

**THE POSSIBILITY OF KNOWING GOD:  
APHAERESIS IN THE THOUGHT OF MEISTER ECKHART**

Oana VASILESCU\*

**Abstract.** The author investigates the foundation of Meister Eckhart's view on the best way and method to become oneself and to discover God. The study attempts to show that Eckhart's philosophical and mystical perspective is grounded on the concepts of aphaeresis and apofasis and, also, on their functional relation.

**Keywords:** aphaeresis, inner God, Meister Eckhart, mystical knowledge

Our communication tries to bring to light the foundation of certain striking similarities in thinking recognizable in the doctrine of master Eckhart's and Chan Buddhism in the forward path and method for human self-accomplishment and achievement of enlightenment or discovery of inner God. This foundation consists of a concept (common) subtended by the principle of aphaeresis, referring to the idea of preexistence potential within the individual, a real, pure (image of God, Buddha-nature) to be disclosed.

Circumscribing the role of negation in speech about God is achievable in the conceptual framework provided by the conditions of (im)possibility of a discursive knowledge about an object that transcends strictly cognitive and comprehensive skills and also human language. Strengths of apofasis are detectable by putting it in an interdependent relationship with aphaeresis method, since both aim to remove the veil of ignorance or illusory knowledge in order to reveal the hidden truth.

Confessing (also) about the influence of the Areopagite thinking, Meister Eckhart turns out to be, in his sermons and treatises, a follower of the path in the process of achieving apofatic knowledge of God: "If I call on God being, is such as I would call as the sun pale or white. God is neither this nor that.", "If I say that God is good, it adds something, but one is the negation of negation and deprivation of deprivation."<sup>1</sup> In Eckhart's conception, God is always inside the

---

\* PhD in Comparative Literature, PhD Student in Philosophy, Associate Researcher, Institute of Philosophy and Psychology, Romanian Academy. This article is an alternative (smaller) compared to a study published in the "Revista de Filosofie", no. 3-4/2009 under the title "aphaeresis and apofasis: Meister Eckhart and Chan Buddhism".

<sup>1</sup> Meister Eckhart, *The Soul Citadel*, translation, afterword and notes by S. Maxim, Iasi, Edit. Polirom, 2003, p. 72; *Benedictus Deus* (spiritual teachings), translated by D. Dumbrăveanu, Victoria Comnea (treatises) and Stela Tinney (sermons), Bucharest, Edit. Herald, 2004, p. 206.

human being ("Why not stay in you drinking in your own good? I Wear in essentially all truth.", "We must not consider God as being outside us, but as appropriate and inner."<sup>1</sup>) and can be rediscovered in the depths of the soul through a series of operations of aphaeresis ("Nothing must be covered within us that will not find it if we find all [...], God will reveal all that He is, in turn, and will not cover anything that may give: wisdom or truth, privacy, divinity or whatever.", "so long as it is not removed from us that which is intermediate, we do not savor him as God does himself", "There are three things that prevent us from hear the word forever. The first is the body, the second is the multiplicity, and the third is fleeting. [...] Who wants to hear the divine word must deny Himself entirely."<sup>2</sup>) and by an absolute introversion ("The man who has left and denied all, the man who does not shed any insight into what he has left and remains stead, resolute and firm in itself, is able to say that he has denied everything."<sup>3</sup>). Truth/God is inside each individual soul, is enrolled in the intimate fiber of human being itself. For this reason, one who seeks truth or God must return to himself and to discover the depths of the soul. To recognize God in his/her heart, one must also proceede as a hermeneut artist, namely to sculpt the statue inside, removing all that is intermediate, removing everything related to bodily multiplicity and transcending himself entirely. Only rigorous performing all these operations of aphaeresis man reveals God hidden inside his soul and reveals His image.

C.G. Jung says that, like Indian systems, Meister Eckhart developed a psychological concept about God: "In the Christian sense of culpability report, inner feeling of kinship with Eckhart's God seems a bit strange. We feel transported in the atmosphere of the Upanishads."<sup>4</sup> Psychological conception of God (identified with the archetype of the Self: "God's image does not coincide with the unconscious in general, but particularly with its content, namely the archetype of the Self."<sup>5</sup>) developed by Eckhart is close not only to this Indian concept of essential identity between Atman (absolute individual self) and Brahman (universal absolute self) - as already suggested by C. G. Jung - but also to the concept of Buddhism (Chan, especially) of the presence of Buddha-nature in each inner being. Master Eckhart's assertions about God inner, innate in man, the "own good" of man, which is the very divinity within, sent to Ma-Tsu Chan master phrases related to "treasury" includes every individual who always "treasure" nature Buddha: "In instead of looking into the treasury of your own, you left home and lost elsewhere. (...) You have your own treasure at hand, just

<sup>1</sup> Meister Eckhart, *The Soul Citadel*, ed. cit., p. 54 (Sermon 5b) and p. 60 (Sermon 6).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 89, p. 90 (Sermon 11) and p. 91 (Sermon 12).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 95 (Sermon 12).

<sup>4</sup> C.G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, translated by Viorica Nişcov, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1997, p. 263.

<sup>5</sup> C.G. Jung, *The Human Image and the likeness of God*, translated by Maria-Magdalena Angheliescu, Bucharest, Edit. Teora, 1997, p. 307.

use it as you please - and then what's the vain search for something outside of you?", "Your own treasury contains absolutely all of which you need. Serve yourself of your own heart's treasure instead walking in vain for something outside yourself."<sup>1</sup> The treasure from within our mind or soul is the nature-of-Buddha always possessed as potential: "People despise/ the precious jewel (*Mani*),/ the treasure of *Tathagata*./ But each possesses,/ buried deeply/ in the *Alaya* consciousness./ (...)/ The treasure precepts/ of the nature of Buddha/ is imprinted deeply in our minds."<sup>2</sup>

Chan masters who also recommended *aphaeresis* method for achieving true nature, Meister Eckhart calls, in turn, to use the same techniques of *aphaeresis* to recognize divinity entered the human soul: "The soul is pure, more empty, more poverty, as have fewer creatures, and the more empty of everything is God, the purest understand God and God is contained in"; " the depths of the soul, the image of God, the Son of God, is like a spring of life. Even if he throws over the earth - it's worldly desires - and lies covered, so that no longer sees anything, he is still alive and, if the dust away, he comes forth again (...). In addition, we sometimes use another comparison. When a craftsman carve a shape of wood or stone, he removes chips covering and hiding the shape, it does not add anything to wood or stone, but rather picks and removes what it covers until what is hidden underneath shines. And so is buried treasure in the field, as our Lord says in the Gospel." "When man discloses the divine image God created in him by nature, the image of God is manifested in it. (...) By the liberation of the image of God in man, man become one with God, because man is the image of God, that image that is the essence of God in its purity. And man is emancipated, is more like God, more united with Him."; "Soul must detach all that was added to God by thought or knowledge, must grasp God in all its nakedness, as pure Being (...)."<sup>3</sup>

The method proposed by Meister Eckhart to discover God inside human soul is the *aphaeresis* method, which is - as is clear from the passages quoted above - of the following disclosure: emptying the soul of every creature and delight that comes from creatures; removal from the heart of everything is not God; poverty, draining and purification of the soul; removing the "earth" represented by worldly desires; uncovering the divine nature intrinsically to every human being; emancipation of the divine image within man; elimination of all additions of thought or knowledge; disclosure of the purity of inner divinity. Meister Eckhart uses explicit comparison, already promoted by Plotinus, between the disclosure of the pure godliness image from within the soul and how the sculptor works in

<sup>1</sup> Hui Hai, *Sudden Illumination*, translation by Stella Tinney, Bucharest, Edit. Herald, 2000, pp. 87-88.

<sup>2</sup> Yokai Daishi, *Shodoka*, in *Zen Masters*, selection and commentary by E. Zeisler and T. Deshimaru, translated by R. Ciocănelea, Bucharest, Edit. Herald, 1999, p. 64 and p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Benedictus Deus*, ed. cit., p. 75, p. 104, p. 263 and p. 307.

wood or stone to carve a face. The sculptor that carves a form does not introduce the form into the material and adds nothing to wood or stone, on the contrary, he discovers the form within the material itself, using *aphaeresis* technology, they work for the purposes of disclosure, by removing the excess of material. As sculptor finds the perfect form within the amorphous mass of material (stone or wood) and bring it to light by removing the surplus of material, also, just inside his soul finds the believer the pure image of deity and his work for the purposes of disclosure is about removing all that is not divine, all worldly desires, everything related to creatures, all thought and all knowledge.

For Eckhart, the discovery of divinity in the very inmost soul and the possibility of knowing divinity itself in its essential purity are achieved through the method of *aphaeresis*. Thus, to rely on God, man must "be denied himself and to have denied everything, not to be bound by absolutely nothing that has to do with the senses from the outside and not linger in any creature in time or eternity. (...) Goodness and justice are a garment of God, they cover him, surround him. Therefore, you must know God in all his nakedness, or uncovered nothing and all its purity, as He is to Himself. This you will remain in Him."<sup>1</sup>

*Aphaeresis* operations represented by self-denial, removal of things and creatures, unraveling the external senses lead man to recognize God inside his soul, and *aphaeresis* operations represented by removing the veils of divine attributes (kindness, justice, etc..) lead man to knowledge of God in His essential purity/emptiness.

Master Eckhart recommended the removing of the veils represented by sermons ("Do not be turned away from God because of your words or preaching."<sup>2</sup>), the removing of the veil represented by the search itself of God ("The more you look, the less we find. Go it so that it does not find again. If you do not search Him, you find Him."<sup>3</sup>) and the leaving of God for God himself inwardly ("What is most important and most invaluable to be fulfilled it is that man lives God forsake of God Himself."<sup>4</sup>).

Thus, the true foundation in God is, for Eckhart, the result of a maieutical process which consists of a series of *aphaeresis* operations consisting in the removal of the veils covering all deity (the sermons, the divine attributes, the search itself of God, all related to creature, the ego and the earthly man, and – the most subtle veil - God Himself) and revealing the inner God from within the intimate fiber of the human being. The believer must act as a hermeneut artist able to discover God inside his soul and in every thing: "My mouth it expresses and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 262-263.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Meister Eckhart, *The Soul Citadel*, ed. cit., p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93.

reveals God, but the very being of stone does it too, and I understand more of the fruits of God's work than of words."<sup>1</sup>

In summary, the conclusion of our discussion would consist of a (re)affirmation of the revealing role of negation and its transcendent meaning, of a relationship of mutual dependency between apofatic way and in the aphaeresis method of asymptotic tendency to union with God, and the possibility of setting common ground for fruitful parallels between different spiritual, cultural and religious areas starting just from views structured by concepts as *aphaeresis* and apofasis (or translatable in terms of one or the other).

---

<sup>1</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Benedictus Deus*, ed. cit., p. 300.

