

Eckhart's Spiritual Doctrine in the Light of Modern Science

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There is nothing in creation so like God as silence
Meister Eckhart (1260-1328)

Summary

Eckhart shares many traits with other mystical writers but is unique in two particular ways, namely, in attempting to communicate his experience within the scientific framework of his time and in teaching that the mystical life is not exceptional but the potential calling of the average human being. If he is right in the latter, and if his doctrine is framed within modern cosmology and neurology, he can be seen as the precursor of a paradigm change as great as any that have happened in the history of religion.

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Introduction: Religion and Reality

The motto of the Dominican Order, to which Eckhart belonged, is *Contemplare et contemplata tradere*, that is, to contemplate and pass on the fruits of contemplation. The present paper is written in the same spirit to pass on the fruit of Eckhartian doctrine but interpreted within the framework of modern science, which illuminates and supports it in an unexpected way. Like all mystics, Eckhart preaches what might be called in Quaker terms "that of God within," as he experiences it, but he is unique in attempting to describe it in the scientific categories of his day. Although he himself is temperamentally a Platonist, his cultural background is Aristotelian science or, strictly speaking, protoscience, for it was the precursor of the hypothetical inductive method which was to displace it and which we call science today. It is important to understand science as an evolving way of knowing, and just as Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and others were to construct a new scientific paradigm five centuries ago we are today on the threshold of a paradigm change based on science's discovery that we live in an expanding universe and on other discoveries, particularly about brain function. The emerging new paradigm is as yet in its earliest stages, unnoticed by mainstream science or dismissed as unorthodox and cannot be adequately described briefly, but perhaps a fingerhold may be gained by saying that it hinges on how the question is answered: does our familiar three-dimensional universe constitute the whole of reality or is it, in fact, a subspace of a very unfamiliar higher-dimensional reality.

In Eckhart's lifetime Aristotelian science was transforming Christian theology, and displacing Platonism, due largely to the great *Summa Theologica* of Eckhart's fellow Dominican, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). The main difference between Plato and Aristotle is that each theorized from opposed assumptions about the nature of reality. For Aristotle it was to be found in the familiar world of matter, the here and now, whereas Plato reasoned that there must be an unobservable realm of what might be called pure thought and ideal forms which in some sense existed separately from and preceded the material world that we inhabit. To those encountering philosophy for the first time this may seem an illogical fancy, but not for nothing did Alfred North Whitehead famously say that all of Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato for

when one is asked which is the real circle, the perfect one in my mind or the approximation I have drawn on the page, one realises that there is a problem with limiting reality to the material and observable. Whatever one's opinion may be, the idea of a circle certainly came first.

The distinction between the ontologies, or theories of reality, promoted by Plato and Aristotle has been discussed through the centuries. An Aristotelian will intuitively ask what is the common *substance* that underlies this wood and this paper that I can touch and measure, while a Platonist will want to know where is the *essence* of things. Where, for instance, is the common plan of all giraffes or butterflies, the ideal form which the individual specimens all manifest. Eckhart seems to straddle these two philosophical positions as he attempts to explain his experience of God, but he is temperamentally very much a Platonist. The experience of itself is, of course, wordless, as the quotation at the head of the paper emphasizes, but metaphor and logic can be used to take us to the threshold, when the mind must let go of everything, and in both respects Eckhart is different from other teachers and more provocative.

The Deep Root of Religion

From different understandings of the primal power that we call "God" arise different religions and this explains why Eckhart is at the same time so inspiring and so controversial, for he has an unconventional way of explaining his experience and thus one senses that under his words lies something new and thus something that may turn out to be a threat to conventional religion, and hence to established authority. It must be said, however, that Eckhart himself never wavered in his loyalty to the Church and the religious order to which he belonged. A rebel he was not. The prospect of a new kind of religion may excite us or make us fearful, or sometimes a bit of both, and some elements of Eckhart are very new indeed. Viewed in the long perspective of religious evolution, it can be seen that he goes beyond St Paul as Paul went beyond Jesus, who went beyond Moses. Once we become aware of how religion has evolved as some a new understanding of the creating power has taken hold of a society and seeded a new religion, it is easier to understand the God of Eckhart, albeit wrapped in ancient philosophy and startling metaphors, and become aware that the last word has not been said by credal Christianity. In some ways the God that Eckhart preached may be seen as pure Christianity, but in significant ways it goes beyond Christianity and prepares the way for the next evolutionary step. Like all such religious upheavals, it will mostly be unwelcome and cause dissent, for it must of its nature question orthodoxy, which was, of course, why the Roman Catholic Church banned Eckhart's books and has never formally lifted the ban. The newness of his doctrine, based on a radically new understanding of God can be seen more clearly by locating it within the Judaeo-Christian phylum from which it emerged, as a branch upon a great historical tree. The Bible refers to its origins as "the root of Jesse" (King David's father) but the root actually goes back much further than that.

The God of Moses and the Jews

The Jewish God is taken to be the God that handed down his laws on tablets of stone to Moses, but that is really no more than a tribal myth, for as scriptural scholars have unearthed over the past century or more, the God of the Jews was a much more complicated thing, in fact, an amalgam of three quite different Gods, each with its own most interesting history. Details of how this fusion came about are the subject of endless scholarly debate and disagreement, but in rough outline it would seem that Moses (an Egyptian by name and birth) assumed leadership over the semi-nomadic tribe of Hebrews (Habiru) that had settled in Egypt and had no particular god of their own. Moses was probably a priest of the new religion instituted by the Pharaoh Ikhnoton, which was based on worship of Aton (or Aten), the sun god. It was Ikhnoton's intention to replace the ancient religion of Egypt, based on worship of half-animal, half-human divinities and the cult of death, with the more spiritualized and logical god of the sun, who clearly was the source of light, life, power and fertility, and it is significant that the changes he enforced were met with violent resistance by the Egyptian populace and priestly caste. Such reluctance to abandon traditional gods is typical and inevitable.

In those days there was a confusion of gods, cultural, tribal and family, and when Moses married into a Kenite family he adopted their tribal protector Jahweh, a god of thunder (hence of manifest power) comparable to the Norse god Thor. Jahweh eventually transmuted to become the only god of the Jews, but for a thousand years co-existed with a third divinity, the great semitic god El, which still survives in the *Allah* of Islam. In the Jewish Bible, Jahweh is mentioned about 6,500 times, El (or Elohim) 2,500 times and Adonai 450 times. There are different opinions about the Egyptian origins of Adonai, but without going into the controversial details, it can at least be seen that the Jewish god emerged from a fusion of several different understandings of divinity. Jahweh, who eventually superseded the others, was in large part the invention of the prophets of Israel. He was a stern but just law-giver, a "God of battles", often ruthless, sometimes capricious, one who loved and protected his chosen people, was deeply concerned with their moral behaviour and, perhaps most significantly, a God of Truth. We take for granted, unless we are atheists, that religion is deeply concerned with truth and moral behaviour, but that was not the case before Judaism, for no other tribal god was defined in this way. In fact, the ethical monotheism of the Jews was so far in advance of its time (some aspects of primitive Hinduism perhaps excepted) that Mohamed was to promote it a thousand years later as a religious revolution, after replacing the Jewish god, Jahweh, with the more ancient semitic supreme god Allah.

The God of Jesus

Jahweh in its fully developed form was the God which Jesus inherited, but he unintentionally started a revolution by radically modifying it when he preached Jahweh as a loving father. The two images, a god of love and a legalistic heavenly potentate, have struggled for dominance in Judaism and Christianity alike ever since, with the latter perception usually coming out on top, a god who is waiting to catch us out, wagging a disapproving finger. In the Jewish mythology Jahweh did not only hand down his laws as a gift to the Jews but made a deal, a contract or testament: if you follow my laws I will look after you but, if not, I will punish you. As a result of this flawed image of the creator, Judaism has been caricatured as “systematized angst” and every Sunday millions of Christians plead in the *Kyrie Eleison*, “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy”, sometimes with liturgical breast beating, unaware of what an insult this must be to the God of love that Jesus struggled to communicate to his hearers. Against this historical background the “Jesus revolution” can be appreciated. His was a different sort of God, not a deal-maker, as the parable of the prodigal son illustrates. In Eckhart’s theology God is without any doubt on our side, and in one memorable passage is said to give an understanding wink to the sinner. The contrast between this familiarity, one might almost say chumminess, may be seen by comparing it with the typical attitude of the great corpus of prayer, the psalms, which is central to both Judaism and Christianity. In Psalm 38, for instance, one reads, “Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath Because of your wrath there is no health in my body My guilt has overwhelmed me.”

It would be naïve to criticize ancient Judaism for its theological shortcomings. Far more important is the historical fact that with it religion had taken a mighty step to escape the near universal religious paradigm at that period, defined by worship of many gods and idols. The oneness of God, the sole creator of the universe, was perhaps the greatest discovery of Judaism and, like all Jews, Jesus was very conscious of this. Much of the Old Testament is, in fact, a record of continuous backsliding into polytheism, of which worship of the golden calf is one well known example. Consequently, when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, it should not be a surprise to find that he prefaced his answer with the archetypal Jewish prayer, the *Shemah*, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one” (Mark 12:29). Only after he had made this more important point, did he reply to his questioner, “Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and love your neighbour as yourself.” Belief in the oneness of God was the bedrock on which all his theology stood, and while he himself could reconcile his experience of a loving divinity with the more demanding Jahweh who dominates in the Jewish scriptures, there could be no compromise for him or his Jewish followers when it came to the three-personed god of the newly emerged Christians.

The God of Paul and the Christians

As against the one God of Jesus, Paul’s God composite God must have seemed like a regression to the Jews, but in order to understand the significance of Jesus as a uniquely God-inspired person Paul had to posit within him a divine spirit and in so doing elevate this Spirit to a new level of theological importance. The realisation that came to him on the Damascus road literally bowled him over and seemingly brought on what psychologists would call hysterical blindness, which sometimes happens when the body shuts down its senses, or sometimes goes into paralysis, to avoid confronting a totally unacceptable fact. The fact in Paul’s case was a conclusion that was at odds with a fundamental belief system, Judaism into which he had been born. Such dramatic physical effects often accompany the psychological trauma of bereavement, and giving up a deeply held and unquestioned religious belief is indeed a kind of death. Paul’s reaction is an extreme example of identity crisis, for while he was as much a Jew as Jesus, “a Pharisee of Pharisees”, as he is self-described in Acts 23:6, he was also a Hellenized Jew, born and brought up in Tarsus and as well, as he proudly claims, *civis Romanus*, a citizen of Rome by birth (Acts 22:28). The Pharisees, it should be noted, were a sect whose members adhered most strictly to the Law. Paul was thus in extreme psychological tension, with conflicting cultural and spiritual identities, which was finally, almost convulsively, resolved as the possibility of a new kind of religion and a new kind of identity suddenly came to him as the only way out. Christianity arose from that resolution and his later astonishing statement of self-identity, “I live no longer; it is Christ who lives in me” (*Galatians 2:20*).

Tarsus seems to have played a critical part in Paul’s conversion, which was to bring Christianity into existence. It was Greek and, as he describes it, “no mean city” but, more importantly, it was the centre of the worship of Mithras, originally a Persian god, which was spreading throughout the Roman empire and became the semi-official religion of the Roman army. We have no direct evidence that it influenced Paul (or Saul, as he then was) but as one seeks for analogues between the two religions, they leap from the page. Their significance was first noted by the Christian writer Justin Martyr around 150 AD, though he argued that Mithraism had actually borrowed from Christianity, not the other way round, which was historically impossible. Three of the similarities need only be mentioned here, namely, that Mithras came of a virgin birth, he was a god of salvation and a redeemer who rescued humanity from its animal instincts by killing a mythical and symbolic bull, and a life-giver who took the earth from death to life each spring in some wholly unexplained way. Mithraic theology, such as we know of it, was a hodgepodge even by mythological standards and debate about its influence on Christianity tends to raise strong emotions among scholars, but to say that much of Paul’s Christianity can be clearly mapped into it is not an extreme position. It seems to have been the realisation that Jesus of Nazareth was a real-life saviour on the lines of the mythical Mithras

that triggered his historically famous experience on the Damascus road. The consequence, however, of portraying Jesus thus, rather than as the greatest of the Jewish prophets, was that Paul would have to give up the Jewish identity with which he was hard-wired. He tried hard to avoid the rift, arguing that the Christianity he had founded was no threat, only “a wild olive shoot” grafted onto Jewish stem and drawing nourishment from its sap (*Romans 11:17*) but the inevitable break was only delayed and Jewish Christians were rejected from the synagogue and ritually cursed in 83 AD. The break between the old and new religion was then final.

Paul’s decision to abandon Judaism in favour of his new trinitarian religion meant that much of his neural wiring would have to be replaced. In fact, there is very good reason to say that this is not merely a metaphor, for new neural circuits come into existence with learning of any kind, and when it comes to learning of this kind there must inevitably be a long and confusing period while transformation is taking place. If any serious Christian feels called to go beyond Christianity, experience of this nature, though perhaps not so dramatic is unavoidable. Some measure of the mental distress may be gained in reading John Henry Newman’s account of the internal struggle he had in converting from Anglican to Roman Christianity. The well known hymn “Lead, kindly light” is a very watered down story of two years or more when he found himself forced to cry inwardly, “I have not sinned against the light.” If religion evolves, the next phase will involve the same wrenching decision which faced Paul two thousand years ago and Newman (and many others) in more recent times. A totally new understanding of Jesus will be involved, replacing the iconised and Aryanised figure of popular imagination who has become an object of worship in his own right. Bishop John Spong once remarked humorously that while growing up he had seen so many pictures of Jesus as a tall, blond figure that he entered adulthood unconsciously thinking that Jesus was a Scandinavian! Far more misleading are doctrines that present him a god who came down from heaven and walked the earth before returning to his natural home.

Although Paul brings the concept of God-as-Spirit into the foreground, it was far from new, and indeed appears in the very first verses of the Old Testament. This is, in fact, a characteristic of religious evolution, that what seems new and disturbing can often be found as in undeveloped form, almost as a footnote, in the old. In *Genesis*, a creation story of unsurpassed power and beauty when compared to its analogues in other religions at the time, we are told that “the Spirit of God hovered over the waters.” This is also translated as “brooded over the deep,” resonant with meaning, to which Gerald Manley Hopkins was to add his own beautiful gloss, “with warm breast and, Ah!, bright wings.” Throughout the Old Testament the divine spirit occurs as a creative energy, *ruach*, or wind, but it is marginal to the narrative, suggested only in some of the prophets, although Joel, a minor prophet, talks of *ruach Jahweh* as a spiritual force that will spread to the four corners of the universe. Paul’s conception of the Spirit goes far beyond this, however: it is central to his theology and, as has been said, “blows like a gale through the pages of the *Acts of the Apostles*.” The same animating Spirit that brought the world into existence and brooded over it like a mother bird, reappears as “parted tongues of fire” at the first Pentecost, which is taken to be when the new religion of Christianity was founded. It infused the group with vision, joy and energy and a wholly new sense of spiritual fulfilment.

The theological problem, then as now, was how to bridge the gap between a force that created the world and its theorized indwelling in a species of ape that goes by the name of *Homo sapiens*. Paul’s position was that we had in Jesus proof that it was possible. His religion rested on accepting that Jesus was God incarnated – a proposition anathema to the Jews, and probably to Jesus himself – but Eckhart, as will be seen, goes one critical step further, arguing that all humans are God incarnated, made from the same substance. Though some explanation and provisos will be called, that is basically his position and to an orthodox Christian it must seem like the most outrageous heresy, for it is of the essence of Christianity that Jesus was the only and sinless son of God. Paul’s novel doctrine of the Spirit was formalized and normalized in the fourth century in the Nicene Creed, the opening statement of which is “I believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” The Creed is, quite literally, the constitutional document of the new, post-Judaic religion. There are literally hundreds of Christian churches and sects today which agree on almost nothing except the trinitarian creed. It is important to set this against the insistence of Jesus that God is one and Eckhart’s insistence that we know – or can know - god in two modes, timeless and time-bound, and that knowing is being. The next step for religion, which is where Eckhart is so valuable, is to establish a deeper, more empathic relationship with the reality of which we are a sentient part.

The God of Eckhart

Where Paul found release from an impossible tension in the theory of a tripartite God, which was heresy to the Jews, Eckhart offers escape to the future in an equally controversial vision for it calls, similarly, for changing our self-identity and leaving behind the comfortable familiarity of the past. As one goes deeper into all the implications of Eckhart’s doctrine of spiritual union, it begins to dawn that if he is right, and human fulfilment can only take place as mysticism become a new norm, not an exotic religious option, our species is approaching an evolutionary flexion point as dramatic as when our ancestors in the genus *Homo* came down from the trees and started, or attempted, to walk on two legs. Eckhart makes clear that the while spiritualization begins with a moment of enlightenment (as with Paul), which he refers to continually as “the birth of God in the soul,” it is a long process, never fully completed, in this life at any rate.

In contrast to the monotheism of Jesus and the tripartite God of Paul, Eckhart preached a new dualistic understanding, using the terms *Gott* and *Gotttheit*, which he attempted to harmonize with the orthodox three divine persons, but with limited success. As many commentators have remarked, the wonder is that the Church authorities did not charge Eckhart with heresy long before they did, but this may perhaps be explained by the fact that so much of what he preached was expressed in fanciful and metaphorical language and hard to piece together into a single message. Eckhart's distinction is invariably translated into English as *God* and *Godhead*, or *God* and *The Deity*, although *Gotttheit* would be better translated as *Godness* or *divinity*, since the suffix *-heit* in German, as, for example, in nouns like *Froelichhkeit* and *Geistigkeit* - that is, *happiness* and *spirituality* - expresses a state, rather than a thing or a person. What Eckhart seems to be saying is that while the divine reality is legitimately to be understood in its manifestations, these are projections in time and space of a timeless and indescribable entity, which is the real reality - *ens realissimum*.

Nothing very new there theologically, but Eckhart insists that it is the essential, timeless "godness" of the deity (*Gotttheit*) which we humans share and can manifest, at least potentially, in exactly the same way that it was once thought to be uniquely manifested in Jesus. In his words, "There has never been such an absolute union, for the union of the soul with God is far closer than that of the body with the soul." Not to put too fine a point on it, insofar as we can say that Jesus was God then we are also God. That is what Eckhart preaches, full frontal: in his words, "Where I am there too is God." The immediate reaction of most good Christians is likely to be that this is nonsense and dangerous nonsense at that. The man in the street would probably say he was deranged, like the poor chap who thinks he is Napoleon. So was Eckhart after all a danger not only to religion but to commonsense and sanity?

If Eckhart's new understanding of God is authentic - and that, surely, is what so many people sense in his works - it follows that a three-personed model of God, which was a theological revolution in its time, is going to be at best incomplete and will call for an updating. Given that religion evolves as it follows new understanding of God, it can be seen that the doctrine of the Trinity, once a huge step forward, is now for serious seekers of truth an obstacle to further development, an intellectual and spiritual dead end. Slowly a once life-giving theology ossifies or seeks false development through elaborate fantasies like the "Cosmic Christ". This is, in fact, a thinly disguised form of idolatry, worship of the god-man Jesus and, as such, destructive of Paul's vision of a community committed to taking on "the mind of Christ". To question the Trinity will seem appallingly wrong to any sincere Christian, and a denial of all that gives Christianity its value, but it is worth remembering that Paul's Christianity outraged the first Jewish followers of Jesus, who never for a moment imagined that their theology of one God could ever be superseded, for was it not given by God himself to Moses? Indeed, the Jews and perhaps early followers of Jesus (see *John*, 28) felt so strongly about this new trinitarian religion that some of them attempted to assassinate Paul in the temple at Jerusalem. As Luke tells the story, in *Acts* 21, "The crowd seized him, yelling 'This is the fellow who spreads his doctrine all over the world and attacks our people, our law and this holy place Kill him, kill him!'"

The struggle between the historically deep-rooted old religion of Judaism and the emerging new, seemingly half-pagan religion of Paul, has been largely airbrushed out of Christian history but can be read between the lines in the New Testament, where animosities flare out unexpectedly in different places, such as the one just cited. Although it would be a grave mistake to read the New Testament like history off the page, the gospels tell us that Jesus himself insisted that he was not going to change "one iota of the Law." Paul, however, in a most intemperate outburst wrote in his Epistle to the Galatians (3:10) that anyone who persisted in following a religion based on obeying laws, was "under a curse". How would Jesus have liked that? Without some historical knowledge we cannot fully appreciate how disastrously wrong this must have seemed to the Jewish followers of Jesus at the time, for the Law, then and now, is regarded by Jews as the greatest gift that God has given to them, a "unique treasure" and the thing that marked them out forever as his "chosen people."

Seeking the Essence

What now is holding back Christianity from taking the next step into humankind's religious future, as once the God of the Jews blocked the emergence of Christianity? Eckhart's actualized God, which manifests the creating will of the Godhead, is rather similar to Plato's Demiurge, a sort of managing divinity at work in the world on behalf of a higher unknowable divinity, and his use of the Greek philosophers' concept of essence - i.e., the timeless, inner and real reality of something - enabled him to give a revolutionary answer to a question that had long bothered theologians. In *Genesis* we are told that "God made man in his own image; male and female he created them," but that inspiring statement leaves us asking what characteristics in God we have inherited or, equally intriguing, what human characteristics do we suppose that God actually has? By what logic can we claim to know that we are in some meaningful sense godlike or that the power which created the cosmos is human-like? Modern science gives us the basis for a substantive answer.

Before coming to that, however, more should be said about Eckhart's use of the category of *essence*, for it leads to a doctrine that is both enlightening and confusing. What made it, and still makes it, controversial is that his distinction between the manifest and essential God was not just some dusty academic wordplay but a hidden manifesto, a call to a higher state. The philosophy of the time was much concerned with the idea of essence, for this was held to be the ultimate but invisible reality which underlies all things, the *Istigkeit* or "isness", which underlies all questions about the meaning of life. Some modern

thinkers, like Aldous Huxley, have tried to find through mind-altering drugs, which Eckhart would surely have condemned, but he would have loved the theological jingle of Robert Service, quoted here from memory:

God is the Isness of the Is.
The author of the cosmic Biz,
The high, the low, the near, the far,
The atom and the evening star.
The lark, the shark, the cloud, the clod,
The whole darn universe is God.

Eckhart preaches what all mystics preach, that the highest state of spiritual development is not found in good works or conventional piety but in surrender to the “isness” and, in so doing, acquiring a new sense of identity. The new self comes from the sense of being part of a higher self, often expressed as being a drop absorbed into an ocean of divinity. This sense is not regarded as being an essential part of being human, and those who have it are regarded as being abnormal, as once no doubt our ancestral two-legged apes, stumbling about on the ground, were regarded as abnormal by their one-time companions in the trees. In the same way the fully developed human, with an habitual sense of oneness with his or her creating source will be considered abnormal, if not freakish. Throughout Eckhart’s many different ways of saying that this sense of oneness is the new normal, there runs like a thematic thread that union of the divine and human is timeless, outside of time, and it is the religious and scientific implications of this which are revolutionary, going much further than anything the gospels or the creed say about man’s “god-likeness”. The doctrine that God and man share the same essence is not entirely new, however, for the so-called Greek Fathers, writing before Nicaea, frequently used the term *theosis*, or divinization to make this point, neatly expressed in a soundbite of Athanasius, which could have been taken straight out of an Eckhart sermon, “God became man that man might become God.” The Hindu doctrine of Brahman and Atman makes much the same point when it teaches that man’s consciousness can be compared to the shared breath of the ultimate divinity. Islam is an interesting anomaly, for while the teachings of the Koran cannot be reconciled with a sharing of the nature of Allah, such a self-identification is, of course, at the heart of Sufism. In the non-theistic traditions Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism do not have a divinity of any sort and Shintoism, which is essentially nature worship, is animistic rather than theistic.

Many will have difficulty in dealing with a timeless realm, for almost by definition timeless means unreal and non-existent, but let it be assumed that Eckhart is right in saying that union with the divine concerns a timeless “me” and a timeless “Godhead”, the question arises, do we experience it (according to our capability) in what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called “peak experiences” or habitually but subconsciously, as a fish swims unconsciously in water? Such thoughts may appear of no interest or value to the individual who feels a need for something spiritual in their life, but nothing so esoteric as this. To add to the difficulty, there is implicit in Eckhart’s doctrine the need for spiritual intelligence to know God in this way, if only because the more we are able to understand what is going on in spiritual transformation, the more we will be able to plan for it and avoid pitfalls and self-deceptions. The need for an intelligent spirituality is a contentious point, and many would argue the seemingly obvious that one does not have to be clever to be good or may warn against the danger of intellectual pride masquerading as spirituality. There is, however, another side to this which calls for lengthier debate, for Eckhart is not arguing the case for humans to become virtuous, which he takes for granted, but something far more challenging. He sees the ultimate goal of religion as making the transition to a different kind of human being. The significance of this may be appreciated in considering that our ancestral apes have over a huge time span made the transition from ape to human. Now, Eckhart says, we are called upon to go beyond the human.

In fact, Eckhart’s teaching is pure Christianity, for it is central and in plain sight in Paul’s definition of Christianity as the quest to have “the mind that was in Christ,” for Jesus is *par excellence* and by definition a step beyond the normal human. In Eckhartian terms, Jesus was fully divinized, whereas we are either only part way or not even started on the task or not even aware of the possibility. Paul says that Jesus “is the first of a great new human family” (*Romans*, 8:29) – or what biologists would call the holotype, the first discovered instance of a new species. The problem is that Christian mythology has defined Jesus in such a way as to make acquiring of Christ-consciousness impossible, for apart from the fact that it presents him as the unique son of God, he was supposed to be sinless and, whatever that might mean, no human would ever think of attaining that status. So, despite what Paul taught, the Christian churches are in effect teaching, “Forget about becoming like Jesus: it’s impossible.”

Eckhart tries to escape this trap by postulating that the essence of Jesus, like the essence of every human, was laid down, so to speak, before he was born, or even conceived. He thus opens a completely new understanding of the theological problem of the hypostatic union – i.e., how a human being can be divine and human at the same time. In various places Eckhart stresses that the birth of God in the soul is the same in the ordinary human as it was in Jesus, and took place before our human birth, in a realm that seems to be a timeless kind of parallel reality. “This eternal birth,” says Eckhart, “occurs in the soul precisely as it does in eternity ... and occurs in the essence or ground of the soul” (*Sermon* 40). Somehow he manages to reconcile

orthodox trinitarianism with a theology that is clearly Arian, for from his perspective Jesus is uniquely different only because he went as far as a human can go in expressing this divine essence.

The Crisis in Christianity

Fast forward to 2016, and we find a Christianity in rapid decline, in the West at least, with many sincere spiritual seekers drifting away from the churches, feeling that their needs are unrecognized and unsatisfied. Insofar as the churches feel a sense of crisis, it is largely because of dwindling congregations: the issue of a crisis in doctrine, structure or praxis is rarely mentioned and the few who do bring up these matters are usually content to express them as hardly more than speculations, not as a call to action. This fact is important, and reveals a kind of Catch 22 for, on the one hand, they can hardly initiate from within churches change on the scale now required, since it would threaten vested interest of all kinds, while, on the other hand, if their conscience prompts them to leave the group and criticise from outside, they will be regarded, naturally enough, as outsiders and apostates and having no authority. Christians will regard it as their moral duty not to listen to their message. There is a most striking parallel here between the present crisis in Christianity (leaving aside other religions) and the period when Paul's new religion of "Christianity" emerged to challenge Judaism. The perceptive reader can see in the New Testament the struggle to break away from the old, most clearly because Jesus himself insisted that his call was only to reform Judaism. "Do not go the gentiles," he instructed his disciples, "nor to any city of the Samaritans" (Matt. 10:5) and in the Sermon on the Mount "Do not give what is holy to the dogs [nor] cast my pearls before the swine" (Matt. 7.6). Without historical knowledge that Jews routinely referred to gentiles as dogs, pigs and sinners we miss the force of these sayings. Paul, by contrast, promoted himself as the "apostle to the gentiles," the very swine that Jesus had excluded as unable to appreciate his message. In the past fifty years or so in the West many millions have abandoned Christianity, some for purely secular and materialistic reasons but, and more worryingly, some leave as a matter of conscience, since they cannot in truth subscribe to most of the credal statements. They know they are telling lies and being untrue to themselves when they say in unison that they believe that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, but they also know that they have neither the right nor the competence to question "authority". What would be gained by breaking ranks? Overall, there is a strong sense that a religious revolution of some kind is needed, a new vision and inspiration. Christianity is crumbling and the gap it leaves is being filled by materialism, sensualism, exotic New Age alternatives and worse.

The Crisis in Science

Less widely known is that science too is in a crisis, and its once proud boast that it is a quest for truth has been compromised, like Judaeo-Christianity, in many ways. So-called "Big Science" prostitutes science in the cause of profit-making, and the ideal of science as a philosophy in search of reality and truth has given way to careerism and a dogmatic secularism has become in effect, but unofficially, the religion of scientists. There are at least a dozen recent books about the loss of idealism and unified vision in science with titles like *The End of Science* and *The Trouble with Physics*, to name but two. Go deep enough and it will be found that the twin crises in science and religion have the same root in inadequate beliefs about the nature of reality and the inability of both to escape from the limited understanding of an earlier age. It has been truthfully said that in the quest for truth, the greatest difficulty comes not from accepting the new but unlearning the old. That there is a crisis in theoretical science should not surprise us, since the foundations of science as we know it were laid down five centuries ago, before we even knew that atoms or galaxies or electricity existed and the concept of energy, and even the word, lay three centuries into the future. Several discoveries have triggered the crisis, but most centrally Edwin Hubble's observation of the galactic redshift. This implied that the galaxies were moving away from each other, which implied that the universe is expanding, which in turn implied that it must have had a beginning in the far distant past. If this logic be accepted, and it was later to be confirmed with data brought back by the COBE satellite, there must have been a moment of when our universe came into being and hence a creating energy of some kind, whether or not we may wish to call it "God". Once we know that the universe is expanding, we know that the initial heat energy is dissipating, and the cosmos is cooling, From an initial temperature of billions of degrees, we can calculate that in outer space it must now have dropped to about 2.7 degrees above absolute zero, and this is exactly what the COBE satellite found. The principle is stunningly simple, no more exotic than the limerick taught to beginners in physics:

These facts you will learn at your school
About Messrs Thomson and Joule,
Who allowed compressed gas
Through a small hole to pass
And expand. Then the gas became cool.

This simple chain of logic has put the theological cat among the cosmological pigeons, but it has also thrown a brilliant new light on Eckhart's theorizing about the timelessness of man's potential union with the "Godhead". If we wind back in imagination the expansionary process that now constitutes the basis of

cosmology, we come eventually, after some fourteen billion years, to a point where, hard as it may be to believe or imagine, all the energy of this vast cosmos was compressed to the size of a pea. If we continue to wind, it will shrink further until it becomes a mathematical point, that is, with no dimensions at all. In a word, it will disappear, rather like the dot of light when we switched off the old television screens, and with it will disappear familiar time and space. Unless the energy which constitutes our universe has been totally de-created, it must continue to exist *in potentia* in another form of energy in some other domain where there is neither space nor time, inaccessible to our senses but not to our logical faculty. At this point human imagination is at its limit.

Stephen Hawking called the COBE information about the microwave background radiation of the cosmos the most important scientific finding of the century, but there is a case for saying that it is the most important scientific finding ever, for it forces science to a whole new level, where it must engage with cosmogenesis, not to put too fine a point on it, a science of creation. Many scientists stubbornly resist the challenge to wind back the imaginary film of cosmogenesis all the way back to its logical first state as a point, but once this psychological barrier has been overcome, it follows that our 3-dimensional universe must have emerged from another higher dimensioned realm that is inaccessible to observation. A first idea of what is at issue in this matter of dimensionality may perhaps be gained by considering how an infinity of two-dimensional circles can be visualised by mentally slicing up, salami-wise, a cylinder of three dimensions into an infinite number of (almost) two-dimensional circles. Similarly, we can visualize a solid cone being sliced vertically into a finite number of different shapes and mathematical properties. A vertical section through the apex will create two triangular faces, while curves of different shapes will be produced at different places. The point being made here is that in some way all these different two-dimensional shapes are contained within a three-dimensional body. By legitimate analogy, therefore, we can reasonably conclude that our three-dimensional cosmos can in principle be contained within a higher dimensioned reality. While this mode of thinking is still controversial, there is a notable body of scientists who argue for the existence of a hypothesized timeless realm of many, doubtless infinite, dimensions from which our 3D cosmos appeared, actualized in the Big Bang, and to which it will eventually return in the so-called Big Crunch. The argument for the latter is widely but not universally accepted, but is assumed here.

Eckhart and the Emerging New Science

Christian orthodoxy holds that Jesus co-existed with his Father from eternity, and was there at the creation, but Eckhart's doctrine leads clearly to the conclusion that everything that now exists in our time-space universe once existed, "before" the Big Bang, in a timeless domain of reality commonly called "hyperspace". The idea of potential pre-existence is not at first easy to understand, but one may perhaps gain a fingerhold in considering how the oak tree exists somewhere and somehow in potential in the acorn before it is actualized. An even better example perhaps may be found in the pre-existence of a thinking, loving human being in the fusion of an ovum and sperm, which creates a double cell with potential consciousness that may eventually manifest in a Bach cantata or Shakespeare sonnet. Wherever did these mental creations come from? All great artists and many scientific theorists say the same thing, that they feel their insights are not self-created but are in some sense given "from outside". The real existence of hyperspace is almost a blind spot in normal science, which seeks to avoid its implications by inventing imaginary and logically impossible entities like wormholes in space and immaterial "strings" with dimensions as required to make the equations fit. Simple logic would, however, justify the existence of something like hyperspace, since if one were to ask what our three-dimensional cosmos is expanding into, whatever the answer might be, it cannot be a pre-existing three-space. Even though all we know about hyperspace we know by inference, it is still valid knowledge, just as, for instance, we can be sure that a solid and visible dog exists somewhere by inferring its existence from tracks in the snow. In much the same way we can be sure through logic applied to scientific observation that some timeless realm deserving of the name hyperspace exists and that our familiar universe and each one of us could have pre-existed as a potentiality of some kind in this invisible and timeless realm before it was actualized, almost seeded, in the Big Bang. Consciousness is a mysterious thing, and conscious will a mysterious but very real force, physical yet not physical. We can appreciate this in considering that although lifting a mug of coffee comes about through the electrochemical activity of the muscles of the arm, nothing happens or can happen until I will it to happen. Consciousness can also be stored in encoded form and tapped into by modern technology. In some very real fashion the consciousness of Bach lives on in the plastic grooves of a CD and can be shared. It is not unreasonable to suppose that, in a general way, consciousness is just as much at home in dimensions other than the familiar three that we inhabit.

What Eckhart preached about the formless and characterless essences of the Godhead and of man co-existing in unity makes logical sense from this new scientific perspective. He says, for instance, "God is always within the inner spark of the soul and has always been in it, eternally and with no interruption, and for man to be one with God in this requires no grace." (*Sermon 92*) This requires a little deciphering, for Eckhart uses the term "grace" to mean divine action in a general way. His point is that since our human essence is part and parcel of the timeless divine essence, it did not call for any special creative act on the part of God. This is at first a rather tricky concept and really calls for a separate article, or even a book, to bring out its full significance, but with that proviso, it can be said that, to the extent that it is true, each one of us has within us an unsuspected and undeveloped kind of consciousness which is of the same nature as the divine eternal

will. To the extent that our will coincides with the will of our primal Source, it must have an eternal, timeless and dimensionless quality.

There is an enormous temptation for scientists to deny the real existence of hyperspace, for the emergence of our 3D cosmos from an invisible realm implies a creation event and thus the existence of a creator. Accepting the reality of hyperspace clearly threatens to introduce what Newton called “occult forces” into a science which has taken such pains to exorcise them. The hypothesis of a reality beyond, or above, our familiar 3D world raises fundamental questions but also opens up new scientific vistas. Some find this situation disturbing, some exciting. As regards the moment of creation, current scientific orthodoxy is probably to be found in Stephen Hawking’s conclusion (without evidence, it must be said) that it all happened through a quantum fluctuation, an uncaused and unexplainable event. He ends his best-selling book, *A Brief History of Time*, with a triumphant flourish, “What place, then, for a creator?” The real difficulty in this debate, however, lies not in whether or not the equations are watertight but in a failure of imagination. Why, it must be asked, should reality be limited to the three-dimensionality that we are able to know through our senses, the same senses which we share with our ape ancestors, and indeed with beetles? A full answer to that question will require a new kind of science, but most professional scientists are blissfully unaware that science evolves, so the possibility of a different kind of science is almost never considered. Although the term “paradigm change” is bandied about when discussing the history of science, few are convinced that the present paradigm will ever be superseded.

For the spiritual seeker the challenge is that a new kind of religion is called for, and transitioning to it must necessarily be as traumatic as the break out of Christianity from Judaism, which set “son against father and daughter against mother.” The words are reputedly those of Jesus but almost certainly were put in his mouth by a later generation. The most sincere seekers can hardly escape being torn between the unquestionable good of traditional, mythological Christianity, which has shaped western civilization and is almost in our DNA, and the untested promise of a religion which has no name, no scripture, no liturgy or administrative authority and no identifiable members. The unconvinced may, however, recall that Christianity began with exactly the same handicaps. It did not even have a name until the word “Christian” was coined, perhaps ten years after the death of Jesus, at Antioch. The need for a fundamental change in religion comes simply from the fact that human evolution, which for a million years and more has moved forward unselfconsciously, even blindly, is now at a fork, where, as the eminent sociobiologist E. O. Wilson puts it, “natural selection has been decommissioned” and the future of the species is now in our hands. We must decide what kind of human we want to create and set ourselves consciously to the task. Like it or not, we are co-creators, and that is where Eckhart has something to say of real importance. It will, however, need to be mapped into modern physics, biology, psychology and cosmology – a task for a latter day Aquinas.

Beyond Eckhart

This brief paper can do hardly more than point out that the challenge and the opportunity are there, but one scientific discovery is of particular importance, namely that we humans are unique among all creatures in having power to deliberately change our brain, and thus (within reason) to change ourselves, and ultimately our species, into anything we wish. *Homo sapiens* emerged from *Homo erectus* and has the capability of transforming into a new species (or perhaps subspecies), *Homo novus*, a term which Paul introduced in the Greek *kainos anthropos*. This previously unrecognized potential in humans has been given the names *neurogenesis* or *neuroplasticity* and has been proven in several well attested experiments. The best known of these was performed on a group of individuals who were training to obtain their licence as taxi drivers in London. What they had to learn is conventionally called “the Knowledge” and consists of the ability to know the best route from any location in the city to any other. Through examining brain scans before and after they had acquired the Knowledge it was found that there was a part of the brain, the hippocampus, which had clearly increased in size. Somehow from the attempt to memorize and verbalize a myriad of possible routes had grown the organ that enabled it to be done. The implications of neurogenesis are revolutionary and still being explored, but in the present context it raises the question of whether or not one can grow the part of the brain that facilitates habitual awareness of the divine reality and a sense of our oneness with our primal source, with our fellow humans and with the natural world.

It is a fascinating question. Brain functions overlap, generating complex feedback loops, and are inseparable from endocrine and other chemicals which, paradoxically, create our moods and are created by them. Despite this complexity, some definite connections between parts of the brain and the type of consciousness they create can be seen. Our sense of smell is clearly generated by the olfactory lobe, but what we are talking about here is a part of the brain which generates an habitual awareness of “the Other” and is found in its developed form only in those individuals whom we call mystics. There may be many more potential mystics around than we suspect, however, for research by Alister Hardy and others has shown that a surprising proportion of ordinary people have at least flashes of “mystical” oneness, when “time stands still.” However esoteric this may appear to the modern reader, Eckhart insisted that his doctrine is for “ordinary Christians”, but was he being naïve in attributing to run of the mill Christians a sensitivity to, and a hunger for, a kind of consciousness that is actually very extraordinary? The answer to that question is surely of the utmost importance.

There has been a good deal of research in the new field of neurotheology to identify the part of the brain that could be deliberately developed to intensify spiritual awareness”, or what has been humorously named the “God spot”, but it is fragmentary and contradictory. The most obvious location would seem to be the prefrontal cortex, the most recent evolutionary development, sometimes called the executive brain, which is barely existent in other mammals and in new born humans. However, given the coordinated nature of brain function, there may not be a single simple answer and since Eckhart places so much stress on the wordless and image-less nature of our union with the divine, development could take place in the reticular formation, which is the most primitive part of the brain and does little more than generate consciousness in itself and alert us to danger or opportunity. It is the reticular formation which lets a mother hear, almost unconsciously, the slightest sound from her baby sleeping in another room. Almost by definition, a mystic is one who has a comparable constant awareness of the divine all around and within us, where ordinary *Homo* sees, hears and feels nothing.

As to whether or not this high doctrine is for ordinary Christians, It surely would be more true to the facts to say that it is only for serious Christians, who probably constitute less than five per cent of the whole body. Most who would identify themselves as Christians, probably even the majority of churchgoers, do not feel themselves engaged in a spiritual search of any serious kind, least of all a quest for *metanoia*, the radical transformation of consciousness that Paul saw as the whole point of Christianity. Technically, reception of the sacrament of confirmation is a commitment to spiritual change but this is rarely so in practice, and when confronted with the demands of Eckhartian spirituality, most confirmed Christians would probably react with, “I didn’t sign up for that!” A quite different and fully conscious kind of commitment is called for.

Is Eckhart’s doctrine, in fact, exclusively Christian? While he, like Paul, takes Jesus to be the blueprint and, so to speak, the finished product of *metanoia*, Eckhart more clearly universalizes the concept of the hypostatic union, the mysterious union of man and God that Christians find only in Jesus. Without defining it too narrowly at this point, this unified consciousness may be expressed in the phrase attributed to Jesus, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). It is found in garbled form mixed up with polytheism in early Hindu scriptures, but not in the Jewish Bible, the Koran or Buddhist scriptures. It is, however, at the heart of Sufism, and any of the great Sufi teachers would know immediately what Eckhart was saying. One of them, Mansur Al- Hallaj, was, in fact, crucified for saying just this. Oliver Davies, a translator of Eckhart and one of his most reliable commentators, says in the introduction to his translation that “Eckhart wrote that the pagan philosophers, Moses and Christ all professed the same truth, although each did so differently and at different levels of realization,” but I am by no means sure that this is the case. For Eckhart seems to have raised spiritual theology to a new level by insisting on the importance of truth in the strictest sense as an integral part of what we would loosely call spirituality. Insofar as both science and religion are at base a search for truth, a community of seekers defined by a common quest for God-awareness of the “Eckhartian” kind would be at odds with the world’s great “faith groups”, who are committed to the truth as expressed in myth, for this would have been the only way available when they were founded. Would such a religion, committed to finding scientific truth as a moral imperative, just add to the cacophony of a world already split into competing and antagonistic religions, or would it be the start of a great unification and a major step forward in human evolution?

Before one can embark on the journey towards unitary consciousness that Eckhart holds out to us another paradox, almost a Catch 22, must be resolved, for one must ask, “Do I want to have it?”, and how can one answer that without already knowing what it is that one has not yet experienced? In this situation the value of Eckhart’s writings is that they clearly emanate from someone who has experienced it and thus we may, at least, be confident that such a mysterious state does exist. It could be called an unnatural state because its attainment depends on going against many impulses that would be considered part and parcel of normal human nature. It is unfortunate that we have no good name for this hypothesized state, since “mystical” implies various negative and irrelevant properties, not least “impractical” and “dreamy”, whereas Eckhart was by no means alone among mystics in being a very practical person and a first class administrator. The Sanskrit term *advaita* – “not two” - comes close, but perhaps a new term *entheism* – signifying God within and without - might be pressed into service to identify Eckhart’s core doctrine, but now illuminated and justified by innovations now breaking into science.

The Way Forward

What kind of consciousness might be called entheistic? A full answer to this is really a task for the future, but the following three brief comments are offered as steps towards it. Firstly, if to be fully human is to have great empathy and empathy is taken to be an intuitive sharing of others’ consciousness, entheism can be understood as empathy taken to a new depth. It is the opposite of self-centredness, just as Copernicus’s theory of a sun-centred universe was the opposite of the earth-centred universe which was the commonsense of the time. Like the Copernican revolution, entheism, though startling at first, must eventually become the logic of the obvious, a new commonsense. Secondly, entheism entails the kind of traumatic decision that Jesus called for when he said that the grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die. This sounds very noble, but who wants to die? To attain the new self a comfortable old self must be given up, and while this begins with a single decision, once made it leads to a life of seemingly endless occasions when the hard and “unnatural” way must be chosen. It will also without doubt be a life with a

good deal of confusion, perhaps for long spells, but also unexpected mini-revelations. It is perhaps significant that Eckhart does not emphasize the “dark night of the soul”, as does John of the Cross, for although there can hardly be spiritual development without very hard and dark periods, one senses his advice would be to meet them with the same kind of trust as a child.

The third comment that might help in applying Eckhart’s doctrine fruitfully is really the central point of this essay, namely realising that it contains implicitly a new creation story in which we humans play a starring role and which chimes with the most modern scientific theory of cosmogenesis. It does not exactly contradict the biblical account, which tells us that “God created all things out of nothing by his word,” but Eckhart’s Deity, the ultimate reality, could not have arrived on some celestial scene to find a “nothing” ready there to be shaped. Eckhartian logic, if we may so speak, leads to the conclusion that everything must emanate from the Godhead itself. That is not a dry academic proposition, but the start of a journey of self-discovery and self-transcendence. For if Eckhart is right, we must conclude that we were not made from nothing but from the Godhead itself. This is the heart, core and kernel of Eckhart’s doctrine, which he tells with a kaleidoscope of metaphors and paradoxes, as for example, “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which he sees me.” These jolt us momentarily into a new way of thinking and then of feeling, until eventually we realise we have crossed a threshold and start to feel at home in what was once a strange and unfamiliar place. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we find we’re not in Kansas anymore.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Eckhartian doctrine is the deliberate disabling of the highest form of our normal human consciousness: we are the only species that has self-awareness and can think about thinking. In order to find the point where the featureless ground of self meets and is met by the divine ground of the *Gottheit* this highest of human faculties must be abandoned. Eckhart uses the word *Grund*, or ground, continually to signify the part of us that is unified with the divine, and although it is an important part of his “new good news”, it has not been developed in the present paper simply for reasons of brevity. This meeting and merging of Ground with ground takes place in a mental silence, when all thought and emotion - regrets, memories, hopes, fears, ambitions and plans for the future - subside and die away. There is more to be said than this, however, for there is another kind of silence that one carries around within one through all the hubbub of the daily round. Eckhart and other spiritual masters talk of this silence-in-distraction but one could wish they had talked more explicitly and in greater detail, for most of our life is spent in the market place, rather than the desert, and the healing nature of this mysterious mindfulness is of more importance today than ever. There is a real need for a practical, pastoral theology that will help to attain it.

In that regard Eckhart only lifts the latch on the gate that gives us a first glimpse of this new vision and opens up a new spiritual and developmental highway. He does not say much about the associated praxis, the religious structures and ways of behaving, of dealing with everyday life that are necessary for the serious seeker of truth to learn and grow, and he takes for granted that his hearers would be familiar with the Christian practice of the time. That cannot be taken for granted in a post-Christian world, and his doctrine needs perhaps to be erected on a foundation of basics that will have to be re-learned and perhaps invented anew for our times. What aims to end in a principled abandonment of the self – a proposition both scary and confusing - may have to begin with the most elementary self-denial, like taking the smallest piece of cake on the plate. It cannot be other than a long journey, sometimes in the sunny uplands, sometimes as unwelcome as physiotherapy, and Eckhart’s greatest value today may be to convince us that there is something pretty wonderful at the end of it and encourage us to keep our faces pointing firmly in that direction.