

JOHANNAS "MEISTER" ECKHART

Johanns "Meister" Eckhart (The name is variously spelled: Ekehart, Eckart, Eckhard) was born circa 1260, died circa 1327. He was a German philosopher, and the first of the great speculative mystics.



Extremely little is known of his life; the date and place of his birth are equally uncertain. According to some accounts, he was a native of Strassburg, with which he was afterwards closely connected; according to others, he was born in Saxony; or at Hochheim near Gotha.

Trithemius, one of the best authorities, speaks of him merely as "Teutonicus" 1260 has frequently been given as the date of his birth; it was in all probability some years earlier, for we know that he was well advanced in age at the time of his death, about 1327.

He appears to have entered the Dominican order, and to have acted for some time as professor at one of the colleges in Paris. His reputation for learning was very high, and in 1302 he was summoned to Rome by Pope Boniface VIII., to assist in the controversy then being carried on with Philip of France. From Boniface he received the degree of doctor. In 1304 he became provincial of his order for Saxony, and in 1307 was vicar-general for Bohemia .

In both provinces he was distinguished for his practical reforms and for his power in preaching. Towards 1325 we hear of him as preaching with great effect at Cologne, where he gathered round him a numerous band of followers. Before this time, and in all probability at Strassburg, where he appears to have been for some years, he had come in contact with the Beghards (the Beguines) and Brethren of the Free Spirit, whose fundamental notions he may, indeed, be said to have systematized and expounded in the highest form to which they could attain.

In 1327 the opponents of the Beghards laid hold of certain propositions contained in Eckhart's works, and he was summoned before the Inquisition at Cologne. The history of this accusation is by no means clear. Eckhart appears, however, to have made a conditional recantation—that is, he professed to disavow whatever in his writings could be shown to be erroneous. Further appeal, perhaps at his own request, was made to Pope John XXII., and in 1329 a bull was published condemning certain propositions extracted from Eckhart's works. But before its publication Eckhart was already dead. The exact date of his death is unknown.

Of his writings, several of which are enumerated by Trithemius, there remain only the sermons and a few tractates. Till the middle of the 19th century the majority of these were attributed to Johann Tauler, and it is only from the scholar Pfeiffer's careful edition that one has been able to gather a true idea of Eckhart's activity. From his works it is evident that he was deeply learned in all the philosophy of his time. He was a thorough Aristotelian, but by preference appears to have been drawn towards the mystical writings of the Neo-platonists and the pseudo-Dionysius. His style is unsystematic, brief and abounding in symbolical expression. His manner of thinking is clear, calm and logical, and he has certainly given the most complete exposition of what may be called Christian pantheism.

Eckhart has been called the first of the speculative mystics. In his theories the element of mystical speculation for the first time comes to the front as all-important. By its means the church doctrines are made intelligible to the many, and from it the church dogmas receive their true significance. It was but natural that he should diverge more and more widely from the traditional doctrine, so that at length the relation between his teaching and that of the church appeared to be one of opposition rather than of reconciliation.

Eckhart is, in truth, the first who attempted with perfect freedom and logical consistency to give a speculative basis to religious doctrines. The two most important points in his, as in all mystical theories, are first, his doctrine of the divine nature, and second, his explanation of the relation between God and human thought.