

On Mysticism and Religion

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For the full understanding of Eckhart's mysticism, I ask the reader to follow me in a detour which, inadequate as it is by its sketchiness, should help in the understanding Eckhart.

Classic Judaism, and following its conceptualisations, Christianity and Islam, are religions of monotheism. They worship the *One God*, in contrast to the pagan worship of many gods. This difference between the One and the many is not a quantitative but a qualitative one. The ONE is the supreme principle of knowledge and of ethics. It has not only emerged in the Near East, but also in India and China, and often in a purer form than in the concept of the One God.

It seems to me a reasonable hypothesis to assume that at a certain point of human development when man had cut most of the primary ties that still made him a part of the soil and of his tribe, and when individuation had reached its first peak he had to become more aware of himself as an individual being confronted with the manifoldness of phenomena, which were 'not-I', i.e. stood in opposition to him. As a consequence a logical need had to develop, namely that to distinguish the phenomenal world, the world of the many, from another principle which stood opposite the phenomenal world, the principle of the ONE, or the No-thing, in order not to be overwhelmed by the deceptive veil of the manifoldness of things. Man must have had the same experience with himself. At the same first peak of individuation, the laws and norms of his primary group became less effective and he was overwhelmed by the manifoldness of his desires and wishes; the more objects he created, the more desires were awakened; he would become a helpless bundle of desires unless he could build the idea of the ONE in himself, experience himself as the subject of desires and actions, formulate a concept of self or of I. Thus the search for the principle of the ONE as a regulating principle of cognition and self experience became a necessity, unless man was to become the helpless object of things and of his senses.

In India the principle of the ONE was established in the earliest parts of the Upanishads; it is called the Brahman as the principle of the ONE in the universe, which is identical with the Atman, the principle of the ONE in the person. The ONE is not somebody or something; it transcends all that exists, having no other name than that it is not something. It is the supreme principle of the world, often also defined as *neti, neti*, i.e. it is not this and is not that. (But side by side we find also the Upanishads concep-

tualisation of the Brahman as Supreme Father, hardly distinguishable from Old Testament language.) In Mahajana Buddhism the „highest“ is absolute voidness (emptiness), which can be hinted at only by what it is *not*.

In Chinese thinking we find the same idea expressed in Taoism. The Tao-te-ching begins with this sentence: „The Tao about which something can be said is not the absolute Tao. The names which can be given are not the absolute names. The Nameless is the origin of heaven and earth.“¹

In Zen Buddhism we find many formulations pointing out the inexpressibility of the highest principle, and the whole aim of the Zen effort is to shatter the attempt to understand the ultimate by means of discursive intelligence.² The same idea is expressed in Western Mysticism. Plotinus gives the expression of the idea of the ONE (*hen*) to be followed by *Boethius and Pseudo Dionysius, Rumi*, the great Persian Mystic, rooted in the Moslem and Eastern tradition, assumes an identical attitude. In the Near East the concept of the ONE was expressed in the symbol of God *the supreme king*. This was a historical necessity because in small states ruled by oriental despots, who claimed for themselves divine power, the concept of the highest principle, of the ONE, had to be formulated in the symbol of the supreme king, the ‘King of Kings’. To be sure, this God was different from all idols: he had no name³ and no image was permitted - or possible - to make of him. But inspite of these precautions the symbol of God the king lent itself to the danger of the anthropomorphisation and idolization of the concept of God. This danger was all the greater as the concept of God was cultivated by the Church in the European Middle Ages whose social structure was also dominated by the presence of emperors, Popes and feudal lords who were supreme figures. Thus the *symbol* ‘God’ standing for the ONE and the supreme value, deteriorated to an imagined *reality* of a King of Kings who ruled the rulers and their subjects from his supreme throne in heaven.

While this *idolization of God* dominated the concepts of the masses and of those leaders who thought like the masses, there were always thinkers and groups (usually revolutionary ones) who wanted to cleanse the pure concept of the ONE from the ‘unclean’, authoritarian and idolizing admixtures which had covered and distorted it. The history of Judaism and Christianity can be characterized as the continuing effort of restoring the concept of God to its original meaning against the process of the idolization.

This effort was made not only through mystical thinking, as it was just described, but also through a very different approach: the „negative theology“ of Maimonides. The negative theology teaches that no positive attitude about God’s being is permissible. One can say what God is *not*, but not what God is⁴. „It will be now clear to you“, says Maimonides, „that

¹ Lin Yutang, *Laotse*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt 1955, p.37. - My translation.

² Cf. D. T. Suzuki’s writings on Zen Buddhism, which are by far the best source for understanding the fundamental ideas of Zen Buddhism. Precisely because of their authenticity Suzuki’s books require more effort from the reader than a number of less authentic and ‘easier’ books.

³ As I pointed out in *You Shall be as Gods* (New York 1966) God makes a concession to Moses who says that unless he mentions God’s name they will not believe him, and mentions his name; but the name itself expresses being in the imperfect form (as a process and not a thing) and is best translated as „my name is nameless“.

⁴ Cf. on this subject D. Kaufmann, *Geschichte der Attributenlehre in der jüdischen Religionsphilosophie des Mittelalters von Saadja bis Maimuni*, Gotha 1877, who also discusses the Arabic contri-

every time you establish by proof the negation of a thing in reference to God, you become more perfect, while with every additional positive assertion you follow your imagination and recede from the true knowledge of God.”⁵

Negative theology has its roots in the biblical tradition. The prohibition to represent God by a name or any kind of picture or statue is in essence the prohibition to make any positive statement about God.⁶ The prophets have continued the battle against the idolization of God by fiery protests against the worship of images and statues portraying God.

Both trends, the Eastern and Western mystical idea of the ONE and the Jewish concept of negative theology had the same function: to defend the non-idolatric idea of God the ONE against the idolization which occurred in the development of Christianity.

In Master Eckhart both traditions meet. He was strongly influenced by Maimonides, the author he quoted most frequently and never contradicted and also by the mystical-tradition, especially (Pseudo) Dionysius. This twofold influence not only fortified Eckhart's position, it also made it possible that he sometimes followed more the thinking of Maimonides, and sometimes more that of the mystical tradition.

If one considers this liberating function of Eckhart's mysticism and his uncompromising insistence on independence, one may be well prepared to correct the other cliché of mysticism as 'irrational', and 'opposed to reason.' „If God had no goodness, my will would not want him ... I am not blessed, because God is good. I also never want to desire that God gives me blessedness by his goodness, because he would not be able to. *I am blessed only because God is reason (vernünftig) and because I recognize this.*“ Or: „Reason is God's temple. Nowhere does God dwell more essentially than in his temple, in reason.“⁷

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E. Fromm, *On Being Human*, New York: Continuum 1994, pp. 160ff.

contributions to the concept of negative theology; furthermore H. Cohen, *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, Kaufmann Verlag, Frankfurt, 1928, pp.71-74; 109-114.

⁵ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, translated from the Arabic by M. Friedländer, Pardey Publ. House, London 1904, p.161.

⁶ I have discussed this point in much detail in E. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, New York 1966, p. 33ff.

⁷ Sermon 10 (*Quasi stella matutina*) in: J. Quint, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, translated into German and edited by J. Quint, Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1969, pp. 195-200. -(My translation E. F.; emphasis added).