

Mystics of the Church 7

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- Bernard McGinn has entitled his volume devoted to this great group of mystics *The Harvest of Mysticism*, for mysticism reached its apogee in the 14th century and after. The chief inspirers and craftsmen of this surge of mysticism were Dominicans. In some contrast to the *Brautmystik* or kataphatic mysticism of the Franciscans, Dominican mysticism leaned toward the *Wesenmystik* or apophatic tradition. Its major figures included Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, and Johannes Tauler, but the way for them was blazed by Albertus Magnus (c. 1200-1280) and Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), who, although not mystics, laid the foundation on which the mystics built.

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- I. Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas
 - A. Albertus Magnus
 - 1. According to Albertus Magnus, no human mind can comprehend what God is, but they can understand what God is not and how things flow from God and return to God. Albertus created what someone has called “a metaphysics of flow.” God is self-existent and characterized by supreme freedom. The Prime Mover is not an efficient cause of motion but the source of formal emanation or flow, always “boiling over” forms. Albertus distinguished philosophical from theological contemplation. Philosophical contemplation depends on natural wisdom, theological on “light infused by God.” He also distinguished two kinds of intellect—effective and assimilative. By the assimilative intellect the philosopher may ascend to “the Divine Intellect that is the Light and Cause of all things.” (*On Intellect and Intelligible* II.19.)

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- 2. To reach this level, the intellect must undergo four purifications (1) through the study of beauty, (2) through acquiring illumination, (3) through separation from continuous matter and time, and (4) by “joining with the light of a higher order” (II.10). Albertus distinguished two kinds of light that might descend on the intellect—inherent natural light and “a light from elsewhere.” Although he emphasized intellect as primary, “since nothing is loved unless it is known,” he tried to correlate the roles of loving and knowing on the path to union. Like Dionysius, he made the relation between kataphatic and apophatic central to his analysis of mystical theology. While all affirmations about God are only *relatively* true, all negations are *absolutely* true. God can be known in two ways: symbolically by comparison of bodily qualities to God and mystically through limited manifestation in creatures.

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- 3. Again like Dionysius, he insisted that God lies beyond *both* affirmation and negation. “God can be seen in no way whatsoever, but he is seen in the very ignorance of him.” The human intellect can attain the divine substance through simple regard, but it can never comprehend God. Albertus was not as confident as Thomas Aquinas that humans can know *that (quia)* God is, though both agreed that humans cannot know *what (quid)* God is. “Therefore, neither in this life, nor in heaven, do we see more of God than a confused *quia*, although God himself is seen more or less clearly according to the different ways of seeing and of those who see.” (*Super Epistle 5.*) Albertus remained deeply apophatic. The visions of God people experience in this life by grace differ significantly from the beatific visions of heaven, for in this life a medium is necessary. In the beatific vision we see “the light of glory.”

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- B. Thomas Aquinas
 - 1. Aquinas did not accord mystical theology as great a role as his teacher did. He wrote no commentary on Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*. He agreed with Dionysius’s conviction that God is most accurately spoken of by negation, for God is above everything we can know. As self-existent being, God is not an object of knowing. In some contrast to Albertus, Aquinas believed that humans can find happiness only in the vision of God. His answer to “*Cur Deus homo?*” (“Why the God-Man?”) was so that we may see God. God has to strengthen our intellectual vision by the supernatural gift of the “light of glory.” To see God does not mean to comprehend God, however. Even in heaven God will remain beyond human understanding. Contemplative vision brings us close to the state of humans before the fall.

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- 2. Like Albertus, Aquinas left room for both natural and supernatural forms of contemplation. By contrast with Albertus, however, he believed that the contemplative life begins with the faculty of desire. Seeing the object of desire arouses one to love more greatly still. Supernatural contemplation is a gift from God.
- 3. Aquinas assembled nine arguments for the superiority of the contemplative life, but he allowed that sometimes the active life should prevail. Although he denied that we can know what God is in this life, he left room for rapture by which “the entire soul is gathered into the vision of the divine essence,” citing 2 Cor 12:2-3. He differentiated rapture from ecstasy.

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- II. Meister Eckhart
 - Like his distinguished Dominican teacher Albertus, Eckhart (c. 1260-1327) leaned toward the *Wesenmystik* or apophatic approach. He was, however, a creative thinker in his own right and more deeply immersed in the mystical tradition.
 - A. Life
 - Born at Hoheim in Thuringia of a noble family, Eckhart entered the Dominican convent at Erfurt as a youth. He completed his studies at Paris, where he received the Master of Theology in 1302. He became Provincial of the Saxon province of Dominicans in 1304 and was entrusted with the reform of the houses in Bohemia in 1307. In 1311 the order sent him to teach in Paris, but around 1313 he returned to Germany, living first in Strassburg and afterwards at Cologne. He became one of the most noted

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- preachers of his day. In an age pervaded by fear of heresy and in an order entrusted with the Inquisition he fell under suspicion of heresy. In 1326 he was tried before the court of the Archbishop of Cologne. He appealed to Pope John XXIII, but he died during the proceedings. In 1329 the pope condemned 28 of his sentences as heretical or dangerous.
- B. Writings
 - Eckhart was a prolific writer. While prior of his home convent at Erfurt (1295-1298), he wrote *The Talks of Instruction* about self-denial, the Christian life, and aspects of the interior and exterior life. On returning to Paris in 1302 he penned *Parisian Questions* about divine and human *intellegere* (“understanding”). A number of his sermons for the years 1303-1311 were published under the title of

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- *Paradise of the Intelligent Soul* around 1330-1340; in these he set forth his daring thesis about the relation of the human intellect to God and employed already the term *grunt*, “an origin and a ground of all his divine work.” During his years as a provincial, Eckhart also published important Latin works such as *Sermons and Readings on the Book of Ecclesiasticus*. During a second period in Paris (1311-13), he composed his *summa*, *The Three-part Work*—part one *The Book of Propositions*, part two *The Book of Questions*, and part three *The Book of Expositions*. He directed these to the friars. The major thrust of the lectures was to show the conformity of reason and revelation, philosophy and theology. He gained a close acquaintance with the writings

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- of Marguerite Porete at this time and took a very different view of her than her Dominican accuser, William of Paris. Eckhart learned much from her and from Mechthild of Magdeburg. At Strassburg and Cologne he preached in Middle High German. He may have written his *Commentary on John* at Strassburg, which marked a turning point in his career. He wrote another commentary on Genesis entitled *The Book of the Parable of Genesis, The Book of the Parables of Natural Things, and The Blessed Book*, which included *The Book of Consolation*, about opposition developing to his views. Against his critics he composed a *Defense*.

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- C. Mystical Theology
 - 1. McGinn has characterized Eckhart's theology as "the mysticism of the *grunt* (ground)". The German *grunt* carries numerous implications not easily translated, but it doubtless spoke to the seeker of Eckhart's day. Basic to understanding Eckhart is his statement: "God's ground and the soul's ground is one ground." McGinn says that in this statement Eckhart "is announcing a new form of mysticism." (*The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*, 85.) "*Grunt* is the protean term at the center of Eckhart's mysticism," he adds, "one that vanishes from our grasp when we try to contain it in any definable scheme or doctrinal system." (Ibid. 86.) Closest to Eckhart's usage was probably Hadewijch's Middle Dutch *gront* and *afgront* (abyss) with which she described the interpenetration of God and human

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- in the love union. In Eckhart *grunt* expressed both the ground of the soul and the hidden depths of God. In Latin the closest idea would be *principium* and *unum*, “God as absolute unity, distinctly indistinct from all things.” (McGinn, *Harvest*, 89.) *Grunt* expressed the need for total separation from created things and the self as created—*abgescheiden* (literally “cutting away”), *gelassen* (“letting go”), and *durchbrechen* (“breaking through”). These words came close to terms used by earlier mystics such as annihilation, *entbilden* (“dis-imagining”), and *entwerden* (“unbecoming”).

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- 2. *The Ground as fused identity.* In Sermon 42 Eckhart summed up his perspective: “Now know, all our perfection and our holiness rests in this: that a person must penetrate and transcend everything created and temporal and all being and go into the ground that has no ground. We pray our dear Lord God that we may become one and indwelling, and may God help us into the same ground. Amen.” The groundless ground belongs to both God and human in fused identity. Elsewhere, sounding like Augustine, Eckhart says: “If anyone wishes to come into God’s ground and his innermost, he must first come into his own ground and his innermost, for no one can know God who does not first know himself.” (Sermon 54b.) *Grunt* is “the uncreated something in the soul.” Eckhart made a close connection between *grunt* and *geburt/gebern* (birth). He was the

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- clearest exponent of a union in which all duality between God and the soul vanishes. The goal of the Christian life is “unity of indistinction” in which God and human do not differ at all. Like Erigena, Eckhart taught that both God and the soul are ultimately one and therefore unknowable. To act out of a “well-exercised ground” is to live and act “without a why,” the heart of Eckhart’s ethics. The way to attain indistinct union with God is through the action of the Word become man. Insofar as we are God’s offspring, we are identical with Christ. Eckhart warned against coveting mystical experiences because that would draw us out of the ground where we are one with God.

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- 3. *Eckhart’s metaphysics of flow*. In Eckhart’s theology all things flow forth from God and flow back or break through to God. McGinn outlines this theology under five headings. (1) *Bullitio-ebullitio*. Everything emanates from the Divine Silence. There is first an inner boiling (*bullitio*), then a boiling over (*ebullitio*), and finally creation (*factio* or *creatio*). (2) God is *Principium* and Trinity, the *grunt* or origin of the inner boiling. The Father is “Principle without Principle,” the Son “Principle from the Principle.” Eckhart regarded all activity as Trinitarian. God as *Principium* is the Trinity. There is a dialectical relationship between God and the creation, just as there is within the Trinity. When we speak about God as Father, we must also speak about God as Mother, for the source of *bullitio* lies beyond all human language. The Father is primordial fullness, the

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- supra-personal and potential *grunt*. The Only-Begotten Son proceeds from the Father in order that we too might experience eternal birth. Eckhart repeatedly spoke about the birth of the Word in the soul. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as the source of creation and as the love in which all things are restored to God. The Holy Spirit is the root of God's indistinct-distinction in relation to creation, the bond between Father and Son. (3) Eckhart focused much of his time discussing *the appropriate way to speak about God*. He proposed three ways: (a) predication, (b) analogy, and (c) dialectic. He favored dialectic. If we say, "God is thus and so," we must say the opposite, "God is not." He liked opposites: distinction/indistinction; similarity/dissimilarity; eating/hungering; height/depth; within/without; mobile/immobile; and mine/not mine.

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- What he wanted to communicate is that God is utterly transcendent. We may use terms such as *esse*, *unum*, and *intellegere* about God, but we must also recognize that they are inadequate. God is unnameable to us because of God's infinite existence, yet God is omni-nameable (Latin Sermon VIII.) (4) *Creation is boiling over*. Creation is continuous, the constant of God's flowing into creatures to give them existence. Whereas Aquinas spoke of God as *efficient* cause, Eckhart spoke of God as *formal* or *essential* cause. He refuted two errors about creation: that it is "out of nothing" and that God ceased creating. God's continuous act of creation means that creation is eternal. We cannot think of a time *before* creation or *after* creation. Whereas Aquinas thought of "formal" existence, Eckhart posited "virtual"

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- existence, for existence is pure gift. Creatures, therefore, must acknowledge their nothingness in order to become one with the divine Nothing that is also all things. (5) *Humanity is the image of God.* The human destiny is to draw all things back to their ultimate source. Human intellect differentiates it from other creatures, so they can respond to the presence of God in creation. What is true of the Son in the Trinity is true of the soul as the image of God. Humans need to live according to their inner image. "I am to know God without medium, without image, and without likeness, God actually has to become me and I have to become God." (Sermon 70.) The moment the soul becomes aware of God and tastes God, it has five properties in itself—separation from here and now, its nothingness, its purity, its operation and seeking within itself, and that it is an image. (Sermon 69.)

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- 4. *The return to the ground.* Eckhart sought in his preaching to arouse his hearers to a new state of awareness that would lead them back to the divine *grunt*. He did not conceive the path as a series of steps or stages. Just as creation is continuous, so also is incarnation—the hominification of God and the deification of humanity and the universe. (1) Christ played an important role in Eckhart's mystical theology. God's purpose in sending the Son was that we "may become by the grace of adoption what the Son is by nature." (*Commentary on the Prologue of John.*) That was his version of Irenaeus's "God became man that we might become God," but the adoption emphasis came from Paul's letter to the Romans (Rom 8:12-15). The condition for taking on the image of Christ is total purity, emptiness, detachment. We become Christs, but not in the

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- same sense as the Son, for we are *adopted*. In the incarnation human nature was transformed not just by God becoming man but also by taking on the divine image. To attain this transformation, we must free ourselves from “the nothing” by total self-detachment. When we arrive at where God shines “naked,” we can realize the status of being the one Son. From thence we proceed to live from the inner being and nature that the Son takes from the Father. Does the historical life of Jesus play a role? Eckhart here projected an *imitatio* of Jesus, especially of the Passion. Imitation of Christ is nothing less than total self-denial. In suffering both physically and spiritually we imitate Jesus. In that the soul’s *grunt* and God’s *grunt* are the same, when we accept suffering, God too suffers.

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- (2) As the statement quoted above indicates, Eckhart underscored “grace” as the means of salvation. Grace meant for him a “divine mode of existence” given to the essence of the soul in order that it could work divinely and spiritually. It is “supernatural.” Eckhart, however, departed from Aquinas in two ways: (a) Grace is more intellective than it was for Aquinas. (b) Where the connection between grace and union was clear to Aquinas, it was not to Eckhart. Sometimes Eckhart saw it only as a means rather than an end. “I say: grace does not unite the soul with God. It is a bringing to [the point of] fullness; that is its function, that it brings the soul back again to God.” (Sermon 21; cited by McGinn, *Harvest*, 162.) He also did not give much attention to the church and sacraments as means of grace, but he seems to have thought of God’s immediacy as the starting point of the spiritual life. Regarding prayer, he looked down on making specific requests; we should petition for nothing but God.

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- (3) The most striking features of Eckhart's thought lay in the emphasis he gave to **detachment** (*abgescheiden*), **birthing** (*gebern*), and **breaking-through** (*durchbrechen*). What he sought to do was to make people aware of what it means to live in the reality of God's presence. He called on them over and over to be "penetrated with divine presence." God is a God of the present, not of the past. How can the soul attain such awareness? By detachment, birthing, and breaking-through. How can we do those? Only by the grace of God. What we can do is to let go. "We must learn to let ourselves go until we retain nothing at all that is ours." (*Talks of Instruction* 21.) Eckhart echoed Marguerite Porete's call for annihilation of the human will. We should want nothing, know nothing, and have nothing. Detachment, therefore, is not just *another* virtue; it is *the* virtue of the apophatic. It assumes the place of humility in traditional Christian

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- spirituality. It is through detaching of the self, letting go, etc., that the eternal Word is born in the soul. Not surprisingly, the divine birth was among the most common themes in Eckhart's preaching. Eckhart seldom cited the Song of Songs, but he had a fascination for the images of bearing and giving birth. McGinn has observed, "God's ground and the soul's ground are one and the same ground, and in some way reside deeper even than the birth of the Son in the soul." (*Harvest*, 176.) Eckhart connected breaking-through closely with birthing to express the need to go beyond God as Creator to the Abyss. "Here the soul forsakes all things, God and all creatures." (Jostes 82; cited by McGinn, *Harvest*, 179.) Here the soul finds herself as "the fathomless ocean of the Godhead."

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- (4) For Eckhart **mystical identity** must carry the soul beyond union of wills to the point where there is *ein einic ein*, "One Single One," where the created will must be so annihilated that there is nothing left but the divine will working in itself. Eckhart has been accused of pantheism, but he was far from that. Even in heaven, we will remain distinct from God, even though we experience indistinct union in the *grunt*. In the *grunt*, Eckhart can say, "The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one eye and one seeing, one knowing, and one loving." (Sermon 12.) Eckhart held reservations regarding mystical absorption, rapture, ecstasy, and other experiences lest believers confuse them with union in the *grunt*. They

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- could be useful, but they should not get in the way of concentration on God alone. The union takes place in intellect, but God himself and not knowledge of God is the true beatitude.
- (5) One who has attained indistinct union with God should **live without a why**, that is, spontaneously, like a child. The phrase first appeared in Beatrice of Nazareth and recurred in Marguerite Porete. In Eckhart's view action and contemplation should be fused in the perfected soul. Contemplation should result in fruitful action. In a sermon on the Mary/Martha story (Luke 10:38-42) Eckhart argued the superiority of Martha to Mary. He also underscored the Pauline "redeeming the time" (Col 4:5). Because Martha attained a free mind and lived out of "a splendid ground," she had found "the one thing necessary."

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- III. Henry Suso
 - The censure of Eckhart did not halt the spread of his ideas. Disciples such as Henry Suso and John Tauler altered some of the more controversial teachings of the Meister, but they continued to propagate his main ideas and defended him. They both repudiated the Brethren of the Free Spirit, a group widely condemned for heresy, but they promoted another group sympathetic to Eckhart who called themselves the Friends of God. Although few names of this group are known, a “friend” produced *The German Theology* that Martin Luther published twice in the early phases of the reformation.

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- Henry Suso (c. 1295-1366) was one of the most popular preachers and writers of his day. As a mystical writer, McGinn has noted, he synthesized a number of aspects of late medieval German mysticism—the “spiritual philosophy” handed down from the desert monks, preserved by the medieval monks, and retained by the mendicants; “imitation of the passion” in literal following of Jesus; motifs of courtly literature used to describe the love of God; and Eckhart’s mysticism of the *grunt*.

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– A. Life

- Suso, born of a noble family in Constance, entered a Dominican convent there at age 13. After five years of moderate devotion he experienced a conversion. He went on to do further study in theology and philosophy, first probably at the Dominican house in Strassburg (c. 1319-1321) and then at the *studium generale* at Cologne (c. 1323-1327). In both he would have come in contact with Eckhart. He returned to Constance around 1327. A year or two later, he wrote *The Little Book of Truth*, a brief defense of Eckhart's teachings designed to refute the Brethren of the Free Spirit. His defense of Eckhart led to his removal from his professorship. He took up preaching in Switzerland and the Upper Rhine and became a valued spiritual director in many women's convents, especially of the Dominican Order. In 1343-1344 he served as prior of the Constance

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- community in exile at Diessenhoven. As a result of some hostility, however, he was transferred to Ulm about 1348, where he remained the rest of his life. He died January 25, 1366.
- ### – B. Writings
- Besides *The Little Book of Truth*, Suso wrote *The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, a practical guide to meditation with a hundred brief meditations on the passion. It became one of the most widely read books of the 14th and 15th centuries. Suso himself made a Latin adaptation entitled *The Clock of Wisdom* around 1334. Other works attributed to him include four sermons (only two of which are genuine), some spiritual letters (surviving in an abridged form), and a life of Elsbeth Stagel (c. 1300-1360), a Dominican nun, entitled *The Life of the Servant*. During the final years of his life, about 1361-1363, he edited his four main vernacular works into *The Exemplar*.

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– C. Spiritual Philosophy

- 1. Although Suso was forced to give up an academic career, his writings show that he did acute thinking. In *Clock of Wisdom* he contrasted study of visible things with the Servant as a student at a higher level. He related how a vision turned him from worldly learning to Wisdom. As the desert monks, he believed that the true philosophy is a life of prayer and penance. *Philosophia spiritualis* is *sapientia* or *sapida scientia*, “knowledge that knows by taste.”
- 2. His **strategies for presenting spiritual philosophy** included much attention to imagery. He used courtly language and images to portray the Servant as a knightly adventurer in service of his lady-love, Eternal Wisdom. In line with the feminine gender of Sophia/Sapientia for Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible, he noted that God is beyond

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- gender. He deliberately shifted roles from male to female for both himself and the Divine Lover. Toward the end of his life Suso ordered a series of twelve illustrations for *The Exemplar*. Images were central in his view to attaining mystical consciousness. He considered images crucial to the practice that leads to God, though he recognized that they fail to capture the hidden divinity, just as words do. “How can one form images of the imageless or describe the mode of what is modeless? Whatever comparisons are made, it is still a thousand times more unlike than like. And yet, so that one may drive out one image with another, I will show it to you here imagistically in the language of pictorial comparisons, as far as this is possible in the case of those meanings beyond images.” (*Life of the Servant*, 210.) The soul cannot cling to the pure God spiritually; it must have some kind of image to lead it back to the union with God, and the best image for this is “the dear image of Jesus Christ.” (Ibid. 49.)

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- 3. **The content of Suso's spiritual philosophy** consisted of the following: (1) *Imitation of the passion of Christ*. "Breaking through Christ's suffering humanity to attain the Son's being in the naked Trinitarian Godhead (i.e., being freed of forms of creatures, reformed in Christ, and transformed in the Godhead) expresses the essence of Suso's mysticism." (McGinn, *Harvest*, 212.) The spiritual philosophy is nothing more nor less than learning to read and live Christ's passion. Like Eckhart, he used the general paradigm of flowing forth and returning, but for him this is made concrete and personal in the incarnation. Like Eckhart, his was a functional Christology, centered in conformity to the compassion of Christ. For years he engaged in the most extreme ascetic practices, for instance, fastening a cross barbed with thirty iron nails to pierce his skin or scourging himself until the whip broke.

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- He considered such things a form of *com-passio*. He later learned to bear trials and tribulations in the spirit of "perfect releasement from self."
- (2) *Gelassenkeit*. Suso frequently used the word *ker*, "turning." We must turn away from the world and turn within. In all of his writing he underscored the importance of the proper kind of inward turn. True inwardness is necessary for detachment (*abgescheidenheit*) and releasement (*gelassenkeit*). Suso preferred releasement or letting go to Eckhart's detachment, but he meant essentially the same thing. What we must let go of is the false self that is attached to the things of the world and its pleasures. We need three insights to let go of the false self: (a) to recognize that this self and the self of all things "is a nothing" (as Eckhart), (b) the created ego resting on its own activity, and

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- (c) the growing awareness of becoming one with Christ. In contrast to Marguerite Porete and Eckhart he insisted that letting go means to surrender and not to annihilate the self. Releasement does not mean to abandon one's usual exercises but to change the attitude out of which they are performed. He would not go so far as Porete and Eckhart in claiming a union of indistinction, for God and the human always remain distinct. Mystical identification is a mental state of the mystic. The object of releasement is to satisfy the divine will in all things.

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- (3) **Visions and rapture** played a much larger role in Suso's thinking than they did in Eckhart's. Like Augustine, he distinguished three kinds of visions—corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual. He knew that it is difficult to distinguish between visions and dreams. We test whether they are true by the Bible and the Church's teaching. In *The Exemplar* visions confirm the Servant's status and instruct his spiritual followers. Throughout this writing the Servant has easy access to the heavenly world. Like his English contemporary Richard Rolle, Suso describes experiences of heavenly sweetness, divine fragrance, celestial song, mystical dancing, and the warming of the heart. Many recounted seeing the events of the passion of Christ. Whereas Eckhart viewed claims of ecstatic experience with suspicion, Suso had no such reservations and depicted them graphically.

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- (4) Suso shared with Eckhart the concern for *durchbruch* (“breakthrough”) to the *grunt* (“ground”) to *vereinung* (“union”). At the same time he modified his teacher’s thought in ways that conform to Eckhart’s own defense at his trial. He spoke often of the *grunt* as the inexpressible depths of the divine nature that is beyond but not other than the Trinity. Where he differed from Eckhart was in insistence that the “unity of indistinction” is a mental state. With Eckhart he would see the *grunt* as the goal of all striving for God and detachment as the way to it. He came close to Eckhart in insisting that the detachment must be bottomless. He was careful, however, with reference to Eckhart’s concept of “fused identity.” God and humans always remain distinct. Suso synthesized traditional elements taken from the Dionysianism of Richard of St Victor and Bonaventure and combined these with Eckhart’s. Although he accepted Eckhart’s

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- view that all creatures exist eternally or virtually in God, he diverged from him in holding that “each creature’s created nature is nobler and of more advantage to it than the being it has in God.” (*Little Book of Truth* 3; McGinn, *Harvest*, 235.) He called it the “mistake to end all mistakes” to think that, in this life, human actions were God performing in them. In early writings Suso made much of birthing metaphors, but in later ones he developed a more erotic attachment to Eternal Wisdom. With reference to “breakthrough” Suso connected it with identification of the human nature of the suffering Christ as necessary preparation for penetrating into the divine mystery. In his understanding of “union” Suso also differed from Eckhart in denying that we can enjoy the same kind of substantial and personal union with God that Christ

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- does. He mixed language of unity of wills and unity of the Spirit with Eckhart's unity of indistinction. He envisioned his purpose as to prepare his hearers for "loving union with Eternal Wisdom."
- (5) Suso spent a considerable amount of energy refuting or correcting mystical errors. He identified with **Gotesfrunde ("Friends of God")** over against **Geister und Geistern ("Free Spirits")**. He contrasts the Friends of God with the Brethren of the Free Spirit. They sought mystical transformation with discretion, humility, and adherence to the teaching of the Church, whereas the latter devoted themselves to "unrestrained liberty."

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- IV. Johannes Tauler
 - Johann Tauler (c. 1300-1361) came under the influence of both Eckhart and Suso. Like, Suso, he also qualified a number of Eckhart's ideas and supported the Friends of God.
 - A. Life
 - Little is known of his early years, but he was born into a wealthy family. He entered the Dominican Order at Strassburg in 1315, where he would have studied for about eight years. He never aspired to be an academic and had a somewhat negative attitude toward scholars. He probably came in contact with Eckhart, active in Strassburg between c. 1313-1326, but we do not know of their personal relationship. Around 1330 Tauler began his own preaching career in Strassburg. He directed much of his preaching to women religious in the city populated with eight convents of Dominican nuns and possibly as many as seventy beguinages, for most of eighty surviving sermons reflect a convent situation. During the conflict between Pope John XXII and Lewis the the Bavarian, the Dominicans supported

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- the pope and Strassburg the Emperor. The Dominicans were forced to leave the city. Tauler took up residence farther down the Rhine from c. 1339 to 1343. Through contact with Henry of Nördlingen, a Friend of God, he became acquainted with Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. He also met Rulman Merswin (1307-1382), the financial supporter of the Brothers of the Common Life founded by Gerhard de Groote. He returned to Strassburg in 1343 before the death of Lewis. He ministered unselfishly to the sick when the city experienced the Black Death between 1347 and 1349. He left no evidence that he tried to protect Jews during the pogrom in February 1349, but he did note in one sermon that there were both good and bad Jews, just as there are good and bad Christians. In the last twenty-five years of his life he traveled extensively, preaching several times in Cologne. He may have visited Ruusbroec in Groenendaal and perhaps the Dominican community in Paris around 1350. He died June 16, 1361 in Strassburg under care of his sister Gertrude, a Dominican nun.

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- B. Sermons
 - Tauler left no formal treatises. We know his thought only from his sermons, collected already during his lifetime. These followed the liturgical year. His thought was simpler than Eckhart's and lacked the creative style of Suso's.
- C. Sources of His Thought
 - Tauler knew well traditional classics of Latin mysticism such as the desert Fathers, Augustine, Dionysius, Gregory the Great, Hugh and Richard of St Victor. He was well versed in Dominican theology, especially Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. He clearly leaned heavily on Meister Eckhart, siding with him for instance against Aquinas concerning the presence of God in the deepest ground of the soul. In support of this position he cited Proclus, the late Neoplatonist. In his only specific mention of Eckhart, he

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- defended him as “one loving master” who “taught you and told you about these matters, and you did not understand him. He spoke from eternity, and you took it as referring to time.” (Sermon V.15.)
- D. Mystical Theology
 - 1. Tauler’s theology sank its roots in the doctrine of God and theological anthropology. He shared the apophaticism of Eckhart, using a number of the Meister’s key phrases. The major focus of his preaching, however, was on anthropology. His view of human nature was essentially Pauline—body, soul, and spirit—with some dashes of Platonism. The goal of the spiritual life, in his view, was to restore the lost harmony between the inner and the outer person. The outer person has to come to the point of releasement (*gelassenheit*) in order that it may come under control of the

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- rational person. When the rational person achieves releasement, it may recognize its dependence on God.
- 2. Tauler used the term *grunt* even more than Eckhart, giving it essentially the same nuance. He did not, however, simply ape the Meister. He differed from him in the way he understood the relation of “mind” (*gemuete*) to the ground. *Gemuete*, Latin *mens*, was for him the source of the faculties of knowing and loving. “It is much higher and more inward than the faculties, because the faculties receive their power of acting from it; they are within it and have flowed forth from it. It is in all of them, but is much higher; it is totally simple, essential, and formal [i.e., pure form, like God]. One master speaks of this more than the others. The masters say that the *gemuete* of the soul is so noble that it is always at work, whether a person sleeps or wakes, and whether he is aware of it or not. It has a divinely formed, ineffable, eternal

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- inclination back to God.” He added, “These masters say it always beholds, loves, and enjoys God without cease. How that is, we leave go for now. What is more, the *gemuete* knows itself as God in God, and yet it is created.” (Sermons 64; cited by McGinn, *Harvest*, 255-256.) The *gemuete* looks pretty much the same as the *grunt der sele*, “ground of the soul,” which is one with the divine ground in its deepest reality. Once more, Tauler cited Proclus in support. Although he seems almost to have equated *gemuete* and *grunt*, he never used *gemuete* of God. He distinguished the two words in significant ways. He used the word *grunt* in virtually the same way Eckhart did, including other metaphors—the divine spark, the soul’s base or crown. Like Eckhart, he believed *grunt* is the source and goal of all things, nothing other than God, but he used it more often to signify the core of the human, the *imago Dei*. Like

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- Eckhart, he wanted to link the soul’s ground and God’s ground. Only by attaining our ground in *humility* will we attain God’s ground. Both the human ground and God’s ground are unnameable. Like Eckhart, Tauler spoke of the *grunt*, both human and divine, as desert. In some respects, however, he differed from Eckhart when he spoke of *grunt* of the soul as created and when he emphasized the *grunt* as the image of the Trinity. He left no hint of Eckhart’s idea of “God beyond God.” Whereas Eckhart spoke rarely about the dual abyss (*abgrunt*) of God and human, it was central to Tauler. Although he delineated carefully the continuing differences between God and human in union, he used expressions of absolute identity as they melted together in the abyss. “The abyss that is created draws the uncreated Abyss into itself, and the two abysses become a Single One (*ein einig ein*), a pure divine being, so that the spirit is lost in God’s Spirit. It is drowned in the bottomless sea.” (Sermons 41.) The annihilated abyss invites the divine Abyss to take over completely.

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- 3. Tauler's mysticism was experiential and practical. A key word in his vocabulary was *bewinden*, "to get to know, to become sensible of, to experience." Whether he was an experiential mystic himself (as he denied), he clearly sought to teach others and to guide them toward the *grunt*. In pursuit of this objective, Tauler preached three essential attitudes: **turning**, **releasing**, and **receiving**. He used *ker* over and over. Conversion is the key to the spiritual life. Although he regarded *abker*, turning away, as essential, he emphasized still more *inker*, turning inward, for it leads to the *wesentlich ker*, turning toward the *grunt/abgrunt*. This form of turning does not differ from mystical union. Like Eckhart and Suso, Tauler too considered *gelassenheit* or *abgescheidenheit* the key to gaining God. "The measure of our emptiness is the measure of our receptivity. . . . If

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- God is to go in, the creature of necessity must get out." (Sermons 25.) The Holy Spirit pours the seven gifts into the empty soul. Detachment is essential for receiving. So long as we hold on to what is of the world, God cannot take over. "A person cannot come to perfection unless he always lifts himself up and directs his essential inclinations up to God and sets his inmost ground free." (Sermons 5.) The key quality is openness to receive (*lidikeit*).
- 4. Tauler gave concreteness to his teaching by presenting them in relation to **the following of Christ as the model**. For him the imitation of Christ centered on imitation of the passion. In a sermon on Luke 5:25-27 he set forth six virtues needed to follow Christ: humility, mildness, and patience in the lower faculties; and faith, hope, and love in the higher. In doing good works, we must direct pleasure to God alone. The aim is poverty of spirit, which means "a bottomless sinking into the bottomless nothing."

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- 5. Although Tauler criticized the scholastic theology of his day and even the papacy, he never questioned the role of the Church as the Body of Christ and the necessary instrument of salvation. His was an **ecclesial mysticism**. He preached with great force the virtue of humility, discretion, patience, obedience, poverty of spirit, and universal love. There can be no salvation apart from faith, hope, and love, and we become open to these in following Christ's example of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Tauler's sermons also made much of the role of sacraments in the devotional life. God meets us in an unmediated fashion in the sacraments. Tauler urged frequent communion. He also placed great emphasis on the role of prayer, not only emphasizing prayer as "raising up of the *gemuete* to God" but also distinguishing between verbal or outer prayer from interior prayer of union.

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- 6. Tauler, unlike Eckhart, viewed the path to union with God as a process that could be sketched out in a mystical itinerary. He mentioned three stages—beginners, advanced, and perfect—in several sermons. Closer to his own perspective, he outlined two itineraries. The first was his variation on the **stages of love** outlined by Bernard of Clairvaux and Richard of St Victor. "The noblest and most wonderful thing that can be spoken about is love; there is nothing more useful to learn about," he declared. (Sermons 76.) He distinguished interior love from exterior love of neighbor. Both are necessary, and the quality of brotherly love confirms that our inward love is directed to God. The quality of inner love is measured by our reaction to suffering. Love is the dynamism that powers the entire process of sinking into indistinct union in the ground. In several sermons Tauler adopted Richard of St Victor's four stages of love—wounding love,

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- binding love, languishing love, and dying love. In others he followed Bernard's distinctions of sweet love, wise love, and strong love in a sermon on the Song of Songs. Tauler had a strong interest in the role of violent love that would drive the soul to total self-denial and even into the annihilation of the *grunt*. The second concerned the **stages of union**. He marked out three stages on the mystical path—ecstasy, affliction, and identity. In Sermon 39 he sketched this:
 - Now we want to speak about three stages, a lowest, a middle, and a highest stage. The first stage of an inward, virtuous life, which can lead us to lofty nearness to God, is when a person turns himself totally to God's wonderful works and the manifestations of the inexpressible gifts and outflowings of God's

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- hidden goodness. From this is born the state called "jubilation." The second state is poverty of spirit, when in strange way God withdraws himself from the soul, leaving it in a painful deprivation. The third is transformation [*übertart*] into divine being in the union of the created spirit with the self-existent Spirit of God, which can be called an essential conversion. (McGinn, *Harvest*, 285.)
- Tauler cited biblical models for the deepest form of mystical experience. Job exemplified the second, Elijah the third. Union is divinizing, according to Tauler. In Union we sink into a state of unknowing, as Dionysius insisted, for God in beyond knowing. Deep, interior prayer is a form of union.

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