

Meister Eckhart

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Introduction

“All creatures are a mere nothing. I do not say that they are something very slight or even something, but that they are a mere nothing.”¹ Meister Eckhart

“All composite things are impermanent.”² Buddha.

Two of the greatest mystics of all time were Meister Eckhart and the Buddha. Today, each has an impressive level of popularity in modern teachings and writings. One can often find them quoted in the same text, often in support of each other.

Yet, how alike are they really? On a general level, there are certainly some similar concepts and terms. However, that could be said of the comparison of any two theologians or philosophers. Even those who are most opposed in views will have a common ground somewhere. If one stretches enough, some similarities can be found, or at least inferred, among many great religious figures.

The challenge, then, is to look deeper and find if the connections really do hold up under scrutiny, or do they fall away once the initial assumption is examined. That is the purpose of this paper—to examine the teachings Meister Eckhart and of Buddhism to determine if there are substantial parallels between them. Beyond the normal similarities one would find in any two mystical traditions, are there connections between Eckhart and Buddhism that are meaningful?

¹ Matthew Fox, *Meditations with Meister Eckhart* (Bear & Company: Sante Fe, 1983), 36.

² D. T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 35.

This paper will explore differing viewpoints about the connection between Eckhart's brand of mystic Christianity and Buddhism. "Who is this person who has attracted monks and Marxists, philosophers and psychologists, Zen thinkers and Hindu scholars, Polish poets and American novelists? Why this universalist appeal in Meister Eckhart?"³ And does this universalism extend to a link to Buddhism?

Background/Life Details

Meister Eckhart was a Dominican priest from Germany, born around 1260 in the village of Hocheim, best known as a mystic and the father of German idealism. Some sources state his birth name as Johannes Eckhart, while others insist it was Eckhart von Hocheim.⁴ He came to religion at the young age of 15 and studied in Erfurt, Cologne and Paris. He was likely influenced by the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, although did not study with him personally. He was very successful and held a number of positions of importance in the Dominican branch of the church, including the prestigious position of teacher at Cologne and Paris.^{5,6,7}

While Eckhart is known as a scholar and a leader in the church, he was unique in his popularity with the common people. He was especially well-known for his gift of preaching and bringing the Bible's teachings into the German language of

³ Matthew Fox, *Passion for Creation* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2000), 3.

⁴ Maurice O'C. Walshe, trans., *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2009), xxv.

⁵ Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1967), 1:449.

⁶ Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1963), IV: 68.

⁷ Raymond B. Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1941), xiv.

the people he served. “As a preacher he disdained rhetorical flourish and avoided oratorical passion; but effectively employed the simple arts of oratory and gave remarkable expression to a hearty sympathy.”⁸

Eckhart’s Heresy

Despite Meister Eckhart’s illustrious rise, his life and career did not end well. Over time, he became a mystic, embracing and emphasizing the personal connection one feels with God, instead of limiting himself to the teachings of the church. To call one a mystic today is generally considered a compliment. However, in the thirteenth century, it did not have such a positive connotation. Mysticism was often seen by the church as “so-called ‘wild’ religious societies, which preached and propagated alarming and dangerous mysticism.”⁹ It was a threat to the church that the Inquisition sought to stop.

It would seem that a man who would hold such important positions, and be allowed to teach future clergy, would be a person the church trusted. Shockingly, however, Eckhart came under the scrutiny of the Inquisition. His trouble began in 1326 when the Franciscan Archbishop of Cologne called him before the Inquisition. The Archbishop was quite conservative and vehemently opposed to anything resembling mysticism.¹⁰ One incident that may have brought this negative

⁸ Arthur McMahon, "Meister Johann Eckhart," In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol 5 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05274a.htm> (accessed May 3, 2010).

⁹ Blakney, xiv.

¹⁰ Walshe, 8.

attention was a comment he made that the Franciscans “are not able to discern what God is in the least of creatures—not even a fly!”¹¹ He likely further fanned the flames in his initial response to the charges when he brought to his defense Cicero, Origen, St. Thomas, as well as the Bible. “He warned them [his accusers] that they themselves might be proved to be heretics.”¹²

During this time, the rivalry between the Franciscans and Dominicans was in full swing. Theology was of primary concern to the church but also to the average person. Unlike today, religious beliefs were the focus of intellectual debate. “Theology was, to the medieval man, what politics is to us today. The issues involved were of immediate, heated, and personal interest.”¹³ It was a serious matter what a person believed, which is why the Inquisition became so powerful.

After initially being acquitted, the Archbishop attacked him again with another trial. He was not so lucky this time and was found guilty. Eckhart struck back and demanded the Pope hear his case, refusing to accept the decision of a Franciscan. Once this was granted, he walked 500 miles for the hearing in Avignon. He was not himself on trial, but his works were, and the church determined if he was to be censured. It was during this trial that he defended his beliefs in his famous “Defence.” He died in 1327 or 1328, just before the completion of the inquiry. While he was not branded a heretic, 28 of his 108 articles were

¹¹ Blakney, xviii.

¹² Blakney xxiv.

¹³ Blakney xviii.

condemned by Pope John XXII, under great influence from the Archbishop.

Interestingly, the Pope himself was later branded a heretic.¹⁴¹⁵

The Pope issued a papal Bull, or mandate, against Eckhart, entitled *In agro dominico, 27 March 1329*. In addition to the articles determined to be heretical, Eckhart himself was denounced in the document. “He sowed thorns and obstacles contrary to the very clear truth of faith in the field of the Church and worked to produce harmful thistles and poisonous thornbushes.”¹⁶ This scathing criticism caused Eckhart and his work to essentially be shunned for hundreds of years. Very little was said or written about him until a renewed interest began in the late 19th century.¹⁷

While he came to be seen as an enemy of the church, he did not see himself that way. “It should be emphasized that Eckhart was really horrified by the idea of heresy himself.”¹⁸ He supported the church his entire life. “Eckhart was one of the world’s great ‘Yes-sayers,’ whose deep conviction was that untruth or evil is not to be fought with condemnation or criticism, but that it must be displaced by an overwhelming disclosure of true and good.”¹⁹ Unlike others of his time, he did not rail against the church, but merely focused on what he felt was important—

¹⁴ Eckhart Society, "Eckhart: The Man," 2008, <http://www.eckhartsociety.org/eckhart/introducing-eckhart> (accessed May 3, 2010).

¹⁵ Blakney.

¹⁶ Eckhart Society, "The Man".

¹⁷ Eckhart Society, "The Man".

¹⁸ Blakney, xxiv.

¹⁹ Blakney, xiv.

knowing God. Yet, he would not turn from the truth he had found for himself to save himself.

In his famous defense, he wrote “I may err but I may not be a heretic—for the first has to do with the mind and the second with the will!”²⁰ He defended himself by saying “he had always avoided all errors of faith and unbecoming moral conduct and said that, if erroneous statements were found in his writings or sermons, he would retract them”²¹ That was just enough of an opening for the Pope to be able to claim that he had renounced his beliefs. However, that “would run counter to the whole character of the man.”²² He did not retract his statements, but rather regretted that he was misinterpreted.

He was a great man who was pulled down by a lot of little men who thought they could destroy him ... Eckhart did not have the kind of mind that wasted time being cautious about every comma: he trusted men to recognize that what he saw was worth seeing.²³

Following his condemnation, Eckhart essentially disappeared from the church. His writings, however, were preserved by some of the underground mystical societies—“those who grow tired of the negations of institutional minds and hungry for some sure affirmation.”²⁴ Unfortunately, his influence was not what it might have been. “For it was not Eckhart who was the loser in this

²⁰ Blakney, xxiii.

²¹ Blakney, xxiv.

²² Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, trans., *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), xiii.

²³ Fox, *Passion*, 23.

²⁴ Blakney, xxv.

condemnation; it was the Christian church, which to this day still seeks as holistic a spiritual vision as Eckhart once had.”²⁵

Major Theological Beliefs

Eckhart was a scholastic who was influenced by the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, among others. Yet, his focus was truly on preaching, not scholastics. “He found the Scholasticism of his day far too confining and he reached out to poetic and paradoxical expression He was indeed an artist.”²⁶ His writings are primarily sermons, not books or treatises, and many of those sermons were recreated from notes taken by listeners, not from his own manuscripts.²⁷ It was in his preaching that he made his greatest contribution. He “effectively employed the simple arts of oratory and gave remarkable expression to a hearty sympathy, using pure language and a simple style.”²⁸

One of the challenges in reading Eckhart is that he does not have a singular, consistent, systematic theology. “Don’t try to understand Eckhart too much. Don’t try to work it all out. Just read it.”²⁹ Additionally, since his writings were actually designed to be delivered verbally, they do not have the same academic rigor that one sees in other written documents. Additionally, he was also speaking from a mystical experience, rather than from a focus on intellect. Matthew Fox puts it this

²⁵ Fox, *Passion*, 23.

²⁶ Fox, *Passion*, 29.

²⁷ Blakney, xxii.

²⁸ McMahan.

²⁹ Eckhart Society, "Eckhart: The Teachings," 2008, <http://www.eckhartsociety.org/eckhart/introducing-eckhart> (accessed May 3, 2010).

way, “There is something unnerving about inhaling too much of academic approaches to a poet-teacher like Eckhart Since Eckhart is a poet and a mystic, I hope the reader of Eckhart will respond with art and mysticism.”³⁰ Adding to the difficulty is that all the manuscripts he left were not in good shape. “Perhaps the only real consensus among students of Eckhart is that he is not an easy author to read.”³¹

Because of the nature of his writings and the fact that he has not been seriously studied for long, there are disagreements about his beliefs. While many sources consider him a Neoplatonist, scholar Matthew Fox vehemently denies this. Instead he describes Eckhart’s theology this way, “Eckhart ... is a biblically rooted spiritual theologian. This means that his is a creation-centered and not a fall/redemption-centered spiritual theology.”³²

While he often preached to priests and nuns, he also sought to teach the commoner. He wrote, “If the ignorant are not taught, they will never learn and none of them will ever know the art of living and dying. The ignorant are taught in the hope of changing them from ignorant to enlightened people.”³³ It was his stressing the importance of each person’s unity with God instead of the ritual of the church, that caused him to become a concern for the church. “This man who, with moving eloquence, told the common people about the unity of God and man, a unity

³⁰ Fox, *Passion*, 9.

³¹ Colledge, 24.

³² Fox, *Passion*, 42.

³³ Blakney, xxiii.

so intimate that there would be no need for kneeling and bowing, no room for a priest in between, did indeed threaten to burst the ecclesiastic shell.”³⁴

Instead of speaking about the church, he focused on God. “He was a man of single intent, and that intent was God.”³⁵ “God is something to any person who is religious, but to Eckhart, he was everything.”³⁶ “It could justly be said that Eckhart was a man of one idea—one very great idea, to whom nothing else mattered much. That idea was the unity of the divine and human.”³⁷ This did not mean that he saw humans as equal to God. He often said that creatures are nothings, but humans did have a “divine kernel, this ‘little spark’ of God which is concealed within the shell of selfhood ... the germ of eternal life and the seed of God, the point of divine grace from which many may derive his worth and hope.”³⁸ He sought to know the true source of everything, which could only be known deep within. He said this about himself:

“When I preach, I usually speak of disinterest and say that a man should be empty of self and all things; and secondly, that he should be reconstructed in the simple Good that God is; and thirdly, that he should consider the great aristocracy which God has set up in the soul, such that by means of it man may wonderfully attain to God; and fourthly, of the purity of the divine nature.”³⁹

³⁴ Blakney, xxiii.

³⁵ Blakney, xiv.

³⁶ Blakney, xvii.

³⁷ Blakney, xx.

³⁸ Blakney, xxi.

³⁹ Blakney, 1.

He was driven by the mystical experience. “The main motive for his doctrine lay in a feature of mystical experience—that it involves a mental state not describable in terms of thoughts or images.”⁴⁰ He, himself, said that one cannot actually express what is God. Yet, he tried, as all theologians do.

One of his key concepts is that of the Godhead, which he usually referred to as different from God, although at times he used the word God when he seemed to mean Godhead. God exists as the three Persons of Trinity, while Godhead is the Ground of God, while also being indescribable. He also referred to this as “is-ness.” He wrote, “God and Godhead are as different as earth is from heaven.”⁴¹ Through contemplation, one could reach unity with the Godhead.⁴² He preached that “Truly you are the hidden God.”⁴³

“The great need of man is that his soul be united with God.”⁴⁴ Eckhart believed the church could provide the knowledge to do this, but it was not enough to save people. The unity must come from direct knowledge of the individual, and the spark of the soul could be attained in this life. He taught that God could be known sensibly (in the world), rationally (in the mind), and super-rationally (beyond sense

⁴⁰ Edwards, 450.

⁴¹ Suzuki, 16.

⁴² Edwards, 450.

⁴³ Colledge, xiv.

⁴⁴ Jackson, 68.

and mind through the mystical experience).⁴⁵ “God must become I, and I must become God Thus we are transformed into God and know him as he is.”⁴⁶

He also believed one grew spiritually through detachment. “True detachment means a mind as little moved by what befalls, by joy and sorrow, honor and disgrace, as a broad mountain by a gentle breeze.”⁴⁷ God is beyond any need or emotion or finite characteristic. He often used the *via negativa* in his writing. “Although the tradition of negative theology is long and rich, it has few spokesmen to equal Eckhart.”⁴⁸ He stated that Godhead is “the negation of negation, i.e. the absolute fullness of being.”⁴⁹ At times he referred to God as absolute being but other times as not a being.

Eckhart also developed a psychology within his theology. He saw multiple levels to the soul, with the highest one as the place where one can know God as he is via the spark of the soul.⁵⁰ It is this spark that is the connection of a person and the absolute Deity, or Godhead. “In its real nature this basis of the soul is one with Deity.”⁵¹ It is not enough that the soul was created and exists. One must turn toward God to reunite to find bliss. The soul needs to go back to the Godhead. “This same light [the spark of the soul] is not content with this simple divine

⁴⁵ Thomas Shepherd, *Friends in High Places* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2006), 75.

⁴⁶ Shepherd, 76.

⁴⁷ Shepherd, 78.

⁴⁸ Colledge, 31.

⁴⁹ Jackson, 68.

⁵⁰ Edwards, 450.

⁵¹ Jackson, 69.

essence in its repose ... it wants to go into the simple ground ... not the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit.”⁵²

These beliefs differed from the orthodoxy of the day in substantial ways. The spark of the soul implied an uncreated soul, and the ability to know God through contemplation meant the church sacraments were no longer needed to accomplish this. He also referred to creation as an emanation, which some might take to mean not literally created. However, Eckhart did believe in the literal creation, while seeing it through two levels of time. In God, the absolute, all events occur simultaneously. What humans can know is temporal and limited.⁵³ He wrote, “To talk about the world as being made by God to-morrow, yesterday, would be talking nonsense. God makes the world and all things in this present now.”⁵⁴

Some categorize Eckhart as a pantheist, and some of his statements can be interpreted in that light. However, in other writings he clearly differentiated between Creator and created. “Still the creature is not the creator, nor is the just man God.”⁵⁵ Noted Eckhartian scholar Matthew Fox describes him as a panentheist:

For Eckhart it is basically wrong to think of God as a Person “out there” or even of God as wholly Other “out there.” God is in us and we are in God.

⁵² Colledge, 36.

⁵³ Edwards, 450.

⁵⁴ Suzuki, 12.

⁵⁵ Blakney, 303.

This is the theology of inness and of panentheism which form the basis of Eckhart's God talk and consciousness.⁵⁶

Major Buddhist Beliefs

To determine if there are parallels between Meister Eckhart and Buddhism, one needs to understand several basic teachings of Buddhism. These can initially be summarized through The Four Noble Truths. First, there is suffering or unsatisfactoriness or pain (dukkha). This is a natural part of life. Second, suffering comes from attachment, craving, and clinging to things. Third, there is a way out—by releasing cravings. Fourth, the way to release is through the Noble Eightfold Path, trainings on how to live a moral life. To be free of suffering is to become enlightened, to reach Nirvana. Like Eckhart, Buddha used the via negative to describe this as, “The extinction of desire, the extinction of hatred, the extinction of illusion.”⁵⁷

“Buddha believed there was little value in spending precious mental energy on speculative subjects such as gods or the nature of the divine.”⁵⁸ He did not deny the existence of God, he simply did not see the concept as important. How one lived life to alleviate suffering is what mattered.

Buddha also rejected the Hindu belief in a soul. “One of the most challenging doctrines of the Buddha is the doctrine of anatta, often translated as ‘no self’ or ‘no

⁵⁶ Fox, *Passion*,. 44.

⁵⁷ Carole M. Cusack, *The Essence of Buddhism* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2001), 27, 30.

⁵⁸ Cusack, 26.

soul.”⁵⁹ However, it is important to note that the soul he referred to was an ego-soul, filled with will. Any attachment to a self was seen as an attachment that eventually led to suffering, and this must be shed to reach enlightenment. Instead, of egocentric souls, he “was affirming the reality of a wide realm of being, not confined within the bounds of ‘I’, ‘me’, and ‘mine So that people might live a wider, freer life.”⁶⁰

A corollary teaching to no self (anatta) is that of anitya, or impermanence. There is nothing that is permanent—everything changes. “Only mistakenly do people take certain things to be permanent, remaining essentially the same through all contingent events.”⁶¹ When one realizes that everything would eventually change, there is no need to be attached to anything or any notion of a self, and this would alleviate the suffering of life and lead to nirvana.

Buddha also spoke of nothingness. “There is a sphere which is neither earth, nor water, no fire, nor air, the sphere of nothingness. It is only the end of suffering.”⁶² This is a concept that is easily misunderstood and interpreted as nihilistic. In actuality, it refers to the infinite fullness of life. As Thich Nhat Hanh states: “If we are able to see that emptiness and non-emptiness point to the same reality, both notions will be transcended, and we will touch the world that is free

⁵⁹ Cusack, 26.

⁶⁰ Geoffrey Parrinder, ed., *World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1971), 275.

⁶¹ Parrinder, 274.

⁶² John Bowker, *World Religions: The Great Faiths Explored and Explained* (London: DK Publishing, 2006), 62.

from notions and concepts.”⁶³ Another aspect of this nothingness is called tathata, or the real nature of things as they are, or suchness.

Central to Buddha’s teachings was meditation. Right contemplation is the last step on the Eightfold Path. When one is leading the moral life outlined by the Path, all effort comes together in meditation. “Buddha taught vipassana (‘insight’) meditation, which is an analytical method based on mindfulness, observation, and total awareness of reality.”⁶⁴

The Zen tradition places a special importance on meditation. They hold that human nature is fundamentally good, and by going within during meditation, one can know their true state of Buddha-hood. “The self interferes with unmediated experience, and subjects it to analysis; Zen meditation assists in clearing this block.”⁶⁵

Parallels Between Eckhart and Buddhism

A cursory reading of Meister Eckhart finds there are some seemingly related concepts and terms to Buddhism. Indeed, many scholars find parallels between the two. Some find general similarities, and others find very strong connections. “To this day Eckhart remains the subject of ever more comparisons between Christian

⁶³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 160.

⁶⁴ Cusack, 34.

⁶⁵ Cusack, 56.

mysticism and Buddhism.”⁶⁶ As his writings become more well-known, the comparisons increase.

“If in the fourteenth century, he [Eckhart] could be portrayed as heretical, by the twentieth century his daring insistence on the transcendent nature of the Godhead and of the spiritual awakening of the individual could be seen in a world context as the European parallel to Buddhist metaphysics.”⁶⁷

One of the earliest writers to see a parallel was Daisetz T. Suzuki, who wrote about his first readings of Eckhart’s sermons in this way: “The ideas expounded there closely approached Buddhist thoughts, so closely indeed, that one could stamp them almost definitely as coming out of Buddhist speculations.”⁶⁸ He especially saw similarities to Mahayana Buddhism, specifically the school of Zen.

Suzuki connects Eckhart’s teaching on God as being and not-being at the same time in this way, “Buddhist enlightenment is nothing more than this experience of is-ness or suchness (tathata), which in itself has all the possible values (guna) we humans can conceive.”⁶⁹ In other words, Eckhart’s term Godhead is describing the ultimate reality of all, just as the Buddhist term tathata means the suchness of all things, or the Buddhist ultimate reality.

Suzuki similarly connects Eckhart’s teaching of pure nothing and the Buddhist teaching of emptiness (sunyata). Eckhart asserted one was closest to God when the following occurred:

⁶⁶ Esoterica (Michigan State University), *Meister Eckhart: An Introduction*, <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/REL275/EckhartIntroduction.html> (accessed May 3, 2010).

⁶⁷ Esoterica.

⁶⁸ Suzuki, 11.

⁶⁹ Suzuki, 13-14.

Wherein he may once more become like the original image as he was in God when there was no distinction I find that it is no other than absolute detachment from everything that is created He who would be untouched and pure needs just one thing, detachment.⁷⁰

Eckhart's salvation is found in detachment, or pure nothingness. Buddha's enlightenment is found in emptiness (sunyata). Suzuki writes "Eckhart is in perfect accord with the Buddhist doctrine of sunyata when he advances the notion of Godhead as 'pure nothingness.'"⁷¹

Catholic theologian Hans Küng also sees a parallel in the teachings of sunyata in this way:

If God is truly the Absolute, then he is all these things in one: nirvana, insofar as he is the goal of the way of salvation; ... emptiness, insofar as he forever eludes all affirmative determinations; and the primal Buddha, insofar as he is the origin of everything that exists.⁷²

An additional parallel around detachment can also be found in the primary Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths. Eckhart writes "for to be either this or that is to want something ... but detachment wants altogether nothing."⁷³ This concept can be seen as similar to the Third Noble Truth, which states the way out of suffering is to end craving and attachment to form.

One also finds common language in the path to enlightenment or salvation. Buddha taught one must empty oneself of the ego identity, while Eckhart taught

⁷⁰ Suzuki, 18.

⁷¹ Suzuki, 20.

⁷² Rob Cook, "Nothing is Real," *Religion East & West*, no. 6 (October 2006): 16, FirstSearch Database (accessed May 3, 2010).

⁷³ Suzuki, 19.

one could know God in nothingness. He wrote, "Since it is God's nature not to be like anyone, we have to come to the state of being nothing in order to enter into the same nature that He is."⁷⁴ Both teach of releasing of a sense of identity to become one with what is.

Another potential area of commonality is the concept of silence. Eckhart and Buddha both stressed the importance of the silence, or meditation. Eckhart wrote, "It is in the stillness, in the silence, that the word of God is to be heard. There is no better approach to this Word than through stillness, through silence."⁷⁵ This is how one found the unity in God that Eckhart saw as the ultimate goal. "No. Be sure of this: absolute stillness for as long as possible is best of all for you."⁷⁶ Most of the Buddhist traditions stress some form of meditation, many focusing specifically on the use of silence. A famous Buddhist saying is, "Capable of practicing silence, we are free as a bird, in touch with the essence of things Don't ask me anything else, my essence is worldless."⁷⁷ The Buddha taught that complete silencing was nirvana, or enlightenment. Indeed, the importance of silence be one of the strongest parallels between the teachings.

Differences Between Eckhart and Buddhism

⁷⁴ Eckhart Society, "Eckhart: Some of Eckhart's Sayings," 2008, <http://www.eckhartsociety.org/eckhart/some-eckharts-sayings> (accessed May 3, 2010).

⁷⁵ Blakney, 107.

⁷⁶ Eckhart Society, Sayings.

⁷⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 92.

While there are similarities between Eckhart's Christianity and some aspects of Buddhism, there are differences as well. Some argue that one must guard against superficial, easy comparisons that overstate similarities. "Just because we want to be frightfully ecumenical, or frightfully high-minded, we should not try to gloss over what may be perceived as a real difficulty by some."⁷⁸ Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and Zen philosopher Abe Masao both issue caution against attempts at syncretism.

Indeed, a high-level overview of Buddhism seems to contradict Eckhart in several ways. First, there is no God to speak of in Buddhism. "Some people may argue that this is not just a superficial or vulgar objection, but one of substance, pointing to a fundamental difference, an unbridgeable gap, between Buddhism and Christianity, and at one level it must be conceded they have a case."⁷⁹ Yet, the Buddha did not teach the non-existence of God, simply that the question was not important. One might say he was agnostic on the question. Still, Eckhart was theistic and Buddha not.

There also appears to be disagreement on the concept of the soul. While Eckhart writes, "When God made man, he put into the soul his equal, his active, everlasting masterpiece ... God's nature, his being, and the Godhead all depend on

⁷⁸ Walsh.

⁷⁹ Walsh.

his work in the soul.”⁸⁰ Buddha taught “there is no permanent, unchanging, real “soul” (atman) residing within the human individual.”⁸¹ The difference seems clear.

Even when one scholar finds similarities, others may insist the deeper meanings are actually different. For instance, on the comparison of nothingness, Japanese philosopher Ueda Shizuteru states, “Although Eckhart for his part also speaks of ‘nothingness’ of the godhead, there is a basic difference In each case, ‘nothingness’ belongs to a completely different world.”⁸² Ueda asserts Eckhart’s nothingness is in regard to the Godhead, the purity of God’s Essence, what God is. In Zen, however, nothingness “is not a description of the pure One, but lies beyond and on this side of the One, like a zero.”⁸³

One of the challenges in finding similarities between any two religions, is that one can find themselves reaching to make a point and then overstating one’s case. For instance, Suzuki makes a bold statement regarding the “little point” that Eckhart refers to in a sermon. Eckhart is referring to the spark of the soul where he and God meet. Suzuki states: “To have a satori [enlightenment] means to be stand at Eckhart’s ‘point.’ This little point is full of significance and I am sure Eckhart had a satori.”⁸⁴ Many would question how any person could truly know

⁸⁰ Blakney, 224.

⁸¹ Parrinder, 274

⁸² Ueda Shizuteru, "Ascent and Descent: Zen Buddhism in Comparison with Meister Eckhart," *Eastern Buddhist* 16, no. 2 (August 1983): 73, FirstSearch Database (accessed May 3, 2010).

⁸³ Shizuteru, 81.

⁸⁴ Suzuki, 63.

about another's mystical experience. "Most philosophers of mystical experience warn against claiming that there is a generic trans-religious experience. They stress that experiences are always culture-mediated."⁸⁵

Conversely, many hold that there is a commonality in religious experiences across cultures. L. Phillip Barnes suggests religious disagreements may be likened to "a disagreement between two men as to who owns the car they are riding in. In both cases, the two experiences are phenomenologically identical."⁸⁶

Conclusion

Each person must ultimately decide how similar or different two religions are. On some level, whenever one endeavors through religion to explain the nature of humankind, the universe, or ultimate concern, there will be some common language. For instance, virtually every religion has a version of the Golden Rule. The concept of immanence or transcendence (or both), will often be introduced. In that way, parallels between religions are not unusual. The question is whether the commonalities are substantial enough to link the beliefs in a meaningful way.

In comparing beliefs, no matter how objective one attempts to be, one's embedded religion is bound to have an impact. For instance, if one sees God as an existent being, then one is likely to argue that Christianity and Buddhism differ greatly based simply on their concept of God or no God. However, if one's sees God

⁸⁵ Cook, 15.

⁸⁶ Cook, 15.

as essence, source, or substance, they are more likely see a parallel between mystical Christianity Godhead and Buddhism's isness. So much depends on one's starting point, and bias is hard to avoid.

In addition to one's current belief system, the nature of language makes comparisons equally as difficult. For instance, even scholars who acknowledge that both Eckhart and Buddha taught the concept of nothingness will use wildly different definitions of the same words. Where one sees Eckhart's concept of nothingness as connecting to Buddhism's emptiness, another finds no connection whatsoever. One sees nothingness as a psychological concept, while the other sees an existential nothingness. Finding common language is almost impossible.

Perhaps one can take direction from the two teachers themselves, who both emphasized the personal, mystical experience, rather than a strict intellectual understanding. As Suzuki wrote, "I grow firmly convinced that the Christian experiences are not that all different from those of the Buddhist. Terminology is all that divides us and stirs us up to a wasteful dissipation of energy."⁸⁷ Rather than continue to debate how similar the original teachings were, a better question to ask is how they can inform each other today.

It seems to be of great significance that analogous movements of the spirit appear here from origins completely independent of each other, widely

⁸⁷ Suzuki, 14.

separated in time and space ... it is important to see that such origins—quite independently of each other—can as it were move towards each other.⁸⁸

The Buddhist can use Eckhart to understand mystical Christianity. And Christians can use Buddha to deepen their own beliefs. Whether one sees a common heritage or not, one can decide for themselves today whether the other teaching has meaning. Perhaps the best approach is to honor the shades of gray between these different spiritualities, instead of trying to make solid colors.

⁸⁸ Shizuteru, 74.

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