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Florian Wöller • Ueli Zahnd (eds.)

Dominican Culture, Dominican Theology

The Order of Preachers and Its Spheres of Action (1215 – ca. 1600)

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iussu Societatis edendum curaverunt
Jan C. Klok
Volker Leppin
Ulli Roth

curator
Jan C. Klok

Annemarie Pilarski
Ulrike Treusch
directorium Societatis

Krijn Pansters
praeses Societatis

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Table of Contents

Preface 9

List of Figures 11

1. Florian Wöller/Ueli Zahnd
Dominican Culture, Dominican Theology: Introduction 13

I. Dominican Identities and Cultures of Expertise

2. Jan-Hendryk de Boer
Giving Advice to the Pope
Dominicans as Experts During the Pontificate of Pope John XXII 23

3. Marcel Bubert
Black Friars as Heresy Experts
Dominican Identities and Inquisitorial Expert Culture
in Late Medieval France and Aragon 43

4. Isabel Iribarren
The Monzón Affair (1387–1403) and the Construction
of a Dominican Thomist Identity 59

5. Ulrike Treusch
The Grabow Case
An Example of Dominican Identity at the Council of Constance 79

II. Preaching and Liturgy

6. Christian Troelsgård
Mnemonic Verse, Theology, and Pedagogy
in Augustinus de Dacia's († 1285) *Rotulus pugillaris* 93

7. Carol J. Williams
Guy of Saint-Denis and Jerome of Moravia
on the Modally Sequential Office 109

8. Alberto Ferreiro
In Vigilia Sancti Iohannis Babtiste
St Vicent Ferrer on the Vigil of John the Baptist in a Catalán Sermon 123

9. Kristin Hoefener
Liturgical Chant and Devotional Practices
in Late Medieval Dominican Nunneries 139

III. Memory and Material Cultures

10. Marika Räsänen
Rethinking Relic Devotion in Medieval Dominican Culture 161

11. Kirsten Schut
Lay Death and Burial in Dominican Habits 181

12. Christian Etheridge
The Iconography of Dominican Saints Found on the
Claus Berg Altarpiece Made for the Priory of St Nicholas
in Aarhus, Denmark 197

IV. Dionysian Theology

13. J. Cornelia Linde
Pseudo-Dionysian Thought in Early Dominican Theology
The Concept of *Ordo* in Guerric of St Quentin's *In Lamentationes* 225

14. Samuel Baudinette
Between Philosophical and Christian Contemplation
The Role of Dionysius in the Writings of Albert the Great 241

15. Constant J. Mews
Dionysius, *Theologia*, and Thomas's Final *Summa* 265

V. Albert the Great and the Plurality of Dominican Thought

16. Amalia Cerrito
Faith and Natural Philosophy in Albert the Great's Account
of the *generatio Christi* 283

17. Marco Vorcelli
The Book of Job Through the Lens of the *Nicomachean Ethics*
Aristotelian Fortitude and Virtuousness of Job's Lamentation
in Albert the Great's Commentary on Job 6:11–12 297

18. Paul D. Hellmeier
Neo-Platonic Ways and Levels of Knowledge in the Interpretation
of Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas and Berthold of Moosburg 311

VI. Dominicans on Prayer

19. Jonathan Reinert
Thomas Aquinas on Petitionary Prayer and Divine Providence 327

20. Anja Bork
Meister Eckhart on Petitionary Prayer and the Relationship between God and Human 345

21. Andreas Zecherle
Johannes Tauler on Petitionary Prayer
An Attempt at Bridging the Gap Between Ecclesiastical Tradition and Mystical Thought 359

VII. Dominicans and the 'Others'

22. Johnny Grandjean Gøgsig Jakobsen
The Dominicans and 'the Others'
The Friars Preachers as Vanguard Against Pagans, Orthodox, Jews, Muslims, and Heretics. The Case of the Baltic Sea Region 373

23. Cheryl Midson
The Dominican Order and Eastern Christianity in the Thirteenth Century 395

24. Volker Leppin
Just a Quarrel of Monks?
Dominicans, Augustinians and the Early Reformation 409

List of Contributors 425

Index of Names 427

Index of Places 432

Index of Subjects 435

Meister Eckhart on Petitionary Prayer and the Relationship between God and Human

Anja Bork[1]

1. Introduction

With one exception, Meister Eckhart's texts known to us do not explicitly deal with petitionary prayer or prayer in general. The exception is a Latin interpretation of the Lord's Prayer,[2] probably written by him when very young.[3] In this interpretation, Eckhart discusses various positions, but his own opinion is hardly discernible. Moreover, we know of neither Latin disquisitions nor vernacular reflections by Eckhart that deal explicitly with prayer. It is astonishing that Eckhart does not seem to have been more concerned with prayer, for prayer is an essential part of Christian and Dominican life. Petitionary prayer is of particular importance because it is about the relationship between God and humans. In addition, there are other issues related to petitionary prayer that have been reflected upon again and again and have been approached in different ways by different theologians. Moving between academic thinking, responsibility for the Order, and pastoral care, Eckhart was influenced by various theological traditions of his time. Since prayer plays an important role in all these areas, texts of various genres dealing with prayer can be found in all of them.

However, in texts of Eckhart known to us, references to prayer are found in his vernacular sermons and treatises. Holding leading positions within the Dominican Order, Eckhart was mainly active in Erfurt, Strasbourg, and Cologne, where he also preached and was entrusted with pastoral care. Situated in everyday Christian life and piety, the vernacular texts show Eckhart's approach to

[1] Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), CRC 1391, project ID 405662736. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all who supported me in the preparation of this article in terms of content, language, and form: Melissa Brooks-Yarba, Paul Bauer, Matthias Keller, Volker Leppin, Jonathan Reinert, and Andreas Zecherle.

[2] Echardus de Hochheim: *Tractatus super Oratione Dominica*, ed. Erich Seeberg (Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Die lateinischen Werke 5), Stuttgart 2006, pp. 109–129. Markus Vinzent has re-evaluated a vernacular text that seems to be a Middle High German version of Eckhart's Latin interpretation of the Lord's Prayer (*Pater noster qui est in caelis*, ed. Auguste Jundt: *Histoire du pantheisme populaire au Moyen Âge et au seizième siècle*, Paris 1875 [reprint Frankfurt a.M. 1964], pp. 231–235) that he once considered "certainly not" by Eckhart: Vinzent, Markus: *Meister Eckhart: On the Lord's Prayer* (Eckhart: Texts and Studies 2), Leuven 2012, p. 263, n. 194. Since nothing has been published about this yet, it cannot be included in this article. I thank Markus Vinzent for the reference and look forward to further insights.

[3] Seeberg, Erich: "Einleitung", in Echardus de Hochheim *Tractatus super Oratione Dominica*, pp. 105–107.

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prayer within daily life. Therefore, Eckhart's reflections on prayer need to be elaborated in his vernacular works in particular.[4]

Looking at the treatise *Counsels on Discernment*[5] (*Die rede der underscheidunge*) is especially worthwhile regarding Eckhart's thoughts on prayer. Embedded in the monastic life of the friars, there is a section on "the most powerful prayer"[6] right at the beginning of the treatise. *Counsels on Discernment* deals with the question of true obedience, which is important for the relationship between human and divine will. This is a crucial question regarding petitionary prayer. Reflecting on the relationship between human and divine will leads Eckhart to one of his most fundamental issues: detachment (*abegescheidenheit*).[7] There is a treatise commonly attributed to Eckhart which also deals with prayer and goes beyond what is said in *Counsels on Discernment*. Moreover, there are references to prayer in the vernacular sermons attributed to Eckhart. Sermon 19 is particularly interesting in this regard, with Eckhart explicitly asking: "What is prayer?"[8]

For this reason, this article focuses on Eckhart's vernacular texts, consisting of sermons and a few treatises. Considering different passages from Eckhart's vernacular work, various perspectives emerge that help us understand Eckhart regarding the question: How does Eckhart talk about petitionary prayer in his

4 Freimut Löser has compiled all the passages where Eckhart speaks of prayer with a special focus on the practice of prayer: Löser, Freimut: "*Oratio est cum deo confabulatio*. Meister Eckharts Auffassung vom Beten und seine Gebetspraxis", in eds. Walter Haug/Wolfram Schneider-Lastin: *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang. Neu erschlossene Texte, neue methodische Ansätze, neue theoretische Konzepte. Kolloquium Kloster Fischingen*, Tübingen 2000, pp. 283–316.

5 Echardus de Hochheim: *Die Rede der Underscheidunge*, ed. Josef Quint: *Traktate* (Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Die deutschen Werke 5), Stuttgart 1963, pp. 185–309. A new German translation with explanations can be found in Leppin, Volker: *Meister Eckhart. Reden der Unterweisung*, Leipzig 2019. In the following, the English translation by Edmund College and Bernard McGinn is used: Echardus de Hochheim: *Counsels on Discernment*, in: *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund College O.S.A./Bernhard McGinn (The Classics of Western Spirituality), London 1981, pp. 247–285.

6 Echardus de Hochheim *Counsels*, p. 248 = *Rede*, ed. Quint, p. 190, l. 1: "dem aller kreftigesten gebete".

7 *Abegescheidenheit* is one of the main motifs in Eckhart's thinking (cf. Echardus de Hochheim: *Predigt 53: Misit dominus manum suam*, ed. Josef Quint: *Meister Eckharts Predigten, vol. II* (Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Die deutschen Werke 2), Stuttgart 1958, p. 528, ll. 5–6. Cf. *Meister Eckhart. The German works, vol. 2: 56 Homilies for the Liturgical Year. 2. De sanctis*, trans. Loris Sturlese/Markus Vinzent (Eckhart: Texts and Studies 12), Leuven 2020, p. 148. His terminology is not fixed, but he uses different words to describe it. Cf. McGinn, Bernard: "*Gelâzen/Gelâzenheit* from Eckhart to the Radical Reformers", in eds. Volker Leppin/Freimut Löser: *Von Meister Eckhart bis Martin Luther* (Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch 13), Stuttgart 2019, pp. 89–111; on detachment in Eckhart's work see for example Vinzent, Markus: *The Art of Detachment* (Eckhart: Texts and Studies 1), Leuven 2011.

8 Echardus de Hochheim: *Sta in porta domus domini et loquere verbum*, in: *Meister Eckhart. The German Works, vol. 1: 64 Homilies for the Liturgical Year. 1. De tempore*, trans. Loris Sturlese/Markus Vinzent (Eckhart: Texts and Studies 9), Leuven 2019, p. 405 = *Predigt 19*, ed. Josef Quint: *Meister Eckharts Predigten, vol. I* (Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Die deutschen Werke 1), Stuttgart 1958, p. 318, l. 12: "Waz ist gebet?"

vernacular texts, and what does that mean for the relationship between God and humans?

2. Comments on Prayer in the Treatise *Counsels on Discernment*

Counsels on Discernment is one of the earliest texts known to us by Eckhart. Originating during Eckhart's time as monastery prior and vicar in Erfurt, it is dated to the years from 1294 to 1298.[9] A short heading added later[10] says that *Counsels on Discernment* are

> conversations that the vicar of Thuringia, the prior of Erfurt, Friar Eckhart of the Order of Preachers, held with those young men who, conversing, asked him about many things as they sat with each other at collation.[11]

Introduced in this way as a conversation with younger friars, the *Counsels* were not immediately intended for written form.[12] The brothers asked Eckhart questions, which he answered.[13] Among other things, they talked about possessions and work,[14] sin and repentance,[15] confidence and hope,[16] and the reception of the Eucharist.[17] The individual sections can be subsumed into three groups. The first eight sections (1–8) deal with obedience and detachment, the next eight sections (9–16) deal with sin, and the last eight (17–23) deal with following Christ.[18] However, as the individual sections are rather loosely connected, the *Counsels* have no evident structure.[19] Reflecting on the conversational situation indicates a later compilation of the individual sections into 23 'Counsels on Discernment'.[20]

The first of the 23 *Counsels* deals with "true obedience",[21] while the second is about "the most powerful prayer".[22] The explanations about obedience intro-

9 Quint, Josef: "Vorbemerkungen zu den RdU", in ed. *id.*: *Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Die deutschen Werke 5*, Stuttgart 1963, pp. 137–184: 168; Leppin 2019, p. 85.

10 Quint 1963, pp. 168–181.

11 Echardus de Hochheim *Counsels*, p. 247 = *Rede*, p. 185, ll. 1–6: "Daz sint die rede, die der vicarius von türingen, der prior von erfurt, bruoder eckhart predigerordens mit solchen kinder hâte, diu in dirre rede vrâgeten vil dinges, dô sie sâzen in collationibus mit einander." This and all quotations below from Eckhart are my translations, based where possible on the translation by Sturlese and Vinzent, cf. above note 7 and note 8.

12 Leppin 2019, pp. 85–87.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

14 For example Echardus de Hochheim *Counsels*, pp. 251–255, 268–270, 280–285 = *Rede*, ed. Quint, pp. 200–211, 255–262, 290–309.

15 For example *ibid.*, pp. 261–262 = pp. 232–235.

16 For example *ibid.*, p. 263 = pp. 238–239.

17 For example *ibid.*, pp. 270–277 = pp. 262–284.

18 Leppin 2019, p. 87.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87; Quint 1963, pp. 177–178.

21 Echardus de Hochheim *Counsels*, pp. 247–248 = *Rede*, ed. Quint, pp. 185–189: "Von wârer gehôrsame daz êrste".

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 248–249 = pp. 190–191.

duce Eckhart's understanding of prayer and are especially important in order to understand the following second counsel about "the most powerful prayer, and [...] the highest work of all."[23] The two issues—obedience and prayer—are closely linked in Eckhart's *Counsels*. It will be seen that the linking element is the will. Therefore, a first section focuses on obedience. Afterwards, in a second section, prayer is discussed.

For Eckhart, "true and perfect obedience is a virtue above all virtues, and no work is so great that it can be achieved or done without this virtue."[24] Entering the monastery meant the transfer of will to the prelate, but Eckhart connects the obedience within the convent with obedience to God. Obedience in the Order is obedience to God, and obedience to God is shown in obedience to the prelate.

> If I deny my own will, putting it in the hands of my superior, and want nothing for myself, then God must want it for me, and if he fails me in this matter, he will be failing himself. So in all things, when I do not want something for myself, God wants it for me.[25]

Eckhart continues and asks:

> What is it that God wants for me that I do not want for myself? When I empty myself of self, he must necessarily want everything for me that he wants for himself, neither more nor less, and in the same manner as he wants it for himself. And if he were not to do this, by that truth which is God, he would not be just, nor would he be the God that it is his nature to be.[26]

Surrendering the will in true obedience provides space for the divine will, so that there remains only one will: the will of God.

The idea of 'conformity of will'[27] does not originate with Eckhart. Eckhart quotes Augustine[28] and follows Thomas Aquinas in terms of content. This is

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 248 = p. 190, ll. 1–2: "Von dem aller kreftigesten gebete und von dem aller hœhsten werke".

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 247 = p. 185, ll. 8–9: "Wâriu und volkomeniu gehôrsame ist ein tugent vor allen tugenden, und kein werk sô grôz enmac geschehen noch getân werden âne die tugent."

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 248 = p. 187, ll. 3–7: "Swenne ich mînes willen bin ûzgegangen in die hant mînes prêlâten und mir selber niht enwil, dar umbe muoz mir got wellen, und versûmet er mich an dem teile, sô versûmet er sich selber. Alsô in allen dingen, dâ ich mir niht enwil, dâ wil mir got."

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 248 = p. 187, l. 7–p. 188, l. 2: "Waz wil er mir, dâ ich mir niht enwil? Dâ ich mich ane lâze, dâ muoz er mir von nôt wellen allez, daz er im selben wil, noch minner noch mêr, und mit der selben wîse, dâ er im mit wil. Und entæte got des niht, in der wârheit, diu got ist, sô enwære got niht gereht noch enwære got, daz sîn natiurlich wesen ist."

[27] Matsuda, Mika: "*Gehôrsame*. Die Erfurter 'Reden' Meister Eckharts in der Auseinandersetzung mit Thomas von Aquin", in eds. Dagmar Gottschall / Dietmar Mieth: *Meister Eckharts Erfurter 'Reden' in ihrem Kontext* (Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch 6), Stuttgart 2013, pp. 223–242, talks about "Willenskonformität", following Thomas de Aquino: *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 19, a. 10, ed. Pietro Caramello, 4 vols., Turin 1948–1950, vol. II, p. 104: "Utrum necessarium sit voluntatem humanam conformari voluntati divinae in volito, ad hoc quod sit bona."

[28] Augustinus Hipponensis: *Confessionum Libri XIII*, X, XXVI.37, ed. Lucas Verheijen (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 27), Turnhout 1981: "Optimus minister tuus est, qui non

recognizable from the fact that Eckhart, like Aquinas, assigns a central position to obedience. With regard to the vows of the Dominican Order, obedience is the most important vow for Aquinas before poverty and chastity:

quia votum obedientiae continent sub se alia vota: sed non convertitur. Nam religiosus etsi teneatur ex voto continentiam servare et paupertatem, tamen haec etiam sub obedientia cadunt: ad quam pertinent multa alia praeter continentiam et paupertatem.[29]

By placing obedience at the beginning of *Counsels on Discernment* it becomes evident that Eckhart agrees with Aquinas on the primacy of obedience. But Eckhart differs from Aquinas's thoughts on a central point. In Aquinas, conformity of will means that the human person wants what God's will is for him or her ("vult hoc quod Deus vult eum velle").[30] For Eckhart, by contrast, true obedience means that there is no will but the divine one.

While for Aquinas, the human will is brought into conformity with the divine will, for Eckhart it is about giving up one's own will completely and thus giving space for the divine will. Where the divine will has moved in, there is no more space for the human will. Therefore, for Eckhart, being obedient means giving space in one's inner being for the divine will. "In true obedience there should be no trace of 'I want it so, or so', or 'I want this and that', but there should be a pure going out of what is yours."[31]

This is also expressed in Sermon 25: "When our will becomes God's will, it is good; but when God's will becomes our will, it is much better."[32] In contrast to Aquinas, Eckhart puts the divine will in the place of the human will. By understanding conformity of will not as the alignment of the human and divine wills, but as the abandonment of the properly human will, Eckhart goes beyond Aquinas's notion of conformity of will, which affects prayer:

magis intuetur hoc a te audire quod ipse uoluerit, sed potius hoc uelle quod a te audirit." Echardus de Hochheim *Rede*, p. 189, ll. 4–6: "Als dâ sprichet sant Augustînus: 'der getriuwe diener gotes den engelüstet niht, daz man im sage oder gebe, daz er gerne hœrte oder sæhe; wan sîn êrster, hœhster vlîz ist ze hœrenne, waz gote allermeist gevellet'" (*id. Counsels*, p. 248: "That is what Saint Augustine says: 'God's faithful servant has no desire for people to say or to give to him, or what he likes to hear or see, for his first and his greatest aim is to hear what is most pleasing to God'"). Cf. Leppin 2019, p. 90; Largier 2008, p. 793, note to p. 336, l. 21.

29 Thomas de Aquino *Summae Theologiae* II–II, q. 186, a. 8, ed. Caramello, vol. III, pp. 885–886. Cf. Horst, Ulrich: *Wege in die Nachfolge Christi. Die Theologie des Ordensstandes nach Thomas von Aquin* (Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte des Dominikanerordens Neue Folge 12), Berlin 2006, p. 161; Matsuda 2013, pp. 225–226. See also Thomas de Aquino *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 186, a. 7, ed. Caramello, vol. III, pp. 883–885.

30 Thomas de Aquino *Summae Theologiae* I–II, q. 19, a. 10, ed. Caramello, vol. II, pp. 104–105. Cf. Matsuda 2013, p. 227.

31 Echardus de Hochheim *Counsels*, p. 248 = *Rede*, ed. Quint, p. 188, ll. 3–4: "In wârer gehôrsame ensol niht vunden werden 'ich wil alsô oder alsô' oder 'diz oder daz', sunder ein lûter ûzgân des dînen."

32 *Id.*: *Moyses orabat Dominum Deum suum etc.*, in: *The German Works, vol. 1*, p. 437 = *Predigt 25*, in: ed. Quint: *Meister Eckharts Predigten, vol. II*, p. 9, ll. 5–6: "Sô unser wille gotes wille wirt, daz ist guot; aber sô gotes wille unser wille wird, daz ist verre bezzer."

And therefore in the best of all prayers that a man can pray, there should not be "Give me this virtue, or this way of life," or "Yes, Lord, give me yourself, or give me everlasting life," but "Lord, give me nothing but what you will and do, Lord, whatever and however you will in every way." [...] And when one has concluded that prayer, one has prayed well, for then one has in true obedience wholly entered in God. And just as true obedience should have no "I want it so", so also one should not hear from obedience "I do not want", because "I do not want" is a sure poison of all obedience.[33]

With the reference to Jesus's words in the Garden of Gethsemane, the surrender of the will becomes an act of imitating Christ.[34] Even if Eckhart did not make this explicit, for the Dominicans in the 14th century, at any rate, it is quite natural to assume that they perceived this reference.[35]

Since wanting to pursue the idea of surrender the will, it is useful to look at the second counsel, in which Eckhart elaborates on this. There Eckhart amplifies the consequences of obedience for prayer:

The most powerful prayer, and almost the strongest of all to obtain everything, and the most honorable of all works, is that which proceeds from an empty spirit. The emptier the spirit, the more the prayer and the work is mighty, worthy, profitable, praiseworthy and perfect.[36]

The "empty spirit" is crucial for prayer. It is the best condition for powerful prayer. Even more so, it is the only condition for praying. As shown before, prayer does not involve petition for something particular like "Give me this or that".

Anticipating his listeners' question, Eckhart even goes further:

What is an empty spirit? An empty spirit is one that is confused by nothing, attached to nothing, has not attached his best to any fixed way of acting, and has no concern whatsoever in anything for its own gain, for it is all sunk deep down into God's dearest will and has forsaken its own.[37]

33 *Id. Counsels*, p. 248 = *Rede*, ed. Quint, p. 188, l. 4–p. 189, l. 4: "Und dar umbe in dem aller besten gebete, daz der mensche mac gebeten, ensol niht sîn weder 'gip mir die tugent oder die wîse', oder 'jâ, herre, gip mir dich selber oder êwigez leben', dan 'herre, engip niht, wan daz dû wilt, und tuo, herre, swaz und swie dû wilt in aller wîse'. [...] Und swenne man daz gebet alsô volbringet, sô hât man wol gebetet: als man zemâle ûzgegangen ist in got wârer gehôrsame. Und als wâriu gehôrsame niht ensol haben 'ich wil alsô', also ensol niemer von ir gehœret werden 'ich enwil niht'; wan 'ich enwil niht' ist ein wâriu vergift aller gehôrsame."

34 See Matt 26:39: "verumtamen non sicut ego volo sed sicut tu" and Luke 22:42: "verumtamen non mea voluntas sed tua fiat."

35 Leppin 2019, p. 94.

36 Echardus de Hochheim *Counsels*, p. 248 = *Rede*, ed. Quint, p. 190, ll. 3–6: "Daz kreftigeste gebet und vil nâch daz almehtigeste, alliu dinc ze erwerbenne, und daz aller wirdigeste werk vor allen dingen, daz ist, daz dâ gât ûz einem ledigen gemüete. Ie lediger daz ist, ie daz gebet und daz werk kreftiger, wirdiger, nützer und lobelîcher und volkomener ist."

37 *Ibid.*, p. 248 = p. 190, ll. 8–12: "Waz ist ein ledic gemüete? Daz ist ein ledic gemüete, daz mit nihte beworren enist noch ze nihte gebunden enist noch daz sîn bestez ze keiner wîse gebunden enhât noch des sînen niht enmeinet in deheinen dingen, dan alzemâle in dem liebesten willen gotes versunken ist und des sînen ûzgegangen ist."

We see that the empty spirit, "sunk deep down into God's dearest will", is in true obedience. Detached from everything, an empty spirit can surrender to God and "forsake its own [will]". This leads directly to Eckhart's doctrine of detachment: being detached gives the soul the possibility of union (*unio*) with God.

3. Comments on Prayer in the Treatise *On Detachment*

The significance of detachment for prayer becomes even clearer when looking at the treatise *On Detachment* (*Von abegescheidenheit*). It has not been proven whether the text was written by Eckhart himself or not. Kurt Ruh speaks of a limited authenticity ("eingeschränkte [...] Authentizität").[38] There is no doubt, however, that the treatise in its content and thoughts is close to Eckhart's texts, which have been proven to be authentic. Therefore, it is considered here.

In the treatise *On Detachment* the statements on prayer are even clearer and more radical than those in *Counsels on Discernment*. Eckhart asks about the prayer of a detached heart:

> But now I ask: "What is the prayer of a heart that has detachment?" And to answer it I say that purity in detachment does not know how to pray, because if someone prays he asks God to get something from him, or he asks God to take something away from him. But a heart in detachment asks for nothing, nor has it anything of which it would gladly be free. So it is free of all prayer, and its prayer is nothing else than uniformity with God. That is all its prayer consists in.[39]

What is implied in *Counsels on Discernment* is made explicit here: within detachment, prayer is not possible because it is not necessary. "Sunk deep down into God's dearest will",[40] there is nothing to pray for. Yet, at the same time, only a detached and empty spirit is able to pray powerfully. In *On Detachment* Eckhart expresses this even more sharply:

> All the prayers and good works that man can accomplish in time move God's detachment as little as if no single prayer or good work were ever performed in time, and yet for this God is never any less gentle or less inclined toward man than if he had never achieved prayer or good works.[41]

38 Ruh, Kurt: *Meister Eckhart. Theologe, Mystiker, Prediger*, Munich 2018, p. 165.

39 Echardus de Hochheim: *On Detachment*, in: *The Essential Sermons*, trad. College/McGinn, pp. 285–294: 292 = *id.*: *Von abegescheidenheit*, ed. Quint: *Traktate*, pp. 377–468: 426, l. 6–427, l. 3: "Nû vrâge ich aber: waz ist des abegescheidenen Herzen gebet? Des antwürte ich also und spriche, daz abegescheideniu lûterkeit enkan niht beten, wan swer betet, der begert etwaz von gote, daz im werde, oder begert aber, daz im got etwaz abeneme. Nû enbegert daz abegescheiden herze nihtes niht, ez enhât ouch nihtes niht, des ez gerne ledic wære. Dar umbe sô stât ez ledic alles gebetes und enist sîn gebet niht anders dan einförmic sîn mit gote. Dar ûf stât allez sîn gebet."

40 Cf. above note 38.

41 *Id. Detachment*, pp. 288–289 = *abegescheidenheit*, ed. Quint, p. 414, ll. 2–6: "allez daz gebet und guotiu werk, diu der mensche in der zît mac gewürken, daz gotes abegescheidenheit alsô wênic dâ von beweget wirt, als ob niendert gebet noch guotez werk in der zît be-

As we have seen so far from the two treatises *Counsels on Discernment* and *On Detachment* a paradoxical picture emerges: on the one hand, the empty spirit or detached heart is necessary for powerful prayer; on the other hand, within detachment praying is not possible. Only an empty spirit, which wants nothing and is free from any self-attachment, can utter a powerful prayer. But at the same time, in detachment there is nothing to pray for, because the spirit is already "sunk deep down in God's dearest will and has forsaken its own."[42] This tension lies at the core of Eckhart's understanding of prayer.

4. Comments on Prayer in Eckhart's Vernacular Sermons

Taking the tension in Eckhart's understanding of prayer seriously, the question arises as to what to pray for. It has already become clear that Eckhart's focus is less on the content of prayer. Instead, his focus is on the way of praying. Nevertheless, in Sermon 27, he brings the two aspects, content and manner, together:

> I just now thought, when I pray my *Pater noster*, that God himself taught us: when we say: "Thy kingdom come, let your will become!" We pray incessantly to God that He removes us from ourselves.[43]

The petition for detachment becomes the decisive content of every petition. This is even more evident in Sermon 67:

> Those who pray for something that is not God or something around God, they pray in the wrong way; when I pray for nothing, I pray in the right way, and this prayer is right and it is powerful. Those who pray for something else, worship an idol, and one may say it is a pure heresy. I never pray so well as when I pray for nothing at all and when I pray for nobody, neither for Henry nor for Conrad. *True worshippers pray to God in truth and in spirit* [John 4:23], i.e. in the Holy Spirit.[44]

schæhe, und enwirt got niemer deste milter noch deste geneigeter gegen dem menschen, dan ob er daz gebet oder diu guoten werk niemer gewürhte."

42 Cf. above note 37.

43 *Id.*: *Hoc est praeceptum meum ut diligatis invicem*, in: *The German Works, vol. 2*, pp. 434–443 (emphasis in original); = *Predigt 27*, in: ed. Quint: *Meister Eckharts Predigten, vol II*, p. 54, ll. 3–6: "Ich gedâhte nû, dô ich mîn pater noster bette, daz uns got selbe lêrte: dâ wir sprechen: 'zuo kome uns dîn rîche, dîn wille werde!', dâ biten wir allez got, daz er uns selben uns beneme."

44 *Id.*: *Deus caritas est*, in *The German Works, vol. 1*, p. 719; = *Predigt 67*, ed. Josef Quint: *Meister Eckharts Predigten, vol. III* (Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Die deutschen Werke 3), Stuttgart 1976, p. 131, l. 3–p. 132, l. 1: "Die dâ iht<es> bitent wan gotes oder umbe got, die bitent unrehte; swenne ich nihtes enbite, sô bite ich rehte, und daz gebet ist reht und ist kreftic. Swer ihtes iht anders bitet, der betet einen abgot ane, und man möhte sprechen, ez wære ein lûter ketzerîe. Ich enbite niemer sô wol, wan sô ich nihtes niht enbite und vür nieman enbite, noch vür Heinrich noch vür Kuonrât. Die gewâren anbetære die betent got in der wârheit ane und in dem geiste, daz ist: in dem heiligen geiste." Italics mine.

These radical words show very clearly the aforementioned difference to Thomas Aquinas. While for Aquinas, praying for a certain good is possible in conformity with the divine will, for Eckhart the abandonment of one's will means the detachment from any petition.[45] Detachment is not only the decisive way of prayer but also becomes the sole content of prayer at the same time.

Eckhart expresses this here drastically. To pray for nothing and for nobody is the best and only right way to offer a powerful prayer. The names Henry and Conrad were common names, exemplifying the individual determination of the human in time and space.[46] Using names in Sermon 67 expresses the overcoming of time and space in detachment. The individual is left behind. The need for petition and intercession recedes into the background. Thereby, questioning a common practice of the church and the believers, the wording of the content can easily be misunderstood. Therefore, it is astonishing that this is said in a sermon. But it shows that Eckhart is not interested in the content of prayer, but rather in the manner.[47] Supporting this thought, Eckhart refers to a quotation from John 4.[48] He elaborates on this in Sermon 19 as well:

> A woman asked our Lord where one should pray. Then our Lord said: *The time will come, and now it is, when the true worshippers will pray in spirit and in truth. In fact, God is a spirit, and therefore we must pray in spirit and in truth* [John 4:23–24]. [...] Instead: in the first emanation, where the truth emanates and flows, "at the door of the house of God", there the soul must stay and must utter and express the Word. All that is in the soul must speak and praise, even though no one should hear the voice. In silence and quiet [...] there God speaks into the soul and speaks Himself completely into the soul. There the Father gives birth to His Son and has such great pleasure in the Word and He also likes it so much, that He never ceases to speak the Word all the time, that is, beyond time.[49]

The aspects mentioned here provide a new insight, making obvious what has already resonated before. For Eckhart, praying means the soul speaking. Imagining the relationship between God and the soul as a conversation, prayer is embedded into this idea. The soul's praying is resonating, so God is answering. The conversation between God and the soul is not loud; on the contrary, only in silence does the conversation ensue. Against the background of Eckhart's thought, silence can be understood as the detachment from everything created. Moreover, the second important concept of Eckhart's theology is mentioned

45 See Matsuda 2013, pp. 238–239.

46 Largier 2008, p. 655, note to p. 24, l. 15.

47 Leppin 2019, pp. 94–95.

48 John 4:23: "veri adoratores adorabunt patrem in spiritu et veritate".

49 Echardus de Hochheim: *Sta in porta*, p. 403 = *Predigt 19*, ed. Quint, p. 316, l. 6–p. 318, l. 1: "Ein vrouwe vrâgete unsern herren, wâ man beten solde. Dô sprach unser herre: 'diu zît sol komen und ist ieze, daz die wâren anbetære suln beten in dem geiste und in der wârheit. Wan got ist ein geist, dar umbe sol man beten in dem geiste und in der wârheit'. [...] Mêr: in dem êrsten ûzbruche, dâ diu wârheit ûzbrichet und entspringet, in der porte des goteshûses, sol diu sêle stân und sol ûzsprechen und vürbringen daz wort. Allez, daz in der sêle ist, sol sprechen und loben, und die stimme ensol nieman hœren. In der stille und in der ruowe [...] dâ sprichet got in die sêle und sprichet sich alzemâle in die sêle. Dâ gebirt der vater sînen sun und hât sô grôzen lust in dem worte und im ist sô gar liep dar zuo, daz er niemer ûfgehœret, er enspreche alle zît daz wort, daz ist über zît."

next to detachment. This is the birth of God. God's answer to the soul's speaking in silence is the eternal Word, which is born all the time. Understood as a conversation between God and the soul and detached from everything created, prayer is significant for the relationship between God and humans. This shows the fundamental importance of praying. For Eckhart, praying is an exclusive event between God and the human person, an event unaffected by the world. The human being is absorbed into the will of God. The union is created in prayer but at the same time it is a prerequisite condition for prayer. This thought permeates Eckhart's theology of prayer. Likewise, this is evident in his comments on praise: "What praises God? Likeness does. Thus, everything in the soul that is like God, praises God; what differs from God, does not praise God."[50] Eckhart compares the likeness between God and the praising soul to the relationship between an artwork and its artist: "as a picture praises its master who has impressed all the skill in it that he has in his heart and which made it so much like him. The likeness of the image praises its master without a word."[51] Again, wordless praise, giving praise in silence is to be valued more highly than praising in words or praying with the mouth.[52]

Starting from the quoted passage from John 4 about the explanations of the birth of God and the silent conversation between God and the soul, the chain of thoughts of the sermon leads directly to the question: "What is prayer?"[53] Eckhart answers this question with a quotation he attributes to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, which is actually found in John of Damascus's *De fide orthodoxa* and is correctly attributed in a Latin sermon by Eckhart.[54] In *De fide orthodoxa* John of Damascus writes: "Oratio est ascensus intellectus ad Deum."[55] Eckhart combines this statement with a reference to a "pagan",[56] perhaps taken from the

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 405 = p. 318, ll. 4–6: "waz lobet got? Daz tuot glîcheit. Alsô allez, daz glîch ist gote, daz in der sêle ist, daz lobet got; swaz iht ist unglîch gote, daz enlobet got niht."

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 405 = p. 318, ll. 6–8: "als ein bilde lobet sînen meister, der im îngedrücket hât alle die kunst, die er in sînem herzen hât und ez im sô gar glîch gemachet hât. Diu glîcheit des bildes lobet sînen meister âne wort."

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 405 = p. 318, ll. 8–9: "Daz man mit worten loben mac, daz ist ein kleine dinc, oder mit dem munde betet."

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 405 = p. 318, l. 12: „Waz ist gebet?"

[54] *Id.*: *Sermo XXIV.2: Domus mea domus orationis est, Luc. 19*, eds. Ernst Benz/Bruno Decker/Joseph Koch: *Magistri Echardi Sermones* (Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Die lateinischen Werke 4), Stuttgart 1956, p. 225, l. 13–p. 226, l. 1.

[55] Ioannes Damascenus: *De fide orthodoxa* III, cap. 24 (cap. 68), ed. Eligius M. Buytaert (Franciscan Institute Publications Text Series 8), St. Bonaventure, NY 1955. The thought of John of Damascus is widely spread in ancient and medieval theology. For example, it can be found in Thomas de Aquino *Summae Theologiae* II-II, q. 83, a. 13, arg. 2, ed. Caramello, vol. III, p. 425; and also after Eckhart in the sermons of Johannes Tauler, *Predigten*, ed. Ferdinand Vetter, *Die Predigten Taulers aus der Engelberger und der Freiburger Handschrift sowie aus Schmidts Abschriften der ehemaligen Straßburger Handschriften* (Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters 11), Berlin 1910, p. 20, ll. 6–7; p. 67, ll. 23–24; p. 101, ll. 13–14; p. 154, ll. 16–17; p. 421, ll. 19–20. Cf. Largier 2008, p. 924, note to p. 218, l. 17. For Thomas Aquinas on petitionary prayer, see the contribution of Jonathan Reinert in this volume (pp. 327–344). For Tauler on petitionary prayer, see the contribution of Andreas Zecherle in this volume (pp. 359–370).

[56] Echardus de Hochheim *Sta in porta*, p. 405 = *Predigt 19*, ed. Quint, p. 319, l. 1: "Ein heiden sprichet".

Liber de causis.[57] The combination of these two statements brings Eckhart to a conclusion that is now no longer surprising:

> On the contrary: all the pleasure and satisfaction and joy and wellbeing that you can have here, all this has to go. Whoever wants to praise God has to be holy, to be united, must be a spirit and not be anywhere outside, indeed: must be one with everything raised above all things in eternal eternity. I do not mean: all creatures that are created, but rather, above all that one could do, if one wished, the soul must rise above. As long as something is above the soul and as long as something which is not God is before God, [the soul] will not enter the ground in the "length of days".[58]

In the Middle High German text, the reader can perceive the ascent linguistically by the triple repetition of "mêr". In the English translation, "mêr" is translated as "on the contrary" the first time, "indeed" the second time and "but rather" the last time. As the comparative form of the adverb "much" (Middle High German: "vil") "mêr"[59] indicates in this authentic meaning that there is something more. However, the statements do not seem able to be increased, but Eckhart goes beyond. It is not enough "to be holy, to be united, to be a spirit and not to be anywhere outside",[60] it is necessary to be "raised above all things in eternal eternity."[61] Rising up this way, until there is nothing above the soul and nothing between God and the soul, leads the soul to the ground. With these two paradoxical movements, ascent and descent, the core of Eckhart's mystical theology is stated. Detachment is the ascent to God and the descent to the ground at the same time.[62] For Eckhart, praying means walking this paradoxical way. Prayer is the ascent of the soul to the ground.

[57] Cf. *Liber de causis*, prop. 24, §23, eds. Alexander Fidora/Andreas Niederberger: *Von Bagdad nach Toledo. Das "Buch der Ursachen" und seine Rezeption im Mittelalter. Lateinisch-deutscher Text, Kommentar und Wirkungsgeschichte des Liber de causis* (Excerpta Classica 20), Mainz 2001, p. 116: "Quod est quia ex rebus sunt quae recipiunt causam primam receptione unita, et ex eis sunt quae recipiunt eam receptione mulitplicata, et ex eis sunt quae recipiunt eam receptione aeterna, et ex eis sunt quae recipiunt eam receptione temporali, et ex eis sunt quae recipiunt eam receptione spirituali, et ex eis sunt quae recipiunt eam receptione corporali." Cf. Echardus de Hochheim *Sta in porta*, ed. Quint, p. 404, note 13; Largier 2008, p. 924, note to p. 218, l. 18.

[58] Echardus de Hochheim *Sta in porta*, p. 405 = *Predigt 19*, ed. Quint, p. 319, ll. 4–11: "Mêr: alle lust und genüegede und vröude und welde, die man hie gehaben mac, daz muoz allez abe. Der got loben wil, der muoz heilic sîn und gesament sîn und ein geist sîn und niergen ûz sîn, mêr: allez glîch ûfgetragen in die êwige êwicheit hin ûf über alliu dinc. Ich enmeine niht alle crêaturen, die geschaffen sîn, mêr: allez, daz er vermöhte, ob er wolte, dar über sol diu sêle komen. Die wîle iht ob der sêle ist und die wîle iht vor gote ist, daz got niht enist, sô enkumet si in den grunt niht 'in der lenge der tage'."

[59] Cf. art. "mêr, adj. adv. conjunct.", *Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch*, ed. Matthias Lexer, digital version in *Wörterbuchnetz des Trier Center for Digital Humanities*, Version 01/21, https://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/Lexer?lemid=M01346, retrieved August 8, 2024.

[60] Echardus de Hochheim *Sta in porta*, p. 405 = *Predigt 19*, ed. Quint, p. 319, l. 6: "muoz heilic sîn und gesament sîn und ein geist sîn und niergen ûz sîn."

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 405 = *Predigt 19*, ed. Quint, p. 319, l. 7: "ûfgetragen in die êwige êwicheit hin ûf über alliu dinc".

[62] Eckhart also states this in his aforementioned Latin sermon XXIV: Echardus de Hochheim *Sermo XXIV*.2, eds. Benz/Decker/Koch, p. 224, l. 11–p. 227, l. 10.

Thus, considering the path taken in prayer to detachment, the question of the place of prayer becomes insignificant. With John 4, Eckhart locates the worship in spirit and in truth.[63] With this, too, Eckhart shows that prayer for him is a thoroughly inner process which leads the soul to the ground in which it can encounter nothing but God.

5. Conclusion

Expressing the human being's turning towards God,[64] prayer is an essential part of Christian life and is essential for the relationship between God and humans. The analyzed passages reveal that petitionary prayer does not play a superior role in Eckhart's work. Moreover, the specific practice and the content of prayer does not matter. Instead of talking about content, place, or frequency of prayer, everything revolves around detachment and aims at union with God. Even in his *Counsels on Discernment*, which probably emerged from conversations with younger friars, he speaks only about the way of prayer. Stating obedience as a prerequisite for prayer there, the surrendering of the human will means to give space to the divine will. With the primacy of obedience, Eckhart is based on Thomas Aquinas, but he goes beyond the latter with his own thought of abandoning the own will that is seen as being one with the divine will. The state of the abandoned will is defined as detachment by Eckhart. In detachment, the human soul is free from all that is created and from all "this and that". There is just one will, the will of God, which could be understood as Eckhart's mystical continuation of Dominican thought.[65]

Eckhart's position is paradoxical: praying aims at being detached and has no other content, while at the same time this detached praying is possible only after the human will is united to God's will. However, it fits into Eckhart's theology which is constantly revolving around detachment and union with God. Detachment as a place of union and eternal conversation with God, who is the spoken Word, is both the manner and aim of prayer. Eckhart does not have to resolve the paradox. His texts are not instructions in prayer, but are guidance on the way to God.[66] Be it in the monastery conversing with younger brothers or in his sermons, for Eckhart this way to God is an inner path that leads to detachment and thereby to union with God. Only the reference to Jesus's words in the Garden of Gethsemane indicates that the surrender of the will is not only an inner process but also becomes an act of imitating Christ.[67] In prayer, the soul ascends above everything until there is nothing between God and the soul, and arrives at the ground. Detached from everything, there is nothing to

[63] *Id. Sta in porta*, p. 403 = *Predigt 19*, ed. Quint, p. 316, ll. 7–8.

[64] Rantschow, Carl Heinz, "Gebet. 1. Religionsgeschichtlich", in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* XII (1984), p. 31: "Das Gebet ist allen Religionen als Ausdruck menschlicher Zuwendung zur Gottheit eigen."

[65] Leppin 2019, pp. 96–97.

[66] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[67] *Ibid.*, p. 94. See Echardus de Hochheim *Counsels*, p. 248 = *Rede*, ed. Quint, p. 188, ll. 7–8: "herre, engip niht, wan daz dû wilt, und tuo, herre, swaz und swie dû wilt in aller wîse."

pray about. For Eckhart, the conversation between God and the soul happens in silence. Therefore, this relationship, which is expressed in petitionary prayer, takes place in detachment. Attaining detachment so as to communicate with God is what we need to pray for.

> We ought to pray so powerfully that we should like to put our every member and strength, our two eyes and ears, mouth, heart, and all our senses to work; and we should not give up until we find that we wish to be one with him who is present to us and whom we entreat, namely God.[68]

[68] Echardus de Hochheim *Counsels*, p. 249 = *Rede*, ed. Quint, p. 191, ll. 1–4: "Alsô krefticlîche sol man beten, daz man wölte, daz alliu diu gelider des menschen und krefte, beidiu ougen, ôren, munt, herze und alle sinne dar zuo gekêret wæren; und niht ensol man ûfhœren, man envinde denne, daz man sich welle einen mit dem, den man gegenwertic hât und bitet, daz ist got."