

KURT FLASCH, *Meister Eckhart. Philosopher of Christianity*, Pp. XI+321. New York-London: Yale University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-300-20486-5. Paper \$ 31,99.

“People today want to know about Eckhart. Many, using the language of advertising, consider him ‘in’” (p. 158), as his writings seem to be a mystical invitation “to escape the hectic pace of the present life in an industrial society” (p. 158); Eckhart is thus habitually used as remedy for the diseases of the present. Kurt Flasch, a distinguished scholar of medieval studies, conceives his book in opposition to this tendency by shaping the contours of a historical and philosophical Eckhart, since “like all arguments and texts, Eckhart’s are grounded in his life and times” (p. XIII). To this aim, Flasch follows the events characterizing Eckhart’s life through a detailed analysis of his works, by assuming as a principle “to stay close to Eckhart’s texts” (p. 155). This enables the readers to glean the essential philosophical dimensions of Eckhart’s writings, to grasp the most urgent problems in the academic debates of his time, and to familiarize with his principal opponents. Therefore, not only the *Opus Tripartitum* or the First Parisian Question, but also the speeches and the biblical commentaries are written by Eckhart to respond to specific philosophical issues in his time. In fact, also the German sermons, usually celebrated as typically mystical texts, without any connection with the Scholastic discussions, are really conceived “to demonstrate the Christian truth with philosophical arguments” (p. 190).

Then, exploring the idea of “mysticism” – and this is perhaps the most appealing aspect of Flasch’s study – is not the point in the case of Eckhart. Rather, Flasch endeavors to define what we mean by “philosopher”, or more precisely by the phrase “philosopher of Christianity”. This question – raised intentionally in the subtitle of the book – is, in this reviewer’s opinion, the heart of the matter. The fact that Eckhart is primarily a “philosopher” and not a “mystic” is in itself an original position, even if it must be said that several recent studies are now following this line (see, among others, L. Sturlese, *Meister Eckhart: Ein Portrait*, Regensburg 1993; A. Beccarisi, *Eckhart*, Roma 2012). In fact, it is certainly more unconventional to apply to Eckhart the expression “philosopher of Christianity” (p. 14), as in the most recent medieval studies this phrase is considered a stereotype and, where it is employed, it is generally referred to Thomas Aquinas or, in a large sense, to Thomism. However, Flasch’s approach does not intend to be just a provocation meant to question the strongest convictions about the history of Medieval Philosophy, but rather a speculative hypothesis worth examining. Accordingly, he provides firstly a comprehensive definition of the “Philosophy of Christianity” as an effort “to prove Christian ideas rationally in such a way that believers and unbelievers alike would come to recognize them as true, and not merely as culturally contingent constructs Christian communities of faith” (p. 15). Secondly, in the light of this, he presents a broad historical overview in order to challenge some crucial questions, such as “What is Philosophy?” or “Which are Medieval Philosophers of Christianity?” Then, his intention is ultimately to find just in Eckhart’s work a possible starting point to embrace again this “forgotten concept” (p. 30). In so doing, Flasch’s ambition is both to interpret Eckhart’s figure in an alternative way and to study him in order to typify the complex relationship between “philosophy” and “Christianity”, “reason” and “faith”.

The book presents a marked fluctuation from a historical to a speculative viewpoint. On the one hand the author – as he himself declares – offers a careful and original study on

Meister Eckhart as medieval theologian and philosopher; on the other hand, Flasch's considerations on the idea of "Philosophy of Christianity" go evidently much further. First of all, in order to address the problem, he assigns precise meanings to notions, such as "faith", "reason", "Christianity". Moreover, the definition of "Philosophy of Christianity" itself (p. 15) is effectively a consequence of a defined theoretical choice. Then, the fact that Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, but also Blaise Pascal, Johann Gottlob Fichte, György Lukács, Martin Heidegger, and several contemporary theologians are quoted or criticized into Flasch's analysis is obviously a further result of a peculiar hermeneutical approach to the problem. Flasch himself maybe would not approve my last considerations, as "it is a hermeneutical act of violence" (p. 158). But, I do not intend this as a weak or a critical point of the book. Indeed it seems to corroborate the idea that behind each serious and stimulating historical research there must be a clear philosophical perspective.

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