

# Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge

by C.F. Kelley

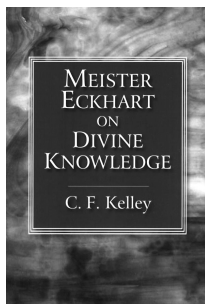
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*Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos*

*“Aliquid est in anima quod est increatum et increabile; si tota anima esset talis, esset increata et increabilis; et hoc est Intellectus.”* (There is something in the soul which is uncreated and uncreatable; if the whole soul were such, it would be uncreated and uncreatable; and this is the Intellect.)

Meister Eckhart

This reissue of C.F. Kelley’s classic work *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977) was one of the original comprehensive studies on Meister Eckhart available in the English language which shifted the very way he was understood. Oddly enough this groundbreaking work has been out of print and difficult to obtain until this republication. The Preface of this original work summarizes its magnitude: “What is here presented to the reader supersedes all former interpretations of Eckhart’s teaching. It refuses to ignore what he precisely and repeatedly says cannot be ignored, that is, his exposition of the doctrine of Divine Knowledge in terms of the highest and most essential of all possible considerations.” (p. xxii)



Johannes Eckhart also known as Eckhart von Hochheim, widely referred to as Meister Eckhart (b. 1260-d. 1328)<sup>1</sup> was born at Hochheim

<sup>1</sup> Readers will be interested to recall that preeminent perennialist author Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1887-1947) described his deepest praise for Meister Eckhart: who resumed and concentrated “in one consistent demonstration the spiritual being of Europe at its highest tension.” (Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* [New York: Dover Publications, 1956], p. 61); and also “The best European teacher is Meister Eckhart; supremely exact.” (Alvin Moore, Jr. and Rama P. Coomaraswamy (eds.), *Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy* [Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988], p. 211).

in Thuringen, Germany. Eckhart was a German Dominican who lived during the High and Late Middle Ages, an epoch that was embalmed with tradition and “unitive knowledge” demonstrating no semblance to the *Weltanschauung* of the modern and postmodern era that has become an inversion of tradition and even calls itself anti-traditional. Notable scholars have described the High and Late Middle Ages as arguably the richest age producing mystical literature unparalleled in the whole of Christianity—Western or Eastern. Eckhart was an exceptional student, one also gifted with administrative abilities. He received the degree of doctor of theology from the University of Paris in 1302 where he also held the position of professor until he was called back to Germany to teach and fulfill administrative duties.

One of the distinguishing marks of the Dominican Order in the direct line of St. Thomas Aquinas (b. 1225-d. 1274) was its emphasis on “the primacy of the Intellect” which is to also say the primacy of the Godhead (*Gottbeit*) and the pure or transcendent Intellect (*Intellectus*). The intellect should not be confused with reason (*ratio*) yet at the same time they should not be considered as separate faculties, “Reason can never comprehend God in the ocean of his unfathomableness” (p. 100), and yet “Divine Knowledge never contradicts reason” (p. 167). The ground (*grund*) of Eckhart’s exegesis contains a staunch expression of the negative theology (*via negativa*) or *apophatic* mysticism that was expounded by St. Thomas Aquinas and particularly by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. And yet Eckhart also affirms *cataphatic* mysticism and what appears to transcend both *apophatic* and *cataphatic* perspectives—the absolute or the unmanifest Godhead evades all approximations and determinations.

Carl Franklin Kelley (1914-2008)<sup>2</sup> was both a Christian scholar and a practitioner. He belonged to the Benedictine Order and was a member of the Downside Abbey in England. Friends such as the Eckhartian

<sup>2</sup> “Although it is not clear whether Kelley had knowledge of René Guénon, it may interest some readers that there are passages in his treatise which sound, for all the world, like a passage from the French metaphysician.” (Wolfgang Smith, *Christian Gnosis: From St. Paul to Meister Eckhart* [San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2008], p. 156); “C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*. Kelley’s book clearly owes a great deal to Schuon, whose aphorisms are repeated almost word for word, but nowhere in the book can we find any appropriate acknowledgment.” (Harry Oldmeadow, *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010], p. 120).

scholar and Professor Josef Quint (1898-1976), the neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain (1882-1973)<sup>3</sup> and English writer Aldous Huxley (1894-1963)<sup>4</sup> encouraged Kelley to articulate the metaphysical doctrine of Divine Knowledge that was central to Eckhart's teaching. He had spent nearly two decades in reflective consideration, profoundly studying and writing the work that later became known as *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*. Kelley contextualizes the significance of Eckhart's teachings on Divine Knowledge for the postmodern seeker in an era saturated with pseudo-spirituality and laden with erroneous thinking:

Being wholly traditional in the truest sense, and therefore perennial, the doctrine he expounds will never cease to be contemporary and always accessible to those who, naturally unsatisfied with mere living, desire to know how to live, regardless of time or place. (p. xxiv)

In Kelley's Preface to the original work he explicitly states the challenges, if not the sheer "impossibility", of translating the true meaning of Eckhart's terminology from medieval Latin and German into contemporary English. This work is divided into a dyad: Part I. *Preparatory Considerations* contains the following chapters: 1. Difficulties and Misconceptions, and 2. The Reality of the Divine Self; and Part II: *The Doctrine* comprises: 1. God and the Human Self, 2. The Word, 3. Primal Distinction, 4. The Inversion, 5. The Veils of God, and 6. The Detachment.

In the first chapter, 'Difficulties and Misconceptions', Kelley underscores the implicit and explicit obstacles of understanding Eckhart's teachings from perspectives rooted in modern and postmodern

<sup>3</sup> It will interest readers to recall that Jacques Maritain had met René Guénon (1886-1951), seminal spokesman of tradition at a conference that Guénon convened to discuss the claims made in the book *Beasts, Men and Gods* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1922) by Ferdinand Ossendowski that he had reached the legendary Kingdom of *Agarttha*. Guénon's reflections on the idea of *Agarttha* were later compiled into the book *Le Roi du Monde* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1927), under the title in English: *The King of the World* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001). See also Marco Pallis, "Ossendowski's Sources", *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, Nos. 1 & 2 (Spring/Winter 1983), pp. 30-41; Charles Upton, "Atlantis and Hyperborea: An Inquiry into the Cyclical Mysteries," in *Who is the Earth? How to See God in the Natural World* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2008), pp. 95-125; Mircea A. Tamas, *Agarttha, The Invisible Center* (Toronto: Rose-Cross Books, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Huxley was the author of the widely regarded anthology *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).

bias, “Surely the greatest obstacles originate not from Eckhart but from ourselves; or rather from our own mental attitudes, which are grounded in prejudices and limitations wholly foreign to him.” (p. 24). Kelley describes the essence of the perennial or what is primary in the embarkation of any spiritual path: “A fundamental qualification laid down by Eckhart for the study of the doctrine is the capacity to discriminate between eternal [Absolute] and temporal [relative] realities.” (p. 42). Eckhart *ipso facto* states, “nothing manifested contains its original unmanifested source” (p. 42), which can be summarized in the axial distinction “that which is primary [unmanifest and absolute] and that which is secondary [manifest and relative or contingent].” (p. 42). To mistake the relative for the absolute is, Eckhart notes, “the root of all fallacy.” (p. 42)

In ‘The Reality of the Divine Self’ the reader will find that many of Meister Eckhart’s injunctions reflect the quintessence of Christian gnosis found in other non-dual doctrines and in the esoteric aspects of the world’s religions<sup>5</sup> or even in the Shamanic traditions—“I am a knower.” (p. 56) or “My truest *I* is God.” (p. 96). Kelley describes being and knowledge as one—“knower and known are one in knowledge.” (p. 58). He distinguishes between the relative and the Absolute in regards to the human individual, “Thus he is aware of two certitudes: ‘he was born in time,’ yet ‘he who is now the supratemporal intellectual act [or reality] is not born.’” (p. 63). Eckhart writes, “[Metaphysically] prior to the existence of the individual self, that unrestricted Knower is, and is his own infinite Selfhood, knowing himself by himself.” (p. 64): the human individual is what he knows and can only know as much as he is; what is transcendent can only be known by what is itself transcendent. The human individual was itself *a priori* transcendent or, in the words of Eckhart, of an uncreated and uncreatable origin *in divinis*: “And inasmuch as that which is in God is not other than God, then in principle my truest *I* [or innermost Self] is God.”

<sup>5</sup> “[O]ne might add that of all the Christian gnostics, Meister Eckhart is the closest to Sri Shankaracharya.” (Jean Biès, “Answers to Some Questions,” in *Returning to the Essential: Selected Writings of Jean Biès*, trans. Deborah Weiss-Dutilh [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004], p. 222); see also Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006); A Monk of the West [Elie Lemoine], *Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism*, trans. Alvin Moore, Jr. and Marie M. Hansen (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004).

(p. 68). The metaphysical nature of the Self is a prolongation of “the entire created order” which “is sacred” (p. 72)—in fact the cosmos is a veritable *theophany*.

In the chapter, ‘God and the Human Self’, Kelley describes Eckhart’s view on the mystery of sapiential identity within the context of the transcendent personality: “God is the transcendent and timeless Principle of which all individual beings, including the human being, are only contingent images or reflections.” (p. 88). And yet the all-possibility of the Godhead is never individualized *per se*: “The Godhead with whom all manifestation is identical in principle, is fundamentally nonmanifested.... God [*Deus ad extra*] and Godhead are distinct as earth and heaven” (p. 90). Eckhart view of transcendent personality is aligned with the non-dual doctrine of Shankara’s *neti-neti* or “neither this nor not”: referring to the all-possibility of the Godhead, Eckhart states, “After all, God is neither this nor that.... There in the Principle all grass-blades, wood, and stone, all things are identical. This is the highest of all considerations, and I have fooled myself with lesser considerations.” (p. 92). The negative theology (*via negativa*) or *apophatic* mysticism of Eckhart shines forth in his statement “He is the Principle without principle.” (p. 93) And yet Eckhart simultaneously affirms a positive theology (*via affirmativa*) or *catophtic* mysticism “God is all-possibility and all-inclusive.” (p. 101). The reader finds that any attempt to assert attributes to the Godhead falls short of the mark: “Every determination [of the Godhead] is a restriction, a negation.” (p. 109); and again, “I know God, yet I do not know him”. (p. 110). Thus a “negation of a negation is transcendently acknowledged as God’s affirmation of himself.” (p. 112)

The chapter ‘The Word’ is demanding as it approaches the ineffable mystery of the Logos as the disclosure of Divine Knowledge to itself *via* the human individual. It is the Word as Revelation that leads the spiritual seeker outside the pale of mental activity to what is true and transcendent—*In principio erat Verbum*—“In the beginning was the Word” (*John* 1:1) and “all things were made [by the Word]” (*John* 1:3). Eckhart explains, “The nature of a word, is to reveal what is hidden.” (p. 131). The Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is metaphysically connected to the Principle or the Word which never enters into the manifest order—for the Principle is prior to all manifestation—“All things come from God. He is in all things, yet pre-eminently all things are in him” (p. 141)

The chapter ‘The Primal Distinction’ embodies the essence of the doctrine of non-dualism found throughout Eckhart’s writings. Kelley notes: “the doctrine that Eckhart, following Aquinas, expounds is fundamentally the perennial ‘doctrine of nonduality.’” (p. 148). The perennial doctrine of non-dualism pervades Eckhart’s teachings: “God speaks the One, but we understand two.” (p. 147); and “God cannot be disturbed by any distinction or multiplicity.” Again, “In truest reality there is no duality” (p. 149). With this said the reader should bear in mind that “Although God is nondual and uncompounded in his limitless being, he is nevertheless God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and these are not three Gods, but one God.” (p. 116). Kelley reminds readers that those who have failed to perceive Thomist non-dualism are those who have not understood essence (*essentia*) and isness (*esse*)—“isness in itself alone directs the issuing forth of the possibilities of essence, it is the principle of all that is” (p. 159). Isness is prior to essence whereas essence is the supporting principle of all manifestation and even derives its name from isness—“essence by itself can never be an efficacious cause.” (p. 151). Eckhart elaborates, “For it is in accordance with the reality of the intellectually higher (which is isness) to influence essence, just as it is natural for the lower (which is essence) to receive such influence.” (p. 152). Isness never enters into the manifest order and is therefore outside the domain of dialectic as such—“Divine Knowledge in itself is neither a ‘what’ nor an ‘is’” (p. 154).

The chapter ‘The Inversion’ reflects on the affirmation made in the first chapter of Genesis identifying the universal and perennial source of Divine Knowledge: “all truth, by whomsoever it be spoken [or known], is from God” (p. 165). Eckhart illuminates a metaphysical, but nonetheless traditional outlook that could be applied to interfaith dialogue: “It is impossible ever to have two things completely equal in the universe or to have two things the same in every respect. For then they would no longer be two, nor would they stand in relation to one another.... We always find and confront diversity, difference in structure and the like, apart from the realm of Divine Knowledge.”

(p. 179). Diversity or multiplicity *de facto* only exists in the Godhead's transcendent unity for it must not be forgotten that it is in the One, the Godhead, that multiplicity originates. Eckhart repeatedly uses the negation of the negation (*negatio negationis*) when referring to the unmanifest Godhead "Since every affirmation is a limitation and hence a negation, then the negation of an affirmation is a negation of a negation and as such divine, infinite affirmation." (p. 187).

In 'The Veils of God' Meister Eckhart confirms, "there are as many ways of understanding as there are human knowers." (p. 190) and yet he declares "*there* is the True Man; in that Man all men are one Man." (p. 204). Even the veil of truth, he insists, must be cast off for the seeker to be reabsorbed into the unmanifest Principle. The Godhead is the Absolute Subject where "Opposites must be transcended." (p. 208). It is the Godhead alone that is "the Knower, Known, and Knowledge" (p. 212). Eckhart allows readers to comprehend original sin from a non-dual orientation: "prior to original sin there was original wholeness" (p. 214). Eckhart outlines the quintessence of all metaphysical doctrines—assuming all veils of the divine have been discarded: one "knows God through God." (p. 214), which is a common principle shared by Shankara, "only the Self [*Ātmā*] knows the Self [*Ātmā*]." The chapter concludes that Divine Knowledge is integral to the human individual who then no longer experiences the state of separateness abiding in the essence of the *Imago Dei*—Image of God:

When I stood in the Principle, the ground of Godhead, no one asked me where I was going or what I was doing: there was no one to ask me.... When I go back into the Principle, the ground of Godhead, no one will ask me whence I came or whither I went. There no one misses me, there God-as-other [or God veiled in manifestation] passes away. (p. 214)

The chapter 'The Detachment' can perhaps be summarized in the following sentence "Man must accept the *given* before he can realize the *gift*." Eckhart refers to the process of detachment as the "divine journey", "the return of the Word to the Father" (p. 217). This "return" pertains to the relative or contingent order and not to that of the absolute or unmanifest order, for the Word "never goes anywhere" (p. 218). Kelley reminds the reader that of all of Eckhart's

writings and teachings there is no theme more predominant than the doctrine of detachment and yet the zenith of this doctrine is summarized in the poverty of spirit or spiritual poverty—“A poor man is he who wants nothing, knows nothing, has nothing.” (p. 222). Eckhart draws from the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas on this subject: “if a man has become detached from himself and all things, then God necessarily fills him.” (p. 227). It is the “infallible necessity” that guides the human individual toward detachment and thus the unmanifest Godhead: “It is in spiritual poverty, detachment, simplicity, that the oneness between man and God is found. And this oneness is through grace, for it is grace that draws man away from earthly things [or structural manifestation] and rids him of all things conditioned by mutability and corruptibility.” (p. 227). The paradox of Eckhart’s instruction is that the soul seeking transcendence or union must cease seeking itself—“the seeker must recede into Intellect which does not seek” and “The more one seeks God the less one finds God.” (p. 236).

Readers will find the republication of this formerly hard-to-find book to be a metaphysical beacon of immeasurable value for contemporary seekers and scholars alike. Many books have attempted to extract Eckhart and even the function of mysticism from Western Christendom altogether, as if Meister Eckhart and mysticism in general could be divorced from the Church, its sacraments and rights. This notion, according to Kelley’s work, is a grave misapprehension of the Christian tradition<sup>6</sup>. For those living in an era intoxicated by extreme materialism, progressivism and secularism, it is challenging to understand Eckhart’s stance on the significance of the Church. “The Body of Christ”—the presence of Christ in this world and its magnitude in the transmission of “the spirit of Christ”—functions as a “second birth” for the devout practitioner. Eckhart was a mystic *par excellence* and yet he was indisputably traditional and orthodox in his outlook. Some have committed a grave error by attempting to reduce Eckhart’s

<sup>6</sup> With this said it is important for readers to know that since the post Vatican II revisions, the Roman Catholic tradition has faced an extreme crisis. For an excellent detailed analysis of what led to this eclipse in the Western Church see: Rama P. Coomaraswamy, *The Destruction of the Christian Tradition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006).



metaphysic to a psychological analysis and interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Given

<sup>7</sup> “Meister Eckhart’s view, therefore, is purely psychological.” (C.G. Jung, “The Type Problem in Poetry,” in *Psychological Types*, trans. R.F.C. Hull [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976], p. 248). It is not therefore surprising that Jung affirms: “the concept [of the] ‘transcendent’ is relative.” (C.G. Jung, *Letters, Vol. 2: 1951-1961*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, eds. Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffé [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975], p. 378). The fact that Jung’s theories aided the emergence of transpersonal psychology and are firmly rooted in its foundation brings up many questions as to the validity and efficacy of transpersonal psychology’s so-called spiritual orientation. Even though Jung parted ways with his master Freud, and recognized the imperative nature of the spiritual domain for the psychological health and well-being of the human individual, he took the reductionistic trajectory of Freud to a new acme by psychologizing religion itself. It is worth noting that Jung’s epistemology is essentially anti-metaphysical and antagonistic to the perennial philosophy, as it embraces empiricism and borrows heavily from the modern philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), which ends up relativizing the Absolute: “[T]hat threshold which separates two epochs [the premodern or traditional world from that of the modern] plays the principal role. I mean by that threshold the theory of knowledge whose starting-point is Kant. On that threshold minds go their separate ways: those that have understood Kant, and the others that cannot follow him.” (C.G. Jung, *Letters, Vol. 2: 1951-1961*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, eds. Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffé [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975], p. 375) It is for this reason that Jung refutes the existence of the Intellect as a spiritual faculty that apprehends Reality unmediated, which is in radical contradiction to the world’s spiritual traditions that are in Jung’s assessment “pre-Kantian” or naïve and outmoded: “Let us take as an example the believing person. . . . He lives in the same world as me and appears to be a human being like me. But when I express doubts about the absolute validity of his statements, he expostulates that he is the happy possessor of a ‘receiver,’ an organ by means of which he can know or tune in the Transcendent. This information obliges me to reflect on myself and ask myself whether I also possess a like receiver which can make the Transcendent, i.e., something that transcends consciousness and is by definition unknowable, knowable. But I find in myself nothing of the sort. I find I am incapable of knowing the infinite and eternal or paradoxical; it is beyond my powers.” (C.G. Jung, *Letters, Vol. 2: 1951-1961*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, eds. Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffé [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975], p. 375) Jung likewise assures the reader that this theoretical trajectory is a “Kantian epistemology expressed in everyday psychological language.” (C.G. Jung, *Letters, Vol. 2: 1951-1961*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, eds. Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffé [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975], p. 379) Some might argue that Jung is speaking from the position of the apophatic or negative theology (*via negativa*)—as opposed to cataphatic theology—which is a mystical approach that attempts to realize the Divine by discernment and knowledge of what It is not. For example, “Whenever we deny something unreal, it is with reference to something real” (*Brahma Sūtra*, III.2.22 quoted in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1943], p. 76). However, even if Jung were affirming such an approach neither the apophatic nor the cataphatic theology would accept such a flawed conclusion—one that undermines both integral spirituality and its corollary integral psychology. While there are myriad ways of conceptualizing the “transcendent unity of religions”, this does not presuppose that there are no absolute criteria by which we can know the Supreme Reality with all certitude as the saints and sages of the plenary revelations have, such as Shankara, Ibn ‘Arabi and Meister Eckhart.

the spiritual entropy of the times the following quote from Eckhart provides a paramount directive for seeking esoteric or mystical truth when spiritual parodies are everywhere to be found, yet the inner dimension is inaccessible without the exoteric or outer dimension: “If thou wouldst reach the kernel, thou must break the shell.”<sup>8</sup> This book is an essential resource to the research and reconciliation of the legacy of this paragon of Western Christendom. Readers will find the work to be an indispensable expression of the *philosophia perennis*<sup>9</sup>—found in all times and in all places. We will conclude this review with the edifying words of this great master—“Love is simply the will reintegrated into principal Truth.” (p. 243).

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<sup>8</sup> Meister Eckhart, quoted in Frithjof Schuon, “Preface,” to *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, trans. William Stoddart (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1981), p. 3; See also the revised translation of the former: Frithjof Schuon, “Preface,” to *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence, A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge and James S. Cutsinger, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006), p. xiv.

<sup>9</sup> Readers interested in the topic of the perennial philosophy and the Christian tradition, see Mateus Soares de Azevedo (ed.), *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005).