

between past and present ways of conceiving this matter?

But the central problem is to be found in the doctrine of God. Repeatedly we are told that atonement is achieved by the pain of God's involvement with his estranged creation. The objectivity of the cross is to be found in the claim that there God 'increases in experience' (p. 110). What is underplayed, almost to vanishing, is the notion of the atonement as the *active* renewal and completion of the creation. The result is that the resurrection is stressed mainly as divine protest against evil, and even creation itself, on what is surely a misreading of Genesis 1, as involving 'God in cost and pain from the very beginning' (p. 22). That is to say, when the suffering of God bears the weight it does here, other things that ought to be said about what is going on here become unsayable.

In parallel with this is the fact that the virtual identification of Father and Son in what happens—and I do not wish to reject the author's wish to maintain an essential unity of act and will between the two—makes it difficult to conceive the centrality of the incarnate Son's representation of us before the Father. Is not the atonement to do both with a unique divine act and with the perfection of the creation in and through the human life of the incarnate? Because that strain is at least muted, it does seem to one reader at least that this book, for all its wide-ranging interest, has not quite escaped from Moltmann's tendency to reduce atonement to theodicy.

COLIN GUNTON

**GOD WITHIN: THE MYSTICAL TRADITION OF NORTHERN EUROPE**, by Oliver Davies, *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London. 1988. Pp. 224, £7.95.

Oliver Davies has a Doctorate in German from Oxford University and for two years was Lektor at the University of Cologne. *God Within* presents the results of his study of a number of North European mystics from the 14th century. Davies' intention is threefold: to show the extent to which these writers 'form a specific school, to examine the place of that school within the context of the universal inheritance of the Christian church,' and, primarily, to rescue these writers from 'the academic sidelines,' by providing a broader audience for their message.

The burden of Davies' exposition concerns Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruysbroeck (or, as Davies prefers, Ruusbroec), to each of whom he devotes long, detailed chapters which together comprise almost half the text. Tauler also does well with 25 pages. But Suso, the *Theologia Germanica*, and four of the 14th century English mystics are granted from 2 (Rolle) to 15 pages (*the Cloud of Unknowing*). The book concludes with a brief summary and evaluation of *Wesenmystik* 'then and now'.

Davies prefaces his presentation of the North European mystics with a chapter devoted to their medieval background, a generally well-informed and engaging synopsis of the emergence of two major currents of spirituality—*Brautmystik* and *Wesenmystik*, bridal mysticism and 'the mysticism of being.' Since his thesis pivots on the place of Meister Eckhart in 14th century spirituality, it is not surprising that he next devotes 42 pages to the Dominican preacher—the longest treatment given any of his subjects. Overall, Davies' approach to Eckhart is academically accurate, if less than well-balanced: he distances himself doctrinally from Eckhart at several critical points and generally regards the Meister with an air of suspicion absent in the rest of the book.

210

After briefly and accurately outlining what is known of Eckhart's life, Davies considers his teaching under the rubrics of Metaphysics (Creation, Being, God and Godhead); the Human Soul (the Spark of the Soul, the birth of God in the soul); and The Spiritual Life (detachment and spiritual poverty). What Davies understands by 'metaphysics' is unfortunately left implicit.

Despite evident discomfort concerning Eckhart's doctrinal orthodoxy, Davies' sketches are generally representative of several major themes. What he omits, even in a long chapter, is considerable, however, with sometimes misleading results. Thus, while the doctrine of 'modelessness' is mentioned in passing much later (p. 185), it is nowhere elaborated under the Meister's 'metaphysics.' The key notions of *Gelassenheit*, 'breakthrough', and 'the transformation of images', among others, are also neglected. Davies similarly overlooks the critical difference between two of Eckhart's key theological distinctions, that between the primordial unity of the Godhead and the distinction of persons in and activity by the persons of the Trinity, and that between God's 'inner' life and action and God's 'external' activity as Creator, etc. This causes him to misrepresent Eckhart's intention and accomplishment with regard to both union with God and the identity of God's essence and intellect (e.g., pp. 47, 67).

Further, although Davies adverts to the separation of dialectic in the thought of Ruysbroeck (see pp. 148, 150, 193), he curiously misses it in Eckhart, one of the most dialectical of all medieval writers. It is not sufficient in this regard to see the Meister's approach as 'dynamic', or even 'paradoxical' (pp. 38, 42–45), for dialectic has its own specific character, one which affects the whole of Eckhart's method and teaching. It also accounts for the frequently contradictory positions he seems to evince when isolated passages are cited. Thus, to say that Eckhart 'wholly' espoused the 'noetic' view that knowledge is superior to love with respect to union with God (pp. 151, 164) is only partially true. Following St. Thomas himself, the Meister not only asserted the primacy of love in this life, but, true to his dialectical method, transcended both positions with respect to the preeminent agency of divine grace and mercy (see Sermon 39, DW I).

Davies' presentation of Eckhart's spiritual teaching regarding 'the spark of the soul' (p. 48) also appears somewhat muddled. This may stem from his inadvertence to the confused etymology of *synteresis* as 'conscience', based on a problematic translation in Jerome's Vulgate (for which see Walshe, *Meister Eckhart*, Vol. I, pp. xlii.) In any event, as B. Ashley has demonstrated, for Eckhart the 'divine' spark of the soul (which is also the 'abyss' or *abditum mentis*) is not some special faculty or 'uncreated organ' (as Rudolf Otto also suggested), but rather the *ratio superior*, the highest 'point' of the intellect as it is turned toward God, a teaching based on both Aquinas and Augustine and dependent on divine exemplarity. As Colledge, McGinn, Caputo, and others have amply demonstrated, the Meister's teaching here is traditional, orthodox, and at most 'pantheistic'. Davies, conversely, resuscitates the accusation that in describing the 'spark of the soul' as uncreated, Eckhart was dipping into pantheism (p. 49). Similarly, the assertion that in regard to union with God, Eckhart, unlike the more circumspect Tauler, pantheistically allows for no distinction between Creator and creature (p. 94) is simply false.

For some reason, Davies interprets the 'birth of the Word in the soul', the centre of Eckhart's spiritual doctrine, as a 'metaphysical process', albeit one with 'the deepest consequences for our daily living'. (57) Here Davies ignores the splendid research of Hugo Rahner, who traced the imagery of this theme to its ancient sources in Christian and even Hebrew biblical

tradition. And although he cites Eckhart's clear statement that the birth 'really happen(s)' (p. 58), it apparently escapes him that Eckhart is not proposing a metaphysical thesis, but describing a shift in consciousness and behaviour. Thus, the birth of the Word in the soul is not merely 'an image of our union with God' (p. 56), much less an item of metaphysical speculation, but a breakthrough experience of spiritual transformation.

Davies' accusations of fatalism and quietism in Eckhart's doctrine (p. 63) are equally ill-founded, and may well result from his failure to appreciate the dialectical character of the Meister's method. Similarly, the author misunderstands Eckhart's position on the character of suffering with respect to the birth of Word in the soul (p. 87), a move which allows him to prefer Tauler's substantially identical treatment. This is no less true regarding Eckhart's nuanced teaching on equanimity, which Davies interprets as a species of impassivity (p. 63).

Davies concludes that 'To regard the Eckhartian way as a distillation of the Christian experience is dangerous, and fundamentally contrary to the Christian understanding of the role of the historical Christ in our salvation' (p. 72). He sees, rather, the necessity of drawing 'Eckhartian spirituality into the Christian tradition; to identify its presence above all in Holy Scripture, which must be normative horizon for all Christian theology'. I am not sure whether 'it' refers to Eckhart's way or Christian tradition; in either case, not only does Davies fail to baptize Eckhart's spirituality, but he also wholly ignores the vast scriptural exegesis which represents the bulk of Eckhart's extant writings and grounds both his theology and his spirituality.

If Davies' exposition of Eckhart is truncated and unfavourably biased, his treatment of John Tauler, Henry Suso, and the *Theologia Germanica*, while truncated, is not so slanted, despite the recurrent temptation to denigrate the Meister's teaching by comparison. His lengthy discussion of Ruysbroeck provides the most informative, balanced, and accurate chapter, however, and is well worth the price of admission. Clearly, the Fleming is his favourite among the Northern European mystics.

Davies devotes only a single chapter to the English mystics. The teaching of the *Cloud* author is the focus of the chapter. Even here, although Davies concedes a certain 'reminiscence' to Eckhart's doctrine on pp. 171 and 185, he emphatically denies any influence of the Rhineland tradition (p. 178). Davies thus finally concludes, not surprisingly, that 'the spirituality of Meister Eckhart, Jan van Ruusbroec and the *Cloud of Unknowing* are thoroughly independent systems, conceived in an entirely various idiom' (p. 191). The only points of mutuality are their common Augustinian inheritance (one which they share, of course, with every medieval spiritual writer), and the experience of 'self-stripping' (p. 192) (which they likewise share with, for instance, Catherine of Siena, among others).

Despite some flaws, *God Within* is nonetheless a welcome contribution to the growing field of comparative mysticism. Compared to Rufus Jones' *The Friends of God*, or Richard Kieckhefer's *Unquiet Souls*, it advances our knowledge and understanding of the great mystical writers of northern Europe less than it summarizes and confirms what has been discovered during the past several decades, especially by continental scholars. Regrettably, Davies' study was unable to profit from recent work on Eckhart emanating from America, including Bernard McGinn's many excellent articles and prefaces and Frank Tobin's splendid treatment of Eckhart's thought and language, which have shed truly new and interesting light on this 'prince' of medieval mystics.

RICHARD WOODS OP