PART III

Letting Go of the Self

The Preacher
CHAPTER EIGHT

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

What inspired Eckhart to take this unconventional path? In part, he considered his popular preaching merely the fulfillment of his vocation as a Dominican friar, bound always to be "useful." His increasingly intuitive approach to divine union also somewhat dampened his enthusiasm for the scholastic project of discovery. But more than any other factor, it was a midlife reassignment, possibly at his request, that created the circumstances for his new focus on preaching. In Strasbourg the master encountered a particular appetite for his ideas among religious women—nuns in orders and laywomen known as beguines—that would define the remainder of his career, shaping both the form and the content of his preaching, while simultaneously drawing him into the sights of their common enemies in the church hierarchy.

Who were these beguines and where did they come from? In effect, they 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 laywomen 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.

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

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

The communal focus, however, remained explicitly religious. Each
house followed its own set of rules, similar to those in a monastery or con-
vent. The goal was to pool the group’s work and income, so that each of the
“sisters” would have sufficient time to attend mass, hear sermons, read, and
pray. Typically the women wore plain white, brown, or gray tunics and head
coverings—similar to those worn by nuns and thus a frequent source of con-
fusion and controversy. Again, unlike mendicant friars or the wandering lay
preachers known as beghards, beguines did not engage in street begging or
public preaching. Whether or not the affiliation with a male order was for-
mal, Dominican and Franciscan friars were frequent visitors, serving as con-
fessors, counselors, and preachers. The sisters themselves ranged in age
from young women still considering marriage to elderly widows. The com-
unities were apparently dynamic in membership, with some women join-
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.

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

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

Hiding Under the Cloak of Holiness

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

Marguerite, in William’s view, was a “pseudo-woman” who had written 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
the Lesser." Contrary to "Holy Church the Greater," guided only by divine
love, the worldly version of Christianity was dominated by "peasants of
grace" and "merchants of the spirit," who focused on asceticism and other
external works, rather than the internal life of the spirit.

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

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

On April 11, 1310, the theological commission unanimously condemned
Marguerite Porete and her book as heretical. On June 1, 1310—a year before
Meister Eckhart's arrival in Paris—she was burned at the stake in the Place
de Grève (today known as the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville). Even a hostile chroni-
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 sintistmo), 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
have to fast or pray, because then sensuality is so perfectly subject to spirit and reason that a person can freely give the body whatever pleases it."

Ad Nosum was arguably directed more at beghards, wandering male preachers, than beguines, and the decree did not yet conflate the latter with the Free Spirit heresy. The guilt by association, though, was sufficient for many opponents of religious women, most notably the archbishops of Strasbourg and Cologne, who reignited their campaigns to close down beguines. One modern historian has characterized the period between the Council of Vienne and the Council of Constance (1415) as "a hundred years' war against beghards and beguines." As in all wars, as Eckhart would himself discover, that campaign would entail considerable collateral damage.

A New Calling in Strasbourg

Sometime toward the end of Meister Eckhart's second year as a regent professor in Paris, Berengar of Landora, recently elected master general of the Dominicans, approached the scholar with a new mission. The priory in Strasbourg, the order's second most important German house (after Cologne), was in crisis. Its deepest and most long-standing conflict was with the secular clergy of the city, who had regularly quarreled with the friars since their arrival nearly a century earlier. Twice—from 1261 to 1263 and between 1287 and 1290—the bishop and his clergy had persuaded the town council to expel the Dominicans from the city. In the second instance, only a papal interdict, suspending all religious services in the city, forced Strasbourg's magistrates and secular clergy to relent. Twenty years later, the Strasbourg priory maintained a fragile truce with the bishop and his clergy, often jeopardized by local Franciscans, who were among the Dominicans' most vocal critics.

Much of the clerical conflict in Strasbourg centered on competition over lay donors. Parish churches, like mendicant houses, relied heavily on voluntary contributions for both maintenance and expansion of their operations. "Message control" was another significant source of strife. Dominicans and other mendicant friars were supposed to obtain episcopal approval for all 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)
and had risen through the ranks in close personal service to King Albrecht I and the house of Habsburg. He was also unusual in the sense that concern for his church duties occupied almost as much time as political machinations. Educated at the University of Bologna, Johann devoted considerable energy to enforcing clerical discipline, through multiple synods and strict punishments. Order and hierarchy reigned as his supreme values. Multiple communities of several hundred beguines—abetted by the mendicants—indisputably threatened both.

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

Most relevant to this newest assignment, Eckhart had extensive experience in dealing with civic officials and members of the secular clergy. In addition to frequent interventions in local conflicts involving Saxony’s seventy existing houses, the provincial had overseen the negotiation and founding of at least four new male convents and three new female convents. (The first, and most straightforward, was the father’s testamentary donation for a new Dominican convent in Gotha, upon the aged knight’s death in May 1305—our only documentary evidence of the elder Eckehard’s passing.) In most instances, securing princely and papal approval for the new priories—often a challenge in itself—was inevitably followed by prolonged discussions with local officials who remained wary of Dominican expansionism. Attempts to establish a new Dominican priory at Dortmund, for example, had failed three times until Eckhart obtained the backing of Emperor Henry VII and
similarly assuaged local leaders’ concerns (and even then, local tensions resurfaced 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 occasions, 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 sacred theology.” A similar document two and a half years later names him as “Brother Eckhart, vicar general” of Teutonia. Whenever this formal appointment 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 residence did witness an apparent de-escalation in confrontational rhetoric. Surviving deeds and other financial records indicate that the former provincial’s fund-raising and persuasive abilities remained sharp, giving the Strasbourg 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
lecturer, unquestionably as a much-revered senior colleague and preacher in his sermons and private conversations. The Strasbourg collegium was one of the most highly regarded programs within the order, attracting exceptionally bright (and ambitious) young men from Alsace and further abroad. Its cohorts, officially capped at an annual enrollment of twenty-three, included two of Meister Eckhart’s most famous disciples, Johannes Tauler and Johann of Dambach. The two professors resident during the master’s early years in the priory, Jean Picard of Lichtenberg and Heinrich of Lübeck, were both resolute Thomists, unlikely sympathizers with Eckhart’s Neoplatonic leanings. Yet whatever differences of opinion emerged, there is no mention in chapter documents of open confrontations with the master general’s newly resident emissary, fresh from his second regent professorship in Paris.

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

Eckhart had counseled and preached to religious women for at least twenty 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 Nestrum_, 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 Eremitic Heinrich of Friesmar 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
description of the divine pursuit among the wider public. Eckhart’s fellow theologian Godfrey of Fontaines had marveled at the deep and subtle wisdom of The Mirror, but also cautioned that it should be used carefully, “for the reason that many readers] might abandon their own way of life and follow this calling, to which they could never attain and so they might deceive themselves, for it is made by a spirit so powerful and trenchant that there are only a few such, or none.” Meister Eckhart apparently concurred with this assessment and took great care never to mention Marguerite by name or to quote from The Mirror. At the same time, he also likely agreed with Godfrey that “none should doubt that this seed ought to bear holy fruit for them who hear it and are worthy.” Was his own preaching on the subject in Strasbourg an attempt to continue Marguerite’s work in a more orthodox manner?

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

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

The period 1250–1350, by contrast, was awash in written accounts by
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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.
Both favor dialogues between the Soul and various figures, and employ the allegorical language and style of the courtly love genre, alternating between poetry and prose. The ultimate goal for Mechthild appears to be the same as for Marguerite: self-annihilation. In describing the divine union, which Mechthild calls "receiving God's greeting," she clarifies that "[n]o one can or should receive this greeting unless one has gone beyond oneself and become nothing. In this greeting I want to die while living. The blind holy people can never ruin this for me. These are those who love and do not know." Mechthild, like Marguerite, knew because she had experienced God herself. Her book, like The Mirror, might even provide a guide for those enlightened 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.

But the differences between the two works are even more instructive, particularly in terms of Eckhart's subsequent responses to both. Mechthild, separated from Marguerite by two generations and hundreds of miles, had stayed markedly closer to the conventions of courtly love. Much of The Flowing Light's seven books and 267 chapters is occupied with wooing and
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.

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

Food played a particularly significant role in the piety of religious women. This is not surprising, given the stereotypical role of women in preparing meals, but deciding when and what to eat also represented a particular kind of physical autonomy among female mystics. Denied the priesthood, holy women could nevertheless experience the suffering of Jesus through remarkable fasts and other painful ordeals. As the Book of Twelve Beguines explained, fasting also intensified the soul's insatiable hunger for God. Beatrice of Nazareth found this divine hunger so overwhelming that she frequently experienced choking and other tortures. Fortunately, the consecrated Eucharist allowed fasting women to "eat God," and be filled with the divine presence. Again, these were not heterodox events (or simple cases of anorexia 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.

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” (kérn) 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.

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
of Stommen (1242–1312), allegedly suffered many years of diabolical torment in response to her own acts of self-mortification, ranging from being physically torn apart at night by demons (and reassembled in the morning by angels) to dodging the flying excrement thrown at her and her visitors by the same evil spirits.

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

From Pursuer to Pursued

Eckhart's reaction to such aspirations among the religious women he encountered was predictable. Long before his arrival in Strasbourg, he had decided 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 internal 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.

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, it 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.

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.

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
friend from death. Seneca counseled that a man should take all things as if he had wished and prayed for them, to which Eckhart added if [a man] is perturbed by outward mishaps, then truly it is right and proper that God has permitted him to suffer this harm, for he wanted and thought to be just and yet was upset by so small a thing. Returning to his recurrent theme of developing a proper mental attitude, Eckhart came to the Stoic conclusion that the good man should never rail at loss or sorrow: he should only lament that he does lament them, and that he is aware of his own waiting and lamentation.

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

What spiritual advice did the master provide to the many nuns and beguines he encountered in Strasbourg? Rather than proscribe these communities’ common valorization of suffering, Eckhart applauded these female audiences’ desire for divine union while offering them an alternate vision of it—one based not on mortification, but on contemplation, not on self-isolation and competition, but on a communal project of spiritual progress. The best example he knew of such internalized seeking was the famed Cistercian convent at Helfta (about fifty miles from Erfurt), founded by the count of Thuringia and in Eckhart’s youth directed by the formidable Gertrude of Hackeborn (1232–91). According to one admiring chronicler, Gertrude
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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 incapable 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. *If 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 divine spirit. “We think that in the Eucharist we eat God,” explained Hadewijch, 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 religious writers identified themselves as “women” only when they spoke about their own carnal failings, but Eckhart’s sermons positively embrace the traditionally 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 characteristic of being born.*

Female audiences undoubtedly welcomed the master’s rejection of his
age's misogyny. When God made man, he made the woman from the man's side, so that she should be like him. He did not make her from the head or the feet, so that she would be neither woman nor man to him, but so that she should be his peer. Just like men and women, he preached, the active and passive powers of the soul were complementary equals, each essential to achieving divine union. Obviously, a woman and a man are unlike, but in love they are alike; dwelling on their differences only brings bitterness and no peace. All humans, regardless of gender, possessed these complementary powers of the soul and all were capable of knowing God directly. When preaching on the perfectly humble man (homo), for instance, Meister Eckhart made clear that we use the word homo for women as well as for men, even though many of his fellow scholastics refuse it to woman because of her weakness.

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

On the other hand, Eckhart's encounter with the nuns and beguines of the Rhineland appeared to reinforce his own emerging conviction that pursuit 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.
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

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

At the same time, he had not completely abandoned his scholarly ambitions, at least for the still incomplete Opus Tripartitum. He brought the working manuscript of the Opus with him to Strasbourg, as he did in all his travels, but he does not appear to have made much progress. The only Latin works he might have written during this time were the Commentary on John and the Book of Parables in Genesis; if there were other commentaries or treatises they have not survived. Most historians believe that he abandoned the project sometime during his fifties, while in Strasbourg. In a few sermons, he mentions keeping a notebook, but these and other notes apparently contained ideas for his sermons rather than for his forlorn magnum opus. How could such an ambitious project—his life’s work as he initially imagined it—launched just a decade earlier with such enthusiasm and hope come to such an ignominious end?

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

Throughout the previous two decades he had spent in the upper reaches of university and Dominican leadership, Eckhart had repeatedly reminded himself and his listeners of the necessity of humility in all actions. Humility is a root of all good... I said in the schools of Paris that all things shall be accomplished in the truly humble man. Now, surrounded by audiences of novices,
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._
In embracing the way of intuition and negative theology, Eckhart had already called into question all so-called scientific knowledge of God. There is no way man can know what God is. But one thing he does know: what God is not. And this a man of intellect will reject. More specifically, this was an interpretation men of intellect at the University of Paris rejected. While libraries today overflow with the manuscripts of scholarly commentaries from this period, only a few scattered notes remain from Meister Eckhart’s lectures there. The Neoplatonic modification of Thomist philosophy that he and his mentor Dietrich proposed found few supporters or disciples, at least not in Paris (back in Germany was another matter). His own philosophical project was not attacked so much as ignored—an even worse fate among scholars. In part, this was the by-product of a recent retrenchment of many Dominicans around the Summa of Aquinas, which they officially declared as canonical for the order in 1363.

Eckhart was not alone in his views. Other members of the younger generation, most notably the Franciscan William of Ockham (ca. 1287–1347), had likewise begun to question the overall scientific unity of theology claimed by Duns Scotus. Their attacks focused not just on the conclusions of their fellow theologians but on their methods—specifically assumptions made on the basis of language. Ockham in particular believed that much of the speculative theology espoused by their teachers was based on unwarranted generalizations. Applying his famed razor to all theological systems, the Englishman argued that plurality was not to be assumed without necessity. In other words, all objects—humans, trees, chickens—were knowable, intelligible individual entities in themselves. Universals proposed an essential relationship between some of those individuals, but these were merely mental concepts created by humans, not by God. They had no reality. And even then, these categorical names (nomena) represented faulty generalizations based on the resemblance of various particulars and inadequate knowledge of the whole. There was no basis for assuming that all chickens, for instance, shared a common nature or essence. Many key scholastic concepts, such as species, were thus rendered meaningless, as were the deductions made employing them. Metaphysical entities, Ockham argued, remained beyond human comprehension and were only
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
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
proceeded to pick apart the individual words of the day's Latin passage, exposing at length (in a schoolmasterly way) on the relevance of *et* ("and") within a certain context, or *ecce* ("behold"). Preaching on Ecclesiasticus 50:6–7 ("Like the morning star in the mist"), Eckhart illustrated his point about the derived nature of human existence by singling out the *little word* quasi, which means "as" and is what the children at school call a "by-word" [adverb]. This is what I mean in all my sermons. The truest thing that one can say of God is "Word" (Verbum) and "Truth." God called himself a Word... man was a "by-word."

Here was the grammatical equivalent of comparing humans to a face reflected in a mirror. It is hard to imagine two more eloquent or memorable expressions of humans' fundamental dependence on God (the verb of being itself) that still preserved individuals' distinctiveness.

Far more frequently, the master had to find or invent German words for many concepts that he had, until now, only written about in Latin. Often no German counterpart for a Latin term existed, or the one that did lacked the richness or complexity Eckhart wanted to convey. This was especially true when Eckhart wanted to describe the relationship between God and the soul. His solution was to use the building blocks of the German language to construct completely new words. He became a master of neologisms, creating what philosopher Karl Jaspers called "music of abstraction." In Eckhart's hands, theology became poetry, lending his German sermons a poignancy and vitality not found in his Latin writings. Typically he chose to insert prefixes or suffixes that allowed him to transform everyday words into abstract concepts. By adding the suffix -*heit* ("hood"), for instance, to *Gott* ("God"), Eckhart was able to talk about the essential divinity (gott*heit*) that was much more than the Creator Himself. Similar modifications supplied him with words for "essence" (wes*heit* or "beinghood"), the specific quality of objects (*stückheit* or "thisness"), immutability (unwandel*barkeit* or "unchangefulness"), and of course, the unique quality of trusting detachment necessary to experience God (geldz*anheit* or "letting-go-ness"). Many of Eckhart's neologisms involved negating a known concept. *Entbilden* combined *ent* (de- or un) with *bilden* (to form or illustrate) to convey how one must "unmake" an idea or image. *Entwenden* combined *ent* and *wenden* (to become) to describe...
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).

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.

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 (grun). 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
associations with the female body and childbirth were nowhere to be found in contemporary theological writing, not even among women mystics.

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

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

You should wholly sink from your youness and dissolve into his Hisness and your “yours” and his “His” should become so completely one “mine” that with him you understand His uncreated self-identity and His nameless nothingness...

Viewed in the context of Meister Eckhart’s general teaching and as words on the page, the passage appears somewhat comprehensible; heard in a sermon, the spoken concepts of “youness” and “Hisness” must have been baffling.
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; *verruhnftichheit*) was used to mean different things at different times. Conversely, only experienced listeners would have realized that the soul’s “little spark” (vünkeln), “little castle” (bürgethn), 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.

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 analogical. After reciting Acts 9:8, for instance, he proceeded to explain:

*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.*
The remainder of the sermon proceeded to address each of the four senses in depth, which in the hands of Eckhart became a powerful exposition on the unknowability of God, the soul's hunger for the divine, detachment from the world, and the birth of God in the soul. Often the master veered from his youthful training and did not enumerate his points in advance, instead offering a succession of readings.

A medieval preacher speaks to a diverse audience of laypeople.

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

As a lecturer, Meister Eckhart regularly drew on five types of authority. Most obviously, scriptures themselves provided the starting point for all his vernacular sermons as well as the internal structure of many of them. Here his reputation as a famous theologian would help assuage any doubts among 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
teaching status while flattering his listeners that they were all involved in the same journey of discovery. I was thinking last night that there are so many heavens, he shared, semi-confidentially, or another time in the same sermon, I was thinking last night that all likeness is a preamble. I cannot see anything unless it has likeness with me; I cannot know anything unless it has likeness with me.

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

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

One of the most striking tendencies throughout Eckhart’s vernacular sermons is his fervent and almost desperate desire to connect with his audience, 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 oratory 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
course he went on to explain that this fact is to our supreme advantage, for therein He has in view our highest bliss. He intends thereby to lure us into Himself and to get us purified so that He can take us into Himself, so that with Himself He may love us in Him and Himself in us. Yet no sooner was the master safely back in the realm of conventional thought than he boldly proclaimed that I will never give thanks to God for loving me, because He cannot help it, whether He would or not: His nature compels Him to it. I will give Him thanks because by His goodness He cannot cease to love me. (One can only imagine the semi-attentive husband returning home to tell his wife that, according to Meister Eckhart, thanksgiving to God was unnecessary.)

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

Disclaimers of this nature were rare in the vernacular sermons. Instead Eckhart typically had high estimations of his listeners' powers of comprehension and attempted to remain attuned to his audience's potential concerns. 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, Eckhart conceded, [an]d strange . . . but so it is true in the eternal truth, 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—[as I once said before and was not properly understood—but generally assumed sincere confusion rather than intentional misconstrual of
his words. References to slow-witted persons were principally aimed at fellow theologians or clerics.

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.

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 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.

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 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.

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.
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 be is life itself.

GERMAN SERMON 58

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

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

Not that Meister Eckhart was the first preacher of his day to discuss ways into God. In his own sermons he identified two widely acknowledged methods, which he contrasted with his own "third way." One [way] is to seek God in all creatures with manifold activity and ardent longing. The most famous recent advocate of this via positiva was St. Bonaventure, like Eckhart a learned theologian and admirer of St. Augustine as well as a mendicant administrator. Bonaventure, though, was a Franciscan who embraced the affective piety of his order's founder, in which one began by loving the created world and other humans and progressed to loving the Creator Himself. In his Soul's journey to God, Bonaventure described—in Latin and chiefly for his fellow Franciscans—six successive levels of illumination, beginning with the apprehension and perception of beauty in nature and fellow humans by the 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*
all creatures circle and are means. But led into God on this way by the light of His Word and embraced by them both in the Holy Spirit—that passes all words. This third way—not really a way—offered much more than either affective piety or special revelations could ever promise, and, unlike those two paths, Eckhart's third way was accessible to all seekers. How marvelous, to be without and within, to embrace and be embraced, to see and be the seen, to hold and be held—that is the goal, where the spirit is ever at rest, united in joyous eternity! Such complete immersion in the Godhead, according to Eckhart, was the ultimate transformative experience sought by all humans.

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

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

Such complete detachment or cutting away (MHG abgescheidenheit) had been the goal of Christian monks and nuns for over a millennium. Tradition dictated that achieving it required many years of sacrifice and suffering, and
THE WAYLESS WAY

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
dangerous mystic

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

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

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

*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.*

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:

*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.*

Even noble requests, ostensibly bringing one closer to God, stumbled over themselves and became substitutions for what should be the sole objective.

*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.*

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
Christianity of the day. Yet according to Eckhart, this prevailing attitude constituted a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of both God and prayer. Looking for something with God is treating God like a candle with which to look for something; and when you have found what you were looking for, you throw the candle away.

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

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

The final and perhaps greatest barrier to the divine birth within was the self, what we would today call the ego. Cease to be this or that, he advised, and to have this and that. Our Lord, Eckhart reminded his listeners, says, “He who would be my disciple must abandon self;” none can hear my words or my teaching, unless he has abandoned self. Yet how few otherwise pious seekers were able to accomplish this feat! It is lamentable how some people think themselves very lofty 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.
The true seeker must therefore be intrepid and continue forward in the midst of doubts.

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

The Divine Birth

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

all your activity must cease and all your powers must serve [God's] ends, not your own. . . . No creaturely skill, nor your own wisdom nor all your knowledge can enable you to know God divinely. For you to know God in God's way, your knowing must become a pure unknowing, and a forgetting of yourself and all creatures.

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

Certainly. You cannot do better than to place yourself in darkness and in 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
earth. It is uncreated and uncreateable, a piece of divine and celestial nature. This power alone is free, and it touches neither time nor flesh, flowing from the spirit, remaining in the spirit, altogether spiritual. Like its divine source, this power knows neither time nor other human distinctions, such as here and now.

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

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

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

Ironically, the "imageless" preacher relied on several metaphors to convey the ideal precondition of the soul necessary for the divine spark to achieve its end. One was the absolute silence necessary to hear the Word, the creative work of God.
THE WAYLESS WAY

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
back to the second century CE. Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and especially Origen all wrote of Jesus being “born again” in the heart of the believer. For Origen, this event was based on acquired knowledge of the Word, while in the works of Maximus the Confessor the divine birth was the product of a virtuous life. Eckhart either knew these teachings directly or via contemporaries as Albert or Bonaventure. But his own understanding of the divine birth was distinctive, stressing instead the internal silence and emptiness that made it possible.

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

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

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

You need not seek Him here or there, He is no further than the door of your heart; there He stands patiently awaiting whoever is ready to open up and let
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.

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

*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.*

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

*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 selfsame 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.*

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

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

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

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

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

These were heady words for any simple seeker in the audience. Was Meister Eckhart actually saying that experiencing the divine birth in the soul made one divine? This was far more than any other way to God promised—but could it actually be true?
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
union, and *the outer man*, who continues to live in the world. The inner man, or *bare substantial being*, coexists with God in the ground; the outer man, or *personal being*, shares of this substance but remains a worldly creature, reliant on divine grace throughout its earthly existence.

For Eckhart, divine union was not some optional upgrade; it was the very purpose of human existence. *I have said before and say again that everything our Lord has ever done he did simply to the end that God might be with us and that we might be one with Him, and that is why God became man. It would be of little value for me, he proclaimed elsewhere, that “the Word was made flesh” for man in Christ as a person distinct from me, unless he was also made flesh for me personally so that I too might be God’s son. Yet the idea that such a union could be achieved on earth remained a controversial claim, especially among theologians and church leaders. The universal accessibility of such a state posed even more troubling questions about the roles of clergy and sacraments. And what were the consequences for an individual who achieved such union—were they truly “free in the spirit,” as some contemporaries claimed St. Paul had promised? Meister Eckhart’s wayless way to God obviously came out of a deep Christian tradition, but where it was headed was less obvious to his audiences, and perhaps even to the master himself.*
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 bair'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.
But at what cost this prize? Had the Parisian master unwittingly strayed into the heretical territory of religionless spirituality, the “auto-theism” of Marguerite Porete? Worse yet, was he unwittingly leading scores of the trusting faithful to their own perdition? Whatever his private reflections, Eckhart the public preacher showed no doubts that the divine birth constituted the fundamental truth of the gospels and of all Christianity. It was his pastoral duty to share this version of the good news with the world. Yet at the same time he was no isolated naff. As a longtime administrator with some degree of worldly experience, Eckhart knew that he was presenting a novel and potentially hazardous interpretation of the quest for salvation. Out of some combination of conviction and self-confidence he regularly courted danger with his provocative exclamations. Preaching the divine birth to “the common people” was daring enough, but Eckhart went still further, attempting to convey his unconventional notions of God and the Godhead and of an active spirituality based not on the quest for salvation but on the “why-less” nature of Creation itself. The just man transformed by the divine birth became in that sense not just like God but God Himself—a seemingly heretical notion by any traditional theological standard.

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

What were the moral obligations of an individual who had been thus transformed by the divine birth? Here too the master treads perilously close to the alleged “spiritual liberty” of Marguerite Porete. The truly humble man, 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
anything that is against God and His commandment, you have not the love
of God, though you may deceive the world into thinking you have. . . . just
like a man whose legs are tied so that he cannot walk, so a man who is in the
will of God can do no wrong.

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.

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

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.

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 experi-
enced the divine birth, however, the outer man continues to live by his own sup-
port, albeit benefiting from the influx of grace from the personal being in many
manifestations of sweetness, comfort, and inwanhness, 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
to receive God within him is good, and in receiving he is virgin. But for God to be fruitful in him is better, for only the fruitfulness of the gift is the thanks rendered for that gift, and herein the spirit is a wife, whose gratitude is fecundity, bearing Jesus again in God's paternal heart.

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

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

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

To most fourteenth-century Christians, this translated into a biblical endorsement of the monastic life over the distracted life of a layperson. Eckhart himself voiced a version of this reading in his Latin commentary on the gospel of John: As long as we are not like God and still undergoing the birth by which 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
for no why for which to live, so the just [person] has no why for which to act. Following the divine birth, the seeker merely expresses the divine nature that has become his or her own: God and I are one. Through knowledge I take God into myself, through love I enter into God.

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

If someone asked [the just man]: “Why do you love God?” [he would respond]—“I don’t know, for God’s sake.”—“Why do you love the truth?”—For truth’s sake.”—Why do you love righteousness?”—“For righteousness’ sake.”—“Why are you living?”—“Indeed, I don’t know [but] I like living.”

Love itself has become an irresistible force. The just person no longer has any attachments whatsoever, but rather loves all of creation equally and indiscriminately, in conformance with his or her divine nature. You must love all men equally, respect and regard them equally, and whatever happens to another, whether good or bad, must be the same as if it happened to you. Eckhart realized that such a state of equanimity (gelichkeit) seemed virtually impossible, but for the truly transformed individual it was completely natural. Jesus himself, Eckhart reminded his listeners, preached: “He who leaves father and mother and sister and brother, farm and fields or anything else, shall receive a hundred fold and eternal life” (Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:29–30). The transformed individual can accept a friend’s death or his own eyes being plucked out without resistance or protest. Though it should entail all the pains of hell, of purgatory, and the world, the will in union with God would bear all this eternally, forever in hellish torment, and take it for its eternal bliss. One need only look to the example of the Savior Himself. When Jesus is led before Pilate, like a lamb led to the slaughter, he does not open his mouth (Isaiah 53:7), despite the governor’s repeated accusations. Like the just man, the mute “King of the Jews” simply 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
birth was not the logical outcome, but rather the inevitable outcome. This was the good news of the Scriptures, Eckhart proclaimed, and in preaching a life of joyous action he was merely serving as a guide for others on how to become an authentic person.

Reimagining Salvation

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

But what about the rest of his audience? Were most people able to understand the master’s words, much less carry them out in their own spiritual journeys? What guidance did the master offer the less spiritually adept? This was the basis of later criticisms of Eckhart’s preaching that he made little accommodation to “simple and uneducated” listeners, who were prone to misunderstand many of his ideas. It’s possible, of course, that the master dedicated some of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of sermons he delivered over the course of his long life to the usual topics of sin and repentance, aimed at the lowest common denominator in his audiences. In that respect, 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.
This was a shocking revelation for fourteenth-century Christians who came of age amid incessant jeremiads and ubiquitous artworks portraying an angry, vengeful God, one who seemed unambivalently obsessed with punishing the multitude of human sins committed against Him. Eckhart's God—pure being, pure love—seeks out only those parts of Himself to be found within His creation, including the divine spark in every person. He is not oblivious to human transgressions, but is the very essence of mercy: God always rewards more than he should and punishes less than he should. Stressing the magnitude of divine forgiveness, Eckhart even declares that God likes forgiving big sins more than small ones. The bigger they are, the more gladly and quickly He forgives them.

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

Should anyone ask what God is, this is what I should now say, that God is 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
divine birth. For Luther, the seeker’s frustrated attempts to achieve salvation by practicing such works might reveal the radically corrupt nature of all humans and the absolute necessity of divine help. Similarly, both men believed that the subsequent transformative moment—what Eckhart calls the divine birth and Luther refers to as justification by faith—was made possible only by divine grace, by God coming to the seeker. Finally, both Luther and Eckhart saw the good works that follow that moment as the natural outpouring of the soul’s transformation. But while Luther characterized the resulting pious life as a form of gratitude (and quickly became wary of talk about “becoming God”), Eckhart insisted that the truly pious life lacks any cause, any “why”—even gratitude—and instead flows forth as the inevitable product of God’s divine nature now dwelling within the soul. All good works, he seems to say, belong to God, since it is the divinity within that makes them possible, transforming the individual seeker into an active vehicle for God’s love.

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

This was Eckhart’s general rule: any external act that prepared the way for the divine birth was good; any act that sought something other than God was bad. Thus the master praised Holy Communion, God’s entering into human beings through the sacrament of the altar, as a prefiguring of the divine birth and castigated those unworthy [and] unbelieving people who do not believe that this bread on the altar can be transformed, that it can become the gracious body of our Lord and that God can bring this about. Eucharistic devotions
were becoming increasingly prominent in the fourteenth century, and in this sense Eckhart was perfectly in tune with his times.

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.

On the Edge of Orthodoxy

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.
And indeed, his apparent rejection of petitionary prayer and aversion to many external acts of devotion would eventually cause Eckhart difficulties. Far more controversial, though, were his teachings about "becoming God." In large part, as usual, these problems were of his own making. To the trained theologian, it was obvious that all beings were at their core divine, since most scholars agreed with him that God was equivalent not only to love but to existence itself. As he attempted to explain to a no doubt flummoxed, non-scholarly audience, *God knows nothing but being, He is conscious of nothing but being; being is His circumference. God loves nothing but His being. He thinks of nothing but His being.* This was merely a circumlocutory way of saying that all existence was from God and thus all creatures shared in His divinity, a not unorthodox view. Yet the master could not refrain from incautiously adding, *I say all creatures are one being*—a statement that, when he was later confronted with accusations of pantheism, Eckhart admitted *sounds bad and is wrong in this sense.*

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

Again, Eckhart's position is not pantheist (all things are God), but panentheist (God is in all things)—not necessarily a heretical view. And seeing that God transforms such base things into Himself, he asks, *what do you think he does with the soul, which He has dignified with His own imago?* For while all creatures share in existence through God, only humans (and angels) have the capacity to share in God's essence through thought. This transformation was the very fulfillment of human existence. *Why did God become man?* he asks rhetorically, answering: *That I might be born God Himself.* The incarnation was the greatest good God ever did for man, allowing humans to know God's being and 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.

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.

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.

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.

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
creature, Eckhart preached, even after experiencing the divine birth, he could merely declare "there is a God."

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

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

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

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