

Why were Eckhart's propositions condemned?

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The promulgation of the Bull *In agro dominico* in March 1329, which condemned twenty-eight propositions taken from the work of Meister Eckhart, is an event which has attracted the attention of many scholars in recent years. This interest is the result not only of the 'rehabilitation' of Eckhart by the theological fraternity (the greater part of which is now convinced of his fundamental orthodoxy) but also of the extraordinary character of the condemnation itself. In the present article I do not intend to repeat the work of Bernard McGinn, Edmund Colledge and others, who have shown the extent to which Eckhart was misunderstood by the commission which examined his work¹, but rather to enquire why it was that such misgivings were ultimately translated into a formal condemnation of Eckhart's work by the Holy See itself.

In agro dominico stands out from other such condemnatory Bulls in a number of ways. Firstly, it was the first and only occasion when the full machinery of the Inquisition was used against a member of the Dominican Order, and it was similarly the first and only time in which a theologian of the first rank was charged with the *inquisitio haereticae pravitatis*: the most serious accusation which the Inquisition had at its disposal and the one which carried the heaviest penalties. Despite its extraordinary character, however, Eckhart's trial remained fundamentally within the bounds of legality, as Winfried Trusen's recent study has shown. Trusen also reveals, however, the malevolence of his detractors and their determination to inflict maximum damage upon Eckhart within the strict letter of the law. Had they not conducted a trial for heresy against him, for instance, his objections that he was not subject to their jurisdiction as a Dominican would have been good, as would his protestation that the case against him was invalid since the instigators had been shown to be wholly disreputable.² On the evidence of Trusen's conclusions, therefore, we immediately encounter the question of an antagonism towards Eckhart which animated his detractors from the outset of his trial in Cologne, and it seems reasonable therefore to enquire into the political and historical background of the trial in order to draw to light the possible motivation for those who wished to see Eckhart's public humiliation.

The very first sign of a movement against Eckhart comes around 1325, when he was in his sixty-sixth year. In 1323 or 1324 Eckhart arrives

in Cologne to act as regent (*magister regens*) of the Dominican *studium generale* in that city. He is at the height of his career, in that he has twice held a Parisian chair of theology (an honour he shares with Thomas Aquinas alone), and he has successfully carried out his extraordinary brief (to which we shall return) in the troubled city of Strasburg. Eckhart arrives in Cologne, then, to one of the top teaching posts in his Order, as a powerful academic theologian and an accomplished administrator.

It is all the more surprising, therefore, that this should be the moment at which formal accusations are first levelled at him for teaching matters not consonant with the Catholic faith. And what is even more surprising is that it should have been Nicholas of Strasburg, a Dominican theologian, who initiates this procedure. Nicholas had admittedly been the Papal Visitor to the Province of Teutonia since the year 1325 but he also held the post of *lector* either at the Dominican centre of studies or at the Dominican convent, and thus was Eckhart's academic subordinate. Unfortunately, we possess no documents from this first examination of Eckhart's teaching except certain statements from Eckhart's formal defence, which are taken up and used by other of his accusers at a later date. But from remarks which Eckhart makes later, it is evident that the findings of Nicholas of Strasburg were that Eckhart was entirely innocent of having taught heterodox material.

It would be wrong to think of this examination of Eckhart's teaching as being an entirely isolated event, however. The General Chapter of the Dominican Order held at Venice in the Spring of 1325 made a statement castigating those 'brethren in Teutonia who say things in their sermons which can easily lead simple and uneducated people into error'. This statement is repeated at the General Chapter in Toulouse in 1328, at the very height of Eckhart's trial, and immediately prior to the publication of the condemnatory Bull. And, in this second instance, the dangerous material in the friars' sermons is defined as 'subtle matters' (*subtilia*), which seems a clear reference to Eckhart's inclination to present sophisticated theology to the common people.³ What we find here then is a likely indication that clouds were gathering around the head of Eckhart in the early 1320's, and that the Dominican Order was seeking to distance itself, at least publicly, from his cause. Two further facts are possibly significant here. The first is that during the previous year, 1324, the Dominican Order had seen a change of leadership. Herveus Natalis, who must have held Eckhart in high esteem, for he maintained his appointment (under Berengar) as Visitor in Strasburg, had died in 1323 and he was followed by Barnabas Cagnoli, a man of less certain sympathies. The second consideration is that the initial statement expressing the Order's unease regarding events in Teutonia falls in the same year as Pope John XXII's decision to charge Nicholas of Strasburg, who was already the Dominican Visitor in Teutonia, with the added responsibilities of a Papal Visitor to that Dominican Province. Here we find more than one indication, then, of the development of

some considerable political sensitivity in the Dominican Province of Teutonia, and centring on the figure of Eckhart himself.

The unparalleled brevity of Nicholas's inquiry, together with the fact that he was himself so closely allied with Meister Eckhart, strongly suggests that it was in essence a stratagem, a defensive manoeuvre on the part of the Dominican Order, against incipient attempts to discredit one of its chief theologians and administrators.⁴ It seems very unlikely that Nicholas could have undertaken such an inquiry without the knowledge and complicity of the head of his own Order, and so the cautionary statement regarding certain preachers in Teutonia of Spring 1325 is balanced by a determined attempt by the Order to head off the approaching attack. But, if this was indeed a ruse to protect Eckhart, then it was, of course, one which failed.

If the inquisitorial proceedings conducted by Henry II of Virneburg, the Archbishop of Cologne, were remarkable on account of the fact that Eckhart was both the sole Dominican to be charged with heresy during the Middle Ages and the sole theologian of the first rank to undergo this indignity, then it also seems exceptional that the papacy should persistently have upheld the rights of the Archbishop of Cologne to conduct such an examination into Eckhart's work, even though Eckhart himself represented no threat to Pope John XXII. It cannot really have been in the Pope's best interests to condemn a foremost Dominican theologian. Perhaps one of the most striking things of all about this case is that the papacy pushed through the condemnation *even after Eckhart's death*. In contrast, the charges levelled against Nicholas of Strasburg by the Archbishop are simply left in the files. More importantly, the case against William of Ockham, who placed himself in outright opposition to the papacy when he escaped from Avignon and sided with Lewis of Bavaria, was never concluded. In the eyes of John XXII, the subtleties of Meister Eckhart's teaching must have seemed far less threatening than the vehement and full-blooded attack on the papacy launched by William, and yet it is Eckhart who is condemned and not William; and, of course, the charge against William was only an examination of faith, and not a full inquisitorial proceeding.

There are three distinct questions therefore which emerge from this state of affairs. The first is who was the instigator of the attack upon Eckhart? The second is why was such an attack mounted? And the third is what factors led to Pope John XXII proving so amenable?

The first question is easily answered, and here all commentators are agreed. The letter sent by Pope John XXII to Henry II of Virneburg, assuring him that the case against Eckhart will continue, despite the latter's death, is clear evidence of the centrality of the Archbishop of Cologne in the whole affair. Here is the motivating mind, the fount of animosity.⁵ We need, then, to explore in greater detail the experience and character of this Archbishop in order to explain the possible reasons for

his antagonism towards an elderly Dominican theologian who, prior to 1323, he had surely never met.

Henry II of Virneburg belonged to a noble family from the Eifel region of Germany (bordering on the present day Belgian Ardennes).⁶ It was a family which rose meteorically at the end of the thirteenth century only to vanish into obscurity, just as suddenly, two centuries later. Henry III, the Archbishop of Mainz between 1338 and 1346, belonged to the same Virneburg family. The young Henry II soon showed himself to be an ambitious man, although he had to wait until his mid-fifties before gaining election to the Archbishopric of Trier in 1299. Unfortunately for him, Pope Boniface VIII had reserved the appointment for himself, and thus the election was proclaimed invalid. It took a direct personal intervention by the Pope himself, however, to persuade Henry to give up the Archbishopric. Henry was a candidate also for the seat of Cologne when the latter fell vacant in 1304 with the death of Wikbold von Holte. However, the vote was split over three candidates. William of Jüllich was killed on the battlefield shortly afterwards, and Henry and Reinhard of Westerbürg both turned to the Curia in order to gain a decision in their favour. Only after two years of intensive personal lobbying of the Pope, first of Benedict XI and then of Clement V, was Henry able to secure his election to the Archbishopric of Cologne.

Once in position, Henry applied his considerable abilities to remedying the financial ills of his archdiocese. Indeed, financial acumen is one of the hallmarks of his career, so that upon his death, in 1332, the Pope was able to praise him for the 'good order' of the Archdiocese of Cologne.⁷ There are occasions, however, when his aspirations in this direction appear quite grotesque. During the double election of 1314, for instance, Henry insists as part of his support for Frederick the Fair that the King should lend him martial aid, if necessary, at his own cost, while no such obligation was to fall to himself. The King should always permit him access, and should pay for the costs of the Archbishop's lodging at the royal court. The King is required to maintain, at his own cost, two emissaries from the Archbishop at the court who are permanently to ensure that the King does nothing that might be harmful to the Archbishop's interests. Even Gregor Schwamborn, Henry's mild biographer, who is prepared to tolerate his extensive and destructive nepotism as an old man's 'indulgence', describes these preconditions as 'schnöde Habsucht' or 'bare-faced avarice'.⁸

The second keynote of Henry's reign is his abhorrence of heresy. As soon as he takes office in 1306, Henry addresses himself vigorously to the question of the so-called extraregular groupings, the Beguines and the Beghards, who lived a life based on the evangelical precepts but who did not follow a formal religious rule.⁹ The women lived sometimes singly and sometimes together, and they took only temporary vows. The men were generally itinerant, mendicant people who, for one reason or another, did not become part of the regular mendicant orders. It is

against these groups that Henry launches his attack. And it is of particular interest that he explicitly accuses them of the antinomian heresy of the Free Spirit, which had been recorded by Albert the Great at Ries, near Augsburg, during the 1270s. Thus they are guilty of teaching that the soul can become so totally one with God that we can no longer sin, and all is permitted. Fornication, in particular, is not to be thought of as a sin. The perfected soul is also free from the observance of Church practice. Henry threatens those who do not renounce their lawless ways with excommunication and the secular arm. Robert Lerner makes the point that Henry is the first to link the so-called heresy of the Free Spirit with the Beguines and the Beghards; and Lerner also makes the point that we have no actual evidence from Cologne in this period for cases of Beguines or Beghards being put on trial for the errors of the Free Spirit.¹⁰ The legislation issued in Mainz and Trier in 1310 follows Cologne by making specific reference to Beghards, but there is no mention in either case of antinomian principles. As with earlier complaints against the Beguines, those prior to Henry's decree of 1307, Mainz and Trier stress the complaint of unregulated mendicancy.

In 1311–12, in two different Bulls (*Cum de quibusdam mulieribus* and *Ad nostrum*), the Council of Vienne also presented a link between the Beguines and the Free Spirit heresy. Here, it seems, there were two factors at work. The first is the case of Marguerite Porete, who was burnt at the stake in 1310 for refusing to recant certain propositions she had put forward in her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. A reference in a contemporary chronicle suggests that she was a Beguine (probably of the more suspect, itinerant type). Whether her work contains heretical elements or not is a matter of some dispute, but it would certainly seem at least to permit antinomian readings. But the second important factor here is Henry himself. Neither the Archbishop of Mainz, nor that of Trier, were present at the Council of Vienne, and thus Henry was the dominant German presence, together with John of Dürbheim, the Bishop of Strasburg (to whom we shall return). The first Bull, *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*, shows a keenness to differentiate between pious Beguines and those who constituted a threat to Church orthodoxy. Nor does it speak of the Beguines particularly in terms of an antinomian sect. The second Bull, *Ad nostrum*, however, is altogether harsher in tone in that it makes no attempt to safeguard 'good' Beguines and it makes explicit reference to their alleged antinomian practices. It is perhaps significant that this second, more uncompromising, Bull even makes reference to 'the German land' (*in regno Alemanniae*) as being the geographical area concerned, which may well point to the influence of Henry of Virneburg, the sole German Archbishop present at the Council, in the drawing up of this document.¹²

In our examination of the reasons for the condemnation, the next point to consider is why it was that Meister Eckhart should have attracted the attention of Archbishop Henry and, indeed, become the

object of his indefatigable animosity. The answer, or at least part of it, is to be found in the fact that Eckhart, in the year 1313, moves from Paris, where he has finished his second term as *magister regens*, to Strasburg. Under normal circumstances, a Parisian master would have returned to his own Province, which in Eckhart's case was Saxonia, whereas Strasburg lies in the Province of Teutonia. We may conclude therefore that Eckhart must have been dispatched to Strasburg at the behest of Berengar of Landora, the General of the Dominican Order. Somewhat surprisingly, a number of documents survive which indicate that Eckhart did not in fact hold a teaching post at the Dominican Convent in Strasburg. Rather, he seems to have been serving as Vicar-General of the Province with oversight of the many women's convents in the South German area. This, at least, is what we can deduce from the few instances in which his name occurs on documents from this period (property transactions and a disciplinary visitation to a convent). Winfried Trusen is quite right to point out that the circumstances of Eckhart's move to Strasburg have not been adequately commented upon, and he is right too when he says that they have to do with the implicit threat to the Dominican Order brought about by the Vienne moves against the Beguines, for whom, to a considerable extent, the Dominicans themselves bore pastoral responsibility.¹³

Since 1267, at the behest of Pope Clement IV, the Dominican Order had accepted responsibility for the many women's communities which had sprung up in Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and which, largely due to their numbers, had failed to find a home within the established monastic orders. These groupings were of diverse kinds, but many were communities of Beguines, some of which became Dominican (or Franciscan) tertiaries, while others retained a high degree of independence. In the light of this special link between the Beguines and the Dominican Order, it is easy to see why Eckhart should have been sent to Strasburg, for it was in the Province of Teutonia, in which Strasburg was situated, that over half the 'Dominican' nunneries were to be found. A good many of these owed their existence to Beguine origins, and their number was constantly increasing as more and more Beguine communities sought affiliation with the Dominican Order, although the practical expression of Dominican pastoral care might take the form only of the appointment of a Dominican chaplain to the community. And in cities such as Strasburg and Cologne, where medieval records have been well preserved, it is noticeable that there was a marked tendency for the Beguine establishments to collect around the Dominican (and Franciscan) houses.¹⁴ This was certainly the case in Strasburg, where, during Eckhart's sojourn there (1313—1323?), there were three Dominican nunneries in the immediate vicinity of the friars in the very centre of the city: Turm, Offenburg and Innenheim. All three of these convents had originally been Beguine houses which had been accepted by the Dominican Order sometime before the year 1276. In 1304 these three

were joined by Mollesheim and in 1323 by Spiegel. But the friars were also surrounded by a large number of religious women whose relations with the Dominican Order were less precise. Dayton Phillips, in his seminal study of Beguines in medieval Strasburg, suggests that in the period 1300—1310 there were some ninety Beguines living in the immediate vicinity of the friars. Many of these would have been women living alone, inhabiting the Schlauchgasse, which led directly off the friars' own house. It is recorded that by the end of the fourteenth century there were in Strasburg some eighty-five Beguine houses attached to the Dominican Order.¹⁵

The decision of the leadership of the Dominican Order to send Eckhart to Strasburg was proved to be well-founded when, on 13 August 1317 and actually prior to the publication in Paris of the Vienne decretals on 25 October of that same year, the Bishop of Strasburg initiated a campaign against those extraregulars who identified themselves with the sect of the 'Free Spirit'. It is by no means the case that the Bishop thereby intended those Beguines and religious sisters who were closely allied with the Dominicans and Franciscans; in fact, he specifically excluded the 'honest' Beguines who were in the care of the Franciscans.¹⁶ Nevertheless, his instruction of August 1317 seems to have been interpreted by the secular clergy of the area as an invitation to open season on the Beguines for, in August of the following year, the Pope was forced to issue the Bull *Ratio recta* in which he determines that the distinctions of *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus* between 'good' and 'bad' Beguines must be respected. And on 18 January 1319, 'accommodating himself to the wishes of the local clergy', the Bishop actually called for the dissolution of the Beguines and their return to normal parish life.¹⁷ This resulted in the papal Bull *Etsi apostolicae* (23 February 1319) in which John XXII explicitly states that the Vienne decretals must not be extended to Third Order Franciscans.

There can be no doubt that the situation regarding the Beguines in Strasburg was both confused and acrimonious. Above all, it was the product of a long animosity between the secular clergy and the mendicant orders. Under the influence of the Bishops close in sympathy to the secular clergy, decretals issued at the Council of Vienne had decidedly reduced privileges accorded to the Franciscans and Dominicans alike, and the announcement on 5 August 1318 of the formation of an alliance between the cathedral chapter and the chapters of St Thomas and St Peter in Strasburg against the mendicants, who were regarded as being the supporters of those in error, is a clear instance of this conflict.¹⁸ It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that within this context Meister Eckhart, who was one of the chief figures on the Dominican side during these turbulent years, must have appeared as a defender of the Beguine cause against the efforts and interests of the secular clergy, not least those of the Bishop of Strasburg, John of Dürbheim.

It is easy to see therefore why Meister Eckhart, upon his arrival in Cologne, should have been of interest to the Archbishop, who was a close ally of the Bishop of Strasburg and was well known for his zealous pursuit of groupings which he suspected of heresy.¹⁹ And, in addition to Eckhart's role in Strasburg, it was during his Strasburg years that Eckhart began to present in German some of the radical ideas which had long been part of his Latin writings. The treatise 'On the Noble Man' from his *Liber Benedictus* is a particular example of this, and it is perhaps not surprising that material from the *Liber Benedictus* featured prominently in the first lists of Eckhart's suspect articles to be drawn up at Cologne. While being of a different nature altogether, such articles could easily be read by the uneducated or the unsympathetic as being perilously close to some of the precepts of the Free Spirit which Archbishop Henry believed to be such a threat among the Beguines. It remains now for us to ask why it was that the Archbishop should have found such a ready ear in Pope John XXII for his malignant intentions towards Meister Eckhart.

A brief glance at German history between the eighth and the fourteenth century shows that it is marked by the constantly shifting patterns of power involving the German Emperor (not to forget his princes), the Papacy, the French King and the provinces of Italy. In 774, Charles the Great became King of Lombardy and was crowned in Rome in 800. Otto the First invaded Italy in 951 and received the title '*imperator et Augustus*' in Rome in 962. Frederick Barbarossa, from his base in Swabia, launched an extensive campaign in Northern Italy which led him finally to exert considerable influence not only in Lombardy but also in the province of Tuscany and parts of central Italy. Frederick II's entrance onto the Italian stage in 1220 was certainly less felicitous and led to a serious weakening of the monarchy in Germany and the rise of the German princes. Lewis of Bavaria's active involvement in Northern Italy from 1323, and his invasion of Italy in 1327, can be seen therefore to be merely the latest in a long-standing tradition of German Kings seeking an extension of their empire and income in the lands of Italy.

But the Papacy had already shown itself to be particularly sensitive in the matter of German incursions into Italy. Frederick Barbarossa's extensive gains there were never formally recognised by his friend, Pope Lucius III, fearful doubtless of an alliance with the Normans in Sicily. And the activities of Frederick II in Italy likewise alienated the Papacy. The evident reason for this unease was the implicit threat to the Pope's Italian possessions, combined more often than not with the sound instincts of the Papacy to maintain a proper balance between the French and German powers. But there were particular reasons why John XXII should have resented Lewis of Bavaria's incursion into Italy. From the very beginning of his reign, John XXII had shown himself to be greatly concerned with the Italian problem; and the constitution *Si fratrum* of

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March 1317, which was drawn up soon after John was elected Pope, 'assumed that the empire was vacant and declared penalties against any who might meddle with it in defiance of the papal claim to administer during the vacancy'.²⁰ Although the initiation of the papal process against Lewis, which occurred on 8 October 1323, followed the battle of Mühlendorf in 1322, in which Lewis defeated his rival, Frederick of Austria, it also came immediately after Lewis's first direct intervention in the affairs of Lombardy through his lieutenant, Berthold of Neiffen, in March 1323.²¹ It was Italy which was paramountly the bone of contention between Pope and Emperor, rather than the disagreement on the process of Lewis's election, and the reasons for this are not difficult to see. Lewis himself possessed virtually no funds; 'his lack of money was chronic and desperate to a degree which sets him apart from most of his contemporaries'.²² His attempted assertion of imperial rights in Italy therefore was not just an act of aggrandisement but a policy for increasing his revenue, important not least for securing his position in Germany, which was never strong. The financial advantages of hegemony in Italy cannot have been far from John XXII's mind either, although it was in fact the cost of his wars in Italy which led to the stringent measures he took elsewhere in Europe in order great to increase the papal revenues.²³ Of far greater importance to the Pope was the need to restore papal power in central Italy prior to a return to Rome. The Papacy envisaged itself gaining a new independence based in Rome, with benign Hapsburg rule in Lombardy: a plan which was wholly obstructed by the intervention of Lewis of Bavaria, who fought in open animosity to the Pope, and who, after a successful campaign, had himself crowned King by a representative of the Roman people in the year 1328.

The relevance of Pope John's troubles in Italy, where he was confronted by an outrightly hostile and generally victorious German King, is crucial to an understanding of why it was that Meister Eckhart's propositions were condemned. One of the questions to be raised most insistently by the account of Eckhart's trial is why the Papacy did not simply let matters drop. It could not have been in the interests of the Holy See to carry through the condemnation of Eckhart's teaching and yet, even after Eckhart's death, the Bull *In agro* was promulgated. It seems imperative therefore finally to ask what were the circumstances which allowed Archbishop Henry of Virneburg to exercise such an irresistible influence upon Pope John XXII.

Henry was one of the three most powerful German ecclesiastical electors of the German King. And already in 1308, with the contested election of that year, he had shown himself to be in possession of a sharp political sense and to be not at all afraid of isolating himself from the other German Archbishops. In that year Henry had sided with the Papacy by supporting Henry of Luxemburg against the French candidate. The Archbishops of Mainz and Trier, both of whom were under French influence, had opposed the Pope and the Cologne

Archbishop, but in vain. In the second contested election, of 1314, Henry had once again shown himself to be a man of shrewd and opportunist independent judgement. On this occasion, Mainz and Trier initially supported John of Bohemia, Henry of Luxemburg's heir, in their determination to keep out the Hapsburg candidate. In the face of John of Bohemia's youth, and the unlikelihood of gaining papal acceptance for that reason, they later switched their allegiance to another Luxemburg candidate, Lewis of Bavaria. Henry of Virneburg, on the other hand, resolutely supported the Hapsburg, Frederick of Austria. The result of the contest was a double election with Lewis being crowned in Aachen by the Archbishop of Mainz, and Frederick being crowned in Bonn by Henry of Virneburg himself. Henry of Virneburg, 'the chief supporter of the Austrian party among the princes', was therefore the Pope's chief ally, and one whom he simply could not afford to alienate.²⁴ A glance at the key dates in the Pope's struggle with Lewis, when the Archbishop's influence over John XXII would have been greatest, shows that these correspond closely to the critical stages in Eckhart's trial. The process against Lewis, which was initiated in 1323 (perhaps the year of Eckhart's arrival in Cologne), reached a head in 1324, when the Pope excommunicated him. And in January 1328, when Eckhart may already be dead but *In agro dominico* has not yet been published, Lewis is crowned Emperor in Rome and, as a further act of defiance, he appoints an anti-pope, the short-lived Nicholas V. In fact, a clear insight into the nature of relations between the Pope and the Archbishop is afforded by a letter which John wrote to Henry on 3 June 1324. In an earlier letter, of 6 April, the Pope had urged Henry to publish the first process against Lewis (which he had so far failed to do on account of opposition from the citizens of Cologne), and in this second letter the Pope promised the Archbishop restitution of whatever toll-rights King Albrecht had removed from his diocese during the toll-war in the Rheinland area; all the Archbishop was required to do was to notify the Pope of the present owners of such rights.²⁵ This document is the clearest we possess so far of the far-reaching influence which the Archbishop of Cologne exercised over Pope John XXII in this period, and of the evident willingness of the Pope to accede to the wishes of his German ally; it is therefore of considerable consequence in our evaluation of the reasons for Eckhart's condemnation.

Different reasons have been put forward as to why Pope John XXII promulgated the Bull *In agro dominico*, thus condemning the work of a foremost Dominican theologian. Kurt Ruh has suggested that it was the result of the fact that much of Eckhart's teaching was in the vernacular, and thus might potentially exercise far greater influence among the masses.²⁶ Although this may well have been a factor, the fact that the condemnation was published only in the diocese of Cologne, and not in that of Strasburg, where Eckhart had preached and written in the

vernacular for over ten years, suggests that it was not a primary one. The argument put forward by Otto Karrer, that Eckhart was 'sacrificed' in order to placate the Franciscans and to compensate them for the canonisation of Thomas Aquinas, also seems difficult to sustain.²⁷ In 1328 John XXII was in a relatively strong position with regard to the Franciscan rebellion. His Bull of 1323, *Cum inter nonnullos*, had pronounced the teaching of the absolutely poverty of Christ to be heretical, a Bull which, however unpalatable to the Franciscans, was accepted by their General Chapter held at Lyon in 1325. In addition to this clear victory, at the beginning of 1328 we find Michael of Cesena, the General of the Franciscan Order, a virtual prisoner at the papal court of John XXII (together with William of Ockham). In the light of this balance of power, which was so favourable for the Papacy, John XXII simply had no need to placate the Franciscan Order or to pander to their wishes.

As we have seen, the concerns of Pope John XXII during the critical period of Eckhart's trial lay with Italy, with his hopes for a return to Italy, and with his struggle against Lewis of Bavaria over the Italian lands. It is within this political context that Henry II of Virneburg, the Archbishop of Cologne, who was animated by a marked hostility towards Meister Eckhart, gained great personal influence over the Holy See. And the fruit of this influence, inspired by animosity, was that a distinguished Dominican theologian with a penchant for academic *subtilia* was dragged before the Inquisition in an affair which disgraced him and disgraces still, not a little, the Church of his day.

- 1 Among English-language works, see in particular Bernard McGinn, 'Eckhart's condemnation reconsidered', *The Thomist*, XLIV, 3 (July 1980), pp. 390—414; also: Maurice O'C. Walshe, 'Was Meister Eckhart a heretic?', *London German Studies*, I (1980), pp. 67—85; Richard Woods, *Eckhart's Way* (Delaware, 1986; London, 1987), pp. 151—178; Edmund Colledge, 'Eckhart's Orthodoxy Reconsidered', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 71 (1990), pp. 176—184.
- 2 See Trusen, *Der Prozess gegen Meister Eckhart*, Paderborn, 1988. With regard to Eckhart's objection that the trial was invalid in that Nicholas of Strasburg had already examined his work, Trusen points out that Nicholas, as Visitor, could not have conducted proceedings for heresy (p. 71), and with regard to his objection that the commissars had no authority over him as a Master of Theology, Trusen points to the precedent of the condemnations by Bishop Stephan Tempier and Archbishop Robert Kilwardby (p. 91). But Trusen believes that the commissioners may in fact have gone beyond the letter of the law in their determination to proceed against Eckhart on the grounds of heresy rather than the lesser charge of censure (p. 97).
- 3 I am therefore inclined to agree with Kurt Ruh (*Meister Eckhart*, Munich, 1985, pp. 171ff) against Joseph Koch (*Kleine Schriften*, I, Rome, 1973, pp. 314ff) on this point. Koch argues that the 'error' concerned is of a political nature and to do with the role of the Dominican Order in the conflict between the Papacy and the Emperor. Ruh, on the other hand, argues that 'error' is generally the medieval shorthand for heresy. Ruh also makes the important point that simple and uneducated people played no part in the political controversy between the Papacy and the Emperor. The repetition of the injunction in 1328, which uses precisely the same formula as the 1325 injunction ('ducunt populum in errorem': *Monumenta*

ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum historica, IV, p. 180) with the addition of the word *subtilia* seems also to support Ruh's case.

Trusen argues forcefully for Koch's reading, providing new and interesting material to illuminate the tensions in the Dominican Order surrounding the controversy. But his statement that it is now 'evident' that the 1325 declaration had 'nothing whatsoever to do with Eckhart' (p. 60) must be balanced by the fact that Trusen never actually addresses the two main points made by Ruh, nor the fact that the same formula is used in both injunctions. The matter appears, in any case, far from resolution.

- 4 This observation seems first to have been made by X. Hornstein in his *Les grandes mystiques allemands du 14e siècle* (Lucerne, 1922), p. 34. Trusen's (p. 66) view that this cannot have been the case on the grounds that Nicholas was not himself empowered to initiate such proceedings in the absence of other persons acting as accusers seems strange. It cannot have been beyond the initiative of Nicholas to find just such persons if he did indeed wish to conduct an inquiry of this kind. Trusen makes the good point, however, that the legal status of Nicholas' enquiry was not sufficient to undermine the legality of the later trial, as Eckhart claimed (p. 71).
- 5 This seems the case even though the original source of the complaint against Eckhart is likely to have been those of his Dominican brethren who were envious of him and to whom he himself refers (*Rechtfertigungsschrift*, Daniels, 1; Théry, 185). But it is not at all clear that we need resort to the theory that Eckhart was the victim of internecine conflict within the Dominican Order between reformers and their opponents (pace Trusen, p. 70).
- 6 For the following, see Gregor Schwamborn's detailed study of Henry II of Virneburg (*Heinrich II, Erzbischof von Köln*, Neuss, 1904), especially pages 8–12. I was wrong to state that Henry was a Franciscan in my own *God Within* (London, 1988), as is Richard Woods in his *Eckhart's Way*.
- 7 Schwamborn, p. 72.
- 8 Schwamborn, p. 22.
- 9 In his actual edict, Henry refers only to the *begardi*, but we may assume that this term embraces the women too, or *Beguines*.
- 10 See R.E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages*, London, 1972.
- 11 See Paul Verdeyen, 'Le procès d' Inquisition contre Marguerite Porete et Guiard de Crosseonessart (1309–1310) in *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 81, 1986, pp. 47–94.
- 12 This is the view also of Schwamborn (p. 66, n. 2). Lerner records that the Vienne decrees were drawn up by commissions and not at plenary sessions, which again supports the theory that *Ad nostrum* may have been the expression of a small, radical German faction, motivated by animosity towards the *Beguines*. It is also noteworthy in this respect that the Pope was obliged to promulgate the Bull *Ratio recta* in 1318 in order to counteract excessive persecution of the *Beguines* in Germany and to reinforce the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' *Beguines* which was made in *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*, the earlier of the two Vienne decretals.
- 13 Trusen, pp. 19–61. What Trusen does not notice, however, is the network of relations which connects Archbishop Henry with the Vienne decretals against the *Beguines*, and with John of Dürbheim, Bishop of Strasbourg. Henry and John were also united in their support of the Habsburg candidate against Lewis of Bavaria (see Hauck, *Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands*, VI, 495). It is also possible that there is a parallel to Eckhart's move in the appearance of the leading Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus in Cologne in 1307 (the same year in which the Archbishop made his first attack upon the extraregulars of that city). This possibility has been disputed (see E. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, Brunswick, 1954, p. 519, where there is also a good bibliography on this question), but there is certainly a tradition going back to the early seventeenth century which suggests that Duns Scotus might have been sent to Cologne to combat heresy among the *Beguines*

- and thus by inference to defend the Franciscan Order. See Wadding, *Annales Minorum*, 1636, vol.III, p. 71 and Ferchius, *Oratio in Ionnem Dunsium Scotum*, 1634, p. 10.
- 14 See Otto Langer, *Mystische Erfahrung und spirituelle Theologie*, Munich, 1987, pp. 36—38. R. W. Southern (*Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, Harmondsworth, 1970, pp. 327f) writes: 'of the hundred and sixty-seven individual beguines whose exact address in Cologne is known between 1263 and 1389 a hundred and thirty-six lived in the neighbourhood of the Dominicans and Franciscans'. See also McDonnell, p. 203f.
- 15 D. Phillips, *Beguines in Medieval Strasburg*, Palo Alto, 1941, pp. 90ff.
- 16 McDonnell, pp. 528ff. There is also a good discussion of the situation in Strasburg in Ruh, pp. 112ff and Trusen, pp. 24ff.
- 17 McDonnell, p. 533.
- 18 Trusen, p. 26. See Patschovsky, A., 'Strasburger Beginenverfolgungen im 14. Jahrhundert' in *Deutsches Archiv* 30, 1974, pp. 94—161 for relevant documents from this period.
- 19 See note 13 above.
- 20 H.S. Offler, 'Empire and Papacy: the Last Struggle' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, series 5, vol. VI, 1956, p. 25.
- 21 *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* Const., v. nr. 729, p. 568 (quoted in Offler, p. 24).
- 22 Offler, pp. 31f.
- 23 Between the years 1320—1 and 1325—6 the papal income advanced from 112,490 to 528,857 florins, of which some 336,000 florins were used for the war in Lombardy. See Offler, p. 27.
- 24 Carl Müller, *Der Kampf Ludwigs des Baiern mit der römischen Curie*, Tübingen, 1879, vol. I, p. 151.
- 25 Müller, *ibid*. Müller's reference for this letter is *Oberbairisches Archiv* I, 64, no. 25f.
- 26 Ruh, p. 173.
- 27 See Koch, p. 321, n. 195.

Brothers in the Church Today: Probing the Silence

Bruce H. Lescher CSC

'Sometimes nothing is a pretty cool hand.'

—Luke, in *Cool Hand Luke*.

The years since Vatican II have hit religious brothers hard. Brothers have been leaving religious life in greater percentages than priests or women religious.¹ The brothers' present search for identity in this vocational crisis may take years to work itself out. Meanwhile, brothers need to reflect on a phenomenon not affecting women religious or priests: general silence in the Church about their vocation. The question is: what do we make of the silence?