, beginning with their 1229 arrival in Erfurt, just fourteen years after Dominic received papal approval for his new religious order. During the subsequent two generations, the Dominicans rapidly established communities throughout the towns of the area, including the house in Gotha. By 1270, when ten-year-old Eckhart might have begun attending the Erfurt school, the original order of some twenty loosely coordinated houses scattered across the continent had transformed itself into a powerful network of more than thirteen thousand friars in twelve provinces. The expansion had been so rapid that a few brothers from the earliest days of the order who had known St. Dominic personally were still around in Eckhart's time.

Like their Franciscan competitors, the Order of Preachers was in constant recruiting mode. The Erfurt priory's Latin school, located in the heart of the city and attended by hundreds of students, offered an especially rich hunting ground. Noble youths like Eckhart were favorite targets, but most students with his background remained intent on secular careers in business or politics. A religiously inclined individual of Eckhart's social status also had many options among the various religious orders, not to mention a possible career as a bishop or even cardinal. The Dominicans' reputation for rigorous educational standards gave the order a distinct edge with
middle-class and noble parents, who typically held worldly ambitions for
their sons. The resulting pedagogical arms race with the equally ambitious
Franciscans led to a series of popes, bishops, and superiors to repeatedly pro-
hit the poaching of pledges from other religious orders but clearly such
mandates were difficult to enforce. Just a decade before Eckhart’s own deci-
sion to join the Dominicans, the order also lowered its official age of admission
from eighteen to fifteen, again prompting outrage from their rivals, the
Franciscans.

Sometime—perhaps regularly—during his studies at the Erfurt Domin-
ican school, the teenage Eckhart would have heard a vocational pitch along
these lines (taken from one of the order’s preaching manuals). The life of a
Dominican preacher was “an excellent and noble work,” more necessary,
pleasing to God, useful, and personally profitable (in a spiritual sense) than
any other human profession. Whereas knights fought for personal glory or
gain, “preachers are also called soldiers of Christ . . . for they make war on
the errors against faith and morals, which are opposed to the rule of their
Sovereign.” Preachers were also more useful than “carpenters, stonecutters,
masons and other workers of this kind, for they are charged with construct-
ing in the hearts of men a house exceedingly pleasing to God.” They were
likewise “happier and more fearless” than merchants, for “they carry on
their spiritual trade through the land, exchanging their wisdom for precious
acts of faith and numerous good works.”

Eckhart’s Dominican teachers would also not have hesitated to extol the
superiority of their calling to that of their fellow religious residing in monas-
teries and convents. Paraphrasing Gregory the Great on the virtues of
preaching, his recruiter would lament that:

There are some who, endowed with excellent qualities, reserve all
their ardor for contemplation, and who refuse to work, through
preaching, for the salvation of their neighbor. They love the quiet of
the hidden life, and shut themselves up in their meditations; but if
judged strictly, they will be found responsible for having omitted
much that would have been profitable if done among men.
The preaching of a single friar, the recruiter would remind young Eckhart and his classmates, could reach many people, as seen in two sermons of St. Peter where the apostle claimed to have converted three thousand and five thousand people respectively (Acts 2:41 and 4:4). The Savior himself spent more time preaching than praying and at his ascension gave the Great Commission to “go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature.” The apostle Paul likewise claimed preaching as his chief vocation—“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach” (1 Corinthians 1:17)—as did all of the Church Fathers.

Finally—and this would be the clincher for certain self-confident and ambitious teenage boys—preaching was difficult and thus not for everyone. The world needed strong and effective preachers, but very few were up to the challenge. “Preaching is such a noble art that one cannot fulfill it in an honorable and fruitful manner without overcoming the most serious difficulties. But how success is to be envied and praised!” Those few brave souls willing to take up the challenge of this divine calling would gain “a particular glory,” earning them “the joy of angels and the anger of demons.”

Why did young Eckhart in fact choose to enter the Dominican order? The Cistercian cloister at Georgenthal lay only a few miles from Tambach and nearby Gotha offered other options, including a Franciscan house. Here the implicit themes of Eckhart’s later writing offer some insight. The celebrated rigors of the mendicant life promised an institutionally endorsed type of heroic Christianity in a society that celebrated the great men of days past and lamented the mercenary selfishness of its own time. Preaching God’s Word offered a seemingly more useful and nobler purpose than either the contemplative life or worldly careers—two recurrent motifs in Eckhart’s later sermons. Above all, the Dominican path promised the most exciting intellectual prospects of any vocation the future scholar could have pursued. Perhaps Eckhart’s lifelong spiritual quest began in these early years, spurred by the mentoring of a friar at his school or by the boldly inspirational sermon of a Dominican recruiter.

Not all noble and patrician families were pleased by a son’s choice of a vocation in either mendicant order. Joining the secular clergy at least...
promised the possibility of political prominence, as well as material rewards. Dominicans and Franciscans, by contrast, rarely rose to the rank of bishop, with some notable exceptions. The most famous Dominican of all time, Thomas Aquinas, met fierce resistance from his own noble family upon announcing his vocation, with his brothers even kidnapping and imprisoning the would-be friar for two years before relenting. Nonetheless, the Dominican strategy of concentrating recruitment efforts on schools and universities paid off. Unlike Franciscans, who counted many peasants and lower-class individuals in their number, Dominican friars were far likelier to come from literate, urban, and even noble backgrounds—like the young aristocrat from Tambach.

Upon his application to enter the order, possibly as early as 1275, Eckhart was examined by a panel of three brothers at the Erfurt priory. Often the interview process included an informal walk through the cloister's garden with a senior member of the panel conversing with the prospective friar in Latin about his life, studies, and aspirations. Star pupils such as Eckhart sailed through this part of the process, while candidates displaying inadequate Latin or emotional immaturity were turned away at this point. Following the panel's recommendation, all of the brothers in the house of roughly fifty members voted on his admission, with the prior reserving the right of final approval. The new postulant then began a probationary period of six months, during which his participation in the life of the community was greatly restricted. Only after the prior and other brothers were satisfied of the would-be friar's seriousness and stability was he allowed to proceed with his solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and begin life as a Dominican friar.

On the appointed day, young Eckhart was escorted by the novice-master, along with other postulants, to a full chapter meeting of the house and instructed to prostrate himself before the prior, with his arms folded beneath his chest. The ensuing initiation ceremony began with a ritual question from the prior, "What do you seek?" to which Eckhart had been briefed to answer, "God's mercy and yours." The prior then interrogated the postulant before his future brothers about any possible impediments (being too young or already betrothed, holding outstanding debts, or suffering from bad
health) and his willingness to endure the many hardships of Dominican life “for God and for the Kingdom of Heaven.” Upon Eckhart’s clearly audible assent, he was then stripped down to his undergarments and robed in the habit of a Dominican friar.

Following more prayers and a blessing with holy water, Eckhart and other novices then joined their new brothers in a procession through the cloister to the priory’s church, marching two by two and singing “Come, Holy Spirit.” As the song concluded, Eckhart and his fellow novices again prostrated themselves before the altar and remained immobile during a new sequence of psalms and prayers until instructed by the novice-master to rise and approach the prior, who received each of them with an embrace and a kiss on the cheek. The novice-master and other friars quickly joined the prior in embracing their new brother, after which the assembly retired to a celebratory meal in the refectory. Unlike some orders, the Dominicans did not change an initiate’s name; the castellan’s son from Tambach would hereafter be known as Brother Eckhart.

Cultivating the Habits of Devotion

During Brother Eckhart’s novitiate of a year and a day, he received general character training and began to memorize dozens of hymns, psalms, and prayers, including the fixed-hours devotions known as the daily office, required of every Dominican. He was assigned a slightly older brother as a daily companion, or socius, who trained him in the essentials of Dominican life. His companion gave him a tour of the cloister grounds, showing him where to sit and how to behave in the choir during worship, how to modulate his voice and gestures in different settings, and how to enter the refectory two by two, bowing to the prior and then assuming a seat at a table, but not too close to his neighbor. He learned to keep his face veiled by his cowl, or hood, at all times until he had fully entered a room. He was introduced to the vestarius, or stock-master, who supplied him with shoes, leggings, straw for his bed, and other essentials. Within the first week, he also met the house librarian, who gave him parchment and pen so that he might write out his
general confession. By the end of the week, the novice Eckhart was expected
to be able to perform the house's daily routine of prayers and other activities
without a misstep.

He was also expected to dress himself properly in his habit—a task that
wasn't as simple as it may sound. The most visible sign of Brother Eckhart's
new identity, this distinctive set of clothing in black (to symbolize penance)
and white (to symbolize purity) would serve as his daily uniform for the next
sixty years. Like all Dominicans, Eckhart would don as the base of his habit
a white tunic that stretched from his shoulders to his ankles. This was girded
by a leather belt, then covered by a white scapular—two long strips of cloth
from his shoulders to a little before his knees and elbows, with an opening
for the head. To this he attached a black cowl and then placed over his head
a black mantle, or cloak, that was sewn together at the breast. Fashioned
entirely of unfinished and undyed wool, the habit was, by intention, rough
against the skin (also hot during summer) and even ill brothers were forbid-
den to wear smoother, more soothing linen. Undergarments were also
woolen and some brothers chose (for penitential reasons) to exacerbate their
physical discomfort with hidden hair shirts or thin ropes tightly bound
around their waists. His belt could hold only one knife, a handkerchief, and
a paternoster chaplet, or rosary. Unlike many Franciscans, Dominicans were
permitted to wear shoes, albeit of modest style. Finally, in the manner of all
monks, the new brother would have the crown of his head shaved, leaving
him with a narrow band of hair, "about three fingers wide." He was not al-
lowed to wear a hat.

During his first years as a Dominican, Eckhart's pursuit of God was con-
ducted mostly within the confines of the Erfurt priory. He did not leave the
priory unescorted during this time and certainly was not permitted to
preach or beg. The largely autonomous community of some fifty men and
youths, perhaps a third of them lay brothers not under vows, provided the
novice with a distinctive combination of structured religiosity and intellec-
tual freedom. Like all monastic orders, the Dominicans lived by a strict daily
routine, in this instance based on the Rule of St. Augustine, in which each
day began with Matins prayer service in the church at midnight (two a.m. in
the winter). After an hour or so of reciting the first divine office, Eckhart and
his brothers enjoyed a few more hours of sleep or private prayer before awakening at sunrise for the Lauds prayers, a major office celebrated in the church. The remaining duties of the day—a combination of prayer, physical labor, and studying—were interspersed among the daily office's hours of Terce (mid-morning), Sext (mid-day), None (mid-afternoon), and concluding with the major evening office of Vespers, followed by supper, a chapter meeting, the day's last prayer at Compline, and three or four hours of sleep before rising again for Matins. The chanting of each office's psalms and Bible passages, initiated by a sacristan's bell ringing, followed an annual liturgy. While the content of prayers varied and the timing was adjusted to seasonal variations in sunrise, the schedule itself remained inviolable. Visiting Benedictine monks noted acerbically that the Dominican style of chant was brisker than in their own monasteries, but reciting the priory's structured prayers—including weekly recitation of the nine-lesson Office of the Dead—still required a great deal of the young friar's time and attention.

As in conventional monasteries, Eckhart's superiors believed that the shaping of internal character began with the externals of physical discipline. Once the rigors of the friars' daily routine engendered habits of body, habits of mind could then follow. The novitiate thus focused on the essentials of liturgical prayer and personal discipline. First Eckhart and his fellow novices learned the order's Marian devotions, such as the Salve Regina and Office of
the Blessed Virgin. Once these were mastered, he was then expected to memorize the entire Dominican psalter, containing the various psalms and prayers for the day’s liturgical hours. He enjoyed full access to all of the library’s liturgical books, allowing him to learn still other parts of the divine office as well as various hymns. The focus on rote memorization of such devotions might strike some modern readers as monotonous and not especially spiritual, but the novice-master and his fellow brethren considered outward conformity to the community’s routine worship a virtue in itself.

Eckhart’s community also cultivated obedience and humility through more direct means. The novice-master met regularly with his charges as a group to discuss their personal struggles. All brothers in the priory, from novice up, practiced regular confession, ideally every day, meeting one-on-one with a confessor and with the entire brotherhood at evening chapter meeting. As a novice, Eckhart learned that a proper confession must include three sacramental elements: full acknowledgment of specific sins in thought and deed; the expression of genuine contrition or remorse; and “satisfaction” for the offenses in question, by prayer or some ascetic penance. Many Dominican houses provided penitential whips which brothers applied to one another’s bare shoulders at the conclusion of daily compline or to the shoulders of an individual brother who had been found guilty by the chapter of some particular transgression. Confessors often prescribed lengthy fasting or other types of deprivation as penance, and some brothers sometimes imposed these trials upon themselves. Whatever Eckhart’s own youthful experience of such practices, he would later criticize flagellation and other intentional suffering, saying they were more often an impediment than an aid to true contrition and detachment.

During his novitiate year, Eckhart’s daily routine was dictated by the demands of the divine office, his Latin lessons, and whatever tasks were assigned him—serving as doorkeeper or reader of scriptures during compline, for example, or simply running errands. His world was small in geographical terms. Most group activities took place on the ground floor, which included the refectory and chapter room. The second floor contained an assortment of private cells, small classrooms, artisanal spaces, and study spaces, with the dormitory occupying the attic space.
Although the young friar’s day was likewise divided into small compartments, each with a clearly designated purpose, the priory’s communal life was designed to provide time (and space) for various forms of individual contemplation and intellectual development. Brother Eckhart spent long periods every day in silence, punctuated by common worship, classes, and the chapter meeting each evening. At least two periods of each day were explicitly devoted to solitary prayer or study, time that he might pass in the relatively well-stocked library, the priory’s serene rear garden, the complex’s inner courtyard with the sounds of urban life just beyond the cloister’s walls, the priory’s newly dedicated church, or in many other private, enclosed spaces. As an advanced student in his early twenties, he would be exempted from the major hours of divine office and enjoy still more hours of silent reading, writing, and contemplation. He might even be granted one of the priory’s small but private cells as a study, with its own table, window, and sometimes a cot.

In these early years, of course, Eckhart slept in the spacious attic dormitory with the other brothers on their hard wooden beds, softened only by an occasional matting of straw or wool. This was typical of the priory’s decidedly egalitarian ethos. All brothers were expected to participate in daily communal prayer and to vote on a variety of administrative and disciplinary issues. The prior retained many prerogatives in the daily running of the community, from assigning preachers and confessors to hosting visitors in the guesthouse. But he also remained subject to the collective will of his brothers, who reviewed him annually and could always appeal controversial decisions to superiors. With brothers assigned to one of thirty-two standard positions—ranging from subprior or novice-master to cobbler or gardener—some sense of hierarchy was inevitable within the priory’s walls. Overt signs of status or preferential treatment, however, could provoke disciplinary action from the prior or community as a whole.

The seemingly contradictory blend of authoritarianism and democracy was nowhere more evident than during the two daily meals, one at midday and one before evening compline, or evening prayers. The brothers first cleaned their hands in the lavabo (Latin, “I wash”) basin in a small corridor between the church and the library, then proceeded single file through the
length of the cloister to the refectory, where upon entering they bowed to the crucifix mounted above the prior at the head table on their right. Finding a seat at one of the wooden tables lining the outer walls of the dining chamber, Brother Eckhart waited for the prior to deliver the initial blessing, and then watched as servers brought at least two cooked dishes to each table. All brothers, even the sick and elderly, ate the same food and drank the same wine. On feast days, a third dish or on special occasions pastries might be served, but even then meals remained strictly vegetarian. Other than his place of honor, perhaps seated next to a visiting dignitary, the prior enjoyed no special privileges and ate his meal in shared silence as the day’s scripture passage was read for the assembled friars. The egalitarian spirit of the Dominican community made a deep and lasting impression on the noble Brother Eckhart, who throughout his life would remain wary of the larger society’s celebration of hierarchy and prerogatives, especially in spiritual matters.

Bending the Bow

His novitiate year complete, Eckhart was finally able to participate fully in the most distinctive components of the Dominican vocation he had chosen: learning and preaching. The daily prayer and discipline of St. Augustine’s Rule remained essential to shaping humble and contrite hearts, but the main business of the Order of Preachers lay outside the walls of the priory. Before the younger brothers could be entrusted to preach the word of God to the wider world, however, they submitted to a rigorous course of study, usually requiring at least four years. In the words of one of the order’s most famous leaders, Hugh of Saint-Cher (d. 1263), “first the bow is bent in study, then the arrow is released in preaching.” Without learning, preaching would miss its target; without preaching, learning would be a useless skill.

Since its earliest days, the Dominican Order had required that every priory maintain a “school” taught by a lector, or professor, assisted by a university-educated “bachelor,” and overseen by a student master (for disciplinary matters) and a visitor (official examiner). All were fellow brothers of the same priory, interacting daily with their charges, which in a provincial
house of Erfurt's size might consist of as many as two dozen younger friars. The curriculum they taught was the most rigorous in Christendom, drawn up twenty years previously by a distinguished commission headed by Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, two of the most formidable scholars of the entire Middle Ages. Eckhart and his fellow students attended three or four lectures daily, not counting reviews led by a "brother repeater." Their academic year, as in universities, typically began on Michaelmas (September 29) and ended on St. John the Baptist's day (June 24).

Once his command of Latin grammar was judged adequate, Brother Eckhart began his mandatory studium artium (liberal arts study) with three years of logic. Like all Dominican houses, Erfurt's school offered at least two or three logic courses at any given time. First the young friar attended lectures on Porphyry's Introduction to Aristotle's Categories. This third-century work (written by a fervent anti-Christian) was the most important primer of the day for learning how to use such basic philosophical terms as genus and species, property and accident, and how to apply those concepts in arguments. All of his future fame as a scholar would hinge on his attaining absolute fluency in this lingua franca of contemporary intellectuals. He then proceeded to the Categories itself, a fifteen-chapter text from Aristotle's Organon that enumerated all the possible kinds of things that can be the subject or the predicate of a proposition. If the thing in question is a horse, for instance, it is a subject when considered as a whole (all its attributes), and a predicate when it "participates in" or is derived from an antecedent subject (e.g., animals). After mastering Aristotle's ten categories of subjects—substance, quantity, qualification, relation, place, time, attitude, condition, action, affection—the budding scholar was able to classify all remarks that could be made about any object, from the pen he was using to take notes (length, weight, color, in his hand, etc.) to angels, souls, or God Himself.

During his early studies in logic, Eckhart was also exposed to the works of the ancient Christian philosopher Boethius (ca. 475–ca. 526), another bulwark of thirteenth-century higher education. Expounding on the categories and methods of Aristotle and Plato, Boethius explored the mechanics of logic on subjects such as the three types of arguments: those of necessity (e.g., the sun will or will not come up tomorrow), of ready believability (the
sun will come up tomorrow), and sophistry (the sun will not come up to-
morrow). In the great philosopher's De topicis differentiis, Eckhart further
learned most of the rules of rhetorical engagement that would serve him
well in his future academic career. Here, for instance, he first encountered
such basic dialectical tools as the syllogism: the most famous example being
the series of statements that a) All men are mortal; b) Socrates is a man; c)
Socrates is mortal. Just as important, instruction in the priory gave Eckhart
the chance to develop his logical and rhetorical skills in regular disputations,
or debates, with other friars. Unlike typical monastic learning, which prized
rote memorization above all, the Dominicans thrived on argumentation,
teaching their younger brothers from the beginning of their studies how to
persuade others through their words—obviously an indispensable skill for a
preacher, even more so for the future university professor Eckhart would
eventually become.

Brother Eckhart's early training in logic and rhetoric was complemented
by rudimentary instruction in the essentials of the faith. As we might expect
of a learning culture based on memorization, this consisted of familiarizing
himself with various spiritual taxonomies: the four cardinal virtues, the
fourteen corporal and spiritual acts of mercy, the eight beatitudes, the seven
deadly sins, the ten commandments, the seven sacraments, and of course
various creedal articles of faith (one God, the crucifixion and resurrection of
Christ, the forgiveness of sins, etc.). Here the novice-master and other senior
brothers aimed to equip their young counterparts with simple guidelines for
their own spiritual lives. The Erfurt priory also offered two daily theological
lectures, one on a book of the Bible and one on the Four Books of Sentences of
Peter Lombard (d. 1160), a twelfth-century compilation of authoritative pro-
nouncements of the Church Fathers and other theological notables. Typi-
cally, the professor, or lector, would deliver the biblical lessons and the
bachelor the lectures on the Sentences. The latter class was directed mostly at
younger students, but all brothers were expected to attend the daily lectures
on the Bible until they were too old or infirm.

Eckhart's mastery of the Sentences, like his skills in Aristotelian logic, was
an essential part of his training as a future academic. In the century since its
compilation, Lombard's systematic overview of excerpts from the Bible and
Church Fathers had become the standard textbook for all theologians—a distinction it would retain even among sixteenth-century Protestant reformers such as Luther and Calvin. In the tradition of other twelfth-century glossators, or theological commentators, Lombard's goal had been to make a coherent whole out of diverse passages and interpretations on such topics such as the trinity, creation, and the sacraments. His “sentences” consisted of relevant pronouncements of Christian authorities from Paul and Augustine to contemporary scholars on the orthodox interpretation of a vast range of doctrinal questions, from free will and predestination to the consensual nature of marriage. Even when Thomas Aquinas and other thirteenth-century theologians began composing their own theological summaries, or *summae*, the *Sentences*’ stature as the preeminent primer on Catholic theology remained unquestioned.

Lectures on Lombard’s *Sentences* provided Eckhart with his first experience in the sophisticated practice of scriptural interpretation, or exegesis. Most crucially for his own religious thinking, he learned how to move from the *sensus historicus*, or literal sense, of Bible passages to various spiritual senses that revealed certain “deeper truths” of the reading in question. The allegorical, or metaphorical, interpretation of a scriptural passage, for instance, viewed the people and actions described in a symbolic manner, together conveying an essential spiritual truth. The moral, or tropological, reading of a text, as in one of Jesus’s parables, provided a lesson for right living today. The anagogical sense of the same passage revealed some prophetic insight into the end times and Final Judgment (including heaven, purgatory, and hell). Each of the four interpretations, according to his teachers, pointed in a different direction: the literal backward to the past, the allegorical forward to the future, the moral downward to the present day, and the anagogical upward to the heavenly. Each sense was true, Eckhart learned, but not readily apparent to the casual reader, hence the need for a trained preacher. A reference to Jerusalem, for instance, might historically refer to the Judean city, allegorically to the church, tropologically to the soul, and anagogically to heaven. As an adult, Meister Eckhart would preach that beyond the literal/historical meaning of “Now the serpent was more subtle than any of the beasts of the earth,” (Genesis 3:1), the Bible
teaches us very clearly about three things, although in parabolic fashion: First, the natures of things, second, the nature of our intellect and how it knows; and third, moral instruction regarding everyman's escape from or fall into sin, as well as the punishments that lead sinners back to virtue and virtue's Lord.

According to St. Jerome (347–420), translator of the authoritative Latin Bible known as the Vulgate, "each and every sentence, syllable, letter, and comma in God's writing is replete with meaning." The exegetical power to extract those multiple meanings that Brother Eckhart learned as a young friar would prove indispensable in his future theological work.

Of course advanced interpretation of this nature required thorough familiarity with the Bible itself, the main focus of Dominican education. Everyone in the Erfurt priory encountered the scriptures multiple times during the course of a day: as they chanted psalms in the chapel, as they listened to the lector's daily lessons, as they ate their meals accompanied by public recitations, and of course as they sat in private reading and contemplation during free time. Erfurt's library possessed multiple copies of the sacred scriptures, sometimes simply called "The Truth," although not perhaps in the form we are used to today. Jerome's Vulgate was not the only Latin version in circulation during the thirteenth century, and many vernacular translations of certain books and passages were also commonly available.

Just a decade before Eckhart's birth, the theological faculty at the University of Paris had attempted to dispel any confusion—at least among scholars—with a standardized version of the Vulgate, largely based on the Correctoria composed by Hugh of Saint-Cher and other Dominican scholars. Even then, any Bible used by Eckhart resembled a premodern version of a hypertext, with the main text accompanied by two sets of glosses, or annotations: the ordinaria, essentially explanatory notes, placed in the margin or at the bottom of the page; and brief interlinearis, definitions or pronunciations, situated between the lines of scripture themselves. Typically drawn from the writings of the Church Fathers, such explications assisted all readers, especially professional sermon writers, in interpreting difficult passages, but could also constrict alternate interpretations (although not in the case of the confident Meister Eckhart).
The most significant transformation of the Bible in Eckhart’s day was the division of the various canonical books into the chapters and verses familiar to modern readers. This single innovation, taken for granted today, made finding and using key scriptural passages dramatically simpler, thus allowing the future Meister Eckhart and his fellow theologians to navigate an otherwise massive text with relative ease. A new series of biblical concordances—likewise a staple of modern scriptural scholarship—further aided theologians and ordinary Christians in their attempts to explore the text thematically. Here too, Dominicans led the way, most notably Hugh of Saint-Cher’s regularly revised and expanded 1235 concordance, which contained alphabetical lists of numerous terms, followed by his own chapter/letter method of location. Without such refinements, the extensive scriptural cross-referencing that theologians of the day relied on for evidence would have been dauntingly difficult and time-consuming.
Releasing the Arrow

The Dominican hunger for learning had been a hallmark of the order from its earliest days. The order's original coat of arms even prominently displays a book at its center. Outside observers of the early Dominicans frequently commented on this distinctive aspect of their piety. The French bishop Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240) expressed genuine admiration that "each day they attend lectures on the Scriptures given by one of their own. That which they have diligently heard they then on holy days present to the Christian faithful through the ministry of teaching."

This ministry of teaching, Dominicans frequently reminded others and themselves, remained the entire justification for the learning itself. In the words of the original 1220 constitution: "Our order is recognized as having been specially instituted from the beginning for preaching and the salvation of souls, and our study should be principally and ardently directed to this end with the greatest industry, so that we can be useful to the souls of our neighbors." Half a century later, Humbert of Romans (1200–77), fifth master general of the Dominicans and himself a university graduate, reiterated the primarily practical end of all Dominican learning. "Others apply themselves to the study of holy writings but if this study has not preaching for its end, of what use is it?" Saving souls remained the goal; knowledge, even theological, was merely the means to achieving that goal. This frequently repeated admonishment against sterile or self-serving learning would continue to weigh on Eckhart throughout his life.

The original mission of Dominic and his followers had been to combat false and dangerous preaching, especially by Albigensians and Waldensians. Popular and knowledgeable orthodox preachers, as subsequent church leaders learned, were much more effective weapons against heresy than inquisitorial proceedings. Even in Eckhart's day, when the most notorious heterodox movements were in retreat, this corrective function remained central to Dominican preaching. Like their counterparts in any Christian era, the friars confronted countless uneducated preachers or self-proclaimed prophets who continued to spread their own particular religious messages, sometimes
THE DOMINICAN WAY

attracting groups of followers that we might call cults. The spectrum between unquestionably orthodox and indisputably heretical preaching remained remarkably broad and ambiguous, leaving many people who thought of themselves as faithful Catholics genuinely confused about what the church actually taught. And here lay the special niche of the Order of Preachers.

The most stirring proclamation of the Dominicans' sacred mission came from their retired master general, Humbert of Romans, shortly before Eckhart entered the Order. In On the Education of Preachers, Humbert repeatedly stressed the urgent necessity of their joint endeavor: "Were there no preachers, men would not think of heavenly truths and soon their hearts would become as parched land." Preaching, in other words, not only "gains entry for souls into heaven more quickly and more surely, so too it prevents their fall into hell . . . through ignorance." Only such loving guidance could help "those who, because of their simplicity, do not understand anything of the spiritual order and who lead a purely animal existence . . . slaves of their passions." The preacher's words served as a light to those poor souls "groping in the dark."

The most famous preacher of Eckhart's day was the Franciscan Berthold of Regensburg. Although some theologians complained about Berthold's reliance on fantastic stories and mere performance at the expense of a substantive religious message, the friar enjoyed a reputation during his lifetime as the finest German preacher ever. His sermons, even admirers conceded, focused less on doctrine than on simple sin and repentance. And Berthold did favor colorful stories about both evil people and saints, sometimes employing popular songs or catchy rhymes. But he was undeniably popular and—based on various conversion stories—effective. He was in that sense one of the first mass evangelists: according to his contemporary biographer, the animated preacher frequently attracted open air crowds of up to 100,000. In 1263, Berthold's reputation earned him a special commission from Pope Urban IV to preach against Waldensians, during which he traveled throughout Germany, including Thuringia, and even to Paris, where he was received by King Louis IX, the future St. Louis.

The Dominican approach to preaching was to combine the popularity
and accessibility of Berthold’s method with rigorous doctrinal training and a greater focus on substance. The ultimate goal remained to move listeners to feel remorse over their sinful lives, but the message needed to be delivered in a precise and deliberate manner, without digressions. A misunderstood or unclear sermon might be worse than one never given at all, giving rise to new confusion and errors. “Dangerously vulnerable to misinterpretation” would in fact be an accusation that the future Meister Eckhart’s opponents would apply to his own sermons.

The thirteenth-century professionalization of preaching, mainly at the hands of Dominicans, represented a pivotal moment in the history of Christian evangelization, comparable only to the development of new mass media technologies in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. It was also unprecedented. Obviously spreading “the good news” of Christ had always been at the heart of the church’s mission, but systematic training of preachers had been nonexistent before the arrival of the mendicant orders. For most of the past millennium, clerics wishing to improve their own oratory might have consulted Augustine’s On Christian Doctrine or the influential Book of Pastoral Care composed by Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century. But not until Pope Innocent III, himself a renowned preacher, called for a revival of the “art of preaching” (ars praedicandi) did the mendicant orders, and to a lesser degree secular clerics, begin to adopt a systematic approach to the practice.

The result was an explosion of preaching manuals and reference works, many of them available to Eckhart in the library of the Erfurt priory. Thirteenth-century Dominican authors alone produced more books than all of the Latin Fathers of antiquity combined. In addition to Humbert’s own general preaching manual, the young friar had access to the seasoned Dominican’s more hands-on guide to sermon preparation that provided outlines for more than one hundred sermons, each tailored to a different specific audience, as well as an additional one hundred sermons categorized by occasion. Jacobus da Voragine, compiler of The Golden Legend, supplemented his compendium of saints’ lives with an equally exhaustive collection of more than five hundred complete sermons. By the time Eckhart began his studies, the spread of both alphabetized indexes and Arabic numerals had made
possible a variety of new reference works for sermon writers, searchable by
key terms, by place in the liturgical calendar, or by purpose (e.g., wedding,
funeral, public dedication).

Other preaching aids offered the inexperienced sermon writer further
comfort, most notably several collections of exempla, or thematic anecdotes.
This new genre drew heavily on the rhetorical writings of the great Roman
orator Quintilian (d. ca. 118), who in turn had scoured ancient literature for
useful parables, tales, legends, fables, and anecdotes. Christianity's greatest
authority on preaching, Gregory the Great, especially valued the emotive
force carried by simple stories of joyously converted sinners, or conversely,
of the agonies suffered by unrepentant evildoers. Detailed descriptions of
the violent deaths and subsequent hellfire suffered by greedy tax collectors
or money lenders were especially popular with audiences. Material of this
sort was the lifeblood of popular preachers such as Berthold of Regensburg,
and young Dominicans were encouraged to make use of relevant exempla—
in moderation. Shortly before Eckhart came to the Erfurt priory, the Do-
minican Stephen of Bourbon published his Tract on Various Preachable
Materials, containing more than 2,900 such colorful and dramatic vignettes.
If the Erfurt library didn't own a copy of this exceptionally popular work, it
most certainly had Humbert of Romans' own collection of 228 exempla, es-
entially "greatest hits" drawn from Stephen's work.

The priory's library offered still other resources for Brother Eckhart as
he composed his first sermons. A successful preacher, he was taught, needed
not just a firm grasp of scripture, but also a deep understanding of the "study
of creatures," a category of knowledge that included history, the laws of the
church, the mysteries of religion, and experiences from one's own life.
Among Dominicans, the most reliable guide to the world of the Old and
New Testaments was the Historia Scholastica of Peter Comestor (d. ca. 1178).
Combining scriptural accounts with other ancient sources, particularly
writings of the Hellenized Jew Flavius Josephus, Comestor's work gradually
became the Middle Ages' most popular narrative of life in the ancient world.
Finally, for questions of moral theology, the young friar could turn to any
one of a number of new penance manuals—another burgeoning genre of the
thirteenth century that most likely began with the formidable work of his

S33
N34
fellow Dominican Raymond of Peñafort (1175–1275), a volume mandated for all Dominican libraries.

Even the authors of such manuals and reference works stressed that homiletics remained at its heart a practical art. A successful sermon writer, Humbert advised, did not follow any formula, but instead skillfully combined appropriate amounts of material from this wealth of reference sources with his own knowledge and personal experience. The successful preacher was in that sense like a gracious banquet giver:

Every good preacher should first be practical, like a host who prepares food of good quality for his guests. Secondly, he should use moderation, even in practical things; for everything found in a grocery cannot be used by a host. And thirdly, he should use words which are convincing, just as at a banquet guests are served not only food of good quality, but also food that is well prepared and pleasing to the palate.

A preacher who focused too much on one topic was like “a host who only serves one dish at a table.” Nor should the preacher “dwell too long on the less important points, which should be passed over lightly.” Preachers who took an inordinate pride in style “are like a host who is more concerned with the beauty of a dish in which food is served than the food itself.” The guest, or sermon hearer, should come away perfectly sated, neither bloated nor starved.

Brother Eckhart also learned other performance “tricks of the trade” from his more seasoned fellow preachers. “The manner of delivery,” Humbert counseled, “should be neither fast nor slow,” and the aspiring preacher must develop clear diction, know the intricacies and resources of language, and preferably develop “a voice with a definite resonance.” Eckhart was also advised “to use a different style according as his authority is little or great; if his authority is slight then he should preach with humility, if his authority is greater he has the right to express himself with more severity.” Since the earliest Eckhart sermon we have was delivered in his mid-thirties—with great authority—we can’t judge whether the young friar heeded this particular admonition.
Finally, both Hugh of Saint-Cher and Humbert of Romans stressed that a preacher needed genuine enthusiasm to arouse a lumbering and often resistant congregation. Moderate the voice to create desired effects, they counseled, and change facial expressions for emotional impact. At the same time, most preaching manuals warned against too much theatricality, too many extravagant gestures or wordplay that, in the words of one author, make a preacher seem more like a comedic performer than a man of God. In contrast to Franciscan preachers, who were openly encouraged to be “jesters of God,” in the manner of their freely emoting founder, Dominicans generally showed disdain for such flashy displays as the crusade preacher Robert of Lecce’s gimmick of ripping off his Franciscan habit at a dramatic moment in his sermon and revealing a full suit of armor underneath. But restraint was more easily counseled than practiced, especially for an inexperienced friar eager to please.

Perhaps the most valuable preaching advice the young friar received, or at least what is most evident in his later sermons, was to pay attention to his audience, both in preparation and delivery. The ultimate goal of all Dominican preaching was to produce a specific emotional reaction, most commonly remorse for sinful living, which in turn yielded a new intention to live a life more pleasing to God. Fostering a penitential heart was thus just the first part of the mendicant preacher’s job: confession, contrition, and penance had to follow. The role of confessor was a central part of the ministry of all Dominican friars, Eckhart included. Sermons that merely informed or entertained were judged failures by the order’s standards, regardless of how much acclaim they received. “As the seed is planted in preaching,” wrote Humbert, “the fruit is harvested in confession.”

As a beginner, Brother Eckhart likely hewed closely to the instructions he received in the Erfurt priory. Even his mature sermons follow the standard Dominican form of starting with a biblical passage in Latin, translating it into the vernacular, then proceeding to reveal multiple layers of spiritual meaning within. In these early years, especially before his university training, these interpretations were likely cautious, drawn from the preaching manuals he was taught to consult. Later, as his sermons became more daring in content, he still remained attuned to audience reception, filling his
preaching with metaphors and occasionally colorful examples, all delivered in simple language for a theologically unsophisticated audience. His points are typically enumerated and his sermons are generally brief. No comments on his voice or performance have survived, and while he was never the successful mass preacher of Berthold’s standing, he clearly developed a significant following in later years.

The adult Eckhart’s greatest violation of his youthful training was probably his deliberate focus on complex, abstract, and sometimes confusing topics. Many preaching manuals quoted St. Augustine’s admonition that “those who cannot be understood without difficulty should never be commissioned to instruct the people; or at least only in rare instances and in cases of urgent necessity.” Most authorities on preaching considered thematic and theological sermons of the kind favored by Meister Eckhart inappropriate for uneducated lay or female religious audiences, where personal conversion should always be the objective. Yet in Eckhart’s mind, he was bringing sinners closer to God, just not in a fire-and-brimstone manner. Likely he took comfort from the reassurance of Augustine, one of his personal heroes, that “It is worth far more to be less understandable, less pleasing, less moving, than to say what is not true and what is not just.” Eckhart also apparently had a higher opinion of the intellectual capabilities of his audiences, particularly among the religious women he encountered.

Above all, Brother Eckhart heard repeatedly during his studies, effective preaching depended on experience and aptitude, two qualities he could not acquire from a book. At some point during his first few years in the Erfurt house, the prior granted him permission to preach to his Erfurt brothers. Once he reached the age of twenty-five and had studied theology for at least a year he was permitted to preach within the surrounding territory, again depending on the approval of both the prior and the priory’s chief preacher, known as the limitator. Reaching this level was not guaranteed to all friars; Dominican superiors noted that Jesus himself waited until the age of thirty to begin his public ministry and that no one without sufficient theological preparation or personal maturity should preach outside the priory’s walls. Twenty-five was also the minimum age of ordination as a priest, a require-
ment for all Dominican friars, though we don’t know exactly when Eckhart received holy orders.

After more experience and at least two additional years of theological study, the young friar was finally able to seek the provincial chapter’s permission to preach not just in Erfurt’s praedicatio district, but anywhere within the province. In the case of Teutonia, this meant a large area the size of modern England. We know nothing of Eckhart’s preaching trips during these years, but can be sure that they offered a very different experience from life in the priory. Like students off to college for the first time, many young Dominican friars in their late twenties found the experience liberating—to a worrying degree, according to some of their superiors. Humbert of Romans recounted his own experience of those young friars who “are always eager to travel to get away from the discipline of the cloister, like children who run away from school.” Many new preachers at this stage in Brother Eckhart’s life were apparently less motivated by missionary zeal than by desires to eat better, visit relatives, or simply see the world. Excursions from the priory were not pleasure trips, his superiors stressed, and the ascetic standards of the Rule still applied in the outside world:

A good preacher should not trouble himself about finding the lodgings where the hospitality is exactly to his taste; he should not turn aside from places where he could do good because he fears to find poor hospitality there; nor should he carry with him provisions in defiance of the rule; he should carefully avoid suspected houses; he should learn to be content with a little; he should leave behind him a good reputation; nor should he be a burden to his hosts; he should show them gratitude; he should hold no bad feelings against those who refused to receive him.

Dominican life on the road was supposed to be hard and unpredictable, an intentional expression of faith in God’s providence. Traveling light, with few provisions, Brother Eckhart and his companion were unlikely to be the targets of the many highwaymen roaming the region, but they were reliant
on the kindness and generosity of strangers. Dominicans were, after all, begging monks. Whatever the constraints or challenges of these early trips, Eckhart’s sermons in Erfurt and elsewhere represented his first visible achievements as a member of the Order of Preachers. The long stretched intellectual bow was finally letting loose arrows aimed at the hearts of his fellow Christians. The community at Erfurt also provided him with a spiritual and emotional home for the rest of his life. In the eyes of many brothers, he was already a success. But in Eckhart’s own eyes, his personal pursuit of God had barely begun.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Right State

We are the cause of all our bindrances. Guard yourself against yourself, then you will have guarded well.

GERMAN SERMON SA

The Pursuit of Holiness

Spiritual perfection, the goal of every Christian monk and nun, has always been an elusive quarry. St. Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–547), author of the most influential monastic Rule in history, envisioned the seeker's journey as a twelve-step program (literally) in humility, beginning with observance of the Ten Commandments and ending with "that perfect love of God which casts out fear, by means of which everything he had observed anxiously before will now appear simple and natural. He will no longer act out of the fear of Hell, but for the love of Christ, out of good habits and with a pleasure derived of virtue." Frequently, the spiritual odyssey was imagined as an ascent up a ladder to God, with climbers often getting stuck, slipping a few rungs, or even falling off altogether.

The monastic pursuit of spiritual perfection was simultaneously a communal effort and an intensely personal struggle. External structures and enforced behavior—the daily routine of prayer and work, ritualized devotion, and penance (often corporal)—were intended to discipline carnal desires and provide a fallow field in which God's grace could grow and blossom.
Self-reflection and introspection naturally played important roles in this process as well, but the core assumption of the communal life of monks and nuns was that both peer pressure and peer assistance were crucial in developing true humility, and thus finding God. With the exception of a few remarkable saints, individuals were assumed too inherently weak and selfish to attempt such a treacherous spiritual journey on their own.

In the fall of 1294, nearly two decades after Eckhart had entered the Erfurt priory, his brothers there elected him as their leader. He was only in his mid-thirties. Although most of the preceding twenty years are shrouded in darkness, we know that the Erfurt priory remained his home throughout this period, even while he studied for several months or even years at the Dominican houses in Cologne and Paris. An exceptionally bright and confident young man, he likely also accompanied superiors to annual synods or other destinations. In his preaching and confessor duties, he interacted regularly with many laypeople as well as religious women. The practical, worldly dimension of his work was well developed and his election as prior appeared as a harbinger of future professional success in the order. But what of his personal pursuit of God?
While prior of Erfurt, Brother Eckhart composed a confident statement of his personal understanding of spiritual perfection. The work, known as the *Talks of Instruction*, is the most extensive surviving document we have from this early period in his life. Delivered between 1294 and 1298 as a series of discussions with young friars, it provides our first glimpse into Eckhart’s own spiritual journey to that point. At the same time, it shows him at work as a preacher and counselor, two roles that he would continue to play throughout his life. Unlike members of the contemplative orders, Dominicans bore the double burden of striving toward spiritual perfection while also translating their own spiritual growth into useful advice for others. It was a dual role that Eckhart would cherish throughout his life.

What, then, did Brother Eckhart, the new prior of the Dominican house of Erfurt, believe about the pursuit of God at this point in his life? The manuscript that has come down to us consists of twenty-three chapters, which an early editor arranged under three themes: obedience, sin and repentance, and struggles of the spiritual life. We don’t know if Eckhart approved this highly traditional organization for his talks; we do know that he sought to preserve and even promulgate the work, which was widely circulated during his lifetime. The most important theme of Eckhart’s mature spirituality—letting-go-ness—plays a central role even at this early stage, albeit in a conventional, monastic form. Several other key components of his later sermons—such as the *divine spark* and the nature of God or the soul—are entirely absent from the *Talks of Instruction*. Yet this book of advice for junior colleagues is as close as we will get to an Augustinian *Confessions* for this stage of his life.

Above all, for a thirty-something Eckhart, the successful spiritual life meant getting in the right state of mind. This was not in itself a novel notion and in fact provided the very justification of monastic life, where detachment from the goods and cares of the world was intended to free the individual to focus exclusively on God. An attitude of what Eckhart already called *letting-go-ness* was essential in all ascetic pursuits, so that God’s grace might take the place of various worldly attachments. Fame, power, wealth, and sexual gratification all needed to be recognized as empty and ultimately futile objects of desire, impeding true spiritual progress.
Bekhart, however, took this attitude much further, including even the very good works and penitential acts intended to promote detachment—an apparently unprecedented interpretation. Too often, he preached to his young charges, we focus more on the acts themselves than the intentions behind them. *People should not worry so much about what they have to do; they should consider rather what they are. If people and their ways were good, their deeds would shine brightly. . . . Do not think to place holiness in doing; we should place holiness in being, for it is not the works that sanctify us, but we who should sanctify the works.*

The spiritual life, according to Brother Bekhart, was an internal transformation aided by external means, not the reverse. He supported the Rule's routine and outward discipline as means to break the self-will, the conventional monastic goal, but also believed that brothers needed to focus more attention on their own state of mind. True obedience to the Rule and to the abbot, extolled by Bekhart as *the virtue to crown all virtues*, represented more than an act of external conformity; it was an internal *letting-go* of will itself. *In true obedience there should be no trace of “I want so-and-so,” or “this and that,” but a going out of your own.* Obedience, in other words, was a fully detached state of mind, far more elevated than the actual deeds commanded.

For the sake of his youthful and inexperienced audience, raised with conventional notions of piety, Bekhart made his point explicit: *[God] is little concerned with our works, but only with our state of mind in all our works, that we love Him in all things. The prior's apparent diminishment of conventional acts of piety should not be misunderstood; it was their perception as bargaining tools with God that he explicitly rejected, not their value as spiritual aids.*

*Many people think they are performing great works by outward things such as fasting, going barefoot, or other such things which are called penance. But the true and best penance is that whereby one improves greatly and in the highest degree. . . . This penance is truly a state of mind lifted into God away from all things, and in whatever works you find you can have it most, and have it from those works, do them the more freely; and then, if any outward work should hinder you, whether it be fasting, watching, reading, or*
THE RIGHT STATE

whatever else, you can safely leave that alone without worrying about failing
in any penance. . . .

Acts of penitence undertaken without this shift in attitude could in fact have
a deleterious effect, drag[g]ing down into ever greater sorrow and plun[g]ing]
a man into such distress that he is ready to despair, and then the repentance remains
painful and he gets no further; nothing comes of this.

Accordingly, the spiritual seeker had to be consistently mindful and care-
ful to avoid an idolatrous attitude toward his own acts of piety.

Skillful diligence is required for this, and in particular two things. One is
that a man has shut himself off well inwardly, so that his mind is on its guard
against the images without. . . . The second is that he should not let himself
be caught up by his internal imagery, whether it be in the form of pictures or
lofty thoughts, or outward impressions or whatever is present to his mind. . . .

This letting-go of all images and concepts would form an important part
of Meister Eckhart’s mature teaching on divine union. Known by scholars as
negative or apophatic (from Greek “to deny”) theology, this approach to the
divine seems inherently impossible to most people. How can one think of
God or heaven without any images or concepts? Trying to get a sense of the
divine from negations—God is not really a being; He does not really exist in
time; He is not really a He—appears befuddling, even if one accepts their
truth. Negative theology is admittedly a difficult concept that Eckhart will
elaborate on only after additional scholarly training and reflection. In this
early context, his passing reference to the practice merely extends the con-
tentional notion of detachment beyond its conventional ascetic limits:
letting-go of all preconceived ideas about holiness as well as one’s very will.

To the astonishment of his young listeners—and likely the discomfiture
of some of his older brothers—Eckhart even turned his sights on the con-
templative life itself:

People say, “Alas, sir, I wish I stood as well with God or had as much devo-
tion and were as much at peace with God as others are, I wish I were like
them, or that I were so poor," or, "I can never manage it unless I am there or
there, or do this or that; I must get away from it all, or go and live in a cell or
a cloister."

Rather than seize an opportunity to extol the virtues of monastic life,
Brother Eckhart instead challenged the inherent superiority of the contempla-

tive life unless one is in the right state.

In fact, the reason lies entirely within yourself and with nothing else . . . restless-
lessness never arises in you except from self-will, whether you realize it or
not. Though we may think a man should flee these things or seek those
things—places or people or methods, or company, or deeds—this is not the
reason why methods or things hold you back: it is you yourself in the things
that prevents you, for you have a wrong attitude to things. Therefore start
first with yourself, and resign yourself.

Even isolation within the friary was not in itself spiritually enhancing.

I was asked, "Some people shun all company and always want to be alone;
their peace depends on it, and on being in church. Was that the best thing?"
And I said, "No!" Now see why. He who is in a right state, is always in a
right state wherever he is, and with everybody. But if a man is in a wrong
state, he is so everywhere and with anybody.

Concerned that some of the young brothers might misunderstand him—
a problem that would continually haunt Eckhart as a preacher—the prior
quickly added, as I have often said, when we speak of 'equality,' this does not mean
that one should regard all works as equal, or all places or people. That would be quite
wrong, for praying is a better task than spinning, and the church is a nobler place
than the street. That said, the emphasis must always be on the intention, with
the outward act or physical setting of secondary importance.
Opening Up to Grace

Eckhart’s radical redefinition of spiritual detachment would remain a part of his preaching throughout later life. His more innovative and expansive notions of letting-go-ness, however, had only begun to develop at this point. Drawing closer to God required an arduous effort of the seeker’s will, even though he also acknowledged that the end goal is the destruction of self. One chapter of the Talks, likely titled by a later editor, was called “How the Will Can Do All Things, and How All Virtues Rest in the Will, Provided Only That It Is Just.” This was perhaps a logical corollary to Eckhart’s emphasis on intentionality, but it would be a source of embarrassment to him in later years, when he had come to believe that the intellect was a far more reliable guide to God than the will.

Even at this point in his life, Eckhart acknowledged that in all his acts and in all things a man should consciously use his reason, but he immediately clarified that this requires much diligence, demanding a total effort of our senses and powers of mind. His audience of spiritual beginners was not taught self-emptying, in the fashion of his later followers, but self-mastery. This above all is necessary: that a man should train and practice his mind well and bring it to God, and then he will always have divinity within. Everyday temptations and obstacles should each be welcomed as spiritual exercises aimed at achieving this goal.

Virtue, Eckhart taught, was a habit of mind that gives value to our actions, not the reverse. The most important thing, the prior told Erfurt’s young friars, was to make a genuine effort, no matter what the obstacles or chance of success. Since it was the state of mind that mattered most to God, not the external act, intention to do good (or evil) was likewise more important than the act itself. If you have a true and proper will, you can lack nothing, neither love nor humility nor any other virtue. Complacency was not an option for the genuine spiritual seeker:

If a man is not drawn to any work and does not want to undertake anything,
then he should force himself into some activity, whether inward or outward.
This submission, according to Eckhart, was the central paradox of the spiritual quest: in applying one's own intentions to good actions, the individual will gradually give way to the divine will, thereby becoming perfect and right.

The focus on purity of heart and intention is reminiscent of chivalric tales, as is the prior's exhortation: ... the greater and fiercer the struggle, the greater and more glorious the victory and the honor of victory. But even here Eckhart refused to valorize external or internal suffering except as a necessary part of spiritual evolution. First, he reassured his audience that God was with them in the midst of their ordeal. However great the suffering may be, if it comes through God, then God suffers first from it. Indeed, by the truth that is God, there was never so tiny a pang of sorrow that befell a man, not the least little discomfort or inconvenience, but if he placed it in God, then it would pain God incomparably more than that man, and incommode God more than the man himself.

Second, he relieved them of their unrealistic self-expectations: People may well be daunted and afraid because the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and the saints was so severe and painful, and a man cannot endure much of this or does not feel compelled to it. But St. Paul, he claimed, reassures us that not all people are called to God by the same route (1 Corinthians 7:24). In the instance of the martyrs and other saints, our Lord gave them this way and also the strength to do it, so that they could follow this way, and he was pleased with them for all this, in which they should profit best. For God has not bound man's salvation to any special mode. If acts of great physical endurance were not one's calling, they should not be attempted. Even the command to follow Jesus did not apply in all respects. Our Lord fasted for forty days, but no one should take it upon himself to follow that. Christ performed many works in which he intended that we should follow him spiritually but not physically. Underscoring his central theme, Eckhart repeated, As I have often said, I consider a spiritual work more valuable than a physical one.

Once more the prior reminded his spiritual beginners that it was the inner state of mind resulting from physical or psychological suffering that
mattered, not the pain itself. Spiritual strife was necessary to let go of all attachments, leaving the seeker bereft of all comfort except one: **God in His faithfulness often permits His friends to succumb to weakness to the end that whatever support they might lean on or cling to may give way... he wishes to be their sole support and security. Great hope and trust in God, according to Eckhart, was the sign of perfect love.** This was the objective of all external discipline, all good acts, and all prayer—to make room for God’s grace in the heart. This was also the natural desire of God’s love: **Wherever a man in obedience goes out of his own and gives up what is his, in the same moment God must go in there.**

This divine compulsion would remain a distinctive part of Eckhart’s spiritual philosophy in later life, challenged by some of his critics who thought it denied the Creator’s absolute freedom. For Eckhart, though, mercy was at the heart of the divine essence. God, he stressed, fervently wants to forgive, not to punish, and is always looking for opportunities to reunite with His creatures. **When a man stands right above sin and turns completely away, then our faithful God acts as if that man had never fallen into sin, and will not let him suffer for a moment for all his sins... Provided He finds him now ready, He pays no regard to what he was before. God is a God of the present.**

For young friars raised with imposing images of a stern final judge, Eckhart’s merciful God must have seemed a startling revelation. In fact, the prior reassured them, **the more and the greater the sins, the more immeasurably glad and the quicker God is to forgive them, the more so since they are more hateful to Him.**

Already at this early stage in his own intellectual development, Eckhart spoke of a hidden God, always present but often unperceived. **In the right state of mind, the good will cannot miss God. But the mind’s perceptive faculty sometimes misses Him, and often thinks God has gone away.** Anticipating his listeners’ question, he posed it for them: **What should you do then? Do exactly the same as if you were in greatest comfort; learn to do the same when you are in the greatest distress, and behave just as you behaved then.** His advice was not “fake it until you make it,” but rather, keep trying and don’t despair. Finding the hidden God requires zeal and love and a clear perception of the interior life, and a watchful, true, wise, and real knowledge of what the mind is occupied with among things and people. What today would be called mindfulness, he reminded his charges, **cannot be learned by running away, by fleeing into the desert away from outward
things; a man must learn to acquire an inward desert, wherever and with whoever he is.

This early and unique reference to an inward desert would also become a major theme in Eckhart's later sermons. At this stage, though (and perhaps mainly because of the inexperience of his listeners), he remained surprisingly wary of promoting divine union and other mystical experiences. There are, he told his audience, two kinds of direct experiences of divine assurance of eternal life:

One is when God tells a man Himself or through an angel or shows him by a special illumination. This happens seldom and to few. The other kind of knowledge is incomparably better, and this often comes to people who have perfect love. It is when a man's love and intimacy with God are such that he has such perfect trust and security in Him, that he cannot doubt and is thus quite assured, loving Him without distinction in all creatures.

This assurance, he made plain, is far greater, more perfect, and truer than the first, and cannot deceive us, unlike the other, which might be a false illumination. Experiencing and acting on love was also far more important than any personal enjoyment of God's presence.
The Right State

As I have said before, if a man were in an ecstasy as St. Paul was (2 Cor. 12:2-4), and if he knew of a sick person who needed a bowl of soup from him, I would consider it far better if you were to leave that rapture out of love and help the needy person out of greater love.

It's difficult to know how much the young prior's cautious attitude toward mystical experiences reflected the audience of the Talks of Instruction. His later sermons, following many years of scholarly study, not only showed more openness to such direct encounters but actively promoted them. There was only one exception at the early stage in Eckhart's thought and it was a highly conventional one: receiving the Eucharist. More than eighty years had passed since Lateran IV had confirmed the doctrine of transubstantiation, that the bread and wine of the mass, when properly consecrated by an ordained priest, took on the essence of Christ's body and blood (while retaining the external form, or particulars, of bread and wine). Ingesting a consecrated host was thus not merely a symbolic gesture but a direct, institutionally sanctioned, physical experience of the divine. And while obviously mediated by a member of the clergy, the sacramental experience remained open to all.

Eckhart's descriptions of receiving the Eucharist in fact often sound like an early, more orthodox version of what he later described as a less formal, less mediated divine experience. First there was the innate feeling of unworthiness before the Creator of the universe: But you might say, "Alas, sir, I feel so bare and cold and lazy that I dare not face our Lord!" I reply, All the more need for you to go to your God, for by Him you will be enflamed and set afire. Next there was the preparation, considerably less demanding and more conventional than achieving letting-go-ness: Whenever a man wishes to receive the body of our Lord, he may well approach without undue worry. But it is seemly and very profitable to confess first, even if one has no pangs of conscience, for the sake of the fruits of the sacrament of confession. Of course genuine contrition for sins was necessary, but the right state of mind need not be fully formed.

Again, Eckhart anticipated the reservations of some of his listeners about a genuine divine union: "How can that be? I can't feel anything?" and "How can I believe in higher things as long as I do not feel in such a condition, but feel myself imperfect and prone to many things?" Proceeding without complete
A priest says the words of consecration that transform the essence of the host and wine into the essence of the body and blood of Christ. This was the most awe-inspiring moment of the mass, later followed by some members of the congregation ingesting consecrated hosts. Frequent communion remained rare in Eckhart’s day.

understanding or notable sensation, he reassured them, in fact helped bolster one’s faith.

Finally, there was Eckhart’s description of the experience itself, also foreshadowing later formulations, but still fairly general and uninformed by mystical literature:

There was never so close a union [as that of the soul and God], for the soul is far more closely united with God than are body and soul, which make up a man. The union is far closer than when a man pours a drop of water into a vat of wine, for that would make water and wine—but this is so turned into one that all creatures could never find out the difference.

It is tempting to look for other signs of Eckhart’s mature spiritual philosophy in this early work, but we must be alert to his more conventional goals in this setting. His passing mention of an inward divinity was never developed except in the usual sense of an individual conscience, with the intellect serving as a reliable guide. And only our awareness of his later focus on the divine spark within each person lends apparent significance to his isolated reference
to a light shining in the darkness, and then we are aware of it. In fact, in the context of his advice to young friars, these words spoke only to the guiding light provided by God’s grace in the midst of a seeker’s internal turmoil and suffering.

It was this focus on an internal battle that most distinguished Eckhart’s early description of the spiritual quest from his mature understanding. The heroic Christian, like the truly noble knight of romances, was one who willfully overcame his worldly attachments and ultimately conquered himself. Adversity was to be welcomed and even temptation and sin had their uses in reaching the ultimate goal. You should know that the impulse to wrongdoing is not without great benefit and use to the righteous, especially compared to a man subject to no weaknesses. The seeker who struggled with temptation deserves far more praise, his reward is much greater.

Eager to press his point, Eckhart employed the dramatic and hyperbolic language for which he would become famous (and infamous to some): Inclination to sin is not sin... [and it even] makes a man ever more zealous to practice virtue strongly; it drives him by force to virtue and is a sharp lash which compels a man to mindfulness and virtue, for the weaker a man finds himself to be, the more he should arm himself with strength and victory. Willingness to sin, he conceded, is sin, but at one point he even boldly proclaimed that in fact, to have sinned is no sin if one regrets it. Provocative words like these, spoken by a prior to his youthful charges, undoubtedly startled his listeners, as he intended. Yet even if some friars misunderstood his main point about the centrality of remorse, the prior, Brother Eckhart, risked no dangerous consequences. In later life, the public preacher Meister Eckhart would enjoy no such immunity.

For all his innovative interpretation of the monastic ideal, Eckhart’s description of spiritual transformation remained markedly conservative. Letting-go did not yet apply to the daily striving that characterized the monastic life. What was most remarkable about Eckhart’s thinking at this point was the consistent focus on a subjective path to the divine. Good works and all other external experiences were only valuable to the degree that they helped a particular seeker let go of worldly attachments and adopt the right state of mind. Amid the unrelenting enforced conformity of the daily Rule, he reassured young friars that there was no universal path to God, who gives
every man according to what is best and most fitting for him. Whatever God then
sends him, let him take it direct from God, regard it as best for himself, and be fully
content. Though later on some other way may please him better, he should think,
"This is the way God has sent you," and accept it as the best.

Eckhart warned young friars about spiritual competition, a particularly
invidious and unproductive peril of monastic communities: "Do not bother
yourself about what condition or way of life God gives anyone. If I were so good and
holy that I were to be elevated among the saints, people would talk about it, and
speculate whether it was a matter of nature or grace, and get confused. They were
wrong to do that. Let God work in you."
"Know thyself," the ancient Delphic
maxim, was the essence of Brother Eckhart's advice to his audience of spiritual
beginners. That self is the chief obstacle to drawing closer to God and
its denial the key to true spiritual fulfillment. It all depends on that. Observe
yourself, and wherever you find yourself, leave yourself; that is the very best way.

The Promise and Peril of Learning

Self-knowledge and humility were also at the heart of Eckhart's other sur-
viving work from this period. But whereas the Talks of Instruction focused on
what he had learned thus far in his spiritual journey, the brief Easter sermon
of 1294 served as a manifesto for what he had yet to discover. At the very
time that Prior Eckhart was counseling his young charges, he had already
begun to move beyond the wisdom gained from life in the cloister to the
wisdom of the ages—the scholarly work that would dominate the next
stage of his life. Following many years of study in Cologne, Strasbourg, and
Paris, he had spent the academic year of 1293–94 as a second bachelor, or
beginning graduate student, at the theology faculty of the University of
Paris, the preeminent institution in Christendom. Near the conclusion of his
stay, on April 18, just five months before assuming the priorship of Erfurt,
Eckhart had delivered a sermon that presaged this next phase in his spiritual
journey.

As with the Talks of Instruction, the audience consisted of fellow Domin-
cans, but there the similarities end. In this instance, an audience of older and
more intellectually sophisticated fellow Dominican friars (and perhaps a few educated laymen) elicited a startlingly different style. While in residence at the Paris Dominican house of St. Jacques, the young scholar had been invited to present the Easter Sunday homily at the house's adjoining church. Eager to show off the fruits of his academic training to that point, Eckhart ascended the pulpit to deliver a Latin address that could not have lasted more than thirty minutes. It was probably not the only sermon he delivered during his year at the St. Jacques priory, but it is the only one that he thought worthy of preserving.

Unlike the free-flowing observations and advice of his *Talks of Instruction*, the Easter sermon was linguistically precise, meticulously structured, and packed with external references. Following the standard Dominican model for an academic sermon, known as the *sermo modernus* style, Eckhart began with two scriptural excerpts touching on his theme, in this instance Christ as the sacrificial lamb. As in all of his Latin and German sermons, the verses in question—here 1 Corinthians 5:7–8 on Christ as the Passover bread and Luke 15:32 on the return of the prodigal son—served as general pretexts for a message delivered on multiple levels. The young friar then stated his protheme, or introduction, followed by a prayer and further explanation of his purpose, also known as an antitheme. The remainder of the sermon consisted of several subthemes, all carefully enumerated, which eventually culminated in a restatement of the principal theme and a prayer for divine sustenance. Throughout the sermon, Eckhart displayed his ability to enlarge on the central theme (*dilatatio*), employing many other intratextual quotations from the Old and New Testaments that highlighted his creative interpretations and other scholarly skills.

This early academic effort, much less accessible to the average listener than the *Talks of Instruction*, provides us with our first glimpse of a budding scholar, already well versed in the ancient Church Fathers and Aristotelian philosophy, and eager to be part of the intellectual revolution then under way at the University of Paris. His frequent name-dropping of both pagan authors (Ptolemy, Hermes Trismegistus, Avicenna) and Christian authorities (particularly St. Augustine) was more than mere academic posturing; something more significant was at work. To be sure, Eckhart aimed to
impress the scholarly brothers in attendance with his erudition, but the sermon itself was at the same time his announcement of what would become a lifelong intellectual project: the formation of a genuine philosophy of religion, a formidable undertaking that aimed to bring together all forms of wisdom, Christian and pagan alike. It was the same spiritual quest that he described to his charges at Erfurt, but the "scientific" methods of modern academic theology would provide him the means to bring a greater intellectual coherence and depth to his own personal experiences and insights. This was a path already trodden by his order's most gifted thinkers, and one that boded well for Eckhart's future prominence beyond Erfurt.

On the surface, the Easter sermon celebrated the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Savior, the focus of the day's liturgy and the central mystery of the Christian faith. At the same time, Eckhart spoke at length about the sacrament of the Eucharist, the reenactment of that sacrifice whereby Christ returns to the community of the faithful in the consecrated bread and wine of the mass. As in the *Talks of Instruction*, the young friar expressed his wonder at the unbelievable ensuing moment of divine union, available to any true believer. *The more deeply a soul receives this sacrament, based on humility, the more receptive she is for God.* Here again the direct experience of the ineffable appeared in conventional form, following the conventional preparation of a humble and contrite heart. The pursuit of God described, despite the learned elaborations, appears no different from the spiritual pilgrimage described in any parish church of the day.

Just below the surface, however, lay another agenda that most of Eckhart's audience would have recognized. A brief reference to the mystery of the Trinity provided him with an opportunity to discourse on the meaning of humility in one of the very capitals of Christian learning. Every wise man, the young scholar boldly preached, knows the limits of his own knowledge. Even the pagan Ptolemy taught that "*whoever is the most humble among the wise is the wisest among them.*" Albert the Great, the preeminent Dominican intellect of the age and a personal hero to Eckhart, likewise often said "*This much I know, if I know anything, that we all know little.*" Unlike the self-assured Cicero, introduced by Eckhart at the outset of his sermon, the true Christian
scholar was a humble man, seeking not knowledge of things, but knowledge of self—the same central theme as in the *Talks of Instruction*.

Clearly Brother Eckhart felt ambivalent about his entry into the world of scholarship. He could not deny that it offered him exciting opportunities to continue his pursuit of God in ways not available in the cloister. Yet he was also already aware of the seductiveness of higher learning, its tendencies to make its acolytes proud, even arrogant. Perhaps he was also struggling with his own ambitions within the academic world, pondering a theological career of great acclaim. His subsequent election as prior in Erfurt offered another source of temptation, with whispered intimations of rising in the leadership of the order, perhaps even to the supreme position of master general itself. Certainly he had the intelligence and apparently the personal skills necessary for success in both career tracks. The world of scholarship offered an intellectual pursuit of God during an exceptionally dynamic and exciting period in Christian thought. The life of a leader in the Dominican order promised less stimulating work but greater direct service to his fellow friars and their communities during a crucial time in the Order’s history.

The decision on which path to pursue, Eckhart could console himself, was not his but rather that of his superiors, and ultimately of God Himself. Fortunately—as he would find out over the next twenty years—the two paths were also not mutually exclusive. But which would best facilitate his personal pursuit of God? Here he would find himself pulled inexorably toward the famed University of Paris. There, amid the greatest theological minds of the day, Brother Eckhart would eventually abandon the notion of spiritual progress as a willful endeavor of self-discipline and embrace ever more radical notions of both the soul and its true object of desire, the elusive divine Creator Himself.