

## A Great Mystic.

THE publication of Mr. C. de B. Evans' work on *Meister Eckhart* (John M. Watkins, London, 20/-), will do much to bring before English readers the genius of a great mediaeval mystic. Eckhart has not lacked attention by English writers, for Karl Pearson, Inge, Rufus Jones, Baron von Hügel and Royce, among others, have all given their estimate of him, while Ueberweg's *History of Philosophy* (E.T.) contains an excellent account of Eckhart's teaching by Lasson. But hitherto it has not been possible to make any detailed study of Eckhart without some knowledge of German. As far as the present writer knows the only English rendering of Eckhart was limited to a few sermons translated by C. Field: now, however, we have a full and careful rendering of the sermons and tractates, and we are indebted to Mr. Evans, who has brought to his task the results of eighteen years' careful study of the Meister. This volume is the first instalment: the second, which we are promised, will consist of a literary-historical introduction, with various appendices. When Mr. Evans has completed his task he will have made a great contribution to the serious study of mediaeval thought, for Eckhart takes his place not merely as an exponent of the scholastic philosophy, but also as a contributor to that under-current of personal religion which must be taken into account in any proper estimate of the Reformation.

Little is known of Eckhart himself. The following scanty details are taken from the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*. He was born about 1260 at Hochheim, in Thuringia (or, some argue, at Strassburg in Saxony). He made his philosophical and theological studies in the Dominican order, and in 1298 was made prior of the Dominican convent at Erfurt and vicar provincial of Thuringia. In 1300 we find him lecturing in Paris, while in 1307 he became vicar-general of Bohemia. Again in 1311 he was in Paris, occupying a professorial chair, and in 1320 he was made Professor of his Order at Cologne, where, apparently, he remained until his death (about 1327). Although he is most famous as the author and perfecter of mediaeval German mysticism, it is interesting to notice that he possessed considerable administrative ability. He was a man of affairs as well as a profound mystic—a not very usual combination—and proved himself an able reformer of the many religious houses which were in his care.

It was as preacher and teacher that he gained great influence in his own day. "He had conceived the then novel idea of

instructing the laity and the many semi-religious communities and brotherhoods of that date, no less than the religious of his Order," and to this end he used the language of the people instead of the more usual Latin. It is on this ground that he has been called the father of the German Language and the father of German philosophic prose (Lasson). His appeal in the language of the people was further strengthened by the fact that he disdained the arts of rhetoric and passion. His style is direct: there is no "introduction" leading up to any point: the point is reached in two or three sentences, as we may see from the following extract, the beginning of a sermon on Matt. xxi. 12:

"We read in the gospel that our Lord went into the temple and cast out all them that sold and bought, and said to them that sold doves: 'Take these things hence!' It was His purpose to have the temple cleared, as though He said: This temple is by rights Mine own, and I want it to Myself to be Lord therein. This temple that God means to rule is in man's soul, which He has made exactly like Himself, as saith the Lord, 'We will make man in our image and likeness.' Which He did. So like Himself God made man's soul that nothing else in earth or heaven resembles God so closely as the human soul. God wants this temple cleared of everything but Himself. This is because this temple is so agreeable to Him, and He is so comfortable in this temple when He is there alone."

This extract illustrates not merely his direct form, but also the theme to which he ever returns—God in the soul, the soul for God. Eckhart's appeal is to intellect rather than to will. This is what we might expect when we remember that not only is he a scholastic, greatly indebted to Aquinas and Albertus Magnus, but that he also abandons the attitude of the Churchman and the traditionalist for a fuller and freer philosophic standpoint. His heart, says Karl Pearson, made him a Gospel Christian, but his mental predilection and his education turned him towards a speculative emphasis.

It is interesting to notice the main themes of his sermons, themes developed at greater length in the Tractates. The problem of the Divine Essence greatly attracted him, and the relation between God and man. He was fond of discoursing upon the faculties, gifts, and operations of the human soul, and of propounding his idea of the return of all created things to God. The Godhead, the Absolute, is the beginning and end of all things, concealed in obscurity, unknown to and unknowable by men—an emphasis which reminds us of Clement of Alexandria. But it is the nature of this Godhead to become self-conscious, and in this manner Eckhart explains the beginning of revelation. Godhead

becomes Father, with a Son, and from this point of view the personal God whom we worship may be regarded as the Divine nature as manifested in His personal character, the self-revelation or manifestation of the ultimate unknown. It is this principle of self-manifestation which explains the origin of the world and of all created beings. Everything created is in a sense a modification of God, and the world is regarded as a series of emanations from the divine being, emanations which Eckhart likens to a succession of concentric circles which are produced when a stone is thrown into a pond. All that God made, he says, is nothing other than an image, a representation of Divine Life. The affinities of Eckhart with Plato and Kant will be readily seen, for all three find reality in the supersensuous world. For Eckhart this supersensuous reality is God.

In this scheme of emanations from the divine being the soul occupies a most important place. Of all created things it is the best. It is immaterial in its essence, and according to the current scholastic conception, it is to be regarded as the simple form of the body, entire and undivided in every part. Eckhart makes an important point when he asserts that there is no distinction of essence between soul and spirit: it is in the exercise of her higher powers that soul may be regarded as spirit. The constant exercise of these higher powers is important, for the soul, so to speak, has a double face, the one turned towards the body and this world, the other directed immediately towards God. While the soul is in the body, its powers may function through bodily organs, but such activity is to be regarded as of a lower order. The true activity of the soul is that which is completely independent of all things physical. Indeed, in the innermost recess of the soul all activity ceases, for there, in the very centre, is a sphere where God lives. Again and again Eckhart insists on this, and it marks his characteristic contribution to the doctrine of the soul. It is the doctrine of the "spark," an idea which may be found in Plotinus and also in Augustine. Many writers regarded this central point in the soul as its true resemblance to God, the residue of the Divine in the human: Eckhart considered it to be the true wesen of the soul.

The true destiny of the soul is its return to God. How is this accomplished? By a complete renunciation of all that touches time and place. Not even mortifications and fastings avail without the appropriate inner spirit, for the true attitude of the soul is not so much spiritual activity as sheer passivity. It must pass through a period of unconsciousness as to the world of sense until it is absorbed in God. This is the negation of all effort: if Eckhart could have used the terminology of a modern psychologist like, say, Baudouin, he would have found an appro-

appropriate term in Contention, the condition of sheer passivity where the soul is entirely oblivious to the manifold things of sense, making no effort of any kind.

"I declare," he says, in a sermon on Luke xxi. 31, "that any soul that sees God must have forgotten herself and have lost her own self; while she sees and remembers herself she neither sees nor is conscious of God. But when for God's sake she loses herself and abandons all things, then in God does she re-find herself."

Thus the return of the soul is the work of God Himself, Eckhart echoing the Augustinian conception of grace and the Thomist idea of the God-directed will.

"As God is the mover of the starry and revolving heavens, so here in the soul He is the mover of the freedom of our will towards Himself and towards all good things."

(Tractate on the "Rank and Nature of the Soul.")

We are drawn by the sacred Trinity with the cords of power, wisdom, and love.

It is interesting to notice that in this return to God the whole material creation must share, and there occurs the suggestion that this movement of spiritualisation may take place in the soul-body realm of a man. The true mystic, i.e. he who by the (paradoxical) exercise of passivity, cultivates the soul by submerging it in God, may here and now attain a state wherein the body is subservient to the higher life. Light may stream through the body itself, the powers of the soul may be ordered harmoniously, and the entire outer man may become the willing servant of the sanctified will. Even the body may renounce all creaturely joys. This idea of spiritualisation is seen in Eckhart's doctrine of the resurrection, for he states:

"Now it is the Christian faith that this actual body will rise at the last day. Then things shall all arise, not as themselves, but in Him who has changed them into Himself. He, spiritualised and turned to spirit, shall flow in spirit back to His first cause."

(Tractate on the "Nobility of the Soul.")

Again, hell is a condition of alienation from God—it is nothing else than a state, he says. At the Day of Judgment man passes judgment on himself. From all this it is clear that Eckhart has little room for conceptions of a material order.

This rapid account of Eckhart's teaching along one line will indicate that his emphasis is speculative: he is more concerned with a philosophical statement than with dogmatic orthodoxy. But even within his speculative position we need to be on our guard, for it is clear that he endangers certain valuable and essential features of the Christian position. There is, for

instance, a certain disparagement of the bodily factor in human personality which does not exactly fit the Biblical teaching. Further, it is difficult to find room in his system for any real freedom of the will. But the great point of discussion is in regard to Eckhart's pantheism. It is acknowledged that many passages in his sermons and tractates lend themselves to a pantheistic interpretation. So, in a sermon on James i. 17, he remarks :

"All creatures are a mere naught. I say not they are small, are aught: they are absolutely naught. . . . Creatures have no real being, for their being consists in the presence of God. If God turned away for an instant they would all perish."

In a fragment (for which we are indebted to Denifle) we read that God and being are the same. It is passages like these (and there are many such scattered about his works) which set the student wondering whether Eckhart preserves sufficiently the essential individuality of the soul, and whether this individuality is really maintained in his conception of the final unity of the soul in God. Most writers are agreed that Eckhart avoids pantheism, Royce, for example, holding that Eckhart never conceives the soul's unity with God to be utter absorption. But it must be confessed that the language is ambiguous, sufficiently ambiguous, at any rate, to indicate what is the real danger of mysticism . . . the inadequate safeguarding of the notion of individuality. Eckhart's conception of the "spark" in the soul, however interesting it may be to a speculative philosopher, is still a good way removed from that idea of life eternal which we find, e.g. in the Johannine view.

These dangers having been noted, any one may proceed to the study of Eckhart with the certainty of great profit. He combines an intense spirituality with acute intellectualism. He knows how to blend love and logic, and his emphasis on the direct experience of God in the soul does much to explain the later emphasis of the Reformation thinkers. Especially in these hurried and commercial days is it good for us to turn back to a preacher who, at first, seems very remote from the actual problems of life, but who, on deeper investigation, is revealed in his true light as a preacher on the themes that really count. Very sound is the advice he gave to one who complained that no one could understand his sermons. He said: "To understand my sermons a man requires three things. He must have conquered strife and be in contemplation of his highest good, and be satisfied to do God's bidding, and be a beginner with beginners and naught himself, and be so master of himself as to be incapable of anger." A similar temper in the audience would increase appreciation of many sermons to-day!

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