

**COMMITTEE III**  
Towards Ecumenism in  
World Philosophy

DRAFT - 9/15/87  
For Conference Distribution Only

**STEPS TOWARD ECUMENISM  
IN MEISTER ECKHART AND NICHOLAS OF CUSA**

by

**Emilie Zum Brunn**  
Director of Research  
National Center for Scientific Research  
Paris, FRANCE

The Sixteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences  
Atlanta, Georgia November 26-29, 1987

© 1987, International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences

Emilie Zum Brunn

Steps towards oecumenism  
in Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa

I. Meister Eckhart and the uni-versality of human  
nature

Though it is unhistorical to speak of oecumenism before Nicholas of Cusa, one of Eckhart's great admirers in the XVth century, it seems to me that the works of the great Dominican theologian at once contain and suggest a series of considerations which are in strait relation with a oecumenical perspective. A sign of this is the way in which he was rediscovered, at the end of the XIXth and beginning of the XXth century by three great comparatists: Rudolf Otto, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Daisetz Suzuki (1). They were struck by the kinship of his thought with that of the East, i.e. with Hinduism as well as with Buddhism. This situates us straightaway on a broader plane than that of the "religions of the Book", i.e. on that of a really universal oecumenism.

What characterizes his practise of inward life as well as his speculative thought, together with his openness to the universal, is an extraordinary power of synthesis. Eckhart did not hesitate, as he tells us himself, to use what can be called a comparative method in order to find out the most direct practical approach to God:

"I have read many books as well of Pagan masters as of prophets of the Old and New Testaments, and I have searched very earnestly and with all my zeal which is the best virtue through which man may in the best and straitest way be united to God, and become by grace what God is by nature ... And when I penetrate all these writings as far as my understanding is capable, I find nothing but this: pure detachment is above all things, for all virtues have somewhat in view the creatures, but detachment is free from all creatures." (2)

So Eckhart tells us that the fundamental virtue or practise for converting wholly to God - the one he preaches all along his German Sermons and Treatises - abegescheidenheit, literally separation, i.e. detachment, is to be found as well in the "Pagan" masters, i.e. the Greek philosophers, as in the revealed Scriptures and in their Commentators. This attitude of freedom and objectivity towards his own religious tradition has always been Eckhart's, in keeping with the school of Köln, i.e. of Albert the Great and his followers who recognized, more or less explicitly, a double revelation: that of the Book and that of Reason (Vernunft) or Intellect, that is of the so-called Pagan masters, especially Proclus and Hermes(3).

Some may be surprised that Eckhart's fundamental aim should be "to become God in God" by returning, thanks to the virtue of detachment, to our original being in the Deity. It may seem more Hellenic than Christian - and indeed the concept of deification is of Greek and Oriental origin. But this remark could be extended to the Fathers of the Church as well as to the medieval Jewish and Islamic thinkers who, in the Middle Ages, adopted, together with the Christians, the platonic view of epistrophe or conversion, without hesitating to recuperate "the gold of the Egyptians". I have tried to show elsewhere that this common platonic language created the conditions for an authentic though precarious oecumenism, in the Middle Ages, between some of the representatives of the "religions of the Book"(4).

After this example of practical oecumenism, let us now try and find out the theoretical justifications concerning it in the Master's works. This justification resides for him, as for most ancient and medieval thinkers, in the conviction of the universality of truth. But for Eckhart, this is not something merely abstract. It follows from the nature of God: unus, the One, and from that of man: uni-versus, turned towards the One, according to the symbolism of medieval etymology. This universality becomes even an identification with God when man is separated (geschieden), i.e. detached or liberated as well from sin as from

worldly aims:

"In such a man, liberated from all alien and created things, God does not come, He is in him in His essence."(5)

Such is the noble man, an equivalent to the noble soul, an expression coming from Eckhart's predecessors, the great Rheno-Flemish beguines who first wrote of spiritual matters in the vernacular tongues, German, Flemish and French, and adapted the courtly ideal of the knight wholly devoted to his lady to the relations between the soul and God (6). This conception was diverted from its true meaning by the theoreticians of nazism. They considered Eckhart as a precursor in the return to its Aryan (i.e. noble) origins, and exalted in quite a different spirit from his own ~~the~~ theme of the noble man. The way Alfred Rosenberg and others presented Eckhart's thought - and they still find some disciples in their interpretation - proceeds from a total inversion of the values which the Dominican Master defended, in accordance with the school of Köln and the Rheno-Flemish mystics. For them, the nobility of the human being resides in his/her nature or essence, beyond all individual, ecclesiastical or social difference:

"Humanity is in the poorest and most despised man as perfectly as in the Pope and in the Emperor." (7)

For that tradition, humanity, i.e. the foundation of our nobility, is our original nature, i.e. not our created nature, but its archetype or model in God. Therefore, it is by identifying ourselves to God, in the way mentioned at the beginning of this paper, through abegescheidenheit or detachment, that we may regain the purity, nobility and freedom of this original nature, which alone is truly ours. At the end of his Odyssey, the noble man, who had "gone far away from himself", comes back to himself much richer. Having spoiled his created individuality, he recovers through this very fact the universality of human nature, i.e. equality and communion with the other humans who are one with him in this nature.

^ of Germany

"Do not accept yourself in any way as being this man or that man, but according to human nature, free and undivided." (8)

In fact, every human being is "accidental" in regard to human nature. Therefore it is by separating from that accidental aspect, submitted as such to laws which are foreign to our deepest being, that we are able to recover our essential freedom. On the opposite, to "will" one's difference and to make of it an absolute characterizes what Scripture calls "the old man, the earthly man, the outward man, the inimical man, the man who is a slave" (9). It is by this prejudice against the One and the Universal that Eckhart defines idolatry and injustice as well as heresy (10). So, if the Pan-germanists who pretended to follow Eckhart had really understood his thought they should have classified themselves in those categories - as should nowadays those who pretend to speak in the name of God, while condemning, torturing and killing in the name of their "difference".

Meister Eckhart did not have to ponder over the diplomatic and institutional problems of ecumenism, concerning the relations of churches or nations of different religions, for which his time was not ripe. Nevertheless we find in his works important philosophical and theological presuppositions for a ecumenist charter. On one hand the doctrine of "double" revelation, founded on the catholicity of truth. On the other, a notion of human nature which can be extended to overlook any other "accidents" than those mentioned in his texts, such as that of race, for instance. It is, we could say, a universality de jure, since it is founded on human nature when, thanks to abegescheidenheit, it recovers its "kinship with God",

## II. The Absolute as "the cause of our errors" for Nicholas of Cusa

The cardinal of Cusa is one of Eckhart's spiritual heirs, especially concerning the theme of return to God and negative theology. However, the continuity of spirit as regards the catholicity of truth leaves place to a different perspective which could be characterized as being no longer de jure, but de facto.

There are important reasons for this change. On one hand, in spite of his links with the Rhenish tradition, Nicholas is a man of the Renaissance, strongly influenced by the Italian humanists and mathematicians. That is to say he is an empiricist and in some way a "relativist", i.e. he tries to make an epistemology of human knowledge. On the other hand, one of the chief events which marked his life and thought was the taking of Constantinople by the Turks, in 1453, an event which marks the end of the Middle Ages. The Christians found themselves in the necessity of negotiating with the Infidels and to try and propose a oecumenist charter. Nicholas was all the more ready to do that as he had written his Concordia catholica for the council of Basel, a proposal of Christian oecumenism which he now developed into a grandiose project of peace between all the religions of the world, the De pace fidei. This project was unfortunately of no effect, and is perhaps reserved to more favourable times. Therefore it seems to me we should examine the great idea which presides to it, and distinguish it from the way in which he conceived its realization, marked by the prejudices of his one faith as they existed still in his time.

The deep inspiration of this project is the explanation proposed by Nicholas to account for the errors and oppositions which separate the diverse creeds. He considers the Absolute as, in a way, the cause of these errors and oppositions,

since we cannot know the Absolute as it is in itself, and since we nevertheless identify it with our finite conceptions:

"To the diverse nations, You have sent diverse prophets and masters, at one time and at another. But it is a law of our condition of terrestrial men that a long habit becomes for us a second nature, ~~is~~ considered as truth and defended as such. Therefore great disputes arise, when each community opposes its own faith to the other faiths. So come to their help, You who alone can do so. For it is You alone whom they revere through all the outward objects of their cults and ~~to~~ it is because of You that the religious wars arise. For no one, in all the things he desires, truly desires anything but the good that You are ... so it is You whom through the diversity of their rites they all seem to search for diversely and through the diversity of the divine names it is You whom they name, for as You are in Yourself You remain unknown to all and ineffable ." (11)

Such is the fundamental presupposition of the De pace fidei, in a magnificent analysis which combines the negative theology inherited from Proclus and Denys with a new interest for human experience and epistemology. We find here the theological justification of what Eckhart called "the man who is an enemy" or "the man who is a slave". The latter, on the plane of religious epistemology, had chiefly developed the aspect de jure, or of what man is in the perspective of return: God in God. Whereas here, even in man's comprehension of God, what is developed is the aspect de facto, because it is not the comprehension of the kingdom, and therefore is that of man against man, or at least of religion against religion. Thus we can understand the assurance man has of speaking in the name of God when, by his very condition, he is on the level of the opposites whose mysterious

coincidence God alone knows and is.

We have here, as a complement to the ideal uni-versality of human nature, an analysis which grounds, to my mind, any "Prolegomena to all future oecumenism". However, as has been said, the De pace fidei did not have, at the time, the least practical result. So we must now ask ourselves, even independently from the historical circumstances, if this project is not afflicted with some intrinsic defect which might hinder the achievement of the aim it proposes? That is to say, is the procedure proposed by Nicholas to establish his project of universal peace between all religions at the level of his fundamental intuition? Let us therefore examine if he succeeds in what he proposes, i.e. in trying to show the presuppositions which are common to the diverse creeds.

In a first stage, Nicholas tries to show that all religions, even the polytheistic ones, have a common presupposition: that of one sole Principle, who is also Wisdom and the Word. This demonstration is easy and credible, at least in the Platonico-Christian perspective which is the Cardinal's.

In a second stage, Nicholas tries to show the rationality of the Trinitarian dogma. He develops there a ternarian dialectic inspired by Augustine. Here we go farther away from the initial intention of putting common presuppositions to light, in what Nicholas himself calls "intellectual reasoning".

There is a third stage in which the so-called common presupposition is yet more difficult to demonstrate, concerning the Incarnation of the Word. Here again Nicholas tries to solve the difficulty through a rational argumentation, i.e. through the notion of homo maximum, a kind of human asymptote towards the infinite.

In spite of his rational attempts, in the end Nicholas has recourse to religious faith, since he chiefly tries to convince the Moslems who recognize in Jesus a prophet having made miracles. And this discourse, so rationally begun, ends in



an appeal to the faith in Christ, indispensable for salvation. At this point, we notice that what remains of the rationality aimed at by Nicholas is now reserved to the essentially ethical domain of the divine commandments: "They are brief, they are perfectly known to all and common to all nations", thanks to the light "innate in the rational soul" (12).

We must however recognize that the unicity of the godly Principle, the trinitarian aspect of created things as of their uncreated Cause, and the notion of homo maximum are to be found in more creeds and philosophies than Nicholas could be aware at the time - so that in this he can be considered as a precursor in the search for the archetypes of the human mind, though of course our modern search for them takes a less rational turn.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore that Nicholas does not succeed in discovering effectively, as he had proposed in his treatise De docta ignorantia "doctrines more true and more correct", i.e. approximations which could be accepted by the ones as by the others. In spite of his good intentions, it is in reality to the Christian religion, and particularly to the doctrine of the Word Incarnate, that the Cardinal tries to reduce the others. Without seeming to be aware of it, he returns to the dogmatic statement and its impenitent absolutism. Therefore, apart from the depth of his oecumenical use of the coincidentia oppositorum, the De pace fidei gives the same impression as the so-called Dialogs between Jews, Christians and Moslems which we meet in medieval literature and are usually but reductive attempts. Such are, in spite of the generosity and pacifism they express, The Dialog between a Philosopher, a Jew and a Christian, of Pierre Abelard(13), and The Book against the Sect or Heresy of the Saracens of Peter the Venerable (14). The oecumenism they proposed was that of a reason which recognized the Christian dogma.

We discover in the De pace fidei still other

infractions to the principle of coincidentia, even more shocking for us nowadays. As was taught in those times, Nicholas believed that the Jews would not be saved in the hereafter, since they refused to recognize Christ. Concerning the here and now, we are astounded to notice the indifference with which this religious man foresees the failure of his project with them. He says that it will be of no consequence for the universal peace he tries to promote, since the Jews, contrarily to the Moslems, do not have the means of waging war, when the proclaimed aim of the De pace fidei is to ground the peace of arms on the peace of minds!

Thus we see the reappearance of religious dogmatism and of the intolerance that accompanies it, in spite of Nicholas' relativistic position: a relativism which is finally accepted by him only at the level of religious rites, carefully distinguished from "the true faith". This aborted attempt is a renewed example of the tension of medieval Christian thought: ~~←~~ towards the catholicity of truth and its dogmatic incapacity to reach it. Such was the case, so to say paradigmatic, of saint Augustine, in his desire of a "true philosophy" inspired by Platonic and Stoic universalism, to which he opposes the dogma of the one and only mediation of Christ and of the Church.

This should not prevent us from taking the grain and leaving the chaff. So we could take into account Eckhart's developments on the uni-versality of human nature, on the injustice and "heresy" of those who make an idol of their difference. We could also take into account the Cardinal's religious epistemology- which, in its principle, allows us to avoid as well dogmatism and scepticism. Those thoughts might be helpful in some future charter of oecumenism.

Notes

1. E. Zum Brunn, "L'ontologie de Maître Eckhart et la philosophie comparée", Journal of the Faculty of Letters, (The University of Tokyo, 1979) t.4, 31-41. Reproduced in E. Zum Brunn and A. de Libera, Maître Eckhart. Métaphysique du Verbe et Théologie négative (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), p. 221-233. Also Japanese translation by Omori, (Tokyo: Kokubunsha, 1985).
2. Eckhart, Von abegescheidenheit, <sup>in</sup> Die deutschen Werke, ed. Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Suttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936 etc.), t. 5, p. 400,2 - 401,7.
3. L. Sturlese, "Alle origini della mistica speculative tedesca", 3 (1977), 21-87. Medioevo
4. E. Zum Brunn, "Le néo-platonisme et les trois vérités, juive, chrétienne, musulmane", Les Etudes Philosophiques, 4 (1982), 443-454.
5. Eckhart, Predigt 10, Die deutschen Werke, <sup>t. 1,</sup> p. 165, 13-15.
6. See G. Epiney-Burgard and E. Zum Brunn, And "the Art was born amongst women. North European Poetesses and Mystics of the XIIth and XIIIth centuries, transl. S. Hughes (New York: Paragon, 1987 or '88).
7. Eckhart, Predigt 25, Die deutschen Werke, t.2, p. 18,2-5.
8. Eckhart, Predigt 46, Die deutschen Werke, t.2, p. 382, 3-4.
9. Eckhart, Vom edeln menschen, Die deutschen Werke, t. 5, p. 109,15.
10. See Maître Eckhart. Métaphysique du Verbe et Théologie négative, Introduction and chap. 1.

11. De pace fidei, p. 6.
12. De pace fidei, p. 55. Cf. E. Zum Brunn, "Présupposés éthiques et coïncidence des opposés", Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie, 33 (1986), 111-128.
13. Dialogus inter Philosophum, Judaeum et Christianum, ed. R. Thomas (Stuttgart - Bad Cannstadt, 1970).
14. See J. Kritzec, Peter the Venerable and Islam (Princeton, 1964).