

God as Cow

Second Version¹

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(Posted on September 5, 2010)

The latter part of the European middle ages greatly resembles the state of established religions during the early axial age. Salvation was thought to be entrusted to a priestly hierarchy who alone claimed jurisdiction over the sacraments, the only approved way to God. No distinction was made between allegiance to God and allegiance to the Church's political structure, which routinely was administered by corrupt individuals. By way of reaction, the fourteenth century saw the rise of numerous mystical movements that attempted to foster an individual piety apart from ecclesiastical approval. Of course, this development eventually gave rise to the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther. One of the significant writers and teachers of this movement was Meister Eckhart² (who, by the way, was probably completely unknown to Luther).

Never one to use an abstract, technical expression when a colorful piece of imagery would do, Meister Eckhart once said, "Many people look at God the way they would look at a cow, and

¹ This article constitutes the second version of a paper bearing this title. The original version was on the program for the annual meeting of the Midwestern region of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1995, and a large part of its content, insofar as it was accurate, has become irrelevant. The next year (1996), when I chaired the division, I incorporated that earlier paper in my address, which bore the title, "Three Glimpses of God." I believe that this section is as relevant now as it was fifteen years ago.

The third version, again entitled "God as Cow," went into a different direction, namely the attempts by atheists to depict the Christian understanding of God as "cow," so that they can then show that the Christian cow is a very poor cow. In that version, I assume that, for the most part Christians do not see God in that manner, but then I go on to show that atheists or anyone else who is committed to a purely immanentistic view of God, must create for themselves a "cow" in order to have a basis for a meaningful life. This presentation was my presidential speech to the International Society of Christian Apologetics, and it is available as a DVD on-line through my website (URL: www.wincorduan.com).

² Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1329?) was sometime teacher at the University of Paris and for many years spiritual director in Dominican convents and Beguine houses. Though he was the author of commentaries and treatises, his fame rests primarily on his vernacular sermons. At the end of his life, possibly even posthumously, the inquisition won a papal condemnation of some of Eckhart's key statements.

they love God the way they would love a cow."³ In this section I would like to explain this quotation in its immediate context and in the larger framework of Eckhart's writing and derive from it certain conclusions.

The sermon in question was preached by Eckhart on a day of the feast of St. Augustine. Its text comes from Ecclesiasticus⁴ 50:10 in which the priest of God is compared to a golden vessel adorned with precious stones; in Eckhart's allegory the saint is a vessel that contains God. His main point is that whoever lets go of all accidental things on earth will own them where they are pure and eternal in God. Or, more simply put, to let go of the world is to receive God.

Eckhart insists on a distinction between the way a physical vessel contains a substance, e.g. as a barrel holds wine, and the way in which the soul contains God. The barrel and wine are merely in accidental physical proximity. The barrel is not in the wine, nor is the wine truly in the barrel; the wine is simply in the hollow space outlined by the barrel. However, when God is in the soul, the soul is also in God. And this mutual containment would not be possible if the soul were not directly related to God. Indeed, Eckhart states that the soul is the very picture of God.

There are two kinds of pictures, Eckhart goes on to expound, an external resemblance, as the reflection of the face in a mirror, and this unique case of the picture of God. Whereas the mirror itself is unchanged as it reflects an picture, God pours his very nature into the picture of himself, so that the picture, i.e. the soul, does in fact contain God and does not merely reflect him. At the same time, God communicates his nature to the soul without suffering loss of it in himself; Eckhart says, "the nature pours itself completely into the picture, and yet remains completely whole in itself."⁵ Though Eckhart does not use the word, it is clear that, since the soul is not God by nature, and since God remains God in his own nature, the presence of God in the soul is a case of analogy; God's same nature is present, yet in two different ways. Eckhart goes on to insist that he is referring to God's giving of himself (an ontological reality), not just a knowledge or recognition of God (an epistemological reality).

The picture of God received by the soul does not come through mediation, Eckhart continues (one of his many none too subtle barbs at the Church's sacramental system). God and the soul are within each other's immediate presence. Of course (and here is the critical point that Eckhart's inquisitors never did get), the preeminence belongs to God. Thomists should remind themselves here of the analogy of attribution; the soul has the nature of the picture only because God had it first and instilled it in the soul in his free act of grace. If it were not for God's preeminence, the soul would actually be God; but that cannot be, for then and this is crucial for

³ *Quasi vas auri solidum ornatum lapide pretioso; Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, ed. Josef Quint, (Munich: Diogenes, 1963), 227; the sermon has received its standard reference in *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen Werke*, ed. Josef Quint, 5 vols. (Stuttgart, 1958 76)1: 261.

⁴ Not to be confused with Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiasticus is one of the apocrypha.

⁵ *Quasi vas auri*, 225.

what follows God would no longer be God.⁶ Therefore, this doctrine is neither pantheism nor panentheism. Eckhart goes on to stress the idea that the original reality belongs to God, not the soul. The picture in the soul points to God, not to itself.⁷ To quote the Meister,

A picture does not originate from itself nor on its own behalf; it originates from the original whose picture it is and belongs to it with all that it is. Whatever is alien to the original does not belong to the picture, nor does the picture originate from it. A picture takes its being directly from the original and has one being with it and is the same being.⁸

In short, the picture of God in the soul is the presence of God himself, neither a natural property of the soul nor simply a reflection of God.

By way of application, Eckhart exhorts Christians to live in the light of this truth. As carriers of this picture, Christians should live out of (i.e. as originating from) God and for God, not out of themselves nor for themselves. Their lives should exactly replicate God's desires, loving what God loves and hating what God hates.

The problem with making statements like the above is that people tend immediately to start looking for benefits. Someone might ask, "So, if I have this kind of close relationship with God, do I then receive sweetness and light? Do I have a tremendous mystical experience with God?" Eckhart's reply must at first seem disappointing to anyone looking for benefits; he insists that we must look to God alone, not to what may or may not be happening at any given moment in our lives. We should not let the divine picture become cluttered with distracting earthly pictures.

Now follows the text that sets the theme for this discussion: Some people look at God and love him the way they would a cow. We love a cow primarily for the sake of the benefits she gives us: milk and cheese; in the same way, some people try to love God for whatever benefits they can receive from him, whether it be wealth or consolation. But here is Eckhart's warning:

⁶ Consequently, contrary to Eckhart's critics he was not a pantheist. Pantheism is the world view according to which there is only one fundamental substance, namely God, and so the finite is identical with the infinite (though the infinite may have forgotten that identity!). But Eckhart never makes that mistake. First, creatures are created by God; in Eckhart's Platonic terms, they are the instantiations of divine exemplars, as also Aquinas held. To deny that fact would, for Eckhart, constitute an impossible dualism. Second, God communicates himself to his children by his very self; in modern evangelical theological terms, this idea is equivalent to the "indwelling of the Holy Spirit." Eckhart insists that such a relationship is not a natural property of the soul (though the openness towards it is), but the result of God's grace. *Euge serve bone et fidelis; Deutsche Predigten*, 274.

⁷ Cf. *Dum medium silentium tenerent; Deutsche Predigten*, 419.

⁸ *Quasi vas auri*, 226. Of course, not in the sense of identity of substance, which would be pantheism, but in the sense of shared being that originated with God. Thomas Aquinas also said, "All beings other than God are not their own being, but are beings by participation." *Summa Theologica*, 1, 44, 1. Being belongs preeminently to God; he shares it with his creatures; they participate in his being by analogy.

"Everything for which you strive that is not God himself can never have such a high degree of goodness as that it would not become an obstacle to the highest truth."⁹ In other words, if you look to God for benefits, you will not only not receive the benefits, you will also miss out on God himself.

Consequently, the only option for the Christian is the one pictured in the text for the sermon, to be a vessel that is open to receiving God himself. This is something that can only happen as long as we do not lose our focus because of mundane distractions. The point is that only then, when we live in the light of God's own presence, can "our lives become consistent and steady. Only then can we stand equally firm in love and suffering, in fortune and misfortune."¹⁰ The virtues we display will be the overflow of God's own attributes out of the vessels that we are as we live as one with God. Eckhart ends the sermon with a prayer that this oneness with God may become a reality for all.

For our purposes, the application of this sermon is in its contrast between two different approaches to the Christian life: 1) the recognition of God as God and a life based on an unmediated relationship with him, and 2) the devotion to God in order to receive something. In the first instance God is supreme, and in the second case the creature is supreme with God as the creature's attendant. This second, "bovine," approach to the Christian life will always become self-detrimental in Eckhart's analysis.

The logic of Eckhart's argument is really a piece of not-so-conventional wisdom. Many people today make the reward of a commitment the goal for the commitment; they may try to find a job for the satisfaction that they hope it will bring, a marriage partner for the fulfillment they count on to experience, and a lifestyle for the happiness they expect to receive. But disappointment is inevitable, for these expectations cannot be goals in themselves; they can only be results of commitment to a job, a marriage partner, or a lifestyle in their own right. In the same way, people who try to use God for the sake of receiving spiritual milk and cheese will be disappointed. God is God; you cannot use him as your agent to help you with your plans.

Eckhart used another picture to make a similar point in another sermon.¹¹ Some people are looking for what they believe they are entitled to (happiness and material benefits) by using God as a candle. He surmises that, presumably, if they ever found it, they could then dispose of God, as one does to a used-up candle. However, as long as people pursue their search this way, they are going to find nothing, for creatures in and of themselves are nothing.¹² They will find neither God nor their expectations fulfilled.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹ *Nunc scio vere; Deutsche Predigten*, 170-71.

¹² Cf. my explanation of this point in "A Hair's Breadth from Pantheism: Meister Eckhart's God-centered Spirituality," *JETS* 37 (June 1994): 263-74.

The same problem comes up with regard to people who want to meet God on their own terms, rather than God's. In yet another sermon Eckhart speaks of the way in which some people have made God a matter of taste.¹³ Someone might like the way God tastes one way, but not some other way. So, for example, Eckhart says that some people may prefer God through contemplation and devotion, but if their spiritual lives seem to run dry, they feel that God must no longer be present because they do not like the way God tastes in any other way. Such people confuse a means of knowing God with God himself; consequently, they place God out of sight (Eckhart says, "under a bench") just so that they can go on pursuing spiritual techniques—which will not give them what they want either. Eckhart hopes that they may finally realize that God has disclosed himself and his love on his own initiative and that they will find him, not where they have tried to place him, but where he actually is.¹⁴

So far, these ruminations have concerned the spiritual life of the Christian believer; yet it is only a stone's throw from there to the issue of theological method. Here, also, we can stumble across the erroneous treatment of God as cow, namely as someone (or something) who exists for the benefit of the theological system, not as someone whose being has priority and precedence. As "cow," God's primary role would be functional, fulfilling a need that apparently could not be met in some other way and having his existence and nature be defined entirely by his ability to fill that specific need, no more and no less. I believe Eckhart would want to warn us that to try to find God on our terms rather than his is to miss out on God altogether. After all, cows can only give us milk and cheese; God alone can provide salvation.

¹³ *In hoc apparuit caritas dei; Deutsche Predigten*, 176 -77.

¹⁴ Had Martin Luther known of Meister Eckhart's writings, he might have recognized his own early experience in this passage.