

PART III

Letting Go
of
the Self

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The Preacher

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{ CHAPTER EIGHT }

Dernicious Females

*I thought of something recently: if God did not want what I wanted,
then I should want what He does.*

GERMAN SERMON 9

The Religious Women's Movement

By any conventional measure, Meister Eckhart at age fifty-three had achieved an impressive level of professional success. An esteemed theologian and influential leader within his order, he could have expected to spend his remaining years rising into the upper reaches of the Dominican hierarchy and enjoying ever greater public recognition. Most of his fellow Dominicans knew him for his administrative and scholarly achievements and would have likely imagined him known to posterity as a master general of the order or an esteemed theologian, a worthy successor to Albert and Aquinas. Eckhart's personal pursuit of God had also matured. It now encompassed both rational and intuitive approaches to the ineffable and drew on the work of a variety of pagan and Christian fellow seekers. Granted, some of his theological notions were startling, but if he had continued to write mostly in Latin and address only fellow male scholastics and friars, his reputation would never have been in jeopardy. It is also likely that most of us today would never have heard of him.

Fortunately, God—as Meister Eckhart would have said—had other plans

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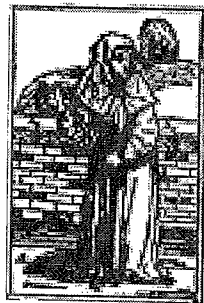
01 for him. The master's greatest fame would not be for his administrative
02 work or even for his scholarship but for his popular preaching. This was not
03 a development the lifelong academic would have foreseen at that point in his
04 life. Eckhart was obviously a capable preacher but so were many friars; not
05 once was he singled out as a remarkable orator, on the level of Berthold of
06 Regensburg or the later Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444). Like all Domini-
07 cans, he had preached throughout his career, but in these later years he made
08 the radical decision to put aside the conventional sermon topics his order
09 prescribed for popular audiences. Instead, he resolved to translate his own
10 innovative religious philosophy into terms that any genuine aspirant, re-
11 gardless of rank or education, could understand. Spiritual egalitarianism to
12 this degree represented a profound departure not only from Dominican
13 practice but also from the elitism of his fellow Neoplatonists and most other
14 scholastics. For this decision, Eckhart was both rewarded and punished. Or-
15 dinary people began to flock to his sermons, delivered in the vernacular
16 rather than Latin, convincing Eckhart that there was a significant popular
17 appetite for sermons of greater spiritual substance. But this very popularity
18 simultaneously exposed him to the wrath of some jealous fellow clerics and
19 the suspicion of certain powerful church leaders who would eventually
20 prosecute him for heresy.

21 What inspired Eckhart to take this unconventional path? In part, he con-
22 sidered his popular preaching merely the fulfillment of his vocation as a
23 Dominican friar, bound always to be "useful." His increasingly intuitive ap-
24 proach to divine union also somewhat dampened his enthusiasm for the
25 scholastic project of discovery. But more than any other factor, it was a mid-
26 life reassignment, possibly at his request, that created the circumstances for
27 his new focus on preaching. In Strasbourg the master encountered a partic-
28 ular appetite for his ideas among religious women—nuns in orders and lay-
29 women known as beguines—that would define the remainder of his career,
30 shaping both the form and the content of his preaching, while simultane-
31 ously drawing him into the sights of their common enemies in the church
32 hierarchy.

33S Who were these beguines and where did they come from? In effect, they
34N were the last remnants of the grassroots apostolic movements of the previ-

ous century. By 1300 the heretical Cathars lay on the verge of extinction and the Waldensians had been successfully marginalized and contained. But the lay appetite for a more authentic spiritual experience remained keen, especially among women. One sign of this was the phenomenon of the God House (*Gotzhaus*), an all-female religious community made up of lay-women from every social class who lived together, often in a residence donated by a wealthy member. Numbering in the hundreds, God Houses had begun to appear in the late 1100s and, by Eckhart's time, could be found in cities across the continent, with a particular concentration in northern Germany and the Netherlands. The resident women, known as beguines (possibly a pejorative term from "Albigensian"), sought a life of simplicity and prayer without vows or clerical oversight. They embraced apostolic poverty and an enhanced spiritual experience, but did not preach. Thanks to the beguines' refusal to proselytize and their generally orthodox views, church authorities seldom censured them as they had other lay apostolic movements of the time.

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A fifteenth-century portrayal of a beguine.

Under the more restrictive atmosphere created by Pope Innocent III and Lateran IV in the early thirteenth century, however, many God Houses began to seek religious and secular patrons. During the subsequent decades, some became formally affiliated with male religious orders, taking religious vows and assimilating into female second orders, such as the Franciscans' Poor Clares (named after their founder St. Clare, 1194–1253). By the time Eckhart himself joined the Dominicans in the 1270s, the Order of Preachers

01 had reluctantly agreed to assume responsibility for 58 convents, forty of
02 them within the German province of Teutonia. Within twenty-five years
03 that number would more than double, to 141 houses across Europe and 65 in
04 Teutonia.

05 Even with the startling growth in female religious orders, the appeal of
06 independent, lay beguinages remained extraordinary. By 1300, for example,
07 the largest German city, Cologne, was home to 169 beguinages, each hous-
08 ing anywhere from a handful to sixty or more women. With numbers like
09 these, beguines had a significant urban presence, making up 5 to 10 percent
10 of the city's total population of forty thousand (which also included more
11 than a thousand nuns in orders). Many west German and Dutch towns experi-
12 enced a similar growth in female religious communities, which slowly
13 spread to the countryside as well. Despite this expansion, requests to join
14 these communities—usually distinguished by a white cross painted on the
15 main door and ~~comprising anywhere from a handful to two hundred~~ *de*
16 ~~inhabitants~~—far exceeded the space available. Some houses began to require
17 dowries or other property for entrance, a common practice among formal
18 religious orders. Others turned to the property owners of their localities for
19 donated buildings or deathbed bequests. Virtually all supported themselves
20 through weaving, spinning, laundry, cleaning, and other work.

21 The communal focus, however, remained explicitly religious. Each
22 house followed its own set of rules, similar to those in a monastery or con-
23 vent. The goal was to pool the group's work and income, so that each of the
24 "sisters" would have sufficient time to attend mass, hear sermons, read, and
25 pray. Typically the women wore plain white, brown, or gray tunics and head
26 coverings—similar to those worn by nuns and thus a frequent source of con-
27 fusion and controversy. Again, unlike mendicant friars or the wandering lay
28 preachers known as beghards, beguines did not engage in street begging or
29 public preaching. Whether or not the affiliation with a male order was for-
30 mal, Dominican and Franciscan friars were frequent visitors, serving as con-
31 fessors, counselors, and preachers. The sisters themselves ranged in age
32 from young women still considering marriage to elderly widows. The com-
33S munities were apparently dynamic in membership, with some women join-
34N ing for a short time and others eventually entering convents and making

formal vows. Sometimes whole houses would convert to regular Dominican or Augustinian convents.

Beguinages remained the major outlier of the apostolic life movement, flummoxing the binary lay-clerical thinking of most church leaders. The papal legate Gilbert of Tournai, while preparing a report on the movement for the 1274 Second Council of Lyons, readily admitted that he couldn't figure out whether to call them "nuns" or "laywomen." Not all members of the church hierarchy found such lay religious associations troubling. The prominent canonist Hostiensis (d. 1271) acknowledged that "in the wide meaning, a 'religious' is so called who lives holily and religiously in his own house, even though not professed . . . such a one is called a 'religious' not because he is tied to any specific rule, but on account of his life, which he leads more strictly and holily than other secular people."

Like other lay apostolic movements, beguines inevitably encountered some detractors who dismissed them either as "pious fools" or "pernicious females." At one end of the spectrum they were condemned for practicing "easy religion" and at the other end for being too curious about religious "subtleties and novelties." Nikolaus of Bibra, a poet in Eckhart's Erfurt, was careful to distinguish between good beguines, who "worked day and night," and bad beguines, who "connive under cover of a false religious leisure, wandering through the localities, consorting with students and monks." When Pope Nicholas III bestowed one local house with the privilege to deal in wool and cloth, Bibra sniped that "now they have blankets to cover their loose lifestyle." Many of the derogatory comments sprang from simple misogyny; a house of women without male supervision could never be a good thing in many people's eyes. Yet until the fourteenth century, the most common attacks were not on beguines' orthodoxy, but on their sincerity, and such criticism did nothing to slow the proliferation of new God Houses across Europe.

Still, so many financially independent women, unaccountable to any higher church authority, was in itself troubling to many church leaders. It didn't help, from the perspective of bishops and their clergy, that both Dominicans and Franciscans thrived as confessors to such female communities and encouraged their growth. During Eckhart's years as provincial of

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01 Saxony, clerical attacks on beguines escalated in both frequency and inten-
 02 sity. Not long after assuming office in 1306, Strasbourg bishop Johann I of
 03 Zürich began accusing several beguines and beghards of unspecified heresy.
 04 Some of the women satisfied the bishop with solemn oaths of orthodoxy;
 05 many more fled the city. A brave few resisted the episcopal action and were
 06 handed over by Johann to the secular arm, empowered to impose sanctions
 07 ranging from fines to banishment to execution. Fortunately for the beguines
 08 in custody, civic authorities sympathized with the local Dominican friars
 09 who intervened on their behalf, got the charges dismissed.

10 The following year, the newly consecrated archbishop of Cologne, Hein-
 11 rich II of Virneburg—an adversary Eckhart himself would come to know
 12 well—threatened all beguines in his diocese with excommunication if they
 13 didn't give up wearing habits and living in separate communities. Three
 14 years later the archbishops of Trier and Mainz followed suit, although en-
 15 forcement in each instance remained spotty and ineffective. General suspi-
 16 cion of unorthodoxy or misbehavior (not to mention pervasive misogyny)
 17 rarely provided specific grounds for disciplinary action. What clerical critics
 18 of beguines desperately needed was a clear and irrefutable link to heresy.
 19 They didn't have to wait long for this dream to be realized.

and

22 Hiding Under the Cloak of Holiness

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 24 In late 1308, royal officials in Paris arrested Marguerite Porete, a fifty-eight-
 25 year-old beguine. Her crime was the obstinate refusal to recant any of the
 26 supposedly heretical claims made in her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.
 27 Marguerite had already been admonished for this offense several years ear-
 28 lier by Bishop Guy II of Cambrai, who had forced her to witness the burning
 29 of her manuscript. Undaunted, she rewrote the book, adding six chapters,
 30 and submitted it to three theologians for approval. This time, upon her ar-
 31 rest she was handed over to William of Paris, close advisor to King Philip the
 32 Fair and general inquisitor of France.

33S Marguerite, in William's view, was a "pseudo-woman" who had written
 34N a book "filled with errors and heresies." In 1310 he formed a commission of

twenty-one renowned theologians to review the evidence against her. There were at least three grounds for this surprising thoroughness. First, William was a scholastic, educated at the University of Paris and committed to expert evaluation of any theological question. Second, Marguerite was no country bumpkin, but an educated noblewoman from the county of Hainault (in what is today northeastern France). She wrote well in prose and poetry and displayed an impressive familiarity with both courtly love literature and academic theology. She addressed sophisticated ideas about God and love in an eloquent Old French, making her teaching more accessible and thus potentially more dangerous than the polemics of a common rabble-rouser. The third reason for William's deliberate and rigorous approach was that Marguerite had been repeatedly identified as a beguine (although some modern historians remain unconvinced that she truly was). If William could persuade the church to condemn this well-spoken beguine for her unorthodox beliefs, it might prompt the church to suppress all beguines on grounds they were linked to heresy.

The Mirror of Simple Souls was a subtly subversive work. On one level it appeared to be a typical allegorical romance of the period, with the questing soul portrayed as a young princess in love from afar with the magnificent King Alexander the Great. This sly reversal of the usual distant lady as love object was just the first of Marguerite's manipulations of familiar themes. In 139 chapters, some quite brief, the dialogue between the Soul and Love (also feminine) is joined at various times by other allegorical figures, including Light of Faith, Divine Reason, Holy Spirit, Graciousness, and Errant Will. In her quest for the divine, the Soul learns about seven progressively higher levels of grace, each bringing her closer to ultimate joy. She eventually achieves the goal of self-annihilation in the fifth stage, followed by a sixth stage of rapture, in which the Soul becomes completely passive, with no independent cares and no concern for good works. Finally, in the seventh stage, achieved only in heaven, the Soul becomes fully immersed in divine love, or God.

What most concerned William and his fellow inquisitors—aside from the apparent claim of becoming God—was Marguerite's obvious contempt for many of the external acts of piety she dismissed as part of "Holy Church

01 the Lesser.” Contrary to “Holy Church the Greater,” guided only by divine
 02 love, the worldly version of Christianity was dominated by “peasants of
 03 grace” and “merchants of the spirit,” who focused on asceticism and other
 04 external works, rather than the internal life of the spirit.

05 Marguerite’s belittling of Reason also undoubtedly irked her clerical in-
 06 terrogators, all of them highly educated scholars. “Men of theology and
 07 scholars such as they/will never understand this writing properly,” she
 08 warned, guided as they were by “Reason, who understands only the obvious
 09 and fails to grasp what is subtle.” “You take the straw and leave the grain,”
 10 she chided them, “because your understanding is too base.” Fortunately,
 11 during the course of *The Mirror*, Reason eventually realizes her own limita-
 12 tions and gladly swears allegiance to Love and Faith as “her liege lord and for
 13 this/Always she must herself abase.” Even then, Marguerite concedes that
 14 “in the whole of a kingdom one could not find two creatures who were of
 15 [such a] spirit,” and even if one could, they would have great difficulty com-
 16 municating the truth of God’s love to those “gross wits” not so illuminated.

17 It’s possible that some of William’s panel of experts might have had
 18 greater sympathy for Marguerite had they read her work in its entirety. In-
 19 stead, in typical inquisitorial fashion, they reviewed only the fifteen seem-
 20 ingly heretical sentences that William had extracted from *The Mirror*,
 21 without any broader context provided. It did not take the commission long
 22 to decide the heterodoxy of a statement such as “[annihilated] souls . . . do
 23 not make use of [the Virtues], for they are not in their service as they once
 24 were; and, too, they have now served them long enough, so that henceforth
 25 they may become free.” This was pure antinomianism in the theologians’
 26 minds, maintaining that sufficiently enlightened people had ascended be-
 27 yond the demands of normal Christian morality. Marguerite did not help
 28 herself by refusing to testify in her defense, while some questionable wit-
 29 nesses for the prosecution eagerly contributed damning assessments.

30 On April 11, 1310, the theological commission unanimously condemned
 31 Marguerite Porete and her book as heretical. On June 1, 1310—a year before
 32 Meister Eckhart’s arrival in Paris—she was burned at the stake in the Place
 33S de Grève (today known as the Place de l’Hôtel de Ville). Even a hostile chron-
 34N icler acknowledged that Marguerite met her fate with considerable dignity

and composure, moving many spectators, among them high-ranked nobles, to open weeping.

Lingering questions about the status of beguines came to a head the next year at the Council of Vienne, convened on October 16, 1311. After first resolving the question of the Templars' guilt (to King Philip's satisfaction), the council turned to the subject of "women, commonly called beguines who, although they promise no obedience and neither renounce property nor live in accordance with an approved rule," wear religious habits and associate with nuns, friars, and priests. Rather than rely on the usual clerical complaints of dissolute living among beguines, the resulting decree, known as *Ad Nostrum*, proceeded directly to the greater danger of heresy. "Some of them, as if possessed by madness, dispute and preach about the highest Trinity and the divine essence and in respect to the articles of faith and the sacraments of the Church spread opinions that are contrary to the Catholic faith." There were, the council conceded, some good beguines, but there were also many bad ones "hiding under the cloak of holiness" and holding "perverted views" (*opinione sinistra*), with which they "deceive many common people and lead them into diverse errors." Good beguines, *Ad Nostrum* decreed, should disband and return to their parishes as ordinary laywomen; bad ones should be excommunicated and otherwise punished.

Specifically, the council condemned "an abominable sect of malignant men known as beghards and some faithless women known as beguines in the Kingdom of Germany." Few if any beguines were members of a new "Free Spirit" sect—only first identified by Pope Clement the year before—but many did help spread "godless and bad lessons." The heretical teaching of this mostly imagined cult drew its main inspiration from Paul's declaration that "where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). Here the text of Marguerite of Porete's *Mirror* proved especially useful, providing many tenets that supposedly had gained greater currency in the wider population and were endangering numerous souls. *Ad Nostrum's* first two articles, for instance, adamantly refuted "that someone in the present life can acquire so great and such a degree of perfection that he is rendered completely without sin and is not able to advance further in grace," and that "upon having attained the degree of this kind of perfection a person does not

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01 have to fast or pray, because then sensuality is so perfectly subject to spirit
02 and reason that a person can freely give the body whatever pleases it.”

03 *Ad Nostrum* was arguably directed more at beghards, wandering male
04 preachers, than beguines, and the decree did not yet conflate the latter with
05 the Free Spirit heresy. The guilt by association, though, was sufficient for
06 many opponents of religious women, most notably the archbishops of Stras-
07 bourg and Cologne, who reignited their campaigns to close down begui-
08 nages. One modern historian has characterized the period between the
09 Council of Vienne and the Council of Constance (1415) as “a hundred years’
10 war against beghards and beguines.” As in all wars, as Eckhart would him-
11 self discover, that campaign would entail considerable collateral damage.
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14 A New Calling in Strasbourg

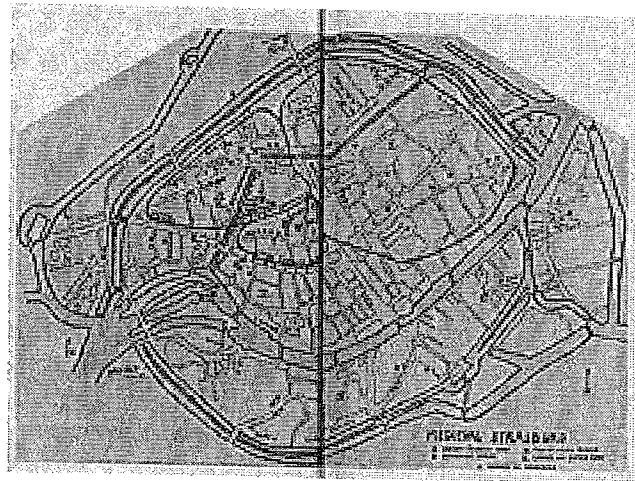
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16 Sometime toward the end of Meister Eckhart’s second year as a regent pro-
17 fessor in Paris, Berengar of Landora, recently elected master general of the
18 Dominicans, approached the scholar with a new mission. The priory in
19 Strasbourg, the order’s second most important German house (after Co-
20 logne), was in crisis. Its deepest and most long-standing conflict was with the
21 secular clergy of the city, who had regularly quarreled with the friars since
22 their arrival nearly a century earlier. Twice—from 1261 to 1263 and between
23 1287 and 1290—the bishop and his clergy had persuaded the town council to
24 expel the Dominicans from the city. In the second instance, only a papal in-
25 terdict, suspending all religious services in the city, forced Strasbourg’s mag-
26 istrates and secular clergy to relent. Twenty years later, the Strasbourg priory
27 maintained a fragile truce with the bishop and his clergy, often jeopardized
28 by local Franciscans, who were among the Dominicans’ most vocal critics.

29 Much of the clerical conflict in Strasbourg centered on competition over
30 lay donors. Parish churches, like mendicant houses, relied heavily on volun-
31 tary contributions for both maintenance and expansion of their operations.
32 “Message control” was another significant source of strife. Dominicans and
33S other mendicant friars were supposed to obtain episcopal approval for all
34N preaching within their jurisdiction, especially at parish churches, but in



practice oversight of sermon content and delivery (even among secular clergy) was virtually nonexistent. Eckhart and his fellow friars routinely preached to all types of audiences, not only at their own churches, covering a range of religious topics. Discordant or even dangerous sermons, from a bishop's point of view, could be as threatening to the diocesan church as lost revenues.

But the most pressing issue was "the religious women question." The Council of Vienne's issuance of the antibeguine *Ad Nostrum* in the spring of 1312 significantly exacerbated local tensions for Strasbourg's Dominicans. Two thirds of the city's eighty-five God Houses lay within a quarter mile of the order's priory, with the friars (and their Franciscan rivals) generally providing pastoral services to the women. Parish priests and cathedral canons, already suspicious of the female communities, considered the mendicants' activities further evidence of their encroachment on the secular clergy's sphere.



Their champion was the man who a few years earlier had reignited the campaign against the beguines, Bishop Johann I of Zürich. Like most high-ranking churchmen, Johann was a career politician, not a theologian. Unlike most of the ecclesiastical elite, however, he was lowborn (even illegitimate)

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01 and had risen through the ranks in close personal service to King Albrecht I
02 and the house of Habsburg. He was also unusual in the sense that concern
03 for his church duties occupied almost as much time as political machina-
04 tions. Educated at the University of Bologna, Johann devoted considerable
05 energy to enforcing clerical discipline, through multiple synods and strict
06 punishments. Order and hierarchy reigned as his supreme values. Multiple
07 communities of several hundred beguines—abetted by the mendicants—
08 indisputably threatened both.

09 Eckhart, in the opinion of his superiors, was the perfect emissary to defuse
10 the order's tensions with the clergy of Strasbourg, particularly on the beguine
11 question. The decision had little, if anything, to do with his theological views
12 or scholarly reputation; it was his more practical skills that appealed to the or-
13 der's leadership. Since his appointment twenty years earlier as prior of Erfurt,
14 the friar from Thuringia had accumulated an impressive administrative ré-
15 sumé. During nearly eight years as provincial of Saxony, he had dealt regularly
16 and directly with princes, cardinals, bishops, and a variety of other nobles. His
17 shared background with society's privileged few undoubtedly helped on such
18 occasions. He was likewise exceptionally well connected within the Order of
19 Preachers, where he knew most if not all of the Dominican leadership person-
20 ally, either from shared time at the university or from his attendance at general
21 and provincial chapters held in locations throughout Europe.

22 Most relevant to this newest assignment, Eckhart had extensive experi-
23 ence in dealing with civic officials and members of the secular clergy. In ad-
24 dition to frequent interventions in local conflicts involving Saxony's seventy
25 existing houses, the provincial had overseen the negotiation and founding of
26 at least four new male convents and three new female convents. (The first,
27 and most straightforward, was his father's testamentary donation for a new
28 Dominican convent in Gotha, upon the aged knight's death in May 1305—
29 our only documentary evidence of the elder Eckehard's passing.) In most
30 instances, securing princely and papal approval for the new priories—often
31 a challenge in itself—was inevitably followed by prolonged discussions with
32 local officials who remained wary of Dominican expansionism. Attempts to
33S establish a new Dominican priory at Dortmund, for example, had failed
34N three times until Eckhart obtained the backing of Emperor Henry VII and

similarly assuaged local leaders' concerns (and even then, local tensions re-
 surfaced after Eckhart's departure, with the Dominicans eventually forced
 out of the city in 1330). By the time he left office in 1310, Eckhart had become
 known in the order as a man who got things done.

Did Eckhart suggest or even volunteer for this assignment? The details
 of this monumental transition in his life and career are shrouded in mystery.
 We don't even know exactly when he left Paris—sometime after June 1313—
 or when he arrived in Strasbourg—sometime before April 1314. Clearly the
 subsequent decade in Strasbourg represented a significant personal move for
 the friar, who had spent most of the previous forty years based at the priory
 of Erfurt. Although he had visited the Strasbourg house on multiple occa-
 sions, most of the priory's hundred some residents were strangers to him.
 The easy camaraderie of the Erfurt house, or to a lesser degree St. Jacques in
 Paris, gave way to an unfamiliar environment, by no means hostile but still
 unfamiliar and perhaps unsettling for a man in his mid-fifties.

Eckhart first appears in Strasbourg's records as a witness to a property
 donation on April 14, 1314. He is listed as "Master Eckhart, professor of sac-
 red theology." A similar document two and a half years later names him as
 "Brother Eckhart, vicar general" of Teutonia. Whenever this formal ap-
 pointment by the master general came, it gave him wide-ranging powers
 among the Dominicans in Strasbourg "to investigate, to punish, to absolve,
 and to reform." His successes and failures in this mission are largely hidden
 from the historical record. Conflicts between the city's secular clerics and
 Dominicans did not disappear entirely, but the initial years of Eckhart's res-
 idence did witness an apparent de-escalation in confrontational rhetoric.
 Surviving deeds and other financial records indicate that the former provin-
 cial's fund-raising and persuasive abilities remained sharp, giving the Stras-
 bourg Dominicans an ever firmer foothold in the city and its environs. Most
 tellingly, his superiors chose to keep him in place during a ten-year period
 when men of Eckhart's capabilities and stature were in high demand
 throughout the order. In December 1322 he was still in Strasbourg, and still
 described as vicar general.

Meister Eckhart's most lasting and visible impact in his new home would
 be on the Dominican men and women he instructed—possibly as an official

01 lecturer, unquestionably as a much-revered senior colleague and preacher in
 02 his sermons and private conversations. The Strasbourg *collegium* was one of
 03 the most highly regarded programs within the order, attracting exception-
 04 ally bright (and ambitious) young men from Alsace and further abroad. Its
 05 cohorts, officially capped at an annual enrollment of twenty-three, included
 06 two of Meister Eckhart's most famous disciples, Johannes Tauler and Johann
 07 of Dambach. The two professors resident during the master's early years in
 08 the priory, Jean Picard of Lichtenberg and Heinrich of Lübeck, were both
 09 resolute Thomists, unlikely sympathizers with Eckhart's Neoplatonic lean-
 10 ings. Yet whatever differences of opinion emerged, there is no mention in
 11 chapter documents of open confrontations with the master general's newly
 12 resident emissary, fresh from his second regent professorship in Paris.

13 Pastoral care of nuns, or *cura monialium*, constituted a key component of
 14 the vicar general's charge, rendered even more timely by Bishop Johann's
 15 antibeguine campaign. The city of twenty thousand was home to eight Do-
 16 minican convents, each housing more than a hundred nuns, and eighty-five
 17 beguine houses. Many secular clerics clearly resented the influence that the
 18 friars exercised over these women, serving as preachers, counselors, and
 19 confessors. What angered the bishop and his clergy even more was that
 20 many Dominican men continued to protect and serve Strasbourg's beguine
 21 communities, despite the explicit prohibition of Vienne's *Ad Nostrum*. Some
 22 of the city's oldest beguinages—Turm, Offenburg, Innenheim—remained
 23 under the explicit supervision of the Dominican priory. Boundaries between
 24 the order's official tertiary (lay) branch and beguines were also quite porous,
 25 as were the divisions between nuns and beguines in general, with some of
 26 the latter eventually embracing life in the convent under a rule. Eckhart and
 27 his fellow friars might have avoided visiting beguinages themselves (as man-
 28 dated by *Ad Nostrum*), but they could not prevent beguines from coming to
 29 any of their churches, hearing their sermons, and participating in other ac-
 30 tivities of the spiritual community.

31 ((no quote
 32

33S *Indeed* Eckhart had counseled and preached to religious women for at least twenty
 34N years, since his days as prior at Erfurt and later as provincial of Saxony. His

surviving German sermons include offhand mentions of visits to convents in Cologne, Colmar, Zurich, and the Lake Constance region. In the wake of Marguerite Porete's execution and the Council of Vienne's *Ad Nostrum*, this pastoral role took on a new urgency, especially for the man sent by his order to defuse the escalating conflict in Strasbourg. Some historians in fact believe that Eckhart's principal mission in the city was to rein in some of the more controversial opinions of its religious women, beguine and nun alike. Certainly the master from Erfurt was not one to shy away from correcting what he considered harmful ideas and practices. What he did not anticipate was how much preaching to Strasbourg's religious women and laypeople would shape him and his own spiritual pursuit.

Divine Suffering

Meister Eckhart was familiar with Marguerite Porete's celebrated case and almost certainly had access to parts or all of *The Mirror*. He knew witnesses for the defense, especially his longtime colleague Godfrey of Fontaines, as well as many members of the investigating commission, including both his future Dominican superior, Berengar of Landora, and his contemporary from Erfurt, the Augustinian Eremite Heinrich of Friemar the Elder. Most significantly, he co-resided with William of Paris, the inquisitor himself, at the St. Jacques friary from 1311 to 1313. Eckhart's opinion of *The Mirror* is more difficult to assess. His own German sermon on Matthew 5:3 ("Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .") matches up closely with chapter 24 of Marguerite's book, and like her he consistently downplayed the role of asceticism and other external acts in drawing closer to God. *The Mirror's* criticism of Reason likewise resonated with the master and his increasingly intuitive pursuit of God. At the same time, Eckhart remained a scholastic at heart and likely bristled at her full-scale dismissal of philosophy and higher learning. He also clearly disagreed with her seemingly elitist notion of divine union and withdrawal from the world.

The most important question, and the one most difficult to answer, is what he made of her attempts to circulate such a potentially dangerous



01 description of the divine pursuit among the wider public. Eckhart's fellow
 02 theologian Godfrey of Fontaines had marveled at the deep and subtle wis-
 03 dom of *The Mirror*, but also cautioned that it should be used carefully, "for
 04 the reason that [many readers] might abandon their own way of life and fol-
 05 low this calling, to which they could never attain and so they might deceive
 06 themselves, for it is made by a spirit so powerful and trenchant that there are
 07 only a few such, or none." Meister Eckhart apparently concurred with this
 08 assessment and took great care never to mention Marguerite by name or to
 09 quote from *The Mirror*. At the same time, he also likely agreed with Godfrey
 10 that "none should doubt that this seed ought to bear holy fruit for them who
 11 hear it and are worthy." Was his own preaching on the subject in Strasbourg
 12 an attempt to continue Marguerite's work in a more orthodox manner?

13 The piety that Meister Eckhart encountered among Dominican nuns
 14 and beguines in fact showed few signs of infection by the alleged "Free
 15 Spirit" heresy. To the contrary, the devotional practices of the Rhineland's
 16 religious women is better characterized as hyper-orthodox, in the instance
 17 of some mystical virtuosi taking conventional church teachings about pen-
 18 nance and the other sacraments to extreme levels. Speculative mysticism, of
 19 the kind practiced by both Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, likewise
 20 remained rare in these houses. More commonly, the pursuit of divine union
 21 involved great physical suffering and special visions—just the opposite of
 22 Eckhart's contemplative approach.

23 While female mystics remained an exceptional minority among nuns and
 24 beguines, their extravagant penitential practices and achievements made a
 25 profound impression on their sisters. During his lifetime, Eckhart witnessed
 26 a boom in the number of accounts by and about religious women claiming
 27 mystical experiences. The new trend—not coincidentally—paralleled the
 28 dramatic spike in women entering convents and beguinages and signaled a
 29 new degree of self-confidence among female spiritual seekers. More than a
 30 century earlier, the forthrightness displayed by the noble abbess Hildegard of
 31 Bingen had been rare; her fellow mystic and correspondent Elisabeth of
 32 Schönau (not highly born) claimed that an angel had repeatedly beaten her
 33S until she agreed to reveal her own visions.

34N The period 1250–1350, by contrast, was awash in written accounts by



religious women in the forms of spiritual diaries (especially “sister books” kept by individual cloisters), hagiographies composed by male admirers (some of them Dominicans), and allegorical dialogues, such as Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror*. Many of the latter relied heavily on the language and imagery of courtly love. As in such secular works, the central metaphor in every case was the quest, typically for experience of ultimate love and unity with the divine. The main difference was that the seeker, the soul, was female and the love object, usually Christ, was male (although sometimes both He and Divine Love were also female—an even more interesting transformation).

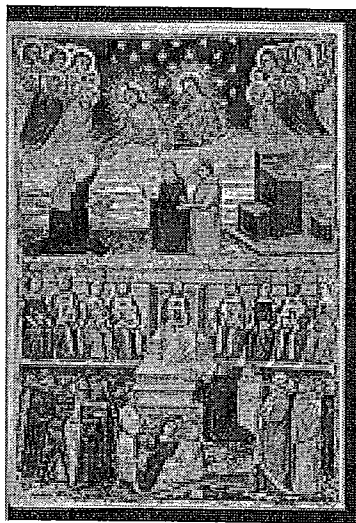
Just as in the instance of chivalric romances, the public appetite for tales of these women’s spiritual journeys appeared insatiable. This did not mean that such writings were universally accepted as valid. The beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1208–92) knew that the authority of any female author was automatically suspect. “Ah Lord,” she sighed, “if I were a learned, religious, man” (such as Eckhart), others might more readily accept such claims to divine experiences. Instead she adopted the familiar tack of acknowledging herself as “a fool, a sinful and poor being in body and in soul.” When, in the course of one of her visions, she implored God to entrust his truths to some “wise people” He responded that it was her very humility that had led Him to choose her: “One finds many a master wise in the scripture who in himself, in my eyes, is a fool.” Even then, Mechthild knew that her writings might be subject to “ill-willed interpretation” at the hands of spiteful “Pharisees.” Her conundrum was distressing: “Now I fear God, if I keep silent, and I fear ignorant people, if I write. Most dear people, what can I do about it that this happens to me, and has often happened?” “I was warned about this book,” she confided, “and people told me that if it were not protected, it could be thrown on the fire.” Like many other women experiencing divine visions, the German beguine relied on the shared authority of a male cleric, in this case her Dominican confessor and scribe, Heinrich of Halle.

Mechthild’s work, *The Flowing Light of Divinity*, was known to Eckhart long before his arrival in Strasbourg. The similarities that Mechthild’s revered *Flowing Light* shared with Marguerite’s condemned *Mirror* are striking. Both works describe the ascent of the soul to a mystical union with God.

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01 Both favor dialogues between the Soul and various figures, and employ the
 02 allegorical language and style of the courtly love genre, alternating between
 03 poetry and prose. The ultimate goal for Mechthild appears to be the same as
 04 for Marguerite: self-annihilation. In describing the divine union, which
 05 Mechthild calls “receiving God’s greeting,” she clarifies that “[n]o one can or
 06 should receive this greeting unless one has gone beyond oneself and become
 07 nothing. In this greeting I want to die while living. The blind holy people
 08 can never ruin this for me. These are those who love and do not know.”
 09 Mechthild, like Marguerite, knew because she had experienced God herself.
 10 Her book, like *The Mirror*, might even provide a guide for those enlightened
 11 few who were able to understand and follow.



Brigitte of Sweden (1303–73) receiving a
 divine revelation from heaven, which she
 passes on to two mendicant biographers.
 Visions and other godly communications
 were common among late medieval female
 mystics.

29 But the differences between the two works are even more instructive,
 30 particularly in terms of Eckhart’s subsequent responses to both. Mechthild,
 31 separated from Marguerite by two generations and hundreds of miles, had
 32 stayed markedly closer to the conventions of courtly love. Much of *The Flow-*
 33*ing Light’s* seven books and 267 chapters is occupied with wooing and
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dancing, ecstatic consummation and painful separation. Mechthild takes the bridal imagery made popular by Bernard of Clairvaux a century earlier to new heights. The Soul is a "full-grown bride," who longs to share the marriage bed with her Divine Lover, and accordingly strips naked in "the secret chamber of the invisible Godhead." Joining her beloved, "[t]he narrower the bed becomes, the closer they embrace./ The sweeter the kisses taste on my lips, the more longingly they look at one another." Ultimately,

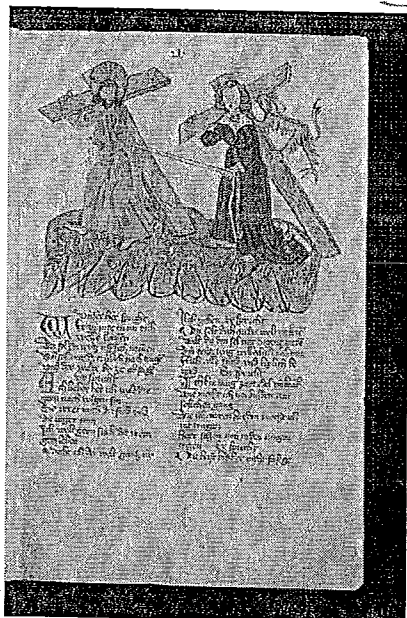
[A] blessed stillness
 That both desire comes over them.
 He gives himself to her,
 And she gives herself to him.
 What happens to her then—she knows—
 And that is fine with me.

Not
 Fatigue

Mechthild was also more clearly orthodox than Marguerite. Whereas Marguerite envisioned a difficult but steady spiritual journey to self-annihilation (seemingly bringing freedom from good works), Mechthild's ascent to God was gradual, full of "great torment," and occasionally yielding fleeting moments of ecstasy. In all his years of working with beguines and nuns, Eckhart regularly encountered this common linkage between extreme asceticism and heightened religious experiences. As with their male counterparts, communities of religious women sought to cultivate detachment from the body and an *imitatio Christi* through daily acts of self-mortification. The seasoned friar knew many of these practices from his own experiences in the Erfurt priory: fasting, sleep deprivation, physical work to the point of collapse, refusal to succumb to illness, and so on. He was also familiar with the frequent recourse of many brothers and sisters to self-flagellation, a penitential act that also supposedly curbed the appetites of the flesh. In some convents and beguinages, extreme versions of these and other "holy exercises of virtue"—such as carrying a cross of nails on one's back—often reached the point of alarming other sisters. Lack of food, drink, and sleep, aggravated by intentional self-isolation, led some women to deep

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01 despair and the brink of suicide. Yet almost all of the individuals singled
 02 out for pious biographies during Eckhart's lifetime described such willful
 03 acts of self-annihilation as necessary preparation for their intense spiritual
 04 experiences.



WISOM (10/15)

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Christ hanging the bride,
 representing annihilation of the self,
 in a fourteenth-century manuscript
 on divine love.

23 Food played a particularly significant role in the piety of religious women.
 24 This is not surprising, given the stereotypical role of women in preparing
 25 meals, but deciding when and what to eat also represented a particular kind
 26 of physical autonomy among female mystics. Denied the priesthood, holy
 27 women could nevertheless experience the suffering of Jesus through re-
 28 markable fasts and other painful ordeals. As the *Book of Twelve Beguines* ex-
 29 plained, fasting also intensified the soul's insatiable hunger for God. Beatrice
 30 of Nazareth found this divine hunger so overwhelming that she frequently
 31 experienced choking and other tortures. Fortunately, the consecrated Eu-
 32 charist allowed fasting women to "eat God," and be filled with the divine
 33S presence. Again, these were not heterodox events (or simple cases of an-
 34N orexia nervosa) but rather intensifications of orthodox practices, such as

Friday and Lenten fasts or the Feast of Corpus Christi, a newly sanctioned devotional practice focused on the consecrated host. 01
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According to most written accounts of famed religious women, God not only welcomed feats of great mortification but rewarded them with revelations and moments of ecstatic divine union. Only when self-will had been weakened or destroyed through intense suffering could a soul experience the “turn” (*kêr*) that opened it to rapture in the Holy Spirit. The visions accompanying these divine encounters might then occur at any time. The beguine Hadewijch of Antwerp (d. ca. 1260), like many religious women, was often seized by the divine spirit during mass, particularly at elevation of the consecrated host. The liturgical calendar and nearby statues clearly influenced the nature of visions, with appearances of the baby Jesus and Blessed Virgin more common during Advent and Christmas, the suffering adult Jesus during Lent and Easter. The figure of Christ played a central role within convents and beguinages, with various ascetic acts aimed at re-creating the Passion and agonies of the Savior. (On rare occasions, holy women contemplating the crucified Savior’s five wounds, or stigmata, were rewarded with the same marks on their own bodies.) The Man of Sorrows was as often the focus of female visions as was the Divine Lover—resulting in a profoundly Christocentric form of mystical encounters among religious women. 03
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Such extreme practices and dramatic successes inspired both wonder and individualistic competition. Most accounts of famous religious women accordingly emphasized that the awe-inspiring feats described should not be attempted by readers. A century earlier, for instance, Christina of Saint-Trond (aka Christina the Astonishing; 1150–1224) had become famous for whirling like a Sufi dervish when in divine ecstasy, then climbing (some witnesses said levitating) up to church rafters, roofs, and nearby trees. The theologian Jacques de Vitry described how the holy woman tried to replicate the torments of the damned in hell by putting herself in ovens, plunging into boiling water (and suffering no visible injuries), having herself lashed to mill wheels and hanged on the gallows, or lying in open graves. In Eckhart’s day, the Premonstratensian nun Christina of Hane died at the age of twenty-three after subjecting her sexual organs to such extreme tortures that even her pious biographer blanched. Another contemporary, Christina 21
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01 of Stommeln (1242–1312), allegedly suffered many years of diabolical tor-
 02 ment in response to her own acts of self-mortification, ranging from being
 03 physically torn apart at night by demons (and reassembled in the morning by
 04 angels) to dodging the flying excrement thrown at her and her visitors by
 05 the same evil spirits.

06 Of course examples of such extreme asceticism remained rare, as they
 07 had in the days of the ancient desert fathers and mothers. And again, the goal
 08 of written accounts was to inspire wonder, not imitation. Christina—Vitry
 09 stressed—was a remarkable individual, a living example of divine power at
 10 work, but not a role model. What was most significant was that other reli-
 11 gious women revered the central value of physical suffering and sought to
 12 emulate it in more moderate fashion.

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From Pursuer to Pursued

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Eckhart's reaction to such aspirations among the religious women he en-
 countered was predictable. Long before his arrival in Strasbourg, he had de-
 cided that all external acts of piety—particularly the dramatic feats of such
 “living saints”—needed to be approached with the greatest caution. Ascetic
 practices were not in themselves harmful. Given his own emphasis on inter-
 nal piety, he even anticipated the question during one of his sermons:

*Now you might ask, “Ought anyone so placed [in contemplation of the
 divine] to practice penance? Does he lose anything by dropping penitential
 exercises?” Pay attention. Penitential exercises, among other things, were
 instituted for a particular purpose: whether it be fasting, watching, praying,
 kneeling, being disciplined [scourged], wearing hair shirts, lying hard, or
 whatever it may be, the reason for all is because the body and flesh are always
 opposed to spirit.*

*The body is often too strong for the spirit, he acknowledged, and there is a real
 fight between them, an unceasing struggle. The spirit was an alien in this world
 and needed all the help it could get, but—and this was a key distinction—if*



you would capture and curb [the flesh] in a thousand times better fashion, then put on it the bridle of love. 01

As Prior Eckhart had lectured his novices twenty years earlier, intentions mattered far more than deeds. Now he told his listeners, including various religious women, *[i]t is great foolishness when many a man fasts much, prays and performs great works and spends his time alone, if he does not mend his ways, and is impatient and angry. He should find out his greatest weakness, and devote all his energy to overcoming that.* The true seeker's goal was to establish true humility, and in that respect ostentatious works of self-denial were just as likely to feed self-pride as to dismantle it. It was external suffering that needed to be offered up and replaced with internal devotion. 02
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Involuntary pain and suffering was another matter. About the time of his arrival in Strasbourg, Eckhart explicitly addressed the question of personal loss in his *Book of Divine Comfort*. The work was most likely composed for the Habsburg noblewoman Agnes of Austria (1281–1364), whose husband, King Andrew I of Hungary, had died in 1301, and whose father, Albrecht I, king of Germany, was assassinated by his own nephew in 1308. Inspired by Boethius's famous *Consolation of Philosophy*, Eckhart focused on the mental tribulations resulting from *misfortunes occurring to outward goods . . . to our relatives and dearest friends . . . and to ourselves: dishonor, hardship, pain of body, and heart's distress.* His stance was typically Augustinian: pain and suffering are inevitably part of the fallen human condition and ought not to be sought out—but in the end God can always bring good out of evil. His advice to Agnes, and to all of his listeners, was to embrace not the spiritual and physical pain of misfortunes but rather the divine grace that inevitably accompanied them. *There is solace for every sorrow, he reassured his audience, no hardship or loss that is without some comfort.* 12
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In the tradition of Augustine and Seneca, Eckhart also saw involuntary suffering as a divine means of self-liberation, bringing the realization that *all suffering comes from love and attachment* to other people, things, and the body, not the misfortunes themselves. Weighed against the rewards of eternal life, earthly troubles should even be embraced: *probably no one can be found who is not fond enough of some living being to gladly do without an eye or be blind for a year, if at the end of it he could have his sight again and if he could thus save his* 28
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01 *friend from death. Seneca counseled that a man should take all things as if he had*
 02 *wished and prayed for them, to which Eckhart added if [a man] is perturbed by*
 03 *outward mishaps, then truly it is right and proper that God has permitted him to*
 04 *suffer this harm, for he wanted and thought to be just and yet was upset by so small*
 05 *a thing. Returning to his recurrent theme of developing a proper mental atti-*
 06 *tude, Eckhart came to the Stoic conclusion that the good man should never rail*
 07 *at loss or sorrow: he should only lament that he does lament them, and that he is*
 08 *aware of his own wailing and lamentation.*

09 Eckhart also remained leery of the out-of-body experiences claimed by
 10 some exemplary nuns and beguines as well as their self-inflicted agonies.
 11 Here too the master worried about the self-promoting dimensions of many
 12 private visions and secret moments of rapture. His own deep antipathy to
 13 images of the divine also made him wary of their vivid descriptions of God
 14 and heaven, not to mention their claims of intimate conversations with
 15 Christ, Mary, and various saints. Such “corporeal” and “spiritual” experi-
 16 ences, even if genuine, were vastly inferior to a purely intellectual encounter
 17 of the divine, without means. *Some people want to see God with their own eyes*
 18 *as they see a cow, and they want to love God as they love a cow. Crude efforts of*
 19 *this nature were bound to fail, because you love a cow for her milk and her*
 20 *cheese and your own profit. He did not go as far as Gregory of Nyssa or Pseudo-*
 21 *Dionysius, denying the very possibility of such visions in this life, but neither*
 22 *did he follow many contemporaries in their enthusiastic embrace of the*
 23 *most famous female mystics of the day.*

24 What spiritual advice did the master provide to the many nuns and be-
 25 guines he encountered in Strasbourg? Rather than proscribe these commu-
 26 nities’ common valorization of suffering, Eckhart applauded these female
 27 audiences’ desire for divine union while offering them an alternate vision of
 28 it—one based not on mortification, but on contemplation, not on self-
 29 isolation and competition, but on a communal project of spiritual progress.
 30 The best example he knew of such internalized seeking was the famed Cis-
 31 tercian convent at Helfta (about fifty miles from Erfurt), founded by the
 32 count of Thuringia and in Eckhart’s youth directed by the formidable Ger-
 33S trude of Hackeborn (1232–91). According to one admiring chronicler,
 34N Gertrude

would read sacred scripture very eagerly and with great delight
whenever she could, requiring her subjects to love sacred readings
and often recite them from memory. Hence, she bought all the good
books she could for her church or made her sisters transcribe them.
She eagerly promoted the girls to learn the liberal arts, saying that if
the pursuit of knowledge were lost they would no longer understand
sacred scripture and the religious life would perish.

As he had advised his Erfurt novices twenty years earlier, Eckhart urged
the religious women and laypeople in his Strasbourg audiences to reconsider
their fervent ascetic pursuit of God. External means might help in the earliest
stages of spiritual development but—like scholastic philosophy—were inca-
pable of reaching God in themselves. More often they led to confusion and
frustration. *Whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way and misses God, who
lies hidden in it. But whoever seeks God without any special way gets Him as He is in
Himself.* God is not to be sought in isolation from the world—as was common
among cloistered women—or in any human activities. *[I]f a man thinks he will
get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies, or by special infusion of
grace than by the fireside or in the stable—that is nothing but taking God, wrapping
a cloak around His head and shoving Him under a bench.* God is not to be sought
at all, Eckhart now decided. Letting go of all desires, even the desire for God,
was the only true way to prepare oneself for experiencing God.

Meister Eckhart's advocacy of spiritual submission likely resonated with
the readers of female mystics, who wrote freely of being "taken" by the di-
vine spirit. "We think that in the Eucharist we eat God," explained Hadewi-
jch, but actually "He eats us." We are not the pursuers, we are the pursued;
God initiates contact with the soul when the time is right. Some male reli-
gious writers identified themselves as "women" only when they spoke about
their own carnal failings, but Eckhart's sermons positively embrace the tra-
ditionally female trait of passivity. *Wisdom, he explains, is a maternal name,
for a maternal name has the property of passivity, and in God we posit both activity
and passivity: for the Father is active and the Son is passive, this being the charac-
teristic of being born.*

Female audiences undoubtedly welcomed the master's rejection of his

01 age's misogyny. When God made man, he made the woman from the man's side,
 02 so that she should be like him. He did not make her from the head or the feet, so that
 03 she would be neither woman nor man to him, but so that she should be his peer. Just
 04 like men and women, he preached, the active and passive powers of the soul
 05 were complementary equals, each essential to achieving divine union. Obvi-
 06 ously, a woman and a man are unlike, but in love they are alike; dwelling on their
 07 differences only brings bitterness and no peace. All humans, regardless of gen-
 08 der, possessed these complementary powers of the soul and all were capable
 09 of knowing God directly. When preaching on the perfectly humble man
 10 (*homo*), for instance, Meister Eckhart made clear that *we use the word homo*
 11 *for women as well as for men*, even though many of his fellow scholastics refuse
 12 *it to woman because of her weakness.*

13 It's not clear how much of an impact Meister Eckhart's preaching made
 14 on the religious women he encountered. His version of the pursuit of God
 15 ran counter to the spiritual thinking and experience of most nuns and be-
 16 guines. One Dominican sister, Anna of Ramschwang, described how she
 17 had consulted Meister Eckhart during his visit to her cloister of St. Katheri-
 18 nenthal, asking him the significance of her vision of the Christ child. His
 19 response was not recorded, though Anna did note in apparent disappoint-
 20 ment that the master spoke "in an elevated way [about] highly incomprehen-
 21 sible matters." Elsbeth of Beggenhofen, the subprioress of Ötenbach,
 22 similarly sought Eckhart's advice about her spiritual experiences and was
 23 told that *no earthly wisdom can grasp it; it is purely a work of God*, and that her
 24 ascetic practices were *of no help unless one submits in free letting-go-ness to God's*
 25 *true command and receives [Him]*. Eckhart's discouragement of spiritual com-
 26 petition and external devotions possibly came as a relief to Elsbeth and some
 27 of her sisters, but as a source of anxiety to others. The ascetic regime, after
 28 all, at least offered a clear and defined path to God. After Eckhart's death, his
 29 disciples Johannes Tauler and Heinrich Suso had considerable success in
 30 spreading their version of the master's teachings among religious women,
 31 but how much fruit Eckhart's own attempts bore is more difficult to say.

32 On the other hand, Eckhart's encounter with the nuns and beguines of
 33S the Rhineland appeared to reinforce his own emerging conviction that pur-
 34N suit of divine experience should not be an esoteric endeavor. Their genuine

hunger for divine experience, he told them, was admirable; their reliance on either extreme suffering or visions was misguided. Instead he proposed a more accessible third way, between the elitist contemplative approach of Marguerite and that of the spectacularly suffering “superwomen” of popular religious literature. The path to experiencing God was open to all, the master preached, not just to an enlightened or self-mortifying few. Unlike most of his fellow scholastics, who considered all women, like uneducated men, incapable of higher spiritual understanding, Eckhart moved toward an ever more universal approach to divine union. But if neither gender nor learning was a barrier to the experience he preached, what then was the value of learning itself? This posed an uncomfortable question for the lifelong scholastic, one he never completely resolved.

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{ CHAPTER NINE }

Master of Living

*Better one master of life than a thousand masters of learning; but no
one learns and lives before God does.*

SAYING 8

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The Restless Intellect

Preaching in Strasbourg confirmed Meister Eckhart’s sense that there was a genuine popular appetite for his message. Audiences full of friars, religious women, and laypeople began to perceive the revered Dominican not just as a “master of learning” (*Lesemeister*), but as a “master of living” (*Lebemeister*). Eckhart in turn addressed them with an unprecedented level of intellectual respect—not as distracted children in search of entertainment and sensation but as adult fellow seekers:

[T]here is not one of you who is so coarse-grained, so feeble of understanding, or so remote but he may find this joy within himself, in truth, as it is, with joy and understanding, before you leave this church today, indeed before I have finished preaching: he can find this as truly within him, live it, and possess it, as that God is God and I am a man.

And the content was potentially explosive. Practical, everyday mysticism available to any genuine seeker was a startlingly radical notion for any



01 society, let alone the deeply hierarchical world of Eckhart's day. That it
 02 might be pursued with minimal reference to external rituals or acts was
 03 even more revolutionary.

04 *the master* At the same time, ~~he~~^{she} had not completely abandoned his scholarly ambi-
 05 tions, at least for the still incomplete *Opus Tripartitum*. He brought the working
 06 manuscript of the *Opus* with him to Strasbourg, as he did in all his travels, but
 07 he does not appear to have made much progress. The only Latin works he
 08 might have written during this time were the *Commentary on John* and the *Book*
 09 *of Parables in Genesis*; if there were other commentaries or treatises they have
 10 not survived. Most historians believe that he abandoned the project sometime
 11 during his fifties, while in Strasbourg. In a few sermons, he mentions keeping
 12 a notebook, but these and other notes apparently contained ideas for his ser-
 13 mons rather than for his forlorn magnum opus. How could such an ambitious
 14 project—his life's work as he initially imagined it—launched just a decade ear-
 15 lier with such enthusiasm and hope come to such an ignominious end?

16 The likeliest explanation is his long-standing, uneasy relationship with
 17 higher learning. Like all Dominicans, Eckhart had preached his entire adult
 18 life, more than thirty years by this point. Whenever his consuming pursuit
 19 of God and simultaneous deep love of learning veered away from the practi-
 20 cal goals of the Order of Preachers he became visibly uncomfortable, even
 21 slightly defensive. Academic debates over such rarefied topics as the nature
 22 of angelic motion did not square easily with the order's down-to-earth mis-
 23 sion of offering comfort, knowledge, and salvation to actual human beings.
 24 Time and again during his university days Eckhart admonished himself
 25 and his fellow academics against the perils of scholarly hubris. And during
 26 the years he worked on the *Opus Tripartitum*, the master made frequent
 27 strained—and ultimately unsuccessful—attempts to present it as a practical
 28 work that would be useful for his fellow friars.

29 Throughout the previous two decades he had spent in the upper reaches
 30 of university and Dominican leadership, Eckhart had repeatedly reminded
 31 himself and his listeners of the necessity of humility in all actions. *Humility*
 32 *is a root of all good . . . I said in the schools of Paris that all things shall be accom-*
 33S *plished in the truly humble man.* Now, surrounded by audiences of novices,
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nuns, beguines, and laymen, he returned to the theme with a renewed sense of purpose.

That is true humility, that a man should concern himself with nothing of that which he is . . . whether by doing or leaving undone, but wait upon the light of grace. The knowing what to do and to leave undone is true humility of nature.

Was it humility that persuaded Eckhart to leave his magnum opus undone in order to devote his energies to other work he felt divinely called to do? Or had he reached a theological and professional dead end in his work on the *Opus* and decided to make a virtue out of necessity by leaving it incomplete and embracing the role of preacher instead?

Eckhart's ambivalence about the scholastic project in general was not a sudden development. At least since his second professorship in Paris and most likely well before that, his growing appreciation of intuitive approaches to God corresponded with a growing frustration at the limitations of rational inquiry. Without a more experiential way of "knowing" the divine, Eckhart began to suspect that philosophical pursuit would remain endlessly unsatisfying. As he told one lay audience,

so long as the intellect does not find true being and does not penetrate to the ground, so as to be able to say, 'this is this; it is such and not otherwise,' so long does it remain in a condition of questing and expectation; it does not settle down or rest, but labors on, seeking, expecting, and rejecting.

The intellect never rests in this life, he concluded. And even whatever knowledge is gained remained suspect and ultimately inferior.

The light of the sun is little compared to the light of the intellect, and the intellect is little compared to the light of grace. Grace is a light that transcends and soars above everything that God ever created or could create. Yet the light of grace, great as it is, is little indeed compared with the divine light.

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01 In embracing the way of intuition and negative theology, Eckhart had
 02 already called into question all so-called scientific knowledge of God. *There*
 03 *is no way man can know what God is. But one thing he does know: what God is*
 04 *not. And this a man of intellect will reject.* More specifically, this was an inter-
 05 pretation many men of intellect at the University of Paris rejected. While li-
 06 braries today overflow with the manuscripts of scholarly commentaries
 07 from this period, only a few scattered notes remain from Meister Eckhart's
 08 lectures there. The Neoplatonic modification of Thomist philosophy that he
 09 and his mentor Dietrich proposed found few supporters or disciples, at least
 10 not in Paris (back in Germany was another matter). His own philosophical
 11 project was not attacked so much as ignored—an even worse fate among
 12 scholars. In part, this was the by-product of a recent retrenchment of many
 13 Dominicans around the *Summa* of Aquinas, which they officially declared as
 14 canonical for the order in ~~1309~~. *in 1309*

15 Eckhart was not alone in his views. Other members of the younger gen-
 16 eration, most notably the Franciscan William of Ockham (ca. 1287–1347),
 17 had likewise begun to question the overall scientific unity of theology
 18 claimed by Duns Scotus. Their attacks focused not just on the conclusions
 19 of their fellow theologians but on their methods—specifically assump-
 20 tions made on the basis of language. Ockham in particular believed that
 21 much of the speculative theology espoused by their teachers was based
 22 on unwarranted generalizations. Applying his famed razor to all theologi-
 23 cal systems, the Englishman argued that plurality was not to be assumed
 24 without necessity. In other words, all objects—humans, trees, chickens—
 25 were knowable, intelligible individual entities in themselves. Universals
 26 proposed an essential relationship between some of those individuals, but
 27 these were merely mental concepts created by humans, not by God. They
 28 had no reality. And even then, these categorical names (*nomina*) repre-
 29 sented faulty generalizations based on the resemblance of various particu-
 30 lars and inadequate knowledge of the whole. There was no basis for assuming
 31 that all chickens, for instance, shared a common nature or essence. Many
 32 key scholastic concepts, such as species, were thus rendered meaningless,
 33S as were the deductions made employing them. Metaphysical entities, Ock-
 34N ham argued, remained beyond human comprehension and were only



William of Ockham, the English Franciscan who challenged the central scholastic notion of universals and gave birth to a theological school later known as nominalism.

known to the degree that God had revealed them in scripture and church tradition.

Eckhart similarly came to believe that true knowledge of God came mainly through revelation and intuition, less so by rational deduction or induction. In that sense, he also questioned the apparent scientific certainty of some of his colleagues. But unlike Ockham and many of the other scholars later called “nominalists,” Eckhart held on to the idea of universals, which he believed existed in the mind of God (but remained inaccessible to humans). This was the position he believed that his spiritual mentor Augustine had held, maintaining an essential order of the cosmos that remained implanted in the human soul but just out of reason’s reach. As a “high realist,” Eckhart remained convinced that his own bridge between Plato and Aristotle offered an appealing (and true) “middle way” for his fellow theologians. To his disappointment, the world of academe collectively shrugged, rendering the *Opus Tripartitum* an increasingly dubious effort.

Finding a New Voice

Eckhart’s renewed devotion to popular preaching in Strasbourg returned the Parisian master to the “excellent and noble work” first proclaimed to

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might have added, were hardly noted for their lively writing or engaging lectures. Logic and authority were the scholar's allies; humor and pathos were not. Popular, and thus effective, preaching was best left to seasoned professionals who knew how to combine diverting anecdotes with a modest, straightforward moral.

The abstruseness of academic jargon was no minor obstacle to Eckhart's preaching ambitions. Yet he faced an even greater challenge: how to describe the ineffable mystery of union with God in mere words. Virtually all Neoplatonists, since the days of Plotinus, had assumed that their way to the divine was inherently inaccessible to all but an enlightened few, and that those few would be able to unravel their dense philosophical language. Many female mystics relied heavily on allegory to address difficult concepts, but their works were mostly written accounts based on personal experience, likewise aimed at "the few" able to understand them (and still fewer able to imitate them). Conveying the unknowability of God and similar mysteries to roomfuls of ordinary people was a radically new and untested venture. How could any preacher hope to convey practical advice about divine union to a popular audience, let alone a middle-aged, celibate academic shaped by the narrow worlds of the friary and the university?

Meister Eckhart must have realized the enormity of the task he had set for himself—one that was in some ways more daunting than completion of the massive *Opus Tripartitum*. He could not deliver his philosophically complex Latin treatises on the divine birth to a church full of ordinary, German-speaking merchants, craftspeople, and peasants. To succeed in this new endeavor, he would have to make significant adjustments. The most obvious adaptation was language itself. Eckhart believed that *words*, like powerful herbs or certain precious stones, *have great power: we could work wonders with words. All words have their power from the first Word.*

Speaking in his Thuringian version of Middle High German, Eckhart the popular preacher had long ago learned to deliberately avoid Latin words as much as possible. The Luke annunciation excerpt of "Ave Gratia Plena Dominus tecum!," for example, was immediately followed by the explanation: *This text which I have said in Latin is found in the holy Gospel, and means in German, "Hail to thee, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!"* On a few occasions he

01 proceeded to pick apart the individual words of the day's Latin passage, ex-
 02 posing at length (in a schoolmasterly way) on the relevance of *et* ("and")
 03 within a certain context, or *ecce* ("behold"). Preaching on Ecclesiasticus
 04 50:6–7 ("*Like the morning star in the mist*"), Eckhart illustrated his point about
 05 the derived nature of human existence by singling out *the little word quasi*,
 06 *which means "as" and is what the children at school call a "by-word" [adverb]. This*
 07 *is what I mean in all my sermons. The truest thing that one can say of God is*
 08 *"Word"(Verbum) and "Truth." God called himself a Word . . . man was a "by-word."*
 09 Here was the grammatical equivalent of comparing humans to a face re-
 10 flected in a mirror. It is hard to imagine two more eloquent or memorable
 11 expressions of humans' fundamental dependence on God (the verb of being
 12 itself) that still preserved individuals' distinctiveness.

13 Far more frequently, the master had to find or invent German words for
 14 many concepts that he had, until now, only written about in Latin. Often no
 15 German counterpart for a Latin term existed, or the one that did lacked the
 16 richness or complexity Eckhart wanted to convey. This was especially true
 17 when Eckhart wanted to describe the relationship between God and the
 18 soul. His solution was to use the building blocks of the German language to
 19 construct completely new words. He became a master of neologisms, creat-
 20 ing what philosopher Karl Jaspers called "music of abstraction." In Eckhart's
 21 hands, theology became poetry, lending his German sermons a poignancy
 22 and vitality not found in his Latin writings. Typically he chose to insert pre-
 23 fixes or suffixes that allowed him to transform everyday words into abstract
 24 concepts. By adding the suffix *-heit* ("hood"), for instance, to *Got* ("God"),
 25 Eckhart was able to talk about the essential divinity (*gotheit*) that was much
 26 more than the Creator Himself. Similar modifications supplied him with
 27 words for "essence" (*wesenheit* or "beinghood"), the specific quality of ob-
 28 jects (*istichheit* or "thisness"), immutability" (*unwandelbarkeit* or "unchange-
 29 fulness"), and of course, the unique quality of trusting detachment necessary
 30 to experience God (*gelâzenheit* or "letting-go-ness"). Many of Eckhart's neol-
 31 ogisms involved negating a known concept. *Entbilden* combined *ent* (de- or
 32 un) with *bilden* (to form or illustrate) to convey how one must "unmake" an
 33S idea or image. *Entwerden* combined *ent* and *werden* (to become) to describe
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the spiritual state of “unbecoming” or “becoming nothing.” God in His ineffability was described as “unspoken” (*ungesprochen*), “being-less” (*weselos*), “a not-God” (*ein nihtgot*). 01
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In addition to coining new words, Eckhart made use of an evocative vocabulary to convey otherwise difficult ideas. His descriptions of divine union, for example, employed a variety of verbs of movement for the relationship between God and the soul: lying, going, falling, flowing, sinking, drifting, running, bubbling, pushing, pulling. The ultimate moment of divine experience was “breaking through” (*durchbrechen*), a word that powerfully conveyed the culminating significance and drama of the event. He frequently described encountering God, an extrasensory experience, in terms of the senses, particularly taste: *Divine love is like the salt that makes bitter food taste good; or it would be strange indeed if the soul that had once tasted and tried God could stomach anything else. One saint says that the soul that has tasted God finds all things that are not God repugnant and stinking.* 04
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The imagery of Eckhart’s German sermons was also distinctive from that of most contemporaries. Unlike the writings of many female mystics, there were no singing birds, flowers, dancing, lovemaking, or other conventions of courtly love literature. There were also no extended allegories of Love, God, or Wisdom. In general, Eckhart preferred stark metaphors that conveyed a sense of dehumanized and unimaginable vastness. In descriptions of the soul confronted with the limitless Godhead, the most common images were *wilderness, desert, ocean, and abyss*. Some of these metaphors were in fact employed by Mechthild and other female mystics, but only Eckhart made use—more than 140 times—of his innovative image of the ground (*grunt*). The one major exception to these impersonal images was his frequent reference to divine union as the *eternal birth* of God in the soul. Accordingly this metaphor led Eckhart to praise the *maternal name* of God, where the eternal Word *does mother’s work, for it is properly a mother’s work to conceive*. In one even more remarkable passage, he also recounted, perhaps autobiographically, how it appeared to a man as in a dream—it was a waking dream—that he became pregnant with Nothing like a woman with child, and in that Nothing God was born; He was the fruit of Nothing. God was born in the Nothing. Such positive 16
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01 associations with the female body and childbirth were nowhere to be found
02 in contemporary theological writing, not even among women mystics.

03 Eckhart's penchant for paradoxical images pushed human language and
04 imagination to their limits, pointing toward something just outside our
05 grasp but never capturing it. One scholar has likened his frequent self-
06 subversion to "creating a kind of metaphysical black hole." Words and con-
07 cepts are no sooner presented than they are deliberately undermined and
08 negated in paradoxical fashion. *God is a word, an unspoken word . . . a word that*
09 *utters itself. . . God is spoken and unspoken.* In another sermon, listeners learned
10 that *God is nothing . . . He is being above all being, He is beingless being.* Elsewhere,
11 Eckhart voiced with approval the opinion of an unnamed master, who
12 claimed that God was *a becoming without becoming, newness without renewal.*
13 When the soul freed itself from time and space, it experienced in God *breadth*
14 *without breadth, expanseless expanse.* Such attempts were the closest a nega-
15 tive theologian could come to describing the ineffable. How does one love
16 the ineffable? *You should love Him as He is: a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person,*
17 *a non-image; rather as He is a sheer pure transparent One, detached from all duality.*
18 When it came to God and the soul, only negative and inherently contradic-
19 tory language could convey the utter otherness of the subject from everyday
20 human experience.

21 Even with a new and colorful vocabulary, the master's translation of
22 scholastic thinking into the common idiom was not always successful.
23 What, for instance, would a modestly educated listener have made of this
24 attempt to describe the timeless melding of divine union?

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26 *You should wholly sink from your youness and dissolve into his Hisness and*
27 *your "yours" and his "His" should become so completely one "mine" that*
28 *with him you understand His uncreated self-identity and His nameless*
29 *nothingness. . . .*

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31 Viewed in the context of Meister Eckhart's general teaching and as words on
32 the page, the passage appears somewhat comprehensible; heard in a sermon,
33S the spoken concepts of "youness" and "Hisness" must have been baffling.
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As might be expected, Eckhart was also not completely consistent in his use of some terms over the course of a long preaching career, and occasionally the same word (most notably, intellect; *vernünffticheit*) was used to mean different things at different times. Conversely, only experienced listeners would have realized that the soul's "little spark" (*vünkelîn*), "little castle" (*bürgelîn*), and "soul's light" (*licht in der seele*) all referred to the same thing. And not all scholarly concepts, despite Eckhart's inventiveness, could be made accessible. Niceties such as the distinctions between the active intellect, the passive intellect, and the potential intellect were especially difficult to convey to a popular audience. Fortunately, he didn't have to try. The former academic was no longer compiling a *summa* and he wasn't interested in offering a crash course in scholastic theology to a popular audience. He cared only about what was useful and necessary for them to understand in order to know God directly.

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Waking the Audience

The format of Meister Eckhart's sermons remained the same throughout his career. After reading the day's scriptural passage in Latin and German, the preacher offered multiple interpretations of the verse in question. Sometimes he laid out the plan for his subsequent homily, following the conventional Dominican exegesis format of four different senses of a passage: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. After reciting Acts 9:8, for instance, he proceeded to explain

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The text which I have quoted in Latin is written by St. Luke in Acts about St. Paul. It means "Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes saw nothing." I think this text has a fourfold sense: One is that when he rose from the ground with open eyes he saw Nothing, and the Nothing was God; for when he saw God he calls that Nothing. The second: when he got up he saw nothing but God. The third: in all things he saw nothing but God. The fourth: when he saw God, he saw all things as nothing.

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01 The remainder of the sermon proceeded to address each of the four senses in
 02 depth, which in the hands of Eckhart became a powerful exposition on the
 03 unknowability of God ^{and} the soul's hunger for the divine, detachment from
 04 the world, and the birth of God in the soul. Often the master veered from his
 05 youthful training and did not enumerate his points in advance, instead offer-
 06 ing a succession of readings.



17 A medieval preacher speaks to a diverse audience of laypeople.

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 21 As always, Eckhart was aggressive in his interpretations of scriptural
 22 passages, convinced that any reading conveying an essential truth was a
 23 valid reading. This exegetical approach, common among contemporary
 24 scholars, gave him considerable thematic flexibility. In Eckhart's hands, Pe-
 25 ter's exclamation upon being released from prison ("Now I know truly that
 26 God has sent me His angel"; Acts 12:11) served merely as a launching point
 27 for the master's usual topic: *Now let us turn this phrase round and say, "Because*
 28 *God has sent me His angel, therefore I know truly." Peter is as much as to say*
 29 *"knowledge." I have said before, knowledge and intellect unite the soul with God.*

30 As a lecturer, Meister Eckhart regularly drew on five types of authority.
 31 Most obviously, scriptures themselves provided the starting point for all his
 32 vernacular sermons as well as the internal structure of many of them. Here
 33S his reputation as a famous theologian would help assuage any doubts among
 34N listeners about some of the interpretive liberties he took with biblical

passages. As in his academic writings, he also made open reference to many other thinkers. Christian figures—particularly Augustine, but also Pseudo-Dionysius, Albert, and Aquinas—were usually cited by name. Non-Christian authors, most notably Aristotle and Plato, but also Avicenna and Maimonides, received mostly indirect mention, usually as *a master* or *a pagan master*. The same was true of fellow scholastics, who were often grouped together as *our masters* or *our best masters*. Occasionally, Eckhart wished to stress the freshness of an idea, such as *yesterday a question was debated in the schools among the great theologians*.

But indisputably Meister Eckhart's favorite authority—other than Augustine—was Meister Eckhart. Dozens of times he prefaced a remark with *I have also said before (and it is a certain and true saying)*, or *sometimes I have said, as I said the day before yesterday in my last sermon*, or *I said in Paris*. Only a preacher of such an elevated scholarly status could get away with such frequent self-invocation. Yet in Eckhart's defense, his strategy was as much to establish an ongoing dialogue with his individual listeners as to proclaim his own superior knowledge—building on his own authority but also drawing each person in the room into a more intimate relationship. "I" appears several hundred times in Eckhart's surviving vernacular sermons, but almost always in the explicit or implicit sense of a conversation. Often that dialogue is with the listener, created by Eckhart's rhetorical use of *you*. *You often ask, for instance, how you ought to live. Now pay close attention*. Describing the utter stillness preceding a personal experience of God, Eckhart anticipated his listener's question: *But sir, you ask, where is the silence, and where is the place where the Word is spoken?* Again and again, he answered his own questions—not unlike in a scholastic *summa*—but with the justification that *I was once asked, I was recently asked, people say*, or similar formulations.

One of Meister Eckhart's most disarming tactics was the semblance of intimacy he created with his listeners. Often, he appeared to be thinking out loud in the pulpit, sharing his own emerging thoughts. Many seemingly irrelevant asides in fact served to establish a level of trust with the audience. *Last night I thought . . . as I said at St. Margaret's* created a sense of communal striving, as did *I used to wonder (it is many years ago) . . . I used to think sometimes, when I came here*. Such devices simultaneously reinforced his own



01 teaching status while flattering his listeners that they were all involved in
 02 the same journey of discovery. *I was thinking last night that there are so many*
 03 *heavens*, he shared, semi-confidentially, or another time in the same sermon,
 04 *I was thinking last night that all likeness is a preamble. I cannot see anything unless*
 05 *it has likeness with me; I cannot know anything unless it has likeness with me.*

06 Like his inspiration Augustine, Eckhart the preacher was not afraid to
 07 share personal feelings and doubts with his audience: *Often I feel afraid, when*
 08 *I come to speak of God, at how utterly detached the soul must be to attain to union*
 09 *with him.* He conversationally confided from his own experience in detach-
 10 ment, *I will tell you how I think of people. I try to forget myself and everyone and*
 11 *merge myself for them, in unity.* Eckhart the man spoke openly of his love for
 12 his father, his close friends, and his fellow brothers, and confided at the be-
 13 ginning of one sermon that *I was thinking on the way, when I was supposed to*
 14 *come here, that I did not want to come here because I should become wet with love.*
 15 *Perhaps you too have been wet with love, but we shall not discuss that.* Were these
 16 tears of sorrow or of joy? Eckhart observed that both emotions *come from*
 17 *love*, but he did not disclose his own state of mind at the time.

18 Again, only a preacher of the master's scholarly status could have in-
 19 dulgued in such apparent familiarities without jeopardizing his own author-
 20 ity. A younger friar or a parish priest, let alone a woman of any rank, could
 21 never have betrayed such vulnerability. Eckhart's challenge, by contrast,
 22 remained both making himself accessible and engaging with a general audi-
 23 ence, and here it was to his advantage to acknowledge his own struggles in
 24 communicating essential truths. *As I was coming here today*, he confided, *I*
 25 *considered how to preach to you clearly so that you would understand me properly,*
 26 *and I hit upon an analogy. If you can understand it, you will be able to grasp my*
 27 *meaning and get to the bottom of all that I have ever preached about.* He then pro-
 28 ceeded to compare the perception of a piece of wood by his own eye with the
 29 intersubjective experience of the soul's spark with divinity itself. Ironically,
 30 the analogy is in fact more confusing than the straightforward account of
 31 divine union that follows it.

32 One of the most striking tendencies throughout Eckhart's vernacular
 33S sermons is his fervent and almost desperate desire to connect with his audi-
 34N ence, to be understood. Most preachers of the day sought to achieve this goal



at an emotional, visceral level, with simple expectations. Eckhart wanted his words to resonate personally as well, but his message went far beyond the need for repentance. Yet often the ideas he was trying to convey remained difficult and intangible, with Meister Eckhart employing multiple metaphors and examples within single sermons in an attempt to make his main point.

Such earnestness was apparently another aspect of his intentionally disarming candor. *Dear children*, he pleaded, *I beg you to note one thing: I pray you for God's sake, I beg you to do this for my sake and carefully mark my words. Just listen to one word more*, he promised elsewhere, *and then no more*. To his credit, Eckhart good-naturedly mocked his own relentlessness: *I will say one word—or two or three!*; or another time, *This is a sermon for All Saints. Now it is over. Now all sit still, I want to keep you longer. I am going to preach you another sermon. God preserve us from peril!* Like many academic lecturers, Eckhart had a hard time confining his ideas to the allotted time (or theme).

Again, the risks in Meister Eckhart's popular preaching project were considerably greater than in typical mendicant sermons with much more modest goals. He knew that the truths he spoke often remained elusive. He charmingly conceded that *Here some folk will say, "You are telling us wondrous things, but we perceive them not."* *I regret that too*. In part this confusion was an inevitable shortcoming of human language. *Since our understanding is a changing thing, it cannot give birth to a perfect Word. The word you hear from me is not a perfect word: it betokens the Word that is in me.* Preaching was an imperfect art at best, but explicating matters that Eckhart himself acknowledged were often "subtle" posed an especially frustrating challenge, occasionally giving way to moments of despair: *Whoever has understood this sermon, good luck to him. If no one had been here I should have had to preach it to this offer-tory box.*

Frequent incomprehensibility was also a problem of the master's own making. Along with neologisms and striking metaphors, Meister Eckhart was known for outrageous statements that appeared to be dangerous, especially when taken out of context (as later inquisitors would do). In seeking to emphasize the Creator's attraction to the divine part in every human soul, Eckhart provocatively proclaimed that *God loves nothing but Himself*. Of



01 course he went on to explain that this fact *is to our supreme advantage, for*
 02 *therein He has in view our highest bliss. He intends thereby to lure us into Himself*
 03 *and to get us purged so that He can take us into Himself, so that with Himself He*
 04 *may love us in Him and Himself in us.* Yet no sooner was the master safely back
 05 in the realm of conventional thought than he boldly proclaimed that *I will*
 06 *never give thanks to God for loving me, because He cannot help it, whether He would*
 07 *or not: His nature compels Him to it. I will give Him thanks because by His goodness*
 08 *He cannot cease to love me.* (One can only imagine the semi-attentive husband
 09 returning home to tell his wife that, according to Meister Eckhart, thanks-
 10 giving to God was unnecessary.)

11 Intentionally jarring statements of this nature were similar to Zen koans,
 12 meant to shake the listener out of the constraints and complacency of con-
 13 ventional thinking. When Eckhart preached *If God gave me anything outside of*
 14 *His will, I would disregard it,* he was not disparaging God or His will but rather
 15 making the point that nothing existed outside of God's will. Here the same
 16 self-confidence that led the famed scholar to make personal asides prompted
 17 him to make incautious theological remarks that could be misunderstood or
 18 later be used against him. Eckhart was prone to forget that most of society
 19 did not know the open atmosphere of intellectual exchange common to the
 20 friary and the university. In one sermon on his most difficult subject, the
 21 primordial ground of divinity, the master appeared to sense that he was in
 22 perilous territory. After declaring that *I am the cause of God's being God: if I*
 23 *were not, then God would not be God,* Eckhart immediately added, *[b]ut you do*
 24 *not need to know this.* Later in the sermon he reiterated, *If anyone cannot under-*
 25 *stand this sermon, he need not worry. For so long as a man is not equal to this truth,*
 26 *he cannot understand my words, for this is a naked truth which has come direct from*
 27 *the heart of God.*

28 Disclaimers of this nature were rare in the vernacular sermons. Instead
 29 Eckhart typically had high estimations of his listeners' powers of compre-
 30 hension and attempted to remain attuned to his audience's potential con-
 31 cerns. *St. Augustine says, what a man loves, that he becomes in love. Should we*
 32 *now say that if a man loves God he becomes God? That sounds as if it were contrary*
 33S *to faith,* Eckhart conceded, *[and] strange . . . but so it is true in the eternal truth,*
 34N *and our Lord Jesus Christ possesses it.* Another statement, that *the soul is made of*



all things, sounds stupid, but it is true, as was still another teaching from Augustine, that on the surface sounds trite and commonplace. Skeptical listeners, unswayed by the master's scholarly credentials, could at least count on his solemn word: If you could know with my heart, you would understand, for it is true, and Truth itself declares it. . . . I call Truth as a witness and offer my soul as a pledge.

Eckhart knew from his youthful training in Erfurt that a preacher's preceding reputation gave him a considerable advantage in the pulpit, but even here he preferred the pedagogical dialogue of the classroom to ensure that the listener was following him. *Mark this well!* he would say at one point, *now observe, or pay attention here!* Listeners at Eckhart's vernacular sermons also got to witness the combativeness of a university professor entertaining students with dismissive remarks about his fellow theologians. Typically, the disagreement came as an aside: *Some masters would hold that the soul is only in the heart. That is not so, and some great masters have erred in this.* Comments of this nature, delivered to a nonacademic audience, reflected an entrenched scholarly habit, less a means of self-aggrandizement than an irresistible by-product from years of lecturing and disputing. In defending more controversial assertions, Meister Eckhart could become more forceful. *I have been asked to make my meaning clear. I will do so, although it is in opposition to all masters now living,* he all but barked during one sermon. He then proceeded to give a lengthy and difficult discourse on good works and time, before concluding, *See, thus we have proved the truth of my assertion, as it truly is. And all those who contradict it, I contradict them and care not a jot for them, for what I have said is true, and truth itself declares it.*

This contentious side of the master has remained mostly hidden from modern readers. Yet it would have been no surprise to his contemporaries, particularly within the order and at the university. One did not rise to prominence in both institutions without some degree of self-assurance and forcefulness of character. But Eckhart did not use the pulpit to settle scores: he never mentions any living person by name and consistently attempts to keep the focus on his description of divine union. He was fond of clarifications—*[a]s I once said before and was not properly understood*—but generally assumed sincere confusion rather than intentional misconstrual of



01 his words. References to *slow-witted persons* were principally aimed at fellow
02 theologians or clerics.

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I marvel how some priests, learned men with pretensions to eminence, are so easily satisfied and are misled by these words that our Lord spoke, "All that I have heard from my Father, I have revealed to you." They want to take it this way and declare that he has revealed to us "on the way" just so much as is needful to our eternal bliss. I do not accept this interpretation, for it is not the truth.

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While clearly benefiting from his own status as both a Dominican and a theologian, Eckhart claimed it was the truth he proclaimed, not his reputation, that was worthy of respect. Indeed among his fellow scholastics

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there are some people who consider themselves very holy and perfect, they make a great parade and use big words, and yet they seek and desire so many things, and want so many possessions and pay so much regard to themselves and to this and that; they claim to be contemplatives, and yet they can brook no contradiction. You can be sure they are far from God and have not attained that union.

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Pitting himself and his pious listeners against hypocritical clerics was a dangerous game, and Eckhart knew it. In the *Book of Divine Comfort*, he accurately predicted that

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many a dull-witted man will declare that a lot of things I have said in this book and elsewhere are not true. To this I reply with what St. Augustine says in the first book of his Confessions. . . . How can I help it if anyone does not understand this?. . . I am satisfied if what I say and write is true in me and in God.

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The master of learning, in other words, clearly lived on in the master of living. Eckhart's disappointing academic impact and his embrace of an intuitive path to God did not lead him to turn his back on philosophy or reason.



Intellectual and teaching habits formed in the classrooms of Paris continued to shape the popular sermons of the Dominican preacher, even as he labored to find a new, jargon-free, spiritual language. The “wayless way” that emerged was a marriage of reason and intuition, paradoxically combining an “imageless” approach to the divine with stunning metaphors and analogies. Although Meister Eckhart couldn’t have known it at the time, it was these sermons that would carry his message forward—much further in time and to far, far more people than his doomed *Opus Tripartitum* ever could have.

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{ CHAPTER TEN }

The Wayless Way

Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden. But whoever seeks for God without ways will find him as he is in Himself, and that man will live with the Son, and he is life itself.

GERMAN SERMON 5B

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Making Room for God

During Meister Eckhart's ten years in Strasbourg and subsequent four years in Cologne, he preached his "method" of divine union to thousands of people—nuns, beguines, and fellow friars, but also craft workers, bankers, merchants, lawyers, soldiers, parish priests, farmers, servants, widows, manual laborers, and assorted travelers, including pilgrims. He spoke to congregations in the Dominican churches of both cities, as well as male and female cloisters and other churches up and down the Rhine that invited him. He also counseled interested individuals privately, often as a confessor. The German sermons that have survived from this period, in fact, were meticulously transcribed by some of his devoted followers and in some instances edited by the master himself before circulation.

In recasting his religious philosophy for an audience of average men and women, Meister Eckhart distinguished himself from other preachers in some notable ways. Unlike the typical Dominican or Franciscan friar, he did

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01 not dwell in his sermons on sin and its eternal punishment in the torments
 02 of hell. He did not tell colorful anecdotes about the saints, like Berthold of
 03 Regensburg, or entertaining morality tales about religious scoffers who get
 04 their comeuppance in the end. There is, in fact, little drama or humor in the
 05 sermons that have survived. Nor were there any prophetic visions or de-
 06 scriptions of eternal bliss in an extended description of heaven. For those
 07 listeners seeking sensations of remorse or joy, let alone diversion of any sort,
 08 Eckhart would have been an acute disappointment.

09 At the same time, the Dominican master had one major draw that few if
 10 any of his contemporaries could match: he offered to show people how to
 11 directly experience God. The hunger for authentic and unmediated experi-
 12 ence of the divine remained as strong in the early fourteenth century as it
 13 had been a hundred years earlier. People of all backgrounds continued to
 14 seek out God in the midst of their lives and in the religious options before
 15 them. Thanks to his impeccable scholarly credentials, Meister Eckhart en-
 16 joyed the authority to describe in poetic language the practical steps that led
 17 to divine union, or what he sometimes daringly called “becoming God.”
 18 Seekers had to be willing to engage with his intellectually challenging—
 19 some might say impenetrable—way of speaking. But for those who perse-
 20 vered, the usual stories from the pulpit about dismembered martyrs paled in
 21 comparison.

22 Not that Meister Eckhart was the first preacher of his day to discuss *ways*
 23 *into God*. In his own sermons he identified two widely acknowledged meth-
 24 ods, which he contrasted with his own “third way.” *One [way] is to seek God in*
 25 *all creatures with manifold activity and ardent longing*. The most famous recent
 26 advocate of this *via positiva* was St. Bonaventure, like Eckhart a learned theo-
 27 logian and admirer of St. Augustine as well as a mendicant administrator.
 28 Bonaventure, though, was a Franciscan who embraced the affective piety of
 29 his order’s founder, in which one began by loving the created world and
 30 other humans and progressed to loving the Creator Himself. In his *Soul’s*
 31 *Journey to God*, Bonaventure described—in Latin and chiefly for his fellow
 32 Franciscans—six successive levels of illumination, beginning with the ap-
 33S prehension and perception of beauty in nature and fellow humans by the
 34N physical senses, followed by intellectual and spiritual contemplation up the



ladder of creation, and culminating in an encounter with the divine source of all. This approach appealed to many Christians of the day and was expanded upon in such instructional works as David of Augsburg's *Seven Stages of Prayer* and Rudolf of Biberach's *Seven Roads of Eternity*. Dante Alighieri was its most famous contemporary proponent and his *Divine Comedy* the most enduring dramatization of the pathway to God through ever-expanding love.

While never impugning Bonaventure or any of his fellow Franciscans by name, Meister Eckhart rejected seeking God through the external world and senses. The Creator was in all things, he agreed, but He could not be directly encountered in this way. Human will, as he had argued against the Franciscan Gonsalvo in Paris, too readily attached itself to images and intermediaries, preventing genuine access to the divine. Even poverty, the supreme virtue of the Franciscans, could become an idol. Preaching on the feast of St. Francis, Eckhart directly challenged his rival mendicants on this score, arguing, *I used sometimes to say (and it is quite true) that whoever truly loves poverty is so desirous of it that he grudges anyone having less than he has. And so it is with all things, whether it is purity, or justice, or whatever virtue he loves, he wants to have to the highest degree. Rather than look to the created world, He who would see God must be blind. Rather than seeking God's voice in the conversation of men, anyone who wishes to hear God speaking must become deaf and inattentive to others.*

The second way into God was through an ecstatic episode, such as the rapture of St. Paul, who wrote of "a man [who] was caught up and heard such words as may not be uttered by men" (2 Corinthians 12:2). Experience of this nature was a rare gift, bestowed only on a select few throughout the Church's history, perhaps including certain contemporary nuns and beguines. This way, however, like that of Bonaventure, yielded only an external and partial view of God. *You should understand*, explained Eckhart, that in a similar ecstatic experience *St. Peter stood on the circle of eternity, but was not in unity beholding God in His own being*. In other words, there was no full union between the seeker and the divine, no direct experience of God's essence.

The third way, the master concluded, *is called a way, but is really being at home, that is: seeing God without means in His own being. . . . Outside of this way*



01 *all creatures circle and are means. But led into God on this way by the light of His*
 02 *Word and embraced by them both in the Holy Spirit—that passes all words. This*
 03 *third way—not really a way—offered much more than either affective piety*
 04 *or special revelations could ever promise, and, unlike those two paths, Eck-*
 05 *hart’s third way was accessible to all seekers. How marvelous, to be without and*
 06 *within, to embrace and be embraced, to see and be the seen, to hold and be held—*
 07 *that is the goal, where the spirit is ever at rest, united in joyous eternity!* Such com-
 08 plete immersion in the Godhead, according to Eckhart, was the ultimate
 09 transformative experience sought by all humans.

10 But how could the seeker *be at home* in this way? *Is it better to do something*
 11 *toward this, to imagine and to think about God?—or should he keep still and silent*
 12 *in peace and quiet and let God speak and work in him, merely waiting for God to*
 13 *act?* Here Meister Eckhart is at his most innovative, providing genuine in-
 14 struction but at the same time arguing against a formulaic striving for God.
 15 He depicts, rather, a kind of anti-striving, in which the individual progres-
 16 sively lets go of all the impediments to divine union and then awaits *the di-*
 17 *vine birth*, an event of pure grace. This is the process of *letting-go-ness*, the
 18 approach that Eckhart first identified as prior in Erfurt and refined over the
 19 course of the next twenty years.

20 Where Bonaventure and other Franciscans wrote of gradually elevating
 21 the soul to God, Eckhart preached of stripping the soul down to its bare es-
 22 sence. God was not to be found “out there,” but within. As in his reading of
 23 the Bible, Eckhart worked as a spiritual excavator, going deep below the
 24 surface of things to get at the core truth that was God. When Jesus preached
 25 “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3), he did not just mean the phys-
 26 ically destitute but the internally liberated individual *who wants nothing,*
 27 *knows nothing, and has nothing.* The ultimate preparation for an experience of
 28 the divine birth was not the accumulation of good deeds and knowledge but
 29 rather a self-emptying of all images and desires—even the desire for God—a
 30 radical letting-go of virtually every aspect of individual identity that verged
 31 on self-annihilation.

32 Such complete *detachment* or *cutting away* (MHG *abgescheidenheit*) had
 33S been the goal of Christian monks and nuns for over a millennium. Tradition
 34N dictated that achieving it required many years of sacrifice and suffering, and



the inexhaustible resilience to rebound from countless personal setbacks. Yet Meister Eckhart reassured his listeners that to reach this state of total detachment *all you need is right intention and free will*. With such a pronouncement, he seems to embrace the kind of easy piety that foes of the new apostolic movements feared and condemned. *No one should think it is hard to come to this, even though it sounds hard and a great matter. It is true that it is a little difficult in the beginning in becoming detached. But when one has got into it, no life is easier, more delightful or lovelier.* Moreover, Eckhart claimed, any sincere believer, regardless of status, could succeed:

And so I say again, as I said before, there is no one here so coarse-grained, so ignorant, or unprepared but if, by the grace of God, he can unite his will purely and totally with the will of God, then he need only say with desire, "Lord, show me your dearest will and strengthen me to do it!" and God will do so as truly as he lives.

But what Meister Eckhart assumes—though he clarifies it less frequently—is that his listeners have already internalized the teachings of conventional piety and conformed their lives accordingly:

Now I say, as I said before, that these words and this act are only for the good and perfected people, who have so absorbed and assimilated the essence of all virtues that these virtues emanate from them naturally, without their seeking; and above all there must dwell in them the worthy life and lofty teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Before one can transcend traditional piety, one must have absorbed its values as second nature. Nonetheless, seekers should never confuse the means of piety with its ends. *If anyone were to ask me, Why do we pray, why do we fast, why do we do all our works, why are we baptized, why (most important of all) did God become man?—I would answer, in order that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God. For this reason all the scriptures were written and for that reason God created the world and all angelic natures.*

The advanced seeker has already completed three of the four steps into God



01 described by Eckhart. *The first is that fear, hope, and desire grow in [the soul]. In*
 02 *the beginning of the good life, the master concedes, even fear is useful to a man*
 03 *and gives him access to love. Similarly, for a man to have a peaceful life is good, but*
 04 *for a man to have a life of pain in patience is better; but that a man should have peace*
 05 *in a life of pain is best. Only then can the soul take the second step, where fear*
 06 *and hope and desire are quite cut off, before coming to the third stage . . . a forget-*
 07 *fulness of all temporary things. In that sense, all—or virtually all—conventional*
 08 *Christian teachings and practices formed the prelude to the divine union*
 09 *Eckhart preached. The ultimate goal of these preliminary stages, as he had*
 10 *stressed to Dominican novices, was humility, which makes a man greatest of*
 11 *all: whoever has this most deeply and perfectly has the possibility of gaining all per-*
 12 *fection. His sermons were aimed at those people who had already attained*
 13 *this deep level of humility, individuals who considered themselves pious*
 14 *Christians but hungered for more. For such men and women, he promised,*
 15 *divine union was a short step away; for those still immersed in selfish lives,*
 16 *Eckhart offered no quick fix. Unfortunately this was a key distinction that a*
 17 *casual listener—or inquisitor—might miss.*

18 The remaining challenge for advanced believers, according to Eckhart,
 19 was letting go of their own piety, at least as a source of pride or self-esteem.
 20 The only acceptable objective is to know God, and this must be a pure and
 21 selfless desire. *The just man seeks nothing in his works: for those who seek any-*
 22 *thing in their works or work for any “why” are thralls and hirelings. . . . Indeed, even*
 23 *if you create an image of God in your mind the works you do with that in view are*
 24 *dead and your good works are ruined. At one point Eckhart explicitly addresses*
 25 *the self-identified godly in his audience, all those who are bound with attach-*
 26 *ment to prayer, fasting, vigils, and all kinds of outward discipline and mortifica-*
 27 *tion, pleading with them to sever*

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 29 *all attachment to any work that involves the loss of freedom to wait on God*
 30 *in the here and now, and to follow Him alone in the light wherein He would*
 31 *show you what to do and what not to do, every moment freely and anew, as*
 32 *if you had nothing else and neither would nor could do otherwise . . . for*
 33S *otherwise you will have no peace.*

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The same purity of intention applied to prayer. *Anyone who desires something from God is a merchant*—the ultimate put-down for his pious listeners. 01
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If one prays for [anything] but God alone, that can be called idolatry or unrighteousness. . . . When I pray for nobody and for nothing, then I am praying most truly, for God is neither Heinrich nor Conrad. If we pray to God for [anything] else but God, that is wrong and faithless and a kind of imperfection, for it is to set up something beside God. 03
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Petitionary prayer, in Eckhart's eyes, was both foolish and selfish: *If you are sick and pray to God for health, then health is dearer to you than God, and He is not your God.* From the divine perspective, Eckhart preached, the great majority of individual requests were also ridiculously petty, as he illustrated with a contemporary analogy: 09
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Suppose I came to the pope a hundred or two hundred miles and when I came into his presence I were to say, "My lord, Holy Father, I have traveled about two hundred miles with great difficulty and expense, and I beg you—and this is what I came for—to give me a bean;" truly, he and whoever heard it would say, and rightly, that I was a great fool. 15
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Even noble requests, ostensibly bringing one closer to God, stumbled over themselves and became substitutions for what should be the sole objective. 21
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Anyone who seeks anything in God, knowledge, understanding, devotion, or whatever it might be—though he may find it he will not have found God: even though he may indeed find knowledge, understanding, or inwardness, which I heartily recommend—but it will not stay with him. But if he seeks nothing, he will find God and all things in Him, and they will remain with him. 25
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Letting go of the image of God as a heavenly wish granter was no easy matter, especially given how deeply ingrained this idea was in the 31
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01 Christianity of the day. Yet according to Eckhart, this prevailing attitude
 02 constituted a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of both God and
 03 prayer. *Looking for something with God [is] treating God like a candle with which*
 04 *to look for something; and when you have found what you were looking for, you*
 05 *throw the candle away.*

06 *The most powerful prayer, he revealed, one well-nigh omnipotent to gain all*
 07 *things, and the noblest work of all is that which proceeds from a bare mind. Only*
 08 *when the seeker had made his or her mind free (MHG *ledic, vri, lûter, blôz*) of*
 09 *all images, literally un-pictured (*entbildet*), could he or she learn, firstly, how to*
 10 *pray to God. . . . for God is above names and ineffable. In other words, the seeker*
 11 *should pray for union with a mysterious, imageless God, not the anthropo-*
 12 *morphized old man with a beard or any other imagined being. Yet ironically,*
 13 *the master provides one particularly memorable image to convey the image-*
 14 *less encounter: Strip God of all his clothing—seize Him naked in his robing room,*
 15 *where He is uncovered and bare in Himself. Then you will “abide in Him.”*

16 The gap between this God of the scholastics and the God of most people
 17 was considerable. Transcending the divine images that saturated fourteenth-
 18 century Christianity represented a formidable challenge that was probably
 19 beyond the average churchgoer. Yet according to Meister Eckhart only those
 20 seekers who were willing to let go of all the conventional structures of
 21 religion—to let them fall away like obsolete scaffolding—could be truly
 22 open to the divine birth within. *Whatever is familiar to you is your foe*, he
 23 warned. Even the focus on “God” Himself prevented the seeker from expe-
 24 riencing the infinite *ground of being* beyond the human idea of the Creator,
 25 leading Eckhart to make the seemingly shocking proclamation, *therefore I*
 26 *pray to God to make me free of God, for my essential being is above God*, where God
 27 is understood *as the origin of creatures.*

28 The final and perhaps greatest barrier to the divine birth within was the
 29 self, what we would today call the ego. *Cease to be this or that*, he advised, *and*
 30 *to have this and that. Our Lord, Eckhart reminded his listeners, says, “He who*
 31 *would be my disciple must abandon self;” none can hear my words or my teaching,*
 32 *unless he has abandoned self.* Yet how few otherwise pious seekers were able to
 33S accomplish this feat! *It is lamentable how some people think themselves very lofty*
 34N *and quite one with God, and yet have not abandoned self, and cling to such petty*





things in joy and sorrow. They are a long way from where they imagine themselves to be. Eckhart compared a seeker who continued to hold on to his or her personal identity to a sick man with a thick coating on his tongue, who is unable to really taste food or wine: As long as you mind yourself or anything at all, you know no more of God than my mouth knows of color or my eye of taste.

When some of his listeners expressed frustration to Meister Eckhart that they had practiced worldly detachment yet received *no inwardness nor devotion nor rapture nor any special consolation from God*, he admonished them that they were still not letting go of all that is not God. *If you would know truth clearly, Boethius had counseled, you must cast off joy, and fear, and expectation, and hope, and pain.* Each of these attitudes, Eckhart explained, was a means, and thus an impediment to experiencing the divine directly. Similarly, *memory, understanding, and will, they all diversify you, and therefore you must leave them all: sense perceptions, imagination, or whatever it may be in which you find or seek to find yourself. After that, you may find this birth, but not otherwise—believe me! Do not imagine,* the master added, *that your reason can grow to the knowledge of God. If God is to shine divinely in you, your natural light cannot help toward this end.* Human reason, to the contrary, often posed additional barriers to the divine experience.

The way to reach God, in short, was to stop pursuing Him, at least with the intellect and all its desires, *for as long as you want more and more, God cannot dwell or work in you.* Occasionally Eckhart seemed to approach the heretical self-annihilation described by Marguerite Porete: *therefore a man must be slain and wholly dead, devoid of self and wholly without likeness, like to none, and then he is really God-like.* But “destroying the old man” was a perennial Christian theme. What was novel was the apparent prioritizing of a radical internal “poverty” over external poverty—a difficult goal but one accessible to all seekers. Meister Eckhart sympathized with popular reactions to such greater spiritual demands but was unwavering on their necessity:

A man once came to me—it was not long ago—and told me he had given up a great deal of property and goods, in order that he might save his soul. Then I thought, Alas! How little and how paltry are the things you have given up. It is blindness and folly, so long as you care a jot for what you have given up. But if you have given up self, then you have really given up.





01 The true seeker must therefore be intrepid and continue forward in the
02 midst of doubts.

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04 *In all a man does he should turn his will Godward and, keeping God alone*
05 *in mind forge ahead without qualms about its being the right thing or whether*
06 *he is making a mistake. If a painter had to plan every brush-stroke with the*
07 *first, he would paint nothing.*
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10 The Divine Birth

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12 Meister Eckhart's mature understanding of *letting-go-ness* was comprehen-
13 sive. Not only must the sinner let go of the world and sin, but also of all the
14 traditional remedies proposed by the Church: pious acts of devotion and pe-
15 titionary prayer aimed at flawed human notions of "God." The seeker had to
16 let go of all images, desires, and thought itself. Only then was he or she ready
17 for the final step in Eckhart's way to God, which is *to be silent and let God work*
18 *and speak within.* Typically, the seeker was *more aware of God . . . in a quiet place,*
19 but that requirement, Eckhart clarified, reflected human imperfection more
20 than divine nature, *for God is equally in all things and places.* Most important,
21 he continued,

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23 *all your activity must cease and all your powers must serve [God's] ends, not*
24 *your own. . . . No creaturely skill, nor your own wisdom nor all your knowl-*
25 *edge can enable you to know God divinely. For you to know God in God's*
26 *way, your knowing must become a pure unknowing, and a forgetting of your-*
27 *self and all creatures.*

28 Now you might say, "Well sir, what use is my intellect then, if it is sup-
29 posed to be empty and functionless? Is that the best thing for me to do—to
30 raise my mind to an unknowing knowledge that can't really exist? For if I
31 knew anything at all it would not be ignorance, and I should not be empty
32 and bare. Am I supposed to be in total darkness?"

33S Certainly. You cannot do better than to place yourself in darkness and in
34N unknowing.



Eckhart knew well the potential terror of such an internal state, without rules, directions, goals, or other points of reference. *Sir, you place all of our salvation in ignorance!* But the master remained adamant, demanding the leap of faith that would allow God to enter.

Now you might say, "Oh sir, is it really always necessary to be barren and estranged from everything, outward and inward . . . if a man is in such a state of pure nothingness, is it not better to do something to beguile the gloom and desolation, such as praying and listening to sermons or doing something else that is virtuous, so as to help himself?"

No, be sure of this. Absolute stillness for as long as possible is best of all for you. You cannot exchange this state for any other without harm. That is certain. You would like to partly prepare yourself and partly let God prepare you, but this cannot be.

There was no turning back from this ultimate letting-go, the culminating point of existence, *and if you give way to the impulse to turn back, you are bound to lapse into sin, and you may backslide so far as to fall eternally.*

These are unexpectedly harsh words from the normally encouraging master. How could he be so certain that such self-emptying would lead to the desired divine union? The answer lay in Eckhart's understanding of the very nature of the soul and its intrinsic link to the divine.

I have a power in my soul which is ever receptive to God. I am as certain [of that] as that I am a man, that nothing is so close to me as God. God is closer to me than I am to myself: my being depends on God's being near me and present to me.

This power is variously named by Eckhart as *the divine light of the soul, the head of the soul, the husband of the soul, the guardian of the spirit, the light of the spirit, the imprint of divine nature, a citadel, a tiny drop of intellect, a twig, and, most famously, a little spark.* The masters, he notes, *say this [power] is nameless, and indeed Eckhart concedes that it is neither this nor that; and yet it is something that is more exalted over "this" and "that" than are the heavens above the*

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01 *earth. It is uncreated and uncreatable, a piece of divine and celestial nature. This*
 02 *power alone is free, and it touches neither time nor flesh, flowing from the spirit,*
 03 *remaining in the spirit, altogether spiritual. Like its divine source, this power*
 04 *knows neither time nor other human distinctions, such as here and now.*

05 Eckhart's descriptions of *the divine spark* harken back to his longtime
 06 search for a universal religious philosophy. Pagan and Christian sages alike,
 07 he believed, particularly those influenced by Neoplatonism, had long recog-
 08 nized this elusive spiritual core in all human beings and struggled to pin
 09 down its nature.

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11 *There is a fine saying of one pagan master to another about this. He said, "I*
 12 *am aware of something in me which shines in my understanding; I can clearly*
 13 *perceive that it is something, but what it may be I cannot grasp. Yet I think if*
 14 *I could only seize it I should know all truth." To which the other master re-*
 15 *plied, "Follow it boldly! For if you could seize it you would possess the sum*
 16 *total of all good and have eternal life! St. Augustine spoke in the same sense:*
 17 *'I am aware of something within me that gleams and flashes before my soul;*
 18 *were this perfected and fully established in me, that would surely be eter-*
 19 *nal life!'*



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21 The entire point of radical self-emptying and letting-go was to eliminate
 22 the mental noise and other distractions that obscured this power, which nat-
 23 urally sought out *the sweetest, the highest, the best*. The theological term for
 24 this power, Eckhart explained, was *synteresis* (Greek "careful watching"),
 25 what we today might call the moral compass, or more simply the conscience.
 26 It was the part of the soul that always pointed toward God but was often
 27 drowned out by selfish desires. Eckhart compared the liberated *divine spark*
 28 to the flame of a candle, burning brightly and more clearly the farther it
 29 springs from the wick.

30 Ironically, the "imageless" preacher relied on several metaphors to con-
 31 vey the ideal precondition of the soul necessary for the divine spark to
 32 achieve its end. One was the absolute silence necessary to hear the Word, the
 33S creative work of God.

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The heavenly Father speaks one Word and speaks it eternally, and in the Word He expends all His might and utters His entire divine nature and all creatures in the Word. The Word lies hidden in the soul, unnoticed and unheard unless room is made for it in the ground of hearing, otherwise it is not heard; but all voices and all sounds must cease and perfect stillness must reign there, a still silence.

The nature of a word is to reveal what is hidden, Eckhart preaches, which is why the author of the book of Wisdom (18:14–15) wrote, “In the middle of the night when all things were in a quiet silence, there was spoken to me a hidden word. It came like a thief by stealth.” This secret and hidden word (verbum absconditum) is in fact the Word, the divine logos of creation embodied in Christ, which when “heard” joins the Creator and creature in complete union. It is the voice crying out in the wilderness (Matthew 3:3), the sole source of hope in the inner desert generated by the seeker.

Another favored representation of the soul before union was the image of complete darkness. Only when the soul is deprived of all images can the simple, pure light of the divine spark be perceived. Here Eckhart sides with the description of divine illumination offered by Pseudo-Dionysius:

Anything you see, or anything that comes within your ken, that is not God, just because God is neither this nor that. Whoever says God is here or there, do not believe him. The light that God is shines in the darkness. God is the true light: to see it, one must be blind and must strip from God all that is “something.”

For Eckhart, this “blindness” was more than simply shutting one’s eyes to creation, it was emptying one’s mind of all images, so that the divine light can shine into that place I have often spoken of: this is so pure and transcendent and lofty that all lights are darkness and nothing compared with this light.

By far Eckhart’s favorite metaphor for the divine spark’s work in the soul was the *divine (also eternal) birth*. The birth of the Son in the ground of the soul of the believer had been a theme of early Christian teaching, dating

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01 back to the second century CE. Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and es-
 02 pecially Origen all wrote of Jesus being “born again” in the heart of the be-
 03 liever. For Origen, this event was based on acquired knowledge of the Word,
 04 while in the works of Maximus the Confessor the divine birth was the prod-
 05 uct of a virtuous life. Eckhart either knew these teachings directly or via
 06 contemporaries as Albert or Bonaventure. But his own understanding of the
 07 divine birth was distinctive, stressing instead the internal silence and empti-
 08 ness that made it possible.

09 Like the Blessed Virgin herself, the soul of the seeker had to be pure and
 10 uncorrupted. Only the higher power of the divine spark remained unpol-
 11 luted by creaturely thinking, yet even here some unwanted alloys needed to
 12 be stripped clean. *I have often said that the soul cannot be pure unless she is re-*
 13 *duced to her original purity, as God made her, just as gold cannot be made from*
 14 *copper by two or three roastings: it must be reduced to its primary nature.* Like the
 15 alchemist’s elixir, the distilled essence of the divine spark makes possible the
 16 very act of creation, of birth.

17 To be *ready to receive God’s most beloved will and to do it continually*, Eckhart
 18 clarified, *I would be a virgin, untrammelled by any images, just as I was when I was*
 19 *not. . . Since according to the masters union comes only by the joining of like to like,*
 20 *therefore a man must be a maiden, a virgin, who would receive the virgin Jesus.* As
 21 in his embrace of spiritual poverty, Eckhart distinguishes between external
 22 virginity and chastity—as in the case of those under religious vows—and
 23 internal purity, a complete *letting-go* of all mental attachments.

24 The stillness and darkness of the desert night, the utter emptiness of a
 25 virgin mind, all made a direct encounter with God inevitable. And here,
 26 Eckhart revealed, was the greatest irony of the long quest for God: the ulti-
 27 mate role reversal of seeker and sought. The final step for the human seeker
 28 was in fact pure passivity, a total *letting-go-ness* that Eckhart called *potential*
 29 *receptivity*. The ultimate *breaking through*, he explained, was not made by the
 30 seeker coming to God, but by God coming to the seeker.

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 32 *You need not seek Him here or there, He is no further than the door of your*
 33S *heart; there He stands patiently awaiting whoever is ready to open up and let*
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Him in. No need to call to Him from afar: He can hardly wait for you to open up. He longs for you a thousand times more than you long for Him.

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The divine spark provided the gateway but the initiative came from the divine creator Himself.

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The seeker who has fully let go of all images and thoughts is irresistible to God. *Whenever a man humbles himself, God is unable to withhold His own goodness; He is obliged to sink Himself, to pour Himself out into that humble man, and to the meanest of all He gives Himself most and gives Himself wholly.* Some of Eckhart's fellow theologians recoiled at the notion of limiting divine freedom in this way, but the master insisted on underscoring the divine compulsion to love:

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God's comfort is pure and unmixed: it is perfect and complete, and He is so eager to give it to you that He cannot wait to give you Himself first of all. God is so besotted in His love for us, it is just as if He had forgotten heaven and earth and all His blessedness and all His Godhead and had no business except with me alone, to give me everything for my comforting. And He gives it to me complete, He gives it to me perfectly, He gives it to me most purely, He gives it all the time, and He gives it to all creatures.

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Eager to press home his point, Eckhart reaches for some of his characteristic hyperbole.

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If anyone were to rob God of loving the soul, he would rob Him of His life and being, or he would kill God, if one may say so; for the self-same love with which God loves the soul is His life, and in that same love the Holy Ghost blossoms forth, and that same love is the Holy Ghost.

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The divine birth, after all, was God's chief aim. He is never content till He begets His Son in us. And the soul, too, is no way content until the Son of God is born in her. This, Eckhart explained, was the true meaning of the gospel text, "God sent His only-begotten Son into the world." *You should not take this to*

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01 *mean the external world, as when he ate and drank with us, but you should under-*
 02 *stand it of the inner world. In other words, we are an only son whom the Father has*
 03 *been eternally begetting out of the hidden darkness of eternal concealment.*

04 Eckhart's astonishing expansion of the Incarnation of Christ does not
 05 deny the historically unique identity or mission of the Savior but rather
 06 makes a distinction between Jesus's *carnal birth*—about [which] you have been
 07 told plenty—and the *eternal birth* or the *eternal Word* . . . spring[ing] from the *es-*
 08 *sential mind of [God] the Father*. In this latter respect, *God is ever at work in the*
 09 *eternal now, and His work is the begetting of His Son. He is bringing him forth all*
 10 *the time.*

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 12 *And so, if a man is to know God—and therein consists his eternal bliss—he*
 13 *must be, with Christ, the only Son of the Father. . . . True, you remain clearly*
 14 *distinguished in your carnal birth, but in the eternal birth you must be one,*
 15 *for in God there is no more than the one natural spring.*

16
 17 *And so, he attempted to clarify, if you ask me, since I am an only son whom the*
 18 *heavenly Father has eternally begotten, whether I have eternally been that son in*
 19 *God, my answer is: Yes and no. Yes, a son in that the Father has eternally begotten*
 20 *me, not a son by way of being unborn [i.e., eternal].*

21 Eckhart was treading on dangerous ground here, risking that some of his
 22 listeners might not appreciate his fine distinction between the way that Jesus
 23 was the unique Son of God and the way that the righteous seeker was also
 24 God's son. Still the preacher pursued his point with abandon: *For between*
 25 *your human nature and his there is no difference: it is one, for it is in Christ what is*
 26 *in you. That is why I said in Paris that in the righteous man all things are fulfilled*
 27 *that holy scripture and the prophets ever said of Christ: for, if you are in a right state,*
 28 *then all that was said in the Old and New Testaments will be fulfilled in you.*

29 These were heady words for any simple seeker in the audience. Was
 30 Meister Eckhart actually saying that a experiencing the divine birth in the
 31 soul made one divine? This was far more than any other way to God
 32 promised—but could it actually be true?

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Becoming God

For Eckhart, the eternal birth was the seeker's return to his or her true nature. But what was this true nature and how was it affected by the divine union? The divine birth, the master explains, is a profoundly intimate and intersubjective experience, in which the boundaries between the self and God become blurred. The actors and the act become indistinguishable from one another. The divine birth in the seeker's soul is a mutual event: *the opening and the entering are a single act*. The resulting self-awareness is likewise shared, to the extent that there is but one perspective. *You must know*, Eckhart explains, *that this is in reality one and the same thing—to know God and to be known by God, to see God and to be seen by God*. Or in his more famous—and provocative—formulation: *The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me: my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing and one love*.

The state Eckhart described was more than immersion. One should not think of the soul as a piece of wood in a tub of water, he cautioned, for these were *united but not one with one another . . . where there is water there is no wood, and where there is wood no water*. Nor, conversely, was the soul like a vessel in the conventional sense: *Spiritual vessels are different from physical vessels . . . whatever is received in that is in the vessel and the vessel in it, and it is the vessel itself. Whatever the spiritual vessel receives, is its own nature*. The soul in God, Eckhart underscored, is *nothing like God, but instead is of the same essence*. Just as God is everywhere, the transformed soul is everywhere. *Whatever is in God, is God, it cannot drop away from it*.

Thus the seeker does and doesn't *become God* in a conventional or literal sense. It would be more accurate to say that the divinized soul participates in God, while keeping its own distinctive and derivative identity. Human existence, after all, is borrowed from God, who is the face causing the reflection in the mirror. *It is a question difficult to answer*, Eckhart concedes, *how the soul can endure it without perishing when God presses her into Himself*. Yet the distinction between Creator and created does not totally disappear. Eckhart also carefully distinguishes between *the inner man*, who experiences divine

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01 union, and *the outer man*, who continues to live in the world. The inner man,
02 or *bare substantial being*, coexists with God *in the ground*; the outer man, or
03 *personal being*, shares of this substance but remains a worldly creature, reli-
04 ant on divine grace throughout its earthly existence.

05 For Eckhart, divine union was not some optional upgrade; it was the
06 very purpose of human existence. *I have said before and say again that every-*
07 *thing our Lord has ever done he did simply to the end that God might be with us and*
08 *that we might be one with Him, and that is why God became man. It would be of*
09 *little value for me*, he proclaimed elsewhere, *that “the Word was made flesh” for*
10 *man in Christ as a person distinct from me, unless he was also made flesh for me*
11 *personally so that I too might be God’s son*. Yet the idea that such a union could
12 be achieved on earth remained a controversial claim, especially among theo-
13 logians and church leaders. The universal accessibility of such a state posed
14 even more troubling questions about the roles of clergy and sacraments. And
15 what were the consequences for an individual who achieved such union—
16 were they truly “free in the spirit,” as some contemporaries claimed St. Paul
17 had promised? Meister Eckhart’s *wayless way* to God obviously came out of a
18 deep Christian tradition, but where it was headed was less obvious to his
19 audiences, and perhaps even to the master himself.

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{ CHAPTER ELEVEN }

Living Without a Why

The just man has such need of justice that he cannot love anything but justice. If God were not just—as I have said before—he would care nothing for God. . . . If the devil were just, he would love him insofar as he was just, and not a hair’s breadth more.

GERMAN SERMON 41

The Seeker Transformed

The divine birth represented for Meister Eckhart what the chivalric romances of his youth would have called his Holy Grail. Like a questing knight, after many years of journeying he had at last discovered the pure and shining prize he sought. This treasure, he realized early on, lay not in the wider world he had shunned at the age of sixteen, nor, he eventually decided, in the daily discipline or good works of a pious friar. Like Parzival and other great seekers, he looked increasingly within himself for answers, gradually letting go of all images and notions of his divine quarry, until the only way left to “know” the God he sought was in a direct encounter. The God Eckhart found was not reached by the intentional suffering and ecstatic visions of mystical nuns or beguines, but by his final letting go of the pursuit itself, whereupon that spark of divinity within broke through and filled his being. The result was a divinized person (*homo divinus*), what Eckhart called the “just” or the “noble” person.

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01 But at what cost this prize? Had the Parisian master unwittingly strayed
 02 into the heretical territory of religionless spirituality, the “auto-theism” of
 03 Marguerite Porete? Worse yet, was he unwittingly leading scores of the
 04 trusting faithful to their own perdition? Whatever his private reflections,
 05 Eckhart the public preacher showed no doubts that *the divine birth* consti-
 06 tuted the fundamental truth of the gospels and of all Christianity. It was his
 07 pastoral duty to share this version of the good news with the world. Yet at
 08 the same time he was no isolated naïf. As a longtime administrator with
 09 some degree of worldly experience, Eckhart knew that he was presenting a
 10 novel and potentially hazardous interpretation of the quest for salvation.
 11 Out of some combination of conviction and self-confidence he regularly
 12 courted danger with his provocative exclamations. Preaching the divine
 13 birth to “the common people” was daring enough, but Eckhart went still
 14 further, attempting to convey his unconventional notions of God and the
 15 Godhead and of an active spirituality based not on the quest for salvation but
 16 on the “why-less” nature of Creation itself. The *just man* transformed by the
 17 divine birth became in that sense not just *like* God but God Himself—a
 18 seemingly heretical notion by any traditional theological standard.

19 Without full knowledge of the master’s taste for hyperbole or of the way
 20 Eckhart qualified his most outrageous statements, his contemporaries might
 21 be forgiven for seeing more than a passing resemblance to the notorious Free
 22 Spirit heresy and its talk of self-divinization and freedom from conventional
 23 morality. Eckhart was aware of this risk and tried to head it off by invoking
 24 his theological hero Augustine, who claimed that *when a man accommodates*
 25 *himself barely to God, with love, he is un-formed, then in-formed and transformed in*
 26 *the divine uniformity wherein he is one with God.* “One with God” was a familiar
 27 and sufficiently vague phrase that kept his sermon safely within the bounds
 28 of orthodoxy, but Eckhart seemed intent on pushing his luck, adding, *when*
 29 *[that man] is one with God he brings forth all creatures with God, bestowing bliss on*
 30 *all creatures by virtue of being one with Him.*

31 What were the moral obligations of an individual who had been thus
 32 transformed by the *divine birth*? Here too the master treads perilously close
 33S to the alleged “spiritual liberty” of Marguerite Porete. *The truly humble man,*
 34N according to Eckhart, *has no need to pray to God for anything.*



This man now dwells in unhampered freedom and pure nakedness, for he needs undertake and take on nothing small or great—for whatever belongs to God belongs to him. . . . This humble man has as much power over God as he has over himself, and all the good that is in all the angels and all the saints is as much his own as it is God's own.

The spiritual perfection resulting from the *divine birth* in the soul, according to Eckhart, was not a rejection of human nature but a fulfillment of its true potential.

Some contemporaries heard in Eckhart's words an endorsement of the Free Spirit heresy, the idea that those who had experienced union with God could never lose divine status and were thus at liberty to live as they chose, eschewing good works and Christian ritual—and even committing sin—without consequence. But once again, Eckhart's penchant for shocking statements made things unnecessarily hard for him. His teachings on the effects of the *divine birth* were in fact among his most orthodox beliefs. Contrary to adherents of the Free Spirit heresy, the liberty preached by Eckhart did not make Christian virtues superfluous but rather inevitable. *Some people*, Eckhart preaches, *hope to reach a point where they are free of works, [but] I say this cannot be.* The individual transformed by the *divine spark* does not *need* to do any good works to reach heaven, but *chooses* to do them because of his or her new *divine nature*. Nor do sexual promiscuity or other sins suddenly become blameless—quite the opposite.

In very truth 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. He would rather suffer the most shameful death, as the saints have done before him, than commit the least of mortal sins.

As if to anticipate the accusations of future inquisitors, the master explicitly refutes any antinomian interpretation of his words.

Some people say, "If I have God and the love of God, then I can do what I like." They have not grasped this aright. So long as you are capable of doing





01 *anything that is against God and His commandment, you have not the love*
 02 *of God, though you may deceive the world into thinking you have. . . . just*
 03 *like a man whose legs are tied so that he cannot walk, so a man who is in the*
 04 *will of God can do no wrong.*

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Did this mean that transformed seekers became spiritual automatons or puppets? Not so, Eckhart responded, explaining that *the divine birth* allowed seekers to know God and God's will so intimately that they were strongly inclined to do good works and live morally, but they still lived within the world and were subject to its temptations. Still possessed of free will, they had to choose moment by moment to follow the righteous path, and for most, missteps were inevitable. In other words, the inner experience of union with God *is the highest perfection of the spirit to which man can attain spiritually. Yet, this is not the highest perfection that we shall possess forever with body and soul.*

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In Catholic tradition that ultimate experience is limited to those few extraordinary individuals known as saints. Only the saints, Eckhart proclaimed, experienced the divine birth to such a degree that the outer person was transformed as completely as the inner spirit. Only the saints were capable of living a purely holy life. Most just people, and here Eckhart clearly included himself, could but aspire to such perfection in this life.

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It may well be that those who are on the way to the same good but have not yet attained it, can recognize these perfected ones of whom we have spoken, at least in part. Indeed if I knew one such man, I would give a minster [large church] full of gold and precious stones, if I had it, for a single fowl for that man to eat . . . but note, you must pay good heed, for such people are very hard to recognize.

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For those saints, individual identity, what Eckhart calls *personal being*, is preserved but *the outer man* has been completely subsumed by *the inner man*, which shares the same essence as God. For most people who have experienced *the divine birth*, however, *the outer man* continues to live by his own support, albeit benefiting from *the influx of grace from the personal being in many*



manifestations of sweetness, comfort, and inwardness, and that is good: but it is not the best. The just man still remains separated from the Godhead by his worldly external nature. Sanctification may not come until much later in life or after death. In other words, for the great majority of spiritual seekers, *the divine birth* marks not the end of the individual's journey to God, but its true beginning.

Living and Loving

What will the rest of that journey look like? Meister Eckhart's long association with the contemplative tradition has frequently obscured his advocacy of the active Christian life. Yet in his preaching, the aftermath of the divine birth is even more significant than all of the preparation that made that experience possible. Take his characterization of the soul, which in both Latin and German is a feminine word (*anima; Seele*). In Eckhart's hands, that seemingly random lexicological fact is transformed into an extended metaphor on the birth of Christ in the soul, which depends on the soul first becoming pure and virgin, like the Blessed Mother herself. In his freewheeling translation of Luke 10:38, he preaches *Our Lord Jesus Christ went up into a citadel and was received by a virgin who was a wife. Now mark this word carefully, he stresses, it must of necessity be a virgin, the person by whom Jesus was received.* (In German this last word, *empfangen*, can also mean "conceived," an intentional pun on Eckhart's part.) *"Virgin" is as much as to say a person who is void of alien images, as empty as he was when he did not exist.* The master is referring, of course, to his central teaching of *letting-go-ness*, whereby the individual's soul becomes "naked" and "empty," ready to receive the Word of God via the divine spark. Only a completely detached and pure soul can experience the divine birth.

The resulting union is ineffably wondrous, Eckhart agrees, but it is far from the end of the seeker's journey.

Now attend, and follow me closely. If a man were to be ever virginal, he would bear no fruit. If he is to be fruitful, he must be a wife. "Wife" is the noblest title one can bestow on the soul—far nobler than "virgin." For a man



01 to receive God within him is good, and in receiving he is virgin. But for God
02 to be fruitful in him is better, for only the fruitfulness of the gift is the thanks
03 rendered for that gift, and herein the spirit is a wife, whose gratitude is fe-
04 cundity, bearing Jesus again in God's paternal heart.

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06 This is my commandment, Eckhart invokes John 15:12, *that you love one an-*
07 *other as I have loved you.* Yet Christians should not see love as a duty or as a
08 means to salvation: *Properly considered, love is more a reward than a behest.*
09 Good works—the master again stresses—are the natural fruits of the divine
10 birth, not its prerequisites. Of course the faithful seeker will attempt to lead
11 a life of love before union, but it is only that direct encounter with the God-
12 head that makes such a life truly possible. Having experienced the depths of
13 God's love, the transformed individual now avidly seeks opportunities to
14 express that love.

15 In explaining the proper relationship between the contemplative (inner)
16 life and the active (outer) life, Eckhart turned again to a contrast between
17 two women, this time historical figures from the gospel of Luke (10:38–42;
18 also John 11:1–2):



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20 In the course of their journey [Jesus] came to a village, and a woman
21 named Martha welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called
22 Mary, who sat down at the Lord's feet and listened to him speaking.
23 Now Martha, who was distracted with all the serving said, "Lord, do
24 you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by my-
25 self? Please tell her to help me." But the Lord answered: "Martha,
26 Martha," he said, "you worry and fret about so many things and yet
27 few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better
28 part; it is not to be taken from her."

29

30 To most fourteenth-century Christians, this translated into a biblical en-
31 dorsement of the monastic life over the distracted life of a layperson. Eckhart
32 himself voiced a version of this reading in his Latin commentary on the gos-
33S pel of John: *As long as we are not like God and still undergoing the birth by which*
34N *Christ is formed in us, like Martha, we are restless and troubled by many things.*





In a later vernacular sermon, however, Eckhart dramatically reversed the traditional exegesis of the passage, claiming that Martha was in fact more deserving of our admiration and imitation. Mary, he argued, embodied the first phase of the spiritual life—young, innocent, open, full of *unspeakable longing*. Martha, by contrast, was *mature* and full of *wise understanding, which knew how to do outward works perfectly as love ordains*. Her words about Mary were no angry retort, Eckhart explained, but more like teasing. *She saw how Mary was possessed with a longing for her soul's satisfaction. Martha knew Mary better than Mary knew Martha, for she had lived long and well, and life gives the finest understanding.*

As Eckhart had advised his novices back in the Erfurt priory to do, Martha came to know herself first, before she came to know God. She knew the world and its temptations, as well as her own internal struggles. She also knew *the eternal light*, and the compunction to serve others, hence her annoyance with her sister who *sat there a little more for her own happiness than for spiritual profit*. Jesus's response to Martha's plea was not a rebuke but a reassurance that *Mary would become as she desired. . . . She was filled with joy and bliss and had only just entered school, to learn to live*. Martha, on the other hand, *was so well grounded in her essence that her activity was no hindrance to her: work and activity she turned to her eternal profit*. And this, Eckhart reveals, is why the Lord named her twice ("Martha, Martha"): *He meant that every good thing, temporal and eternal, that a creature could possess was fully possessed by Martha.*

For a lay audience accustomed to accepting an inferior spiritual status, Eckhart's words must have come as an unexpected but welcome validation. The cloistered life of chastity, poverty, and obedience had its place in preparing for the divine birth, but ultimately it was a life lived for others that mattered most. The divine path he preached not only didn't denigrate the active life but raised it up as the ultimate goal of all contemplation. Just people went forth and performed good works not to earn God's favor or for any other reason, but because having experienced the divine birth within their souls and attained unity with God, they could not do otherwise. This was the meaning of *living without a why*, a phrase Eckhart did not invent but likely picked up from Beatrice of Nazareth or Marguerite Porete. *In the same way as God acts, so the just [person] acts without why; and just as life lives for its own sake and asks*





01 *for no why for which to live, so the just [person] has no why for which to act. Follow-*
 02 *ing the divine birth, the seeker merely expresses the divine nature that has*
 03 *become his or her own: God and I are one. Through knowledge I take God into*
 04 *myself, through love I enter into God.*

05 The just person—unlike the scholastic—had learned to stop questioning
 06 everything: Why life? Why God? Why me? The just person no longer
 07 thought of the world in instrumentalist terms, doing something in order to
 08 achieve or receive something. Like God, he or she acted without thinking of
 09 justification.

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11 *If someone asked [the just man]: “Why do you love God?” [he would re-*
 12 *spond]—“I don’t know, for God’s sake.”—“Why do you love the truth?”—*
 13 *For truth’s sake.”—“Why do you love righteousness?”—“For righteousness’*
 14 *sake.”—“Why are you living?”—“Indeed, I don’t know! [but] I like living.”*

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17 Love itself has become an irresistible force. The just person no longer has
 18 any attachments whatsoever, but rather loves all of creation equally and in-
 19 discriminately, in conformance with his or her divine nature. *You must love*
 20 *all men equally, respect and regard them equally, and whatever happens to another,*
 21 *whether good or bad, must be the same as if it happened to you.* Eckhart realized
 22 that such a state of equanimity (*gleichheit*) seemed virtually impossible, but
 23 for the truly transformed individual it was completely natural. Jesus himself,
 24 Eckhart reminded his listeners, preached: *“He who leaves father and mother*
 25 *and sister and brother, farm and fields or anything else, shall receive a hundred*
 26 *fold and eternal life”* (Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:29–30). The transformed indi-
 27 vidual can accept a friend’s death or his own eyes being plucked out with-
 28 out resistance or protest. *Though it should entail all the pains of hell, of purgatory,*
 29 *and the world, the will in union with God would bear all this eternally, forever in*
 30 *hellish torment, and take it for its eternal bliss.* One need only look to the exam-
 31 ple of the Savior Himself. When Jesus is led before Pilate, *like a lamb led to*
 32 *the slaughter, he does not open his mouth* (Isaiah 53:7), despite the governor’s
 33S repeated accusations. Like the *just man*, the mute “King of the Jews” sim-
 34N ply knows that he is the Son of God and feels no compunction to assert
 this truth.





The person who had experienced the divine birth also came closer to experiencing *the Eternal Now* of God. Freed from the why of cause and consequence, the *just man* no longer lived between “before” and “after,” between past and future. He lived in the instant, or as Eckhart calls it, *in this present now*. This was not an ecstatic flight from the world, as described by many Neoplatonists, but to the contrary a full immersion in the cares and suffering of the world. Since the transformed inner man was still encased in the outer man, this experience was not completely freed from the temporality of the world. But it did permit the just person to appreciate the essential shared being with fellow humans and other creatures, freed from the tyranny of time.

In some ways, the just person’s state of equanimity is reminiscent of Stoic apathy—the complete eradication of all emotions from the inner self, robbing pain and misfortune of their ability to distress us. But Eckhart did not seek to eliminate a powerful emotion such as empathy so much as to universalize it. For the *just man*, love was an overwhelming and unifying force. Certainly the self-knowledge advocated by Stoics had helped prepare him for the divine birth, but it was the divine essence that now filled him that overcame all suffering. The serenity he displayed might look like that of the accomplished Stoic on the surface, but it sprang from the certainty of unity with all fellow humans, not willful separation from them. Eckhart compared the abiding guidance of the divine birth to a nearby lightning strike that we intuitively turn toward.

So it is with all in whom this birth occurs, they are promptly turned toward this birth with all they possess, be it never so earthy. In fact, what used to be a hindrance now helps you most. Your face is so fully turned toward this birth so that, no matter what you see or hear, you can get nothing but this birth from all things.

The bond between the divine essence and active love was so strong because “God is love,” in the words of 1 John (4:8). *God is love because he is totally lovable and total love. God is all the best that can be thought or desired by each and every person—and more so.* The active Christian life that followed the divine





01 birth was not the logical outcome, but rather the inevitable outcome. This
 02 was the good news of the Scriptures, Eckhart proclaimed, and in preaching
 03 a life of joyous action he was merely serving as a guide for others on how to
 04 become *an authentic person*.

05 Reimagining Salvation

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 09 *Living without a why* is undoubtedly a noble goal, but how attainable was it
 10 for the average seeker? Even more fundamentally, how understandable was
 11 Meister Eckhart's description of it for the ordinary Christian of his day? The
 12 master frequently contradicted himself on this question, suggesting that he
 13 himself remained of two minds about the accessibility of his message (occa-
 14 sionally reassuring listeners *if you can't understand it, don't worry, because I am*
 15 *going to speak of such truth that few good people can understand*). It's possible that
 16 certain sermons were aimed at more advanced members of his audiences,
 17 but his Dominican training would have recoiled at any hint of elitism. More
 18 typically, Eckhart made universally high demands on all his listeners, as-
 19 suming adequate training in basic Christian doctrine, the ability to distin-
 20 guish when the master was employing hyperbole or metaphorical language,
 21 as well as an open heart motivated by genuine and pious intentions. For such
 22 individuals, who also shared his desire for a profound experience of God, all
 23 talk of the divine birth and its aftermath remained safely within the bound-
 24 aries of church orthodoxy.

25 But what about the rest of his audience? Were most people able to under-
 26 stand the master's words, much less carry them out in their own spiritual
 27 journeys? What guidance did the master offer the less spiritually adept? This
 28 was the basis of later criticisms of Eckhart's preaching that he made little
 29 accommodation to "simple and uneducated" listeners, who were prone to
 30 misunderstand many of his ideas. It's possible, of course, that the master
 31 dedicated some of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of sermons he delivered
 32 over the course of his long life to the usual topics of sin and repentance,
 33S aimed at the lowest common denominator in his audiences. In that respect,
 34N the collection of some 150 examples that survived might in fact be a





nonrepresentative sample, preserved only because of their treatment of “higher” questions such as divine union. But Eckhart’s provocative discussion of such questions was in fact the basis for his popular reputation as well as his own identity as a teacher. His message may have been obscure at times but he sought to spread it as widely as possible. It was not secret knowledge in the sense of the ancient Gnostics, but his version of “the good news” preached by Jesus.

Eckhart’s confidence in the spiritual capabilities of his audience also helps account for his apparent uninterest in addressing any ethical questions in his sermons. He speaks of “good works” and “love” for the most part as general concepts, only rarely describing them more specifically in terms of “dos” or “don’ts.” Yet this is exactly the type of direction sought by average Christians raised to avoid sin, accumulate merit, and thus get to heaven. Perhaps Eckhart believed that the basics of Christian morality were so universally understood that he need not devote any attention to rearticulating them. And certainly those who experienced the divine birth he described did not require direction on how to love, given that they were filled with the divine essence. His calling, like that of John the Baptist, was to prepare the way of the Lord, to teach his fellow Christians how to experience God. The rest, he apparently believed, would take care of itself.

And yet Eckhart’s preaching had some profound implications for Christianity as understood in his day. Unquestionably the most fundamental shift in the master’s salvation scheme was his reconceptualization of good and bad deeds alike. Like his hero Augustine, Eckhart viewed evil as simply the privation, or absence, of good. As the bishop of Hippo had written against the dualist Manicheans, evil has no substance of its own, any more than does darkness (the absence of light). Eckhart concurred: *Do you want to know what sin is? Turning away from felicity and virtue, that is the origin of all sin.* And in so turning away from God, he preached, the sinner moved outside of the divine field of vision. God cannot know sin or evil any more than the light can know the darkness. *God knows nothing outside of Himself; His eye is always turned inward into Himself. What He sees, He sees entirely within Himself. Therefore God does not see us when we are in sin. So while God makes merry and laughs at good deeds . . . all other works which are not done to God’s glory are like ashes in God’s sight.*





01 This was a shocking revelation for fourteenth-century Christians who
02 came of age amid incessant jeremiads and ubiquitous artworks portraying
03 an angry, vengeful God, one who seemed unambivalently obsessed with
04 punishing the multitude of human sins committed against Him. Eckhart's
05 God—pure being, pure love—seeks out only those parts of Himself to be
06 found within His creation, including the *divine spark* in every person. He is
07 not oblivious to human transgressions, but is the very essence of mercy: *God*
08 *always rewards more than he should and punishes less than he should.* Stressing
09 the magnitude of divine forgiveness, Eckhart even declares that *God likes*
10 *forgiving big sins more than small ones. The bigger they are, the more gladly and*
11 *quickly He forgives them.*

12 In a religious culture centered on the overcoming of sin and evil, Eckhart
13 sounded a singularly optimistic note about the human potential for reaching
14 God. But his approach remained essentially metaphysical rather than pasto-
15 ral, focused more on the cosmic big picture than on immediate needs for
16 moral guidance. The objective of most of his fellow Dominican preachers
17 was to provoke in their listeners visceral pangs of overwhelming remorse for
18 personal sins, emotions that would lead to confession, penance, and re-
19 formed lives. Eckhart the Parisian master, by contrast, spoke of evil in a
20 more abstract manner, as a necessary part of human nature but more a mis-
21 taken detour than a vicious rejection of God. Sin, he believed, was simply a
22 perversion of humans' natural inclination toward good: *If a man slays an-*
23 *other, he does so not in order to do evil: he thinks that as long as the other lives, he*
24 *will not be at peace with himself: accordingly he will seek his desire in peace, for*
25 *peace is something we love.* Even original sin could not obscure the divine light
26 that shone in every individual, regardless of character or circumstances. *In*
27 *every work, even in an evil, I repeat, in one evil both according to punishment and*
28 *guilt, God's glory is revealed and shines forth in equal fashion.* Eckhart's discus-
29 sions of sin and evil all share this lofty perspective, relying on scholastic
30 theorems rather than the concrete examples most listeners were accus-
31 tomed to:

32
33S *Should anyone ask what God is, this is what I should now say, that God is*
34N *love, and in fact so loveable that all creatures seek to love His loveableness,*





whether they know it or not, whether they wish to or not. . . . there is no creature so worthless that it could love anything evil.

Obviously Eckhart believed in Satan and hell, but just as obviously his images of both—like his descriptions of God and heaven—were dramatically different from those of other preachers.

The question is asked, what burns in hell. The masters generally say it is self-will. But I declare in truth: nothing burns in hell . . . just because God and all those who stand before His face have on account of their true blessedness something which they who are separated from God have not, this very not torments the souls in hell more than self-will or any fire.

This unquenchable desire to be united with God for all time, Eckhart preached, was a worse punishment than any of the torments that artists or poets could dream up. (Of course he had not read his contemporary Dante's *Inferno*.) So too in life, choosing evil provided its own punishment:


Now you might say, "Bad people have a good time, they get their way more than other people." Solomon says, "The evil man should not say, 'What harm will it do me if I do evil and it does not hurt me?' or 'Who would do anything to me on that account?' The very fact that you do evil is to your great harm and causes you enough pain." . . . And if God were to give [the sinner] all the sorrow in the world, He could not afflict him more harshly than he is afflicted by being a sinner.

Just as sinning was its own punishment, Eckhart preached that performing good works was its own reward. This too was a jarring message for pious listeners who aspired to attain the rewards and avoid the punishments of the afterlife. In some ways, the master's attitude toward good works presaged that of Martin Luther two centuries later. Both believed, for instance, that conventional acts of piety could only indirectly affect the soul's progress toward true union with God. In Eckhart's view, acts of asceticism and detachment might assist in the self-emptying required to make way for the





01 divine birth. For Luther, the seeker's frustrated attempts to achieve salvation
 02 by practicing such works might reveal the radically corrupt nature of all
 03 humans and the absolute necessity of divine help. Similarly, both men be-
 04 lieved that the subsequent transformative moment—what Eckhart calls *the*
 05 *divine birth* and Luther refers to as justification by faith—was made possible
 06 only by divine grace, by God coming to the seeker. Finally, both Luther and
 07 Eckhart saw the good works that follow that moment as the natural out-
 08 pouring of the soul's transformation. But while Luther characterized the
 09 resulting pious life as a form of gratitude (and quickly became wary of talk
 10 about "becoming God"), Eckhart insisted that the truly pious life lacks any
 11 cause, any "why"—even gratitude—and instead flows forth as the inevitable
 12 product of God's divine nature now dwelling within the soul. All good
 13 works, he seems to say, belong to God, since it is the divinity within that
 14 makes them possible, transforming the individual seeker into an active vehi-
 15 cle for God's love.

16 Again, Meister Eckhart does not provide his listeners with much guid-
 17  ance on what genuinely good works based only on divine love might look
 18 like. He does, however, explicitly discourage many so-called good works
 19 intended to help the seeker accumulate merit, namely *fasts, vigils, prayers,*
 20 *and the rest.* If such officially ordained activities aid in *letting-go-ness*, then
 21 they might be valuable, but Eckhart rejects all popular notions of "achiev-
 22 ing" salvation through external acts of piety. Pilgrimages to venerate shrines
 23 and their sacred relics presumably fell into this ambivalent category, as the
 24 master at one point asks, *People what is it you are seeking in dead bones?* If visit-
 25 ing a shrine helped a seeker get *in the right state*, then it was acceptable; oth-
 26 erwise it risked being idolatrous.

27 This was Eckhart's general rule: any external act that prepared the way
 28 for the divine birth was good; any act that sought something other than God
 29 was bad. Thus the master praised Holy Communion, God's entering into
 30 human beings through the sacrament of the altar, as a prefiguring of the di-
 31 vine birth and castigated those *unworthy [and] unbelieving people who do not*
 32 *believe that this bread on the altar can be transformed, that it can become the gra-*
 33S *cious body of our Lord and that God can bring this about.* Eucharistic devotions
 34N





were becoming increasingly prominent in the fourteenth century, and in this sense Eckhart was perfectly in tune with his times. 01
02

Eckhart's position on that other staple of medieval piety, petitionary prayer, was a different matter entirely. Nearly all of Eckhart's contemporaries believed in the efficacy of petitionary prayer, prayer that asks God for something—to heal a sick loved one or safeguard crops or strengthen the petitioner's faith. And nearly all those who uttered such prayers believed that enlisting the help of a heavenly intermediary—be it an esteemed saint, the Blessed Virgin, or Christ Himself—increased the likelihood that God would hear and grant their requests. Eckhart, by contrast, saw no need for intermediaries but held that the divine spark within each human, eager to be reunited with its Creator, put every soul in direct contact with God. This divine union, moreover, was the only acceptable objective of any prayer; all others were not only petty and selfish but ultimately pointless, since everything that happens is part of God's plan. 03
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On the Edge of Orthodoxy 17

The Christianity of fourteenth-century Europe was built on fostering a clear understanding of what constituted sins and what constituted good works. Meister Eckhart sincerely believed his preaching to be orthodox, yet his apparent disregard for external acts of piety understandably confused, frustrated, and even angered some listeners. If preparing for the divine birth was the only legitimate work of a devout seeker, then many conventional forms of devotion—such as going to mass or practicing various penitential acts—seemingly became pointless or even dangerous, as they might contribute to a false sense of spiritual progress. More troubling still, the rewards Eckhart promised were far greater than those proclaimed by most preachers. Not only heaven, the master seemed to imply, but divinity itself lay within the grasp of any genuine believer, no matter how lowly or simple. It's inconceivable that a man of Eckhart's intelligence and experience could not have expected significant resistance, from laypeople and clerics alike. 18
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01 And indeed, his apparent rejection of petitionary prayer and aversion to
 02 many external acts of devotion would eventually cause Eckhart difficulties.
 03 Far more controversial, though, were his teachings about “becoming God.”
 04 In large part, as usual, these problems were of his own making. To the
 05 trained theologian, it was obvious that all beings were at their core divine,
 06 since most scholars agreed with him that God was equivalent not only to
 07 love but to existence itself. As he attempted to explain to a no doubt flum-
 08 moxed, non-scholarly audience, *God knows nothing but being, He is conscious of*
 09 *nothing but being; being is His circumference. God loves nothing but His being. He*
 10 *thinks of nothing but His being.* This was merely a circumlocutory way of say-
 11 ing that all existence was from God and thus all creatures shared in His di-
 12 vinity, a not unorthodox view. Yet the master could not refrain from
 13 incautiously adding, *I say all creatures are one being*—a statement that, when
 14 he was later confronted with accusations of pantheism, Eckhart admitted
 15 *sounds bad and is wrong in this sense.*

16 Still, he argued, both being and love—aka God—were undeniably uni-
 17 versal, shared by all creatures. *Feeling I have in common with beasts and life even*
 18 *with trees. Being is still more innate in me, and that I share with all creatures. . . .*
 19 *Love is noble because it is universal.* This is what Eckhart means when he says
 20 that *whatever is in God, is God*, even animals and stones. All things have the
 21 same origin, what he calls the same primal outflowing (MHG *ursprunc*;
 22 Latin *ebullitio*): *God gives to all things equally, and as they flow forth from God they*
 23 *are equal: angels, men, and all creatures proceed alike from God in their first*
 24 *emanation. . . . Now all things are equal in God and are God Himself.*

25 Again, Eckhart’s position is not pantheist (all things are God), but panen-
 26 theist (God is in all things)—not necessarily a heretical view. And *seeing that*
 27 *God transforms such base things into Himself*, he asks, *what do you think he does*
 28 *with the soul, which He has dignified with His own image?* For while all creatures
 29 share in existence through God, only humans (and angels) have the capacity
 30 to share in God’s essence through thought. This transformation was the
 31 very fulfillment of human existence. *Why did God become man?*, he asks rhe-
 32 torically, answering: *That I might be born God Himself.* The incarnation was *the*
 33S *greatest good God ever did for man*, allowing humans to know God’s being and
 34N love directly and thereby become God: *St. Augustine says, what a man loves,*



that he becomes in love. Should we now say that if a man loves God he becomes God? That sounds as if it were contrary to faith . . . but so it is true in the eternal truth, and our Lord Jesus Christ possesses it. 01
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Eckhart insisted that these and his other statements on God as being stayed well within the limits of orthodoxy, even if they weren't always comprehensible to average listeners. He could not make the same claim, however, for his teachings on *the ground* or *the Godhead*. This novel doctrine went beyond the bounds of Catholic doctrine and into the realm of controversy, possibly even heresy. *The ground*, as Eckhart conceived of it, was beyond even God. It was the primordial place of origin, the state of ultimate nonexistence, from which God—and by extension all human souls—sprang into being. The divine birth, for all its importance, was merely a preliminary step toward the soul's ultimate goal: to return to the *Godhead* or *ground*, a process Eckhart called *breaking through*. 04
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In fact I will say still more, which sounds even stranger: I declare in all truth, by the eternal and everlasting truth, that [the divine spark] is not content with the simple changeless divine being which neither gives nor takes: rather it seeks to know whence this being comes, it wants to get into its simple ground, into the silent desert into which no distinction ever peeped, of Father, Son, or Holy Ghost . . . for this ground is an impartible stillness, motionless in itself. 15
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In this sense, both soul and Creator share the same ultimate purpose—to return to their origin in the Godhead, *to unbecome*. They meet and unite in that *strange and desert place [which] is rather nameless than possessed of a name, and is more unknown than it is known*. This is the *mysterious and secret ground* of existence, deep within the nature of both God and the human soul. 23
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In Neoplatonic terms, *the ground* was the place of origin to which the enlightened soul must inevitably return, *the hidden darkness of the eternal Godhead*. It is this belief in a common origin and point of destination—the *ground*—that leads Eckhart to make some of his most startling assertions. *A great master says that his breaking-through is nobler than his emanation (or creation) and this is true*, the master confirmed from his own experience. As a 29
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01 creature, Eckhart preached, even after experiencing the divine birth, he
02 could merely declare “there is a God,”

03
04 *. . . but in my breaking-through, where I stand free of my own will, of God’s*
05 *will, of all His works, and of God himself, then I am above all creatures and*
06 *am neither God nor creature, but am that which I was and shall remain for*
07 *evermore. . . . Then I am what I was, then I neither wax nor wane, for then*
08 *I am an unmoved cause that moves all things.*

09
10 These were bold—and to some listeners potentially heretical—words. At
11 the moment of *break-through*, both the individual soul and its Creator are
12 stripped naked of all their distinctions and properties, down to the ground of
13 being they share. The soul is *transported* (literally “translated”) *into the naked*
14 *being of God*. Notions of “self” and “God” seem to melt away as God Himself
15 is *uncreated*. To aim for total self-annihilation, in the manner of Plato’s *henosis*,
16 was indisputably heretical in the eyes of the Church. Eckhart studiously
17 avoided talking about the process of *breaking-through* in such terms, but his
18 *un-creation* of both soul and God treads perilously close. Even more daringly,
19 Eckhart also seems to imply that man himself is the origin of God:

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21 *In my birth all things were born, and I was the cause of myself and all things:*
22 *and if I had so willed it, I would not have been, and all things would not have*
23 *been. If I were not, God would not be either. I am the cause of God’s being*
24 *God: if I were not, then God would not be God.*

25
26 This is as far as the master will go in this seemingly heterodox direction.
27 Aware that his words might be so construed, he quickly adds *but you do not*
28 *need to know this*, and he concludes the same sermon with a reassurance: *If*
29 *anyone cannot understand this sermon, he need not worry. For so long as a man is*
30 *not equal to this truth, he cannot understand my words*. Yet Eckhart himself
31 clearly believed this *naked truth which has come direct from the heart of God*. The
32 concept of *the ground* or *the Godhead*—with its apparently heretical
33S implications—lay at the heart of all his other teachings. And it was here,
34N beneath the surface of his supposedly traditional theology, that subsequent



inquisitors would rightly detect a direct challenge to several fundamental Catholic teachings. Eckhart would have denied this, of course, but the radicalism of his approach to spirituality went far beyond occasional references to *the ground*. If the path to divine union was essentially a private, internal one, what need was there for religion itself? Again, if the master considered such a dangerous query, he never expressed it explicitly. But some of his listeners clearly did. Formulating a credible answer to this legitimate question would dominate what remained of Meister Eckhart's life as well as his legacy to this day.

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