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The Love of the One- Eyed for the Fresco: Some Thoughts on *Love-as-One* and *Love-as-Many* in Meister ECKHART

Dedicated to Dorothy B.

Every name and generally everything that introduces numericity or makes it enter (our) concepts or ideas is far from God, as according to BOETHIUS God is “the truly one, in whom there is no number;” not even a thought one.¹

Deus Unus Est – God Is Loved, Because God Is One

“The one who loves for real can only love one thing,” says Meister ECKHART in his Latin sermon *Deus unus est*.² In the same sermon he states, “Every creature loves in God the One (*unum*) and loves him because of it, and loves him because God is One (*unus*).”³

In his German sermon *got ist mynne*, ECKHART reiterates the connection between the One and love: “When I say: ‘God is love’ (*got ist mynne*), then I say it in order that the Only-One would

1 When referring to the critical Kohlhammer edition of ECKHART’s works *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*. (Herausgegeben im Auftrag der Deutschen Forschungsgesellschaft). Stuttgart, 1936ff., the German works are abbreviated as DW and the Latin works as LW, followed by a reference to the volume number and further specifications. In the case of ECKHART’s sermons that appear in the commented edition of STEER Georg – STURLESE Loris (eds.), *Lectura Eckhardi* (I–II.). *Predigten Meister Eckharts von Fachgelehrten gelesen und gedeutet*. Stuttgart, 1998., 2003., these are abbreviated as LE I and LE II. The initial quote is taken from Meister ECKHART, LW IV, Sermo IV. 31.

2 ECKHART Meister, LW IV, Sermo XXIX. 264. “*Vere amans non potest amare nisi unum.*”

3 *Ibid.*

remain in sight. Imagine: If one said that God is the love (*got ist die mynne*), then one could ask which love God is and think that there is more than just one love and would thus turn away from the Only-One.⁷⁴

The numeric aspect of love appears also in ECKHART's *Book of Divine Consolation*, in which he claims that "One as one produces no love. Similarly two as two produce no love; two as one, this is the source of natural and fiery love full of desire."⁷⁵

Some of ECKHART's statements on the connection between love and the One seem more common sense, some less. When the Thuringian Dominican provocatively claims love's craving for the One is even the basis for homicide,⁶ the question arises whether the coupling of love and the One in ECKHART's literary legacy is anything more than just a rhetorical or homiletic figure.

A Small Digression: ECKHART as a Mystic of Love

Burkhard HASEBRINK maintains that due to his usage of the erotic metaphors of the Song of Songs, ECKHART can be seen as part of the tradition of love mysticism.⁷ The mystical metaphors of divine–human interaction through *kiss*, *embrace*, etc. inherited from ORIGEN's *Commentary on Canticle*, Saint BERNARD's *Sermones in Cantica*, or the works of WILLIAM of St. Thierry are, however, transcended in ECKHART's reflections on love in the direction of the *immediate union* of God and human.

Bernard MCGINN explains the background of this controversial historical development by the fact that in the XIIIth century a new view of union—with an emphasis on *substantial union*—gained ground through such mystics as HADEWJCH of Brabant, and was further elaborated by Meister ECKHART.⁸ MCGINN admits, however, that as regards the temporal location of the advent of this phenomenon "it is difficult to tell exactly when or for what reasons."⁹

Although ECKHART's theology is often contrasted to the "classical"

4 ECKHART Meister, LE I, Sermon 63. 202. See also the commentary on the sermon in ENDERS Markus, *Das göttliche Wesen der Liebe im Verständnis Meister Eckharts*. In *Erbe und Auftrag (Benediktinische Monatsschrift)*. Beuron, 2003. 39–44.

5 ECKHART Meister, DW V, *Daz buoch der götlichen troestunge*. 30.

6 ECKHART Meister, LE I, Sermon 63. 202.

7 HASEBRINK Burkhard, *Commentary on Sermon 71*. In LE I 241.

8 MCGINN Bernard, *Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity: Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries*. In *Church History* (vol. 56.). The American Society of Church History, Chicago, 1987. 14ff.

9 Ibid.



love mysticism (eg. BERNARD of Clairvaux) and is considered to be more “speculative,” this article will try to provide some evidence for the colourfulness and originality of ECKHART’s reflections on love.

Back to the One: How to Love the Fresco on the Wall?

In his sermon *got ist mynne*, ECKHART analyses in what way the *one* love of God is diffused in the multiplicity of the created world—in other words, how God has “scattered his love in all the creatures and still it remains as the Only-One in him”.¹⁰

The paradox of love as simultaneously *undivided* and *distributed* is illustrated in the sermon by means of two metaphors taken from medieval daily life. They direct the reader’s attention primarily to the dilemma which this paradox creates for the human.

The first of the metaphors depicts the fact that a woman, when she finds pleasure in a certain colour, cannot get hold of it in its “undivided” form. She has to buy it together with the cloth to which it is applied. She cannot simply wear *the red*, she has to wear a red skirt.

¹⁰ ECKHART Meister, LE I, Sermon 63. 204.

The other metaphor points in a similar direction: “When a fresco is painted on the wall, the wall becomes its bearer. Now, who loves the fresco, loves the wall together with it. If one took away the wall, he would take away the fresco too. But take away the wall in such a way that the fresco remains: then the fresco becomes its own bearer.”¹¹

Both of the metaphors illustrate the problem that the human, incapable of living with a paradox, ends up relating to love-as-distributed as if it were distinct from love-as-one. The human relates to her or his concrete condition, to *this and that* (*hoc et hoc*) without consciously relating to the One.

In her or his mind the red skirt and the fresco become disconnected from their ultimate source. In this sense the human acts as a determined, finite and individual being in contrast to God, who in God’s one-ness and undividedness is capable of remaining *indistinct* and *non-opposed* to the multiplicity of created things.¹² In God the red of the skirt and *the red* are not *two*: in God there is no number.

ECKHART maintains, however, that in the human there is also something that enables her or him to transcend the position of a lover of fragmented and preference-based multiplicity, as God desires the *divinisation* (*deiformitas*) of the human leading to equality, as “love transforms the loving one into the loved one.”¹³

God as a One-Eyed Lover ...

The fact that God really wants equality with the human is illustrated in ECKHART’s works through a great variety of images. In his sermon *Qui audit me*, Meister ECKHART likens the joy of God when God finds God’s equal inside the human to the joy of a horse that has been set free on a grassland.¹⁴

In yet another instance ECKHART introduces a story about a woman who has lost an eye. When her husband comforts her in her distress, she replies to him: “Sir, I am not distressing myself about the fact that I have lost my eye; what distresses me is that it seems to me that you will love me less because of it.”¹⁵

ECKHART continues the story by recounting, “Not long after that

11 Ibid.

12 BEIERWALTES Werner, *Identität und Differenz*. Frankfurt am Main, 1980. 102–103.

13 ECKHART Meister, LW II, 354. “*Amor enim amantem transformat in amatum.*”

14 ECKHART Meister, LE I, Sermon 12. 31.

15 ECKHART Meister, Sermon 53. In COLLEDGE Edmund – MCGINN Bernard (eds.), *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. New York, 1981. 193.

he gouged out one of his own eyes and came to his wife and said: Madam, to make you believe that I love you, I have made myself like you; now I too have only one eye.”¹⁶

This story, which the Meister makes use of also in his *Commentary on John*,¹⁷ is a paraphrase of an old narrative that appears already in HERRAND of Wildonie¹⁸ and is a symbolic representation of what ECKHART sums up in his sermon *In diebus suis placuit deo* in the maxim, “Between a servant and a master there can never be equal love.”¹⁹

In ECKHART’s sermon the husband’s gouging out of his eye—the incarnation of God on behalf of the human that has sinned—is not so much about the repayment of the debt created by sin; rather it is a symbol that sin is ultimately incapable of blocking the equality of God and humankind and creating a master–servant kind of relationship between them.

The evidence of the fact that ECKHART considered the doctrine of God’s desire for equality with the human obvious and fundamental can be found also in the *Cologne Trial* documentation, in which the theologian at the end of his life defended the very basis of his teachings.

There he formulates this doctrine from the perspective of love with a reference to the authority of ARISTOTLE and Saint BERNARD: “Love knows no precedence, as BERNARD says, either it finds equals or it creates equals. And according to the Philosopher there is no love between a servant and a master.”²⁰

The invocation of the authority of the acknowledged teachers of the past shows that ECKHART was decidedly firm on the maxim that a blend of superiority and inferiority does by no means lead to anything related to equality.

... and not a Cow

In a number of passages ECKHART ironises a particular stance of “the believers,” which by its very nature precludes equality between God and human: the instrumentalisation of God. In such a setting

16 Ibid.

17 ECKHART Meister, LW III. *Expositio sancti Evangelii secundum Iohannem* (No. 683.). 598.

18 ECKHART Meister, DW I. 378. (A footnote by QUINT Joseph.)

19 ECKHART Meister, LE II, Sermon 10. 60.

20 THÉRY Gabriel, *Édition critique des pièces relatives au procès d’Eckhart continues dans le manuscrit 33b de la Bibliothèque de Soest*. In *Archives d’histoire littéraire et doctrinal du moyen âge*. 1926–1927. 244ff. The first reference is to the Pseudo-Bernardian *Tractatus de charitate* and the second to ARISTOTLE’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Book IV, Chapter 13.

God is perceived as a giver of *this and that*, an instrument with superior powers.

In his sermon *Omne datum optimum*, the preacher depicts a situation in which God has been reduced to a tool through the following parable: “You are looking with God for something (concrete) and you behave as if you have turned God into a candle that you can use for your search; when one has found the things one has been looking for, however, he throws the candle away.”²¹

In yet another instance ECKHART avails himself of a similar image: “Many people want to look to God in the same way they look to a cow and want to love God as they love a cow. You love a cow because of its milk and the cheese and because of your own benefit. It is exactly in this way that those who love God for outer riches or inner consolation behave. ... What they love is their own benefit.”²²

ECKHART may seem strict here, but according to his statement in *Sermo XXIX* quoted in the opening lines of this article, the *primus motor* of the love of God is God’s One-ness, not God’s many gifts.

Love for *this and that*, separated in our consciousness from Love-as-One, violates the principle stated in the introductory quote, which ECKHART borrowed from BOETHIUS: introducing numericity (eg. multiplicity of gifts) into our concept of love implies fragmentation and thus directs the sight of the human away from the Only-One.

Dying to the Non-One: ECKHART’S Concept of Detachment

It has been mentioned in the preceding paragraphs that ECKHART introduces a double emphasis: God is One *and* present in all things. It is precisely this double *indistinctness* that distinguishes God from creation. It has also been suggested that the human—the image of God—cannot be understood as mere multiplicity.

The uncovering of the image of the One in the human requires embarking on the *negative way* (*via negativa*), enabling a vision of the Many through the prism of non-numericity. By implication, the *via negativa* is aimed also at the reconciliation of Love-as-One and Love-as-Many. Terminologically ECKHART refers to this process of learning to view multiplicity through its source (ie. the One) as *detachment*.

21 ECKHART Meister, LE I, Sermon 4. 6.

22 ECKHART Meister, LE I, Sermon 16b. 48. Otto LANGER speaks in this context of “a depotentised God”. LANGER Otto: *Sich läzen, sin selbes vernihten. Negation und 'Ich-Theorie' bei Meister Eckhart*. In *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang*. Tübingen, 2000. 326.

Detachment as religiously motivated *negation* is a multi-layered concept aimed at creating free space inside the human for the action of the *one* God (*vacare Deo*). In the given context we look at it primarily from the perspective of “keeping the Only-One in sight”.²³

Before discussing detachment any further, it may be helpful to introduce it with two short but elucidating references. The first one concerns Max WEBER’s exposition that acts of negation have a fundamental significance for soteriological religions.²⁴ The other stems from Meister ECKHART’s *Book of Divine Consolation* and sums up the ultimate meaning of religious negation: “God takes away only to give something greater.”²⁵

Detachment (*abnegatio, gelâzenheit, etc.*)²⁶ is, according to ECKHART’s sermon *Qui audit me*, a necessary condition for being able to hear the *one* God speak in the midst of the multiplicity of the world.²⁷

It is aimed at enabling the human to approach and deal with the created reality characterised by *corporality, multiplicity* and *temporality*²⁸ in such a way that her or his love for it does not lose the sight of the basal trajectory of Love-as-One.

In his sermon *Videns Iesus turbas*, ECKHART depicts the multiplicity of created reality in the metaphor of *the crowds* (*turbas*). The gospel narrative of Jesus seeing a large group of people in front of him is read by ECKHART as a juxtaposition of the *one* (Jesus Christ) and the *many* (the crowd).²⁹

Naturally, detachment concerns both the outside and the inside reality of the human—the *self* and the *world*. Thus it can be understood as “a practice of breaking-through into things and finding

23 ECKHART Meister, LE I, Sermon 63. 202.

24 For more detail see LANGER Otto. 318.

25 ECKHART Meister, DW V, *Daz buoch der götlichen troestunge*. 20f. See also KAMPMANN Irmgard, *Ihr sollt der Sohn selber sein* (Europäische Hochschulschriften, series 23, vol. 579.), Frankfurt am Main, 1996. 134.

26 For more detail on the etymology of the term *detachment* see PANZIG Erik A., *gelâzenheit und abegescheidenheit. Eine Einführung in das theologische Denken des Meister Eckhart*. Leipzig, 2005. 53–65., 101–113.

27 ECKHART Meister, LE I, Sermon 12. 26: “*Wan der gotes wort hoeren sol, der muoz gar gelâzen sîn.*”

28 PANZIG Erik A., *gelâzenheit und abegescheidenheit—zur Verwurzelung beider Theoreme im theologischen Denken Meister Eckharts*. In *Meister Eckhart in Erfurt* (Miscellanea Mediaevalia). Berlin, 2005. 343.

29 ECKHART Meister, LE II, Sermon 72. 125.

God in all things,”³⁰ as “a turning-away from being-this-and-that”³¹ or simply as “a detaching of the (human) spirit from all the created, the non-one and the non-divine.”³²

When ECKHART expounds upon the gospel passage in which Peter draws Jesus’ attention to those who have left everything in order to follow him, the Meister interprets the word *everything* (*omnia*) as *non-equality* and explains: “Let us leave *everything*, ie. that through which all things are divided.”³³

In her dissertation Claudia ALTMeyer points out that the human is called to die to “the non-One ... which is encoded in the human in the form of *knowing*, *wanting* and *having*.”³⁴ This is an allusion to ECKHART’s famous sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu*, in which he presents the detached human as the one who *knows* nothing, *wants* nothing and *has* nothing, naming the three most basic “activities” of the self.

As detachment concerns the deepest inner processes of the human, it calls for “the transcending of the natural and the discursive”³⁵ and for “a purification of (our) cognizance of all the created and accidental reality fallen into multiplicity.”³⁶

Or as Otto LANGER puts it: “The presupposition of knowing God is the *negation of particularity* (*abnegatio proprii*) ... Only when the creature transcends itself in the *negation of itself* (*abnegatio sui*), it recognizes itself as it really is: in God.”³⁷

The fact that one should encounter the One inside oneself is expressed by ECKHART also through his repeated statements that one should be detached from his “Heinrich” or “Konrad,”³⁸ whereby one’s own name is the symbol of one’s particularity rooted in multi-

30 LANGER Otto, *Zum Begriff der Innerlichkeit bei Meister Eckhart*. In *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter*. Stuttgart, 1986. 21.

31 ALBERT Karl, *Meister Eckharts Mystik der Seinerkenntnis*. In *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter*. Stuttgart, 1986. 13.

32 VÖLKER Ludwig, “Gelassenheit.” *Zur Entstehung des Wortes in der Sprache Meister Eckharts und seiner Überlieferung in der nacheckhartschen Mystik bis Jacob Böhme*. In *Getempert und gemischt* (Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 65.). Göppingen, 1972. 284.

33 ECKHART Meister, LW IV, Sermo LIII. 441.: “*Relinquamus omnia, id est id, per quod sunt omnia divisa.*”

34 ALTMeyer Claudia, *Grund und Erkennen in deutschen Predigten von Meister Eckhart*. Würzburg, 2005. 114.

35 LARGIER Niklaus, *Repräsentation und Negativität. Meister Eckharts Kritik als Dekonstruktion*. In LANG Peter, *Contemplata aliis tradere*. Frankfurt am Main, 1995. 380.

36 VÖLKER. 283.

37 LANGER Otto, *Zum Begriff der Innerlichkeit bei Meister Eckhart*. 19–20.

38 ECKHART Meister, DW III, Sermon 77. 568.; DW III, Sermon 67. 529.

plicity. To this ECKHART adds: “Pay good attention to your self. And wherever you find it, detach yourself from it.”³⁹

Meister Eckhart: I Often Get Scared ...

In his sermon *Misit dominus manum suam*, Meister ECKHART declares explicitly that detachment is an integral part of his preaching agenda: “When I preach, I am accustomed to speak about detachment, and that one should be free of oneself and of all things.”⁴⁰ On the other hand ECKHART also says that “I often get scared, when I should speak about God, how detached the soul must be if she wants to attain union.”⁴¹

As Bernard MCGINN remarks: “At first glance, no concept in his thought seems more simple, though on closer inspection, the richness and subtlety of his understanding of detachment become gradually evident.”⁴²

Aside from directing human existence towards the Only-One and encountering it in all things, detachment also leads the human towards a more general identity than what her or his particularity offers.

It broadens the individual identity of a *human (mensch)* to encompass what lies beyond the particular and what the negated self opens up for: the dimension of *humanity (menschheit)*. Transcending particularity by means of detachment does not lead the individual into a vacuum, but towards genuine fullness. The move from *human* to *humanity*; from *persona* to *natura*,⁴³ is not a step towards acosmism, but towards integration.

This step, prompted by detachment, is of vital importance for the loving capacity of the human too: “In the selfless love of the neighbour the human opens up for the social dimension and finds oneself, one’s ‘humanity’, in one’s fellow human.”⁴⁴ Thus through detachment preferential love ceases to be the ultimate goal; “The

39 ECKHART Meister, DW V, *Counsels on Discernment*. 196.

40 ECKHART Meister, Sermon 53. In *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. 203.

41 ECKHART Meister, DW III, Sermon 73. 266.

42 MCGINN Bernard, *Theological Summary*. In *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. 47.

43 LANGER Otto, *Zum Begriff der Innerlichkeit bei Meister Eckhart*. 22.

44 LANGER Otto, *Meister Eckharts Lehre vom Seelengrund*. In *Grundfragen christlicher Mystik*. Stuttgart – Bad Canstatt, 1987. 191.

totality of unity makes it reality that the detached human loves God in all things.”⁴⁵

ECKHART's insistence on God as One and on keeping the Only-One always in sight is an essential part of his doctrine of love. Disconnecting multiplicity from God in our consciousness disconnects also our perception of Love-as-Many from Love-as-One.

But as the Meister attempted to explain to his mediaeval listeners and readers, creation needs to be loved *in God*, who is its origin. This can be done when the created reality is viewed and loved in its basal unity—“In the source, in the first outflux of all created things into time ... when they still carry eternity in them, as they are just about to flow out.”⁴⁶

Suggested Reading

ENDERS Markus, *Das göttliche Wesen der Liebe im Verständnis Meister Eckharts*. In *Erbe und Auftrag* (Benediktinische Monatschrift). Beuron, 2003.

STEER Georg – STURLESE Loris (eds.), *Lectura Eckhardi* (I–II). *Predigten Meister Eckharts von Fachgelehrten gelesen und gedeutet*. Stuttgart, 1998., 2003.

MCGINN Bernard, *Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity: Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries*. In *Church History* (vol. 56). Chicago, 1987.

ECKHART Meister, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*. (Herausgegeben im Auftrag der Deutschen Forschungsgesellschaft). Stuttgart, 1936ff.

PANZIG Erik A., *geläzenheit und abegescheidenheit–zur Verwurzelung beider Theoreme im theologischen Denken Meister Eckharts*. In *Meister Eckhart in Erfurt* (Miscellanea Mediaevalia). Berlin, 2005.

VÖLKER Ludwig, “Gelassenheit.” *Zur Entstehung des Wortes in der Sprache Meister Eckharts und seiner Überlieferung in der nacheckhartschen Mystik bis Jacob Böhme*. In *Getempert und gemischt* (Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 65.). Göppingen, 1972.

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45 HASEBRINK Burkhard, *Formen inzitativer Rede bei Meister Eckhart*. Tübingen, 1992. 73.

46 HAAS Alois M., *Commentary Sermon 12: Qui audit me*. In LE I 39.