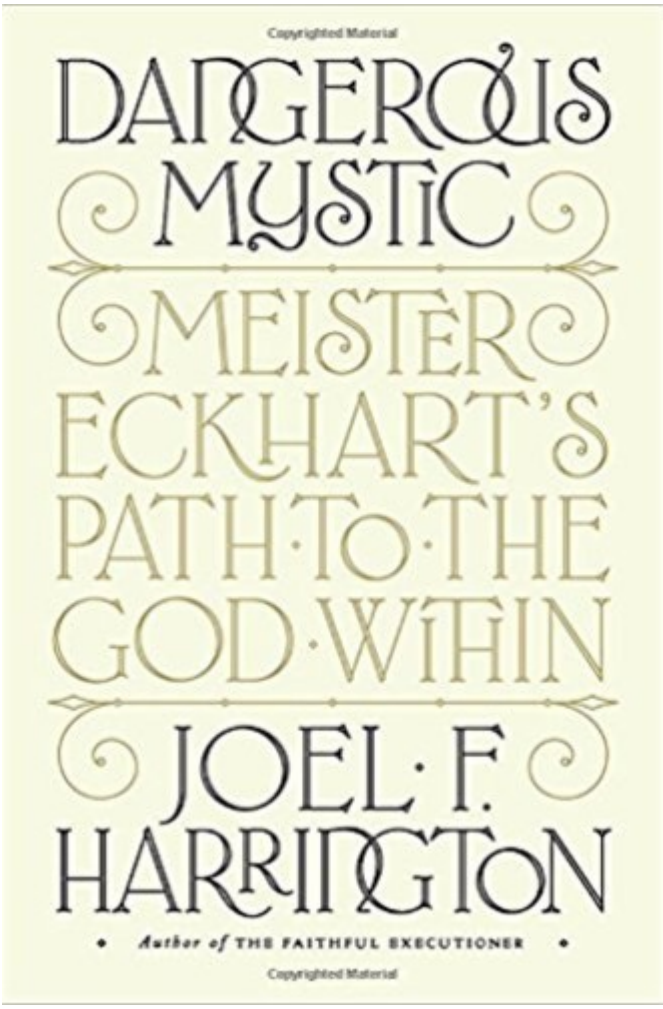
How Christian was Meister Eckhart?

The eccentric preacher's ideas hover between God's absolute otherness and God's self-revelation in Christ.

by John Wilson in the May 23, 2018 issue

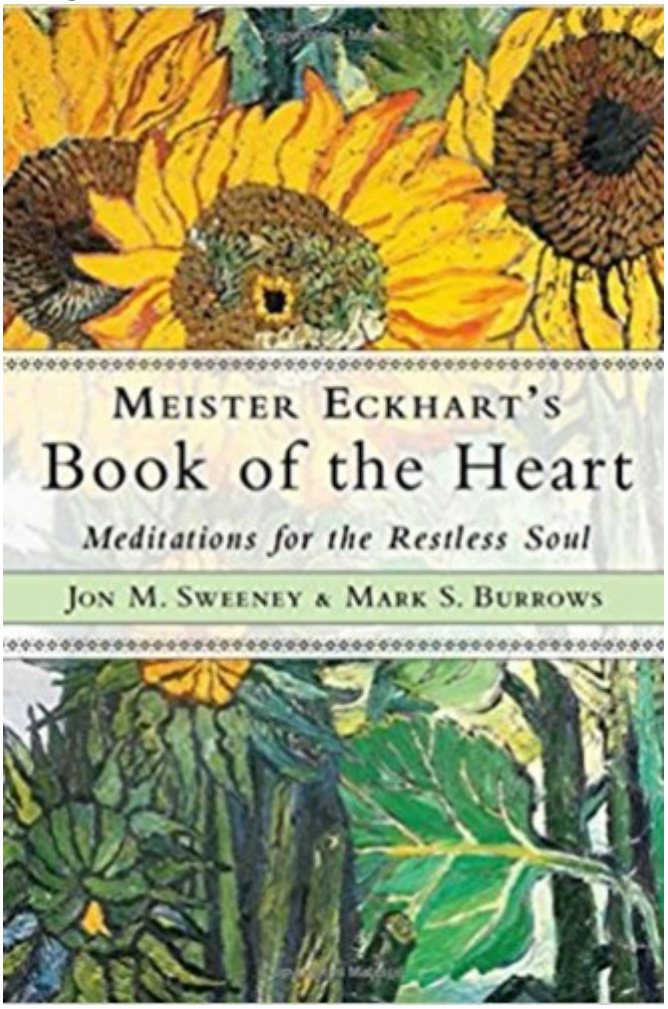
In Review



Dangerous Mystic

Meister Eckhart’s Path to the God Within

By Joel F. Harrington
Penguin



Meister Eckhart’s Book of the Heart

Meditations for the Restless Soul

By Jon M. Sweeney and Mark S. Burrows
Hampton Roads Publishing

I met Meister Eckhart in my midtwenties, by chance, as we say. I’d come across a passing reference to an old book on the Friends of God, a small reform movement that began in the 14th century (one of many in the Catholic Church at that time) in the Rhineland, inspired by Eckhart’s teaching. The book was available from a

scholarly reprint house, and—as was the custom pre-Amazon—I special-ordered it, waited a couple of months, and devoured it when it finally arrived. The book itself was rather dry and sober, but it riveted my attention. What kept me reading, above all, was the emotion I felt when I first saw the phrase “Friends of God.”

As historian Joel Harrington is eager to emphasize in his breezy biography of Eckhart, many people from wildly diverse backgrounds could testify to similar encounters with the medieval teacher. “Millions of Roman Catholics and other Christians have claimed the rehabilitated preacher as one of their own, not to mention many Zen Buddhists, Sufi Muslims, Advaita Vedanta Hindus, Jewish Cabbalists, and a wide variety of other seekers who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.” By this point—even before Harrington has added that “John Cage and John Adams have each written musical works inspired by the teachings of Meister Eckhart”—you will have gathered that this biography is not written primarily for those millions who (like me) read Eckhart as an incorrigibly Christian teacher.

Harrington frankly acknowledges how little we know about Eckhart beyond the bare outlines of his life. But the biographer fills in the gaps by colorfully evoking the time (he surprises us by labeling the span of Eckhart’s life, roughly 1260 to 1328, an era of rampant “consumerism”) and the social background (minor nobility). Around the age of 15, Eckhart began his novitiate at the Dominican cloister in Erfurt, in what is today central Germany, about 30 miles from the hamlet where he was born.

As a Dominican, Eckhart learned to preach. None of his writings that have survived—including sermons in German and in Latin, commentaries, and miscellaneous others—are in his own hand. Rather, they were “transcribed by followers who heard him speak” and were “in some cases approved by Eckhart for publication.” He was a scholar who sought to communicate with unlearned men and women as well as with his peers.

Late in his life, in Cologne after a stint in Strasbourg, Eckhart was accused of heresy. He defended himself vigorously. He died in 1328 before he had a chance to appear before a tribunal of cardinals, but he left a public letter in which he revoked the specific pieces that were said to be heretical “insofar as they could generate in the minds of the faithful a heretical opinion or one erroneous or hostile to the true faith.” As Harrington observes, Eckhart thus implied that “his words were orthodox” even as he “regretted if anyone misunderstood them.”

At other points, however, Harrington suggests that Eckhart himself was aware that "beneath the surface of his supposedly traditional theology" his "inquisitors would rightly detect a direct challenge to several fundamental Catholic teachings." And it's unambiguously clear that, whatever Eckhart himself may have believed about the orthodoxy of his teaching, Harrington is convinced that Eckhart's thought, rightly understood, leads the seeker to a "religionless theology."

Is this true? At the heart of Christianity are two truths that must be held in tension. One is the absolute otherness of God. "Like Augustine," Harrington writes, Eckhart "recognized that even declaring God beyond words or images was itself an internal contradiction: *The more one tries to speak about the ineffable, the less one says about it as ineffable*." (Throughout the book, Harrington sets quotations from Eckhart in italics.) The second truth, to be held in tension with this, is that this ineffable God has spoken to us, has come among us, is with us still.

Much of Eckhart's thought—especially regarding union with God—wrestles with this tension, which runs throughout the history of the church, taking different forms in different times and places, from the long-standing emphasis on theosis in the Orthodox tradition to 19th-century Protestant holiness movements. My own evangelical tradition, alas, has often pretended not to notice the tension, strongly emphasizing the second truth (especially God's self-revelation in scripture) while paying feeble lip service to the first. By contrast, it's at the maximal point of tension between divine otherness and divine intimacy (intimacy with the likes of us!) where Eckhart is in his element.

Readers who want to explore Eckhart's work in depth after reading Harrington's biography might turn to Kurt Flasch's *Meister Eckhart: Philosopher of Christianity*, published in German in 2009 and in English translation in 2015. But for a book that vividly conveys the flavor of this all too fallible but indispensable master—reveling in paradox, playful yet also often heavy-handed, humble yet also excessively proud of his own understanding (consider, for instance, his dismissal of petitionary prayer)—turn instead to *Meister Eckhart's Book of the Heart*. Jon Sweeney and Mark Burrows have taken texts of Eckhart's and fiddled with them, "voicing—or re-voicing—his thought" in the form of short poems. This one, for instance, titled "You Are Not an Answer":

There is no Why in You
and so I must learn to trust

that You are not an answer
to my questions but rather

the source that is true before
every question I ever had

and the love beyond every
answer I will ever know.

There are bits in these poems that remind me of hymns we sing at church, hymns written since the 1960s, with diction that sets my teeth on edge. I can't sing them. ("Stop that," my wife Wendy murmurs, standing next to me. "I'm not doing anything," I protest. "But I can feel what you're thinking," she says.) The poem in *Meister Eckhart's Book of the Heart* called "How Sparks Take Flame" includes the lines "And the more you shed / that self and its agenda," which made me groan out loud.

But to be honest, I often groan out loud when reading Eckhart. I'm sure many of his first listeners, hundreds of years ago, shared my mix of exasperation and gratitude.