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Purity of Thought in Meister Eckhart*

This paper aims at one particular point, namely to show Meister Eckhart’s way of thinking as a thinking of pure reason. I do so by roughly introducing into his biography, by giving two examples from his Latin writings, and by several examples of his German sermons. By doing this I will demonstrate that Meister Eckhart’s purpose is to show that those persons who are illuminated and cleansed from earthly ballast have an access to God. But besides that there is no real ‘concept’ of purification. Therefore Meister Eckhart’s usage of the category ‘pure’ is not stated against somebody; he does not employ the opposite term ‘impure’. If ever, only the unilluminated who stick to earthly ideas are impure. In theological categories, purity in the highest form is only an attribute of God.

Biographical data

Meister Eckhart was born in Tambach in Thüringen in about 1260. We know only very little of his early career. After entering the Dominican Order he studied either in Erfurt or in Cologne before moving to Paris: In April 1294 we find Eckhart as a lector sentenciarum in Paris. From 1294 to 1302 he held several positions within the Order of St. Dominic. In 1302 he was again in Paris where he received the licencia docendi. From then on frater Eckhardus was master, or Meister, Eckhart. It is quite likely that Eckhart met John Duns Scot during the one year of his regency at the Parisian university. We do not know why Meister Eckhart left Paris in 1303 and again took up a position in the Order of St. Dominic. He may have been a victim of the ‘purification’ of the

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Sorbonne. This purification aimed at cleansing the Sorbonne of real or alleged followers of pope Bonifacius VIII.

During the following stay in Erfurt, Meister Eckhart held several offices within the Dominican Order. He may have continued his exegetical works which later resulted in his main commentaries on the Bible.\(^3\) What is quite sure is that in 1311 Meister Eckhart became, for a second time, *Magister actu regens* in Paris, this time for two years. After this third and last stay in Paris, Meister Eckhart was possibly sent to Strasbourg as a spiritual adviser to the Dominican convent there.\(^4\) Later, in 1323, he went to Cologne, perhaps as a lector at the Cologne school of the Dominican Order. During the last years of his life Eckhart was accused of heresy by some of his Dominican *confratres* in Cologne.\(^5\) Whilst on trial Eckhart died a natural death in 1327 or 1328. Because he did not retract before he died, some of the sentences he had taught were condemned after his death.\(^6\) I cannot go into detail about the trial here, although this, too, could be a chapter on ‘purification’. Instead I shall give a short survey of Eckhart’s writings.\(^7\)

The first writings tangible are the sermons which he delivered in 1293 in Paris and his *Collatio in libros sentenciarum*. He also seems to have written a *Commentary on the Sentences* which is either preserved in an anonymous commentary kept in Brugge today or lost.\(^8\) These works are all written in Latin and represent the standard academic literature of that time. Between his first and his second sojourn in

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\(^3\) For further literature see Görge K. Hasselhoff, Moses Maimonides interkulturell gelesen, Nordhausen 2009, pp. 64-70.

\(^4\) Especially this part of his biography has recently been sharply criticised by Loris Sturlese and others, see Loris Sturlese, Meister Eckhart und die curia monialium: Kritische Anmerkungen zu einem forschungsgeschichtlichen Mythos, in: Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch 2 (2008), pp. 1-16; Walter Senner, Meister Eckharts Straßburger Ordensauftrag, in: ibid., pp. 17-35.

\(^5\) For the trials see the summarising discussion by Sturlese in: LW V, pp. 249-270.

