

# Eckhart's Orthodoxy Reconsidered

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There probably has never been a generation since the year 1329, when the Holy See in Avignon condemned fifteen propositions extracted from Eckhart's writings as heretical, when the justice of the condemnation has not been questioned. The object of this paper is to take account of some recent publications which seem to support the decision of the Dominican General Chapter at Walberberg in 1980 to initiate proceedings for a re-examination of Eckhart's case.

One is by Richard Woods OP<sup>1</sup>, and it may be commended for its concise and factual account of the troubled times in which Eckhart lived and suffered. Sagely he observes that some of the Church's grievous problems, which she may be thought to have visited upon the German friar, are still afflicting her, so that the Order of Preachers, in seeking to restore to him his good name, is not merely indulging in Dantesque brooding over the parish pump.

The second is by a Dutch Jesuit, Paul Verdeyen, who has with Romana Guarnieri's permission reprinted, in 1986, as volume 69 of the *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* her text of the French *Mirror of Simple Souls*, parallel to his own critical edition of the manuscripts of the *Mirror's* Latin translation. Though Verdeyen's work is flawed (particularly by one strange misapprehension—that the translation was produced by the Inquisition in Paris before the author of the *Mirror*, Margaret Porette, was tried, condemned and put to death for heresy), nonetheless Verdeyen has made valuable contributions to our further knowledge of Margaret's perplexing and engrossing case. Very soon I shall attempt to support my belief that it is relevant to that of Eckhart.

A more general study of Meister Eckhart<sup>2</sup> by Kurt Ruh appeared at this time. Ruh occupies a commanding position among students of German mediaeval literature, and there is much in his book which we can admire: for example, his generous and sensitive appreciation of what he prefers to call *Instructional Talks* (rather than the older title, *Counsels on Discernment*), that assessment of the role in Christian living that religious houses ought to have. Also he argues with great probability—though he is not the first to have done so—that in Strasbourg Eckhart was not in charge of the studium generale, but was entrusted with the direction of the many Rhineland convents of Second Order nuns, a charge which in the end, one may believe, contributed to

his undoing. There is so much in *Meister Eckhart* to praise that we must regret the more its grave defects: inexcusable errors of fact, and an indifference to Catholic dogma which disqualifies the work as a balanced presentation of essentials.

Although it appeared five years after the Walberberg resolution, Ruh appeared not to know—or, perhaps, to care—about this.

As my own *mise en scène*, I wish to rehearse briefly the data, still relatively little known, concerning Margaret Porette, whose ill-fated book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, is important, some of us believe, for a complete assessment of Eckhart<sup>3</sup>. Not later than the year 1306 the bishop of Cambrai had caused a copy of the *Mirror* to be publicly burned in its author's presence at Valenciennes (because, critics consider, she was a native of the town); and she was then warned what, if she persisted in disseminating the work, would be the result—that she would be treated as a relapsed heretic, with all the consequences of this. Yet that is what she did. First she submitted it to three theologians, whom one manuscript of the *Mirror* names. Two of them are not now to be identified, but the third, Geoffrey of Fontaines, was a celebrated teacher of the University of Paris, whose historicity is beyond question. All three agreed in giving Margaret's book qualified certificates of approval, though safeguarding themselves with caveats that the *Mirror's* subject-matter was so difficult that it should not be broadcast among the simple devout, lest it might lead them astray.

Armed with these expressions of guarded approbation, which, evidently, Margaret caused to be inserted in later copies of her work, she presented one to the bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne, hoping, we may presume, to win from him an unqualified nihil obstat with which she could circumvent the Cambrai prohibition. But this manoeuvre failed. The bishop placed the book in the hands of the Inquisition, who, when all the circumstances were known, submitted the matter to the chief inquisitor of France, William Humbert, usually called 'of Paris'.

William had recently been active in securing the condemnation of the French Knights Templar on charges so patently trumped up that the death sentences pronounced, followed by a hideous auto-da-fè in Paris, in which fifty-six of them perished together, provoked a general revulsion, even among those hardened to such gruesome spectacles. Richard Woods presents a cogent discussion of the motivation of this persecution.

Once Margaret had been delated to William, he had her brought to Paris and closely imprisoned for more than a year, during which time she refused to take any oath, a well-known mark of those tainted with antinomianism, who justified themselves by alleging Matthew 5:34.

We learn this from William's summary of the case, the preface to his verdict that Margaret 'be surrendered to the secular arm', followed by the customary empty recommendation that she be shown what mercy was possible. She received none, dying at the stake in the Place de Grève,

where the Hôtel de Ville now stands, in the presence of an immense concourse on June 1, 1310, only weeks after the Templars' massacre. It is clear that William went to great pains to document the case, quoting, for example, two propositions from the *Mirror* (a contemporary chronicler quotes a third) to show why a commission of experts had judged the book heretical, so that he and his colleagues should not again be accused of judicial murder. Since we shall soon see the close connection between the *Mirror* and one of Eckhart's sermons, we may at this point ask whether Margaret's case also should be reopened; but, as we shall try to show in the introduction to our forthcoming *Mirror* translation, much as we may detest the savageries which the Church permitted and encouraged in her war upon heresy and heretics, Margaret's beliefs, though she expounded them in nuanced terms which leave room for different interpretations, cannot well be reconciled with the teachings of our Church. That, for her, was 'Holy Church the Less' governed by 'Reason', whereas she proclaimed herself a faithful daughter of 'Holy Church the Greater', ruled by 'Love', whose enemy 'Reason' is.

In Kurt Ruh's account of the *Mirror*, he transposes and confuses these two 'Holy Churches', making 'Holy Church the Less' the Church of the 'Simple Souls', that is, Margaret's own Church, the Church of 'Love'<sup>4</sup>. Such an error compels us to ask with what care the *Mirror* can have been read for Ruh's study, and how much of its text can have been understood.

There would be no great profit in attempting to compare or contrast Margaret's teachings with Eckhart's. Her literary gifts are evident, but the *Mirror* as a devotional treatise—which many through the ages have taken it to be—is in appearance wholly traditional. It is only here and there that she inserts into her Boethian dialogue passages, couched in calculatedly ambiguous language, propounding such topics as 'false deification' and, one may suspect, the sinlessness of carnal promiscuity. Eckhart, by contrast, in his reiterated proclamation of his cardinal doctrine, 'the birth of the Word in the Soul', is innovative, employing tactics and language designed to startle his hearers into attention and acceptance.

Today Margaret's book can be variously judged. Romana Guarnieri, to whom belongs the credit for having identified in a Condé manuscript a copy of Margaret's own French text, which for centuries was believed to have been destroyed without trace, and for having published it<sup>5</sup>, was careful to maintain neutrality, yet there have been others<sup>6</sup> to agree with the medieval experts to whom Margaret showed it in awarding it their approval, however guarded. From this it would follow that they consider that she was unjustly condemned, though it is our opinion that this can be upheld only by those who ignore, or, with Kurt Ruh, misrepresent the *Mirror's* evidence.

Once this text became available to the learned world, there were scholars not slow to perceive that there could be links between

Margaret's tragic story and that of Meister Eckhart; and on the last visit to Rome of Josef Koch, beyond question the leading Eckhart expositor of our day<sup>7</sup>, he informed Dr. Guarnieri<sup>8</sup> that he had found proof that Eckhart had read the *Mirror*. Before Koch was able to document this find in any publication, he died; and a thorough search of his papers showed that he had made no note of his discovery. In 1968 I observed how important it would be if the missing information could be identified<sup>9</sup>; and so the matter remained until, when translating Eckhart's German Sermon 52, *Beati pauperes spiritu*, I saw the probability that Koch too had recognised that in 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' Eckhart was repeating a paradoxical proposition which we have also found in Margaret's *Mirror* yet nowhere else.

In brief<sup>10</sup>, Eckhart in *Beati pauperes spiritu* said, if indeed the sermon ever were preached and not merely circulated in writing<sup>11</sup>

If someone asks me now what kind of poor man he is who wants nothing, I reply in this way: So long as a man has this as his will, that he wants to fulfil 'God's'<sup>12</sup> dearest will, he has not the poverty about which we want to talk. Such a person has a will with which he wants to fulfil God's will, and that is not true poverty. For if a person wants really to have poverty, he ought to be as free of his own created will as he was when he did not exist. For I tell you by the truth that is eternal, so long as you have a will to fulfil 'God's' will, and a longing for 'God' and for eternity, then you are not poor, for a poor man is one who has a will and longing for nothing<sup>13</sup>.

The only other place known to us where it is propounded that to will for God's will to be done is not true 'poverty of the will' is in the *Mirror's* chapter 48, where Margaret had written

How the Soul is never free who desires that God's will be done to her to his glory... So, says Love, the Soul wills nothing, because she is free. For no-one is ever free who wishes for anything with his own will, whatever it be that he wishes. For in wishing he is enslaved to himself ... and it was because of such men that God refused his kingdom<sup>14</sup>.

Herbert Grundmann was probably the first to observe how likely it was that Eckhart found all the evidence he required for an appraisal of Margaret's *Mirror* when he returned to Paris, months only after her death, to take up his second term of professorial teaching<sup>15</sup>. William in his proclamation had commanded all the faithful who owned copies of her book to surrender them to him or to the prior of the Paris convent where he lived, and where Eckhart would so soon join him, on peril of excommunication.

Grundmann's suggestion, that Eckhart had seen the *Mirror* in his own house in Paris, gains plausibility from the use that was made of his own writings, after his death and the condemnation of some of his teaching. Thomas Kaeppli, on the basis of his discovery of the

previously unknown Eckhart extracts in MS Basel University Library B VI 16, argued that there is a strong probability that the excerptor found his originals, a comprehensive selection of the Eckhart works, in the Cologne Dominican convent, some twenty years after the dead friar's teachings had been proscribed in the instrument, *In agro dominico*, from which the excerptor himself quotes<sup>16</sup>. If the anonymous Cologne scribe did not scruple to ignore the ban on Eckhart's writing, making private notes probably not intended for publication, there seems little reason to doubt that Eckhart, in the assurance of his twice-awarded chair, regarded himself as equally free to treat the *Mirror* as available to him. But it is beyond possibility that, living under the same roof as William 'of Paris', he should not have known of the book's true history.

We have further evidence that contemporary Dominicans did not consider themselves obliged to accept *In agro dominico* as the last word on Eckhart's teachings. Henry Suso, who must have studied under him, published his *Little Book of Truth* after his death, for he is recognisably the 'sublime master' who is spoken of as no longer alive. In its sixth chapter there is the dialogue between the Disciple, who is Suso himself, and *das namenlose Wilde*, 'the nameless wild thing', subtle in his words but unskilled in his works, abounding in rhetorical verbiage<sup>17</sup>. The Wild Thing says that his wisdom has led him to complete liberty, which is when 'a man lives according to his own choice without opposition, without any look before or after'. The Disciple calls this antinomianism 'evil and deficient', and urges the importance of ordered philosophical thinking. The Wild Thing retorts: 'I have heard that there was a sublime master, and that he denied all distinctions'<sup>18</sup>. The Disciple replies with Suso's statement of what he understands of Eckhart's doctrine of being and essence:

I understand it thus: in truth there is nothing that can be separated from the simple being, because he gives being to all beings, but there is a distinction, in the sense that the divine being is not the being of a stone, nor is the being of a stone the divine being, and no creature is identical with another. Hence the theologians maintain that, properly speaking, this distinction is not in God but from God. And he (that is, Eckhart) speaks concerning the Book of Wisdom: 'Just as there is nothing more inward than God, in the same way there is nothing more distinct'.

Here Suso is demonstrating, as plainly as he thinks expedient, that for him Eckhart's teachings are still open to discussion.

The same point is made, yet more clearly, by another pupil of Eckhart, John Tauler, who said, in a sermon for the eve of Palm Sunday, where he dealt with John 17:21, 'I pray that they may be one as we are one':

Those who have grown in natural wisdom, who have been trained in mortal activities, who have lived in their senses,

cannot come here; no, they cannot come so far. Moreover, one dear teacher taught you and spoke on this subject, and you did not understand him. He spoke from the point of view of eternity, and you understood him from the point of view of time. My dear children, if I have said too much for you, it is certainly not too much for God: but nonetheless I beg you to forgive me, and if there is need I am willing to correct my words<sup>19</sup>.

Kurt Ruh has cited this; and he adds what follows immediately in Tauler's sermon but which is less often quoted:

A great teacher spoke of how one perceives without the senses, without manner and not in any way that can be recognised. Many understood this to apply to externals, and they were poisoned by it<sup>20</sup>.

Tauler, too, is convinced alike of Eckhart's authority and of his orthodoxy, and, preaching to the same Rhineland nuns as the master had guided a decade before, he blames their ill-regulated enthusiasm and their incomprehension for the reputation for heterodoxy which had attached itself to their teacher.

The moral and intellectual climate of these convents, deplored by Eckhart's pupils (and Ruh tellingly has shown that the master too was no friend of 'enthusiasm') is nowhere better described than by Suso in his German autobiography, the *Vita*, and in the pictures drawn for it in MS Strasbourg 2929—the 'exemplar', master-copy, written and illustrated, it can hardly be doubted, in the Dominican house at Ulm where he ended his days in exile<sup>21</sup>. (In attributing the *Vita* to Suso we are in agreement with J.-A. Bizet<sup>22</sup> and disagree, emphatically with the arguments of Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache<sup>23</sup> that its true author was Elspeth Stigel). Particularly when Suso maps the 'mystical way' leading to contemplation and knowledge of God, which his artist illustrated with much ingenuity<sup>24</sup>, we see how aware Suso was of the dangers which lay in Eckhart's doctrine when it was accepted yet only half-understood by untutored minds.

The opinions of Suso and Tauler have been described in detail, because these two skilled theologians evidently considered that Eckhart's teachings should not have been condemned, and that *In agro dominico* might, privately at least, be disregarded. Elsewhere<sup>25</sup> I have shown that an even more illustrious churchman, Nicholas of Cusa, shared both their approbation and their apprehension lest the master's writings be available to those unable to interpret them aright.

Since there have been so many, then and now, satisfied that the case against Eckhart is not strong, one may ask why he did not defend himself better? Every answer must be conjectural; such written evidence as survives cannot tell us all that took place when he was summoned before the courts. Procedures were most unsatisfactory, and weighted against those accused, who were allowed no professional defence, but had to

plead and answer for themselves. How well Eckhart may have done this in Avignon is not known, but when, on 13 February 1327, he made a public protestation of his innocence in the Dominican church in Cologne, he put up a poor performance, occasioning Josef Koch's quip which implied that he was a fading prima donna<sup>26</sup>. Though his date of birth is unknown, he must by then have been approaching his seventieth year, in an epoch when men aged and declined sooner than now. After a lifetime of strenuous achievement, he was denied repose, and, instead, involved in lengthy processes which even some of his contemporaries regarded as unjustly conducted. James Fournier, the Cistercian summoned to Avignon to serve as theological expert—badly needed—to John XXII, whom he succeeded as Benedict XII, had complained to the pope that the method, traditional since the days of Peter Abelard, two centuries before, of preparing an accusatory brief was inadequate. (Clerks of the court scrutinised suspect works and extracted what seemed dubious propositions, and then presented them, deprived of their contexts, in lists for judgment from men who needed never to have seen the original writings.) Fournier left a record, now lost, of how reluctant he was to offer the Holy See verdicts in Eckhart's case and in others based on evidence so partial<sup>27</sup>.

*In agro dominico* is in places worse than partial, and has been edited with hostile intent. The condemned article 15 reads: 'If a man had committed a thousand mortal sins ...' Laurent identified the context of this as *The Book Benedictus*, but in 1981, four years before Kurt Ruh, I pointed out that the same teaching is also to be found in *Instructional Talks*, and that there Eckhart appeals for support to Paul and to Augustine's 'Yes, even sins', which Quint correctly identified as from Augustine's *Of the Free Will*. 'A thousand mortal sins' is Avignon editing *ad peiorem*, and we cannot be sure that at his hearing there Eckhart did not repeat his observation that this is what Paul and Augustine had taught, and that this part of his defence was not suppressed. It may be, as Ruh suggests, that the Inquisition was loth to discard the article because it would serve as a link, or what would look like a link to the apprehensive, between the master's teachings and the views attributed to the 'Brethren of the Free Spirit'; but if this be so it only adds to one's suspicions.

We began by claiming that the new critical edition of the Latin *Mirror* merits consideration in any re-assessment of the Eckhart case. That anonymous clerics should have promoted study of the *Mirror* by their peers, whether or not they knew of the book's condemnation, shows how difficult it sometimes could be to distinguish clearly between heresy and orthodoxy. The whole complex history of Eckhart's trials and judgment also illustrates this. It might be tempting to suggest that Eckhart's borrowing of the notion of what constitutes true 'poverty of the spirit' from the *Mirror*, a work which had been pronounced heretical, helped at Avignon to tip the balance against him. However, we should

question this, if only because in our assessment it is probable that *Beati pauperes spiritu* was composed so late in the day that nothing from it could have been included in the Cologne dossier which was sent to the Holy See. There are undoubtedly numerous passages in the *Mirror* so ambiguous that we find it impossible to interpret them benevolently. Nevertheless, as we have attempted to show elsewhere<sup>28</sup>, there are reasons for thinking that the propositions condemned in *In agro dominico*, if restored to their context, as James Fournier was demanding, and read dispassionately, will call into question that constitution's justice.

One last point should be made, in the hope that it might facilitate further deliberation upon this case, which has perplexed scholars for six and a half centuries. Even Eckhart's supporters conceded that he had incurred enmity. It may well be that within the Order of Preachers one cause of this was his success in the practice of 'the care of women' (Suso in the *Vita* somewhat artlessly makes it plain that this was also the case with him) and in his sensationally popular preaching tours. Yet when his prosecution was undertaken by the archbishop of Cologne and his Franciscan auxiliaries, their conduct showed how Eckhart had played into their hands by his extravagant exposition of sentiments which at times he made to sound startlingly at variance with what his hearers were accustomed to believe. Nonetheless, he remained to the end robustly secure in his certainty of his own innocence, and, to make him appear guilty, his adversaries resorted to stratagems well known to the practitioners of literary criticism, having little or no theological application.

These are, of course, matters of opinion, upon which general agreement will probably never be reached. One can only weigh the evidence and offer one's own view. Mine is that Meister Eckhart, if his language be rightly understood, can be shown to have held and taught the Catholic faith that comes to us from the apostles.

*This is the substance of a paper read at Hawkesyard in June, 1987, to a conference convened by Conrad Pepler, OP and Ursula Fleming.*

- 1 *Eckhart's Way* (London, 1987), in the series *The Way of the Christian Mystics* (general editor Noel O'Donoghue, ODC)
- 2 *Meister Eckhart: Theologe, Prediger, Mystiker* (Munich, 1985).
- 3 A Canadian academic publisher has under consideration a modern English translation of the *Mirror* with historical introduction by Edmund Colledge, Judith Grant and J.C. Marler.
- 4 Meister Eckhart (note 3), p. 100.
- 5 *Archivio Italiano per la storia della pietà* 4, 1965, pp. 501—645.
- 6 For example, the late Stephanus Axters OP, in private conversation with the writer.
- 7 We owe it to Romana Guanieri's perspicacious scholarship that his most important Eckhart studies were collected, chiefly from a variety of learned journals, and printed by her as *Kleine Schriften* (2 vols., Rome, 1973).
- 8 Who in turn informed the writer.



- 9 In 'Liberty of the Spirit: the "Mirror of Simple Souls"' (L.K. Shook, ed.: *Theology of Renewal* vol 2, Montreal, 1968, pp. 100—117).
- 10 A text is in *Deutsche Werke* 2, ed. J Quint (Stuttgart, 1970, pp. 486—506. The translation appeared in Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn: *Meister Eckhart: the essential Sermons, Commentaries and Defence* New York and London, 1981, pp. 199—203. The evidence that Eckhart had probably borrowed from the *Mirror* is set out by Edmund Colledge and J.C. Marler: 'Poverty of the Will': Ruusbroec, Eckhart and "The Mirror of Simple Souls" (P. Mommaers and N. De Paepe, ed: *Jan van Ruusbroec: the Sources, Content and Sequels of his Mysticism* Louvain, 1984, pp 14 —47).
- 11 For the evidence that Ruusbroec translated from Sermon 52, and so exactly that Van Mierlo's suggestion that it was known in the Netherlands merely by word of mouth is ruled out, see Colledge and Marler (above).
- 12 For explanation and justification of this punctuation, first proposed by Quint, see Colledge and Marler (above). By 'unpunctuated "God"' we must understand 'God as he is in himself', by 'God' ' "God" as he is in his creatures', which we called (above) a 'commonplace scholastic distinction'.
- 13 Colledge and McGinn (note 1), p. 200.
- 14 Ed. R. Guarnieri (note 6), p. 559
- 15 'Ketzerverhöre des Spätmittelalters' (see Colledge and Marler, 'Poverty of the Will', p. 15 note 6).
- 16 'Eine Kölner Handschrift' (see Colledge and Marler, 'Poverty of the Will', p. 15 note 7).
- 17 'Das namenlose Wilde' is often translated as 'nameless wild man'; it was Romana Guarnieri in 'Il movimento del libero Spirito' (note 6) who pointed out that the personification is neuter, not masculine, and who adduced Margaret's remark in the *Mirror*, 'or est telle Ame sans nom'. The claim to deification in this attribute of namelessness will be evident to all familiar with pseudo-Dionysius.
- 18 J.M. Clark, trans.: *Henry Suso: Little Book of Eternal Wisdom and Little Book of Truth* (London, 1953), pp. 201—203. The 'denial of all distinction' alludes to '*In Agro Dominico*, art. 10: 'We are wholly transformed and converted into God ... by the living God, it is true that there is no distinction'.
- 19 F. Vetter, ed.: *Die Predigten Taulers* (Berlin, 1910), p. 69.
- 20 *Meister Eckhart* (note 3), p. 11 e.s.
- 21 Edmund Colledge and J.C. Marler: "'Mystical" Pictures in the Suso "Exemplar"' (*Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 54, 1984, pp. 293—354).
- 22 *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 7, 1969, art. 'Henri Suso', 234—257.
- 23 Id., art. 'Elisabeth Stagel', 4, 1960, 588—589, and elsewhere.
- 24 Colledge and Marler, ' "Mystical" Pictures' (note 25), pp. 338, 349 and Plate 3, fig. 10.
- 25 'Meister Eckhart: his Times and his Writings' (*The Thomist* 42, 1978, pp. 240—258). I am not responsible for its many printers' errors.
- 26 Id., p. 244 e.s.
- 27 It is regrettable that Woods (note 2) should allude to and so commend and publicise the distorted account offered by Ladurie in his *Montaillou* of Fournier as an opponent of heresy.
- 28 *The Thomist* op. cit.

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