

God is the ultimate mystery, that we are peering into the dark. In Christ, he says, we are joined to God as to the utterly unknown. The most we can do is peer in the right direction; and all theology is about doing that. But we can never answer our basic question with any use of language, by any thought. We will understand what is God only when we have been taken even beyond language and thinking, and God brings us to share in his own self-understanding. Thomas was not making a new discovery when, at the end of his life, he said that all his writings seemed like straw. He had lived with this knowledge all the time he was writing.

This, then, is the heritage Thomas has left to his brethren and to the Church: first, that it is our job to ask questions, to immerse ourselves so far as we can in all the human possibilities of both truth and error; then we must be passionately concerned to get the answers right, our theology must be as true as it can be; and finally we must realise that theology is not God, as faith is not God, as hope is not God: God is love. We must recognise that the greatest and most perceptive theology is straw before the unfathomable mystery of God's love for us which will finally gather us completely by the Holy Spirit into Christ, the Word God speaks of himself to himself. Then, only then, is our first question answered.

## Reviews

**BREAKTHROUGH: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation.**

Introduction and Commentaries by Matthew Fox. *Image Books*. 1980. pp 579 \$7.95.

Fr Fox believes that Eckhart can help us towards an understanding of christian spirituality which does justice to the biblical roots of our faith, and which allows us to escape from the rather jejune pieties and fussiness which have so often obscured the real point of christianity. To make Eckhart more accessible to English-speaking readers, he has, with some assistance from others, produced a new translation of 37 pieces from the corpus of Eckhart's works, mostly sermons translated from German. He has also written brief commentaries on all these pieces, designed to bring out their spiritual doctrine, often

with the help of further quotations from Eckhart. The whole is prefaced by a fairly long introduction, and rounded off with an Index of spiritual themes.

Eckhart is not an easy writer to present. Apart from the initial difficulty posed, for most of us, by the very language (Middle High German), his vocabulary is often idiosyncratic and it is sometimes very difficult to reproduce his sentence-structures. Also his thought is subtle and elusive, and it is frequently necessary to balance what he says in one sermon against the quite different things he says elsewhere. Naturally enough, he is not usually concerned to be

very systematic in his sermons. This means that he is especially liable to be read in an unbalanced way, because each reader notices in Eckhart only what happens to appeal to himself. This is why Eckhart has been appropriated over the centuries by an amazing range of philosophers and ideologues.

Fr Fox and his assistants have not, I am afraid, overcome the difficulties or the temptations. Eckhart, as we meet him in *Breakthrough*, is firmly established on a late 20th century bandwagon, chanting all the appropriate slogans, and, indeed, sounding rather like an ambitious politician in a presidential election, claiming all popular virtues for himself and denouncing everybody else.

The Introduction, which purports to put Eckhart in his historical context and to indicate the major influences on his thought and the major themes in his writing, is so dominated by wishful thinking and sheer fantasy that the reviewer hardly knows how to begin criticising it. The pages on alleged Celtic influence reduced me to helpless, gibbering fury. Where Fox comes close enough to precision for comment to be feasible, he repeatedly insults his readers with bland assertions which it would be very difficult to substantiate, with tendentious half-truths, or with downright falsehood. Thus we hear a lot about the influence of the béguine movement on Eckhart, though there is no reliable evidence that Eckhart had anything to do with the béguines; on the other hand almost nothing is said of his well-attested links with a variety of monasteries of nuns. (And it is pure mystification to claim that Eckhart was a "feminist", because of his concern for religious women). We are told that Eckhart "insisted" on preaching in the vernacular, as if it were some daring eccentricity of his own.

But all preachers, and in particular all Dominican preachers, were officially obliged to preach in the vernacular. We are told that Eckhart gallantly remained loyal to St Thomas, even though Thomas was "under a cloud of condemnation" throughout Eckhart's life, without it ever being mentioned that in this Eckhart was simply obeying the repeated instructions of successive General Chapters of his Order. We are assured that the primary influence on his thought was "the Bible and Jewish thinking", but it is hard to believe that Eckhart is essentially a "biblical theologian", and Fox offers no cogent argument to support such a claim. And the alleged Jewish influence turns on a fortuitous similarity between Eckhart's notion of Christ as "the great Reminder" and something once said by the founder of Hasidism, and the fact that two Jewish philosophers, like Eckhart, use the phrase "the spark of the soul". But there is, of course, no mention of the fact that Christ as Reminder is a central theme of Gnosticism (of which Fox does not approve), or of the fact that the "spark of the soul" is a medieval commonplace, with roots in Greek philosophy.

Among many startling and, often, unintelligible, claims made for Eckhart, one of the more bizarre is the claim that he is "the most Franciscan spiritual theologian of the church". This evidently means that he, like Francis and unlike later Franciscans such as Bonaventure, rejected "a lot of Platonist dualisms". Whether or not later Franciscans were dualist, there can be no doubt that Francis espoused a marked dualism of body and soul. For instance, he said that the soul lives in the body like a hermit in his hermitage. And when he wanted to refer to the whole man, body and soul, he used the phrase "both men". It is the Dominicans, not the Franciscans,

not Francis himself, who espoused anthropological unicity

The horrors of the Introduction might be just bearable, if the effects were counteracted subsequently in the translation and commentaries. Alas, the effects are maintained throughout, by judicious mistranslation and highly selective quotation. So far as I can judge, most of the translations from German have not even been made from the original Middle High German text, but from Quint's modern German translation. And even that has not been accurately translated. After checking a few sermons carefully, I gave up, so I cannot guarantee that the high level of accuracy is maintained throughout. But in the sermons I did check, there is an extraordinary number of mistakes. Some of them are just errors due to misconstruing the syntax or getting individual words wrong. But sometimes it is difficult to avoid the feeling that the mistranslation is deliberate, intended to minimise anything that would interfere with the alleged "creation-centredness" of Eckhart's spirituality. Thus, in sermon One, *abgeschiedenheit* appears as "letting go", which has a nice, beat-Zen, ring about it, which obscures both the ascetic discipline of "separation" (which is well brought out in Schurmann's book, to which Fox makes periodic reference) and the intellectualist connotation of "abstraction" (for these meanings of the word, see Quint, *Deutschen Werke* V pp 438-40). Then we are told that human beings must become "unwed from themselves and from all things"; but, though *ledic* can mean "unmarried", that is quite irrelevant here. Eckhart is saying that we must be "empty of ourselves and of all things". Over the

page, we read that the Father "speaks the Son in all things", which puts the emphasis on the positive value of the multiple reality which comes out from God; in fact, Eckhart says that the Father "speaks all things in the Son", which stresses rather the superiority of what things are before they come forth into multiplicity. The text goes on "All creatures are words of God", and Fox uses this as the title for the sermon. But Eckhart says "All creatures are *ein sprechen gotes*". Maurice Walshe renders this "All creatures speak God", which makes good sense in the context. But probably it is right to retain God as the speaker; but there is a significance, quite lost in Fox's translation, in the fact that they are all only *one* "speaking of God" (cf. *Deutschen Werke* II 97:6ff). At the end of the sermon there is a serious muddle in the translation; but the concluding shot is simply a fabrication: ". . . you who must die to all things in order to have them restored to you again in the heights" bears not the slightest resemblance to what Eckhart says. There is no hint in the German of creatures being "restored again in the heights".

It would be tedious to go on. The conclusion, I fear, must be that *Breakthrough* seriously misrepresents Eckhart. But there is one consolation. English-speaking readers are not quite as badly off as Fox suggests. A new, complete, translation of the German works into English is on the way. Volume I was published in 1979, by Watkins (London). The translation (reviewed in *New Blackfriars*, 1980, p 352) is by Maurice Walshe. It is very much more to be recommended than *Breakthrough*.

SIMON TUGWELL O P