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MEISTER ECKHART'S ETHICAL UNIVERSALISM, CONFUCIANISM, AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY

ABSTRACT

Meister Eckhart is known for having developed a sophisticated form of inclusivist Christian universalism in the late Middle Ages. This universalism arose from the particular “globalizing” contexts of his times, for which there are real parallels in our own day. The author argues that in key respects, Eckhart’s ethical universalism shows strong affinities with Confucian principles, and can be informed by these as set out historically by Xinzhong Yao and in a contemporary setting by Tu Weiming. In the conclusion, the author sketches the possible influence of Confucianism on a future Christianity, in the light of the Eckhartian universalist inheritance.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are few encounters as important in the world today as that between Confucianism and Christianity. The reasons for this are evident. Each has been at the center of the political, social, and cultural evolution of a major civilization. Neither modern China nor the Western world as it exists today can properly be understood without understanding also the role of Confucian and Christian thought and practice in the formation respectively of modern Chinese and Western identities. Since, arguably, it is these two identities which increasingly find themselves today to be the competing “subjects” of our global or human history, we may assume that socially and culturally both Confucianism and Christianity are already at the early stages of evolving into a new kind of resource for these ancient identities. Since any new, inclusive, human subject of history to emerge from within the social, political and economic spaces now opening up in our rapidly

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globalizing world, will have to integrate the traditional values and perspectives of both China and the West to a far greater degree than we have seen before, we may assume that some kind of new cross-fertilization will need to take place between Confucianism and Christianity in the formation of our distinctively contemporary identities. One important way in which such a cross-fertilization between religions can occur is through mutual learning when classical figures are compared across religions or a classical figure from one religion is analyzed from the perspective of another. Such studies of the past can serve the interests of greater integration between religions in the future, and it is as a contribution toward this end that the present article, by a specialist in Christianity, is written.

An inescapable practical condition, however, is that there should be a sound basis for encounter, of such a kind that genuinely mutual learning can concretely take place. We need to construct a context, for the purposes of this article, which will allow for such an encounter and moment of mutual learning. In the first place, we must account for the understanding of Confucianism that will be operative in this article and, second, for the choice of Meister Eckhart as the representative Christian figure. For the purposes of the present article then, I shall follow Xinzhong Yao's definition of Confucianism as the "seeming paradox" of "moral religiousness," offering "holistic explorations of human nature and destiny and hermeneutical interpretations of human dilemmas which lead to conscious practices that resolve our 'ultimate concerns.'"¹ Based upon an analysis of the sayings attributed to Confucius (551–479 BCE) and Mencius (371–289 BCE), Yao argues that Confucianism is an ethical tradition with profound religiousness. The religiousness of Confucianism is seen in three dimensions: its focus on *li* 禮 (ritual/propriety), *sheng* 聖 (its endless pursuits of sagehood), and *tian* 天 (its reverence toward Heaven). Importantly, Yao argues that it is the interpenetration, or non-separation, of Heaven and earth that guarantees the unity of "sacred" and "secular" in Confucian tradition. It is this unity that allows us to define Confucianism as being based on a universalist, transformational hermeneutic rather than, more exclusively, a hermeneutic of "transcendence." We shall complement Yao's historical perspective with the more contemporary perspective of Tu Wei-Ming, however, in order to bring Eckhart's ethical universalism from the past into dialogue with New Confucianism, which develops the articulation of Confucianism as a potentially global religion in today's world. In this way, we shall seek to identify at least some of the elements that will belong in the evolution of a properly "global" Christian theology, in which the axis of theological thought is beginning to move away from the presuppositions of Western modernity in the light of Chinese traditions and experience.

Our interest in the fourteenth-century German thinker, Meister Eckhart, as the exemplar of Christian thought and practice, lies principally in his universalism. This is not the somewhat shallow universalism of the modern period (which tends to play down the relative importance of Christian foundations and traditions), but neither is it the universalism of the ancient world with its appeal to eschatology.² Eckhart offers us rather an inclusive universalism which derives from within Christian doctrinal foundations and traditions. As such, his work witnesses to the possibilities of an implicit inclusivity within foundational Christianity as a world religion, as something that lies more deeply than the divisions we have inherited. It is these, of course, which will always remain the concrete historical forms of Christian life and practice. What we are arguing for here is the shape of a new Christian theology, which belongs to both East and West, and which brings about a new way of living and breathing Christianity.

II. MEISTER ECKHART: CONTEXTS

Meister Eckhart (1260–1327/8) was one of the leading theologians of the Middle Ages.³ He was a German Dominican (Order of Preachers) and, in his own time, enjoyed an equivalent reputation to that of his fellow Dominican St. Thomas Aquinas. Toward the end of his life, he fell, as did others in the time, under suspicion of teaching things that were in conflict with orthodox Christian beliefs and for a while, following his death, his works were suppressed. In the modern period, however, Pope John Paul II has restored his reputation as a “master of Christian spirituality.”⁴

Eckhart is a figure who in his own milieu was concerned with questions of both ethics and religiosity, as well as questions of theory and practice in Christianity. He was a Catholic theologian whose German-language sermons, which are central to his thought (and which were among the first intellectual works in the German language), were deliberately sought out a century and a half later by the reformer Martin Luther.⁵ More than any other medieval Christian thinker, Eckhart also came to enjoy considerable influence among secular modern Western thinkers. Friedrich Hegel and Arthur Schopenhauer both engaged with his work in the nineteenth century, as did Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida in the twentieth. Eckhart remains widely read today.

Eckhart belonged to the period of the greatest Christian hegemony in Europe when the Catholic Church permeated every level of European society and was at the forefront in the shaping of Western thought (and new Catholic missions, through Franciscans and

Dominicans, extended as far as China). These are the circumstances under which we would expect an unbending exclusivist universalism to arise, seeking to impose a positivist account of Christianity on all, rather than the strongly inclusivist account which Eckhart articulates and develops. In order to understand how this development could have taken place, we need to understand three particular social and intellectual contexts of his thought.

1. The Rediscovery of Classical Philosophies

The scholasticism of the High Middle Ages was deeply indebted to the rediscovery of the classical philosophical inheritance, from the thirteenth century onward, principally bringing to light new Aristotelian and Platonic or Neo-Platonic texts.⁶ In fact, there is a case for the view that High Scholasticism was itself the product of this challenge. Jewish and Islamic thinkers had encountered and come to terms with classical thought in earlier centuries and their discussions and accommodations, now translated into Latin, were also integrally part of this dynamic culture of rediscovery.

At the center of this reception were questions to do with the proper boundaries between the “natural theology” of the ancients, guided purely by reason, and the “revealed truths” of the Abrahamic faiths. The work of Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Duns Scotus, and other leading theologians of this period are dominated by issues that concern legitimate Christian theological use of classical philosophy, with its powerful terminology and conceptual tools, without losing the distinctive and defining Christian emphases in biblical revelation. Thomas Aquinas’s careful accommodation of Aristotle, with the premises that the creation of the world (i.e., that it had not existed from all eternity), and the Trinitarian nature of God can only be known through revelation, became standard within Catholic tradition, but in its own times this was only one in a series of projects which sought to learn from pre-Christian Greek philosophy without compromising key Christian positions.⁷

If in his own time, Thomas Aquinas offered a careful separation of the domains of philosophy and theology, so that the relative authority of each would be clear, Meister Eckhart in contrast argued for the unity of the truths of Aristotelian philosophy, the Mosaic Law and Christian revelation.⁸ It was not, however, that Eckhart was more of a rationalist, but rather that Eckhart had a stronger account of the Creation and its continuing effects. This meant that according to Eckhart’s understanding, the “heavenly” was more potently present in the “earthly” than it was for Thomas. We can see a reflection of this stronger account of “continuing creation” in the technical terms of analogy,

where Thomas argued that the “created” property of the second analogate genuinely belongs to it as “creature” and ceases to be identifiable with the first analogate or God (from which it originally derives).⁹ For Eckhart, however, the “created” property of the second analogate, or “creature,” still remains within the first. Thus the quality of “being,” for Thomas, genuinely belongs to those things that are, whereas, for Eckhart, “being” remains within God and is only “on loan” to creaturely things.¹⁰

Eckhart’s stronger sense of the presence of the divine or the “heavenly” within the “earthly” as such, softens the reliance upon the positive revelation of Incarnation. More precisely, it suggests that the saving knowledge that comes to us from revelation or incarnation is a saving knowledge about the nature of the world, and about our own creatureliness in the world. It is a saving knowledge about God as Creator who is now shown to be dynamically present in the creation in such a way that the Son of God can also be born in us (*gotesgebuert*), as the foundation of the ethical life of detachment (*abegescheidenheit*).

2. *The Condemnation of 1277*

The new access to the classical texts, and especially those of Aristotle, challenged the traditional Augustinianism of the Church which had emphasized the combination of reason and love in faith. The new Aristotelianism, as it emerged from the School of Arts at the University of Paris during the mid-thirteenth century, envisaged a more purely rational content of faith, such that efforts of the will were no longer required. This seemed to many to undermine the role of ethics in faith and the place of the active life of the Church. In the terms of the day, it failed to grasp the importance of maintaining the distinctions (as well as continuities) between the natural knowledge of God through human reason, as represented by Aristotle, and the saving knowledge of God which Christianity identifies with Christ and with his body the Church. The condemnation by Bishop Stephen Tempier in 1277 of 219 propositions reflecting the new Aristotelianism at Paris, was indicative of the deep tension that was felt between philosophers and theologians around these questions at this time.¹¹

Duns Scotus (the leading Franciscan theologian) and Meister Eckhart (the leading Dominican theologian) belonged to the generation after Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), but the influence of the 1277 condemnation can be felt in both their work. Each attempted to restore the balance between reason and love in their articulation of faith, though in quite different ways.¹² Scotus sought to define theology in more distinctively “practical” ways, arguing for an “extension” of the

intellect in our practices in the world, which constituted a fuller form of cognition than when the intellect simply rested within itself. Thus the fullest form of human reasoning (and the kind of reasoning which justifies theology as a “practical science”) is the “right reasoning” we use under the influence of the objective forms of God’s moral law, in concrete situations of moral choice, where we must come to personal decision about “the right thing to do.”¹³

For Eckhart, the unity of reason and love was achieved in a quite different way. An essential part of the Aristotelian inheritance was the principle of *nous*, the highest capacity of mind, which can be translated as “insight” or perhaps as the light of consciousness itself. In the early Augustine, and in the radical Augustinianism of Eckhart’s own day, this light of the mind was an illumination bestowed on the human creature from God.¹⁴ It was therefore our primary and most essential point of contact with God. Eckhart argued for the ultimate unity of mind and will, or knowledge and love, in us, through our accessing this most essential “ground” or “spark of the soul” by which we come to live as creatures from this, our deepest point of contact with God. This was not an intellectualism as such, or a form of rationalism. It was rather a way of defining the human in terms of our utmost possibilities as conscious creatures capable of ethical, self-decentering acts. Within the cosmology of his day, this “ground of the soul” was the point at which, in us, heaven and earth combine, since it is here that the “birth of God in the soul” takes place.

3. *The Rise of “Religious Women” and the Turn to the Vernacular*

But in addition to the rediscovery of classical philosophical texts, Meister Eckhart lived at a time when Christianity was expanding in new ways and at new levels within Christendom itself. This was the time of a large-scale missionary movement toward the laity which is associated with the foundation of the mendicant orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans (Order of Preachers). Eckhart and Scotus both experienced this quite directly in that it was the mendicant orders who were requested by Pope Clement VI to undertake pastoral care of the new, semi-regulated women’s religious communities known as Beguines. In around 1309, both Eckhart and Scotus, as leading members of their orders, moved to Cologne, the center of Beguine life which was concentrated in Germany and the Low Countries.

With the obligation to preach to the *mulieres religiosae* or “religious women” of the day in vernacular German, Eckhart the scholastic theologian faced a significant new challenge. This was an opportunity to find new ways of communicating his Dominican theology, to women who were well known for their vibrant mystical life. In his German

sermons (surviving in the form in which they were written down by others), Eckhart developed a highly expressive, imagistically enriched, preaching style in which language itself seemed to perform and communicate the very state of divine in-dwelling and detachment which was the subject of his preaching. We know in fact, that Eckhart has a very sophisticated semiotic and theological understanding of what language is, which was indebted to the distinguished semiotician Thomas of Erfurt on the one hand and to St. Augustine's "On the Trinity" on the other. For Eckhart then, language originates within the Trinity itself and transformatively flows forth, from the Godhead, through the preacher and into the hearts of the listeners.¹⁵ The preacher addresses specific congregations, and so transformational language remains firmly grounded in the here and now, but it needs to be purified of its material associations and, where we speak of God, language needs to be broken down in ways that prevent its "fixity" from obstructing the divine flow. For Eckhart, language needed to be freed from the multiplicity of earthly existence, becoming transparent to the heavenly reality which had given it birth. This transparency was often configured as a form of "abstraction" as words were purified in a sense from their "heavier" and less spiritual associations while, at the same time, the conceptual closure of words was broken down through apophatic techniques which undermined any sense there might be in Eckhart's audience that they were coming to a firm grasp of what God is. Eckhart's sermons constantly elude any sense of closure, while communicating a strong sense of the capacity of the unity of heaven to make itself present through the multiplicity of words. He understands this always to be a process which takes place both within us, in our depths, and in the social spaces outside ourselves.

We can see the origins of Eckhart's inclusive universalism in a combination of factors then. The close encounter with pre-classical culture which typifies the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is part of this, as is the condemnation of 1277. This introduced a turn to ethics which was the obligation of his own generation of theologians to engage more fully with the human as such, and with our unity as both reason and will, knowledge and love, within the particularity of human situational life. Deep philosophical abstractions were measured against the particularity of the human person in ethical decision making. Underpinning these positions was an unshakeable belief which Eckhart's work conveys in a process of continuing creation such that the generativity of the Creator can be felt in each moment of time and in every place. It is this which brings our humanity into conformity with the divine creativity, providing the foundation for the truly ethical, "detached" life. The constant refrain for this deep metaphysical and ethical structure of the universe in the German sermons is the image

of the “birth of God in the soul.” The God who was born in Bethlehem is the same God who is born in us, and is so on account of the nature of God himself which is to be born and reborn as Creator in the created order. For Eckhart, this is like the pushing of the “heavenly” through the “earthly” and the constant reshaping of humanity, at the central universal core of our existence, through the “command of heaven.”

But the close encounter of the Dominicans and of Eckhart himself with an entirely different register of self-confident, female religious life within Christendom, was also a key factor here.¹⁶ This confronted Eckhart with the challenge of devising wholly new approaches to the communication of Christian truth in a vernacular language which, in those places of preaching, could become a new shared discourse of self-dispossession and love. We can read this moment in history as the point at which traditional Christian theology, with its celibacy and Latinity, entered into the life and culture of the people, and began to take on an increasingly inclusivist form. But integral to this inclusivism was a further point that needs to be noted. Eckhart stressed the extent to which he was concerned with innovation in the area of *teaching*. Eckhart does not advocate new practices or desisting from old ones. Rather, he specifically defines the innovation he is advancing in terms of a different internal disposition within practices. It is not what we do but how we do it that counts for Eckhart. For Eckhart it is the kind of understanding we bring to practices—even to Christian practices—that determines their value.

III. MEISTER ECKHART: THEMES

In considering Eckhart’s themes, we have to consider also the extent to which he implicitly argued for an innovation not in practices themselves but in the doctrinal thinking that informs those practices. Eckhart was keen that his audience should not think that practices alone were enough. This is not the same as the later Protestant critique of Catholic practices on the grounds that justification is through faith alone (although there are some parallels). It is rather the understanding that God works in us, in ways that need to be reflected and intensified through Christian culture. Our understandings of how God works through us are intrinsic to that same process of divine activity. We need to *understand* how God works in us. This understanding is doctrinal but is more than the traditional acceptance of the Lordship of Christ and the creedal life of the Church. These are not renounced or relativized. But conclusions are drawn from the truth of Incarnation as to the nature of God and the nature of the human creature. The nature of God is to give birth to himself, constantly, as Creator in the human

person, as creature. Fully in accordance with the traditions of the Church, Eckhart understands Incarnation to be the point of contact between the earthly and the divine, or between heaven and earth. It is the making present of the heavenly on earth. But Eckhart also reads scripture as pointing to our own capacity to become sons of God, and to be ourselves taken up into the incarnational dynamic that governs the space between humanity and God, earth and heaven. His thinking communicates an enormous conviction of the power of heaven or of God to push its way through us and into the world. Our “point of contact” lies in our very essence where the light of consciousness arises, we might say, and where we are most “receptive” to his “activity.” If Eckhart’s “intellect” is the point of our origination as living consciousness, then it is here, in the inescapable dependence of who we are on something other than ourselves—in the “giftedness” of our own conscious life—that we receive God’s own life and are freed from the constraints of self. Eckhart’s ethical life of detachment arises when we learn or allow ourselves to live, from the life of God himself, at the source of our living, self-aware consciousness.

1. Heaven and the Transformed Consciousness of Jesus

1. The Human Consciousness of Jesus

In a way that was unusual for his times, Eckhart lays an emphasis upon the humanity of Jesus himself, in terms of his transformed consciousness, and he identifies two forms of decentering, the first of which is “physical” and the second “spiritual”:

For that person who wants to cast his soul, the grain of wheat, into the field of Jesus Christ’s humanity that it may perish therein and so become fruitful, the manner of their perishing must also be of two kinds. The first way must be physical and the second spiritual. The physical side is to be understood like this: whatever he suffers from hunger or thirst, cold or heat, or from being scorned and suffering unjustly, in whatever way God sends it, he must accept it willingly and gladly, just as if God had never created him, except to endure suffering, discomfort and travail, not seeking for themselves anything in that, nor desiring anything in heaven or earth, and they should consider all their suffering as being only a little, as a mere drop of water compared to a raging sea. That is how you should regard all your suffering compared with the great suffering of Jesus Christ. Then the grain of corn, your soul, will become fruitful in the noble field of Jesus Christ’s humanity and will perish there so as to abandon self completely.¹⁷

The “spiritual” form of suffering is more internal and absolute:

Now observe the second manner of the fruitfulness of the spirit, of the grain of wheat. It is this: all the spiritual hunger and bitterness

that God permits to invade him, he shall endure. [...] You should let God do what he will with you, what he will just as if you did not exist: God's power should be as absolute in all that you are as it is in his own uncreated nature.¹⁸

2. Heaven

The language of “suffering” (*leiden*) in Eckhart is frequently combined with the “activity” of God (*wirken*) and so is suggestive of human acceptance of divine mandate or power. On a number of occasions, Eckhart uses the term “heaven” for that divine intervention:

Just as the power of heaven works nowhere so effectively and in no element, as in the ground of earth, although it is the lowest, for here it has the greatest opportunity to work, so too God works most in a humble heart, for there he also has the greatest opportunity to work and finds there what is most like him. He thus teaches us to enter into the ground of true humility and true nakedness, to cast off everything that we do not have by our human nature (which is sin and defect), and also whatever we have by nature which is born of attachment.¹⁹

2. *Universalism and the “Birth of God in the Soul”*

Eckhart's dominant image for “divine activity” in us however is the “birth of God in the soul.” This does not go directly back to the historical Incarnation of Christ but rather to what is revealed in the historical Incarnation: namely the Triune God. He states:

The word “father” implies pure begetting and means the life of all things. The Father begets his Son in the eternal mind of God, and thus the Father begets his Son in the soul just as he does in his own nature, and begets him in the soul as her own, and his being depends on his bringing his Son to birth in the soul, whether he would or no.²⁰

But if it is the nature of God to be fertile in the soul, then it is the nature and desire of the soul too to receive this birth, suggesting a far-reaching reciprocity between the divine and the human, heaven and earth:

God's chief aim is giving birth. He is never content until he begets his Son in us. And the soul too is in no way content until the Son of God is born in her.²¹

Just like the creation itself, this birth is not as such in space and time. It is not itself a created birth but a birth that is one with the continuing creation, which is not itself space and time but rather that which causes space and time to come into existence:

This birth does not take place once a year, or once a month or once a day, but all the time, that is, above time in the expanse where there is no here and now, nor nature nor thought.²²

Once again, the reception of the “birth” is characterized as inwardness and reflective withdrawal from the senses:

This the soul in which this birth is to take place must keep absolutely pure and must live honorably, in introspective recollection. It must not lose itself by running out through the five senses into the multiplicity of creatures but must turned inwardly into its own purest part...²³

You must leave the crowd and return to the source and ground from which you came. All the powers of the soul, and all their activities—these are the crowd. Memory, understanding and will all divide you, and so you must leave them all: sense-perceptions, imagination or whatever it may be in which you find or seek to find yourself. After that, you may find this birth but not otherwise.²⁴

The reality of the “birth of God” in us is signaled by the presence of virtues:

We shall therefore speak of this birth, of how it may take place in us and be consummated in the virtuous soul, whenever God the Father speaks his eternal Word in the perfect soul. For what I say here is to be understood of those who are good and perfected who have walked and who still walk in the ways of God; not of those who are natural and undisciplined, for they are entirely remote from and wholly ignorant of this birth.²⁵

Eckhart decisively places the initiative for this birth with God and the heavenly:

The earth can never flee so far from heaven that heaven cannot flow into her, impressing its power upon her and fructifying her, whether she wishes it or not. It is just the same with us. We think that we can get away from God but we cannot escape him, for every corner reveals him. We think that we are fleeing from God, but we run into his arms. God gives birth to his only begotten Son in you, whether you like it or not. Whether you are asleep or awake, God does his work.²⁶

3. *Ethics and “Detachment”*

These passages show the proximity of Eckhart’s conception of the “birth of God in the soul” to the continuing creation of the world and all its creatures. Heaven presses upon earth and earth cannot resist it, according to Eckhart’s rhetorical phrasing. But it is evident that there is nevertheless a specific place for the human will with respect to the ethical state which the “birth of God in the soul” brings about in us. Eckhart marks a strong distinction between my individual selfhood or individual sense of ownership, and my human nature as such.

Detachment involves the overcoming of the former and the exaltation of the latter:

I say our human nature and the individual person are different. Our human nature itself is so noble that its highest peak is equal to the angels and akin to God. The closest union that Christ had with the Father, that is possible for me to win, could I but shed what there is of *this* or *that*, and so realize my own human nature.²⁷

For Eckhart, it is this property of being *this* or *that* which stops us feeling one with all things:

“This” or “that” is not all things, for as long as I am this or that, or have this or that, I am not all things and have not all things. Cease to be this or that, and to have this or that, then you are all things and have all things and so, being neither here nor there, you are everywhere. Therefore, being neither this nor that, you are everything.²⁸

This universal consciousness has strong ethical implications:

Whoever loves God as he ought or must (whether he wishes to or not), and all creatures love him, he *must* love other people as himself, rejoicing in their joys as he does in his own, wishing that they should be honored as much he himself is honored, and loving the stranger as one of his own.²⁹

Eckhart envisages a state in which the detached self has wholly internalized the divine command:

He who makes his will wholly over to God, to him God gives his will in return, so wholly and so genuinely that God’s will becomes that person’s own will.³⁰

Eckhart speaks of a comprehensive process of detachment as the ground of virtue:

We must learn to remove from all God’s gifts to us the sense of our own self, to possess nothing of our own and to seek nothing, neither advantage nor pleasure, nor inwardness nor sweetness nor reward nor heaven itself nor our own will. God never has entered nor ever does enter someone through their will but only through his own will. And so whenever he finds his own will, there he gives himself and enters in with all that is his. The more we strip ourselves of ourselves, the more we become him.³¹

This detachment has repercussions even for our state of mind in devotional and religious practices:

This above all else is needful: that you must lay claim to nothing! Let go of yourself and let God act with you and in you as he will. This work is his, this word is his, this birth is his, in fact every single thing that you are. For you have abandoned self and have gone out from all the soul’s powers and activities, and your individual nature.

Therefore God must enter into your being and powers, since you have stripped yourself of all possessions and become a desert ...³²

It follows therefore:

People should not worry so much about what they should do but rather about what they should be. If we and our ways are good, then what we do shall be radiant. If we are just, then our works will be just. We should not expect to be able to ground sanctity on what we do, but on what we are, for it is not works which sanctify us but we who sanctify our works.³³

Eckhart concludes:

If someone thinks they will get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies or by special infusions of grace, than by simply being at the fireside or the stable, then that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak around his head and showing him under the bench. For whoever seeks God in a special way, gets that way and misses God, who lies hidden in it. But whoever seeks God without any special way, gets God as he is in himself, and that person lives with the Son and is life itself.³⁴

IV. ECKHART'S UNIVERSALISM AND CONFUCIANISM

We can read Eckhart's universalist philosophy or theology as turning around two specific axes. The first is the nature of heaven, as penetrating earth, and as having a momentum of its own to drive more deeply into the created order, transforming earth according to the dictates of heaven (which Eckhart represents as the "birth of God in the soul"). The second is his understanding of human nature as possessing within itself, at the root of conscious, a point of contact between heaven and earth. This is the "ground" or "spark of the soul," which is the locus of the birth of the "Son" in us. These two axes together serve to emphasize the fact that the transformational point is in fact located *within us* and so is also *within the world*. This is not strictly a "transcendentalist" option in the modern sense of the term, since, for Eckhart (for all his Platonism), the medieval idea holds that the "noetic" or "intelligible" reality of mind as rooted in the self-knowledge of God, is always contained within the encompassing created order. The "birth of God" is not our movement *out of* the world, but rather marks a different way of being *in* the world: a way in fact which brings our own created life (or "being") into conformity with the life of God.³⁵

For Eckhart, these two axes come together in the person of Christ, whose own transformed consciousness is the prototype of a transformed humanity, as we allow ourselves to be shaped by the same

heavenly powers that shaped his earthly life. If Christ is heaven on earth, then we too, as the place of the possibility of the “birth of God in the soul,” can become like him the presence of “heaven on earth”: we can ourselves be “the Kingdom of God on earth” (Hilary of Poitiers).³⁶

We can see a series of elements here then which indicate a significant convergence with Confucian themes. First, the emphasis on heaven as ubiquitous and as present within us all disrupts the religious–secular distinction with which we are otherwise very familiar in Christianity (and to which Yao refers).³⁷ Second, the image of the “ground” or “soul’s spark,” which is the point of contact between the earthly and heavenly in us, exalts our humanity and universalizes this relation. This marks a different way of being in the world, which is a potentiality within every human being. Again this is close to earlier, traditional Christian developments of Aristotelian *nous*, but Eckhart has radicalized it *communicatively*, by developing a new kind of dynamic or transformational theological language in the pastoral and kerygmatic register of his German language sermons for the people of his day. Third, in the “birth of God in the Soul” Eckhart effectively offers a very strong account of our union with, or internalization of, the Mandate of Heaven (in Confucian terms). This is an evocative, transformative, Christological image, deriving from traditional sources, which dramatizes and intensifies the several medieval Christian accounts of how God effects in us an internal transformation, through different levels of grace and through the action of the Holy Spirit. This image of transformation is both anthropological and cosmological and so corresponds to what Tu Weiming has called the “anthropocosmic” dimension.³⁸ Eckhart’s strong emphasis on the continuing material nature of language and on preaching as performed in the here and now, means that the “anthropocosmic” dimension in him also comes to expression in terms of what Tu Weiming calls “concrete humanity” or “lived concreteness.”³⁹ For all his Platonism, the dynamic structure of Eckhart’s work springs from the Christian doctrines of Incarnation and Creation, which always center him in the utmost possibilities of concrete human embodiment. In an important passage, Eckhart sets out what we can call his “transformational hermeneutics,” explaining to his congregation that when he emphasizes the divinity of Christ, he is not denying Christ’s material and created humanity, but is only drawing our attention to Christ’s divinity in order that we should be united with him according to his divinity (on Augustinian principles of becoming what we know and love). But this does not mean that we cease to be also material and created as Christ is according to his humanity.⁴⁰ In other words, Eckhart is seeking to use language (which is both “material” and “intelligible”) to effect a change in how we are

in the world as both mind and body, realizing our “human nature” or translating “this” and “that” into a universal form of particular human existence. Fourth, Eckhart details the state of “detachment” which is consequent upon the “birth of God in the soul” as being the making of other people’s concerns as one’s own. As radical decentering of the self, and acceptance of all things rather than some, “detachment” appears to be a form of ethical, universal consciousness which approximates to Confucian “compassion” and to the condition of being “filial children of the cosmos.”⁴¹ Fifth, and finally, Eckhart’s thought can be taken to be a reflection on the human as such. Since we are reflective consciousness, we innately have an orientation to our own “ground,” which is the point of contact between heaven and earth. This means that we can advance in self-knowledge and self-cultivation over time and through instruction, although there is also much in Eckhart which points to a “Taoist” emphasis on disruptive language and sudden spiritual breakthrough. But in Eckhart, for whom metaphysics and ethics are a unity, the emphasis lies more upon growth in understanding than on moral struggle and long-term efforts of the will.⁴²

But there are important ways too in which Eckhart is unlike Confucianism. We could never apply to his image of humanity the notion of Peter Boodberg’s “co-humanity” (as a translation of *ren*). Here perhaps Eckhart exhibits some of those distinctively “proto-Idealist” Western characteristics which some scholars have identified in the German Dominican School of which Meister Eckhart was a part.⁴³

But Eckhart differs also from the traditional Confucian model in his relative neglect of rite and culture. Indeed, his work can be read as a critique of these. But we have to take account here of the particular situation in which he found himself, of a feminine religious culture which strongly emphasized visionary experiences for instance. Eckhart does not critique shared practices as such but rather seems to imply that their intrinsic value can already be secured by an internal “detached” disposition of the self. In this, he may be close to the New Confucian emphasis upon interiority as distinct from the inherited rites of tradition.

V. FUTURE CHRISTIANITY

It may be that Western Christians are in a situation today which is not wholly distinct from that of Meister Eckhart, even though a key “pre-Christian” philosophical tradition with which we must engage is that of China, rather than the classical world, and the “internal other” is generated by immigration as much as it is by the legitimate claims of women for a more defining role within the churches. But the pressures

to deepen and extend the inclusivity of Christianity as a world religion are undoubtedly there, without however compromising Christian doctrinal orthodoxy. And it may well be that Eckhart's "anthropocosmic" theology and his "lived concreteness," together with the dynamic doctrinal imagery of union with God and robust apophaticism which he develops, can be important pointers for us to the shape of a future Christianity.⁴⁴

But for the purposes of the current critical conversation between China and the West, Eckhart seems from one perspective at least to remain incorrigibly Western. For all the convertibility of metaphysics and ethics in his work, the human other is never constitutive within the self. There is genuine ethics here but no "co-humanity." And it is at this point, that we encounter something that few would have predicted a decade or so ago. Contemporary neuroscience presents us with a self-understanding which presupposes that at a neurobiological level the other is *constitutively* present to us. In other words, we are so powerfully constructed to encounter the other interactively, through the evolutionary history that we all share, that scientists studying the human brain are drawn to study a brain that is interacting with another person, in order to see it most fully activated. This is the inheritance that all of us take into cultural and social human life. It is moreover a biological inheritance which already includes high levels of empathy, judgment and reflexivity, within an intensive interactivity of gesture and expression, which scarcely comes into consciousness itself but is communicated to the self-aware subject as an intuition we have about the other or other persons.⁴⁵

Eckhart, like many other medieval thinkers, is actually very close to our contemporary scientific self-understanding as "intelligent embodiment." Neuroscience endorses the premodern emphasis on the material nature of the sign, seeing words as "tools" or even "material objects" to be carried from one place to another.⁴⁶ Words are the corporeal building blocks by which we extend our constitutive capacity to embrace the other in face-to-face conversation (as well as through ritual and rite), and as such are the cultural form and performative realization of our uniquely human and shared interrelationality. Eckhart seems close to this in the context of his preaching, where words circulate among people, sharing the disclosure of heaven on earth. But the contemporary theologian might wish to add that what is coming into view here, in the context of preaching, is in fact a universal human inheritance of interrelationality and embeddedness in the world (as "living concreteness" or in Mencius' phrase "the full realization of the bodily form")⁴⁷ which belongs to the human person as such, to be drawn out through relation with others, which is constitutively present in the self. And if this is a condition which holds for all people and all

societies (whatever they actually make of it), then the distinctive element for the contemporary Christian theologian who may wish to hold to such a strong account of the continuing creation, is the conviction that this “human nature” has been perfected in the person of Christ and self-communicates in the world through the transforming power of the life-giving Spirit.

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ENDNOTES

1. See Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 216.
2. John Hick is an example of the former (John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* [London: SCM Press, 1977]) and Origen pp. 184/185–253–54 of the latter.
3. The best general introduction to Eckhart's life and work is Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).
4. Details of the “rehabilitation” of Meister Eckhart in the modern period are given by The Eckhart Society, <http://www.eckhartsociety.org/eckhart/eckhart-man> (Retrieved February 7, 2014).
5. Luther in fact responds to the Eckhartian inheritance through his engagement with texts by Eckhart's pupil John Tauler. See the analysis in Steven E. Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 13–46.
6. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955).
7. John I. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
8. “What Moses, Christ, and the Philosopher teach, is therefore the same truth, one that differs only in respect of the way it is related to the believable, the probable and the true.” *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, p. 185. See Jeremiah M. Hackett, ed., *A Companion to Meister Eckhart* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 397.
9. See Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963) and Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1991), 103–107.
10. Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, *ibid.*, 103–107.
11. Jan A. Aertsen, Kent Emery Jr., and Andreas Speer, eds., *Nach der Verurteilung von 1277. Philosophie und Theologie an der Universität von Paris im letzten Viertel des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 3–19.
12. This was not only true of Eckhart but also of Duns Scotus, for instance. See Mary Beth Ingham, *The Harmony of Goodness* (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2013).
13. For texts, see Allan B. Wolter, *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 127–35.
14. This was first developed in the German Dominican School by Dietrich of Freiberg (Davies, *Meister Eckhart*, 85–93).
15. See Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986); Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God and the Light of Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 137–87; and Davies, “‘Love Was His Meaning’: On Learning from Medieval Texts,” in *Trials of Desire and Possibility of Faith, Papers in Honor of Denys Turner*, eds. Eric Bugyis and David Newheiser (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 242–67.

16. Otto Langer, *Mystische Erfahrung und Spirituelle Theologie. Zu Meister Eckharts Auseinandersetzung mit der Frauenfrömmigkeit seiner Zeit* (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1987).
17. M. O'C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises*, 3 vols. (London and Dulverton: Element Books, 1979, 1981, 1985), Sermon 89 (=W 89). I have made some slight modifications to Walshe's translations.
18. Ibid.
19. W 46.
20. W 40.
21. W 68.
22. W 31.
23. W 1.
24. W 4.
25. W 1.
26. W 53.
27. W 10.
28. W 49.
29. W 40.
30. W 10.
31. *Meister Eckhart: die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, Vol. 5 (Stuttgart and Berlin: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1936–), 281.
32. W 3.
33. *Meister Eckhart: die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, Vol. 5, 197–98.
34. W 13b.
35. For an extensive development of this theme, see Markus Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011).
36. Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, XI, 39.
37. Yao Xinzong, *Confucianism and Christianity—A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1996), 38.
38. Tu Weiming, *The Global Significance for Concrete Humanity* (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2010), 186–87.
39. Tu Weiming, *Concrete Humanity*, 363–66.
40. W 63. This sermon is newly translated as Sermon 11 in Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart. Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994), 148–52.
41. Zhang Zai, in Tu Weiming, *Concrete Humanity*, 203–204.
42. Dietmar Mieth, *Meister Eckhart. Mystik und Lebenskunst* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 2004).
43. Kurt Flasch, "Kennt die mittelalterliche Philosophie die konstitutive Funktion des menschlichen Denkens?" *Kant-Studien* 63 (1972): 182–206.
44. For a recent response to Yang Huilin's perceptive reflections on a possible hermeneutical rapprochement between China and the West, including the place of apophaticism, see Oliver Davies, "China and the West: Encounter, Theology and the Hermeneutics of History," *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture* 30 (2013): 243–61.
45. Leonhard Schilbach, Bert Timmermans, Vasudevi Reddy, Alan Costell, Gary Bente, Tobias Schlicht, and Kai Vogeley, "Towards a Second Person Neuroscience," *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 36, no. 4 (2013): 393–414. For a survey of the field, see Jonas Chatel-Goldman, Jean-Luc Schwartz, Christian Jutten, and Marco Congedo, "Non-Local Mind from the Perspective of Social Cognition," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 7 (2013): 1–7.
46. Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind. Embodiment, Action and Cognitive Extension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 44–60.
47. Tu Weiming, *Concrete Humanity*, 190.