THESIS

THE IMPLICATIONS OF PROCESS METAPHYSICS
FOR CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

THE IMPLICATIONS OF PROCESS METAPHYSICS
FOR CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

This study gives a metaphysical discussion of mystical Chris-
tianity, comparing and contrasting the traditional static metaphysics
with a metaphysical scheme where process is fundamental. Two Christian
mystics, Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross, are used to
exemplify the pattern of life and traditional metaphysical outlook of
Christian mysticism. Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysical scheme, as
presented in his Process and Reality, serves as the process alternative.
For all three persons the doctrine of God provides the focus for
metaphysical discussion.

The principal aim of the metaphysical discussion is to argue that
process metaphysics provides a more adequate interpretation for the
experiences of the Christian mystics than the static, non-process
metaphysics the mystics themselves used. The main characteristic of the
mystics' experience which metaphysics must take into account is the
intimacy the mystic feels with God. Eckhart interprets the intimacy
through an ontological union which occurs on God's transcendent level of
existence. St. John suggests that no ontological union occurs but that
mystical experience is a volitional transformation. Whitehead's
metaphysical categories do not allow for an ontological union but do
provide a conception of God and a model of human experience where a very
intimate relation is possible between the mystic and God. I argue that

Whitehead's view of God as relative, changing, and interacting with the world, more adequately represents what the mystics experience than the view of God as non-relative, static, and metaphysically distinct from the world, which characterizes the theologies of the mystics themselves.

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I. INTRODUCTION

One question that reaches deeply into the nature of the discipline of the philosophical study of religion is the relation between metaphysics and theology. Any philosophy presupposes certain categories of thought through which reality is understood. Metaphysics is the segment of philosophy that articulates categories intended to describe the fundamental nature of reality and which seeks to construe principles that apply to all facets of experience. Thus human experience is the starting point in the development of a metaphysical scheme. An adequate metaphysics must cogently account for all types of experience and remain self-consistent. The types of experience which must be taken into account include ordinary sense perceptions, phenomena derived from scientific investigation and experimentation, and general intuitions of the nature of reality. Science unveils a dimension of reality which cannot be detected through the senses alone. Chemists, for example, can convincingly argue that the material world is composed of atoms, themselves so infinitesimal that they are beyond sense perceptions. These entities which are not experienced directly are an important part of our understanding of the physical world. Metaphysics cannot ignore such information. Neither can metaphysics neglect the intuitions that some persons have about the world. Such intuitions reflect an awareness about reality which cannot necessarily be reduced to specific sense perceptions. Religious experiences also bear on metaphysical speculation. Religious experiences are of many types. They can vary

from intense, ecstatic episodes to general intuitions like those mentioned above. The present discussion concerns the ability of metaphysics to account for a certain type of religious experience, that of the Christian mystics.

A point relevant to the relation between metaphysics and religion is that the categories ingrained in the thought patterns of persons at least partially shape the interpretation of their experiences. Metaphysical assumptions directly affect how one expresses his understanding of the world. Often metaphysical assumptions are not questioned or even fully realized. But if these assumptions are recognized or made explicit, intellectual endeavors will often be seen to be based upon the metaphysical categories that happen to prevail at any given time and culture and that have not been given sufficient critical attention. A benefit of studying metaphysics is that this study can enable us to analyze the assumptions accepted in a school of thought and to assess their appropriateness and adequacy. It is possible that some metaphysical principles may be more adequate than others as a basis for the interpretation of certain types of experience. The present discussion centers on this possibility.

Religion imposes an extra burden on metaphysical speculation. Philosophers who formulate metaphysical schemes often concern themselves primarily with sensory experience of the world. But some persons have religious intuitions which have a profound effect on the interpretation of their experiences. In the West these intuitions have been traditionally interpreted as implying a belief in God. Christian theology articulates this belief in God through accepted metaphysical principles and religious language.

Traditionally Christian theology has interpreted its understanding of reality through a belief system based on the prevailing concepts of Western philosophy, which have been dominated by a metaphysics of being. Static categories have been imposed on Christian theology from its inception, shaping even its concept of God.

The category of substance exemplifies the influence of static metaphysics on Christian theology. Substance epitomizes static thought. In its most common definition, substance is the substratum of any given thing. It is that which endures unchanged in its 'essential' character, even as changes occur. Aristotle first promulgated the doctrine of substance, and it has had profound influence on the Western philosophical tradition since his time.

Christianity has thoroughly integrated the belief in substance into its theology. Throughout the history of the Christian church substance has been associated with orthodox doctrine. For example, the fourth and fifth century doctrines of the status of Christ and of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, two central aspects of Christianity, are directly grounded in the belief in substance. From the time of the early church councils of Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon the status of Christ has been understood in substantialist terms. These early councils defined the status of Christ in the Trinity in terms of a substantial relationship. The Catholic Church's doctrine of the Eucharist, transsubstantiation, also requires belief in substance. To explain the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine, these elements are considered in substance/attribute categories. Thus understood, the attributes of the bread and wine remain the same when consecrated, but the substance itself is changed into the spiritual

substance of Christ's body and blood. [1]

Despite this historical dependence of Christian theology on static, substantialist metaphysics, many theologians assert that a metaphysics based on process categories supplies a better foundation on which Christian theology can be built. Process metaphysics ascribes reality in categories which will give a more fundamental role to change, as over against permanence or static being. Process theology articulates Christian beliefs through a process metaphysics.

A metaphysical scheme based on process principles was formulated by Alfred North Whitehead in his Process and Reality. In this work, Whitehead challenges the static and substantialist metaphysics that has dominated Western philosophy. Christian theologians, such as David Griffin, John Cobb, Jr., and many others, have used Whitehead's thought as a basis for articulating a process theology. Many aspects of Christianity have been interpreted with the categories of process thought. The aspect of Christian thought and experience that concerns this discussion is that of Christian mysticism.

The study of Christian mysticism reveals a complex relation between religious experience, doctrines, and metaphysical assumptions. The writings of the mystics reflect these three factors, and possibly others. A mystic, like any other person, has metaphysical assumptions which define how he interprets all his experiences. Christian mystics also adhere to the basic tenets of Christian doctrine. The religious experience must be articulated through both a general metaphysical

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[1] For a view of the eucharist from a process perspective see Thomas Dicken, 'Process Philosophy and the Real Presence,' The Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1969.

scheme and through the established doctrines of the faith. There is no doubt that there is some influence of metaphysical assumptions on the articulation of mystical experience. What is not certain is the degree of this influence. One possibility is that one's metaphysical assumptions influence only the interpretation of mystical experience. But is is also possible that these assumptions snape the experience itself. This issue bears importantly on the topic at hand and will be discussed in due course.

Within Christianity there are some individuals who are classified as mystics. Christian mystics have much in common with the mainstream of Christianity, but have important traits which set them apart. Since mystics still claim to be Christian, they hold in common the basic faith, doctrines, and practices of other Christians. The life of the Christian mystic is dominated by personal religious experience. But this is not enough to distinguish them from other Christian groups such as the Pietists. What distinguishes mystical Christians is that they cultivate a lifestyle that will nurture ongoing religious experiences which they invariably interpret as some type of union with God. Other Christians may claim an experiential intimacy with God, but only the mystics claim an intensity of intimacy that joins them, in some manner, with God. Christian mystics also usually claim that they gain insight into the nature of God through their spiritual experiences. This seems to claim some cognitive content for mystical experience, though the mystics always insist that the content is not within the realm of the discursive intellect.

The pattern of life of the mystics which nurtures their experiences is one of contemplation. The association between the terms 'mystic' and

'contemplative' is so close that they are almost synonymous. Christian contemplatives lead a life of prayer and devotion, usually set apart from the secular world. The monastic orders of the Catholic church have provided the environment for Christian contemplatives. If there is a distinction to be made between contemplatives and mystics, that distinction lies in the intensity of their religious experiences and in the degree of intimacy claimed with God. It is true that not all Christian contemplatives would call their experiences a spiritual union with God. It is also true that not all the contemplatives within the religious orders attain mystical heights of experience. But the goal of all contemplatives is some degree of spiritual intimacy.

The monastic movement was highly conducive to the contemplatives of early Christianity. Even in its later development, Christian mysticism has been mostly confined to the monastic elements of the Church. In the early Eastern church, monks such as Antony of Egypt, in the fourth century, led a contemplative life of extreme asceticism and established a way of life that was followed by many later contemplatives. The contemplative life was established in the Western church by church fathers such as St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Benedict of Nursea. Many early Christian monks learned the type of contemplation which is the essence of Christian mysticism in these early monasteries, although the speculative theology usually associated with more advanced mysticism had not yet fully developed. After about the twelth century, individuals such as Peter Damian, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Hugo of St. Victor emerged from the monasteries of the Western church and initiated great reforms in the contemplative orders.

The mendicant orders also nourished the development of mysticism within the Church. These orders practiced communal as well as individual poverty, and individuals in the orders often had to beg for alms to support themselves. The Franciscans and the Dominicans were the two most important mendicant orders. Out of the Dominican order came a distinctive type of German mysticism with leaders such as Meister Eckhart, Heinrich Suso, and Johann Tauler. Thomas 'A Kempis also emerged about this time with his famous writing, Imitation of Christ.

The monastic orders in Spain also produced mystics. St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avilla were in the Carmelite order in sixteenth century Spain. They led a mystical life that has had great influence on Christianity. These Spanish mystics were connected with the Catholic Reformation, which also brought about the French School of mysticism, with such notable individuals as Pierre de Burulle and St. Vincent de Paul.

The following chapters present a discussion of the metaphysical dimension of Christian mysticism. The final goal will be to assess the possibility of a Christian mysticism based on a Whiteheadian process metaphysic. It is true that Christian mysticism historically has been based on static, substantialist metaphysics. The question of how a process understanding might express the intimate religious encounters of the Christian mystics is raised when process theology and Christian mysticism meet.

The discussion will center around the doctrine of God. In whatever metaphysical scheme that underlies a Christian theology, the understanding of God is central. It will be of interest first to investigate how mystics have understood God, given their religious

experiences and their metaphysical categories. Next, a view of God from a process perspective will be presented. The metaphysics of these two views of God will then be compared and contrasted. Finally, I will consider the question of whether the process understanding of God is adequate to the type of religious experience that finds expression in Christian mysticism, using the doctrine of God as a focal point for comparison and contrast.

Two outstanding Christian mystics will serve as examples of the static, substantialist thinking which has traditionally prevailed in Christian theology. These are Meister Eckhart, a Dominican who lived in medieval Germany and St. John of the Cross, the sixteenth century Spanish Carmelite. These two are excellent examples for this discussion, for several reasons. The highly intellectual mysticism that Eckhart espoused contrasts with the emotional and passionate life of St. John. Eckhart and St. John each developed an understanding of God that offers interesting variations from the other, even though both are almost universally classified as being mystical. Discussing these two will give a broader perspective on Christian mysticism than would a discussion of only one mystic, or of two more similar Christian mystics.

Eckhart and St. John represent distinct contrasts despite their common contemplative lifestyles. Eckhart brings to Christian mysticism a keen intellectual and explicitly metaphysical perspective. He was as much a philosopher as a mystic, thus creating a mystical theology based on well-reasoned principles. St. John of the Cross represents a more passionate type of Christian mysticism. The mystical path he traveled was solitary, strenuous, and very spiritual. Although St. John was also trained in theology, he did not produce an explicitly philosophical

theology. His writing concentrates on the instruction and description of the contemplative experience rather than on metaphysics. It is possible, however, to extract metaphysical principles from his theology. Much of the practice of St. John's spirituality and the main tenets of his theology have pervaded the contemplative monastic orders. He thus presents a Christian mysticism that represents a broad and important part of the Christian tradition.

My discussion of these two Christian mystics aims to give a general perspective on what mysticism is like in Christianity. Meister Eckhart will be treated in Chapter II and St. John of the Cross in Chapter III. I will provide biographical and historical background for both men in order to illustrate the practical aspects of the mystical life. An acquaintance with the indvidual mystic's life helps make his theology and metaphysics more understandable. Following the biographical discussions, I will present the concepts related to God in each man's theology so as to focus the metaphysical discussion and to draw out the principles which characterize the thought of each.

By way of contrast with the doctrines of God assented to by Eckhart and St. John of the Cross, the process-oriented understanding of God in Whitehead's metaphysics will be presented in Chapter IV. Whitehead's Process and Reality will be the key source. Though Whitehead did not explicitly define the God of his speculative metaphysical scheme as the God of Christianity, many Christian process theologians have used Whitehead's scheme as the basis for their rendering of the concept of God. Whitehead's doctrine of God will provide the focus for drawing out his basic metaphysical position.

Chapter V will compare and contrast the metaphysics of the traditional Christian contemplatives with that of Whitehead. It will be of interest here to compare the nature of God implied by each of the opposing metaphysical systems. The strengths and weaknesses of these metaphysics in relating to mystical experiences of the Christian God will be discussed. Here I aim to integrate process theology and Christian mysticism. I will discuss how a Whiteheadian understanding of God would fit into the spiritual experiences of the Christian contemplatives. The key issue is whether a process metaphysics might be more adequate to experiences of profound spiritual intimacy than the static metaphysics which has traditionally prevailed.

II. MEISTER ECKHART

Meister Eckhart has been the focus of much attention in the study of Christian mysticism. Though he lived seven hundred years ago, the study of Eckhart's thought is still important because it embodies a theological and metaphysical position that has had much influence on mystical Christianity since his time. This study of Eckhart will concentrate on his doctrine of God, but I will first give a brief introduction to his life and works and to some of his general metaphysical concepts. Eckhart has become a classic example of Christian mysticism who especially lends himself to theological inquiry in that he was at once a clear-thinking theologian and a passionate exponent of the mystical path.

Historical Background and Biography

To understand the thought of Eckhart, one must know something about his world and times. Johannes Eckhart was born in the year 1260 to a family of relatively high status. He was the son of the steward of a feudal castle in the Thuringian forest in medieval Germany. At this time Europe provided a unique intellectual atmosphere. St. Thomas Aquinas died about a year after Eckhart entered the Dominican order. Scholasticism dominated the theology of the time. The Dominican order itself, to which Thomas Aquinas also belonged, was at its peak when Eckhart became a member. But the Franciscan order, established only about ten years prior to the Dominican, was in competition and conflict

with the Dominican order. Dante was a contemporary of Eckhart, although they probably never met. The decline of feudalism, the revival of trade and commerce, and the growth of towns reflect the economic trends of the time. Along with these developments came greater interest in education, which drew children of the nobility such as Eckhart to the religious orders. The Dominican order was especially attractive. This order did not usually accept novices under the age of fifteen, so we presume that Eckhart was at least this age upon entering the Dominican monastery at Erfurt. Here he made his novitiate and worked on his early studies.

Eckhart's higher education began at about age seventeen when he was sent to Paris to be a student of the arts. In 1280, at the age of twenty, he was sent to the Dominican _Studium Generale_ in Cologne, founded by St. Albert Magnus, to study theology. From 1293-1294 he was again at Paris where he lectured on the _Sentences_ of Peter Lombard, which was part of the usual course of study in the University, and prepared himself for his master's degree in theology. In Paris, he lived in the Dominican house of St. Jacques where Thomas Aquinas had resided only a generation before. [1]

Eckhart's energies thereafter were directed to administrative as well as theological duties. He returned to Erfurt where he was named prior to the Dominican house there, and was later given the responsibility of Vicar General of Thuringia. About 1300 he returned again to Paris and graduated as Master of sacred theology in 1302, after which he was called Meister (or Master) Eckhart. It is not clear why

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[1] See Introduction to Meister Eckhart, _Parisian Questions and Prologues_, trans. by Armand A. Maurer, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), p. 9.

the title stuck in Eckhart's case and not with others who received the same degree. It is possible that Eckhart referred to himself in this way, and that this name was then used by his earlier followers. [2] At this time he also became a Regent Master and held the Dominican chair of theology for foreigners. Gonsalvo of Spain held the Franciscan chair as Regent Master, and it was with him that Eckhart would debate the theological issues separating the Dominicans and Franciscans. [3] It was indeed an honor for Eckhart to be taken from administrative responsibilities at Erfurt to defend his order at the University in Paris. In 1303 Eckhart once again returned to the administration of the Dominican order, first as Provincial Minister of Sacony and then as Vicar General of Bohemia. Later, in 1310, he was elected as Provincial Minister of all Aleminnia. [4] This last election was not confirmed. Instead Eckhart was sent back to Paris in 1311 to lecture at the Studium Generale. This stay at Paris lasted only until the year 1314, when he became Professor of Theology at Strasburg, and a lector in the Dominican convent there. Eckhart remained at Strasburg at least until the year 1320, and served as preacher and spiritual leader to the lay people as well as those committed to the religious life. His reputation spread widely while he was at Strasburg, and he acquired many sincere followers. His theology appealed especially to nunneries, where mystical teaching was accepted and more popular than at monasteries.

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[2] See Introduction to, Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation, trans. by Raymond B. Blakney, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1941), p. xix.

[3] James M. Clark, The Great German Mystics, (Folcroft PA: Folcroft Press, 1941), p. 9.

[4] Clark, p. 9.

Sometime after 1321 he returned to the Studium Generale in Cologne to teach and remained there until approximately 1326.

The latter part of Meister Eckhart's life was complicated by his confrontation with the infamous Inquisition. In 1326 the Archbishop of Cologne, Henry of Viniburg, called him before the tribunal of the Inquisition to answer charges of heresy. This action was apparently an extension of the Dominican-Franciscan conflict. Eckhart was the most outstanding Dominican in Germany at the time. His popularity made him the subject of attack from the Franciscans, who were generally embittered against their rival mendicant order. Their bitterness was further aggravated by the swift canonization of Thomas Aquinas, which was seen as a major boost for the Dominicans. [5] The Archbishop who accused Eckhart was a Franciscan, but the person who was assigned to investigate him, a Dominican named Nicholas of Strasburg, readily acquitted him after hearing Eckhart's arguments against the charges—quite to the Archbishop's displeasure. Then the Inquisition accused Eckhart a second time, this time at the hands of two Franciscans, who compiled a list of errors extracted from Eckhart's sermons and writings. In response to these accusations Eckhart wrote his famous Defense, and on February 13, 1327, in the Dominican church in Cologne, he publicly answered the charges. Immediately thereafter he set out to Avignon to personally plead his case with the Pope, his right as a Dominican according to the Libertas Romanas. But he died before the conclusion of his trial. Pope John XXII, on March of 1329, posthumously condemned twenty-eight of Eckhart's propositions. Seventeen of these were labeled

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[5] Blakney, p. xxiii.

as heresy, while the other eleven were deemed consistent with Catholic teaching if accompanied with proper explanation. [6]

The formal condemnation ended much of the official influence of Eckhart's teaching but did not seriously mar his personal reputation. The exile of the papacy to Avignon mitigated the influence of the papacy in the eyes of the German populace. Pope John himself was probably under pressure by the Franciscans to condemn Eckhart's teachings. The twenty-eight disputed propositions were only a small part of the original Eckhart material scrutinized by the Inquisition, leaving a great deal free from official controversy.

Meister Eckhart wrote in both German and Latin. His more formal treatises were in Latin, and his sermons and less formal spiritual writings he wrote in German. His German writings, though less rigorous philosophically, demonstrate the implications for everyday living of the theology laid down in his Latin works. Among his Latin works are: a commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences, of which only the introduction survives; a treatise on the Lord's Prayer entitled Pater Noster; several commentaries on Scripture, i.e., two on Genesis, one on Exodus, Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom, and the Gospel of John; his Defense, and his uncompleted Opus Tripartitum. In German many of his sermons and his instructive writings, The Book of Divine Comfort and The Aristocrat (which were probably intended as one work), Talks of Instruction, and About Disinterest have survived.

Scholars have carefully preserved and edited Eckhart's works. His German works were originally edited and published by Franz Pfeiffer in

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[6] Maurer, p. 10.

Deutche Mystiker des XIV. Jahrhunderts, [7] which was translated into English by C. de B. Evans as _The Work of Meister Eckhart._ [8] This pioneering and often unreliable edition has been superseded by the Kohlhammer edition by Josef Quint, who has produced definitive texts of Eckhart's Latin [9] as well as his German writings. [10] One defect of earlier studies of Eckhart was their total neglect of his Latin treatises. Though Eckhart maintained a fairly consistent doctrine in his German and Latin works, when he wrote in Latin he showed more intellectual refinement.

Eckhart's German works used in this study are twenty-eight of his sermons, selected from Pfeiffer's collection, _The Talks of Instruction,_ _The Book of Divine Comfort, The Aristocrat,_ and _About Disinterest,_ all translated by Raymond Blakney in _Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation._ His Latin works used are his _Parisian Questions,_ the prologues to his _Opus Tripartitum_ and _A Commentary on Exodus,_ translated by Armand Maurer in _Parisian Questions and Prologues._ Though any original research must be done with the German and Latin texts, these two translations provide students studying Eckhart in English with careful translations of his most important writings.

General Metaphysical Concepts

Eckhart bases his theology on a metaphysical system in which being

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[7] Gottinnen, 1924, 1957.

[8] Watkins, England, 1924.

[9] Josef Quint, et. al., _Meister Eckhart. Die deutchen Werke._ Kohlhammer edition, Vols. I-V, 1938ff.

[10] E. Benz, Josef Quint, et.al. _Meister Eckhart. Die lateinschen Werke,_ Kohlhammer edition, Vols. I-V, 1938ff.

dominates becoming. In Eckhart's time, just as throughout much of the history of Western thought, what is static is associated with perfection, while change denotes imperfection. Being is given the ultimate ontological status, and becoming is said to be derivative from being, having only secondary ontological status. This conviction dominates Eckhart's thinking and shapes his concept of God. Here I will discuss Eckhart's general metaphysical concepts, focusing on his assimilation of ideas from other thinkers, and especially on the extent to which substance, Platonic ideas, and changelessness are important to his metaphysical view of the world.

Influence of other thinkers

Many thinkers contributed greatly to Eckhart's theological and metaphysical understanding. Thomistic scholasticism and Neoplatonism were both highly influential on him. Thomas Aquinas aimed at formulating a synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology. Neoplatonism was the school of thought in the tradition of Plotinus, who developed a speculative philosophy based on Plato's thought. Thus Plato and Aristotle, two very important figures in the Western philosophical tradition, played key roles in the Eckhart's intellectual development.

Plato, whom Eckhart referred to as 'that great priest,' [11] influenced Christian thinking of Eckhart's day largely through the Neoplatonist Plotinus (205-270). But Plato's own works also continued to be read; his Timaeus was especially influential because it provided a cosmology which many medieval thinkers such as Eckhart largely

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[11] Sermon XX in Blakney, p. 190.

assimilated. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was a Christian thinker, strongly influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy, to whom Eckhart also directed much attention. In addition, Dionysius, a sixth century Christian mystic who conceived a mystical theology laden with Neoplatonic thought, was also studied by Eckhart. In Eckhart's day Dionysius was believed to be the convert of Paul referred to in the Acts of the Apostles. [12] Largely because of his false apostolic authority, Dionysius strongly influenced medieval theology towards Neoplatonism. Indeed, much Neoplatonic influence pervades Eckhart's own world view.

Aristotle, known as 'the Philosopher,' also exerted much influence on medieval Christian theology. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) created a synthesis of Aristotle's ideas and the Christian theology of his day. Aquinas was the most respected authority of Eckhart's time and for many centuries to follow. The standards of orthodoxy in Eckhart's era were set by the scholasticism of St. Thomas Aquinas. Though the world-view of this school differs in important ways from Neoplatonism, Eckhart derived concepts from both camps. Avicenna (980-1037), an Arabian philosopher, was an authority respected by Eckhart who promulgated Aristotelian ideas. Albert Magnus (1200-1280), who founded the Dominican Studium Generale in Cologne, where Eckhart studied, and Boethius (480-524) were among the other thinkers whom Eckhart studied and respected. Thus, though Eckhart made original contributions to Christian Theology, he drew extensively from authorities of the past. Philosophically, Eckhart's thought generally conformed to the intellectual trends of his time, though some of his ideas had

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[12] Acts 17:31.

implications that were unacceptable to Church authorities of his day.

Plato's theory of ideas

Plato's theory of ideas represents an important part of Eckhart's metaphysics. For Plato the realm of ideas exceeds the physical world in value and has a more fundamental ontological status than the particular objects that 'participate' in them. Objects derive their existence from participating in ideas or universals, e.g., a tree exists because it participates in 'treeness.' Eckhart's understanding of ideas is much the same. Plato's Greek word is idea (from idein, meaning to see), for which Eckhart in German uses bild. [13] Eckhart's use of Platonic ideas is illustrated by the following passages:

> Thus, know that the name or word 'goodness' stands for nothing more or less than pure and simple goodness and so, when we speak of 'the good,' that should mean goodness infused into something or begotten by the unbegotten goodness. (14)

> When the agents of the soul contact creatures, they take and make ideas and likenesses of them and bear them back again into the self. It is by means of these ideas that the soul knows about external creatures. . . . [F]irst an idea is taken and then absorbed, and in this way the soul connects with the phenomenal world. (15)

> Now the purpose of a cognitive likeness is to represent something to the intellect. (16)

A cognitive likeness is the principle of the operations of the

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[13] Blakney, p. x.

[14] 'The Book of Divine Comfort' in Blakney, p. 43.

[15] Sermon I in Blakney, P. 97.

[16] Parisian Question II: 'Is an Angel's Understanding, as Denoted in Action, the same as his Existence?' in Maurer, p. 53.

> senses and intellect. Now a cognitive likeness is in no sense a being. (17)

> The active intellect abstracts ideas from external things and strips them of all that is material or accidental and passes them on to the passive intellect, thus begetting their spiritual counterparts there. (18)

The first passage above demonstrates Eckhart's use of a view of the archetypal ideas most like that in Plato's metaphysics. In the next four excerpts the concept of ideas is used in a much more epistemological sense. For Eckhart, ideas are abstracted by the intellect so that the soul can know material entities. The ideas themselves, however, are not material; they are above the realm of creatures.

But Eckhart does not deify the ideas. Ideas are non-material, so their status is higher than that of the physical world. One of the agents of the soul, the intellect, is an idea. However, the soul itself is not an idea, nor is God an idea. [19] Eckhart even explicitly states that ideas have nothing to do with God:

> There is nothing like the divine Being, for in him there is neither idea or form. (20)

Ideas, then, are intermediaries between the physical world and the soul. The soul knows God on a certain level through ideas, though, as we shall see later, Eckhart's goal is to know God without these intermediaries.

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[17] Maurer, p. 52.

[18] Sermon III in Blakney, p. 112.

[19] Sermon IV in Blakney, p. 168.

[20] Sermon XVIII in Blakney, p. 180.

Substance

Part of Meister Eckhart's metaphysics is a belief in substance. This belief directly relates to Aristotle's category of substance, though Eckhart's use does not exactly coincide with Aristotle's. Substance cannot be perceived. Substance is that in which the attributes of a being inhere; it is the concrete individual thing. Eckhart describes it as the category

> which includes more of being than any other category and through which everything comes to be. (21)

Substance is the substratum for whatever has being, whether material or spiritual. It is the medium in which all change occurs. Substance remains numerically one while its attributes are free to undergo change. This numerical oneness is a central tenet in Eckhart's view of reality:

> Again, existence is one. Now substantial form gives existence. Therefore it is one. (22)

Thus substance for Eckhart provides the means by which the One underlies the Many, at least in the physical world. Eckhart, unfortunately, does not extensively develop his doctrine of substance. It seems that he departs from Aristotle, a pluralist, for a more monistic understanding of substance. Eckhart does not explicitly discuss the relation between substance and Platonic ideas.

Change as imperfection

Another important feature of Meister Eckhart's thought is that

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(21) Sermon XXVI in Blakney, p. 220.

(22) 'The Aristocrat' in Blakney, p. 74.

perfection lies only in what is static and changeless. This bias against change is explicit in Eckhart's fourth _Parisian Question_ where he discusses motion:

> To be set in motion denotes an imperfection. Accordingly the more perfect something is, the less it participates in motion and place; and because the heavenly body is in the first rank of perfection it is least subject to motion and place. (23)

And later:

> whatever has existence fully is immutable, for example God. (24)

Being thus takes a loftier place than becoming in Eckhart's understanding. This bears on his theology in an important way. If perfection is static, then God must be immutable if he is to be both metaphysically ultimate and most perfect morally. (25)

Eckhart's Doctrine of God

Meister Eckhart's doctrine of God is difficult to reduce to one consistent system. Often what he writes about God in one context will seem to contradict what he has written elsewhere. The level of reality where Eckhart's God resides is so far removed from the realm of normal experience that human language is pressed to its limits to describe or explain it adequately. Eckhart's use of paradoxical statements concerning God complicates an attempt to formulate his ideas consistently.

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(23) Parisian Question IV: 'Does Motion without a Terminus Imply a Contradiction?' in Maurer, p. 69.

(24) Maurer, p. 69.

(25) 'About Disinterest' in Blakney. p. 85.

Despite these problems, it is possible to extract a coherent doctrine of God from Eckhart's works. Taking both his German and Latin writings as a whole, Eckhart generally maintains a consistent theological framework. On the surface Eckhart seems to equivocate on some fundamental issues, but a deeper understanding of his intentions may resolve the contradictions. Metaphysically, Eckhart gives his readers much more to work with than do other Christian contemplatives. He usually makes his metaphysical beliefs quite explicit. His mind seemed eager to expound on the abstract rather than to dwell on particulars.

God as Being

In his understanding of the metaphysical properties of God, Eckhart often describes God as Being (esse). This is not any one particular determinate being (ens), but Being itself (ipsum esse), that which confers being on all that exists. God's essential nature is Being. All contingent things look to God for their Being, and only God supplies his own Being. The following passages in Eckhart's writings show God as Being in this sense:

> Existence (esse) is the very essence of God. So all things receive existence from him and from him alone. (26)

> Existence is God (esse est Deus). (27)

> Being is a name above all names. To be defective is to show a decline in being. All our lives should reveal Being and therefore, to the extent that life is Being, it is of God. (28)

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(26) 'General Prologue to the Opus Tripartitum,' in Maurer, p. 91.

(27) Maurer, p. 98.

God is pure, simple, absolute Being that diffuses into everything that exists. His being is one and undivided. Here the One is real and totally excludes multiplicity. Being in this sense totally transcends created things, while particular things participate in Being only partially. In his Defense Eckhart affirms that 'existence is God' by making a distinction between 'Absolute Being' and 'formally inherent being.' [(29)] While God is this Absolute Being, creatures enjoy formally inherent being.

The being of created things is different from the Absolute Being of God. In creatures existence is conferred with accidental properties. Here it is particular things that exist. Their existence is not pure, it is corrupted with matter, and they endure for only a limited time. The appearance of multiplicity dominates. These particular beings totally depend on Absolute Being for their existence:

> Creatures have no Being of their own, for their Being is the presence of God. If God withdrew from them for even a moment, they would all perish. (30)

While in God Being is pure, in creatures existence is contingent upon God's pure being.

In equating God with Being, Eckhart was not proposing anything new or controversial. St. Thomas Aquinas defined God in much the same way, though Maurer points out some important differences. [(31)] From the

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[(28)] Sermon XVI in Blakney, p. 171.

[(29)] Defense, III, no. 4, in Blakney, p. 264.

[(30)] Sermon XIX in Blakney, p. 185.

[(31)] Maurer, p. 36.

passages seen thus far, one would reason that for Eckhart the metaphysical character of God is Pure Being. The matter is not that simple, however. The Master seems to equivocate on the issue. Throughout most of his sermons and in the prologues to the Opus Tripartitum Eckhart maintains this view. In the Parisian Questions, however, he asserts another position.

God as Intellect

The metaphysical ground of God in the Parisian Questions is intellect rather than Being. At issue here is whether Being has metaphysical primacy over knowing or vice versa. Does God exist because he knows? Or does he know because he exists? In his sermons Eckhart asserts the primacy of Being over Intellect:

> There is an authority who teaches that 'Being, life, and knowledge rank highest but knowledge is higher than life and Being, because whoever has knowledge necessarily has both the others.' According to that, life would rank ahead of Being as, for example, a tree has life, while a stone has only Being. However, if we reach down into Being pure and simple, as it really is, we should find that Being ranks higher than life or knowledge. (32)

In apparent contradiction to this passage, Eckhart reverses himself in his Parisian Questions and insists that Intellect for God takes precedence over being.

The context in which Eckhart makes this claim is provided by the question 'Are existence and understanding the same in God?' Eckhart answers in the affirmative and gives proofs from Thomas Aquinas to support his answer. Understanding is brought up to the same level as

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(32) Sermon XVI in Blakney, p. 171, see also p. 219.

existence as regards God's nature. Eckhart then takes a further step, seemingly contradicting his original answer and asserts that understanding is more fundamental than existence. His statements are explicit:

> I declare that it is not my present opinion that God understands because he exists, but rather he exists because he understands. God is an intellect and understanding, and his understanding itself is the ground of his existence. (33)

> . . .among the perfections intelligence comes first and then being or existence. (34)

In his placing of Intellect above Being, Eckhart departs from the doctrine established in Thomism. Eckhart is laying the metaphysical foundation that will bear directly on his interpretation of mystical experience. With this tenet, knowledge becomes crucial to the spiritual life; whereas when Being is held to be fundamental, the focus of concern for a mystic is the quest for the underlying Being within.

In asserting God as Intellect, Eckhart still maintains the distinction between created things and God. In saying that 'everything in God transcends existence and is totally understanding,' (35) Eckhart is using existence in a contingent sense and not in the self-sustaining sense. Generally, Eckhart considers Being metaphysically derivative from Intellect only when Being is used in the formally inherent sense.

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(33) Parisian Question I: 'Are Existence and Understanding the Same in God?' in Maurer, p. 45.

(34) Maurer, p. 47.

(35) Maurer, p. 48.

It was noted above that Eckhart's writings leave us unclear as to whether Being is fundamental and Intellect derivative or whether Intellect is fundamental and Being derivative. To make sense of this apparent contradiction, one must note that in Eckhart's thought there is a dichotomy, if not a blatant ontological dualism, between created things and the Divine. [36] God in his pure state totally transcends creatures. People, being creatures, interact with God only to the degree they reject their creatureliness. Given that God and creation must remain distinct, if Being is put entirely on the side of the created, particular beings, or even as being formally inherent in those beings, then God must be beyond Being. God can be named Intellect as long as Intellect is considered in a sufficiently aloof and abstract sense. In the same way, if Intellect is placed within the mundane, then Being can be the name of God.

Thus we see that Eckhart states that both Intellect and Being are metaphysically the fundamental nature of God. This reflects Eckhart's paradoxical reasoning, where contradictions are not always incompatible. Direct knowledge of God, for Eckhart, is something beyond the realm of human reason. Any attributes given to God in human language are going to fall short of completely expressing what God really is, including attributes like Being and Intellect. Knowledge of God is always finally ineffable. But as far as metaphysics can be discussed, two very important characteristics of God are pure Intellect and pure Being.

God as Unity

A third very important concept in Eckhart's doctrine of God is

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[36] See Blakney, pp. 85, 195, 159, 131.

unity. Eckhart deals with the issue of the One and the Many by giving absolute superiority to the One. Multiplicity derives from unity, which is fundamental. All multiplicity and diversity seen in the created world have an underlying unity through God. As a person becomes detached from creatureliness, the unity becomes more apparent. Unity of God is a motif that often recurs in Eckhart's writings. Some passages illustrating this motif include:

> There are no distinctions in God and no differences between the divine persons, since they are to be regarded one in nature. The divine nature is Oneness and each person is One, the same One in nature. (37)

> God's property it is, in whom there is no contingent distinction, intellectual or otherwise, such that everything in him is God himself. (38)

> Furthermore, because God with his whole existence is absolutely one, or one being, he must be immediately present with his whole self to every whole. . . . (39)

Eckhart thus continually asserts that unity is to be preferred over multiplicity. Though he never denies that multiplicity exists in the experienced world, he does state that it is a less desirable mode of existence, and that in some sense the One is more real than experienced multiplicity. Unity exists because of the Being provided by God that pervades all existence. Thus unity is not only a metaphysical characteristic of God, but it also reflects the true, but hidden, nature of the created world.

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(37) 'The Aristocrat' in Blakney, p. 78.

(38) 'The Book of Divine Comfort' in Blakney, p. 68.

(39) 'Prologue to the Book of Propositions' in Maurer, p. 98.

There is a tension, however, between the Divine unity claimed by Eckhart to pervade all reality, and the clear distinction he makes between the Divine and the created. At times Eckhart presses the theme of unity to the point of monism, though he generally asserts a dualistic ontology. Metaphysically, it seems that Eckhart maintains a mental/physical dualism, but still claims an underlying unity linking both sides of the dualism. God as Intellect and the spark of the soul within persons lie on the mental extreme and all corporeal things on the physical. The unity is provided by God's Being which inheres in all created things and which also characterizes his own nature.

Distinction between Godhead and God

One often-noted facet of Eckhart's theology lies in his distinction between the Godhead and God. Eckhart seems to use this distinction as a tool to help separate God as the immanent, creating, active entity familiar to traditional Christianity from the impersonal Absolute necessary to his metaphysical speculation. In one of his sermons reflecting his later thought Eckhart makes the distinction quite explicit:

> Thus creatures speak of God—but why do they not mention the Godhead? Because there is only unity in the Godhead and there is nothing to talk about. God acts. The Godhead does not. It has nothing to do and there is nothing going on in it. It is never on the lookout for something to do. The difference between God and the Godhead is the difference between action and non-action. (40)

And also:

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(40) Sermon XXVII in Blakney, p. 226.

God and Godhead are as different from each other as heaven and
earth. (41)

Through this distinction Eckhart shows that what he means by God lies
far beyond what is ordinarily understood as God. When distinguishing
God as pure Being or Intellect from less lofty conceptions of God,
Eckhart uses the term Godhead. Otherwise he uses the word God to
represent his Absolute. God in the traditional sense is understood in
terms of the Trinity. He created the world and interacts with it, and
it affects him. This understanding of God does not preclude
multiplicity and distinction in God's character. In his less abstract
moods Eckhart often refers to God with these less ultimate terms.

The distinction between God and Godhead seems to be epistemological
rather than ontological. Eckhart consistently asserts God's true nature
in ultimate abstract terms. Ontologically there is not God on one level
and Godhead on another. This would violate the unity that is so
important to Eckhart's theology. Rather, God and Godhead represent two
levels of knowing. When one's understanding conforms to the traditional
doctrines of theology, shaped by creaturely reasoning, God acquires
characteristics amenable to that level. But when all creatureliness is
surpassed, God is known in the complete emptiness of the Godhead.
Again, it is not that God has two natures, but that when seen through
creaturely eyes, creaturely characteristics are superimposed on God,
though his true nature precludes all non-ultimate attributes. (42)

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(41) Blakney, p. 225.

(42) In opposition to this view, David Linge suggests that Eckhart
gives God two ontological natures, one relative and the other ab-
solute. See his 'Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the thought of
Meister Eckhart,' Journal of the American Academy of Religion,

Eckhart could not delete entirely all talk of God understood in less exalted terms, because these terms pervaded the understanding and language of his audience and were ingrained in his own mind through his Christian training as a Dominican theologian.

God transcends time

Another of Eckhart's Theological beliefs is that God is beyond the limitations of time. Time belongs to the realm of creatures and has no relevance to the Divine perspective. God experiences the unfolding of all time even before creation, and thus foreknows all that will come to pass throughout time:

> When God first looked out of eternity (if one may say that he ever first looked out), he saw everything as it would happen and at the same time he saw when and how he would create each thing. . . . In that first eternal vision, God looked on each thing-to-be and therefore he does what he does without a reason. It was all worked out beforehand. (43)

God, being outside of time, remains unchanged by events that happen in the created world. This idea futher emphasizes the aloofness of God from particular human concerns. Time, then, is one of the things that a person must go beyond to have pure knowledge of God. (44)

Freedom in God's nature

Eckhart believes that freedom exists only where there is no influence of material things. (45) Therefore, only God can be a totally free agent. Persons enjoy freedom only to the extent that they reject

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Vol. XLVI, No. 4, pp. 474-475.

(43) 'About Disinterest' in Blakney, p. 86. See also p. 272.

(44) See Blakney pp. 203, 151, 131.

(45) Parisian Question III: 'Is the Praise of God in Heaven more Excellent than the Love of Him on Earth?' in Maurer, p. 59.

the material world. [46] It is thus only the non-material soul that may be free within persons. This idea is not well developed in Eckhart, but given Eckhart's assertion that God foreknows all events, any felt freedom within the material world must be empty. If God has it 'all worked out beforehand,' then no genuine choices can be made. Nothing can be other than what has already been determined. This again reinforces Eckhart's implicit dualism in that freedom can only reside in purely mental entities, the soul and God, while materiality precludes freedom.

Creation and emanations

Another issue of interest within Eckhart's doctrine of God is creation. Eckhart's beliefs include aspects of both the Neoplatonists' emanations and the traditional creation ex nihilo. It is important for Eckhart that there be some starting point for the physical world, in contrast to God, who is eternal. The persons of the Trinity are eternal with God and are formed through continuous emanation. Eckhart states:

> . . .The emanation of the persons in the Deity is the reason for creation and comes before it. (47)

> So God created all things not like other craftsmen, so that they stand outside of himself, or beside himself, or apart from himself. Rather, he called them out of nothingness, that is from non-existence, to existence, so that they might find and receive and have it in him, for he himself is existence. (48)

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[46] See Blakney, pp. 128,159.

[47] 'Commentary on the Book of Exodus' in Maurer, p. 108.

[48] 'General Prologue to the Opus Tripartitum' in Maurer, p. 85.

Eckhart clearly refects Plotinus' doctrine that all reality emanates out of God. Eckhart does assert that the persons of the Trinity emanate from God. This allows a Trinitarian God without compromising the unity of the Godhead. [49]

Creation characterizes God's relationship to the world. The world, being created by God, is dependent on God not only for its origin, but also for its continued existence. Creation accounts for the radical distinction between the world and God. While creation implies distinction, emanation emphasizes unity. Eckhart thus maintains the ontological unity of God by representing the persons of the trinity as emanating from God. They acquire characteristics but still remain one with God in a way more intimate than creation would allow.

God suffers

Occasionally Eckhart speaks of God in much less detached terms. He shows in this way that he considers God to have immanent as well as transcendent characteristics. One theme that occurs several times in Eckhart's German writings and that emphasizes God's immanent character, is that he suffers along with the world. From this perspective, rather than seeing God as aloof and unaffected by the world, God is seen as intimately related to the world and feeling the pain and loss of suffering. In 'The Book of Divine Comfort' Eckhart states:

> . . . since God is with us when we suffer, he suffers with us. He really knows the truth who knows that what I am saying is true. God, suffering with man, suffers imcomparably more in his own way than man suffers for him. (50)

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[49] See Bernard McGinn, 'The God Beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart,' in The Journal of Religion, January 1981, Vol. LXI, no. 1, p. 14.

God spoken of in this way resembles more the living God of the Jewish tradition than the impersonal principle Eckhart usually concerns himself with. When Eckhart speaks of God's suffering, he clearly is operating on the level of God as opposed to Godhead. This shows that Eckhart feels that temporal things must make some difference to God, even though this does not fit well into his metaphysical system.

Mystical Experience

Union with God

In Eckhart's theology, God relates most intimately with persons through an ontological union with the human soul. Eckhart's whole theological system finds its completeness in this relationship. This union provides the ultimate goal for the religious life and is the most valuable experience possible in human existence.

According to Eckhart's understanding, within the human soul there is a trace of something that shares the nature of the Divine. This Eckhart calls the 'spark of the soul,' or the 'aristocratic' agent. The medieval conception of the soul, which Eckhart shared, was that of an enduring substance which defines the life of a person from birth until death. Eckhart states that the soul itself is created, [51] though there is a spark within the soul that is uncreated and is more Divine than creaturely:

> As I have often said, there is something in the soul so closely akin to God that it is already one with him. It is unique and has nothing in common with anything else. It has

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[50] Sermon XV in Blakney, p. 167, see also pp. 50,68.

[51] Sermon XIII in Blakney, p. 159.

no significance for this world whatsoever—none! Anything
created is nothing, but that Something is apart from and
strange to all creation. If one were wholly this, he would be
both uncreated and unlike any creature. (52)

The soul, for Eckhart, operates through faculties or agents. (53) The

highest of these are the will and the intellect. He further states that

the intellect ranks higher than the will. (54) Through the human

intellect, God is perceived as Intellect:

Nevertheless, I say that intelligence is above will. Willing,
man conceives God in the garment of goodness. Thinking, man
conceives God naked, stripped of both goodness and being.
(55)

There are times, however, when Eckhart states that the aristocratic

spark of the soul is beyond the intellect. Just as God has nothing in

common with the creaturely world and is beyond space and time, so also

the aristocratic spark of the soul transcends creaturely limitations:

. . . Three dimensions [of the soul] represent three kinds of
knowledge. The first is sensual: the eye sees things at a
distance. The second is intellectual and is much higher in
rank. The third represents that aristocratic agent of the
soul, which ranks so high that it communes with God, face to
face as he is. (56)

The awareness of union between the aristocratic agent of the soul and

God is often referred to by Eckhart as the 'begetting of the Word.'

Since he was a Christian theologian, Christ had to enter his thinking at

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(52) Sermon XXIII in Blakney, p. 205.

(53) In German kraft.

(54) Maurer, pp. 53-67.

(55) Blakney, p. 221.

(56) Sermon XII in Blakney, p. 153.

some point. Eckhart concerns himself very little with the human person of Jesus. He concentrates much more on the more abstract concept of Christ as the Logos, the Eternal Word, continually being begotten from the Father. The Logos is an idea or representation of God appprehendable only by the aristocratic soul, whether it be called intellect or something beyond it. Through the begetting of the Logos, God reveals himself to those who have realized their aristocratic nature through worldly disinterest, that is, through rejecting everything that is creaturely. [57] The speculative mystic, thereby, realizes his spiritual quest.

The union with God that Eckhart concerns himself with is not a transient, ecstatic event. Eckhart's mysticism is not emotional. We have seen that Eckhart believes that the soul is ontologically related to God in a very special way. Deep within the soul there is a spark of the Divine. The religious life, therefore, should serve to bring about an awareness of that already existing union with God and to enable one to see the Divine throughout the ordinary world. Richard Kieckhefer asserts that the union Eckhart teaches is habitual, non-abstractive (compatible with ordinary consciousness), and available to all who seek it. He emphasizes that detachment through poverty, a key notion in Eckhart, engenders an awareness of the constant reality of God's presence. [58]

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[57] 'The Aristocrat' in Blakney, p. 77.

[58] Richard Kieckhefer, 'Meister Eckhart's conception of Union with God,' The Harvard Theological Review, Vol.71, no.3-4, p. 203-205.

Meister Eckhart's life and teachings give us one example of what mysticism is like in Christianity. He has distinctive qualities that characterize his version of Christian mysticism. I have presented something of his life, doctrines, and metaphysical assumptions in this chapter. But to use Eckhart as the only example of Christian mysticism might not adequately depict the great variety of ways that mysticism is practiced in the Christian tradition. To broaden the presentation of Christian mysticism, I will bring into this study another Christian mystic, one whose mystical path relies more on the emotions than on the intellect. St. John of the Cross emphasized the passionate, more emotional aspects of mysticism and it is he who will be the topic of the following chapter.

III. ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

The Spanish Carmelite contemplative, St. John of the Cross, also warrants much attention in the study of Christian mysticism. Many later Christian contemplatives have looked to St. John as an example of the spiritual journey to intimacy with God. Much of what St. John taught and lived is still practiced in the monastic orders of the Catholic church. St. John of the Cross embodied the vocations of an educated theologian and of a practicing mystic. His theology relies on many of the same philosophical assumptions that have prevailed throughout much of the history of Christianity. His beliefs and implicit metaphysics were widely accepted and were not tainted, as were Eckhart's, with accusations of heresy. St. John had deep personal religious experiences. His mystical theology is not explicitly philosophical or speculative, though it does reflect the ability of a keen intellect. His writings present practical means for living the contemplative life and exhibit a broad psychological understanding. In discussing St. John of the Cross, I will first look at his personal biography, and then examine his doctrine of God in order to investigate the metaphysical assumptions on which he bases his theology.

Personal Biography and Historical Setting

Spain in the period of the Counterreformation provides the historical setting of St. John of the Cross. [1] Born on June 24,

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[1] Biographical information comes from E. Allison Peers, Studies

1542, at Fontiveros, Spain, he was named after John the Baptist, whose Feast of the Nativity falls on that day. His father, Gonzalo de Yepes, came from a wealthy family of silk merchants, but he had been disowned because of his marriage to Catalina Alverez, a poor weaver of low social status. Gonzalo died shortly after the birth of John, leaving his family in extreme poverty. John's widowed mother appealed to her husband's family for help, but was entirely rejected. She then settled with John and his two brothers in Medina del Campo, and John began his education at the Catechism school there.

In this early part of his life, he served as an acolyte for a convent and learned the trades of carpentry, tailoring, and painting. At the age of seventeen, he started working at the Hospital de la Conception in Medina. Here, he found his way into the graces of the hospital's founder, don Alonzo Alverez, who sponsored his studies at the Jesuit college in Medina. He spent four years there where he was taught Latin, Rhetoric, and the classics of both Latin and Spanish. After completing study at the Jesuit college, don Alonzo wished for John to study for the secular priesthood, but John himself felt called to the religious orders. He chose the Carmelite order and entered the monastery of Santa Anna in Medina, and was soon sent to nearby Salmanaca where he studied both at the Carmelite College and at the prestigious University of Salmanaca.

John was ordained as a Carmelite monk in 1567 and sang his first Mass in Medina. On this occasion he first met Teresa of Avila. Teresa

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of the Spanish Mystics, I, (New York: The Macmillian Co., 1951), and the Introduction to Kieran Kavanaugh, The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1973).

at the time was just beginning her reform of the Carmelite order. Like almost all the religious orders in the Catholic church at one time or another, the Carmelites had fallen into leniency. Teresa sought to re-establish the order to its former strictness and had received permission from her bishop to do so. At the time of her meeting John, she had established a few houses of Reformed Carmelite nuns and proposed that John help her by doing the same for the monks within the order. John readily agreed to this, realizing himself the need for a stricter life. First, however, Teresa had to secure a house for the monks. In the interim, John returned to Salmanaca to complete his studies. Within a year he graduated and was appointed assistant professor at the monastery of Santa Anna back in Medina. Teresa soon came to him with news that she had obtained a small farmhouse which could house the monks for the reform of the order. He left the monastery at Medina to go with Teresa to Valladolis where she had established a new community of reformed nuns. She made him chaplain and confessor so that he could learn the details and routines of the reform. After about three months of this, he set off to the house that Teresa had obtained for him in Duruello.

John and four other monks began this new monastery, which was nothing more than an old deserted farmhouse. On the first Sunday of Advent in 1568, John said Mass and relinquished the 'Mitigated' rule for the new 'Primitive' rule. It was on this occasion that he took the name of John of the Cross.

The new rule was much more severe and more contemplative than the former. The monks were to be much more withdrawn from the world, not eat meat, and not wear shoes. Because of this, they soon came to be known as the Decalced Carmelites, from the Spanish word meaning 'without

shoes.'

As the new movement within the order grew, conflict also developed, for political as well as spiritual reasons. Questions concerning possession of certain monasteries and similar problems gave rise to the conflict. John of the Cross soon was caught in the middle of it. Nicholas Ormaneto, a Papal Ligate who had favored the Decalced reform, died, leaving the reformers less protected from their Calced opponents. A group of Calced Fathers took advantage of the situation, seized John, declared him a rebel and had him imprisoned. John was assigned to a small dark cell in a monastery that had been built as a closet. For six months he was scourged three times a week and given only bread, water, and occasionally a few pieces of fish to eat. After six months of this, a new, more compassionate supervisor was assigned to him. He was then treated somewhat more kindly and was given paper and ink to write down his poems that he had been composing in his mind. He eventually escaped from the monastery where he had been held captive and fled to a house of Decalced nuns in Toledo. He was soon elected Prior of the Monastery of El Calvario, and continued there for nine months until he was assigned to found a college for the reform which was to be located in the southern part of Spain. The following years were occupied in the administration and the organization of the Decalced reform. He held various positions such as Prior, Vicar Provential, and Major Definitor within the reform. During this stage of his life John of the Cross did most of his writing.

Regardless of his duties of administration, John was first and foremost a contemplative. His spirituality was never overshadowed by the business of directing the reform movement. He would always take

time for prayer. Also, throughout his life, he served the monks, nuns, and lay persons as a spiritual counselor and director.

John of the Cross, the contemplative and spiritual leader, had a personality that was warm, passionate, caring, but at the same time quite serious. His normal disposition was generally severe, but he also took great joy in making people laugh. When correcting his subjects he was always careful not to be overly severe or harsh, lest he sadden or discourage them. John could seldom watch others doing manual labor without himself pitching in to help. Even as a superior in a monastery, he would help in scrubbing floors and like chores. Being very much a lover of nature, John would often take his monks to the mountains for recreation so that they might not tire of monastic life. A very real and deep part of John of the Cross was his compassion and pity for the sick. From his younger days at the hospital in Medina and throughout his life, he would always go out of his way to be sure that the sick were properly cared for and that the poor were fed.

John's last years were again clouded by conflict. This time it was not conflict between the Calced and the Decalced Carmelites, but rather conflict within the Decalced reform. There was a controversy concerning the expulsion from the reform of a certain father named Gracian. John disagreed with this expulsion, which had been proposed by the Vicar General, and because of this disagreement was not elected to any further office in the reform. This did not displease St. John of the Cross. He had been longing for a simpler life so that he might devote himself more completely to prayer and contemplation. He was sent to live a life of solitude at La Penuela in Andalusia in the year 1591. He was there only a month when he developed an inflammation in his leg

and had to be sent elsewhere, so that he could receive proper medical attention. His final destination was the monastery at Ubeda, where he was quite unknown. The prior was a father named Francisco Cristostomo, who, lacking the qualities of a devout prior, was quite unfriendly to his new guest with his disposition of great holiness. John's illness steadily grew worse, and it soon became evident that he was approaching his last days. Father Cristostomo, greatly moved by John's illness, begged forgiveness of John, and from that time on led a pious life. John of the Cross died the night of December 13, 1591. He was canonized one hundred and thirty-five years later, in 1726, and was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1926.

John of the Cross was not only a profound contemplative, but was an effective and talented writer as well. He wrote both poetry and prose. His major writings are The Ascent of Mt. Carmel/The Dark Night of the Soul, The Spiritual Canticle, and The Living Flame of Love. Lesser works include his poetry and letters to his various disciples and students. The poetry of St. John of the Cross was written with much feeling and in a refined style. His prose, although lacking in the refinement of his poetry, served to expound his mystical teaching in practical and understandable terms and to offer a structured scheme for mystical ascent.

Doctrine of God

Transcendence

One characteristic of God in the theology of St. John of the Cross is transcendence. God is ontologically separate from, and radically different from, the created world. He exists on a level of being far removed from that of his creatures. His being is self-sufficient. He

requires nothing outside himself to exist. Creation has only contingent

being, requiring God's being to maintain its existence:

> Creatures, earthly and heavenly, and all distinct ideas and
> images, natural and supernatural, that can be objects of a
> person's faculties, are incomparable and unproportioned to
> God's being. God does not fall under the classification of
> genus and species, whereas, according to theologians,
> creatures do. . . . The being of God is different from the
> being of his creatures. God by his being, is infinitely
> distant from all of them. (2)

And also:

> All the creatures of Heaven and earth are nothing when
> compared to God. . . .

The transcendence of God is, of course, very much part of the theology

of Christianity in general. St. John of the Cross presents nothing

controversial when he asserts God's transcendent nature.

Immanence

Though one important metaphysical characteristic of God is

transcendence, He also relates to the world immanently. A radically

transcendent God that has no immanence could not interact with the world

in any meaningful sense. But St. John's whole theology assumes that God

does interact with the created world in general and with the souls of

persons in particular. Thus, in St. John's theology, God condescends to

the created world order despite his transcendence.

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(2) The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book III, Ch. 12, trans. by Kieran
Kavanaugh, (Washington, D.C., ICS Publications, Institute of Car-
melite Studies, 1973), p. 230.

The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book I, Chapter 4, in Kavanaugh, p. 78.

God's first act of relation to the world was in creating it. St.
John adheres to the Catholic belief of creation ex nihilo. In this
doctrine the world received its being by a sheer act of creativity on
the part of God, being created, as it were, 'out of nothing.' It was not
fashioned, in other words, out of some pre-existent substrate. Nor is
it part of the Divine substance. Here, St. John describes something of
this act of creation:

> God created all things with remarkable ease and beauty, and in
> them He left some trace of Who He is, not only in giving all
> things being from nothing, but even by endowing them with
> innumerable graces and qualities, making them beautiful in a
> wonderful order and unfailing dependence on one another. (3)

In this passage we see that creation indeed owes its very existence to
God, but at the same time it acquires a sense of dignity and value from
being created. There is no doctrine of emmanations or of the material
world being inherently evil associated with St. John's understanding of
creation.

After he created the world, God did not remove himself from it and
leave it to run on its own. God maintains his presence throughout the
world's existence: the world could not even continue to exist otherwise.
St. John makes the sustaining presence of God most clear especially with
respect to the human soul:

> It should be known that God dwells secretly in all souls and
> is hidden in their substance, for otherwise they would not
> last. (4)

> . . .God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially,

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(3) The Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 5, in Kavanaugh, p. 434.

(4) The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 4, No. 14, in Kavanaugh, p.
648.

even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists. By it He conserves their being so that if the union would end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist. (5)

Thus he considers God to be metaphysically immanent as well as transcendent. We will see below that through God's immanence the soul may experience God intimately, which is the final purpose of the religious life for St. John of the Cross.

Ineffability

God's ontological separateness from the created world erects an epistemological barrier. Since God exists on a different order of being than creatures, no creature can know God as he truly exists. Thus, a sense of ineffability runs through any experience of God. St. John of the Cross often affirms that whatever a person experiences of God is beyond rational understanding and communication:

> This divine knowledge of God never deals with particular things, since its object is the Supreme Principle. Consequently one cannot express it in particular terms, unless a truth about something less than God is seen together with this knowledge of Him. But in no way can anything be said of that divine knowledge. (6)

> It is extremely easy to judge the being and height of God less worthily and sublimely than is suitable to His incomprehensibility. (7)

The experiences that a contemplative has in preparation for a spiritual

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(5) The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Chapter 5, No. 3, in Kavanaugh, p. 116.

(6) The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book II, Ch. 26, No. 5, in Kavanaugh, p. 194.

(7) The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book III, Ch. 12, No. 1, in Kavanaugh, p. 229.

encounter with God are other-worldly enough to carry this ineffability.[8] Things pertaining to the spiritual realm far exceed the abilities of creatures to understand and to relate.

Attributes of God

God is absolute and infinite. Though St. John of the Cross maintians that God as he really is can never be known by creatures, he does occasionally suggest attributes that can be considered to apply to God. Some of these attributes express the infiniteness and absoluteness of God:

> . . .God in His unique and simple being is all the powers and grandeurs of his attributes. He is almighty, wise and good; and He is merciful, just, powerful, and loving, etc.; and He is the other infinite attributes and powers of which we have no knowledge. Since He is all of this in His simple being, the soul views distinctly in Him, when He is united with it and deigns to disclose this knowledge, all these powers and grandeurs, that is: omnipotence, wisdom, goodness and mercy, etc. (9)

Here St. John asserts that God is infinite metaphysically, being omnipotent, wise, almighty, and simple in existence; and that He is also infinite morally, being good, merciful, just, and loving. Elsewhere he states that 'God transcends the intellect and is incomprehensible to it,' [10] further expressing the ontological and epistemological aloofness of God.

Beyond the restrictions of space and time. In St. John's theology, God is not confined in space or time. He informs us that 'God is

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[8] See Kavanaugh, p. 69-70.

[9] The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 3, in Kavanaugh, p. 610.

[10] The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 3, No. 48, in Kavanaugh, p. 628.

formless and figureless'[11] and that 'God is not bound to any place.'[12] Both phrases treat God as non-material. That God is outside of time is stated in the following passage:

> [T]he day of God's eternity. . .is different from this temporal day. In that day of eternity, God predestined the soul to glory, decreed the glory He would bestow on her, and gave it to her freely from all eternity before He created her. (13)

For St. John, God experiences time in a radically different manner than does the created world.

God is unchanging. An important metaphysical attribute of God stated by St. John is that God is unchanging and unmoving. This reveals an idealization of the static which is basic to his theology. St. John writes:

> Let it be known that these motions are motions of the soul more than of God, for God does not move. These glimpses of glory given to the soul are in God stable, perfect, continuous, and constantly serene. . . .Although here below God seemingly moved within it [the soul], He does not in Himself move. (14)

> How this movement takes place in the soul, since God is immovable, is a wonderful thing, for it seems to the soul that God indeed moves, yet He does not really move. (15)

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[11] The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 3, No. 52, in Kavanaugh, p. 630.

[12] The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book III, Ch. 42, No. 3, in Kavanaugh, p. 286.

[13] The Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 38, No. 6, in Kavanaugh, p. 555.

[14] The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 3, No. 8, in Kavanaugh, p. 614.

[15] The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 4, No. 6, in Kavanaugh, p.

St. John's cosmology allows movement and change only in the created world. Thus for creatures change can be genuine, but God himself is static. Metaphysically, this implies that what is static is more fundamental than things which change, even while it allows change to be dominant in the material world.

Christ in St. John's Theology

The figure of Christ plays an important role in the theology of St. John of the Cross. While some Christian mystics (e.g. Eckhart) pay little attention to the person of Jesus Christ, St. John considers him central to the relationship between God and persons. St. John's Christology is very orthodox. In agreement with Catholic doctrine, St. John teaches, as we saw above, that the universe was created in dignity and favor. Humanity fell into sinfulness with Adam, but through Christ the lost dignity has been restored. St. John summarizes his beliefs about Christ as follows:

> Not only in looking at them did He communicate natural being and graces, as we said, but also with this image of His Son alone, He clothed them in beauty by imparting to them supernatural being. This He did when He became man and elevated human nature in the beauty of God and consequently all creatures, since in human nature He was united with them all. . . And in this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of His Son and through the glory of His resurrection according to the flesh, the Father did not merely beautify creatures partially, but rather we can say, clothed them wholly in beauty and dignity. (16)

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(16) The Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 5, No. 4, in Kavanaugh, p. 435.

For St. John of the Cross, the Incarnation of God in the person of Christ effectively changed the status of human nature in its relation to God. Also concerning Christ, St. John says:

> In giving us his Son, His only Word (for he possesses no other), He spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has nothing more to say. (17)

This again emphasizes the finality and completeness of God's relation to mankind through Christ. The life of Christ also provides the supreme example for the spiritual life. St. John reports that 'a man makes progress only through imitation of Christ. . . .' [18]

The Relations between God and the Soul

To understand the relationship between persons and God, it is important to know how St. John views the human soul. It is clear that the soul for St. John is, like God, substantial: it is a substratum that endures and undergoes change. The soul, also like God, is spiritual rather than material substance. It is of a different order than purely material things:

> There is as much difference between the soul and other corporal creatures as there is between a transparent liquid and the filthiest mire. (19)

Though of a spiritual order, it is not on the same level as God. It is restricted through the physical body in which it dwells:

The soul, through original sin, is a captive in the mortal

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[17] The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book II, Ch. 22, No. 3, in Kavanaugh, p. 179.

[18] The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book II, Ch. 7, No. 8, in Kavanaugh, p. 124.

[19] The Ascent of Mt. Carmel,, Book I, Ch. 9, No. 1, in Kavanaugh, p, 92.

body, subject to passions and natural appetites. (20)

The corruption of the soul associated with its post-fall condition closely relates to its ontological status. Ontologically, material reality is on a lower level than the spiritual. The soul cannot be totally on the spiritual level since it is dominated by the physical body.

St. John divides the psyche into levels, one spiritual and the other sensory. Both levels have faculties that operate appropriate to their nature. Intellect, memory, and will serve the soul on the spiritual level; sense faculties, phantasy, and imagination serve the soul on the sensory level. [21] In The Ascent of Mt. Carmel St. John explains how each of these faculties is used in the spiritual life and how each when relied on excessively can be a hinderance.

Mystical Experience

For St. John of the Cross, the aim of the religious life is to achieve the most intimate experience of God possible. St. John's prose and poetry presents imagery associated with such mystical encounters with God. The Ascent of Mt. Carmel and The Dark Night of the Soul describe the trials and preparations that the soul must undergo in its quest for God. St. John uses the image of the darkness of night to represent the deprivation the soul must undergo of everything that satisfies its natural desires. The Spiritual Canticle and The Living Flame of Love both speak of the mystical marriage that occurs in union

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[20] The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book I, Ch. 15, No. 1, in Kavanaugh, p. 105.

[21] See Maurer, p. 47.

with God, using the imagery of the Bride (the soul) and her Groom, Christ. St. John writes of the union of the soul with God as a passionate culmination of the spiritual life.

The union between God and the soul, however, is not ontological or substantial. St. John is careful to maintain that the soul never totally looses its existential identity:

> . . .the substance of the soul is not the substance of God, since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion to Him, it has become God through participation in God, being united and absorbed in Him, as it is in this state. (22)

We saw above that God indeed dwells in the soul, maintaining it through a substantial presence. It seems that St. John believes that the soul maintains a natural union with God substantially, with the substance of the soul deriving its being from God. This is a union only in a very qualified sense. It is not the soul obtaining the ontological status of God. It is merely the natural ontological dependence of the creature on the creator. In the following lengthy passage from the Ascent of Mt. Carmel we see that St. John indeed recognizes this natural ontological relation between the soul and God, but then goes on to maintain that a union made possible by spiritual transformation is the goal he desires:

> To understand the nature of this union, one should first know that God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists. By it he conserves their being so that if the union would end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist.
> Consequently, in discussing union with God, we are not discussing the substantial union which is always existing, but the union and transformation of the soul in God. This union

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(22) The Living Flame of Love, Stanza II, No. 34, in Kavanaugh, p. 608.

is not always existing, but we find it only where there is likeness of love. We call it 'the union of likeness' and the former 'the essential or substantial union.' The union of likeness is supernatural, the other natural. The supernatural union exists when God's will and the souls are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. (23)

In The Spiritual Canticle St. John of the Cross further explains the ways that God and the soul relate:

> . . .God's presence can be of three kinds:
> The first is His presence by essence. In this way He is present not only in the holiest souls, but also in sinners and in other creatures. For with this presence He gives them life and being. Should this essential presence be lacking to them, they would be annihilated. This presence is never wanting to the soul.
> The second is His presence by grace, in which He abides in the soul, pleased and satisfied with it. Not all have this presence of God; those who fall into mortal sin lose it. The soul cannot know naturally if it has this presence.
> The third is His presence by spiritual affection, for God usually grants His spiritual presence to devout souls in many ways, by which He refreshes, delights, and gladdens them. (24)

Here St. John reemphasizes the same types of relationship with God as mentioned above. The first way is the ontological dependence that is in the nature of the created soul. The second seems to be the justifying presence of God that persons require for salvation, the type of relation to God Christianity in general seeks. The third is an intimate encounter with God that the contemplative life nurtures. This last way seems equivalent to the 'union of likeness' that St. John speaks of in the Ascent of Mt. Carmel.

A phrase that St. John of the Cross uses very often in describing the ontological relationship with God that occurs in the mystical

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(23) The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book II, Ch. 5, No. 3, in Kavanaugh, p. 115-116.

(24) The Spiritual Canticle, Stanza II, No. 3, in Kavanaugh, p. 449.

encounter is of 'becoming God through participation.' St. John seeks some sort of deification of the human life, but it is clear that he means it through a volitional and behavorial transformation and not an ontological transformation. Thus the intimate mystical encounter is a volitional participation in God and not an ontological elevation to God. In the following passage St. John states this explicitly:

> A man makes room for God by wiping away all the smudges and smears of creatures, by uniting his will perfectly to God's; for to love is to labor to divest and deprive oneself of all that is not God. When this is done the soul will be illumined by and transformed in God. And God will so communicate His supernatural being to it that it will appear to be God himself and will possess all that God Himself has.
> When God grants this supernatural favor to the soul, so great a union is caused that all the things of both God the the soul become one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed it is God by participation. Yet truly, its being (even though transformed) is naturally as distinct from God as it was before, just as the window, although illumined by the ray, has an existence distinct from the ray. (25)

This passage summarizes well St. John's position that the mystical quest is volitionally transformative and does not involve a radical ontological change. The will of the soul becomes the will of God, but the soul maintains its identity and creaturely status.

Frithjof Schuon asserts in an article that St. John of the Cross should be classified as a 'passional' mystic. He defines this type of mysticism as having no involvement of the intellect in its method. He says that this mysticism 'is entirely centered on love—on the will with its emotive concomitances—and not on gnosis.' (26) Schuon describes

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(25) The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book II, Ch. 5, in Kavanaugh, p. 117-118, see also p. 547, 377, 614, 559, and 531.

(26) Frithjof Schuon, 'The Characteristics of Passional Mysticism,' Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 13, Nos. 3-4, p. 187.

passional mysticism in general and St. John of the Cross in particular as being quite concerned with sentimental humility and with an individualized contemplative quest. Though St. John's mysticism seeks a negation of all the desires of the intellect and memory as well as the will, the mystical experiences that St. John describes through 'spiritual marriage' and the trials of the 'dark night' reflect an intense involvement of the emotions and a lack of concern with the faculty of the intellect. The union with God that St. John seeks involves the will much more so than the intellect.

Schuon's category of passional mysticism is useful in that it emphasizes the psychological involvement that is so integral to St. John's writings. It also distinguishes St. John's lack of concern for intellectual involvement with God from other Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart.

Comparative Discussion between Eckhart and St. John

Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross are two outstanding Christian mystics. There are few, if any, scholars of mysticism who would deny that these two are mystics. The boundries of mysticism are by no means clear-cut. Mysticism has been defined in many ways. But however it is defined, Eckhart and St. John of the Cross must belong to the mystical segment of Christianity.

Although St. John and Eckhart are both considered Christian mystics, they are by no means totally alike in their theological and philosophical thinking, in their general religious disposition, or even in their interpretation of what their religious experiences were like. From these contrasts, as well as from their similarities, we can gain insights into Christian mysticism.

The lifestyles of both Eckhart and St. John were dominated by the religious orders of the Catholic church. The Dominican and the Carmelite orders each aimed at a life that would allow its members protection from worldly distractions and allow freedom for religious devotion and service. The Dominicans were a mendicant order: they were not cloistered in a monastery and spent much time traveling and teaching. The Carmelites did live in monasteries and remained more detatched from the secular world.

The duties of administration of their orders were an important part of the lives of Eckhart and St. John. Eckhart heavily involved himself in the theological debates of his day, especially with the rival Franciscans. He held numerous teaching and administrative positions within the Dominican order. St. John played an important role in the reformation of the Carmelite order and in the administration of the Decalced Carmelite order that he helped found. Both men put much energy into the practical problems involved in governing their orders.

Eckhart and St. John were both well educated men and were trained in theology. Although quite a span of time elapsed between the two, they share a great deal of intellectual tradition. Thomism strongly influenced both men. St. Thomas lived just a generation prior to Eckhart and was a major influence on his theological and intellectual development. But Thomas' influence was not short-lived. By the time of St. John of the Cross, orthodox Catholic teaching was still dominated by Thomistic concepts. This influence of Thomism resulted in both men's theologies taking on many of the Aristotelian concepts which St. Thomas incorporated into his writings. These concepts included that of substance and its related doctrines.

Both men's theologies define God in substantial terms. God is a spiritual substance, different in kind from material substance of the created world. Man, having a substantial, spiritual soul, is in the intersection between these two levels of reality. An ontological dualism pervades the metaphysical schemes underlying both men's theologies. This dualism imposes an ontological separation between the God and the world.

Eckhart's thinking was more heavily influenced by Platonic thought than was St. John's. Thus his theology follows more in the tradition of St. Augustine, Ploninus, Boetheus, and other Platonic Christians. As a result of this influence, Eckhart gives greater metaphysical importance to the abstract. Ideas, understood in Plato's sense, are an important part of Eckhart's view of reality. The realm of Ideas in his ontology lies somewhere between the Godhead, as Pure Being, and the material world. St. John's theology does not exhibit nearly as much Neoplatonic influence. By his time the Aristotelian concepts of Thomistic scholasticism were much more dominant.

Creation is an important act of God in the theologies of Eckhart and St. John. God as the one who created the world out of nothingness characterizes the status of God in relation to the world. The created owes its very existence to the Creator. Both men share this doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Eckhart, again exhibiting Neoplatonic influence, believes that the persons of the Trinity come about through emanations out of the Godhead. Purer forms of Neoplatonism hold that all levels of reality emanate from God. Eckhart rejected this doctrine insofar as it contradicted the orthodox Christian doctrine.

Closely related to the doctrine of creation is the belief in both theologies that God sustains reality as well as creates it. Eckhart often emphasizes God as Being Itself which is the pure form of existence that sustains particular instances of being. The created realm is contingent upon God's Being. Though St. John does not discuss this topic in as much detail, he generally accepts the same doctrine. Especially when discussing the soul, St. John talks about the sustaining substantial presence of God's Being.

While both men describe God as Being, we noted that Eckhart occasionally describes God as Intellect. This view of God is probably the result of his Neoplatonic influence. Understood in this way, God's metaphysical function involves knowing as well as existence. Metaphysically, Understanding, or Intellect, is more fundamental than Existence in certain parts of Eckhart's writings. This doctrine of Eckhart gives knowledge an importance to the mystical path not found in the teachings of St. John.

Both St. John and Eckhart conceive God as unchanging. A static ideal dominates in both systems. In these dualistic ontologies, change occurs only in the created world. Substantialist metaphysics describe reality in such a way that change is derivative from static existence. God, understood as substance without accidental properties, is totally removed from the possibility of change.

The attributes of God asserted by Eckhart and St. John give Him an absolute and infinite character. Metaphysically, God transcends all other aspects of reality. His being is different in kind from that of anything else. Morally, God epitomizes all the qualities of perfection. God does not fall within the limitations imposed by space and time,

since He is a spiritual, non-material Being.

At times Eckhart talks about God in relative terms, but this is in tension with his metaphysical doctrines about God. In his distinction between Godhead and God, he uses the concept of God to articulate the more relative aspects of the deity. These relative characteristics of God do not belong to Him metaphysically, but are the result of imposing worldly traits on what is really something radically different. God's relative nature, as we noted in our discussion of Eckhart, is merely an imperfect understanding of His true existence.

The concept of Christ plays an important part in both theologies, but St. John emphasizes this aspect of Christian doctrine more than Eckhart. It was noted that Eckhart really concerned himself very little with the human existence of Jesus. What concerned him more was Christ as the Word, continually being begotten in mystical union with God by the aristocratic soul. Understood in this way, Christ is an abstract entity. St. John accords Christ a much more central place in his understanding. He accepted the Catholic teachings concerning the relation of Christ to the human race. But St. John also saw Christ as the best example to be followed in the spiritual path toward union with God. Christ as the beloved Bride of the Church which one joins in spiritual marriage is a favorite metaphor of St. John of the Cross.

An important difference between Eckhart and St. John lies in their doctrines concerning the human soul. Both understood the soul as substantial and as spiritual. St. John believed that the human soul is part of the created realm, quite removed from the nature of God's reality. An ontological barrier divides the human soul and God. Such is not the case in Eckhart's description of the human soul. Eckhart

asserts that there is an uncreated part of the soul. This 'aristocratic agent' of the soul is on the same level of reality as is God. Thus, in Eckhart's view, the human soul and God can indeed exist on the same ontological order.

This difference in the ontological status of the human soul has profound implications for the metaphysical explanation of what goes on in the experience of the Christian mystics. Since no ontological union is possible in St. John's theology, he maintains that the mystical oneness experienced is a volitional transformation which he calls 'becoming God through participation.' This transformation occurs as worldly desires are suppressed, so that the will of the soul conforms to the will of God. Eckhart's doctrine goes beyond transformation. His claim is that there is something in the human soul that exists on the same level as God, and that the contemplative experience is a realization of this aristocratic nature. This awareness is nurtured by the rejection of worldly interests, that is, through an extreme spiritual poverty. Mystical experience yields the knowledge that there is something of the Divine within the human soul. These two doctrines offer quite different metaphysical explanations for the spiritual intimacy claimed by the Christian mystics.

We have how looked at two very important Christian mystics. Although they have very much in common, the two also differ in important ways. The teachings of both of these mystics depend on systems of metaphysical assumptions which are dominated by static concepts. But metaphysics can stress process concepts instead of static ones. Such is the thought of Alfred North Whitehead. I will present his metaphysical scheme in the next chapter. His system will be useful in providing a

basis on which to discuss the question of how Christian mysticism might be interpreted in process terms.

IV. ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD'S PROCESS PHILOSOPHY

Process theology is a non-traditional interpretation of Christianity that takes its metaphysical principles from process philosophy, rejecting the static principles which have been generally assumed in Christian theology, and which have dominated philosophy in the Western world since Plato and Aristotle. Traditionally-accepted philosophical assumptions are turned upside down in process philosophy; the relative upsurps the absolute, change dominates the static, becoming stands over being, pluralism replaces dualism, freedom reigns instead of determinism, and creativity characterizes the universe. Just as process philosophers argue that dynamic categories offer a better explanation of human experience, process theologians assert that Christianity is more adequately formulated when based on process principles.

Alfred North Whitehead was one of the first twentieth century process philosophers to formulate a highly systematic, fully developed metaphysical scheme. He recognized deeply rooted problems in Western philosophy as his interests grew from mathematics to philosophy of science and then to metaphysics. His metaphysical scheme is comprehensive, detailed, and complex, and has been the focus of much critical discussion. Whitehead holds a most eminent position among process philosophers, and many process theologians have been strongly influenced by his thought. Not all process theologians agree on the details of a metaphysical system for Christianity. But Whitehead's system very often is an important element in Christian process theology.

Whitehead himself was a philosopher, not a theologian. He introduced God into his system for purely metaphysical reasons and not to defend any particular religion. But he did associate his God with the intuitions of the higher religions. This leaves to Christian process theologians the task of synthesizing a Whiteheadian understanding of God with the God of the Christian faith. The aim of the present section is to sketch some features of Whitehead's metaphysics, focusing especially on his understanding of God, in order to provide a basis for discussing the relevance of process metaphysics to Christian mysticism.

Biographical Information

An acquaintance with Whitehead's personal life might shed some light on his philosophical outlook. He was born and educated in England and spent his early career there. On February 15, 1861 Alfred North Whitehead was born to Alfred and Maria Whitehead in Ramsgate, Isle of Thanet in Kent. He was the youngest of their children. Alfred was taught at home by his parents until he was about age fourteen when he was sent to Sherborne School in Dorset. His higher education began at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1880. His formal studies were in mathematics, but he also developed interests in philosophy, religion, politics and literature, though he did not attend courses in these disciplines. In 1884 he was appointed to the mathematical staff at Trinity College.

In this early part of his career, Whitehead's most famous achievement was his work with Bertrand Russell on Principia Mathematica. Russell was a student at Cambridge whom Whitehead recognized as exceptionally brilliant. The two eventually became close friends and

collaborated on <u>Principia Mathematica</u>. This work was an attempt to derive the system of pure mathematics from the principles of formal logic, demonstrating that logic is a more fundamental discipline than mathematics. This project occupied Whitehead from 1900 until around 1910.

Mathematics continued to dominate Whitehead's interest after he resigned his teaching position at Cambridge in 1910 and moved to London. Here he wrote <u>An Introduction to Mathematics</u> and was appointed to the staff of University College. While in London he held other positions, including teaching applied mathematics at the Imperial College of Science and Technology and serving as chairman of the Governing Body of Goldsmith College.

The beginning of the 1920's marked Whitehead's turn of interest toward philosophy of science. His writings of this period included <u>An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge</u>, <u>The Concept of Nature</u>, and <u>The Principle of Relativity</u>. Whitehead by this time was one of the most distinguished philosophers of science writing in English.

His move to America commenced a period in which Whitehead's career took a strong turn toward metaphysics. This move occurred in 1924, when Whitehead accepted a position at Harvard University as professor of philosophy. In 1925 he produced <u>Science and the Modern World</u>, which criticized the doctrines of scientific materialism. This was soon followed by <u>Religion in the Making</u>, a short book which sketches Whitehead's theory of the roots of religion in the solitary experiences of human beings. Whitehead gave the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1927. It was for this that Whitehead developed the technical structure of his 'philosophy of organism,' the name he gave

to his metaphysical scheme. He expanded these ten lectures into _Process_ _and Reality_, his most important metaphysical work. _Adventures of Ideas_, a restatement of Whitehead's later metaphysical ideas, was published in 1933. _Modes of Thought_, published in 1938, contained Whitehead's analysis of nature in the process terms developed in his earlier works.

Whitehead's interests in religion are especially relevant to this study. His early life was influenced by the Church of England, of which his father was a minister. He had a brief interest in Roman Catholicism shortly before his marriage in 1891. He studied Catholicism and read a great deal of theology for about eight years. But afterward he gave up interest in religion and entered a period of agnosticism. This agnosticism lasted for only a few years. He regained an interest in God and religion, but never again was he a member of any church.

General Metaphysical Ideas

One important characteristic feature of Whitehead's metaphysics is its atomistic structure. The world is composed of discrete bits of reality. Whitehead conceived the building-blocks of reality as events of becoming that he calls 'actual entities' or 'actual occasions.' These are what Whitehead considers most concrete in reality. [1] Actual entities are brief pulses of reality. As soon as an actual entity completes its process of becoming, it ceases to be an acting part of reality. Actual entities are to be understood as dynamic events with

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[1] Alfred North Whitehead, _Process and Reality_, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherborne, (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p, 18. As a tool for interpreting this work, see, Donald W. Sherborne, _A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality_, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966).

both spatial and temporal dimensions, and not as static enduring particles. Each actual entity is unique. This view contrasts greatly with the concept of qualitatively identical static particles which characterize some atomistic schemes.

Actual entities become as they do partially through their experiences of other entities. Whitehead's use of the term 'experience' does not necessarily imply conscious experience. An actual entity may or not be conscious of each of its experiences. There are two main types of experience, conceptual and physical. Whitehead calls any element of experience a prehension. Physical prehensions are of other actual entities, and conceptual prehensions are of abstract possibilities that Whitehead calls eternal objects.

Whitehead's definition of the actual entity reflects the importance in his thought of the present moment. In Whitehead's system only actual entities are fully real, and actual occasions exist only in the present moment as defined by their subjective immediacy (or immediacy of becoming). Future and past events exist derivitively and are not actual in the fullest sense.

Endurance

Although the present moment is given emphasis, the factor of endurance is not neglected. Endurance is an abstraction from a series of actual entities joined by a path of causal inheritance and bearing a close mutual resemblance. The intelligible world comprises relations among actual entities. A group of actual entities united through their causal connections, make up what Whitehead calls a nexus. [2] A single

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[2] Process and Reality, p. 20.

actual entity, becoming microscopically, is insignificant in isolation. But a group of actual entities sharing a character becomes more forceful in its influence upon experience. A social nexus is one in which a particular characteristic is shared by each of its members. A single series of actual entities, temporally consecutive, sharing a character, make up 'enduring objects' [3] and account for the phenomenon of endurance. An enduring object is only a single strand of consecutive actual entities. But many of these strands can combine to form a spatio-temporal, social nexus that has the quality of endurance. Whitehead calls these 'societies.' A social nexus of this type is a 'corpuscular society.' [4]

This understanding of endurance contrasts with the concept of substance in non-process metaphysics. Substance has often been understood as the concrete, enduring reality. It is an alleged substratum of reality that remains self-identical while enduring change; it is the 'stuff' or 'matter' of the universe; it is the most general category pertinent to reality. Substance, as such, cannot be perceived. It is a part of anything experienced, but cannot itself be experienced. An extension of this belief in substance is that there are two types of substance, physical and mental. This is the dualism that haunts Western philosophy. A soul is an example of mental substance, while all material objects are characterized by physical substance. These two types of substance are generically different, forming two metaphysically opposing dimensions of reality.

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[3] *Process and Reality*, p. 34.

[4] *Process and Reality*, p. 35.

Whitehead asserts against this view that the category of substance is an unnecessary and debilitating burden to Western Philosophy. [5] It is much simpler and more elegant to understand change as fundamental. In Whitehead's understanding of actual entities and their relations, the category of substance is totally rejected. Endurance, rather than being metaphysically concrete, is understood as an abstraction. Change is metaphysically fundamental, not an accidental feature of unchanging substance. The common understanding of substance commits what Whitehead calls 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness,' [6] in assuming the concrete reality of something which is really abstract. Whitehead sees that substance adds nothing in explaining experience and even produces serious philosophical problems. Therefore, according to Whitehead, it should be rejected from metaphysics.

Closely relating to Whitehead's concept of actual entities is his 'Ontological Principle.' [7] This is the principle that anything which exists must either be actual or be derivative from something actual. Thus anything which has any claim to reality must in some way relate to an actual entity. For example, spatio-temporal, macroscopic objects are real, since they are abstractions from serially-ordered consecutive actual entities, but they are not themselves actual. Actual in this sense means concrete and immediate. Stated differently, Whitehead is saying that apart from actual entities, nothing exists at all.

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[5] Process and Reality, p. 29.

[6] Process and Reality, p. 7. See also Science and the Modern World, Section III.

[7] Process and Reality, p. 24ff.

Eternal Objects

One class of entities that play an important role in Whitehead's metaphysics is the category of 'eternal objects.' [8] These are potentials or universals, comparable to the Ideas or Forms in Plato's metaphysics. In contrast to actual entities which alone are fully actual, eternal objects are potential. They are not yet particular in any temporal actual entity but are potential in that they may ingress into some particular actual entity at some time. Eternal objects are part of the data which actual entities must take into consideration in their process of becoming. The nature of the existence of eternal objects differs from that of actual entities. While actual entities are characterized by their becoming, eternal objects exist unchanged and fully determinate. As 'pure Potentials' or 'forms of definiteness' they affect reality in their role as data for concrescing actual entites even though they themselves are not actual. The eternal objects are part of what is 'given' to each actual entity. They are part of the experience out of which an actual entity forms itself.

Creativity

The ultimate metaphysical category in Whitehead's metaphysics is creativity. [9] Each event in the universe exhibits creativity. Each process of becoming involves decision, or an element of self-creation. An actual entity decides how all its data are to be incorporated into its concrescence or process of becoming. Latitude for decision is part of the structure of reality in Whitehead's metaphysics. This latitude,

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[8] Process and Reality, p. 44ff.

[9] Process and Reality, p. 7.

or indeterminantness, on the microscopic level is the basis for Whitehead's claim that 'the universe is. . .a creative advance into novelty.' [10]

Whitehead's Doctrine of God

God plays an important role in Whitehead's metaphysics. Incorporating God into his metaphysical scheme was not something Whitehead did with little thought. He was severely critical of philosophers who use God as a special exception to metaphysical principles necessary to save a metaphysics' coherence. [11] Whitehead insists that he treats God as an example of all the principles that obtain throughout his metaphysical scheme. [12] He felt that the introduction of God was necessary for metaphysics to adequately explain the universe as experienced by humans.

Whitehead did not exclusively equate the God of his metaphysics with the Christian diety, but he did in a general way identify his metaphysical God with the God of the higher religions. Whitehead gave religious intuitions a great deal of importance in forming his metaphysical ideas. In this section it will be of interest to discuss the characteristics of Whitehead's God in relation to other aspects of his metaphysics.

In his process metaphysics, Whitehead rejects the concept of God as totally absolute and ultimate. [13] Creativity is ultimate and God must

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[10] Process and Reality, p. 222.

[11] Process and Reality, pp. 342-343.

[12] Process and Reality, p. 343.

[13] Process and Reality, p. 21.

obey this principle just as every other entity in the universe must. There is thus a strong element of relativity in God's nature. Whitehead sees God as not being completely static and unchanging, but as exhibiting, along with all the creatures in the universe, an ongoing process of creativity.

God as an Actual Entity

Whitehead defines God as an actual entity, though a unique one. God shares the characteristics of the other actual entities. [14] He is concretely real. [15] He experiences other actual entities and the eternal objects, meaning that He has both physical and mental prehensions. God's uniqueness as an actual entity consists partly in his everlasting becoming. While other actual entities become and then perish in a fraction of a second, God maintains his becoming without perishing. God is the only everlasting actual entity. Another facet of God's uniqueness as an actual entity lies in that he prehends all actual entities as they complete their concrescence. This gives to God a sense of relatedness to all other entities in the universe.

Two Natures of God

God's function in the world is too complex to be represented by one single nature, in Whitehead's understanding. God is relative in some aspects and absolute in others. Therefore Whitehead conceives God as having two natures. One, the relative and immanent side, Whitehead calls God's consequent nature. The other, the absolute and

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[14] Process and Reality, p. 18.

[15] Process and Reality, p. 345.

transcendent, is God's Primordial nature. In giving God these two contrasting natures, Whitehead is trying to overcome the limitations of a God characterized by a single nature. These two poles of God's existence account for the contrasting and paradoxical roles that God plays in Whitehead's understanding of reality.

Whitehead considers the absolute characteristics of God to be part of his primordial nature. Although Whitehead's metaphysics is oriented toward process, change, and relativity, he still recognized that permanent, static, and absolute elements are an important part of experience and must be given adequate consideration. Likewise, Whitehead rejects God as totally absolute and static, but understands God as having an absolute and non-temporal side.

Whitehead states that God's primordial nature is 'God in abstraction, alone with himself.' [16] This is the form God takes when considered apart from all concrete things. The primordial nature of God has more to do with potentiality than actuality. But this potentiality greatly affects reality. The existence of true potentiality is an important characteristic of the universe as conceived by Whitehead. God plays an important role in the introduction of potentiality into the world as it comes into being.

The eternal objects closely relate to the primordial side of God. It is in this part of God's nature that the eternal objects reside, or are 'envisioned.' But they do retain their own independent existence and are not simply a part of God. This side of God maintains an eternal envisagement of the eternal objects so that He can relate these pure

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[16] Process and Reality, p. 34.

potentials in a unique way for each concrescing occasion. [17] Part of the becoming of any entity includes a prehension of God. [18] When thus prehended, God presents the eternal objects in a way that reflects His primordial nature. That is, He orders the eternal objects in a way that would produce the greatest creativity or the highest good if they were to become actualized in just that way. Whitehead states:

> The wisdom of [God's] subjective aim prehends every actuality
> for what it can be in such a perfected system. . . .' (19)

But this ingression of the eternal objects is not a determined process. Actual entities are not bound by God's aim. They may choose to actualize any, some, or none of the creativity suggested by God's valuation of the eternal objects. Thus God's role in relation to finite reality is that of influence and not of control.

From the perspective of the concrescing occasion, this receiving of God's influence is its initial aim. In this interrelation between God and an actual entity, impetus toward becoming is instilled in the concrescing occasion. Whitehead thus says of God that 'He is the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire.' [20] In God, the principle of unrest that perpetuates the becoming of the universe is universally instantiated.

Contrasting with the primordial nature of God is his consequent nature. This is the relative side of God. It complements and completes the primordial nature. These two natures of God are not separate

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[17] Process and Reality, pp. 344, 31, 207, 40, 87.

[18] Process and Reality, p. 88.

[19] Process and Reality, p. 346.

[20] Process and Reality, p. 344.

entities but are two aspects of the same entity. The consequent nature of God is the aspect of God that relates to concrete actualities.

Where the primordial nature is God's influence on the world, the consequent nature is the world's influence on God. This side of God represents God's prehension of the world. [21] As each actual entity completes its process of becoming, it ceases to exist concretely. The universe in Whitehead's metaphysics is thus characterized by a 'perpetual perishing' of actual entities. But this is not the complete extinction of that entity. As each entity perishes, its form of definiteness or achieved actuality is preserved in the consequent nature of God. This taking into account of achieved actuality is God's physical experience, just as His envisagement of the eternal objects is His conceptual experience. The values achieved, the creativity realized are thus saved in God's everlasting experience. Whitehead calls this preservation in God the 'objective immortality' of completed entities.

This side of God continually changes. It is shaped by the outcome of the world's process of becoming. God does not control the outcomes of particular occasions, but he does experience them and is thus truly affected by the world. How things turn out does make a difference to God. Whitehead states concerning God:

> He does not create the world, He saves it: or more accurately,
> He is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it
> by his vision of truth, beauty and goodness. (22)

Whitehead conceives this consequent side of God as preserving the creativity achieved by the multiplicity of past actual entities, i.e.

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[21] *Process and Reality*, pp. 31, 88.

[22] *Process and Reality*, p. 346.

the advance of the world that would otherwise be lost. Thus God is dependent on the world just as much as the world is dependent on God. This interrelation precludes an understanding of God as aloof from the world, unaffected by it, but ruling it with complete control.

Contrasts with Traditional Christian Doctrines

Whitehead's metaphysics challenges many traditional Christian notions of God. Christianity has often described God as the absolute ruler of the cosmos. We have seen that Whitehead understands God's power in exerting his desires in the world as limited rather than absolute. To give to God absolute control would violate all the principles of Whitehead's metaphysics, for it would preclude the creativity, freedom, and genuine change which Whitehead held as the fundamental principles in his metaphysics.

A God having complete foreknowledge of events would also violate Whitehead's metaphysical principles. Whitehead's God knows everything in the past, but cannot know the details of the future. For any actual entity in its concrescence, God knows all its antecedents, but cannot know what the final outcome of the concrescence will be. God has a broader knowledge than any other actual entity since His primordial nature experiences all the eternal objects and His consequent nature experiences all past actual entities. Given this vast knowledge of the world, God certainly has predictive abilities, but not absolute foreknowledge.

Whitehead's God does not create the universe ex nihilo, as God does in traditional Christian theology. The relation between God and the world is such that creation is a mutual act. Whitehead states that:

It is just as true to say that God creates the World, as that

the World creates God.   (23)

God creates the world only in the sense that He provides the urge to

become in each actual entity.   In giving each concrescing occasion its

initial aim, God performs what may be considered a creative act.   This

is not a creation out of nothing but is a continual act of creation.

In His primordial nature, God is an 'aboriginal instance of creativity,'

(24) but not creativity itself.   This view thus contrasts greatly with

the traditional Christian understanding of God the Creator.

Whitehead's Doctrine of the Soul

Whitehead's doctrine of the human soul directly concerns the topic

at hand.   To better understand the relationship between persons and God,

the metaphysical basis of human life must be clarified.   Whitehead

recognized that there is something in human individuals that integrates

a vast quantity of information and that is capable of exhibiting almost

unlimited creativity.   Persons experience something within themselves

that endures, coinciding with, and even defining their own existence.

Traditional Christian theology has asserted that each person has a

'soul.' Since only persons have souls, there is a qualitative difference

between human beings and lower forms of life.   The soul is the locus of

personality and consciousness. Many theologians have categorized the

soul as a mental substance, different in kind from its human body and

the rest of physical reality.   The status of the soul and its relation

to the body has been extensively pondered throughout the history of

philosophy.

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(23) _Process and Reality_, p. 348.

(24) _Process and Reality_, p. 225.

In Whitehead's system, the human soul is a special type of enduring object. [25] We noted above that an enduring object is an abstraction from a series of actual entities that are causally connected and that share some characteristic element. The human body is a complex structured society organized such that all its functions and activities are directed by one controlling center. The human brain directs all biological activity. But not all human activity can be reduced to biological terms. Thoughts, emotions, and consciousness are very important dimensions of human life. Whitehead proposes that there exists in each present moment of human life an actual entity that co-ordinates and integrates all the experiences, both mental and physical, of the human organism. This regnant occasion makes decisions, reflects, and performs all the functions in each present moment that comprise the conscious mind. The soul is the series of these regnant occasions throughout the living history of that particular individual. Whitehead's term for the soul, thus understood is a 'living person.'

This concept of a living person accounts for both the qualities of endurance and change that underlie the human personality. The quality of endurance is an abstraction from the historic route of regnant occasions. These individual entities take account of all their predecessors through physical prehensions of the immediately preceeding regnant occasion. Thus a continuity with the individual's past is maintained. Each occasion adds its own measure of novelty and passes this on to the next concrescence through its objective immortality. The living person can thus undergo great change while preserving a sense of

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[25] Process and Reality, pp. 109, 119.

continuity with itself.

In Process and Reality Whitehead distinguishes between two modes of human experience. The mode of experience that he calls presentational immediacy is clear and conscious perception of stimuli. This is the level of normal human sense perception. But this mode of experience is derived from a more fundamental type which he calls experience in the mode of causal efficacy. [26] Experience in this mode is vague and emotional, more a matter of deep feeling or visceral awareness than of clearly discriminated contents. In contrast with the clear perceptions of presentational immediacy, an undiscriminated feeling of 'withness' of the body characterizes causal efficacy. Experience in the mode of causal efficacy enters conscious human perception when experience in the mode of presentational immediacy is suppressed. In lower forms of life causal efficacy is the only mode of experience. It is a reaction to the environment without conscious sense perception. This does not mean that lower forms of life do not have conceptual prehensions. No unit of experience is possible at all without conceptual prehensions. Experience in the mode of causal efficacy terminates before it achieves presentational immediacy.

In this chapter, I have outlined Whitehead's general metaphysical position, his doctrine of God, and his understanding of human persons. Whitehead's emphasis on process as over against static being has pervaded this chapter. His treatment of God, human persons, and their interrelations is shaped by metaphysical categories which emphasize the reality of becoming over being. These metaphysical beliefs, we have

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[26] Process and Reality, p. 81.

noted, differ greatly from those of the mystics themselves. The final chapter will attempt to mesh process metaphysics with the kind of experiences described by Christian mystics such as Eckhart and St. John.

V. COMPARISON OF STATIC AND PROCESS METAPHYSICS AND THEIR
INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

I have shown in the previous chapters how Christian mysticism has been interpreted through predominantly static, non-process metaphysical categories. We saw that two Christian mystics, Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross, in particular, interpreted their religious experiences in static terms. These mystics did not have available to them an alternative system where the categories of thought are based on process and change. In this chapter I will suggest how the experiences claimed by the Christian mystics might be interpreted in terms of the process metaphysics of Whitehead presented in the previous chapter. And I will argue that this interpretation is more adequate to those experiences than the traditional static view.

Before engaging in comparative discussion between process and static metaphysics, let us briefly return to the problem of the general relation between metaphysics and experience. I am attempting to demonstrate that the experiences of the Christian mystics can be interpreted through metaphysical concepts other than those through which the mystics themselves viewed reality. The Christian mystics clearly had profound experiences, and these experiences are of great interest to the philosophy of religion. But the way that the mystics have interpreted their experiences might not be entirely appropriate to all cultures and times. The metaphysical beliefs of the mystics of Christian history may not be relevant to today's world. I believe that

it is not necessary to accept the Christian mystics' metaphysics, or their particular beliefs about God, in order to recognize that they had profoundly intimate experiences with God, which can be reinterpreted in terms derived from some other metaphysical system.

I suggest that the connection between the contemplative experiences of the Christian mystics and their metaphysical assumptions is relatively weak. In other words, metaphysical assumptions play only a limited role in the way mystical experiences occur. For example, a mystic whose metaphysics contains a belief in an all-encompassing ocean of being that underlies reality might bring an expectation to that experience that may become incorporated into the experience itself. But I believe that such expectations or assumptions by no means completely control the experiences. Rather, metaphysics plays its more important function in the subsequent interpretation of the experience.

What is more important in the occurrence of mystical experiences are religious beliefs. Metaphysical assumptions and religious beliefs, though they both make statements about reality, are distinct from one another. Religious beliefs are less general than metaphysical assumptions, explain reality from a more limited perspective, and are usually not concerned with explaining the wide scope of experiences which metaphysics must deal with. How the mystic conceives the relation between God and human beings determines the actions he will take concerning his spiritual goals. The very basis for the mystical life lies in the belief that there is a possibility of experiencing God in a way more intimate than He is normally experienced. But more than one set of metaphysical assumptions can underlie such a religious belief. For this reason, I maintain that the relation between religious beliefs

and mystical experiences is closer than the relation between metaphysical assumptions and mystical experiences. If one does accept that Christian mystics did have experiences of God, it is not necessary to accept their own metaphysical interpretations of their experience, but only the religious belief that allows the possibility of the experience.

The possibility remains that the Christian mystics used the metaphysical concepts that they did because those concepts were in fact more adequate for interpreting their experiences than any others, including the process concepts to be argued for here. It is possible that the Christian mystics used static categories because their contemplative experiences revealed an ultimately static reality. Though this is a possible explanation for the mystic's metaphysical interpretations, it is the one which I will argue against. There is nothing that I have found in the writings of Eckhart and St. John that suggests that their static concepts originated in their mystical experiences. The mystics did not enter their experiences with a blank slate of metaphysical categories. Rather, these two mystics were trained in an intellectual environment dominated by static metaphysical assumptions before they became mystics. Their study of theology instilled a scheme of metaphysical concepts into their thinking. And in the case of both Eckhart and St. John, this metaphysics was based on a static, non-process view of reality. No alternative metaphysical systems were available to them where process is fundamental. I regard the fact that both Eckhart and St. John viewed reality through non-process metaphysics as the result of their intellectual environments rather than as evidence that Christian mysticism confirms that reality

itself is ultimately static.

A fundamental change of metaphysical concepts in the mystics' thinking as a result of their experiences might be a reason for believing that Christian mysticism is laden with certain metaphysical ideas. But there is no evidence that such a change occurs in either Eckhart's or St. John's thought. Their mature metaphysical schemes do not exhibit concepts which are foreign to their earlier intellectual training. It is true that they developed religious doctrines that complement their experiences, but they did not seem to need to change their basic metaphysical assumptions to accommodate these doctrines.

If one accepts the proposition that there is not a necessary connection between mystical experiences and one particular metaphysical system, then the question of which metaphysics most adequately interprets the mystics' experiences becomes relevant. It seems reasonable to believe that metaphysical schemes other than the one held by the mystics could interpret, to some extent, the mystics' basic experiences. A more extreme position, the one I am defending, is that there are glaring problems in the metaphysical schemes of the mystics and that a process scheme might more adequately interpret their experiences.

Throughout this discussion I have used the doctrine of God as the focus for presenting the metaphysical ideas about God of Eckhart, St. John, and Whitehead. I compared the ideas of Eckhart with those of St. John of the Cross at the end of Chapter IV. Here I will compare Whitehead's process doctrine of God with the static views of St. John and Eckhart. I will argue that Whitehead's God could be the object of mystical experiences and that Whitehead's system describes God in such a

way that the relation claimed between the mystic and God can be given an adequate metaphysical interpretation.

There are some radical differences between the metaphysical characteristics of God in Whitehead's scheme and the doctrines of God found in the writings of Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. Metaphysical disagreements about the nature of God have many implications for conceiving the relationship between God and human persons. As we shall see, this relationship is a key issue in the philosophical study of Christian mysticism.

Both St. John and Eckhart define God in terms that make him radically distinct from the material world. They both define God's transcendence by asserting that God is Pure Being, different in kind from the contingent beings of the material world. This view of God places an ontological barrier between God and the world. Such a radical transcendence of God does not fit particularly well with the understanding of God by Christianity in general or especially with the experiences of the mystics.

A radically transcendent God would be inconsistent with God as the mystics claim to experience Him. Eckhart and St. John both deal with this inconsistency by allowing God to relate to the world immanently, despite their basically transcendent understanding of God. St. John states that God condescends from His exalted, transcendent nature and chooses to interact with the world by such acts as creation, His sustaining presence, and especially through the incarnation.

Eckhart's doctrine of God stresses transcendence even more than that of St. John. We saw that Eckhart states God's absolute otherness through His qualities of Being, Intellect, and Unity. All three of

these aspects of God set Him far apart from the world. Though Eckhart at times speaks of God in relative terms, we noted that this manner of speaking does not reflect his view of God's true metaphysical nature, but is only an epistemological distinction.

It seems that both Eckhart and St. John have problems in finding ways for God, defined in basically transcendent terms, to have a truly immanent nature as well. Given their basic view of God as transcendent, their attempts to make God also immanent sometimes appear artificial and end up compromising the original transcendence. A definition of God in terms of a single transcendent nature seems to limit how God can also be immanent.

The view of God as having one single nature is characteristic of static metaphysics. A basic assumption of static, non-process thought is that ultimate reality is final, complete, and thus beyond change. Christian theology, when based on such metaphysical categories, equates God with this ultimate reality. This conception of God necessarily limits Him to having only this one metaphysical nature. To conceive that God had other metaphysical characteristics would contradict the assumption that He is metaphysically ultimate. Whitehead, however, rejected the assumption that God is metaphysically ultimate.

Whitehead avoids the problem caused by defining God through one single nature by asserting from the onset that God is just as much immanent as He is transcendent. God in Whitehead's system has two natures which equally characterize Him. God's primordial nature is predominantly transcendent, and His consequent nature is predominantly immanent. Since God is defined as having two natures, it is not necessary to compromise one nature for the sake of the other.

Whitehead's concept of God with two natures is much less limiting in how it describes God's relations with the world than Eckhart's or St. John's more single understanding of God.

The mystical experiences of Eckhart and St. John seem to reflect a very immanent God. Their closeness to God is so great that they call it a divine union. But the metaphysical categories in which they place God so strongly stress His transcendence that this very immanent relation with the mystics seems out of place. Whitehead describes God in terms that do not preclude such an immanent relationship with human individuals.

One example of the weakness of static metaphysics in accounting for God's immanence is reflected by Eckhart's statements that God suffers. Eckhart's religious feelings about God seemed to imply that God is so close to the events of the world that He could feel the pains of its shortcomings. But Eckhart's metaphysics defines God as entirely self-sufficient and metaphysically aloof from worldly events. For God to be truly affected by particular events in the world would require metaphysical categories that place God in a closer ontological relation with the world. It seems that Eckhart experiences things about God that he does not have the metaphysical categories to express.

This capacity for suffering on the part of God that Eckhart mentions is a central tenet about God in Whitehead's metaphysical system. Whitehead conceived God as so intimately interrelated with the world that He genuinely feels the losses incurred by unrealized perfections. One characteristic phrase of Whitehead is that '. . .God is the great companion--the fellow-sufferer who understands.' [1] This

level of immanence far exceeds that allowed by Meister Eckhart's metaphysical scheme.

Eckhart and St. John of the Cross define God in terms which radically oppose Whitehead's understanding of God. The former define God as Being while the latter defines God as becoming. There is a basic disagreement as to whether God is fundamentally static or in process. Both Eckhart and St. John depict God's most basic property as pure undifferentiated being. They describe God as Being Itself, in contrast with all particular beings, which are metaphysically derivative. These two mystics consider God as already complete, perfect, and satisfied. Such a God in no way can be dependent on the world or be affected by it in any meaningful sense.

Contrasting with this understanding of God, Whitehead defines God as an actual entity that is intertwined with the process of the world's advance. Whitehead's God is not yet complete; He is continually experiencing process and undergoes change. The outcome of the world's continual advance has a profound effect on God's everlasting process of becoming. Whitehead conceives a mutual influence between God and the world. God affects the world and the world affects God.

This quality of becoming seems to more adequately reflect the nature of God as experienced by the Christian mystics. Eckhart uses the quality of being to emphasize the separateness of God from the world. We noted that Eckhart claims that God's pure being is different in kind from the being that material things possess. This higher status of being implies in God an aloofness that is in contradiction with the

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(1) Process and Reality, p. 351.

intimacy felt by the mystics. A God of being, as described by Eckhart, exhibits final completeness and ultimate self-sufficiency. Whitehead's God of becoming is closely interrelated with the world, exhibiting a true metaphysical interdependence. His process of becoming is affected by the outcomes of events in the world, in His consequent nature. The degree of closeness to human persons is greater for a God in process because of this metaphysical interdependence.

How God experiences time is a metaphysical aspect that exemplifies the relation between God and the world. We saw that both Eckhart and St. John depict God as beyond the restrictions of time. They adhere to the doctrine that all sequential occurrences of worldly time are experienced in an instant by God. Whitehead, however, viewed God as unfolding through time. Whitehead conceived God as an everlasting actual entity. But He is also unique in that He is a non-temporal actual entity. He does not exist for only an instant like other actual entities. Still God's non-temporal status does not mean that He enjoys any special privileges allowing Him to escape time's consequences. The participation of Whitehead's God in time is another metaphysical characteristic that places God on closer terms with the world.

An important concern in evaluating the treatment of mystical experiences in a metaphysical scheme is with regard to the adequacy of its explanation of the intimate experiences between the mystic and God. The mystics assert the reality of their close relation to God. A metaphysics that cannot give appropriate metaphysical interpretation and status to their experiences is less adequate, at least in this context, than one which can. I suggest that the metaphysics of Whitehead offers a doctrine of God that more adequately expresses the source of the

experiences of Christian mystics.

We have seen that the mystics themselves do not agree on the ontological implications of their mystical experiences. Meister Eckhart asserts that mystical contemplation reveals an ontological union between the soul and God which takes place on a very transcendent level. Rather than suggest that such an intimate relation takes place on the human level, Eckhart maintains that there is a spark of the Divine within the human psyche. God need not condescend to the human level to intimately relate to a human soul. We noted while discussing Eckhart's interpretations of mystical experiences that he conceived persons as having an inner 'aristocratic' nature that is on God's ontological level of existence. In mystical experiences, God relates to this aristocratic nature and not to the less spiritual aspects of human beings. But St. John believes that the soul and God can never meet ontologically. What occurs in the mystical experience is a volitional and behavorial transformation where the will of the soul becomes very close to the will of God. We see here two quite different metaphysical interpretations of the intimate experiences claimed by these two Christian mystics.

Both interpretations aim at explaining the profoundly intimate relation with God that the mystics feel. Eckhart and St. John both also want to avoid compromising God's transcendence. Eckhart tries to avoid this by asserting that the union is ontological. There is something in the soul which is divine, and the union thus occurs on God's ontological level. St. John maintains God's transcendence by denying that mystical union is ontological.

The intimate experiential relation between a Christian mystic and God can be more adequately interpreted in Whitehead's process

metaphysics. It seems clear that there cannot be an ontological union between a living person and God in Whitehead's system, but that there can be a very great intimacy between them. It is not possible in Whitehead's scheme for the actual entities which make up a living human person to merge ontologically into that actual entity which is God. There is a mutual relation between these actual entities whereby one has a real effect on the other. But each of these actual entities retains its own independent identity, achieving its own synthesis of its world.

The fact that an ontological union is not possible between God and human persons does not mean that the experiential union of mystical experience cannot be given a metaphysical explanation in Whitehead's system. An ontological merger is not necessary to provide an adequate metaphysical interpretation for mystical experience. We noted that the metaphysics of St. John does not allow ontological union. Since St. John does not insist that mystical union with God be ontological, there is no reason to believe that there is something in the mystic's experience itself that requires this particular metaphysical interpretation.

Whitehead depicts the normal relation between God and living persons as a pervasive and ever-present fact of life. There is a very close interrelation between the world and God in Whitehead's system. Some of the data of the actual occasions which constitute a living person originate from God. The initial aim, the very urge toward creativity, originates from God's primordial nature. Whitehead thus understands God as part of the process of the life of a living person. But this normal role of God is not necessarily consciously experienced.

God's presence in the unfolding of a living person is so constant that it tends to evade the attention of consciousness.

This pervasive, continual presence of God as part of the process of a living person coincides with the religious intuitions of many persons. But the experiences described by the Christian mystics are something beyond this intuition of God's continual presence. The experience of the mystics seems to be much more intense. God's presence, as expressed by the mystics, is immediate and intensely conscious. These Christian mystics experience God so passionately that they test the limits of the language and symbols of their faith when they interpret their experiences.

It is possible to interpret the mystic's intense experience of God through Whitehead's metaphysical categories. Whitehead's interpretations of human experience, together with his doctrine of God, allow an intense, intimate relationship to occur between a human living person and that unique actual entity which is God. The normally unconscious presence of God can at times be consciously focused on and experienced. Experience of God is normally in the mode of causal efficacy. Mystics, however, want to intensify the experiences of God in this mode of experience. John Cobb, Jr. offers an explanation for how this shift in modes of experience might occur in a Whiteheadian theology.

Cobb, a prominant process theologian, presents an interpretation of religious experiences in his book, A Christian Natural Theology. He notes the distinction, made above, between the religious experiences that are pervasive and continual and ones that 'seem wholly discontinuous with ordinary life.' [2]

Cobb suggests that these more intense experiences represent a more complete continuity with God than during normal times. He explains this increased continuity with God through an analysis of Whitehead's model of human experience. The human living person normally obtains experience from several sources: from past occasions of its own historic route of regnant entities governing the living person; from actual entities of the body over which it presides; from other living persons; and from God.

Cobb suggests that mystical experiences would occur when the regnant actual occasion inherits from God more strongly and the importance of the other factors of experience are mitigated to triviality. During mystical experiences, feelings of personal identity, physical sensations, ordinary sensorry experience, and relations with other persons become overwhelmed by the feeling of union with God. We have seen in the previous chapters that this is what the contemplative lifestyle of the Christian mystics nurtures. The mystic diminishes his own will so that his volitional identity becomes that of God. Asceticism and physical discipline control and mitigate physical sensations so that they do not interfere with the union with God. The mystical journey, especially as lived by St. John of the Cross, is one of extreme solitude. These dimensions of the mystics' lifestyle mitigate the other channels of experience so that experience of God can dominate conscious perception.

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(2) John Cobb Jr., A Christian Natural Theology, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), p. 233.

The implications of Cobb's analysis can be seen in the lives of both Eckhart and St. John. The actions and beliefs which these two mystics promoted seem to fit in well with the metaphysical interpretation offered by Cobb. Eckhart's virtue of spiritual poverty can be seen as a means whereby all channels of experience, except God's, are suppressed. In his sermons, Eckhart teaches that persons who wish to experience God must empty themselves of all that is not God, including the non-spiritual aspects of their own personality. This emptying is the realization of the inner aristocratic nature. Once all is emptied, only the Godhead remains. The Dark Night that St. John endures achieves the same emptying through a more severe, solitary, and ascetic lifestyle. While Eckhart emphasizes the intellect in this emptying, St. John concerns himself more with the passions. But both descriptions of the mystical path cut off the aspects of human experience mentioned by Cobb: the past events of the mystic's life, physical desires and feelings, and other persons in the world. Experience of God totally dominates during the mystical encounter.

Whitehead's model of human experience and doctrine of God can thus account for the relation with God claimed by the Christian mystics. Both Eckhart and St John explain the metaphysical basis for mystical experience as a certain state of being in relation to God, who is understood in static concepts. The process view, however, interprets the mystical experience as a mutual encounter between a human person and God, who both participate and influence the experience. In its basic terms, the static view emphasizes mysticism as a state of being, while the process view emphasizes mysticism as a dynamic relationship. I believe that the interpretation of mystical experiences given in process

terms offers a viable alternative to the traditional non-process interpretation of Christian mysticism.

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