

REVIEWS

MEISTER ECKHART SPEAKS. Edited and introduced by Otto Karrer. (Blackfriars Publications; 6s.)

Since Eckhart is among the greatest of Friars Preachers, the Order has a special responsibility for his reputation. That is the first reason for welcoming even so slight a book as this from a publishing house associated with the Order. Eckhart's teaching was censured by the Church, but, so far as we know, he died in submission to the Church and protesting the orthodoxy of his intentions. Born before the death of St Thomas, whose influence must have pervaded his youth, and trained in the highest Dominican tradition in the great schools of Cologne and Paris, Eckhart took this tradition into the pulpit; not of course for the first time, but in a strikingly original and impressive way: uniting deep and daring thought with gloriously radiant, vigorous and pungent language. He is one of the creators of the German language. His influence formed Bd Henry Suso and Tauler and has continued to run deep and wide down to our own time. It is now as strong as ever and, thanks to modern scholarship, is less contaminated than ever before with historical errors: religious people outside the Church are as likely as ever to feel Eckhart's attraction, but they have less excuse than their predecessors for any facile assimilation of him to protestantism or pantheism. This good result is partly due to Dominican scholarship (Denifle and Théry). From another point of view, what may be called Eckhart's apostolic function appears precisely in this continual attraction which his teaching exerts on non-Catholic minds.

These remarks may partly illustrate what I have ventured to call the Order's responsibility towards Eckhart. The scholars have done good work; the theologians seem to be less enterprising. We need to recover and re-think, critically and in the light of St Thomas and his commentators, the unsystematized insights of so great and so dangerous a master. The difficulty of the task, far from daunting, ought to encourage us. In the apostolic field of intellectual charity towards our non-Catholic and indeed non-Christian contemporaries, there are surely few, if any, tasks more worthy of being undertaken; or in which we are more likely to be met half way; and even in this field, after all, two heads are better than one.

As for the little book under review, the editor's aim is apparently to give the pith of Eckhart's spiritual teaching, but in a devotional, not a scholarly way. This distinction seems to be drawn too sharply. If you want to 'study' Eckhart, you are referred, in the first lines of the

Introduction, to another more learned work 'which is being prepared by the same publisher'. The same as what? We are not told. Is it inappropriately student-ish to wonder why? And the same questions recur on every page of the little anthology of texts which follows. There is not a single reference; you never know where you are in terms of sermon or treatise; which seems to me a serious defect, even in an unpretentious booklet like this.

Because, in the first place, there will surely be some readers, and these not always the least 'devotional' and certainly not the least intelligent, who would like to follow the texts back into their contexts, not only to understand these particular ones better, but in general to get to know Eckhart better. In other words, an anthology is surely unsatisfactory in the degree that it cannot serve as an introduction; and this one can only imperfectly serve as such, because, as I say, the texts never point explicitly beyond themselves. They are just there, out of the blue, in a sort of void. It would have been a trifling addition, surely, to the work of editor or translator to supply those useful pointers. Besides, the texts themselves sometimes clamour for an elucidation which their wider context might at least begin to provide. Eckhart, we know, is a difficult author—paradoxical, epigrammatic, given to bold strokes apt to take a theologian's breath away or at least raise his eyebrows. It would seem only fair to theological readers—and aren't all readers of Eckhart at least inchoate theologians?—as well as to Eckhart himself, to enable them to place such audacities in some sort of context. It is not only a question of isolated 'audacities', like the unqualified remark that 'God is nameless'—against which see St Thomas, Ia, xiii *passim*. There are also two cases of apparent contradiction; where one statement is followed on the same page by another that seems to cancel it: e.g. on p. 37 we read that every sin 'whether mortal or venial . . . will have to be accounted for in time and in eternity', whereas six lines on we are told that when a man repents 'he has, in the eyes of God, never sinned nor will God for one moment make man suffer for his past offences'. In other places it is the apparent clumsiness of the translation which makes one want to check the text against some reliable edition. In general the translation reads as if the person responsible were unfamiliar with good English; there is an un-English riot of capital letters, especially for adjectives.

With these reservations one may commend the book as a first dip into the Eckhartian ocean. It is noticeable, incidentally, that much of Eckhart's 'audacity' is omitted; in particular there is very little here of those characteristic developments on the union of the soul with God the Son which, in certain sermons, go well beyond the bounds of normal Catholic language. Where Eckhart's originality does flash out

it is usually, here, a result of his expressing the *extreme* consequence of some truth. For example: 'Real humility makes a man conscious of his nature; a something created out of nothing . . . he is now as little able to attribute to his own credit the good actions which God works in him as he was before he was created.'

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

NEW ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY. Edited by Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre. (S.C.M. Press; 21s.)

METAPHYSICAL BELIEFS. By Stephen Toulmin, Ronald Hepburn and Alasdair MacIntyre. (S.C.M. Press; 25s.)

MYSTERY AND PHILOSOPHY. By Michael Foster. (S.C.M. Press; 12s. 6d.)

Among the most interesting volumes of this *Library of philosophy and theology* are those in which English philosophers have turned their attention to the analysis of theological statements. Of course no new movement is ever entirely new, and some of the problems now being faced were put and answered in the middle ages, which shared our inclination for linguistic analysis: but every age that is to avoid sterility must find its own formulation of the questions, and its own version of the answers. If the modern questioning sometimes seems rather radical, we may remember that a well-known article of the *Summa Theologica* begins 'videtur quod Deus non sit'.

Mr Foster's book is itself an attempt to assess the worth of the movement. He suggests that linguistic philosophy has more in common with Christian thought than had the Greek-inspired philosophy of former days. The contrast of Jew and Greek is an old theme, but is not overplayed; unfortunately Mr Foster prefers to present even the simplest ideas in other people's words, which makes his work rather indigestible.

The essays of *Metaphysical Beliefs* put the problem which is central to any theology. Since the mysteries of God's kingdom cannot be directly expressed, how can we get outside the closed circle of irreducibly 'mythological language'; how can we show the validity of the parables we are bound to use? In essays called *Poetry and religious belief* and *The logical status of religious belief*, Mr Hepburn and Mr MacIntyre are not so much offering a solution as displaying the complexity of the problem and eliminating false approaches—which is in some ways a more valuable thing to do.

New Essays is now some two years old, pioneer work on which the later books partly depend. The central theme is the same: how can we locate God in revelation? Mr Crombie, in an interesting study, suggests that 'statements about God are in effect parables which are referred out of our experience in a certain direction'; the subject of these statements