Was Kierkegaard Inspired by Medieval Mysticism?

Meister Eckhart's »*Abgeschiedenheit*« and Kierkegaard's »*Udsondring*«

Frits Florin

Let me start where it all started. Reading several passages in *Works of Love*, certain texts of Anti-Climacus and many notes in Kierkegaard's *Journals*, there was a shock of recognition: where had I read similar texts before? Was it in not the medieval mystics?[1] I put this idea forward to several Kierkegaard researchers but got hesitant to reluctant reactions. Recently I found a small but extremely interesting study about Kierkegaard and mysticism.[2] The author reported that he met the same reaction to his approach. An ironic but easy answer could be that we are in good company. Indeed, the reviewers of the sermon held by Kierkegaard as a part of his final examination at the Pastoral Seminar (January 1841) were very positive, but they judged that Kierkegaard »at the end of his sermon, engaged too much in a mystical area ('the blessing of silent prayers, the blissfulness of contemplation, God's presence in us'), instead of mentioning, more appropriately, the Word and the sacraments.«[3] In order to achieve some clarity, I will try in this study to identify some basic parallel structures of thinking in Kierkegaard and in medieval mysticism, especially in its Rhineland version with Meister Eckhart as its prominent example.

But before doing so, I have to overcome another preliminary obstacle. What exactly is mysticism? How does one define it? The answer is not that simple. Even *Religion in Geschichte and Gegenwart* observes that a formal definition is impossible.[4] Even in its Christian form, it is true that one can discern some common themes but even those are dealt with in very different ways. In his book on Meister Eckhart,[5] Kurt Ruh com-

pares the concept of mysticism with the equally broad and complex concept »romanticism.« He mentions *cognitio Dei experimentalis* (Bonaventura) as a possible approach.

The basic theme of all forms of Christian mysticism is »God is love« together with the reflection of this divine love in human life. The tract *De diligendo Deo*, by Bernard of Clervaux can indeed be considered the basic constitution of all Christian mysticism. The way to the *unio Dei* and the way back to radical *caritas* of the neighbour in all its different stages is the central theme. Furthermore, in most Christian mystics, and certainly in those of the medieval Rhineland, there is a clear influence of Neo-Platonism.[6] At the same time, however, a host of modifications are always applied. Perhaps a last common characteristic is the fear and trembling of the Christian believer as he balances on a peak, with an abyss at each side: on the one side the *vana curiositas mundi* where a person just scratches the surface of his own existence – as well as that of the surrounding world (like the Don Juan character in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*); and on the other side, the *superbia* in which he stakes all he is and has in order to gain full sovereignty over himself and autonomous control of all possible obstacles on his way through life.

Perhaps in our day especially, it is particularly important to establish what medieval mysticism was *not*. It should not be associated with the bizarre and free-floating mixtures of magic and science, arts and a cosmic sense of nature, or gnosis and religion which we know in our time.[7] While contemplation plays a central a role in mysticism, it never is the aim nor the core. All medieval mystics harbour suspicions of overemphasizing phenomena like ecstasy [*raptus*, *jubilus*]. These phenomena originate from human nature rather than God's overwhelming love. Eckhart prefers the concept of *Schau* or *visio* to describe a phase on the path to God. It is the experience of God, and consequently he never defines its content even if he refers to it frequently.[8] It is the point or moment of tangency between the finite and the infinite, which presupposes total openness, freedom and emptiness of the soul.[9] It is reminiscent of the category of »adoration« or »worship« [*Tilbedelse*] in Kierkegaard, the »maximum for a human being's relationship with God, and thereby for his likeness to God, since the qualities are absolutely different.« It »absolutely expresses the difference« and »the absolute distinction« (*SV3* 10, 104; CUP 413).[10] After having cleared away relative ends, the way is free for the confrontation of the individual in his detachment from the multitude (self-annihilation of the self, as far as it is identifying with »this and

that«) and God's majesty (see also *Pap.* X 5 A 39). Kierkegaard knew about the joy of adoration (*SV3* 14, 164; *LF* 43), but is as silent about the experience itself as Meister Eckhart. As for Eckhart, selfless love remains the aim which cannot be reached without a form of self-annihilation (kenosis) which makes a space for God.

What did Kierkegaard Know about Mysticism?

In his library, Kierkegaard had collections of sermons by Johannes Tauler (Kat. 245-247). He also possessed »*Cherubinischer Wandersmann*« by Angelus Silesius (Kat. 783). He made quite extensive use of Abraham of Santa Clara whose complete works were in his library (Kat. 294-311). The book on Meister Eckhart by his lifelong rival, Hans Martensen, (Kat. 649) – probably the first systematic study on Eckhart in Protestantism[11] – was part of his library, as were the writings of Fénelon (Kat. 1912-1914) and Madame de Guyon (Kat. 525-527 and 1915-1917). Other important sources which certainly influenced his interpretation of mysticism were several prominent representatives of pietism, such as Johann Arndt and Gerhard Tersteegen, both of whom make some use of medieval mystical sources. He also owned »*Die deutsche Theologie*« with Luther's introduction, translated by the same Johann Arndt (Kat. 634). He owned the complete works of Jakob Böhme as well, but I could find only very limited evidence that he read these.

Other sources were the many historical surveys in his possession (Arnold, Görres, Helfferich, Böhringer). Scholtens[12] studied Kierkegaards markings in some of these books and concluded that he was more interested in the quotations of the mystics themselves than the interpretations offered in the historical surveys.[13] Quotes in the journals do often refer to the marked texts in the surveys. In this context it is interesting to note that one chapter in the study by Martensen on Eckhart mentioned above consists entirely of quotes.

As to the use Kierkegaard made of all those sources, I must make a preliminary remark. Hans Brøchner, who enjoyed a relationship of great mutual respect and friendship with Kierkegaard, remembered that during one of their walks one day, the Magister told him that, »in fact, geniuses always lack the ability to understand in an objective way the ideas of others; they everywhere find their own.« And several days later, speaking about himself, he said: »I never had the ability to understand others objectively.«[14] It is known that he characterised himself as »a genius in a

provincial town«! In his writings, we seldom find direct references or quotations, and when we do, it is not always possible to ascertain if Kierkegaard really had read the source from which he quotes or whether we should consider the quote to be a coincidental hit. Therefore the only adequate way to acquire insight into the relationship between Kierkegaard's thinking and mysticism is to analyse the content of his texts and contexts and to compare them with those of the mystics.

What we know for sure is that Kierkegaard read the writings of mystics and the above-mentioned representatives of pietism more or less daily, for his own edification. Echoes of this reading can be found everywhere in his works and journals. Tersteegen was one of his favourites. Kierkegaard rejected the strained devoutness and the narrow-minded moralising of some pietists. But in Tersteegen and the mystical tradition he recognised the suffering connected to true Christianity through the rejection of conformity to the world, the longing for the absolute in the shape of seeking unification with the will of God.

In the year 1849, Kierkegaard had to make an important personal decision. Either he would publish *The Sickness unto Death* and *Training in Christianity* and continue his duties as an author or he could opt for a paid position within the state-church. He even dreamed of taking up again some sort of relationship with Regine Olsen. The decision was not only one of principle; it was also a decision with important practical consequences. He knew that continued authorship would lead him at some point into poverty – a feared and loathed perspective for the dandy he was! He finally made the decision to continue as a writer after having read a text of Fénelon, saying that it must be horrible for a man to realise that he is doing less than God expects from him (*Pap.*[15] X 4 A 299). The religious structure and motivation of this decision will be paramount in his further writings.

Judge William and Mysticism

Mysticism is more present in the themes and structures of Kierkegaard's thinking – as I will try to demonstrate in the following – than in explicit references. But there is one character in Kierkegaard's works who deals extensively with mysticism: Judge William, in the second part of *Either/Or*.

Can one imagine a man more averse to mysticism than this settled, well-educated, mature and conventional citizen? He systematically ar-

gues against it in the second part of *Either/Or* (*SV3* 3, 222-232; *EO* II, 240 ff.). First of all Judge William points out that mysticism can do without religiosity. The judge describes the core of mysticism as follows:

> The first form the choice takes is complete isolation. That is, in choosing myself, I separate myself from my relations to the whole world, until in this separation I end in an abstract identity. Since the individual has chosen himself according to his freedom, he is *eo ipso* acting. Yet his action has no relation to anything in the surrounding world, for the individual has completely exterminated this and is only for himself« (*SV3* 3, 222; *EO* II, 240).

He observes these kind of tendencies already with the Greeks (the Stoics): they aimed exclusively at acquiring personal virtues like courage, self-control, moderation, etc. at the cost of civil virtues – that is, virtues which keep the state functioning perfectly.

Once mysticism functions in a religious context however, the individual remains isolated, but at the same time, the eternal is identified with God. The mystic is »in love with God.« When praying, an ethical character is thinking of his daily life, begging for help or thanking for the gift of life. But the mystic's ideal prayer is erotic, like the whispering of lovers. In his intense love of God, the mystic wants to be like God. The mystic chooses himself as does the ethical character, but the act of choosing is purely internal and has nothing to do with the world in which he lives his daily life; as a consequence, he has nothing to do with his fellow man with whom every human being ought to build relationships – if he had not chosen to become a mystic. Indeed, being a mystic implies that one has no relationship with the other – except God, »the absolute Thou.« According to mysticism, freedom is not to be conquered in the day-to-day struggle with what one happens to find in himself (this particular body, this family, this education, this culture, this nationality etc.) and in the surrounding world, but in his association with this absolute Thou. The mystic cannot deny that God has positioned man in time, and in this particular time, but he can only interpret this forced temporality as a probationary period. By contrast, William tells a story of a friend who, after having studied oriental and Christian mysticism, committed suicide since the infinite could apparently only be reached through the negative.

God constantly puts the mystic's love to the test, but the mystic's

choice is not fundamentally concrete and his conception of the world as pure vanity and sin can never be an interpretation which links him to the concrete. According to Judge William, it is not an existential choice, but a metaphysical one. He summarizes his dislike for mysticism in three points:

1. It is a sort of boldness towards God. The judge's basic assumption is that every human being should love God with all his heart. But a mystic wrongs both God and himself, pretending that he is what he is by virtue of his exclusive relationship to God as if he were a special object of God's choosing. He makes God into an idol and himself into someone who, by coincidence, was promoted to be a chosen one.
2. The judge characterises the mystic as someone with an effeminate sort of weakness. The mystical experience confirms and proves his love of God and therefore he tries to repeat it endlessly. Although he acts (in his inner self), there is no real development. The mystic must patiently wait out the stale and weak periods inbetween mystical experiences.
3. Finally, the judge dislikes mystics because they chose solitude. He doubts if this can be sufficiently justified from an ethical viewpoint. William rejects such isolated existence – if not for other reasons, then based on his conviction that every man should be married – since it implies after all that one does not want to deal with other people.

Is this the judgement of the creator of the character of Judge William as well? This question cannot be answered with a simple »yes« or »no.« But I think there are more options than »yes« or »no.« Scholtens[16] groups several themes familiar to mystics with a series of typical Kierkegaardian metaphors: the wrestling with God, soberness versus inebriety, prayer as respiration, light and darkness, the well, dizziness, the symbol of the fruit, the moment as a mystical point of tangency. These themes and even some of the metaphors can be found in medieval mysticism.

In 1849 Kierkegaard quotes Tersteegen with approval (*Pap.* X 1 A 672) when Tersteegen assumes that the writings of the mystics are so little esteemed and used because they demand asceticism and self-denial instead of »*Raisonniren* und *Speculiren*.« Kierkegaard's central theme is a predispositional tension within human beings: on the one hand, human

beings have a primitive opening to the eternal which gives rise to the human vocation of becoming spirit; cultivating this kinship to God is a lifelong project. On the other hand, human beings face difficulties in finding the ways and means to temporally realise and express this relationship to the eternal given the fragmentation and multiplicity of daily life. This is of course a central theme in mysticism as well. My thesis is that Kierkegaard – probably motivated by his pietistic roots – dealt with this central theme and consequently a series of other themes in mysticism but modified it essentially with a typical Lutheran sense of sinfulness and the critical reflection of Enlightenment.

Kierkegaard and Mysticism

A religious man should relate absolutely to the absolute telos and relatively to the relative telos. Therefore a religious man is like a fish out of water. He is never at ease in time and in the diversity of the world. Religiosity therefore is never an objectively ascertainable quality. It belongs to the inner self as an aspiring, a striving, a longing. In this way, central themes of mysticism and of pietism go hand in hand for Kierkegaard.

A life without a conscious relation to the absolute is a life without passion and a life which avoids one's (pre-)disposition and responsibility to become a self. Such a life is doomed to become a narrow-minded existence, copying its character from others. It leads to a specific form of desperation described by Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death*: desperation caused by an absence of infinitude. But a life which avoids its intended relationships in the sphere of the finite, a life which looks for a short-cut to infinitude, leads to a form of despair as well: it leads to a daydreaming life, a life in a sort of abstract sensitivity or sentimentality, knowledge without self-knowledge, a striving without a broader view of life [*Livsanskuelse*]. It is especially in the works of the pseudonym Anti-Climacus that one finds the Christian ideal articulated as a life founded or based on God in transparency[17] rather than an unclearly defined self which is lost into an abstract universe like the state, the nation, etc. (*SV3* 15, 102; *PC*, 169). Already in his earliest works Kierkegaard confronted the objective, the controllable, and the calculable with the subjective and dialectically uncertainty one sees in the religious (*SV3* 10, 132n; CUP, 446n); he opposes the diverse business of the world with »willing one thing,« the Good, with becoming one with the will of God. Finally, he confronts sin with a life in transparency before God. Truly to do the

good means to do it without any other motivation than the good itself. In the *Edifying Discourse* on the *Purity of Heart* (1846-1847), Kierkegaard ruthlessly dissects all the pretexts and the complicated means of introducing other motives under the banner of striving for the good. As he always does when he tries to describe the religious ideal in positive terms rather than approaching it via the negative (as he usually does) he resorts to a metaphor:

> Purity of heart – this is a metaphorical expression that compares the heart to the ocean, and why specifically to that? Because the ocean's depth is its purity, and its purity is its transparency, when it is transparent. As soon as it is impure, it is not deep but shallow, and as soon as it is shallow it is not transparent either. When, however, it is deeply and transparently pure, then, however long one continues to look at it, it is one thing; then its purity is this constancy in being deep and in being transparent. (...) Just as the ocean, when it lies still this way, deeply transparent, aspires to heaven, so the pure heart, when it is still, deeply transparent, aspires solely to the good; or just as the ocean becomes pure when it aspires only to heaven, so the heart becomes pure when it aspires only to the good. Just as the ocean reflects the height of heaven in its pure depth, so the heart when it is still and deeply transparent, reflects in its pure depth the heavenly sublimity of the good. If the least thing comes between them, between the sky and the ocean, between the heart and the good, indeed, even if it was impatience in desiring the reflection, then the ocean is not pure, then it does not purely reflect the sky (*SV3* 11, 112; *PH*, 121).

This existence before God is the simple one, without irresolution – not because of any objective, calculated certitude – but because of the simplicity of a life before God after the leap of faith has been accomplished. It also means self-annihilation – not in the sense of annihilating the self, but in establishing it »before God;« that is, by relating absolutely to the absolute and relatively to the relative, the manifold, the temporal, the finite. Evidently within the perspective of the finite, there is striving after the good, but it is the calculated good, the egocentric good.

Eckhart takes his point of departure in scholastic metaphysics when speaking about the good. But it is typical for his way of thinking that he immediately translates it into the religious-ethical sphere, the sphere of the responsible subject. It is evident for him that the good as one of the

transcendentalia (*ens, unum, verum, bonum*) – the good in its pure form – is in God, but in humans only *analogice*. But by introducing the metaphor of the birth of the good in the soul, his metaphysics gets a sudden dynamic, existential value:[18] it is a man's task to participate in the Good which gives itself in man (gives birth in the soul: *Gottesgeburt*) in the *incarnatio continua*. As a consequence – and here is an obvious parallel with Kierkegaard – one can consider the good from two incompatible angles. First, creatures in their temporal shapes and functions can be considered to be good. But this is the illusory good since it is a good which lacks its ground in God and as such, creatures are nothingness. And secondly the good can be a God given grace in a man's soul.[19] The task of man is to be open to the birth of God in the soul. From that moment forward, there is only one Good steering the will, separating it from the multitude of creatures:

> Ich kehre mich der Kreatur zu, von der Naturgemäß Untrost kommt, und kehre mich von Gott ab, von dem aller Trost ausfließt. Wie kann es dann wundernehmen, dass ich in Leid gerate und traurig bin? Wahrlich, es ist Gott und aller dieser Welt wirklich unmöglich, dass der Mensch wahren Trost finde, der Trost sucht bei den Kreaturen. Wer aber Gott allein in der Kreatur liebte und die Kreatur allein in Gott, der fände wahren, rechten und gleichen Trost allerorten.[20]

I want to point out that for Eckhart sin means clinging to things themselves, not to the good in things by which God gives himself in the creation and gives them *Sein*.[21] Therefore in Eckhart's Neo-Platonic metaphysics, the sinner looses *Sein*. He enters nothing. Kierkegaard generally[22] avoids this sort of metaphysical language as it suggests that he would attempt to »explain everything,« a fault he attributed to Hegel (i.e. *SV3* 5, 40n; *FT*, 42n and *SV3* 6, 118; *CA*, 20). Kierkegaard focuses on the concrete existing individual who must act responsibly, *coram deo*, before God, by uniting the idea of God with the daily activity of the individual.

Neither Kierkegaard nor Eckhart are moralists in the small-minded sense of the word. It would be a contradiction for Kierkegaard to identify striving for the good with some relative behaviour. Striving for the Good means to risk all [*at vove Alt*]. And for Eckhart, it is essential that there is no »how.«

> Da sagte Sankt Bernard: 'Das will ich Euch sagen: Gott selbst ist der Grund warum man ihn lieben soll. Die *Weise* dieser Liebe ist *ohne* Weise, denn Gott ist nichts; nicht so jedoch dass er ohne Sein wäre: er ist vielmehr weder dies noch das, was man auszusagen vermag; er ist ein Sein oberhalb allen Seins. Er ist ein Seinloses Sein. Darum muss die Weise mit der man ihn lieben soll, *weiselos* sein. Er ist über Alles hinaus, was man auszusprechen vermag.'[23]

For both Kierkegaard and Eckhart, negative theology means *kenosis*; it is the impossibility of a direct communication of or about God, an annihilation of an attachment to finitude, the directly sensuous, and busyness. It is a distance from what Kierkegaard calls »the world« or »the worldly« and Eckhart »the creaturly.«

Another basic parallel is a kinship with God [*Slægtskab med Gud*]. In Kierkegaard, this is the joyous word of Christianity: the doctrine of man's kinship to God by which his task is to become like God. And since God is love, it is by loving that we fulfil this task (*SV3* 12, 66; *WL*, 62-63).[24] It is this kinship that opens the way to a life as a responsible Self before God, and at the same time it establishes a fundamental equality between humans – not in an abstract way, but quite to the contrary, in the very concrete way of fear and trembling with responsibility before God (*SV3* 15, 170n; *SUD*, 120). It is here that the principle of »like for like« comes in: »*the Christian like for like, eternity's like for like*« (*SV3* 12, 358; *WL*, 376). The relationship to God defines the relationship to one's neighbour and every neighbour is *like for like* in the sense that the kinship of every individual with God compels one to love his neighbour.

Here again, Eckhart's point of departure is quite different – and again the theme and its import are similar. In the deepest ground of the soul, if there is openness and receptivity, the *Gottesgeburt* brings about a likeness [*glichkeit*] to God. The Father gives birth to the Son and by doing so he radically transforms one's life: that is why the rare moments of contemplation [*Schau*] do not constitute the central point in Eckhart's theology but rather the transformed life *in via*. *In patria* there will be the direct and perfect contemplation of God. Clearly in his doctrine of the *Gottesgeburt*, the doctrine of the Trinity – influenced by Neo-Platonism – plays an important role. But the real heart of the matter is the transformation of the individual into a responsible subject striving after complete and radical selflessness in a likeness to God, as he manifested himself in Christ. The »like for like« is a familiar thought for Eckhart. All

people are equally close to God's nobility [*al sin edelkeit*] and that is why one should love his neighbour as himself and why what happens to one's neighbour should be like something happening to oneself.[25] Eckhart uses the metaphor of the burning coal. Why does it hurt when the coal is placed in my hand? Because it has something that my hand does not have. If my hand contained the same heat as the coal, one could put all the fire of the world in it and it would not hurt. Those who have a likeness to God are open to the *Gottesgeburt*: »Hier ist Gottes Grund mein Grund und mein Grund Gottes Grund.«[26] Once one opens oneself and lets God be God in one's inner self, what then remains is something »simple« and »unique« [*ein einfaltiges Eins*].[27] The unproblematic way in which the likeness of God and man is presented after the *Gottesgeburt*, is perhaps the main difference between medieval mysticism and Kierkegaard. In his dissertation,[28] Richard Purkarthofer outlines the path Kierkegaard follows with regard to the idea of the imitation of Christ: from pietism, back to the *devotio moderna* [Geert Groote, Thomas a Kempis], and finally to Tauler. At least three themes in Tauler must have appealed to Kierkegaard and can be found in *Training in Christianity*: 1] his attempt to renew faith, 2] the problematic relationship between the inner and the outer, 3] the problem of the imitation of Christ, as well as the interrelationships of these three issues. Again, the parallel is more thematic than literal. To be a follower or imitator of Christ is the very core of the demand – it means that one must identify with the mockery and humiliation of Christ, the ground of the offence [*Forargelse*] which defines Christianity. For Kierkegaard, however, imitation is not a unification with God as it is for Tauler, who regarded Christ as truly one with God and, as such, the ideal to be imitated as far as the aspect of God's incarnation in the human is concerned. Anti-Climacus – not encumbered by neo-platonic Trinitarian metaphysics – simply focuses on Christ as the unity of God and this singular human being (*SV3* 16, 86; *PC*, 82),[29] and says that a Christian must be a follower or imitator whose life is as similar to Christ as is humanly possible (*SV3* 16, 107; *PC*, 106). For Kierkegaard, incarnation was the indirect communication of God, his revelation in the shape of a humble servant and not, as one finds in medieval mysticism, the union between God and human nature, the metaphysical ground for the *incarnatio continua*.

Another parallel: both Eckhart and Kierkegaard consider the core of sin to be pride: the opposite of openness to the gift of God, an openness to the good.[30] Both consider the relationship to the eternal and therefore

the whole field of sin and responsibility to be the essence and the trial of subjectivity. I am aware that I use a modern terminology here, alien to the middle ages, but a conscious anachronism can sometimes have a clarifying effect. For Eckhart, the principle of individuation is the unification with God, which means that the antithesis between the outside and the inside ceases, and that the antithesis between a relationship to things and a relationship to the good in things – creatures and the creator – also ceases. As we already observed, this ideal of unification is never to be completed *in via*, it can only be accomplished *in patria*.

As I noted before, Kierkegaard's attention was not drawn to medieval mysticism because of the metaphysical foundation of mystical thinking (although we could find some echoes in the »like for like« and in the doubling in God as a subject). Rather, he recognised his own views in their »existential« reflections and used them. As an illustration of this thesis, I would like to conclude with a brief comparison between the concept of *Abgeschiedenheit* in Eckhart and the concept of separation [*Udsondring*] in Kierkegaard.

»Abgeschiedenheit« in Eckhart and »Udsondring« in Kierkegaard

In the introduction to one of his sermons,[31] Eckhart gives a brief summary of what he means by *Abgeschiedenheit*: man in his inner self should become empty of himself and of all things and, furthermore, should realise again and again the »simple good« that is God. *Abgeschiedenheit* means that man should realise the nobility laid down in a his soul which makes it possible for him, in a miraculous way [*in ein wunder*], to come to God. And finally, it means that he should realise the purity [*klârheit*] of the divine nature: »God is a word, an unpronounced word« [*Got ist ein wort, ein ungesprochen wort*]. This complex of problems is worked out in his *Traktat über die Abgeschiedenheit*. The authenticity of this writing is doubtful, but it is clear that most of it comes from Eckhart – perhaps a transcript made by a listener. God himself is never this or that: he is himself unaltered. The *creatio continua* and the *incarnatio continua* make is possible for us to discern him by giving up multiplicity, the »this or that,« even the self as far as it is »this and that,« the »exterior man« [*der aüssere Mensch*]. What remains is receptivity[32] for the one and pure God, the birth of God in the soul [*Gottesgeburt*], by which man's relationship to God becomes one of likeness [*glîchkeit*].[33] Indeed, God himself is the perfect *Abgeschieden-*

heit: he is never »this or that.« In the state of *Abgeschiedenheit*, there is no will but the will to be [*sie will nichts anderes als sein*],[34] that is one and beyond time. God is timeless and we are in time, changing, developing, becoming. But by the movement which leads to a degree of *Abgeschiedenheit*, one approaches the final goal of purity, of pure *Sein*.[35] The way to *Abgeschiedenheit* is suffering, and it is here the *Imitatio Christi* comes in, but the *Abgeschiedenheit* itself is beyond suffering, as suffering always relates to a »this or that.« The ethical consequence of *Abgeschiedenheit* is that all human works have no other motive than God alone.[36]

For Eckhart, the birth of God in the soul [*Gottesgeburt*] is the *plenitudo temporis*, a union with God who is outside time. At the same time, the union of the soul – that by which man differs from other creatures – with God results in a secondary movement in knowledge, in *exitus* [*ûzslac*] and in *reflexus* [*widerslac*], that is *in via* again. Eckhart was very much aware of the difference between the situation *in via* and the one *in patria*.[37] So even if Eckhart seems to describe the *Gottesgeburt* in terms of a »once and for all,« especially in his characterisation of the striving for *Abgeschiedenheit*, it appears that he is very much aware of the role of time in the human condition. In other words, the »ethical turn« in Eckhart puts man firmly back in time, but completely changed after the leap of the *Gottesgeburt*, the moment of union with the timeless. The category of the future plays no explicit role in Eckhart. This does not mean, however, that Eckhart's thinking is purely Greek in Kierkegaard's sense, pure recollection. The tension in Eckhart is between on the one hand, the immediate presence of God as the bearing power in everything, *Sein*, the giver who is to be born in every human soul [*Gottesgeburt*] and, on the other hand, change [*alteratio*] and becoming [*fieri*]. Man can discern the eternal in a timeless moment of direct divine transformation which affects all acting and consciousness because it founds him transparently in his origin. But he must »come back« *in via*, where he can still harm himself because the »nothing« is still threatening in the form of death and sin. Medieval man was very much aware of his status of *homo viator*, living on thin ice, through which he could sink into the fathomless depths of chaos and obliteration at any moment.

The final goal in this life is not the *unio mystica*. In a remarkable and surprising reversed interpretation, as it were, of Luc. 10, 38-40, Eckhart states that Martha, in her service, was nearer to the goal than Maria in her contemplation.[38] Radical selflessness is the existential effect and the final meaning of *Abgeschiedenheit*.

Kierkegaard tries to take temporality thoroughly seriously. Temporality in Kierkegaard means an everlasting urgency in struggle and striving. We humans can never place ourselves outside temporal reality unless we dwell in the medium of fantasy – either through speculation and abstraction or through poetry. We are constantly changing, developing, becoming [*i Vorden*] and can never escape this *condition humaine*. But at the same time we have a disposition to become spirit, to transcend time and diversity. This inner movement tries to find expressions in existence, expressions that by definition never can be completely congruent or final. But a precondition is that one first leaves immediacy. Immediacy, in this context, means a life in the immediate, regardless of whether one desperately tries to master and control it, or flexibly adjusts to it. What escapes control or adjustment is pure luck or misfortune. And the movement of putting oneself at a distance from immediacy is identical with the religious movement as soon as it, at one and the same time, includes an acceptance of responsibility and recognition of not being infinitely autonomous, but created:

> Here the upbuilding is quite properly distinguishable by the negative, by the self-annihilation that finds the relationship with God within itself, that suffering-through sinks into the relationship with God, finds its ground in it, because God is in the ground only when everything that is in the way is cleared out, every finitude, and first and foremost the individual himself in his finitude, in his cavilling against God« (*SV3* 10, 229; *CUP*, 560-561).

But this is still the immanent form of the religious.[39]

Kinship to God is fundamentally disturbed by sin: sin is the negation of God, so to speak, the opposite of God. Stating *via negationis* that God is without sin, is blasphemy (*SV3* 15, 171; *SUD*, 122). The disposition to become a spirit is still there in the sinful human being, but, in the final analysis, as an impotent passion which takes man to his frustrating limits, to despair in one of its many shapes or even to a mad destruction (for example, the »hysteric spirit« in Nero: *SV3* 3, 174-177; *EO* II, 186-189). In the immanent form of religiosity, designated by Kierkegaard as »*Religiosity A*«, the eternal is *ubique et nusquam* (*SV3* 10, 238; CUP, 571). The relationship to God in this form of religiosity is defined as »self-annihilation«:[40] it means a radical rupture with the immediate. The incarnation does not change the basic anthropological structure in the believ-

er, but »accentuates it paradoxically.« The antithesis between man and God is accentuated by the appearance within history of a human being without sin, in complete kinship with God. At the same time, the possibility of a new beginning arises: the imitation of Christ leads to a restored kinship with God. God in Christ, however, is not distinguishable in any direct way: this was Judas's mistake. He wanted a directly distinguishable manifestation of God in Christ, but God is only distinguishable in an indirect way: the positive has to be recognised by the negative. God can be recognised in Christ only in and by his suffering, in his appearance as a self-effacing servant. Once this existential movement of faith has taken place, the immediate becomes a relative telos, subordinated to the relationship to the absolute telos. The unconditional demand constitutes itself; »self-annihilation« now means total selflessness. The faithful relates in a new way to the immediate: the »new immediacy« is there as soon as the entire world of relative things is put together with God or an image of God. The essence of friendship and of erotic love for example is no longer based on the selectivity of the relationship, but is selfless love. And selfless love presupposes a relationship to the unconditional. In this sense, man's love of a friend or of a beloved is not dependent on the object of his love: even if this changes or even if the beloved dies, love remains. The separation [*Udsondring*] by the religious constitutes the self by putting it at a distance from its own determining *accidentia* and, in its Christian variant, by confronting it with the demand of total selflessness.

Both in *Two Ages* (1846) and in his battle with the state-church, Kierkegaard stresses the socio-political consequences of the separation by the religious. Here separation means, above all, a separation from the masses, a non-conformity based on the idea of a life *coram deo*. Kierkegaard accepts, be it sometimes reluctantly, the inevitability and ubiquitous character of both the formal equality of all humans [*Nivelleringen*] and of constant reflection, the first being the principle of democracy and the second the demand of the Enlightenment to take nothing for granted. The risk of these characteristics of modernity is, in the former case, a tendency to look for the support of as many others as possible as if truth and justice were guaranteed by the power of the number and, in the latter case, a tendency to a never-ending reflection, an eternal doubt (irony or scepticism) which can never be stopped by itself and which, in the final analysis, leads to endless twaddle, complete passivity or cynicism. Nobody in the age of modernity can avoid formal equality and critical

reflection, but because the religious is not in conformity with the world, it can break through both theses hindrances. It breaks through formal equality with the idea of equi-valence before God (*coram deo* versus *coram hominibus*) from which the unique individual originates. And it breaks through endless reflection and doubt with the leap of faith. Only in the religious *Udsondring* can the degeneration of both a levelling out and an endless reflection be broken through: it breaks through the blathering, the search for excitement and sensation, the endless postponement of decisions, and the constant jealous watching of others.

The highest form of religious separation for Kierkegaard, however, is worship or adoration, when man is free from immediacy, multiplicity and diversity: that is, »transparent before God« (*SV3* 17, 138; *JFY*, 106) in the complete silence of receptivity (*SV3* 14, 135; *LF*, 10-11). Between Kierkegaard's adoration and Eckhart's *Schau* there seems to be a considerable overlap.

The ultimate aim, shared by both Meister Eckhart and Magister Kierkegaard in their discussions of *Abgeschiedenheit* and *Udsondring*, is to make clear that God is no factor, no function, no last justification of this world, but that he is the infinite giver.

Notes

1. The same happened (at least once) in reverse: Kierkegaard recognized a certain similarity between Tauler's idea of the voluntariness of »giving up everything« and what he wrote about the issue in *Christian Discourses* (13, 170): see *Pap.* VIII 1 A 587.
2. (With thanks to Johan Taels) Wim R. Scholtens, *Kijk, hier barst de taal... Mystiek bij Kierkegaard*, Kok, Kampen/Altiora, Averbode, 1991.
3. *Breve og Aktstykker vedrørende Søren Kierkegaard*, Munksgaard, Copenhagen, 1953, p. 15.
4. Third edition, col. 1237, »Eine abstrakte Formel für M. ist unmöglich, weil das Phänomen nur in seinen historischen Erscheinungen als indische, persisch-türkische, hellenistische oder christliche M. existiert.«
5. K. Ruh, *Meister Eckhart, Theologe, Prediger, Mystiker*, C.H. Beck, München, 1982, p. 188.
6. On the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita on Eckhart, see Ruh, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 55-59.
7. J. Decorte, *Middeleeuwse en hedendaagse appreciatie van de liefdesmystiek*, in Tijdschrift voor Filosofie, 63, 2001, p. 543-568.
8. Cf. Ruh, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 189-199, »Dionysius Areopagita sprach von *arräton*, dem Unausgesprochenen, Augustin und die späteren lateinischen Mystiker vom *ineffabile*, der Wortlosigkeit der mystischen Erfahrung: 'Ich dürfte es erfahren, aber nimmer aussprechen' (Bernardus von Clairvaux). Was Hadewijch als 'in den Geist' entrückte schaute war *unseghelec*, unsagbar.'«
9. Meister Eckhart, *Werke*, Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1993, vol. I, p. 149: »Der Mensch, der nun so im Willen Gottes steht, der will nichts anderes, als was Gott ist und was Gottes Wille ist (...). Er ist ledig und entäußert seiner selbst, und alles dessen, was er empfangen soll, dessen muß er ledig sein.«
10. I refer to *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker* (*SV3*) 3rd edition, edited by A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lange, revised by P.P. Rohde, vol. 1-20, Copenhagen, Gyldendals Forlag, 1962-1964, and to the English edition of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, edited and translated by H. and E. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978-1998; furthermore to *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 2. ed., Copenhagen 1968-70. I use the following abbreviations: *(EO) Either/Or*; *(TUD) Three Upbuilding Discourses*; *(FT) Fear and Trembling*; *(CA) The Concept of Anxiety*; *(CUP) Concluding Unscientific Postscript*; *(PH) Purety of Heart is to will one Thing*; *(LF) The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air*; *(SUD) The Sickness unto Death*; *(PC) Practice in Christianity*; *(JFY) Judge for Yourself.*
11. In his introduction to the German edition (Dr. H. Martensen, *Meister Eckart. Eine theologische Studie*, Hamburg, 1842, p. 2-3. Unfortunately the original Danish edition was not at my disposal). Martensen tries to explain the increasing interest in mysticism in his days. Romanticists are nostalgically longing to a glamorized idea of the Middle Ages, the religious contemplation in the quiet convent cell as opposite to the idle, worldly nature of the present times. Regarding himself, Martensen perceives medieval mysticism as a precursor of Hegelian speculation: »Schelling und Hegel haben die Mystik wieder gedacht, und gefordert, dass die in einen schlechten Rationalismus hineingerathene Wissenschaft sich verjunge durch jenes unmittelbare, kindliche Schauen Gottes und der göttlichen Dinge.« Martensen accomplished a considerable *tour de force* by understanding the medieval negative theology as an idealistic-positive one.

12. Scholtens, *Kijk, hier barst de taal*, p. 17.
13. Further and more detailed information on Kierkegaard's knowledge of mystics can be found in several studies by M.M. Thulstrup, »Kierkegaards Encounter with Mysticism Through Speculative Idealism«, in *Liber Academiæ Kierkegaardiensis*, V, p. 31-92, C.A. Reitzels Forlag, Copenhagen, 1984; »Studies of Pietists, Mystics and Church Fathers«, in *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 1, p. 60 f., C.A. Reitzels Forlag, Copenhagen, 1978.
14. Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Søren Kierkegaard truffet. Et liv set af hans samtidige*, C.A. Reitzels Forlag, Copenhagen, 1996, p. 322.
15. I made use of the digital edition by Alastair McKinnon, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff & Stéphane Hogue, 1993.
16. Scholtens, »Kijk, hier barst de taal...,« p. 37-64.
17. This concept must not be confused with rational lucidity. It has to do with sincerity, openness, self-criticism and a lack of conceitedness.
18. E.g. in the *Liber Benedictus: Werke II*, p. 232 f.
19. Both Eckhart and Kierkegaard had the text of James 1:17 as their favourite: »Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.«
20. *Werke*, vol. II, p. 243.
21. *Werke*, vol. I, p. 666.
22. (With thanks to David Kangas for putting me on this track). In a note in his *Journals* of 1852 (*Pap.* X 5 1 A 39), Kierkegaard states that God, being spirit, doubles himself. »But the doubling is exactly in this, that it is suffering, coming from him and that this nevertheless must be an expression of love.« This rather obscure passage refers to the fact that it is hard to live up to one's kinship to God by becoming a spirit in this world, which consists of time and multiplicity. This world is relative (God is pure Subject, there is nothing objective in him *Pap.* XI 2 A 97) and the striving of the religious man means leaving the worldly behind him. Is the idea of Gods doubling of Neo-Platonic origin? Trinitarian speculations à la Dionysius Areopagita or Eckhart in the sense of emanations within the being of God cannot be found in Kierkegaard. The only place where he mentions Trinity at some length (*Pap.* V A 3), he refers more to the way a human can relate to God than to a supposed inner structure in God. Here again one could refer to mystics, including Meister Eckhart, who discerned the majesty of the one God behind the Trinitarian expression. We leave this as it is for now.
23. Werke, vol. II, p. 187.
24. The Hong's translation reads here as follows: »Just as Christianity's joyful message is contained in the doctrine of humanity's inherent kinship with God, so is Christianity's task humanity's likeness to God.« »Humanity's« stands for *Menneskets*, meaning »the human being's,« expressing that the individual self [*den Enkelte*] is the focus. This is why I consider the translation somewhat misleading on this point.
25. *Werke*, vol. I, p. 61.
26. *Werke*, vol. I, p. 69–71.
27. *Werke*, vol. I, p. 73.
28. *Wider dass unlebbare Leben. Studien zur Kommunikation in den »erbaulichen Reden« Sören Kierkegaards*. University of Vienna, 30 November 2000, p. 71-79, where he demonstrates the influence of Tauler's work *Nachfolgung des armen Lebens Christi* on *Training in Christianity of Anti-Climacus*.
29. This to avoid a Hegelian interpretation of the incarnation as the unification of God

and humanity. In his book on Eckhart and other medieval mystics, H.L. Martensen speaks of them as precursors of Hegelian speculation: »Schelling und Hegel haben die Mystik wieder gedacht und gefordert, dass die in einen schlechten Rationalismus hineingerathene Wissenschaft sich verjünge durch jenes unmittelbare, kindliche Schauen Gottes und der göttlichen Dinge,« Martensen, *Meister Eckart*, p. 4.

30. *Werke*, vol. I, p. 361. And Kierkegaard: 15, 121 ff.; *SUD*, 67 ff.
31. *Werke*, vol. I, p. 565.
32. It would be to far off the subject to elaborate on the Aristotelian distinction between *intellectus possibilis* and *intellectus agens*. Eckhart, however, understands complete receptivity as the fulfillment of the *intellectus possibilis*.
33. *Werke*, vol. I, p. 83 ff.
34. *Werke*, vol. II, p. 439.
35. This is not the place to elaborate on the medieval doctrine of analogy to which I referred before. The distinction between the *esse divinum* which is *per se* and the *esse creatum* which is *ab altero et in altero* is in this context relevant in so far as it means that man can relate to things in two ways: either to the thing in itself, or to the good, the truth, the justice in it.
36. *Werke*, vol. I, p. 15: »(...) so sollst du alles, was du in allen deinen Werken vermagst, rein nur Gott zum Lobe tun und sollst davon so ungebunden bleiben, wie das Nichts ungebunden ist, das weder hier noch dort ist.«
37. See Kurt Ruh, *Meister Eckart*, 1989, p. 134.
38. *Werke*, vol. II, p. 209 ff.
39. In my view *Religiosity A* in the *Postscript* is a construction (Christianity without Christ) to enable Climacus to clarify the meaning of the incarnation. It is not a phenomenological description of pre-Christian religion.
40. This self-annihilation is to be understood as *coram deo* that is not – at least not in any direct way – *coram hominibus*.