

## Individual Mysticism and Eckhart Today

### 1. Introduction: Madonna and Rumi

»Ought all men to have the same religion? Ought they to approve the same fruits and follow the same leadings? Are they so like in their inner needs that, for hard and soft, for proud and humble, for strenuous and lazy, for healthy-minded and despairing, exactly the same religious incentives are required?«<sup>1</sup> Thus asks WILLIAM JAMES in his justly famous, pluralistic account of ›The Varieties of Religious Experiences‹, first delivered as the Gifford lectures in 1901 and 1902. This article follows JAMES in his tolerance of, and interest in, non-canonical expressions of religious life, exploring how Meister Eckhart's preaching can help us better understand the eclectic, interreligious practices through which many people in the Western world, whose spiritual life is not anchored in or by traditional religious institutions, improvise for themselves a version – or, to speak with WILLIAM JAMES, a »variety« – of religion. I will be arguing that Meister Eckhart provides a model for critical engagement with the interreligious phenomenon of New Age spirituality. As well as offering a reading of the substance of Eckhart's theology, I'll be considering some of the ways he was read, copied, and transmitted by his contemporaries. Including an analysis of how Eckhart and his contemporaries themselves adapted and developed their own spiritual practices will assist the project of engaging critically but sympathetically with the eclectic range of practices through which many in the West today live their religion.

To start with, some facts and figures drawn from ›The Religious and Moral Pluralism‹ (RAMP) survey of the late 1990s. The study found that 37% of Britons agreed at the time with the statement »I believe that God is something within each person, rather than something out there.«<sup>2</sup> Spiritual life is apparently detaching itself from external ecclesiastical structures and becoming individualized and privatized in the process. The long history of this development since the late medieval era has been studied by CHARLES TAYLOR in his magisterial ›A Secular Age‹, and as we shall see, the RAMP survey seems to confirm TAYLOR's argument that un-

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1 WILLIAM JAMES, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature*, ed. by MARTIN E. MARTY, New York / London 1985, p. 333.

2 DICK HOUTMAN, STEF AUPERS, and PAUL HEELAS, *Christian Religiosity and New Age Spirituality: A Cross-Cultural Comparison*, in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48/1 (2009), pp. 169–179, here p. 174.

derstanding the changes as a simple process of secularization doesn't do justice to their complexity.<sup>3</sup> In line with TAYLOR's insistence that we don't ignore the culturally situated ambiguities of the development, the RAMP survey suggests that the privatizing process is only one side of the coin.

Country	Personal God	Spirit / Life Force	God within	Don't Believe	Don't Know	Total
Belgium	21.5	23.9	30.8	10.8	13.1	100
Denmark	20.1	20.9	35.2	13.4	10.4	100
Finland	36.7	15.4	28.9	9.6	9.4	100
Great Britain	23.4	14.3	37.2	9.1	16	100
Hungary	32.9	7.8	24.6	14.8	19.9	100
Italy	50.4	7.2	35.9	4.6	1.9	100
The Netherlands	23.4	27.3	26.4	14.4	8.5	100
Norway	27.7	16.0	25.0	15.6	15.6	100
Poland	63.2	12.2	18.4	0.9	5.3	100
Portugal	25.9	21.1	39.1	4.1	9.7	100
Sweden	18.0	19.7	36.0	11.6	14.7	100
Total	33.0	16.2	31.4	9.0	10.5	100

Cramer's V = .196 (p < .001)

Table 1: ›Concept of God‹ category by country (in %); Source: HOUTMAN [et al.], *Christian Religiosity* [Anm. 2], p. 174.

Similar to the British figure, in Catholic Portugal, 39% of the people questioned in 2009 affirmed the ›God within‹ statement, which surprised sociologists of religion, since the idea of divinity being only inside and not without seems hard to reconcile with the official Christian belief in a personal God. Yet what emerges on closer analysis is that the idea is understood in different ways in different contexts. In more secularized countries like Great Britain or the Netherlands, belief in the ›God within‹ fits into a post-Christian world view, whereas in Portugal or Poland,

3 CHARLES TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge [Mass.] 2007.

the idea can be understood in a Christian fashion. For HOUTMAN, AUPERS and HEELAS, the sociologists who performed the analysis, this suggests that: »spirituality is less closely related to, and hence probably less incorporated in, what remains of theistic Christian religiosity in the most secularized countries.«<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, however, in less secularized countries it is simply better integrated.

The results of the RAMP survey thus show, on the one hand, developments that potentially lead away from a theistic conception of divinity and from traditional religious practices. On the other hand, process of transformation always takes place in a particular context. As the radical theologian JOHN D. CAPUTO suggests, individuals are situated, they are »always already in the middle of some confessional community and a complex of other communities«, piecing together a spiritual life from fragments of the culture in which they have grown up.<sup>5</sup> There is no religious life that is not lived in conversation with the culture in which it is practised.

But the table reproduced by HOUTMAN, AUPERS and HEELAS suggests a further important element of current spiritual practices in the West. If we group together those who belong to a particular confession with those who confess to being atheists, this group of orthodox believers and orthodox non-believers together comprise only a minority of the population across the eleven nations in which the survey was conducted (43%). The majority of the population exists in a state of more or less organized improvisation. As HOUTMAN, HEELAS and ACHTERBERG argue in a later article, analysing this »middle ground« is one of the primary tasks for the contemporary study of religion: »because in European countries (and elsewhere, no doubt) it is the most populated territory of the sacred, and apparently expanding in size.«<sup>6</sup> Despite the urgency of the task, however, it is not easy to undertake, for many of the existing methods for quantifying religious practices (like measuring church attendance, or gauging levels of assent to propositional beliefs such as »I believe in a personal God«) are too wedded to traditional institutions and traditional attitudes to capture the sorts of things people do if and when they stop going to church, synagogue, temple or mosque. Nor can such methods easily capture the creative redeployment of institutional rituals where people do stay affiliated and improvise in a traditional framework (hence the puzzlement over the prevalence of belief in a God within in Catholic Poland and Portugal).

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4 HOUTMAN [et al.], *Christian Religiosity* [note 2], p. 176.

5 JOHN D. CAPUTO, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, Bloomington 2013 (Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion), pp. 70 f.

6 DICK HOUTMAN, PAUL HEELAS, and PETER ACHTERBERG, *Counting Spirituality? Survey Methodology after the Spiritual Turn*, in: *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion. Volume 3: New Methods in the Sociology of Religion*, ed. by LUIGI BERZANO, Leiden 2012, pp. 25–44, here p. 26.

In response to these problems, HOUTMAN, HEELAS and ACHTERBERG suggest ways in which the questionnaire methodology used in sociological surveys could be refined to capture the unpredictable middle ground of New Age Spirituality.<sup>7</sup> However, my interest, in this article, is to show the resources already contained within religious traditions, particularly in the mystical tradition, for understanding and assessing the spirituality currently flourishing beyond existing institutions. An approach such as Eckhart's can help in developing a phenomenology of religious life that transcends confessional affiliations even as it acknowledges the inevitably context-bound aspects of spiritual experience. I want also to suggest that the »middle ground« of HOUTMAN, HEELAS and ACHTERBERG be included in cross-confessional or interreligious thinking. The »middle ground« can be called ›interreligious‹ for two reasons: first, because the improvised spiritual life it represents is itself if not a form of religion, then the sort of phenomenon which a Wittgensteinian approach not interested in absolute definitions but »family resemblances« amongst interrelated cultural practices will study alongside less controversially religious practices like prayer or going to church.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, because the practices combined in this process of making-it-up-as-we-go-along are often a syncretic mixture. To give a representative example from popular culture: in 1998, the American singer Madonna released a record on which, accompanied by lounge music with an oriental flavour, she read a poem by the thirteenth-century Persian Sufi poet Rumi in the free translation published by DEEPAK CHOPRA:

»In my hallucination  
I saw my Beloved's flower garden  
In my vertigo  
In my dizziness  
In my drunken haze  
Whirling and dancing like a spinning wheel  
I saw myself as the source of existence  
I was there in the beginning  
And I was the spirit of love.«<sup>9</sup>

Invoking the name of Rumi, therefore, the voice of Madonna formulates the very idea of the God within that we have already seen playing a significant part in the results of the RAMP survey. Other, similar examples could be found: for instance the interest of Madonna, Sting and Gwyneth Paltrow in Ashtanga Yoga.<sup>10</sup> The

7 HOUTMAN [et al.], *Counting Spirituality* [note 6], p. 41.

8 On »family resemblances« see: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen: Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by GERTRUDE ELIZABETH MARGARET ANSCOMBE [et al.], Oxford 2009, pp. 35–37 (§§66–68).

9 DEEPAK CHOPRA, *The Love Poems of Rumi*, London 1998, p. 25.

10 PATRICIA FAY MORGAN, *A Brief History of the Current Reemergence of Contemplative Education*, in: *Journal of Transformative Education* 13/3 (2015), pp. 197–218, here p. 206.

new forms of religiosity recycle the old, drawing from different traditions to reformulate and re-appropriate their insights. New Age Spirituality of this kind is a living example of an interfaith dialogue and exemplifies the problems of power and colonial re-appropriation that such a dialogue will frequently confront.

I want in this article to develop an approach that shows how we might engage with manifestations of spiritual longing such as the one expressed in Madonna's Rumi. It would be easy to dismiss the recording as »kitsch Sufism« which, like the phenomenally successful Rumi translation of COLEMAN BARKS, reduces the didactic interventions of the medieval Persian mystic to a marketable because platitudinous spirituality.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the combination of Madonna and Rumi exemplifies the predicament in which the majority of people in the Western world currently find themselves. To use a Heideggerian formulation, we could say that Madonna's song is the form in which religion is »primarily and for the most part« to be encountered today.<sup>12</sup>

We could react to this eclectic mix by looking for a religious or rationalist alternative that has nothing in common with this spiritual hybrid: a religious purism, or the sort of secular equivalent to be found in DANIEL DENNETT.<sup>13</sup> But in both cases the assumption is that a perspective is available to us that could allow us to leave behind the complex, overdetermined and often contradictory allegiances we have inherited through the process of socialization. CHARLES TAYLOR has argued that such attempts are often dependent on some of the very practices and assumptions they claim to leave behind.<sup>14</sup> Indeed DENNETT's critique of religion finishes with a model of »humble curiosity« (»left your self go«) that echoes religious traditions of self-abandonment even as it hopes to transcend theism.<sup>15</sup> So rather than hoping to escape our predicament, we need to change our relationship to our cultural inheritance. Just as Heidegger, in »Being and Time«, insists that an authentic life will not be a flight from inadequate, everyday practices but a transformatory re-appropriation, so a re-thinking of religion needs to engage with the sometimes

11 OMID AZADIBOUGAR and SIMON PATTON, Coleman Barks' Versions of Rumi in the USA, in: *Translation and Literature* 24/2 (2015), pp. 172–189, here p. 189.

12 »Primarily and for the most part« is a translation of Heidegger's »zunächst und zumeist« used frequently in »Being and Time«. A gloss of the term is given in MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen 1976, p. 370.

13 Cf. DANIEL C. DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, London 2006. DANIEL DENNETT, like WILLIAM JAMES before him, is a pluralist, but he gives up JAMES's focus on the first-person perspective (p. 11) for an evolutionary account of the underpinnings of religious behavior: »In place of a single spiritual sense we have considered a convergence of several different overactive dispositions, sensitivities, and other co-opted adaptations that have nothing to do with God or religion.« (p. 317)

14 CHARLES TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge 1989, p. 504.

15 DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell* [note 13] p. 303.

inadequate, day-to-day spiritual practices through which people fashion a religious life for themselves.<sup>16</sup> In adopting this approach, I'm taking a lead from JOHN CAPUTO, for whom, in a postmodern world, »God emerges here and there, often under other names, not in the bound volumes of theology but in loose papers that describe a more underlying and insecure faith.«<sup>17</sup> But where CAPUTO suggests we should remain forever aware of how inadequate the practices and formulations are with which we pursue the radical alterity that we (mis)name with the name of God, I will suggest that we accept the tools we inherit, for we have no others to work with except those that we improve ourselves through constant practice, and no standards to assess our improvement but those gradually developing ones supplied by the practices themselves.<sup>18</sup> Eckhart can assist us in this process. But before I set out this claim in more detail, I need to explain the term »individual mysticism« to be found in my title, which I will do by exploring what connects mysticism to the spiritual *bricolage* that the HOUTMAN and others have shown to be the most common form of religious practice in Western societies today.

## 2. Spiritual Improvisation and Mysticism

In the introduction to his recent, comparative collection of mystical texts from the major religious traditions, STEVEN T. KATZ offers the following working definition: »Mysticism is the quest for the direct experience of God, Being, or Ultimate Reality, however these are understood, that is, theistically or non theistically.«<sup>19</sup> The alternative focus I want to offer here, drawing on Eckhart's texts, shifts emphasis to the process rather than the substance, unpacking what KATZ might mean by a »quest«. Perhaps it is less a definition of mysticism than a proposal for a phenomenology of religion. Eckhart himself, as is well known, gives no definition of mysticism since he himself doesn't use the word. His texts have been read as an attempt to tidy up and rationalize the affect-laden spirituality of his contemporaries (TRUSEN writes of »rationale Erfassung der Mystik«<sup>20</sup>). That is to say: they have been approached as a theoretical analysis of experiences or practices that Eckhart

16 HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit* [note 12], p. 130 (§ 27). Further references to the text will be given parenthetically in the text using the abbreviation SuZ.

17 CAPUTO, *The Insistence of God* [note 5], p. ix.

18 As DEWEY argues: »Unless progress is a present reconstructing it is nothing; if it cannot be told by the qualities belonging to the movement of transition it can never be judged.« (JOHN DEWEY, *Human Nature and Conduct*, Amherst 2002, p. 282.)

19 STEVEN T. KATZ, General Editor's Introduction, in: *Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Original Sources*, ed. by ID., Oxford 2013, p. 3.

20 WINFRIED TRUSEN, *Der Prozeß gegen Meister Eckhart: Vorgeschichte, Verlauf und Folgen*, Paderborn 1993 (Rechts- und Staatswissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Görres-Gesellschaft N. F. 54), p. 52.

himself perhaps never had, or indeed never aspired to. This playing down of experience is both true and false. Unlike Hadewijch or Seuse, Eckhart does not report visions. Nevertheless, he presupposes a commonality of some sort without which his audience will not understand his sermons. This commonality is explicitly thematized in the sermon on spiritual poverty (Sermon 52):

*Der diz niht enverstât, der enbeküumber sin herze niht dâ mite. Wan alsô lange der mensche niht glich enist dirre wârheit, sô lange ensol er diese rede niht verstân; wan diz ist ein unbedahtiu wârheit, diu komen ist ûz dem herzen gotes sunder mittel.*

»Whoever does not understand these words, should not be troubled. For as long as someone is not themselves akin to this truth, they will not understand my words, since this is an unconcealed truth which has come directly from the heart of God.«<sup>21</sup>

To understand his preaching, for Eckhart, we need be ›like‹, ›equal‹ or, in OLIVER DAVIES's translation, ›akin‹ to a truth that comes without mediation from the heart of God, that is to say, we must in some sense already be involved in or participating in a process beyond mediation that Eckhart does not call experience but truth. A key element of mysticism, following Eckhart therefore, is participation in truth. Another can simply be called love.<sup>22</sup> We will be seeing later what an Eckhart sermon has to say on the topic.<sup>23</sup> Of course, the topos of love is found frequently across religious traditions in texts articulating experiences which seem to ›efface all usual human barriers‹<sup>24</sup>. It can be approached with the dry language of Freud or Romain Rolland, writing of the ›oceanic feeling‹<sup>25</sup>. Or, following Hadewijch and Rumi, it can be formulated using the conventions of poetry. Whatever the literary devices or rhetorical figures used to approach the phenomenon, we find varieties of love over and over in mystical texts: ›The one who drowns in God desires more drowning, / his soul tossed up and down like ocean waves.«<sup>26</sup>

KATZ's working definition emphasizes the ›what‹ that the mystic pursues: God, Being, Ultimate Reality. Following Eckhart, I wish to emphasize two aspects of

21 KURT FLASCH, Predigt Nr. 52 ›Beati pauperes spiritu‹, in: LE I, pp. 163–199, here p. 180. Meister Eckhart, Selected Writings, ed. and trans. by OLIVER DAVIES, London 1994, pp. 208 f.

22 For a recent version of this claim: AMY HOLLYWOOD, Love Speaks Here: Michel De Certeau's Mystic Fable, in: Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality 12/2 (2012), pp. 198–206.

23 For a discussion of love in Eckhart see CHARLOTTE RADLER, In Love I Am More God: The Centrality of Love in Meister Eckhart's Mysticism, in: Journal of Religion 90/2 (2010), pp. 171–198.

24 JAMES, The Varieties of Religious Experience [note 1], p. 281.

25 Sigmund Freud, Studienausgabe. 11 vols., ed. by ALEXANDER MITSCHERLICH [et al.], Frankfurt a. M. 1989, vol. IX, pp. 197–201.

26 Mowlana Jalaloddin Rumi, Spiritual Verses: The First Book of the Masnavi-Ye Ma 'Navi, ed and trans. by ALAN WILLIAMS, London 2006, p. 165 (ll. 1755–1756).

the process: participation and love, because they help to illuminate the phenomenology of spiritual experience that is important for my developing argument. Of course, phenomenology can't claim to have a monopoly on the understanding of religious experience. But what recommends it to me, like the comparable approaches of WILLIAM JAMES, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or HILARY PUTNAM, is that it takes seriously the perspective of those who live and interpret their life in religious terms without being confined to religiously orthodox explanations of their choices and activities.<sup>27</sup> To prepare my reading of an Eckhart sermon, I want to give a brief phenomenological account of the elements of participation and love that, following Eckhart, I'm using to characterize mysticism.

To explain the implications of participation, it is useful to turn to the early Heidegger. Heidegger uses the term ›thrownness‹ or Geworfenheit to articulate how human beings cannot avoid participating in a context. We are always already involved in living a particular form of life. Our everyday forms of interaction – with ourselves, with others, in and with the world – are enabled, shaped and constrained by this condition of being delivered up to a world: the social environment we happen to show up in, and a human life is inconceivable without this inescapable involvement. Heidegger starts by calling this situation ›facticity‹, ›factual life‹, or ›factual life experience‹.<sup>28</sup> By the mid-1920s, when he is drafting the final version of ›Being and Time‹, he is analysing the phenomenon under the heading of everyday, or average ›being-in-the-world‹. He insists on the averageness as his starting point because there is no privileged position untainted by shared human practices from which these practices could be seen through or escaped. Even the authentic forms of existence that the text presents to readers in the second half of the argument must be thought of a modification of these average habits, as opposed to a magical leap beyond them (SuZ, p. 130). Indeed, the very idea of escaping from the ›madding crowd‹ is itself shared: it is something we aspire to the way people generally aspire to it (SuZ, p. 127).

We live our life through shared human practices, and these activities are inevitably average. But that doesn't mean to say that they are worthless or untrue. On the contrary, human practice, for Heidegger, as well as being social through and through is world-disclosing. The practices of our common involvement are the way in which we participate in the truths disclosed by and available to human beings. Thus Heidegger can argue that we are always and inevitably ›in the truth‹



27 JAMES, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [note 1]. For Wittgenstein and PUTNAM: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, Oxford 1966; HILARY PUTNAM, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein*, Bloomington 2008.

28 E.g. *Faktische Lebenserfahrung als Ausgangspunkt*, in: Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*. Bd. 60: *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, ed. by MATTHIAS JUNG [et al.] Frankfurt a. M. 1995, pp. 9–15.

(SuZ, p. 221). However, the same practices that disclose truth also frame, and limit it. We never see truth in a pure form, only the truths that are available to our contingent, human practices. To that extent, human being are always simultaneously »in the untruth« (SuZ, p. 222), appropriating truth in context and for a reason. (This will seem like relativism only if we suppose, as an alternative, that we could magically disentangle ourselves from these commitments. But we can't: truth for a reason and in context is what truth is.)

Heidegger's phenomenology gives us a perspective from which to understand Eckhart's comments on our participation in the truth in his sermon on spiritual poverty (which is not surprising, since Heidegger was himself a reader of Eckhart).<sup>29</sup> Eckhart insisted that »as long as someone is not themselves akin to this truth, they will not understand my words, since this is an unconcealed truth which has come directly from the heart of God« (see above). From a Heideggerian perspective, we will always be able to understand Eckhart's sermon in so far as we cannot escape participating in the truth. We are already involved. At the same time, shaped as we are by existing habits, with their inadequacies, historical quirks, compromises and improvisations, we will never have a pure relation to this truth. So even as we participate in the truth, we might hear the sermon in what Heidegger would call the »deficient mode« of not wanting to deal with it right now, or not being ready for it. Yet even if we do want to hear it, our relation to the self-abandonment of which the sermon so eloquently speaks, and to the moment of pure being-in-God to which it aspires, will always be mediated. Although Eckhart appeals to »an unconcealed truth which has come directly from the heart of God«, he at the same time acknowledges an element of mediation or of human appropriation. Eckhart assumes that we will return to the sermon repeatedly, indeed the sermons were preserved as part of a reading culture.<sup>30</sup> When he writes »as long as« we are not equal to, or »akin to«, the truth, we won't understand it, the phrase suggests an on-going process and the possibility of transformation. It offers the hope that we can return to the sermon having worked on ourselves, having broken beyond our habits, attachments, egotisms and parochialisms. The spiritual aspirant

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29 REINER SCHÜRMAN, Heidegger and Meister Eckhart on Releasement, in: *Research in Phenomenology* 3 (1973), pp. 95–119. JOHN D. CAPUTO, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, revised reprinted edition, New York 1986. BEN MORGAN, *The Unfolding of Our Lives Together: Heidegger and Medieval Mysticism*, in: *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*, ed. by PAMELA SUE ANDERSON, Dordrecht 2010, pp. 235–248.

30 »All the sermons which have come down to us are texts meant to be read (i. e. literary products) which were given a literary polish and stylistic redaction, in the ideal instance by the preacher himself, but mostly by redactors who belonged to his circle.« (DAGMAR GOTTSCHALL, *Eckhart's German Works*, in: *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. by JEREMIAH M. HACKETT, Leiden 2013 [Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 36], pp. 137–183, here pp. 43 f.)

can re-read the sermon repeatedly, attending to the process of participating in the truth until at some point something shifts and the penny drops.

But how does this process occur? One answer would be that we follow the call of, and are initiated into, a living spiritual tradition, and this framework provides impetus and structure for our self-transformation. However, in the Western, Christian mysticism, we find neither formal modes of transmission nor rites of initiation. As a point of comparison, we can consider the process by which the Sufi seeker is accepted onto his or her chosen spiritual path and welcomed as a member of the community:

Like other branches of Islamic learning and praxis, Sufism is passed on to disciples from a master, who is typically called a »shaykh« (literally, »old man,« »elder«). The shaykh's oral teachings give life to the articles of faith, and without his transmission the methodical practice of *dhikr* [remembrance of God] is considered invalid if not dangerous. As with Hadith, transmission is traced back through a chain of authorities (called *silsila*) to the Prophet. The typical rite of initiation is modeled on the handclasp known as *bay'at ar-ridwan* (»the oath-taking of God's good pleasure«) that the Prophet took from his Companions at Hudaybiyya (referred to in Koran 48:10 and 48:18). The rite is understood to transmit an invisible spiritual force or blessing (*baraka*) that opens up the disciple's soul to transformation.<sup>31</sup>

For the argument I'm developing here this example is important for the contrast it represents to the spiritual *bricolage* with which I started. Only very few individuals today understand their spiritual life as a participation in the energy of a particular, living, mystical tradition. So if, from a phenomenological perspective such as that of Heidegger, we can argue that we all participate in the disclosure of truth, it's clear that most people will be using a varied mixture of inherited, redeployed, and contingent tools found in their immediate social environment, rather than adapting to the demands a specific mystical lineage.

Eckhartian participation, therefore, in its contemporary form, will be mediated, multifaceted and pluralistic. But what of love? This aspect of spiritual experience can also be illuminated with a phenomenological vocabulary. As well as analysing our inescapable involvement, Heidegger notices that it matters to us that we are involved. Human beings care: about others, about themselves, about the world around them, and their projects in it. For Heidegger, therefore, we come to ourselves as human beings passionately concerned with our own being as it unfolds in specific situations (SuZ, p.192). It is this dynamic and emotionally charged involvement that supplies the underlying, unitary framework within which individual psychological phenomena such as attitude, desires, wishes and addictions must be understood (SuZ, pp.193 f.). This is not the place for a full analysis of

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31 WILLIAM C. CHITTICK, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide*, Oxford 2000, p.28.

Heidegger's concept of care or its relation to love.<sup>32</sup> I wanted only to indicate how the elements of participation and love that I singled out as aspects of mystical religiosity can be linked by a phenomenological approach. We are inescapably involved and care passionately about this involvement.

If we now return to the Madonna example with which I started, we find both elements articulated:

I saw myself as the source of existence  
I was there in the beginning  
And I was the spirit of love.

But this example also highlights a problem. Once we move into the pluralistic arena of spiritual *bricolage*, and leave behind the constraints and commitments of a particular Church or mystical tradition, we also would seem at first sight to relinquish the tools for discriminating between valid vocabularies and their inauthentic and kitsch-laden competitors. If we wish only to document societal developments, this is not a problem. We can study the »middle ground« of HOUTMAN, HEELAS and ACHTERBERG [note 6] without making value judgments as to the efficacy or authenticity of the practices adopted. However, if we stay with the phenomenological approach that I've been developing, this merely descriptive account will not be sufficient. The phenomenological approach will always be one of involvement in which it matters for the analysis whether the practices in question promote or hinder the project of which they are a constitutive part. If Heideggerian *Dasein* cares, so too does the phenomenologist, who is equally involved in the contexts that he or she attempts to analyse and understand. To come to grips with the plethora of forms of spiritual improvisation phenomenologically, it helps to adopt two rules of thumb:

1. *There are no practices so trivial or inauthentic that they couldn't contribute to genuine spiritual experience.*

Once we forego the idea of a single, authoritative tradition, we can no longer exclude the possibility that the unprepossessing flotsam of postmodern cultural life might unexpectedly further the cause of spiritual self-overcoming as much as more institutionally recognized paths. This is hardly a new theological position. It is a corollary of KARL BARTH's Protestant insistence that there is no action that has any privileged relationship to God, no behaviour, not even that of rejecting worldly attachments, or acknowledging one's brokenness, that can count as the

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32 ROBERT STOLOROW argues that »authentic solicitude entails something like friendship or love, even though Heidegger himself did not explicate such entailment«. ROBERT D. STOLOROW, Love, Loss, and Finitude, in: Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology, and the Arts 13/2 (2014), pp. 35–44, here p. 41.

right attitude.<sup>33</sup> It is found more recently in JOHN CAPUTO's »theology of perhaps« which equally foregoes assurances and accepted patterns, foregoes even faith in God: »My faith is deeper than faith in God and cannot be contracted to faith in God. [...] My faith is faith in faith itself – it's faith all the way down.«<sup>34</sup> Armed with a faith such as this, which is something like a pure openness to the unexpected, or, in CAPUTO's Derridean vocabulary, to the »event«, we cannot decree in advance where we may encounter what we cannot expect. This attitude need not lead to a lazy relativism: »anything goes«. Rather, it demands from the interpreter of spiritual phenomena a changed attitude. The interpreter does not him- or herself stand outside the improvised practices of contemporary culture, but is him- or herself delivered up to the unfolding process of a shared culture like everyone else and trying to make sense of it. He or she will be making sense of phenomena in a specific context. This situatedness is what makes me question CAPUTO's Derridean openness. For CAPUTO's theology of perhaps, God, ›God‹ or the event »can happen anywhere« and we have no guidelines in advance.<sup>35</sup> But unlike CAPUTO, I suggest we will always have a current theory about the best places to look, and the most fruitful ways of approaching the matter, although that approach could turn out to be mistaken. So we can and must have a conversation about the different vocabularies through which we endeavor to grow as human beings. Honesty, circumspection, a willingness to admit when we're wrong will help us sort out which among the currently available practices most promote what we currently take to be a flourishing, rich human life. I would not expect there to be one single answer. As HILARY PUTNAM suggests in his discussion of the differences between MARTIN BUBER's interest in a dialogue with, and EMMANUEL LEVINAS's in the sheer alterity of, the other, we don't need to choose between such positions: each thinker has »identified a different sine qua non of the ›true life‹«<sup>36</sup>. But we do need to endeavor to come up with the best, pluralistic account of the differing habits and attitudes that, in our current situation, help to address our current problems. We don't know in advance that a religious vocabulary will be the best or the only vocabulary for addressing the problem. Rather, we must try to get as clear a sense as possible of the way the different practices with which we are confronted foster or inhibit the dynamic process of human involvement. Being-delivered-up-to-the-truth must be thought of as a developing predicament that we can foster, inhibit, or freeze. Spiritual practices are one of the ways historically human beings have managed this sense of involvement. No habit, ritual or song (Madonna!) should

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33 KARL BARTH, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, ed. by CORNELIS VAN DER KOOI and KATJA TOLSTAJA, Zürich 2010, p. 93, p. 35.

34 CAPUTO, *The Insistence of God* [note 5], p. 19.

35 CAPUTO, *The Insistence of God* [note 5], p. 49.

36 PUTNAM, *Jewish Philosophy* [note 27], p. 99.

be considered too trivial or kitschy to contribute to this management. On the contrary, all spiritual practices, and the related or analogous activities that, in a JAMES-ian, serial study of comparable phenomena might be put along side them, should be analysed and considered in the wider context of the dynamic process of being delivered up to the truth.<sup>37</sup> Which brings us to the second rule of thumb for studying the ›middle ground‹ of HOUTMAN, HEELAS and ACHTERBERG:

2. *Practices should be approached as confronting, fostering, inhibiting, or avoiding the shared, unfolding predicament of our being-delivered-up-to-the-truth.*

It's almost time to show what these methodological considerations have to do with Eckhart, and how a contextually informed reading of Eckhart, and of the transmission of Eckhartian ideas, can help us further refine our method. But first let me highlight what the discussion so far has established. I started from the finding that the majority of the population in the eleven European countries studied in the RAMP survey live a more or less improvised form of spirituality: religious *bricolage* is now the norm. This improvisation always occurs in an inherited context. We do not choose the tools, habits and concepts through which we come to terms with our spiritual predicament. We work with the fragments available to us: fragments from the traditions with which we grew up, and other practices that, in our post-colonial, globalized environment present themselves in our day-to-day life: the yoga class, the Chinese doctor, films that make an impression on us, songs that get stuck in our head, and of course, many apparently non-spiritual activities like jogging, hiking or cooking. There is nothing that could not be spiritually re-deployed, as Eckhart himself reminded his listeners when he observed that, in the right frame of mind, treading on a stone could bring them closer to God than taking communion.<sup>38</sup> We come to terms with our situation using the tools that that situation affords us. There is no ›outside‹ and no hierarchy that we can unquestioningly accept. There is only the ongoing process of disclosing, of discovering, of being-in-the-truth.

What I hoped to have presented with these methodological remarks is a model of the human project that, although it makes general claims about a human predicament, avoids the problems that beset perennialist models of religious experience, by the insistence that the human project will never be experienced in some unadulterated form, but always in a specific historical context. Even where we, as interpreters of religious texts, compare contexts, we are ourselves part of a context and must reflect this context in our analyses. A project that we are currently working on is itself something that we are in the process of discovering and it is not

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37 For JAMES's comments on his ›serial‹ method, see JAMES, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [note 1], p. 382.

38 RdU, DW V, p. 200,1–3.

inconceivable that our view of the project will develop and change as we work on it. But what does that all have to do with Eckhart?

### 3. From Renunciation to Love

One possible answer would be to show how Eckhart's theory confirms my approach. For instance, there is a moment in Sermon 103<sup>39</sup> when the querulous interlocutor whose voice Eckhart includes in the sermon, asks how, once we give up the security of familiar forms of knowledge, we can know whether we are on the right path. How can I know if the eternal birth of the Son in my soul has happened, or is happening in me (DW IV,1, p.487,122 f.)? Eckhart's imaginary interlocutor thus asks a similar question that I've been asking as to how we know for certain that the human and/or spiritual project that I've described is the right one. The answer I offered was: we can't know for sure. We must be open-minded and keep on exploring. Eckhart's answer in Sermon 103 is that there will be three signs that we're on the right path, one of which he elaborates upon in detail:

*Jâ, in der wârheit, swenne disiu geburt in der wârheit geschehen ist, sô enmügen dich alle créatûren niht gehindern, mêr: sie wisent dich alle ze gote und ze dirre geburt. (DW IV,1, p.488,126 f.)*

»Yes, in truth, when this birth in truth has happened, then all the creatures in the world can no longer get in your way. On the contrary: they all point you to God and to this birth.«<sup>40</sup>

Eckhart's explanation is of course no explanation at all. If I could already see that my material life was so transformed that every aspect of it pointed towards God, then I would need no further advice. So there seems to be no alternative. I must face up to the predicament of being-delivered-up without comforting external markers of my spiritual progress.

Eckhart thus addresses exactly the issues that I've been investigating in this article, and refuses to give us a certainty that we don't already ourselves possess. Eckhart does not help us further unless we can help ourselves. This position is completely consistent. Were Eckhart to present us with a clear theoretical model for determining how to confront the situation of being delivered-up-to-the-truth, then we ourselves would need to take no further risks but simply follow set instructions, as if a medieval Eddie Cochran had appeared to us and told us the ›Three Steps to Heaven‹. But this is not what Eckhart does. I cannot emphasize enough the methodological significance of this observation. It changes the very way we approach Eckhart's texts. We cannot treat Eckhart's writings as a quarry

<sup>39</sup> Sermon 103, DW IV,1, pp.426–492, text pp.474–492.

<sup>40</sup> All translations into English, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

from which we retrieve building blocks for elegant theorizations: the measures and models of spiritual life that would save us the trouble of actually dealing with factual life ourselves. Rather, to follow through the Heideggerian or phenomenological approach to Eckhart that I've been developing, we need to find another path to his writings: one which returns to the context, or more accurately the different contexts, in which it seemed meaningful and important for people to copy and transmit texts by Eckhart as part of their own spiritual endeavours.

With this changed perspective we can return to Sermon 103, and in particular to the version preserved in [Augsburg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. III.1.4° 37](#). The manuscript has been described by KARIN SCHNEIDER and more recently by ROBERT STEINKE in FREIMUT LÖSER's catalogue for the exhibition in 2011 ›Meister Eckhart in Augsburg.<sup>41</sup> It was produced in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century and donated in 1481 to the lay brothers of the Birgittine monastery in Maihingen in Southern Germany, and was passed on to the neighbouring Cistercian nunnery in Kirchheim am Ries, probably some time during the wars of the 1520s. The text of Sermon 103 that the manuscript contains strays so far from other versions that the editors of the Eckhart critical edition didn't take it into consideration when constructing their text but rather printed the whole text as an appendix to their record of transmission.<sup>42</sup> In other words, the manuscript is an example of a very active relation to the source text. This is significant for my argument since it gives us an insight into the ways spiritually inclined individuals appropriated, redeployed and altered the ideas and concepts with which Eckhart too was operating. Notice that I don't say: with Eckhart's ideas. The ideas and conceptual figures are not interesting because Eckhart thought them up but, rather, as the tools with which people in a particular milieu grappled with their own spiritual predicament. The Augsburg manuscript gives us a window on to this process of adopting and adapting a set of intellectual tools.

To understand what we can learn from the particular version recorded in the manuscript we need first to look in more detail at the sermon as it has been reconstructed for critical edition of Eckhart's texts, so that we have a point of reference or contrast. We need first to look at the theory in order to understand the sig-

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41 KARIN SCHNEIDER, *Deutsche mittelalterliche Handschriften der Universitätsbibliothek Augsburg. Die Signaturen Cod. I.3 und Cod. III.1*, Wiesbaden 1988 (Die Handschriften der Universitätsbibliothek Augsburg II,1), pp. 347–349. ROBERT STEINKE, *Geistliches in Traktat-, Predigt- und Liedform in der Laienbrüderbibliothek des Birgittenklosters Maria Mai in Maihingen*, in: *Meister Eckhart in Augsburg. Deutsche Mystik des Mittelalters in Kloster, Stadt und Schule. Katalog zur Handschriftenausstellung in der Schatzkammer der Universitätsbibliothek Augsburg* (18. Mai bis 29. Juli 2011), ed. by FREIMUT LÖSER [et al.], Augsburg 2011, pp. 178–182.

42 DW IV,1, pp. 427–429.

nificance of the associated practices. The sermon takes as its text Luke 2:42 *Cum factus esset Iesus annorum duodecim*. (»And when Jesus was twelve years old, [they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast].«)<sup>43</sup> In this episode from the Gospel, Mary and Joseph unwittingly leave a twelve-year-old Jesus behind in the temple, and they find him again, Eckhart elaborates, only when they stop looking at home, amongst friends, family and servants and return to Jerusalem to the temple, which is to say, to the origin:

*Und dô sie wider in den ursprunc kâmen, in den tempel, dô vunden sie in.* (DW IV,1, p. 474,7)

»And when they came back to the origin, to the temple, they found him again.«

The simple, rhetorical trick of treating »origin« and »temple« as if they were synonymous by putting them in apposition allows Eckhart to read the episode from Luke as a meditation on leaving behind the crowd, by which it turns out he means people but also sense perception and concepts, and returning to the ground of our being. For Eckhart, we don't get to God by having ideas about God, but rather by giving up all activity and all ideas and letting God happen to us:

*Sol diz werk volkomen sîn, sô muoz ez got aleine wûrken und dû solt ez aleine liden.* (DW IV,1, p. 476,22 f.)

»If this work is to be completed, then it must be done by God alone, and you should merely suffer it to happen to you.«

Indeed, as the argument continues, Eckhart insists that we must give up any idea that our rational faculties will help us reach God:

*sol got götliche in dir liuhten, dar envüerdert dich dîn natiurlich lieht zemâle niht zuo, mër: ez muoz ze einem lûtern nihte werden und sîn selbes ûzgân zemâle.* (DW IV,1, pp. 476,27–477,28)

»If God is to shine divinely in you, your natural light will, of course, not bring you there. Indeed: it must become a pure nothing, and must leave itself behind.«

In the same way that Samaritans in John 4,3–42, called by the woman at the well, gave up relying on what the woman said about Christ and encountered him directly, so we must give up the, for Eckhart, indirect testimony of our senses and our patterns of thought (DW IV,1, p. 477,31–38). And this means that we must give up the idea of even knowing that we have left knowledge behind: our knowledge of God must be a knowledge »under erasure«, a knowledge under the sign of the adverb »perhaps« as CAPUTO would say: a non-knowledge, or unknowing, that

43 Biblical citations follow the Vulgata Clementina and King James Version: <https://unbound.biola.edu> [06.03.2016].

can't be processed by any of the rational means we might have for absorbing and coming to terms with the encounter. We cannot, for Eckhart, ›know‹ that we don't know God. Rather, the verb he uses to express our situation is *stân*: ›to stand‹. We stand in our unknowing.

*Dû enkanst niemer baz gestân, dan daz dû dich zemâle setzest in ein dunsternisse und in ein unwizzen.* (DW IV,1, p. 478,43 f.)

»You can stand in no better way than by setting yourself in a darkness and an unknowing.«

Unknowing is thus something we do, rather than something we know; a practice rather than a theory.

Once we stand in ›unknowing‹, which could be glossed as a state of non-dogmatic, non-prescriptive openness, we can't turn back to pick up our old intellectual habits. We press forward. Eckhart describes a movement towards something that has no definition, not even a definition *ex negativo* in contrast to the structures which it is not. This movement, as Eckhart describes it, is faster than the motions of the heavens, that is to say it is faster than phenomenon that, for the medieval mind, following Aristotle in ›De caelo et mundo‹, was thought to be the very quickest of all. Having taken us beyond habits of both sense perception and reasoning, Eckhart wants to invoke an immediacy beyond our normal comprehension. If we can let go of the old habits, he suggests, we instantly become absolute potential, a forward movement already participating in God, or as Eckhart describes the state using a somatic image: a pure forward movement already fed and nourished by the very best: *gespîset und gevuoret von dem aller besten guote* (DW IV,1, p. 481,27).

If Eckhart seems initially present a complete transformation (we let go and are transported towards God in a flash), he subsequently goes on to describe something more like a gradient: the more we let go of old habits, the more the openness of ›unknowing‹ is given space. The letting go he characterizes using the image of going into a desert – a deserting of creaturely attachments. Again, to clarify his point, he makes use of Scriptural motifs, taken in this case from Hosea 2,14 (›Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her.‹); from Psalm 54,6 f. of the Vulgate (›Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest – I would flee far away and stay in a desert.‹); and finally from the Vulgate's Psalm 83:10 (›I would rather be a doorkeeper [the Latin term is *abjectus*: ›I would rather be abject‹] in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.‹) So Eckhart has led us to the point where we have started to leave behind our old habits that we may participate more fully in the openness he gives the name God.

Nevertheless, the imaginary interlocutor at this point asks Eckhart whether, as one gives up assumptions and habits, it wouldn't be comforting to have some



practices to fill the space left behind. Would praying, reading Scripture and listening to sermons not assist me? Eckhart's answer is a clear »No«. The best thing is to bear the emptiness left behind as we relinquish our habits of thought and perception (DW IV,1, p. 483,83 f.). The more we prepare ourselves and make space for God, the more he comes to fill us. For, Eckhart explains, God is not like a human carpenter who chooses whether or not he will work. God has no choice: if we empty ourselves, he must fill us, just as the sun must shine more through the air as it clears (DW IV,1, p. 484,90–96); and just as a baby's body, as soon as it is sufficiently developed in the womb, is filled with living spirit (DW IV,1, p. 485,97–99). For, as it says in the Book of Revelation, God is at the door, knocking and waiting for admittance (Apc 3,20): »Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.«

Thus far, the sermon has encouraged us to return to »the origin« which is to say to a state before or beyond an attachment to habits of reasoning and perception, and to human interaction. We can get there absolutely (quicker than the heavens) but also by a gradual process of being emptied out and God filling us. As if to remind us that to speak of a move beyond human interaction will only ever be a hyperbolic formulation (the sermon is after all addressed to a congregation), the voice of the imaginary interlocutor returns with a question. At this point in the argument, the interlocutor is puzzled, for he or she doesn't feel that God is there waiting to be allowed in. However, it turns out that even being aware that God is waiting, is not our business (for otherwise we would be back in a situation where spiritual transformation depended on our own knowledge):

*Daz bevinden enist niht in dinem gewalt, mêr: ez ist in dem sinen, sô ez im vüeget.* (DW IV,1, p. 486,108 f.)

»The feeling is not in your power. Indeed, it is in His power, should it please him.«

To underscore the point, Eckhart once again quotes the Gospels, this time John 3,8: »The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth.« We can't tell how it comes or goes. But what we can tell, Eckhart insists, is that where there is emptiness, that is to say, where we have left ourselves behind, God will come to fill the vacuum (DW IV,1, p. 487,115–118).

Yet still the imaginary interlocutor is not satisfied. He or she wants to know: will there be a sign that lets me know that God has now arrived in me? Eckhart, as we have already seen, surprisingly answers that there will be three signs, of which he will tell us one in this sermon, namely that we will find that everything about the creaturely life we left behind now points us to God, just as anything struck by lightning turns towards the lightning (DW IV,1, p. 488,124–131). For the person

who has already been transformed, everything becomes pure God: *alliu dinc werdent dir lûter got* (»all things become pure God to you«; DW IV,1, p. 488,136), just as if you stare into the sun for a long time, when you look at anything else all you can see is the sun (DW IV,1, pp. 488,137–489,138).

Eckhart is then asked if, having achieved this state, we should continue with our penances and other ritual practices: vigils, fasting, praying, weeping, wearing hair shirts, sleeping on a board and other ascetic activities. Such practices help the spirit not be overwhelmed by the flesh, Eckhart says (DW IV,1, p. 490,143–153). And yet an even more effective way of disciplining the flesh are the constraints and the bands of love, which will catch us as securely as the hook catches the fish (DW IV,1, p. 491,155–160), and will take us further than all ascetic practices and self-discipline:

*Kein dinc enmachet dich gote nêher und got dir alsô eigen als diz sûeze bant der minne. Der disen wec habe vunden, der ensuoche keinen andern wec.* (DW IV,1, p. 492,165 f.)

»Nothing brings God closer to you and makes him more yours than this sweet band of love. The person who has found this path will seek no other.«

Once we are on this path, our human body is transfigured as God's body: feet, hands, mouth, eyes and heart all become his (DW IV,1, p. 492,166–168). For, Eckhart concludes, quoting the Song of Songs (8,6): »love is strong as death.« Indeed, he suggests that if we are walking on the path of love, it no longer matters whether we do something or we don't do it so long as we act with love. There are no fixed practices. And where we do or don't do something with love, it is more fruitful than the purest act done without love. Caught by love, we find a higher freedom. Thus the sermon finishes with the following prayer: »May we thus be caught and freed, with the help of him who is himself Love. Amen.« (DW IV,1, p. 492,178 f.)

The spiritual development described by Eckhart is one in which we give up constraining frames of reference. Yet, he himself quotes the Bible and other familiar authorities like Aristotle, so it is not that he has relinquished all existing discourses. He is rather attempting to transform the listeners' relation to their habits and their context. The change is promoted either by surrender (God acts for and through us), or, in the sermon's peroration: by love. By the end of the sermon we arrive at formulations that prefigure the state of religious improvisation without institutional guarantees that I described at the beginning of the argument. If death separates the soul from the body, it is love which transforms the soul's relationship to the things around it (DW IV,1, p. 492,171). Where at the beginning of the sermon, the rhetoric was one of renunciation, of leaving behind attachments, by the end love itself does the work of change, and anything we do through and with love can have a transformatory effect.

Yet the sermon does not describe love in any detail. The image of the hooked fish, and the resonance of the Song of Songs are all it offers. To that extent it appeals to the listeners' prior experience: to a knowledge they already had. Eckhart's sermon offers less a theoretical statement than a space for the listener to occupy. It is for this reason that the text should not be separated from the wider context of its practical deployment, hence the importance of the variant text contained in the Augsburg manuscript to which I can finally turn to conclude my argument.

#### 4. Varieties of Love

So how did late medieval readers respond to the space opened up for them by Eckhart's preaching? The version of the sermon contained in the Augsburg manuscript cuts the text a little and transposes one or two passages. But it nevertheless preserves the main line of argument of the sermon. One change in particular suggests that the changes were not made through ignorance or carelessness. In other versions of the text we find the Latin word *audivimus* quoted from the Gospel translated as *gesehen hân* (»we have seen«) but in the Augsburg text we find »we have seen and heard« (fol. 287<sup>r</sup>), as if the scribe knew the Biblical passage being quoted and wanted to find a compromise between the gospel text and the sermon. Our redactor thus is thoughtful in the changes he or she makes so we can read them as evidence for an intelligent, historically situated reaction.

Before I say more about the general tendency of the changes and interventions, let me briefly summarize the groupings we find:

1. The text personalizes. For instance it is not »your reason« (*dîn natiürlich liebt*) but »you« who will become nothing (fol. 286<sup>v</sup>; DW IV,1, pp. 476,21–477,22); it is not »man« (*der mensche*) who might cling to the support of familiar practices like praying but »I« (*ich*) (fol. 288<sup>v</sup>; DW IV,1, p. 483,82); and when God is standing outside the door and knocking, it is specifically my job to open (fol. 289<sup>v</sup>; DW IV,1, p. 486,105 f.).
2. Questions of agency are complicated in this version since the line between human and divine agency is not drawn in quite the same place as in the text published in the critical edition: rather than leaving behind external influences to feel God welling up inside us (DW IV,1, p. 476,20 f.), we transcend God's (external) forming of us (*pildung*, fol. 286<sup>v</sup>), to let our spiritual life well up from »the ground« within us (*aus dem grund*, fol. 286<sup>v</sup>); similarly, the carpenter image is changed, and it is no longer God but the human interlocutor who, unlike a carpenter, can't chose when to act and when not to act (fol. 288<sup>v</sup>).
3. The Augsburg version has fewer questions and objections from the fictional interlocutor, so it is less dialogical.

4. Where the reconstructed critical text refers to the natural potential that is unleashed when we give up our habits – *in mügelich enpfencklicheit* as a Middle High German translation of the term *potentia naturalis animae* (DW IV,1, pp. 478,47–479,49), the adapted version replaces the term with *ein mynnecliches enpfencklicheit*: »a loving power« (fol. 287<sup>r</sup>). The scribe has thus moved the first reference to love much earlier in the text, bringing out the degree to which our surrender of intellectual and perceptual habits is a surrender to love. A similar re-emphasis is found in the final discussion of love, which is rearranged so that the Biblical quotation that love is stronger than death appears sooner, effectively underwriting the turn to love as the strongest power (fol. 290<sup>r-v</sup>).
5. The body is also given more prominence. The tricolon used by Eckhart to explain why we might turn back from the state of standing in unknowing is rearranged. Rather than being turned by »our senses or the world or the devil« (DW IV,1, p. 479,51), the change is caused by »the devil or the world or your own flesh« (*von dem teüfel oder der werlt oder von deinem aigen flaisch*, fol. 287<sup>v</sup>). The senses are replaced by »your flesh«, which is given rhetorical emphasis as the last element in the tricolon. The body is also included when the preacher quotes from Psalm 119 to acknowledge the difficulty of the state of unknowing. In the Augsburg text, our sense of taste, as well as the light of our intellect, are affected (fol. 288<sup>v</sup>); both rational and visceral reactions to our situation are included. Finally, the re-arrangement of the closing image (the fish caught on a hook) includes moving the reference to »feet, hand, heart and eyes« reintegrated through love to the end of the argument, drawing attention to them and also adding that »everything in and of« the human (*alz das an im vnd in im ist*) is physically transformed (fol. 290<sup>v</sup>).



In general, the Augsburg text could be seen to highlight certain neuralgic points for late medieval spirituality: To what degree should spiritual life be seen as something personal? In other words: how is the process of changing habits and abandoning attachments the aspirant's own business (as opposed to God's business) since he or she is the one trying to abandon him- or herself? Can the aspirant learn from role models (for instance, from the question of a voice which takes up my potential misunderstandings and helps to clarify them)? What should the aspirant do when existing spiritual practices don't seem to take him or her any further? What is the role of love? What is the role of the body? The Augsburg version of the text does not answer these questions with a set theory or fixed theology, any more than the version in the Eckhart critical edition does. Rather, the text, and the changes it records, presents us with the process of appropriation: not just the theory of standing, without attachments, in the darkness and unknowing of God

(to use the vocabulary of this sermon), or of being-delivered-up-to-the-truth (to use the phrase I derived from my phenomenological reading of the commonality that Eckhart's preaching presupposes), but the aspects of lived experience that this aspiration in this context involved.

The Augsburg manuscript is not the only unusual variant, and we can gain a clearer sense of the spiritual project informing the redaction by comparing it with other versions. One candidate is the text found in Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2926, which is also peculiar enough to have been reproduced in full in the apparatus of the critical edition.<sup>44</sup> The part of the manuscript containing the sermon was copied between 1530 and 1540. HERMAN MENHARDT suggests that the collection was compiled by a protestant priest. In any case, the sermon is copied with a fragment of Eckhart's Sermon 104 under the rubric *Ex Taulero*.<sup>45</sup> It is a fascinating document of how Eckhart's thought is re-appropriated and re-written in the context of the Reformation; self-abandonment is re-formulated as a form of self-hatred (*dich selbs hassen*, fol. 94<sup>v</sup>; DW VI,1, p. 475,9–12. The manuscript deserves study in its own right, but for the purposes of my argument, the jump to the Reformation is too big a step for a productive comparison.

A more useful point of reference can be found in the variant contained in Salzburg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. M I 476.<sup>46</sup> In this manuscript, which was copied in 1441, the sermon is transmitted with three other Eckhart texts that form the cycle on the ›Eternal Birth‹, Sermons 101, 102 and 104.<sup>47</sup> The Salzburg text condenses the sermons as befits a codex uniting a wide range of material in a new compilation. It is noteworthy in comparison with the Augsburg text, however, because the abbreviated text does not suggest a clear agenda. Biblical examples, philosophical authorities, and vivid Eckhartian images are all sometimes cut, but also sometimes retained. The image of the mind outspeeding the heavens (fol. 157<sup>r</sup>) loses the idea of bodily nourishment we find in both the critical text and the Augsburg variant (DW IV,1, p. 481,58–63, and fol. 288<sup>r</sup>). But the redaction is not anti-somatic. Hand, mouth, eye and heart are still reintegrated by the bands of love as they are in the other texts (fol. 157<sup>v</sup>). The condensed text also keeps the dialogical element. The editor or scribe is at one point confused as to whether God or the

44 DW IV,1, pp. 435–437.

45 HERMANN MENHARDT, *Verzeichnis der altdeutschen literarischen Handschriften der österreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, Berlin 1960, p. 624.

46 This version, too, has been reproduced in full in the apparatus of the critical edition: DW IV,1, pp. 429–431.

47 For discussion of the cycle as a whole and Sermon 101 in particular, see GEORG STEER, *Predigt 101: ›Dum medium silentium tenerent omnia*, in: LE I, pp. 247–288. Details of the manuscript are included in WOLFGANG KLIMANEK, *Verzeichnis der in DW IV benutzten Textzeugen und ihrer Siglen*, [http://www.meister-eckhart-gesellschaft.de/Hss-DW.htm#\\_Toc120922119](http://www.meister-eckhart-gesellschaft.de/Hss-DW.htm#_Toc120922119) [06.03.2016].

spiritual aspirant is acting, but it is precisely at the point where Eckhart is himself questioning agency (fol. 157<sup>r</sup>), so the confusion is understandable and doesn't otherwise leave a trace on the developing argument. Some phrases in the section concerning love are cut. But at the same time an explanatory phrase is added that the final state which the sermon describes is one in which love is the driving force (*dz wùrket alles die minne*; fol. 157<sup>v</sup>). More interestingly, the phrase »a human being's most trivial acts« (*des menschen minstesz werk*, DW IV,1, p. 492,176) from the final paragraph of the critical edition is transformed into »a human being's works of love« (*dis menschen minnewerk*; fol. 157<sup>v</sup>). We thus see in a variant without a clear agenda, beyond an intelligent compression of the sermon, two aspects which echo what we find in the Augsburg text: a confusion about agency, and a creative misreading that strengthens the power of love. The Salzburg text is less radical in its approach than the Augsburg redaction. But both texts give us an insight into how Eckhartian spirituality worked in practice. Once a guiding framework of fixed practices and predictable answers was relinquished, questions of agency, authority, imitation and embodiment remained as puzzles to which scribes responds by emphasizing the importance of love.

Thus far we have focused on the efforts of editors and/or scribes to appropriate Eckhart's unsettling approach. But the Augsburg manuscript does not contain only the editorial interventions of the copyist. There are also marginalia by later readers at two points in the sermon: a pointing finger and a rosette which mark two points in the text which particularly drew the attention of someone using the manuscript while it was still a part of people's religious life rather than an object of academic study. The finger points to the passage where human surrender outspeeds the heavens to be nourished by the best (fol. 288<sup>r</sup>). The rosette is drawn in the margin where the verse from Revelation is quoted (3,20): »Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me« (fol. 289<sup>v</sup>). Both markings are directed towards examples of the concrete images to which Eckhart frequently appeals. Moreover, they both coincidentally highlight images that involve food: being nourished with the best, and supping with the Lord. Of course we don't know what the reader went on and did having been prompted to mark these points in the text. We know only that the images made enough of an impact to provoke an annotation, and that the impact was made at points at which the sermons appeal to an embodied reader. The marginalia thus give further attention to one of the neuralgic points we have already noted: the role of the body in the process of fully inhabiting our predicament. The sermon itself comments that ascetic practices make it easier to control one's body. But it says also that love is more effective than institutionalized habits of self-denial. The redactor took this point to heart by increasing the importance of love in the text's developing argument and emphasizing how love reintegrates the body. Later readers responded similarly, singling out

moments when the preacher drew on somatic images. If the sermon charts a development from renunciation to love, the later reception reinforces this dynamic: in practice, as well as in theory, the sermon records the gradual disclosing of an embodied spirituality.

This reading of the Augsburg manuscript has implication both for how we approach Eckhart's texts and for the wider questions of a twenty-first century spirituality. When faced with the challenge to stand without foreknowledge in the darkness of God, individuals continuing in the same spiritual tradition as Eckhart emphasized love and turned their attention to moments of bodily experience. But these emphases are not added arbitrarily to Eckhart's text. His texts always were bodily: addressed by a speaker to a congregation, drawing on the vivid, corporeal images, such as the fish wriggling on a hook, that recur so frequently in Eckhart's preaching. Where the theory seems to move beyond worldly attachments, beyond even sense perception, it is important to remember that such hyperbolic figures of speech are always situated: they are statements, as noted above, for a reason and in a context. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the issues that concerned Eckhart's readers were precisely those of the bodily context of spiritual development: questions of agency and role models, and more importantly, of love and forms of physical pleasure. The search for an authentic spirituality will always be a working through of our embodied situation.

This grappling with our bodily predicaments returns us to the situation I discussed at the beginning of the article: the spiritual *bricolage* that has become the way people in the West live their spiritual life »primarily and for the most part«. In this situation, there is, for most people, no single living tradition with the authority to tell us how correctly to manage spiritual life. One consequence of this realization is that Eckhart can't himself become a replacement authority who tells us the norms for living beyond norms. Eckhart cannot tell us what we can only find out for ourselves. Kierkegaard solved this problem by playing out possible positions in his pseudonymous texts that he did not fix as the one authorially intended meaning.<sup>48</sup> We can solve the problem by taking to heart what we learn from a more contextualized reading of Eckhart's text, and acknowledging the necessarily situated nature of any spiritual undertaking. Once we have made this step, it will be clear that it is only through love, as Eckhart and his copyists emphasized, and through the continual interrogation of bodily experience, as his readers noted, that the question of what constitutes authentic spirituality could ever be answered.

~~As a final observation, it's worth noting that this knowledge was, in some sense, always already contained in the tradition with which Eckhart was working. He~~



48 For a discussion of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, see Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms, ed. by KATALIN NUN and JON STEWART, Farnham 2015 (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 17).

appealed to the Song of Songs to give resonance to the idea of love, but the love he referred to was defined by a Vulgate that related it to death and to hell. The similarities in the Hebrew text are importantly different.<sup>49</sup> The word which in Eckhart's Middle High German is translated as death (*tôt*) (DW IV,1, p. 492,170) in Hebrew is **מָוֶת**. The root of the word is **מָוָה** to ask, implying a questioning, that relates therefore not only to death but to forms of despair. It is also the name of the underworld, or Hades, a subterranean or subconscious realm. Love, in the Hebrew text, negates not just mortal finitude, but forms of inner lostness or darkness, and also rational questioning — or scepticism. It offers a certainty to be contrasted not with theological threats, but with the lived experience of doubt. A confrontation of Eckhart and his readers with the problems of twenty-first century spirituality has thus brought us back to embodied wisdom already contained in the tradition, raising the question of the historical circumstances in which this insight can be repeatedly forgotten or overlooked.

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