

# Thomas Merton and Meister Eckhart

by  
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Let me state briefly some of the issues that will emerge from this talk, which is basically on Thomas Merton and Meister Eckhart. I view them as two of the individuals who have become paradigmatic for the age in which they lived. When we look back to the past, to the fourteenth century, we see Meister Eckhart as one of the dominant figures of that period. And in the modern world, Thomas Merton seems to be one of the representative spiritual journeyers of today.

What I am concerned to do is to unpack their environment, to show what makes them as they are, and not just to dwell on the fascinating aspects of their personalities, their journeys and their writings, even though

all that is very important; but also to give some sense of what is distinctive to their whole age. In the case of Thomas Merton, it is our age. In the case of Meister Eckhart it is another age. But the otherness of Eckhart's world is itself something of value and importance. I want to underline the fact that the Meister Eckhart who fills the books that we buy today is in actual fact very much a figure from an alien and other world, who we have appropriated and fitted into our own world. There is nothing wrong with that. Indeed, that is the very stuff of tradition. But at the same time there is a recognition that he is of interest to us precisely because he is different. And he is different to us because his age was different from our own in some striking and radical ways.

Few spiritual figures have so captured the modern imagination as Thomas Merton. The reasons, at least some of the reasons, for this are perhaps obvious. He has left us both a considerable autobiographical work, a kind of modern day *Confessions*, and also a wide range of spiritual and theological writings in which he takes issue with a number of contemporary problematics to which many if not all of us can relate in one way or another. On the one hand we see in Merton, in the *Seven Storey Mountain*, an instantly recognisable figure of classical Christian confession and apologetics, a frail human being like ourselves called by a power beyond his own reckoning to a new form of living in Christ, a player in a Sophoclean drama caught between the limitations of his own human imperfection and a landslide of grace. On the other, we see in his work a spiritually live person wrestling with many of the problems of existence in today's world. Christian history shows that there are a few individuals whose personal journey becomes a metaphor for the personal journey of many who live in the same period.

One of the ways in which Merton does seem a paradigm for the modern condition is that his own personal way is unthinkable without access to and intense engagement with a whole host of texts and figures from cultures remote from our own. Social scientists speak today of the effects of globalization; but globalization functions historically as well. The paradigm of the modern Christian is of someone who is literate, a keen reader even, and is likely to be someone who gains a good deal from the spiritual texts of other cultures, including our own more remote Christian past. So this is the Merton who devoured the Fathers, especially Maximus the Confessor, who read the Russian thinkers (rather unfashionable in Cold-War America) and who engaged passionately towards the end of his life with the monastic forms of Asian religions, culturally far removed from

either the turbulence of American youth culture which had spawned him or the (apparent) stillness of the cloister at Gethsemani in which he had sought release and retreat.

Merton reads Meister Eckhart for the first time in 1938; at least that is when he first records his name in a notebook. But, as Patrick Reilly has recently pointed out, by 1968 Eckhart has become Merton's 'life-raft'.<sup>1</sup> "I think more and more of him. He towers over all his century". In *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) it is the apophaticism of Eckhart, Eckhart's tendency to think and speak of God in negative terms, which attracts him: the taking leave of God for God's sake. We can indeed imagine the effects upon someone like Merton of the very radical theory of language that we find in Eckhart, the deeply questioning and critical way in which Eckhart understands our use of language about God by which generally we obscure him. If we want to use language of God in a way that is adequate to God, or that reveals or communicates God, then human language must undergo a radical transformation. Merton who was himself very sensitive to the problematics of language about God (as we see in his late work *Raids upon the Unspeakable*), must indeed have been struck by such ideas. Merton rightly noted the crisis of religious language in the modern age. As others before and after him have stressed, religious language, our religious language, has become exhausted, weighed down by centuries of misuse and over-familiarity. The greatest challenge to Christianity today is the discovery of new ways not just of thinking about God but also crucially of talking about God so that what we say of him or to him will communicate to others in our communities something of the awesome power of God which all must feel for whom speech about God is a contest and an issue.

The second major feature of Merton's life and work which, in my view, makes him paradigmatic as a Christian thinker for today, is the emphasis which he came increasingly to lay upon social action. Indeed, the latter part of his life (or perhaps it begins earlier) is marked by a great struggle between the cloister, the conventual Christian religious life, monasticism as withdrawal from the world, and the impulse which never waned in him, but which indeed seems always to have grown stronger, which led him to seek the realisation of his faith in radical social action. This is the Merton who feels passionately about the H-bomb, about environmental issues, about the rights of women and black people. But at the same time, such issues for Merton do not deny the claims of retreat and contemplation, the monastic style of living, but are somehow bound up

with these. Throughout his later work we can feel the tension in him, at times painfully intense, between retreat and sacrifice, contemplation and action; and we can sense Merton's own persistent conviction that at some deep level of Christian life, these two poles are one, united in a life which is both the highest service to God and the greatest self-donation to God: acting from God and being enacted by God.

But I would not claim that these two poles ever do attain unity in Merton's work, or that that conceptual tension between them is ever resolved except in the fleeting terms of an existential and personal realisation of transcendent truth, gifted by grace, which we glimpse between the pages of his books, as it were, in the silences of his own work. And I do not feel that we find such a resolution in Merton since, at the end of the day, Merton is a modern and belongs to us; and that truth, the unity of being and action, is not there in our intellectual culture. It is absent from the cultural patterning which defines us all and from which none of us, however resourceful or imaginative, can ever escape. And yet, as those of you who know my own work on Eckhart might suspect, the secret of the unity of being and action was once known and held; it was once enjoyed, and Meister Eckhart is one of those who knew it best. This is a theme which we shall seek to develop.

But let me begin the next stage of this talk with a brief presentation of the two men. Merton we have already seen. He is both a radical and a traditionalist, a man who is altogether part of his age and astonishingly at the cutting edge of his own modernist culture, but one who opts for one of the most medieval forms of the religious life. He opts for silence, but his thought or theology has a distinctively rhetorical and literary feel to it. He is an imaginative writer whose prose style can have at times quite explosive effects. He seeks withdrawal but is entirely honest and open about himself (perhaps this is the American in him); he assumes that we will want to know about him, the most intimate details of the process of his spiritual growth and maturation. Indeed we can see Merton even on the Ruby Wax Show, giving a good account of himself, and altogether raising the tenor of the day.

Of Eckhart, the man, on the other hand we know almost nothing. But here immediately we must sound a note of caution. After all, we are not comparing like with like. The Middle Ages had an entirely different sense of the appropriateness of biography, or autobiography. Hagiography was fine, of course (although it was better that someone else did this on your behalf), and, it is true, a fellow-Dominican and perhaps even erstwhile

student of Meister Eckhart called Henry Suso did in fact write one of the very first quasi-autobiographies that we possess: Henry Suso's *Life of the Servant* in which he details many vivid passages from his own life, and indeed seems something of a Merton figure in that we can easily see Suso on the medieval equivalent of the Ruby Wax Show, telling everyone how he cut the letters IHS into the flesh of his own chest, "so that the blood streamed", before realising that this really was not the way forward. So this too was part of Eckhart's world, and we often forget how surrounded he was by the exuberant aspects of medieval culture: the thousands of religious women of fourteenth century Strasburg and Cologne, whose intense eucharistic piety gave the Catholic church the feast of Corpus Christi: a religious environment which gave the very highest place to the phenomena of mystical union, if you like, to visions and to ecstasies.

Among such people the austere Eckhart moved. In fact, I would suggest that we are speaking about more than personal style, that it is virtually inconceivable that Eckhart would ever have communicated much about himself, as Henry Suso clearly did, not because this was inappropriate to his age but because of the nature of his own thought. But in one sense this is not austere at all, but is filled with a human presence, though one which is implicit rather than explicit, sensed and not seen.

Like Merton, too, Eckhart was a radical, and he belonged to some of the most radical intellectual movements of his age. He was not of course a social radical, nor could he possibly have been so, since what we think of today as social radicalism is very much a modern phenomenon. The absence of stereotypes in Eckhart's work against Jews and women for instance, unusual in a medieval writer, does argue for a kind of social egalitarianism however and is one of the most attractive features of his work. Like Merton, too, Eckhart was an avid reader; indeed Eckhart was one of the few individuals in the Middle Ages of whom we can say that he may well have read any texts that were circulating in the major centres. Also he read texts used by other cultures, notably by Arabs. Part of that results from the fact that he held very important chairs at the university of Paris, but this eclecticism, a persistent curiosity in what is being said by others, is also a feature of his intellectual work and method.

Thirdly, like Merton, Eckhart was a communicator par excellence. He was after all a Dominican. He was a preacher of extraordinary power and scope. Nothing is clearer from Eckhart's work than the drive to communicate the divine word, his own divine word. On one occasion he tells us that if there had been nobody there to listen to his sermon, then he

would have had to deliver it to the collecting box. He is also, like Merton, a literary figure, and we should not forget the great German reception of Eckhart in the modern period which has constantly been fascinated with the quality of his language, the style, imagery and literary devices of his work, which are quite extraordinary. But to say that, like Merton, he was a theologian who systematically used the work of thinkers of the past would of course be a truism to the extent that medieval theologians read the *auctoritates*, the earlier authorities, and therefore rooted their thought in a tradition in a way that Merton consciously seeks to achieve as well. But we should recall that Eckhart very much stands within a distinctively German school of Dominican thought, which was particularly influenced by the world of Neoplatonist thinkers and their Arab commentators. But I have suggested that there is something that deeply divides our two thinkers and which transcends all their affinities, and it is to this that I should now turn.

In the case of Merton, we see a tension between contemplation and action, which seeks resolution, while in the case of Eckhart the terminology we would use is that of being and doing. The reason for this is simple but important: the Middle Ages does not know contemplation in the modern sense. This terminology belongs to the sixteenth century, the Spanish mystics and their aftermath. It suggests also a dark night of the soul. The affectivity and the individuality implied by these words do not really obtain in the earlier period. The Eckhartian desert is not the dark night but rather a state of cognition, a transcendent state in which knowing becomes unknowing: a place bereft of images. It is not particularly a place of personal desolation. In the same way medieval contemplation is something that occurs in *lectio divina*, as the mind breaks through to or is illuminated by divine truth of scripture.

Here at once we can see an immense difference opening up between Eckhart, the medieval mystic, and Merton, the modern one. For Eckhart, mysticism, if we like, or union with God, is embedded within a general ontology, that is, an overall account of the way the world is. This involves elements which derive from the Bible and elements which derive from philosophical tradition, Eckhart makes scant distinction between these two. He believes that the one supports the other. Union with God has to be sought within this system; it cannot be indifferent to it since the world itself is God's creation. For the modern Merton however there is a very clear distinction between philosophy and the Bible, between a scientific account of the world and spirituality. Of course, Merton believes that the world is God's creation, but he also believes that scientists can speak

authoritatively about its genesis and its character, about the way it works. For Eckhart on the other hand, the world as God's creation is indistinguishable from his own understanding of it; there is no space here for natural science. There is no real distinction between science and theology. In sum, Eckhart lives and thinks within the parameters of a unified religious, indeed Christian cosmology. The world belongs to God, and it is the science of God, theology, which sheds crucial light on the way it works. For Merton, I would suggest the picture looks rather different. He does not need theology to explain the world; rather theology and Christianity represent a system of belief and values which he places upon the world, through an act of faith. Merton has a sense of being an active agent, freely selecting and possessing the power to change the world. Individuality is the great modern invention, if you like, the autonomous subject responding in freedom to the radical options of faith and charitable action in the world. But the modern self is also a naked self in a sense, cast adrift in a secular world, and without the myriad continuities between the inner personal world of the individual and the external world of creation.

That unbridgeable divide between them therefore is the most fundamental way in which we conceive of the world: cosmology. Now Christianity is a world religion which was created and engendered at a time when there predominated what we might call an integral cosmology. If you could have asked a medieval Christian how the world works and where it came from, then they would have been likely to give you a theological answer. In other words, they had a religious understanding of themselves and a religious understanding of the world of which they are a part. In the modern period we operate with different paradigms however. On the one hand we may have a religious view of the nature of the world (though few would argue today that space around the earth is full of light and the song of angels), but we will also have an understanding of the world which results from natural science. This has taught us that the human race is not in fact the centre of the universe and has also shown us that we do not need belief in God in order to explain the way the world is. But this is not necessarily a liberating development. After all, one of the main characteristics of very modern ways of thinking which many of us will be familiar with is an attempt to recreate an integral cosmology. Ecology, deep ecology, eco-feminism, even depth psychology are ways of seeing the world which convey the sense that we belong to a greater reality or context. Modern Gaia theory believes even in a (medieval) world-soul. These are systems of thinking which find a place for us, ways of seeing the world

which include us. Without that, we are left as isolated individuals, negotiating our existence as best we can, and are no longer at home in the cosmos.

But not so Meister Eckhart, who was, we may believe, entirely at home in the cosmos. The most distinctive and beautiful idea in Meister Eckhart which conveys this fact is that of the birth of God in the soul. I would suggest that this is a theology of grace. God is a Trinitarian God. God gives birth to himself all the time in the human soul:

The Father gives birth eternally to his Son in his own likeness. "The Word was with God, and the Word was God". It was the same in the same nature. And I say further: he gave birth to the Word from my soul. Not only is my soul with him and he with it in his likeness, but he is in it; and the Father gives birth to his Son in the soul in entirely the same way as he gives birth to him in eternity. He must do so whether he wishes to or not. The Father gives birth to his Son without ceasing, and I can say more: he gives birth to me as his Son and his same Son. Further, not only does he give birth to me as his Son, but he gives birth to me as himself and himself as me and myself as him and as his nature. In the innermost source, I spring forth in the Holy Spirit; in that place there is one life, one being and one act. All God's action is one; that is why he gave birth to me as his Son, without distinction.<sup>2</sup>

It is the birth of God in the soul, which is the language of being, which grounds moral action. It makes us good. The two are as one. The great metaphor that Eckhart uses for being morally good, for being, to borrow a phrase from other world traditions, non-existent. The good life for Eckhart is non-existence, is being empty of self. It is what he calls detachment. And detachment comes from the birth of God in the soul. As Eckhart says:

When this birth has really happened then no creature can hinder you any more on your way. Rather they all point you to God and to his birth. We can represent this with the image of a flash of lightning. Whatever lightning strikes, be it a tree, an animal or a man, it turns that object immediately towards it. If a man has his back towards the lightning he turns around in that moment to face it. If a tree has a thousand leaves, they all turn instantly towards the flash. See, it is the same for those who know this birth. They are instantly turned towards it by whatever is present to them, however coarse. Indeed what was previously an obstacle for you now comes to your aid.<sup>3</sup>

So it is the birth of God in the soul which creates detachment, which is emptiness, which is being empty of creatures and therefore filled with God. Now where does Eckhart get that from? It seems to us to be mystical theology, which has subjective significance only, and is not in any sense a pragmatic and objective description of the world. But in fact 'the birth of God in the soul' belongs in Eckhart to a whole complex of thought, some of which is emphatically 'scientific', and represents an attempt to explain the nature of the working of the world. The following quotation is taken from Eckhart's commentary on the Gospel of John, which he writes as a scholastic theologian and where he discusses the issue of the origin of the world. He talks about the Trinity and he talks about the generation of the Word and states:

What proceeds is in its source. It is in it as a seed is in its principle, as a word is in one who speaks, and is in it as the idea in which and according to which whatever proceeds is produced by its source.<sup>4</sup>

That is scholastic language for saying that the Word is the same as the Father. It is not the likeness of the Father. It is the same as the Father. The Son and the Father are One. The Son or Word is the same as what the Father or the Principle is. But what is crucial to this is that Eckhart is talking about more than the Trinity here. As he says:

On this account I would say what it says here about the procession of the divine persons holds true and is found in the procession and production of every being of nature and art.<sup>5</sup>

In other words he moves from talking about God to talking about the world. The world is as God is. The same principles apply. The world comes from the Trinity. Therefore the way the world is constructed, the way it is generated as world, is defined by the Christian Trinity and precisely because the action of the Christian Trinity is what makes the world as it is, so in the same way, we who are creatures have in us that same Trinity which gives birth to itself in the soul.

So we look back at Meister Eckhart and discern in him, in his belief that the same divine principles operate inside us and outside us, the outline of a world that is whole. Above all it is a world in which we can truly be at home. Of course, we are free to believe this today, no less than religiously minded people have done at any other time in our history, but we will do so differently. This is my point. For we are forced to make a distinction

between subjective and objective ways of seeing the world. We cannot use theology as a model for explaining the way the world functions, but, as modern people, we are obliged to rely upon the understanding of those whose professional task it is to work out the various causalities of the world. Although many of us will believe in, let us say, the saints, not so many of us will rely upon prayer to a particular saint to heal appendicitis rather than a visit to the hospital. Of course, there are enormous practical advantages in being able to understand the world also in non-theological and more pragmatic terms, but the price our civilisation has paid for this is that we no longer live within a cosmos which has us at its centre and thus in which we can be said to be deeply and imaginatively at home. Some trends in modern science do tend in this direction more than before, but it is still all too easy to see ourselves as individuals whose continuities of being with the physical world and the cosmos as a whole are tenuous in the extreme. When we read the work of medieval mystics such as Eckhart therefore, we are fascinated by the extent to which religion governs their world and their existence, allowing them a unity of being and action, while they prayed to the God within whose trinitarian dynamic was not only the principle of their own deepest being but also the metaphysical mechanism which governed the visible and invisible structure of the world in which they lived and were at home.

## Notes and References

1. P.Reilly, 'Moses as an Exemplar: The Paradoxes of Thomas Merton', *The Merton Seasonal*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Autumn 1996, 13.
2. O.Davies, *The Rhineland Mystics* (London: SPCK, 1989) , 35
3. *Ibid.*, 37
4. E.Colledge & B.McGinn, *Meister Eckhart* (NY: Paulist Press, 1981), 124.
5. *Ibid.*