

Medieval Axial Mysticism: Meister Eckhart

1. Welcome to this second video lecture on Medieval axial mysticism. In the previous lecture we explored the radically subjective, axial mysticism of the Beguine mystics, Mechtilde of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete. In this lecture we shall study a male mystic from the same period who was likely influenced by their writings, the Dominican academic and mystic, Meister Eckhart
2. As both an academic professor and a mystic, Eckhart straddled the widening chasm between (1) academic objectivity and (2) contemplative subjectivity. He was both a capacious thinker and a poetic mystic. He took one of the Dominican chairs of theology at the University of Paris (the one preciously held by Thomas Aquinas, no less) in 1311, the year after Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake. He even lived in the same community as her inquisitor. (3) Eckhart will allude to Aquinas in his own philosophical work. There is also such a pronounced affinity between his mystical approach and that of the Beguines, Porete's in particular, that it seems very likely that he had access to and learned from her work.
3. Eckhart's academic teaching develops a metaphysical ontology of the relationship between God and the soul that tracks the mystical descent into the divine taught by both Mechtilde and Porete. His pastoral preaching was often in German to Beguines who would have been familiar with both as well. He also served a term both as provincial and as novice master for his new Dominican order. In short, Eckhart was a well-rounded medieval thinker at the center of creative new developments in medieval axial mysticism.
4. As we saw in an earlier lecture, Aquinas inferred the existence of God from Aristotelian causality, arguing that God is the ultimate source and end, ground, horizon and rhythm of the cosmos. (1) Eckhart will speak of God in similar terms, but not through deductive inferences from the world without but from the interior depths of the individual soul.
 - a. (2)He will focus in particular on what he will refer to as the "ground" of the soul, that lies "beneath" or grounds both intellect and will. To reach awareness of this ground, he calls upon his listener to "empty" their minds of all thoughts and desires, all images and feelings. He argues that this is the spiritual meaning of poverty. He describes such a "poor" soul as a porous soul, porous to the creative activity, the *energeia* of the divine welling up from the trinity that sustains the

soul's very existence. Plumbing this ground opens our awareness out onto the divine, its boundless, creative vitality surging within us.

5. Eckhart counsels that we should always act from that ground. That is, our activity should not be a mere means for achieving some goal, but rather our intention in action should be simply to express God's own creative activity welling up within us. In other words our activity should itself be contemplative, performed for its own sake, "*ohne warum*" "without a why". Porete had taught similarly that in the ultimate sixth stage of humility, having abandoned our own will, we act "*sans pourquoi*" again, "without a why" or even more literally "without a for-what."
6. Again as with Porete, in our so acting, God's Word becomes flesh once more; we incarnate God's own creative activity for our time and place. (1) Our difference from Christ lies not here, but in our inability to maintain such transparency to the divine for more than occasional moments. In more traditional language, (2) what Christ is by nature we are by grace.
 - a. (3) This also implies that any activity of ours can be a sacred practice or prayerful ritual. It has affinities to the Buddhist practice of "mindfulness". Eckhart will say (4) that 'if you cannot find God in the stable as easily as in church you are not yet perfect.' On the contrary, (5) to restrict prayer to church is to effectively mug God, "to throw a cloak over God and stick him under a bench."
7. In one sermon, Eckhart asks his congregation "what is it that burns in hell?" He answers that commonly both theologians and mystics say that it is self-will. "But I say truly that what burns in hell is nothing." (1) That is, again with Porete if God is everything that all that (2) is not God in us is ultimately nothing. He draws a comparison: (3) When I grasp a white hot coal why does it burn my hand? His response: because my hand is not itself white hot. If my hand were already on fire, then like Mechtilde, I would feel no pain, rather I would be in my native element. As Mechtilde had written,

*A fish in water does not drown
A bird in the air does not plummet
Gold in fire does not perish
Rather, it gets its purity and its radiant color there.*

8. This leads us to Eckhart's theory on how to understand our talk about God. (1) Dionysius had argued that whatever we say of God is more false than true. But that does not mean we should say nothing about God. For some things can be said that are more true than others. (2) Thus it is truer to say that God exists than that he doesn't. But that does not mean he exists in the same sense that we exist. (3) Existence, in relationship to God is absolute, unconditional, perfect, whereas existence applied to us is relative, contingent, dependent on God. When attributed to God, what we mean by "existence" must be extrapolated to infinity. (4) Eckhart on the other hand will take a more all or nothing approach to meaning. He will argue that if by "existence" we mean what we mean when we say that "God exists" than we do not exist, not in the same sense. (5) That is, insofar as God exists, we do not. On the other hand, (6) insofar as we exist, God does not exist, again, not in the same sense. Now it is in terms of this doctrine of analogy "in quantum" or "insofar as" that we can understand what Eckhart means by saying that that nothing burns in hell. Insofar as sin is not God, it does not exist. In hell then, it is all that is not God within us that burns, and in purgatory burns away, in that we are purified, immolated in the divine, as in Porete's final stage of love and humility.
9. We can also find resonances with Porete's sixth stage of humility in another famous passage of Eckhart in which he preached that "the eye by which I see God is the same eye by which God sees me." (1) That is, to see God I must empty myself of all that is not God in me, all that obstructs my vision. (2) But then when I am nothing but an expression of God's ongoing creative activity in me, then (3) my seeing God is actually God seeing God through me. In effect to see God I must effectively become a transparent medium for God to work through me, in effect my activity is God activity in that moment.
10. Thanks to his doctrine of analogy. Eckhart will claim, (1) however, in contrast to Mechtilde and Porete, that one never leaves the virtues behind. Rather (2) when acting without a why one becomes a pure incarnation of them. It is likely both his academic background, as well as his experience as a novice master and provincial that leads him to maintain a critical distance in the evaluation of one's behavior. Thus he will say that (3) "the just man, insofar as he is just, is an incarnation of God's own justice." But also that (4) "the just man, insofar as he is still a man, and not perfectly just at all times in all ways, is not a perfect incarnation of God's justice. Thus whereas Porete (5) had argued

that the mystic who abandons her will to God can sin no more, Eckhart will object: “(6) There is no man in this life who forsook himself so much that he could not still find more in himself to forsake.”

11. As the ground of our very soul, however, our difference from God, is due entirely to us, not to God. Thus in an address to his novices Eckhart will advise them,
 - a. (1) “*Never think that you are far from God. Even if, in your great sinfulness you cannot think of yourself being close to God, never believe God is not close to you. Even if he cannot come inside your house, he is but at your door.*”
 - b. To which I would add, (2) “*knocking*”. While we, as sinners, will always remain to that extent distinct from God, as expressions of God’s ongoing creative activity, God is never distinct from us. In fact, what distinguishes God from all other things, is his very indistinction from them. God’s radical transcendence lies in his radical immanence.
12. For us to be aware of God’s presence then, we must empty our soul of all that is not God, sweep clear all attachments that are simply so much clutter, ridding ourselves of what Eckhart’s student, John Tauler, will refer to as “the I, Me, Mine.” Unencumbered, we are to let go and simply be here now. (1) Such “letting go” *Gelassenheit*, is the fundamental virtue for Eckhart. For it is the essence of humility, (2) which is the mother of all the virtues, (3) more basic even than love. For it is in emptying ourselves of ourselves that God can be everything in us.

Here we find the masculine element in Eckhart’s spirituality. (4) The language of Beguine mysticism is ultimately empowering. By abandoning our own will we become an avatar of the divine will. (5) The language of Eckhart, by contrast, focuses on people blessed *with* wealth and power *letting go* of their power, (6) emptying themselves to become a poor soul, which alone can be a porous soul. The end result is the same, but in the middle ages, if not still today, men and women need to hear different messages.
13. Now if God’s ongoing creative activity is the ground of our soul, what is the ground of God? Now Christians believe God to be a trinity of persons: the Father being a Father through the begetting of his Son, the Spirit, the love processing from the intimacy of their relationship. But does the trinity too have a ground? What could ground the trinity?

(1) As first cause, God can have no ground other than himself. God's ground then is groundless. (2) Plumbing it is to plumb a bottomless abyss, or positively, a sheer, spontaneous welling up or boiling over of creative activity of which we and everything else are but diverse expressions. Eckhart seeks to evoke such a sense of boundless sheer existence (3) by appeal to the desert, an empty expanse without landmarks or any distinctions. It's an apt metaphor, as early Christian mystics went into the desert wilderness to experience a union with God beyond all the distractions of civilized life. In terms of our history of religion and technology, we might compare God's groundless ground

14. to the featureless, boundless grasslands of the Aryan steppes.

15. Now as befell Mechtilde and Porete before him, Eckhart too would be accused of heresy. The Archbishop of Cologne where Eckhart spent his final years preaching his mystical sermons in German to Beguine and Dominican sisters, would put him on trial and condemn him as a heretic. But as a former provincial and eminent professor of theology, Eckhart appealed his conviction to Pope John XXII, resident in Avignon. There he was retried before a board of fellow theologians, but he died before a verdict was reached. The verdict was to condemn some propositions drawn from his teaching and preaching as misleading, others as outright heresy.

16. However the pope claimed that Eckhart had recanted on his deathbed and so died a faithful son of the church to which he had dedicated his life. The framing of Eckhart's recantation, as reported by the pope, however, interestingly employed Eckhart's doctrine of analogy: that *insofar as* anything he had taught was contrary to the teaching of the church, he recanted it. One can imagine that in so speaking he had repudiated only others' misunderstandings of his words, that insofar as his teaching and preaching were orthodox, as he himself had argued in his trial, he recanted nothing. and thus, like Porete,, he died incandescent.