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A HAIR'S BREADTH FROM PANTHEISM: MEISTER ECKHART'S GOD-CENTERED SPIRITUALITY[1]

WINFRIED CORDUAN*

If God is omnipotent and omniscient, can a person truly be free? If human beings are free, would this fact not limit God's omnipotence and omniscience? Recently a lot of effort has been expended in attempting to sort out this apparent difficulty. If God is in control of all events and knows exactly what is going to happen in the future, is it still possible to affirm human actions as significantly free—namely, as not in some way determined by God?

In many cases the response has been to assert that, since we know already that we are free, God's power or foreknowledge must be limited in some way. Leading this charge has been process thought as exemplified by Charles Hartshorne, who asks: "Can we worship a God so devoid of generosity as to deny us a share, however humble, in determining the details of the world, as minor participants in the creative process that is reality?"[2]

Even some otherwise quite conservative writers are questioning the idea of an infinite God in order to accommodate human freedom. Bruce Reichenbach has advocated that "God limits himself in the creation of individuals who are free."[3] Clark H. Pinnock,[4] Donald H. Wacome[5] and Frederick Sontag[6] all ask us to restrict our understanding of God's omniscience with regard to foreknowledge of free human actions.

Any number of responses to this movement is possible. For instance, one can embrace it, criticize it, or renew efforts to maintain both the classical picture of God and human freedom. All of these are efforts worthy of much further discussion, but in this paper I propose to do none of them. Instead I intend to present a radical alternative in conceptualization and

* Winfried Corduan is professor of philosophy and religion at Taylor University, Upland, IN 46989-1001

[1] The title is an echo of John Wesley's comment that he finds himself "within a hair's breadth of Calvinism" (*Works* 8 284) Sometimes truth is better served with the scalpel than with the sword

[2] C Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany State University of New York, 1984) 16

[3] B Reichenbach, "God Limits His Power," *Predestination and Free Will Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (ed D Basinger and R Basinger, Downers Grove Inter-Varsity, 1986) 108

[4] C H Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," *Predestination* (ed Basinger) 147

[5] D H Wacome, "Divine Omniscience and Human Freedom," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society* 12 (1989) 49–64

[6] F Sontag, "Does Omnipotence Necessarily Entail Omniscience?", *JETS* 34 (1991) 505–508

spirituality. What if, for one horrifying moment, we were to let go of the treasured notion of a fundamental human autonomy and let God be in control without any encumbrance at all? In other words, what if we were to go in the opposite direction of the dilemma and question the significance of human power for the sake of maintaining an omnipotent and omniscient God?

Our guide for a glimpse at this alternative will be Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1329?), sometime teacher at the University of Paris, 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 many of Eckhart's key statements.[7] Meister Eckhart states:

> Where the creature ends, there God begins to be. Now God desires nothing more from you than that you abandon yourself in your creaturely being and let God be God in you.[8]

We shall develop this picture with the aid of six theses gleaned from Eckhart.

I. THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE TO GOD IS NOTHING

Meister Eckhart occupied the same chair at the University of Paris that had been held not too long earlier by Thomas Aquinas. Thus it can be expected that he was quite familiar with the many subtle ways of expressing the relationship between God and the world.[9] But frequently he chose to employ a dialectical approach in which he would express the extremes of the infinity of God and the finitude of the world.

Thus we read: "All creatures are pure nothing. I am not saying that they are of little worth or anything at all; they are pure nothing."[10] Such a statement out of context can be highly misleading, and there is no shortage of commentators who have attempted to equate this notion with the Buddhist idea of absolute nothingness (*sunyata*).[11] But the best way to understand a thinker is in terms of his or her intellectual environment. Thus it is ironic that David Blamires should even have felt the need to confirm that Eckhart belongs "within the context of scholastic philosophy

[7] The bull *In agro dominico* dated March 27, 1329 Translated in *Meister Eckhart The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* (New York Paulist, 1981) 77–81

[8] The standard editions of Eckhart's works are *Meister Eckhart Die deutschen Werke* (5 vols , ed J Quint, Stuttgart, 1958–76) Standard citation *DW Meister Eckhart Die lateinischen Werke* (5 vols , ed E Benz, J Koch, *et al* , Stuttgart, 1938–75) Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* (ed J Quint, Munich Hanser, 1963) Most of my references will be to *Deutsche Predigten* or an English translation, followed by the standard citation if available The present quotation is from *In hoc apparuit caritas dei in nobis (Deutsche Predigten* 180, *DW* 1 83)

[9] E g the analogy of being

[10] *Omne datum optimum (Deutsche Predigten* 171, *DW* 1 58)

[11] E g R Schurmann, "The Loss of the Origin in Soto Zen and in Meister Eckhart," *Thomist* 42 (1978) 281–312

and theology "[12] In the case in question Eckhart does not say that "all is nothing," which could be a Buddhist statement He states that "all creatures are nothing," which has to be at least a western, if not a Christian, affirmation In one paradoxical stroke he refers to the reality of the creatures and yet denies their being How can such a thing be?

There are two motives behind Eckhart's assertion, one metaphysical and one pastoral Metaphysically he attempts to emphasize the purely one-directional dependency of creatures on God Let us continue the above passage

> Whatever has no being, that is nothing Now all creatures have no being for their being depends on the presence of God Were God to turn from his creatures for only a moment, they would be annihilated [13]

In other words, Eckhart does not say that at present creatures do not exist Of course they do But he maintains that they do not have being in the sense of owning it as intrinsic to themselves Creatures have been given being It is something they have received extrinsically, and they continue to receive it extrinsically every moment of their existence Creation is potentially instantaneously reversible, and thus creatures exist only on borrowed being

Meister Eckhart had no patience with those of his accusers who attempted to circumvent this thesis In his official defense he stated

> To deny this is to be ignorant and blaspheme God, as if God were not the creator and the creature was not created For creation is from nothing not [merely fashioning] John 1 3 says "All things were made by him and without him was not anything made "[14]

The very essence of finite creatures is to be dependent on the Creator

The second motive behind this thesis is pastoral, though it has epistemological overtones Given the above reality, why would one want to look to the creatures rather than the Creator when it is the Creator that one wants to find? If you are looking for being, do not look at nothing Eckhart asserts "When the soul no longer moves outward to external things, then it has come home and lives in a simple pure light "[15]

Eckhart is here not denying external revelation, whether in Scripture or in terms of a natural theology After all, that is where he learned these truths He is also in no way denying the goodness of creation as creation We can understand such a statement as containing a timeless warning against idolatry or worldliness But I believe that the best way to understand it is in the context of the spiritual debates of his day Then it becomes a polemic against a theology of ecclesiastical mediation, a theology that says the way to discover God is through a physical life of devotion,

[12] D Blamires, "Meister Eckhart Historical Perspectives," *Theor Theor* 10 (1976) 229

[13] *Omne datum optimum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 171)

[14] Eckhart, *Defense* 9 13 Translated in R B Blakney, *Meister Eckhart A Modern Translation* (New York Harper, 1941) 286

[15] *Surrexit autem Saulus* (*Deutsche Predigten* 333)

sacraments and institutional authority. As long as you focus on those things, says Eckhart, you focus on nothing.

Thus Eckhart shows us that much of contemporary theology is occupied with nothing. John B. Cobb declaims that "there is no reason to suppose that the world once came into being out of nothing."[16] He clarifies: "The central concern is that God and man be each understood as having integrity in himself."[17] From Eckhart's standpoint this is a tragic mistake, for it seeks to ascribe intrinsic being to a creature when it is entirely dependent on its Creator for its being.

II. TO EXIST IS TO EXIST IN GOD

The second thesis is the corollary of the first. Insofar as anything exists, it exists in and through God. This view is not pantheism because we are talking about created beings, not emanations of God. But it is a description that underscores the orthodox doctrine of the divine immanence and creatorhood. Eckhart states: "All creatures are as nothing in God, for he has the being of all creatures within himself."[18]

At one point he goes on to say the apparently unthinkable: "What is in God is God."[19] Removing this sentence from its context could lead one to draw the erroneous conclusion that, since all creatures are in God, they are God. Eckhart's opponents chose to take exactly this interpretation. But he himself admits that, taken in that way, the sentence is false and erroneous.[20] The context and Eckhart's clarification leave no doubt that he is merely referring to the creatures' being (their existence), not their essence.

> It is true that they are one in being, just as they are one in God who is being, of whom all things are and have their being immediately [21]

All things are one with God insofar as they share his community of being. In this respect what Eckhart says is not all that different from previous assertions of the participation of finite beings in God's being. After all Thomas Aquinas said, "All beings other than God are not their own being, but are beings by participation."[22]

Still, this immediate relationship between God and creation demands a lot of explanation. Here we have one of the areas that eventually led to Eckhart's condemnation, for his accusers took him to assert that the world is coeternal with God. In his commentary on Genesis Eckhart states:

> So, when someone once asked me why God had not created the world earlier, I answered that he could not because he did not exist.[23]

[16] J B Cobb, Jr , *God and the World* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1969) 91
[17] Ibid 80
[18] *Surrexit autem Saulus* (*Deutsche Predigten* 332)
[19] *Nunc scio vere* (*Deutsche Predigten* 167, *DW* 1 46)
[20] *Defense* 9 50 (Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* 300)
[21] Ibid
[22] T Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q 44, a 1
[23] *Commentary on Genesis* 7 (*Essential Sermons* 85)

In fact he appears to place the creation of the world and the generation of the Second Person of the Trinity into the same moment when he says

> In the one and the same time in which he was God and in which he begot his coeternal Son as God equal to himself in all things, he also created the world [24]

Thus it would appear that "the world has existed from eternity "[25]

And surely it has, Eckhart protests, if you adopt the standpoint of God in his eternal present moment In between the two sentences just quoted from the Genesis commentary he himself clarifies the paradox

> How could he have created earlier when he had already created the world in the very now in which he was God? It is false to picture God as if he were waiting around for some future moment in which to create the world [26]

As Eckhart sees it, God exists in the eternal now There is no time, nor is there any before or after All that God does he does in this eternal moment All that he knows he knows in the eternal moment Eckhart states that God "gives and works only from eternity" and adds exasperatedly "It must be said that he that denies this knows little "[27]

Thus the world was created and exists—at least in its virtual and formal existence—within God's eternity Eckhart considered it the height of stupidity that his accusers could not grasp this simple point If God exists in the eternal now and yet does not create in that eternal now, then there must be a second eternal now in which he creates But this is folly [28]

Furthermore Eckhart makes it abundantly clear that the world's virtual eternal existence in God does not confer eternal material existence

> It does not follow from this, that if God created the world from eternity, the world *is* therefore from eternity, as the uneducated think For creation is not an eternal state, just as the thing created is not eternal [29]

Thus the world is finite, but its finitude is rooted in the infinity of God

Finite being is grounded in Infinite Being And thus we are led back to the original point "Our entire life should be a being Insofar as our life is a being, to that extent it is in God "[30] It is difficult now to understand why Eckhart's accusers would not accept his explanation, which had solid precedent in theology, philosophy and devotional writings The records are incomplete, and there were many currents and tensions in the air But a plausible explanation is this Eckhart's sometimes unguarded formulations were seen as undergirding the spiritual movements—for example, the Brethren of the Free Spirit[31]—that promised a relationship with God apart

[24] Ibid

[25] This is the second of Eckhart's condemned propositions From *In agro dominico* (*Essential Sermons* 78)

[26] *Commentary on Genesis* 7 (*Essential Sermons* 85)

[27] *Defense* 9 27 (Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* 293)

[28] *Defense* "Conclusion" 5 (Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* 305)

[29] *Defense* 3 8 (Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* 265)

[30] *In occisione gladii* (*Deutsche Predigten* 192, *DW* 1 125)

[31] See R E Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley University of California, 1972) 165–166

from Church or tradition on a purely personal level. Eckhart's creation metaphysics stresses an immediacy to God that had to be seen as making any this-worldly mediation dispensable. It would have emphasized the notion that God could be found right where we live, not just through a special sacred dimension.

Thus in one sense Eckhart says some things that coincide with the message of contemporary theology. He would agree with Cobb that to understand the world as purely "profane" would leave us and our world "denied of all value and even reality."[32] But Eckhart's solution goes in the opposite direction from Cobb. Rather than endowing the world with equal status *vis-à-vis* God, he emphasizes the integral dependency of the world on God, its Creator. Cobb sets up the Biblical God and the world as opposed. Eckhart sees the world as composed of God's being (in the sense explained above).

III. SURRENDER TO GOD IS NOT A TRANSACTION

Let there be no doubt about it: If pressed, Meister Eckhart was able to assert the freedom of the will.[33] But we need to be careful about how we are to understand such an assertion. At times when he states that the soul is free he means it in the sense of being pure, unimpeded, unstained, or incorrupt, not in the sense of having the possibility of choice.[34] Second, when he is given the chance to explain his concept of free will we see a very paradoxical picture.

> The masters have said that the will is free in such a way that no one can coerce it, except God alone. But God does not coerce the will; rather, he transfers it into freedom, so that it can will nothing but what God himself is and what freedom itself is. And the human spirit is not capable of willing anything but what God wills. But this is not the absence of freedom; it is its original freedom.[35]

In other words, true freedom consists of God liberating the human spirit in such a way that it will necessarily choose precisely what God wants it to choose.

Thus any notion of the relationship between God and the human being as beginning with a proper human choice is unacceptable in Eckhart's thought. The relationship is premised from beginning to end on the work of God alone. The point of it all is that the human being must unreservedly surrender his or her will to God. Then the human will and the divine will become identical.

> Whoever completely yields his will catches God and binds God, so that God is not capable of doing anything but what the human being wills. Whoever

[32] Cobb, *God and the World* 29.
[33] *Defense* 9.21 (Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* 289).
[34] *Intravit Jesus* (*Deutsche Predigten* 163; *DW* 1.21).
[35] *Convescens praecepit eis* (*Deutsche Predigten* 291; *DW* 2.73).

> completely yields his will, to him God returns his [God's] will so completely and so naturally that God's will becomes the property of the human person.[36]

Eckhart is interested in one thing: to let God become God within us.[37]

Eckhart repudiates the merchant mentality that believes it can bargain with God. These spiritual merchants are "good people who do their good works for the honor of God, such as fasting, waking, praying, and similar things . . . in order that God will give them something in return."[38] But God owes us nothing. Anyone who attempts to please God while still looking for his or her own advantage falls short of the mark.[39] Anyone who feels that he or she can influence the will of God simply does not understand our relationship to God.[40]

Eckhart insists that when it comes to salvation "this work is so lofty and noble that God alone can bring it about."[41] Thus his understanding stands in direct contrast not only to a contemporary process thinker such as Schubert Ogden, for whom the historical act of God has concrete reality only as a human act,[42] but also to any kind of idea of cooperative work between God and the human person. God is neither partner nor copilot. He is not even master in any external sense,[43] but he is God who by his own will works to transform us.

IV. THE BELIEVER POSSESSES THE NATURE OF GOD

Christian theology has always maintained that God indwells the Christian believer and transforms him or her into his image. Possibly like no other orthodox thinker before or after, Meister Eckhart explores the implications of this doctrine. In a central passage he states:

> In all good persons, God exists completely; and there is something in the soul in which God lives; and there is something in the soul where the soul lives in God [44]

Eckhart has two favorite corollaries to this doctrine. First, he maintains that such a union could not be possible if there were not something within the soul capable of fellowship with God. He refers to this part of the soul with many different names, such as a spark or a little castle, and he always emphasizes that it must resemble God in order to commune with God. Thus in its very nature this castle must be like God. Its reality

[36] *Moyses orabat dominum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 336)
[37] *In hoc apparuit* (*Deutsche Predigten* 180, *DW* 1 83)
[38] *Intravit Jesus in templum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 154, *DW* 1 3)
[39] Ibid 155
[40] *Iusti vivent in aeternum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 182)
[41] *Adolescens tibi dico surge* (*Deutsche Predigten* 342)
[42] S Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York Harper, 1966) 180–182
[43] "The other day I thought about the question whether to take or desire anything from God I want to contemplate it carefully, for if I were to take anything from God, I would be as a servant, and he would be as a master in giving But that is not how it should be with us in eternal life" *Iusti vivent in aeternum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 186)
[44] Ibid 340

has to be beyond words and images, and thus it must resemble something uncreated (if such a thing could hypothetically exist) in all possible ways.[45]

The other corollary is that God is never less than God and that when God indwells a person his very divine nature is present within him or her. God does not operate only externally on the Christian person. The infinite triune God, the Lord and Creator of the universe, indwells the believer.

Meister Eckhart frequently captures the doctrine of God's indwelling with the imagery of the birth of God in the soul, an image used by the apostle Paul in Gal 4:19. Eckhart, once again acknowledging the eternality and simplicity of God, states: "The Father gives birth to the Son in the soul in the same manner as he gives birth to him in eternity and in no other way."[46] Given Eckhart's starting point, it really could not be any different: The Father does not have different sons whom he generates off and on depending on time and place, but the Father generates one Son in one eternal act. Thus if the Son is born in the soul, then this birth constitutes the one act that is the Son's eternal generation.

Consequently, insofar as God comes to be in me (and the "insofar" cannot be overemphasized[47]), it is the one God into whom I am transformed. I become a son of God.[48] The divine aspect of this transformation can only be the one and only God. Therefore "everything done by God is one; thus he gives birth to me as his son without distinction."[49] Eckhart also parallels this transformation to transubstantiation:

> Whatever is transformed into something else will become one with it. Exactly in this way I am transformed into him, so that he effects me as *his* being, and thereby as that one, not as something similar By the living God, it is true that there is no distinction whatsoever![50]

These are powerful words, but not heretical—though the Inquisition would not acknowledge the fact that Eckhart was referring to God instilling his being, not that the human person, *qua* human, is divine. In yet another passage Eckhart contends that it is not possible for someone to be a son of God without partaking of the nature of God—though, of course, this is a mystery.

> In this sense there is no "similarity" and no "difference " Rather Without all distinction we shall become the same substance and nature which he is himself[51]

[45] *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 163)

[46] *Iusti vivent in aeternum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 185, *DW* 1 97)

[47] Cf Eckhart's expostulations to that effect in *Defense* 4 1 (Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* 267) Also many of Eckhart's troubles may be attributed to the fact that his opponents refused to recognize the "insofar" ("Theological Summary," *Essential Sermons* 54)

[48] Cf Rom 8 14–17, Gal 3 25–4 7, Heb 2 17

[49] *Iusti vivent in aeternum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 185, *DW* 1 97)

[50] Ibid 186

[51] *Videte, qualem caritate* (*Deutsche Predigten* 319, *DW* 3 310)

This is not pantheism Meister Eckhart does not deny the transcendence of God God is also beyond the soul [52] Most importantly, divinization is not a natural property of the human soul The human being as human being is never more than human being, and there is no divine presence in the human natural state

> God is present in the soul with *his* nature, with *his* being, and with *his* deity, and yet he is not the soul The reflecting of the soul returns God to God, but *it* [the soul] is what *it* is [53]

And similar thoughts to the above are expressed in the following statement along with an indispensable clarification

> When a person empties himself completely for the sake of God, and he no longer belongs to anyone but God, and he lives solely for God, then he is truly the same thing *by grace* which God is by nature, and God recognizes no distinction between himself and this person But now I have said "by grace "[54]

This point may not be ignored Whatever transformation occurs, however much God may take up residence within us, it is always the result of God's grace, never the product of human nature

The same idea was expressed by the legendary Sister Catherine, whose story was at one time attributed to Meister Eckhart Catherine says to her confessor, "Father, rejoice with me, I have become God!"[55] Of course she has not really become God, nor does she think so But she has become aware of what God has done for her by his grace "Yes, I am granted everlasting bliss I have attained *by grace* what God is *by nature* "[56]

Thus Meister Eckhart reminds us of a fundamental yet heavily ignored truth Christianity is supernatural in nature, and the person who becomes a Christian not only undergoes a change of will but also a change of being

V THE ONLY AGENCY IN THE BELIEVER'S LIFE IS GOD'S

At a time when Christendom became increasingly preoccupied with external works, Meister Eckhart was a part of the vocal minority insisting on the absolute priority of the interior life Given the information of the previous points, it is not surprising that he continues to ascribe all significant agency in the Christian's life to the direct work of God

It is not that Eckhart rejects all external works He expects them and encourages them, even to the point of elevating Martha over Mary [57] But external works are nothing if they are not produced by God himself inside

[52] *Nolite timere eos* (*Deutsche Predigten* 272)
[53] Ibid 273 (italics mine)
[54] *Euge serve bone et fidelis* (*Deutsche Predigten* 274, italics mine)
[55] "The Sister Catherine Treatise," *Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher* (ed B McGinn, New York Paulist, 1986) 358
[56] Ibid 359 (italics mine)
[57] *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 281–282)

the person.[58] Understood rightly they are not an effort but a fruit produced by God inside a person. Self-effort apart from God leads to nothing. Self-effort of a godly person leads to very little fruit. God himself will bring about uncountable fruit.[59] As one instance, any kind of love that we humans might have to show is really the work of the Holy Spirit, not our own.[60]

Eckhart's logic goes further. The Christian recognizes no spiritual agency in any part of his or her life other than God's. The soul that is united with God is completely moved by God. It does not move itself. In fact Eckhart claims: "No creature can bring about effects, only the Father can."[61] This idea also includes the corollary of providence: Nothing external can happen to the Christian apart from the will of God. Eckhart counsels people who ask if whatever happened to them is the will of God by saying, "If it were not God's will, it would not have happened. You have neither sickness nor anything else, except that it be God's will."[62] Here and elsewhere he makes it a measure of our Christian maturity whether we are willing to accept God's will joyfully rather than trying to get God to change our circumstances.[63] Even human sinful actions, whether they are done to us or by us, could not have happened if God had not included them in his will for the believer.[64]

There is nothing sadder than the idea that God is not in complete control. Harold Kushner made the best-seller list by claiming that God cannot contravene occurrences based on chance, human free choice, or the laws of nature.[65] That list does not leave much of anything for God to control. But where God is not in control there is no ground for hope or assurance. Meister Eckhart reminds us that God is at the reins and has no intention of letting go.

VI. THESE REALITIES ARE TRUE APART FROM ANY SPECIAL EXPERIENCE

In his article on Meister Eckhart in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Ninian Smart constantly represents as Eckhart's teaching that through special contemplative experiences one achieves the union with God we

[58] Ibid 161, *DW* 1 21

[59] Cf my development of this theme in Meister Eckhart in "Meister Eckhart and the Paradox of Good Works," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society* 14/1 (1991) 1–14

[60] *Hoc est praeceptum meum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 387)

[61] *Ecce ego mitto* (*Deutsche Predigten* 378)

[62] *Omne datum optimum* (*Deutsche Predigten* 168, *DW* 1 58)

[63] *Beati, qui esuriunt* (*Deutsche Predigten* 372)

[64] *Reden der Unterweisung* (*Deutsche Predigten* 70–71, *DW* 5 185 ff), *Das Buch der gottlichen Trostung* (*Deutsche Predigten* 109–110, *DW* 5 3 ff) One is reminded here of the words of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, question 27, on providence "The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand "

[65] H S Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York Schocken, 1981)

have discussed above.[66] Nothing could be further from the truth. Eckhart presents his conclusions as realities to which an experience can only be incidental, possibly even detrimental.

> If a person were in a state of rapture as St. Paul had been and knew of a sick person who needed a little soup, I would regard it as higher that you left off the love and rapture and served the needy person out of greater love.[67]

Spiritual experiences do not carry any significant weight for Eckhart. He is particularly leery of basing one's spiritual state on feelings. Feelings come and go, but realities remain unchanged.[68] Insofar as Eckhart has any positive room for experience at all (and one wonders whether "experience" is even a good word here), it is merely the cognitive one of accepting realities as they are. That is to say, it is propositional but it is not revelatory. The source of the truths are the usual ones of Scripture as interpreted by reason. In such a sober experience the person simply comes to closure on the teachings of Christianity and thus sees himself or herself in a different light. But through the experience itself no new spiritual state is achieved and no new revelation is received.

Thus we see that Eckhart is a part of a very small subgroup among those whom we traditionally call "mystics." In fact it has been commonplace over the last one hundred years or so to define mysticism in terms of a "typical mystical experience."[69] In that case Meister Eckhart would not even be a mystic at all. His focus is on something that is real. Subjective experience is essentially irrelevant to this reality.

At the heart of the realities that Eckhart describes is what I would like to call (echoing von Hugel) the "given-ness" of grace. Grace by definition cannot be earned. It excludes being able to make yourself worthy of receiving it. Eckhart states:

> Therefore, if you wish the Word made flesh to dwell in you, to become a son of God, to receive this grace bestowed on nature, be a man; in line with reason according to the spirit, and not according to the flesh.[70]

What is Eckhart saying here? He is not saying that nature *per se* can save or does not need to be saved. Redemption is essential. The point is that nature need not, indeed cannot, transform herself in order to receive God's grace. Grace is gratuitous precisely because it meets the human person where he or she lives, not in an altered state of being. "In the work of nature and creation there shines forth the work of re-creation and grace."[71] Eckhart repeatedly emphasizes that everything he is saying in terms of

[66] N Smart, "Eckhart, Meister," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2 449–451

[67] *Reden der Unterweisung* (*Deutsche Predigten* 67, *DW* 5 185 ff)

[68] *Et cum factus esset* (*Deutsche Predigten* 436)

[69] Cf W James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York Collier, 1961) 299–301, W T Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Los Angeles Tarcher, 1960) 131–132 But cf my attempt to restate the definition of mysticism in terms of a "story" that need not include an experience (*Mysticism An Evangelical Option?* [Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1991] 21–39)

[70] *Defense* 9 27 (Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* 291–292)

[71] *Defense* 9 27 (Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* 291)

indwelling and transformation applies to Christians only.[72] Thus God's grace is essential. But grace comes down to us. We do not have to work to achieve it. Early in his ministry Eckhart counsels his younger confreres: "There is no better advice on where to find God than where you lost him."[73] In other words, do not look for God. Let him find you.

VII. CONCLUSION

Thus Eckhart shows us a theology and spirituality that is completely willing to let God be in charge. Being is God's being. The only alternative is nothing. Surrender to God means to let God do all, both to become a believer and to be transformed by God. God implants his own nature in the believer through his doing alone. We cannot search out these truths or experience them. We need only accept them.

The immanence of God in this picture is stretched as far as can be done. It seems to verge on pantheism. And yet, as close as it may appear—a hair's breadth—there is an infinitely wide gap between pantheism and what Eckhart teaches. For it is not the created order by itself that is divine. It is the redemptive act of God that transforms fallenness into union with him. What cannot be found in nature and cannot be attained beyond nature can be received from God.

There is only one key to receiving God's grace: to look to him alone. Meister Eckhart was convinced that until we allow God not just first place but all the places we will never be fulfilled. In our day when a powerful theological trend is to find room for God on the human stage, Eckhart stands as a signpost pointing in the other direction: simply to let God be God in all respects. I do not believe that it is either possible or desirable to import uncritically all of Eckhart's pre-Reformation theology into our post-Reformation setting. But the theses presented in this paper can guide us back toward a more theocentric theology in an anthropocentric age. Eckhart prays:

> That we may be one in the oneness which is God himself, to that end may God help us Amen.[74]

[72] *Dum medium silentium* (*Deutsche Predigten* 415)
[73] *Reden der Unterweisung* (*Deutsche Predigten* 68, *DW* 5 185 ff.)
[74] *Convescens praecepit eis* (*Deutsche Predigten* 294, *DW* 2 73)

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