Johann Eckhart Biography

Johann Eckhart

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Biography

The German Dominican Johann Eckhart (ca. 1260-ca. 1327), called Meister Eckhart, founded German mysticism. A theologian and preacher, he represented God as dwelling in man's soul.

Born near Gotha in Thuringia, Johann Eckhart joined the Dominican order and studied in Strassburg and Cologne. In Paris he received a master's degree in theology in 1302. He became provincial in 1303, later vicar, in Bohemia. In 1311-1313 he was again in Paris as a teacher and then was professor of theology in Strassburg until 1323. Finally, he taught and preached as regent in Cologne.

Eckhart was twice involved in ecclesiastical conflicts. He favored the Pope in the struggle between Louis IV of Bavaria and the papacy over the imperial election. He was later a victim of the displeasure of Archbishop Henry II of Cologne, who was determined to destroy the Dominican order. Cited before a hostile tribunal, Eckhart was accused of heresy on 100 counts. He appealed to Pope John XXII in Avignon and was received there but returned to Cologne because of illness. He died soon after and was posthumously condemned, or suspected, of heresy on over 20 counts.

His Thought

Eckhart's doctrine of the "little spark in man's soul" (*Seelenfünklein*) afforded direct confrontation with God. To him God is not an aloof personal deity in whose image man was created, but a shapeless, incommensurable being ever unchanged and immanent in all matter and creatures. Once man sheds the dross of personal assertiveness and selfish drives, he can merge with God, becoming one with Him, like Christ. Eckhart was deemed heretical for denying a difference between the essence of God and that of creatures and for negating the temporal nature of the world. He was not, however, a pantheist.

Eckhart ranged far in his studies. He was beholden to Aristotle, St. Albertus Magnus, and St. Thomas Aquinas, but also to the Neoplatonism of the Spanish rabbi Maimonides and the Moslem philosopher Averroës. As a preacher and prolific writer, he addressed the people in the vernacular and his fellow clerics in Latin. He coined many German philosophical terms, and scholasticism received a fresh stimulus as he preached of emotions welling from his heart and emerging from everyday life. He influenced two other mystics: Johannes Tauler of Strassburg (died 1361) and the Swiss Heinrich Seuse, or Suso (died 1366).