

# Meister Eckhart and Moses Maimonides

by [Petr Chylek](#) (January 2024)



Meister Eckhart– Josef Vyletal, 1974

**Both Meister Eckhart (circa 1260-1328) and Moses Maimonides (1138-1204)** were highly recognized mystics in the Christian (Eckhart) and Jewish (Maimonides) communities of their time. As original thinkers, they found themselves in conflict with the orthodoxy of their respective religions. Maimonides encountered critics of his work throughout most of his life, while Meister Eckhart was accused of heresy by the Inquisition during the few last years of his life.

The essence of mysticism is well described by 18th-century Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lutzatto (1707-1746). He writes:[\[1\]](#)

*A man should naturally be able to teach himself, to understand and to reason with his intellect, and thus gain knowledge from his observation of things and their properties. This is a natural process of human reason. However, there exists another mean of gaining knowledge. This is called Divine Inspiration (RUACH HA KODESH in Hebrew). In this manner one can gain knowledge of things accessible to human reason, however, one can also gain information that could not be gained through natural means.*

Very little is known about the early years of Meister Eckhart. He was born in Germany, but the years of his birth and death are not exactly known. As a teenager, he joined the Dominican order in the city of Erfurt to become a friar. Friars did not live in monasteries like monks; they were supposed to interact with and teach ordinary people. Meister Eckhart studied and later taught in Erfurt, Cologne, and Paris. He became a highly recognized teacher, preacher, and mystic.

The Dominican order emphasized the lifelong study of scriptures and teaching. In the Middle Ages, the Dominican order was occasionally in dispute with another order, the Franciscans. Both orders were established in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century but emphasized different aspects of religious life. In contrast to the Dominican prioritization of intellectual study, the Franciscans based their teaching on actions; living in poverty, practicing humility, and caring for the needs of neighbors. Both orders participated in the Inquisition, "to protect the purity of the teaching of the Church".

Meister Eckhart's attitude towards the regular religion can be deduced from his statement.[\[2\]](#)

*"Theologians may quarrel, but the mystics of the world speak the same language."*

Imagine a flat-roof building and people on all sides of it using ladders of different colors to reach the top. People on various levels of their chosen ladder argue with people on other ladders about which color of the ladder is better and try to convince other climbers to come back down and use the ladder of their color. They do not realize that all the ladders lead to the same roof. The mystics are those who have already reached the top, enjoying the sunshine and each other's company.

Needless to say, the powerful of the Church did not share Eckhart's opinion.

### **Meister Eckhart and the Inquisition**

Meister Eckhart had the following to say about prayer:

*"If the only prayer you said in your whole life was 'Thank you,' that would suffice."*

*"Whoever prays for this or that, prays for something evil, for he prays for denial of good and the denial of God."*

The above citations are one of the reasons why the Inquisition accused Eckhart of heresy. I know that this idea even today contradicts many religious leaders in their approach to prayer. There are prayer books, used for hundreds of years, that specify which prayers should be said at what time. However, not all faithful believe in the effectiveness of prayer to change the intentions and plans of God. A few years ago I was a member of a group learning Hebrew and often we came to discussions of various Torah topics. When we came to prayer one Jewish lady declared that prayers work because they change the one who is praying. I think she was right.

Another group of Meister Eckhart's thoughts relates to the obstacles that humanity puts between itself and God:

*"The less theorizing you do about God, the more receptive you are to His inpouring."*

*"Any object you have in your mind, however good, will be a barrier between you and the Truth."*

*"Those who seek nothing, neither honor nor profit nor holiness nor reward nor heaven, but who have renounced all this, including what is their own—in such men God is glorified."*

The ideas expressed in this group of thoughts were another that the Inquisition took as heresy. The Inquisition court that considered Meister Eckhart's case was composed of several cardinals and the leading figures of the Franciscan order. All those people sought honor, profit, rewards, and holiness in the eyes of the faithful. Eckhart apparently interfered with their goals.

Here are three more statements that the Inquisition used to accuse Meister Eckhart of heresy, in which he describes a close relationship between humanity and God:

*"A good man is the only begotten Son of God."*

*"Everything that the Holy Scriptures says of Christ is entirely true of every good and holy man."*

*"All that is proper to the divine nature is also proper to the just and godly man. Such a man performs everything that God performs, and he has created heaven and earth together with God. He is a begetter of the eternal Word, and God could do nothing without such a man."*

These are surprising statements, even by today's standards. Eckhart is saying that as much as man needs God, God also needs man. God and just man are co-creators of heaven on earth. The current chaos testifies that this collaboration is broken.

The last few thoughts of Meister Eckhart that I want to mention address the darkness that is encountered as part of human life and the light to which it can lead:

*"Truly, it is in the darkness that one finds the light, so*

*when we are in sorrow, then this light is nearest of all to us."*

*"If a man had committed a thousand mortal sins, and if that man were now in a proper state, he should not wish not to have committed them."*

The last citation is again an article from the Inquisition accusing Eckhart of heresy. Eckhart indicates that a great sinner who has reformed himself might have an advantage over a not-so-great sinner. I think he is correct. Most of us, ordinary law-abiding citizens think that we are not so bad and therefore we allow the intensity of our search for God, or of our inner self, to be lukewarm.

One of my fellow seekers was, as a young man, drafted into the US Army and was sent to Vietnam. After his return to the US, he became an alcoholic and drug addict and he ended up as a homeless person living on the street. Then he realized that that was not the life he wanted. Slowly with divine help, he learned and after a few decades, he established his own company. Operating with high ethical standards he became quite successful. Now, after retirement, he is helping several addicts on their recovery path. Despite getting lost in a deep forest, he found the way out and now is helping others out of darkness.

### **Eckhart's roots and legacy**

Ultimately, the Inquisition found over one hundred citations from Meister Eckhart's writings which they classified as heretic. Meister Eckhart appealed his case to Pope John XXII. The Pope reduced the number of citations suspected of heresy to 28 and asked Meister Eckhart to explain and defend himself. Before the case could be resolved, Meister Eckhart died.

Knowledgeable people claim that he died of natural causes. How much the stress of the Inquisition, and the knowledge that tens of people were already burned after being found guilty by the Inquisition, contributed to his timely death remains uncertain.

Meister Eckhart developed a unique understanding of God and the Soul. According to Eckhart, above the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) there is the Godhead, God's essence (GRUND in German) that is completely incomprehensible to man. The human Soul is made of the same GRUND, God's essence. Since there is only one essence (GRUND), the essence of God and the essence of the Soul are the same.

This idea is similar to a branch of ancient Hindu philosophy known as ADVAITA based on Vedanta and Upanishads[3]. The DVAITA in Sanskrit means two or duality; ADVAITA means not two or not duality. There is not a God and His creation. This would be a duality (Dvaita). All is the same; all is Brahman (Hindu equivalent of God's essence or GRUND in German). This is what Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda brought to the West in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with their teaching.

The same idea is hidden in the fundamental Jewish prayer, in the SHEMA. In Hebrew SHEMA ISRAEL, ADONAI ELOHEINU, ADONAI ECHAD (where Adonai is used instead of the God's name YHVH). This is usually translated as: Listen Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one (referring to the monotheism of the Jewish faith). However, ADONAI ECHAD can be also translated as Adonai is the only one. Thus, there is nothing but Adonai, everything is God, the same idea as Brahman in ADVAITA.

### **Meister Eckhart and Moses Maimonides**

Meister Eckhart, like Moses Maimonides, realized that there

was a wide gap between those who were educated and capable of progressing on a mystical path and those who could not. However, their response to this gap was different. Eckhart believed that he was given the power to educate through his preaching, making it possible to bring all people to an understanding of more esoteric ideas. Over a hundred of his sermons, presented in the German language, were preserved. On the other hand, Maimonides limited his Guide for the Perplexed to those familiar with the spiritual esoteric ideas and science of his time.

Meister Eckhart expresses his tolerant approach by the statement that Moses, Christ, and Aristotle (the Philosopher) taught the same truth. Maimonides proclaimed that all people, Jews or not, can achieve a place in the higher spiritual worlds (The World to Come) depending only on their lives.

Most writers do not see a connection between Moses Maimonides and Meister Eckhart. This is at least partially due to the fact that they analyze and comment mostly on Eckhart's sermons. These sermons were written in German and represented Eckhart's attempt to explain complicated theological and mystical concepts to ordinary people and to inspire them to change their lives accordingly. In sermons, you usually do not discuss the sources of your opinions. It is only in Meister Eckhart's works written in Latin, especially in his commentaries on Genesis and Exodus, where Eckhart provides references to the sources related to his ideas. In his commentaries on the first two books of Torah, he lists almost a hundred references [\[4\]](#) to Maimonides, especially to his "Guide for the Perplexed".

Moses Maimonides finished his major philosophical and mystical work, The Guide for the Perplexed, during the last decade of his life. Since he envisioned what kind of response he could expect from his contemporary Rabbinic establishment, he wrote his masterwork in such a way that it would be available only to exceptionally well-qualified scholars. To ensure this he



wrote the Guide in the Arabic language but written with Hebrew letters. Thus, only those who knew both languages were able to read it in the original. It was not till the Maimonides' death in 1204 that the Guide was translated to Hebrew. The upheaval that followed, called the second Maimonides controversy, proved Maimonides' intuition correct. He was thus able to postpone the criticism and rejection of his work by a ruling Rabbinic class into the years when he would not be here anymore.

The Rabbinic anger towards Maimonides reached its peak in the year 1232 when the burning of handwritten copies of the Guide was organized in Paris by Jewish rabbis in collaboration with Dominican monks. While Rabbis were busy burning the Guide, they did not know that in neighboring Germany there would soon appear another scholar, also a Dominican, laboring on Maimonides's ideas. This was of course Meister Eckhart, who became one of the leading mystics of medieval Europe.

All this was happening in times of intense animosity among the official leaders of both religions. Most discussions between religions involve the orthodox dogmatic layers. Mystics, those who go beyond the exoteric formal teaching looking for deeper spiritual meaning of apparently simple stories, usually do not get involved in these quarrels. They realize that beyond the formal teaching, there is a core, that is common to all, to Christian mystics, Jewish Kabbalists, Muslim Sufis, Hindus, Buddhists, as well as to mystics of smaller religious groups. More about mysticism and Moses Maimonides can be found in earlier issues of the New English Review [\[5\]](#), [\[6\]](#).

As a more recent case, Rabbi Johnathan Sacks (1948-2020), former Chief Rabbi of the UK, demonstrated seeds of mystical understanding when he wrote in the first edition of his book *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* [\[7\]](#):

*“God is greater than religion. He is only partially comprehended by any faith. God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims. No one creed has a monopoly on spiritual truth; no one civilization encompasses all spiritual, ethical, and artistic expression of mankind.”*

Some of the Orthodox rabbis accused Rabbi Sacks of heresy. In later editions of his book, he deleted these statements. I do not know whether he retracted or just realized that there is a difference between what Rabbi Sacks as a Chief Rabbi of the UK is supposed to say and what is the personal belief of Rabbi Sacks.

This brings us back to the beginning of our discussion, back to Meister Eckhart’s pronouncement “Theologians may quarrel, but the mystics of the world speak the same language.”

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[1] Moshe Chaim Lutzatto, *The Way of God*, Feldheim Publishers, New York 1997.

[2] All citations contributed to Meister Eckhart can be found in Bull of Pope John XXII, or on YouTube: Master Eckhart Quotes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p531UaqVIXI>.

[3] *The Principle Upanishads*, Dover Publications 2003.

[4] Schwartz Y., *Meister Eckhart and Moses Maimonides: From Judeo-Arabic Rationalism to Christian Mysticism*. In J. Hackett (Ed.), *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*. Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition, Volume 36, Published by Brill 2013.

[5] *Maimonides as the Greatest Jewish Mystic*. New English Review, September 2022.

[6] *Mysticism: Real or Self Delusion?* New English Review, July 2023.

[7] Sacks, J., *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the*

*Clash of Civilizations*. Published by: Bloomsbury Continuum. The cited statement appears only in the 1st edition of the book.

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