

THE MYSTICAL THOUGHT OF MEISTER ECKHART by Bernard McGinn, *The Crossroad Publishing Co., New York, 2001. Pp.xiii + 305, £32.99 hbk.*

THE UNSPOKEN WORD: NEGATIVE THEOLOGY IN MEISTER ECKHART' S GERMAN SERMONS by Bruce Milem, *The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 2002. Pp.ix + 192, £41.95 hbk.*

For centuries Meister Eckhart, one of the most extraordinary of all Dominican thinkers, was hardly known and the majority of the few people who did know a little about him suspected his orthodoxy. Eckhartian studies have become almost a major industry. Lately, in addition to numerous popular treatments, every year on average 30 scholarly books and articles have been appearing on Eckhart (see Niklaus Largier's bibliography in the annual *Eckhart Review*). Nearly half of these have been in German, but English has for quite a while been the second most used language for writing on Meister Eckhart. In the United States there is now an impressive range of Eckhart scholars. Two books of theirs are considered here.

Professor Bernard McGinn is almost certainly the best-known of those American scholars, and his most recent book on Eckhart, to which he has given the subtitle *The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing*, is the finest product of his four decades of study of the man's thought. Oliver Davies, in a recent review, states that it is the best general introduction to Eckhart in any language. Yet it was not a book on Eckhart that McGinn had expected to write. He was writing on him for volume IV of his massive history of Western Christian Mysticism, *The Presence of God*, and discovered that he had too much to say on the subject for the space available, so he turned what he had written into a separate book. It is not simply an ample guidebook that he has written for us. For example, he argues that the vernacular term *grunt* is the key to Eckhart's thought, 'the foundation of Meister Eckhart's mysticism'—a profoundly interesting idea, but by no means all his colleagues would agree with him. This is, then, a stimulating book to read. What, though, in my view, makes it particularly interesting is that McGinn, unlike many Eckhart scholars, is strongly aware of the context of the man he is writing about. He never forgets that he is writing about a medieval Dominican, not just a genius. He also (like the present Pope) insists that, in spite of the originality of his thought, Eckhart is in the mainstream of Catholic tradition. McGinn is equally insistent that Eckhart is a mystic. Admittedly the Meister rarely speaks of his own God-consciousness, 'but he everywhere speaks out of his conviction of the need to become one with Divine truth' (p.22). Meister Eckhart was a bewildering man, but one has the impression in reading this book that Professor McGinn, while offering us a profound scholarly work with 93 pages of genuinely useful footnotes, is writing all the time about the ways of thinking of an old friend.

Bruce Milem, who is one of the younger generation of Eckhart scholars, has given us, in his first book on the work of Meister Eckhart, a very different book from McGinn's. It is basically about his use of language, which the author sees as being of crucial importance for an understanding of his thought. Through a carefully annotated commentary on four important German sermons of Eckhart (52, 2, 16b and 6 in the Quint numbering) Dr Milem considers how, having committed himself to belief in the absolute ineffability of God, the Meister confronts the challenge of talking about something that cannot be grasped in language. He does it by using paradox, wordplay and imagery to bring his hearers into a new way of discerning themselves and of how they relate to God — into an awareness of their utter contingency, of their total dependence on God. And 'since the soul is in some respects indistinct from God, any image of the soul's being must also be to some extent an image of God as well' (p.86).

Not surprisingly, Milem is much more hesitant than McGinn to call Eckhart a 'mystic', and he in fact distrusts any emphasis on the importance of religious experience. He says Eckhart 'obliquely suggests that one need not pursue union with Christ through extraordinary measures, since that union eternally occurs in the intellect' (p.58). He is, in fact, of the opinion that Eckhart's theology 'presents God according to how we can know or think God, rather than to how God actually and truly is' (p.175). This leads our author to consider the argument of writers such as E.M.Cioran 'that there is nothing in the perspective expressed in Eckhart's sermons that could not be given other, non-Christian formulations (p.178). However, he goes on to say: 'Here, I think, is where faith enters the discussion. Eckhart's paradoxes become signs of transcendent mystery rather than disposable absurdities if one believes that God has already revealed God to human beings' (p.178). Reading Eckhart is not after all an alternative to Christian faith. Though this is a finely written book which discusses in a fresh way some much-discussed topics like Eckhart's understanding of the image, it is not a particularly easy book for a newcomer to Eckhartian studies to get to grips with. Nevertheless here is a new voice, one especially welcome today, when a widening range of people is discovering the teachings of this fourteenth-century friar.

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GOD SAVE THE QUEEN. THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF MONARCHY by Ian Bradley, *Darton, Longman and Todd*. 2002. Pp. xxii + 218, £14.95 hbk.

This is a study of the sacrality of monarchy against a backcloth of contemporary British culture—at first sight, as the author remarks, not only an implausible but also a thankless undertaking. (At any rate the courtiers around the heir to the throne are wary of it). It

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