

# Response to Evan King's: "*Unum necessarium*: Meister Eckhart, The Ground and the Theology in the Vernacular"<sup>1</sup>

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My initial aim for this response was to touch on the central points of Dr. King's paper and provide a few examples of what are parallels in the work of Iamblichus of Chalcedon — I was indeed struck by the similarities between the two thinkers. However, upon consideration of the broader movement of the paper in the context of this conference, I would also like to at least point to an underlying impulse that has guided both this conference and the thought of our excellent teacher, Dr. Hankey; namely, that "... there is no envy of any kind in God."<sup>2</sup> Iamblichus, a pagan Neoplatonist writing 800 years before Eckhart, is in agreement with him in many ways — perhaps, most interestingly, in practical ways — pointing to a convergence that is outside of the logic of identity that guides much of the intellectual reality we live in. To quote Dr. Hankey's paper delivered yesterday: "our knowledge of God is not 'our own possession but borrowed from Him'."<sup>3</sup> This notion, it seems to me, makes the work done here particularly relevant to the present intellectual climate and, to be true to the thought of Eckhart and Iamblichus, also to the working out of our individual salvation. In the philosophical approach of these two thinkers there is a desire to overcome abstract oppositions, not by subsuming one into the other, but rather by intellectually preserving their distinction and even opposition while recognizing their unity in a living practice.

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1. Presented at the 37th Annual Atlantic Theological Conference, Halifax, NS, June 22nd 2017.

2. Wayne Hankey, "The Conversion of God in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*: Being's Trinitarian and Incarnational Self Disclosure," (paper presented for "Wisdom Belongs to God," Halifax, NS, June 21 2017), 142.

3. Hankey, "The Conversion of God in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*," 142.

I would like to begin where King begins. As identified in his paper, the interesting result of the papal bull concerning Eckhart is not so much found in the charges themselves — those of seeking to know more than one ought and corrupting the ignorant in a like manner — but rather in the way in which Eckhart's teaching seems to embrace such charges. As King writes, "Eckhart himself highlights the two features later isolated by the inquisition: subtleties of divinity are taught to the unlearned."

The question is first what Eckhart means by unlearned. King writes:

We must be clear about one thing. Whatever the learning Eckhart has in mind, it is *not* what would lead a person to seek a degree in theology. Although he was one of the most illustrious intellectuals of his day, twice holding a chair in theology in Paris, he always maintained that the realisation of the beatific life was to be found outside the university. He is reported to have said that, "One master of life is better than a thousand masters of reading." Or, as he says in the sermon on Mary and Martha... "Living gives the most valuable kind of knowledge."

Thus, it is clear that Eckhart's position here reveals a limiting, or at least a reorientation, of the role of reason in the soul's ascent and the prioritization of an experiential and living knowledge over that which is taught.

It is in Eckhart's understanding of humility that his position becomes clearer. This begins with a distinctly negative moment; "When a man in obedience goes out of himself and renounces what he possesses, God must necessarily respond by going in there...." Thus, entering in to the truth and life of the divine is not first an intellectual striving, but rather comes through renunciation and a lived humility. It is the impoverished soul that God reveals himself to. This certainly rings true with the message of the Gospel; indeed, as King points out, Eckhart uses the authority of the Gospel of John to support his position. Fishermen are the foundation of the church and guardians of its revelation; blessed are the poor and the meek and those that mourn and, so on. These themes are not pointing to a class of people as being more apt to receive the good news (though there may be an argument for this), but rather to an orientation required in the soul itself. The poverty Eckhart outlines is a kind of poverty of the soul which involves the

active 'renunciation' of the lifeless images it projects and becomes entangled in. The humility of self-abandonment is the appropriate state of the soul that wishes to live and move, a humility that is not the attainment of a holy virtue through the striving activity of the soul, but rather an emptying out and letting go of the dead forms to which the soul clings in order to make room for God.

This understanding of humility leads to the more fundamental notion of holy detachment which reveals what is, in my opinion, the heart of King's paper. What gradually emerges as we move through Eckhart's logic is that, at a certain level, the distinction between coming to know and coming to be is ambiguous — knowing and being become correlative. It is in Eckhart's account of detachment that the fundamentally appropriate state of the soul to both know and be — to receive God in his fullness — is revealed. It is a two-sided moment that occurs simultaneously, both the death of the soul and its resurrection through the birth of the Son in the soul. It is a foundational state or orientation which is a unity of opposing tendencies, making it appropriate to the mixed life of the embodied soul.

The 'state', or 'orientation', or 'place', through or in which this union 'occurs', is in some sense both within and external to the soul. King identifies this notion with the Eckhart's use of the term 'ground', writing:

This "innermost source" elsewhere is called the "ground," rightly the most famous German term in Eckhart. He frequently makes it deliberately ambiguous whether he is speaking of the soul's ground or God's ground. In a sense, both are true; it is the unity beyond the difference of God and the soul. It is a realm of sheer immediacy, prior to the mediations of creatures. From this source, God as Trinity and the soul live and are and work. The ground is the "one" of God and the soul. To the extent that the soul unifies itself, it becomes indistinct from the One itself. Grounded in eternity (the eternal will of God), it is capable of a living work in creation: "Go into your own ground and work there, and the works that you work there will all be living."

In this ground, prior to the fantastic mediations of creatures, a living union takes place by means of the soul's participation in that which is given. There is a unity of purpose or, more accurately, unity is realized in and through this shared reality.

What Eckhart's position reveals is, in one sense, a radically limited vision of the soul's innate capacity to move itself by means of reason. King writes:

"I would suggest that constant recourse to natural arguments of the philosophers to explain the birth of the Word, in eternity and in the soul, primarily has a practical aim. Reason must be employed to know the difference between true and false forms of humility and detachment."

While this does not necessarily degrade reason, it does reveal both ends and means that are beyond its innate capacity. Reason is not self-relational but rather a practical means of judgement. Thus, to borrow a term from King, Eckhart seems to be developing a 'technique of the ground'.

King's account of Eckhart's thought has several parallels in the philosophy of Iamblichus. To begin with, the foundation of Iamblichus' doctrine of the soul — the notion of a fully descended soul — is a negative moment similar to that of Eckhart's understanding of humility. In its full descent, the soul is completely "alienated" from itself; it is "nothing" and defined by the "principle of divine limit."<sup>4</sup> Also for Iamblichus, this moment of negation simultaneously reveals a corresponding infilling of the gracious activity of the divine. The empty soul is able to receive its true life. Since God's nature is an overflowing of life and goodness, then the soul that abandons what it possesses "straightway finds god within."<sup>5</sup> By virtue of its self-othering activity, the soul is completely emptied and realizes its nothingness, and yet becomes conscious of a persistence of life within through which it remains one soul; it finds its essential unity within and it is a principle that does not, properly speaking, 'belong' to it.

Furthermore, in Iamblichus' emphasis on what is given by God as opposed to what is sought by the soul, reason is also limited to its appropriate sphere. An overemphasis on the rational aspect of the soul results in an unfounded faith in the soul's reasoning activity, making its discursivity a measure of reality and leading to the application of temporal categories to God's

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4. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* [22], 9.

5. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* [22], 11.

activity. This results in a fundamentally flawed understanding of both the soul and God's nature. For Iamblichus, it is the divine unity that a living receptivity is able to encounter, a principle that is too simple for the complex motions of syllogistic reasoning. King identifies a similar notion in Eckhart, writing:

Having misunderstood the distinction between time and eternity, the blind have become aggressive in their ignorance. This is not an accidental connection: a true understanding of time and eternity, and the different modes of knowing the distinction entails, is a crucial component of a true understanding of God. All things past and future are made in one today, God's eternal present.

The purely rational is bound to move sequentially, but the detached soul is empty and so able to receive a simple whole. As King explains, "Temporality must become constantly directed to the eternal present."

Iamblichus' understanding of theurgy reveals further similarities to themes present in Eckhart's thought. King writes, for example, that Eckhart "argues that an image and its archetype are in a dynamic relation of identity; the image, insofar as it is an image, is indistinguishable from that of which it is an image; it remains within its archetype of which it is born." Theurgical rites are effective because they are grounded in the same logic — the whole is contained in the parts and the parts are taken up in the whole. Since, for Iamblichus, the divine is present in the material world through its presence in divine symbols, the particular acts of the soul are not an extension of their own power but a participation in the power present in the symbols themselves. There is a conversion of the soul which results in a cooperative demiurgy<sup>6</sup> between the participant and God in which the participating soul is transformed. Through theurgy the soul becomes an incarnation of the whole procession and reversion of the divine itself, by which the whole of creation is drawn back to its source<sup>7</sup>, and becomes not only the knower,

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6. See Gregory MacIsaac, "The Nous of the Partial Soul," *Dionysius* XXIX (2011): 29-60.

7. Gregory Shaw writes: "For Iamblichus, the cosmos itself was the paradigmatic theurgy: the act of the gods continually extending themselves into mortal expression" (Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of*

or the potency that characterizes the descended soul's thinking activities, but also that which is known — form, or actualized life.

Furthermore, theurgy is not primarily an intellectual movement but first a practical, lived technique which brings about a “communion of friendship (φιλία)”<sup>8</sup> with God. Indeed, the very word theurgy, ‘God-work’, is meant to contrast with the ‘God-thinking’ of theology. Its practicality makes it appropriate for souls at all levels of the ascent — both the learned and unlearned. It is an account of salvation that is suitable for all souls, or for the entire city: “if one does not grant some such mode of worship to cities and peoples not freed from the fated processes of generation ... one will contrive to fail of both types of good, both the immaterial and material.”<sup>9</sup> The theoretical movement of the soul must be incarnated in such a way that there is an actual identity between the soul and its higher life according to its proper mode.

A final similarity between the two thinkers is the way in which prayer serves as the foundation of their religious thought and practice. King, quoting Eckhart, writes that prayer must be a:

...pure going out [*ein lûter ûzgân*] from what is yours. The most powerful prayer, and almost the strongest of all to obtain everything, and the most honourable of all works, is that which proceeds from an empty spirit [*ledige gemüete*]. [...] One that is confused by nothing, attached [*gebunden*] to nothing ... [and] is all sunk down into God's dearest will and has gone out of its own ... Make a start with yourself, and abandon yourself [*lâz dich*],” and then you have left everything.

The habituation of prayer brings about detachment in the soul, thereby revealing the underlying ground where its relation to God is revealed and the distinction between God and His life in the soul is erased. Iamblichus, for his part, shares this understanding of prayer. He writes that “no sacred act can take place without the supplications contained in prayers.”<sup>10</sup> The efficacy of prayer is related to the state of the soul which utters it, so that “the

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*Iamblichus* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 17).

8. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* [185], 1.

9. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* [220], 1.

10. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* [238], 13: “ἔργον τε οὐδὲν ἱερατικὸν ἄνευ τῶν ἐν ταῖς εὐχαῖς ἱκετεῖων γίγνεται.”

consciousness (συναίσθησις) of our own nothingness makes us naturally turn (παραβάλλω) to supplications."<sup>11</sup> Through prayer, an "indissoluble hieratic communion is created with the gods"<sup>12</sup>, a communion that is both grounded in the life of the supplicant through habit and in the divine through a hypercosmic connection that is outside of the bonds of time and necessity.

#### CONCLUSION

This very superficial response to King's paper has perhaps pointed to some similarities between the thought of Eckhart and Iamblichus. The life of God is immanent and intimate in and to the soul — born in souls at all levels of knowing through a practice of self-abandonment and a relation and participation and unity. Perhaps most striking and hardest to relate, however, is the sense of life and motion in both accounts. God is living and active and this life cannot be compartmentalized through static modes of thought, but must be encountered by a living reason that seeks *by* the power of the very object it seeks. We find life by living the life of God and coming to know this reality. Thus, Iamblichus' thought is grounded in a psychology that reveals the soul to be a "dynamic identity,"<sup>13</sup> while King finds in Eckhart's understanding of the soul a "dynamic relation of identity."<sup>14</sup> This movement in both thinkers' work points to their attempt to truly descend into the flux of creation and seek the ground of unity which both sustains it and provides the immanent means of the soul encountering God. This is perhaps best summed up in a final quotation from King's paper:

Eckhart is not interested in determining whether grace or nature moves the spirit. See the conclusion of the *Discourses*, RdU 23 (EE 285): 'And so anyone is quite wrong who worries about the means through which God is working his works in you, whether it be nature or grace. Just let him work [*lâz in wûrken*], and just be at peace.

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11. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* [47], 13-14.

12. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* [237], 10: "καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν ἀδιάλυτον ἐμπλέκει τὴν ἱερατικὴν πρὸς τοὺς θεούς."

13. Carlos Steel, *The Changing Self: A Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius and Priscianus* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1978), 66.

14. King, *Unum necessarium*