

One Mind: Jung and Meister Eckhart on God and Mystical Experience

Christine Herold, Ph.D.

The College of Saint Rose

The “One Mind” of my title is intended in the sense that Johannes Eckhardt and Carl Gustav Jung were of “one mind” with regard to many of their observations on the nature of God, the human psyche and mystical experience. “One Mind” refers in another sense to Eckhart’s influential idea of the Godhead (W 2:335, Forman trans.) which Jung sees as a precursor to his theory of the Collective Unconscious. In this paper I hope to demonstrate the conjunction of thought in these two great minds in which their psychological, universal understanding of mysticism connects individual psychology and archetypal visionary experience.

Jung (b. 1875, Kesswil, Switzerland) is impressed that Meister Eckhart in the Thirteenth Century (b.ca 1260, Hochheim, Germany) understood God as “a *psychodynamic* state” (Jung, *Types* 246). According to Jung, Eckhart sees “a reciprocal and essential relation between man and God, whereby man can be understood as a function of God, and God as a psychological function of man” (*Types* 243). “From the empirical standpoint of analytical psychology,” Jung explains,

The God-image is the symbolic expression of a particular psychic state, or Function, which is characterized by its absolute ascendancy over the will of the subject, this inspiration that transcends conscious understanding, has its source in an accumulation of energy in the unconscious. The accumulated libido activates images lying dormant in the collective unconscious, among them the God-image, that [archetypal] . . . imprint which from the beginning of time has been the collective expression of the most overwhelmingly powerful influences exerted on the conscious mind by unconscious concentrations of libido. (*Types* 243-44)

As Jung indicates in his *Answer to Job*, the God-image coincides with the archetype of “wholeness,” or the “self” (*Answer* 647-48). An individual in the grip of the archetype, he observes,

can then take on archetypal dimensions and exercise corresponding effects; he can appear in the place of God, so that it is not only possible, but quite sensible, for other men to act towards him as they act towards God. We know that, in the Catholic Church, this possibility has become an institution whose psychological efficacy cannot be doubted. (*Symbols* 66)

Jung contrasts this position with the metaphysical point of view from which God is seen as “absolute” and outside oneself. Understood psychologically, this viewpoint indicates, in Jung’s words, “a complete unawareness of the fact that God’s action springs from one’s own inner being.” Jung credits Meister Eckhart with a rare awareness of this psychological phenomenon.

Jung, like many current writers on Eckhart, infers that the Meister wrote¹ from personal experience (*Types* 242). He concludes that

Eckhart must have experienced a quite extraordinary enhancement of the value of the soul, i.e., of his own inner being, that enabled him to rise to a purely psychological and relativistic conception of God and of his relation to man. (*Types* 242-43)

Bernard McGinn agrees that “Eckhart preached the possibility of a radical new awareness of God,” an understanding of the *unio mystica* that “emphasized a goal of ‘union without difference’, or what in Eckhartian terms we can describe as a *unitas indistinctionis*—the insistence that in the ground of reality there is absolute identity between God and the soul.”

McGinn points out that the Meister did not preach exclusively “to the clerical elite of the schools” (145-46)² but to ordinary men and women. Realizing one’s identity with God, for Eckhart, was not reserved for those who had adopted “a traditional religious way of life,” nor did it require renunciation of the world. God can, in fact, be received as much, Eckhart says, “at the fireplace or in the stable,” as in “inwardness, prayer, sweet ravishments and in the special graces” (which I take to mean the sacraments) [Davies 54]. He speaks, in fact, against enclosure:

Nowadays many people, apparently virtuous, flee the world and hide in monasteries and cells, hoping to be rid of worldly temptations. If their aim were to seek out God, well and good, but it is to be feared that they think more of themselves than of him. (in Strakosch, 63-64)

“Such a person,” he writes, “is doing nothing other than taking God, winding a cloak about his head and thrusting him under a bench” (Davies 54). According to Eckhart,

The spiritual human being, in the form of an assimilation to God, should be free from all ways, exercises, and techniques to find God. God will give the right way. . . . Study only this, to become

3 Herold

pregnant with God. [dar ûf setze al dîn studieren, daz dir got grôz werde]. (W1:201, 5-83, in Haas, 148-50)

These populist psychological views related Eckhart to the Beguine movement of his day, and also led to his condemnation by the Church (Strakosch 32).³ Pope John XXII's Bull of Condemnation (In Agro Dominico 1329) explicitly mentions Eckhart's preaching "before the uneducated crowd." As a result of Eckhart's condemnation, McGinn tells us, "the Dominican General Chapter of Toulouse of 1328 warned against preaching subtilia to the people" (Introduction 360 n.39). "Unitas indistinctionis," McGinn writes, "was born not in books but in the depths of the experience of the mystics of the thirteenth century, in their attempts to live the annihilation (anéantissement) of Marguerite Porete,⁴ or the perfect detachment (abegescheidenheit) of Meister Eckhart" (Introduction 12).

Robert Forman points out, that Eckhart, while arguably a mystic, disapproves of visions, locutions, and sensations, what he calls the "'sensible variety' of mystical experience," though he is sympathetic to "ecstatic rapture, which he calls the 'introvertive' variety of mystical experience" (Forman 20). Eckhart does denigrate, however, an attachment to or desire for a state of rapture. He counsels,

If a man were in an ecstasy, as Saint Paul was, and knew that some sick man needed him to give him a bit of soup, I should think it far better if you would abandon your ecstasy out of love and show greater love in caring for the other in his need. (Counsel 10, College & McGinn trans., 46)

In fact, attachment to any state, *Eigenschaft*, is what we must overcome, according to the Meister, through a process of *Lâzen*, "letting go," in order to attain Abegescheidenheit, "detachment," which makes Gezucket, "rapture" possible (Forman 74-84). Eckhart writes, "Whatever state we find ourselves in, whether in strength or in weakness, in joy or in sorrow, whatever we find ourselves attached to, we must abandon" (W2:160, Forman 79). In Gezucket, Eckhart explains, "with both internal and external powers withdrawn, one experiences neither thought, affective feeling, sensation, nor vision," but has reached the "ground" (*grunt*), the "innermost man," the "spark of the soul" (Forman 99, 104). Eckhart states that this ground is identical with the nature of the soul, which is identical with the nature of God (Forman 106).

Eckhart explains the soul in this way:

. . . by this Kingdom of God we understand the soul, for the soul is of like nature with the Godhead. . . . So much, is God in the soul, that his whole divine nature depends upon her. (W2:270, Evans trans.)⁵

Eckhart here expresses a concept very close to the psychological interpretation offered by Jung. “Looked at historically,” Jung says,

the soul . . . refers to a psychological content that must possess a certain measure of autonomy within the limits of consciousness. If this were not so, man would never have hit on the idea of attributing an independent existence to the soul, as though it were some objectively perceptible thing. It must be a content in which spontaneity is inherent, and hence also partial unconsciousness, as with every autonomous complex. (*Types* 247)

Analytical psychology defines the soul as both “the relation to the unconscious,” and “a personification of unconscious contents.” Jung restates Eckhart’s proposition in these terms: “God and the soul are essentially the same when regarded as personifications of an unconscious content”; and he concludes that “Meister Eckhart’s view . . . is purely psychological” (*Types* 247-48), pointing out that Eckhart “states bluntly that God is dependent on the soul” (*Types* 251). Again Eckhart himself states, “By being created, the soul created God, for he did not exist until the soul was made. A little while since and I declared, I am the cause that God is God!” (W1:410, Evans).⁶

One in this state of rapture, Eckhart tells us, is “inside of the divine ‘expanseness’.” Forman explains that, according to Eckhart, one may come permanently “to live amidst this expanse.” This state Eckhart calls *Geburt*, “the birth” (Forman 165). Eckhart explains, in Sermon 6,

The Father gives birth eternally to his Son in his own likeness. . . . And I say further: he gave birth to the Word from my soul. . . . and the Father gives birth to his son in the soul entirely in the same way as he gives birth to him in eternity. He must do so, whether he wishes to or not. . . . and I can say more: he gives birth to me as his Son and as his same Son. Further: not only does he give birth to me as his Son, but he gives birth to me as himself and himself as me. (Davies 35)

Eckhart further teaches that in the soul “God comes into being and passes away” (W1:143, Evans).⁷ Eckhart’s expression for the ‘passing away’ of God is *Der Durchbruch*, the Breakthrough of the Soul to the Godhead. Jung’s understanding of this is that

God ‘becomes’ by an act of conscious differentiation from the unconscious *dynamis*, a separation of the ego as subject from God . . . as object. . . . But when the “breakthrough” abolishes this separation by cutting the ego off from the world, and the ego becomes identical with the unconscious *dynamis*, God disappears as an object and dwindles into a subject which is no longer distinguishable from the ego. In other words, the ego, as a late

5 Herold

product of differentiation, is reunited with the dynamic All-oneness. (*Types* 255)

This state of All-oneness Jung speaks of, Eckhart calls the “flood and source,” the “ground of the ground” (W2:105, Forman 172), or “Godhead.” Forman demonstrates that in Eckhart’s thought the breakthrough represents the soul’s going beyond all form and distinction of God, including that of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, “beyond all change, diversity, and multiplicity” (Forman 178). Eckhart assures us that from the ground of the ground “all things are moved, and all those receive life that live of themselves, being endowed with reason” (W2:105, Forman 179). In Forman’s words, “To Break Through to the Godhead is apparently to directly perceive just this: all things are moved by that which I myself am” (179). Eckhart emphasizes, “This breaking through guarantees to me that I and God are one” (W2:275, Forman 180).⁸ This is *unio mystica* Eckhartian style.

Jung notes, as have others, the similarities in Eckhart’s thought to Eastern ideas. Jung claims that, since we have no indication of direct transmission (from the Upanishads, for example), “this parallelism proves that Eckhart was thinking from the depths of the collective psyche which is common to East and West” (Forman 180). Similar ideas on the “deification” of man are, in fact, found in the mysticism of Eastern Christianity, as in the seventh century Mystagogia of Maximus the Confessor.⁹ “Psychologically,” Jung says, the religious philosophers of the East and Meister Eckhart in the West identify “the Deity with the numinosity of the unconscious” (*Aion* 194). Jung considers the psychological phenomenon described, and most probably experienced, by Eckhart to be a “mystic regression to the psychic conditions of prehistory . . . in which the impelling *dynamis* has not yet petrified into an abstract idea but is still a living experience.” Jung explains that “as a result of this retrograde process the original state of identity with God is re-established and a new potential is produced.” He describes the experience as capable of creating “the world anew” (*Types* 255-56). “In these bold ideas,” Jung declares, “we hear the voice of the collective psyche, which with imperturbable assurance and the finality of a natural law brings about spiritual transformation and renewal” (*Types* 257).

In his eighties, reflecting on the influences of his youth, Jung wrote, “I was attracted to the thought of Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Plato . . . Their ideas were beautiful and academic . . . but somewhat remote. Only in Meister Eckhart did I feel the breath of life—not that I understood him” (*Memories* 68). In the understanding of his later years, Jung would say of Eckhart that his

world-embracing spirit knew, without discursive knowledge, the primordial mystical experience of India as well as of the Gnostics. . . Well might the writings of this Master lie buried for six hundred

years, for 'his time was not yet come.' Only in the nineteenth century did he find a public at all capable of appreciating the grandeur of his mind. (*Aion* 194)

It strikes me that I might say the same about Jung's own thought and the twenty-first century. This reminds me of a letter Freud once wrote to Jung, attempting to warn him away from his studies in the "occult," and alerting him to certain lurking charges against him. But not to worry as of yet, for "The reputation you have won with your *Dementia* will stand against the charge of 'mystic' for quite a while" (*Memories* 363).¹⁰

Works Cited

- Oliver Davies, ed. & trans. *The Rhineland Mystics* (NY: Crossroad, 1990).
- Meister Eckhart. *Counsels of Discernment*, c. 1300; *Benedictus* (containing the *Book of Divine Consolation*), c.1303-11; *On Detachment*; *Opus tripartitum*, c. 1311-13; vernacular sermons (at Strassburg), 1314-1323, from Bernard McGinn, "Meister Eckhart: An Introduction," in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) 237-57.
- . Counsel 10. *Everything as Divine: The Wisdom of Meister Eckhart*. trans. Edmund College, O.S.A. and Bernard McGinn, ed. Stephen J. Connor (NY: Paulist Press, 1996).
- Robert K. C. Forman. *Meister Eckhart: The Mystic as Theologian* (Rockport: Element, 1991).
- Alois Maria Haas. "Schools of Late Medieval Mysticism," *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, vol. 17, ed. Jill Raitt, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (NY: Crossroad, 1988).
- C. G. Jung. *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, 2nd ed. trans. R. F. C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).
- . *Answer to Job. The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. R. F. C. Hull (NY: Penguin, 1976).
- . *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (NY: Vintage, 1989).
- . *Psychological Types*, trans. H. G. Baynes, revised R. F. C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974, rpt. 1977).
- . *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R. F. C. Hull. Bollingen Series XX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956, rpt. 1976).
- Bernard McGinn, ed. *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics* (NY: Continuum, 1997).

7 Herold

Dom Julian Stead, O.S.B., trans. *The Church, the Liturgy and the Soul of Man: The 'Mystagogia' of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Still River, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1982).

Elizabeth Strakosch, trans. *Meister Eckhart Speaks* (London: Blackfriars, 1957).

Notes

¹ *Counsels of Discernment*, c. 1300; *Benedictus* (containing the *Book of Divine Consolation*), c.1303-11; *On Detachment; Opus tripartitum*, c. 1311-13; vernacular sermons (at Strasburg), 1314-1323, from Bernard McGinn, "Meister Eckhart: An Introduction."

² Though he was professor in Paris, 1302, 1311-1312, and was spiritual director and teacher at Cologne, until 1326, when he was brought to inquisition by the Archbishop of Cologne, Heinrich of Virneburg, on charges of heresy. His trial was moved to Avignon, and Eckhart died en route sometime between 1327 and 1328 (Alois Maria Haas, "Schools of Late Medieval Mysticism," *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, vol. 17, ed. Jill Raitt, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* [NY: Crossroad, 1988] 145-46).

³ despite the fact that he drew upon St. Augustine for his inspiration, quoting, for example, "Do not go out into the world, but rather enter into your own depths whence you will find truth." *Meister Eckhart Speaks*, trans. Elizabeth Strakosch (London: Blackfriars, 1957) 32.

⁴ Burned, 1310.

⁵ C. de B. Evans' trans. *Works*, vol. 2, 270, quoted in *Types*, 246.

⁶ Evans I, 410, quoted in *Types*, 253-54.

⁷ Evans I, 143, quoted in *Types*, 254.

⁸ W 2:275, in Forman, 180.

⁹ Dom Julian Stead, O. S. B., trans. *The Church, the Liturgy and the Soul of Man: The 'Mystagogia' of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Still River, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1982) esp. 40-41.

¹⁰ Freud to Jung, May 12, 1911, in Jung, *Memories*, 363.