

***SILENCE AS PRAISE:
THE RHETORIC OF INEXPRESSIBILITY
IN GERMAN DOMINICAN THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE
(1250-1350)***

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Addenda

In response to the generous feedback and recommendations of my examiners, I have amended a number of oversights and typographical errors in the thesis which follows. These include some inconsistencies in the spelling of some titles in the list of references and in the main body of the text, as well as a mistaken translation of *Dux neutrorum* as “Guide to the Contrary.” One reviewer quite correctly points out that this rendering of *neuter* is incorrect, and remarks that this Latin term instead refers to “the undetermined position [of the] basic existential position that characterizes the work’s addressees.” I thus choose in the body of my thesis to give the standard English rendering of “perplexed,” as a translation for *neutrorum*. The same reviewer also kindly directed me to some recent literature on the Maimonidean Controversy of the early thirteenth century, which has allowed me to clarify the relationship between the apparent burning of the *Guide* by the Inquisition in Montpellier and the Parisian Talmud trials and condemnation of the early 1240s.

I have also significantly expanded some footnotes and references in order to incorporate several bibliographical suggestions provided by my reviewers. These include critical editions of Meister Eckhart’s vernacular sermons published in the series *Lectura Eckhardi*, which provide the most recent in-depth commentaries on several of the sermons which I discuss in my final chapter. Likewise, I have also included in footnotes at appropriate parts of my discussion several studies of Maimonides by Wolfgang Kluxen and Shlomo Pines.

Finally, I must acknowledge that the masterful treatment by Bernhard Blankenhorn titled *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas*, published by the Catholic University of America Press in March of

2015, was only made available to me after the completion and submission of my thesis. This meant that I could not incorporate Blankenhorn's treatment of Albert and Aquinas' reading of Dionysius into this study. However, I have since had occasion to read this highly excellent and rigorous study of Albert and Aquinas' Dionysianism, and am gratified that many of my own conclusions seem to align with Blankenhorn's superbly detailed analysis.¹ Significantly, both Blankenhorn and I advance the argument that Albert's presentation of Dionysius in Cologne gave the impetus to a flourishing interest in mystical union for the wider German Dominican School, even as he and Aquinas significantly transformed the core doctrines of Dionysius on God's ineffability and the entrance into the silence of the "dark cloud of unknowing." A more ideal version of this present thesis would have benefited from access to Blankenhorn's significant scholarly achievement.

¹ See my forthcoming review of Blankenhorn in the *Journal of Religious History*.

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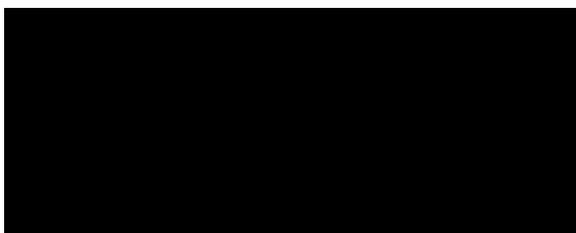
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Abstract

The Order of Preachers is generally thought to be far from silent. The important vocational role of preaching and teaching doctrine often emerges as the sole motivation underlying the Order's spirituality and the friars are commonly portrayed as vociferous disputants, preachers and inquisitors. Yet some of the most important spiritual and mystical figures of the medieval Order, such as Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1328), emphasised repeatedly in their sermons and treatises the need for an inner contemplative silence attached to recognition of the divine ineffability. By considering Eckhart in his wider context as a member of a German Dominican School related to the *studium generale* in Cologne from 1250-1350, this thesis demonstrates that a current of respect for silence was an important aspect of German Dominican theology and practice. The interest in negative theology amongst Dominican theologians like Albert the Great, Ulrich of Strasbourg, Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart provided the impetus for a re-evaluation of silence's role in the life of the spirit. Through their adoption of the heavily Neoplatonic apophysis found in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and the categorical negation of divine attributes advanced by the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, these Dominicans crafted a rhetoric of inexpressibility connected to the silent praise of God in Psalms 64:2. This silent praise of the divine, grounded in the contemplative model of the Order, came to inform the mystical practice of the German laity in the fourteenth century. Transforming the monastic practice of silence into a soteriological virtue in their vernacular sermons and treatises, Eckhart and his confrères argued that silence as detachment was a spiritual ideal incumbent upon the wider Christian community. The scholastic debates about silence which formed a part of the theology of the German Dominican School in the thirteenth and fourteenth century had a direct impact on contemporary religious practice.

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. To the best of my knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.



Samuel Baudinette

4th June, 2015

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Introduction

The Dominican theologian, preacher and mystic Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1328) teaches in one of his many vernacular sermons that “the best that one can say about God is to keep silent out of the wisdom of one’s inward riches.”¹ Eckhart was also particularly intrigued by Psalms 64(65):2 in Jerome’s *Hebraica* translation: *Tibi silens laus Deus in Sion* (“May there be silent praise to you, O God in Sion”).² The central spiritual role which the Meister grants silence in his theological system has received significant attention from a number of scholars interested in Eckhartian thought. For instance, Robert K. C. Forman argues that Eckhart encouraged a life of active contemplation and silence based upon his own experiences in the Dominican cloister. In so doing, he “changed the emphasis of the mysticism found in the Rhineland Valley... in a mode that harmonized [his] twofold Dominicanism” of contemplation and preaching.³ Anastasia Wendlinder also points towards Eckhart’s conscious adoption of contemplative silence from Augustine.⁴ For Karl-Heinz Witte, silence lies at the heart of the Meister’s apophatic mystical system.⁵

Silence has been recognized as an important motor in the theology and practice of other Dominicans besides Eckhart. Many would consider its vital importance in the life of the spirit, from Albert the Great to Henry Suso. However, Dominicans are not generally understood as being silent. This is perhaps the result of the friars’ popular reputation as

¹ Pr. 83, trans. Edmund Colledge, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, ed. by Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 207. Hereafter *Essential Eckhart*.

² This Psalm is numbered 65:2 in the Hebrew *Tanakh*, whilst in the Vulgate translations of Jerome it is numbered 64:2. When referring to the verse in Hebrew and Jewish texts, I use the numbering convention of the *Tanakh*. Otherwise, in all other instances I will refer simply to Psalms 64:2. See below for the history of the translation of this Psalm.

³ Robert K. C. Forman, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic as Theologian* (Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991), p. 44.

⁴ Anastasia Wendlinder, *Speaking of God in Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart: Beyond Analogy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 27-64.

⁵ Karl Heinz Witte, *Meister Eckhart: Leben aus dem Grunde des Lebens* (Munich: Karl Albert, 2013).

vociferous disputants, preachers and inquisitors.⁶ By naming themselves the *Ordo praedicatorum* (Order of Preachers) and as *fratres praedicatorum* (Friars Preachers), the followers of Dominic defined themselves by these very roles. Instead of examining the role silence plays in the spiritual life of the Order of Preachers, most discussions of Dominican spirituality are concerned with emphasising the important vocational role of preaching in the Order's spiritual identity. For instance, the noted Dominican historian Simon Tugwell has argued that the "Dominican life is defined essentially by the Order's job, not by the spiritual needs or desires of its members."⁷ Denys Turner in a recent biography of Thomas Aquinas even goes so far as to place Dominican preaching in opposition to the traditional silent monasticism of the friars' predecessors:

Dominicans are city dwellers, the monks commonly rural; Dominicans are university men, their learning that of the schools; the monk's *schola* is the cloister. But above all, the Dominicans for the most part talk, and the monks, when not singing, are for the most part weeping [their] silent tears.⁸

There has been some recognition in scholarship of the importance placed upon silence by certain members of the Dominican Order other than the Meister. For instance, Turner notes that Aquinas had a deep commitment to silence. He argues that the "intertwining of word and silence is... the default position of Thomas's theology from beginning to end."⁹ Likewise, for Paul Murray "the silence that honours God can be detected between the lines and words of almost everything [Aquinas] wrote."¹⁰ As Wendlinger argues, however, in her analysis of analogy in Aquinas and Eckhart, "the heart

⁶ For instance, in Christine Caldwell Ames, *Righteous Persecution: Inquisition, Dominicans, and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) and Henry Charles Lea, *A History of Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, 3 vols. (New York: Russel & Russel, 1955).

⁷ Simon Tugwell, "The Dominicans," in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. by Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainright and Edward Yarnold (Oxford: SPCK, 1986), p. 297.

⁸ Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰ Paul Murray, "Aquinas at Prayer: The Interior Life of a 'Mystic on Campus,'" *Logos* 14 (2011), p. 58.

at rest in God is a silent heart, but not a speechless one, until it has completed its last earthly beat.”¹¹ For the friars whose calling is ultimately preaching, she believes, “those who are transformed and bear the Silence within themselves are not rendered mute, but... are compelled to speak of God all the more.”¹² Even when silence is discussed by Dominicans in the context of their spirituality and teaching, it has not necessarily been understood as a silence by which the practitioner refrains from speaking.

To best understand how and why a Dominican like Eckhart thought that silence should be the ultimate response to God’s ineffability, it is necessary to examine his wider theological and spiritual context. As Bernard McGinn argues, Eckhart’s background is best explained by seeing him as a “vernacular theologian” forming part of a wider “German Dominican School” founded in the mid-thirteenth century by Albert the Great (d. 1280) at the Dominican *studium generale* in Cologne.¹³ A historiographical label tied to the rediscovery of a specific German philosophical culture and to the publication of the *Corpus philosophorum teutonicorum Medii Aevi*, the “German Dominican School” identifies a group of theologians active in Germany from 1250 to 1350. As Jan A. Aertsen explains, “the new designation is a recognition of the emergence of a German philosophical culture... and thus the expression of the growing importance of Germany as an intellectual centre beside Paris and Oxford.”¹⁴ These Dominicans, including Ulrich of Strasbourg (d. 1277), Dietrich of Freiburg (d. 1310), Meister Eckhart and Berthold of Moosburg (d. 1361), are generally understood to be doctrinally united by their interest in Neoplatonism, intellectual union with divinity and the promotion of the Dionysian mode

¹¹ Wendlinder, *Speaking of God in Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart*, p. 189.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Bernard McGinn, “Mystical Language in Meister Eckhart and his Disciples,” *Medieval Mystical Theology* 21 (2012), p. 216.

¹⁴ Jan A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 315. Cf. Loris Sturlese, *Homo Divinus: Philosophische projekte in Deutschland zwischen Meister Eckhart und Heinrich Seuse* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), pp. 1–13; Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen and Alain de Libera (eds), *Albertus Magnus und der Albertismus. Deutsche philosophische Kultur des Mittelalters* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

of apophysis. Yet, as Niklaus Largier argues, the “German Dominican School” is ultimately no more than a “heuristic concept” and not a discrete “school of thought,” as amongst German Dominicans there were significant doctrinal and theological disagreements.¹⁵ In this study, therefore, I adopt the label “German Dominican School” to refer generally to the Dominican theologians associated in some way with Albert and the *studium generale* in Cologne without firmly asserting any philosophical uniformity. I do argue, however, that members of the German Dominican School, broadly speaking, demonstrate a characteristic approach to silence that is ultimately related to their theological reading and writing.

Through an examination of the idea of silence as it is developed in the writing of the German Dominican School, I argue that silence has an important place in their overall theology and practice. I present here a brief history of the idea of silence that is sensitive to the thinking of the major theological figures of the School and the cultural framework that informs their writing. In doing so, I demonstrate that Eckhart’s attention to silence is actually characteristic of German Dominican teaching, especially about the important role of contemplation in the spiritual life. Tracing the history of the idea of silence in German Dominican discourse is thus a kind of history of spirituality; what Caroline Walker Bynum has called “the study of how basic religious attitudes and values are conditioned by the society within which they occur.”¹⁶

A number of historians of religious thought have become keenly aware of the important role that silence plays in the spiritual and contemplative life of the Middle Ages and beyond. One study, the magisterial *Silence: A Christian History* by Diarmaid

¹⁵ Niklaus Largier, “‘Die deutsche Dominikanerschule:’ Zur Problematik eines historiographischen Konzepts,” in *Geistesleben im 13. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Jan A. Aertsen and Andreas Speer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), pp. 202-13.

¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the Late Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 3.

MacCulloch, offers an introduction to the silences of the Christian tradition, including the contemplative and ascetic silence of the monastic cloister, the silence which results from the apophatic deconstruction of negative theology and the marked silence that is the Church's modern day response to issues of clerical abuse and corruption.¹⁷ Krijn Pansters, Scott G. Bruce, Paul F. Gehl and Ambrose G. Wathen have all provided comprehensive studies of the culture of silence in Christian monasticisms.¹⁸ In 2005, cinema-going audiences were provided an intimate picture of the lives of the Grand Chartreuse, largely devoid of sound or commentary, by German film-maker Philip Gröning's documentary *Die große Stille* ("Into Great Silence").¹⁹ Silent prayer, silence in the liturgy, exegesis and asceticism have all attracted attention, particularly within a monastic context.²⁰ For the German Dominicans who are the focus of this study, however, silence emerged in their theological treatises and in their sermons preached to the laity as a response to the ineffability of God. It was the result of a process of rigid negation of divine language.

Such silence, as an aspect of *apophasis*, or negative theology, has been the focus of examinations by Kevin Hart, Denys Turner and Michael Sells.²¹ In his highly influential *Trespass of the Sign*, Hart argues that negative theology is "discourse which reflects upon

¹⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Penguin, 2013).

¹⁸ Krijn Pansters, "The Secret of Silence: Spiritual Concentrations as Theological Concern," in *The Carthusians in the Low Countries: Studies in Monastic History and Heritage*, ed. by Krijn Pansters (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), pp. 57-69; Scott G. Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition c. 900- 1200* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Paul F. Gehl, "Competens silentium: Varieties of Monastic Silence in the Medieval West," *Viator* 18 (1987), pp. 125-60. Ambrose G. Wathen, *Silence: The Meaning of Silence in the Rule of Saint Benedict* (Washington: Cistercian Studies Series, 1973).

¹⁹ *Into Great Silence*, directed by Philip Gröning (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2005).

²⁰ Bruria Bitton-Ashkelony, "More Interior than the Lips and the Tongue?: John of Apamea and Silent Prayer in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20 (2012), pp. 303- 31; Pieter W. van der Horst, "Silent Prayer in Antiquity," *Numen* 41 (1994), pp. 1-25; Joseph Dogherty, "Silence in the Liturgy," *Worship* 69 (1994), pp. 142-54; Jürgen Ebach, *Beredtes Schweigen: Exegetisch-literarische Beobachtungen zu einer Kommunikationsform in biblischen Texten* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014).

²¹ Kevin Hart, *Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

positive theology by denying that its language and concepts are adequate to God.”²² Hart contends that “negative theology plays a role within the phenomenon of positive theology but it also shows that positive theology is situated with regards to a radical negative theology which precedes it.”²³ For Hart, therefore, negative theology *deconstructs* positive theology. Sells builds upon this foundational idea in his study *The Mystical Languages of Unsayings* by attempting to “identify the distinctive semantic event within the language of unsaying.”²⁴ He calls this the “meaning event” of apophatic discourse. This meaning event, as Sells understands it, acts as the literary and semantic analogue to the concept of mystical union— it “re-creates or imitates mystical union.”²⁵ This new discourse allows Sells to draw distinctions between different types of apophatic languages. For Sells, “a purely apophatic language would be an abstract and mechanical turning back on each reference as it is posed.” However, “some of what has been called *apophasis* is apophatic theory as opposed to apophatic discourse.”²⁶ Apophatic theory, he argues, “affirms the ultimate ineffability of the transcendent...without turning back upon the naming used in its own affirmation of ineffability.”²⁷ Only an apophatic discourse is capable of the continual linguistic regress that is an analogue to indescribable mystical experience.

By arguing that apophatic discourse does not properly result in a moment of silence, however, Sells fails to take into account the repeated calls to silence made by theologians such as Meister Eckhart and those like him in the German Dominican School.²⁸ In some respects, Sells’ differentiation between apophatic theory and apophatic discourse is somewhat arbitrary; a theologian like Eckhart produced works that could fit into both categories and which mutually supported each other. Denys Turner, in his *The Darkness of*

²² Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, p. 175.

²³ *Ibid*, pp. 201-2.

²⁴ Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, p. 9.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 9.

God, offers an important corrective to Sells' theory of apophatic discourse based upon the recognition that even as mystics involved themselves in the infinite linguistic regress of such a discourse, they also repeatedly stressed the necessity of keeping silent.

Turner argues that to truly come to know the ineffable God one must exhaust language. For Turner, "it is of the greatest consequence to see that negative language about God is no more apophatic in itself than is affirmative language."²⁹ Instead, he argues, "the apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language." Turner believes that apophasis is the moment where words fail and one cannot help but fall silent. The negative theologian, he argues, is "embarrassed into silence by her very prolixity... theology, one might say, is an excess of babble."³⁰ Confronted with the very real impossibility of predicating anything of the divine, language ultimately collapses into the *aporia* that apophatic discourse tries to describe. The continuous affirmation and negation of the attributes of the unspeakable divinity, therefore, results in the necessary silencing of speech about God.

For the German Dominican School, such a strategy must ultimately be placed into the framework of the monastic practice of silence. As Oliver Davies is correct to argue, "the need to negate in Christian apophatic discourse is not grounded in a recognition of the limits of language and expression as such, or at least not in that alone."³¹ Instead, "*it is shaped within particular liturgical communities* who are called to give verbal expression to a specific intervention of God in history."³² For Davies, there are two different types of silence which must be considered by the theologian; silence as the absence of noise and

²⁹ Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p. 34.

³⁰ Denys Turner, "Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 18.

³¹ Oliver Davies, "Soundings: Towards a Theological Poetics of Silence," in *Silence and the Word*, ed. by Davies and Turner, p. 201.

³² *Ibid.* (my emphasis)

silence as the cessation of speech.³³ The silence which is caused by the apophatic *aporia* is the latter and it is this silence which is of principal concern in the theology of the German Dominican School. Their silence is a cessation of all speech about God. It is a silence which worships the divine. As Jean-Luc Marion argues:

we may keep silent in such a way that we refuse to think about a thing, refrain from thinking it, and take it to be kept outside the horizon of our thought. But there is another way to remain silent, which is to worship, to take a thing so seriously that we have only one way to speak about it, which is precisely to keep silent.³⁴

However, even if Davies is correct to claim that the silence which results from negation is shaped by the verbal needs of a particular liturgical community, Paul Gehl is equally correct when he argues that “monastic silence stands beside and not entirely within Christian theological systems.”³⁵ Rather, he believes, “it is a practice that at times becomes normative for its practitioners.” Gehl argues that whilst silence for the monk “serves to weigh the monks’ intentions and measure their progress in faith,” there is a higher level of discourse on silence’s role in the spiritual life where “it may also serve to unify man and God beyond the possibilities of knowledge which depends on human language.”³⁶ This is the level of discourse which is the primary concern of the German Dominicans.

The monastic practice of silence, Gehl argues, is not just an ascetic practice. It also forms a rhetorical “approach to God through the moral and mystical dimensions of

³³ Ibid, p. 202.

³⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, “Introduction: What do we Mean by Mystic?” trans. Gareth Gollrad, in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 4.

³⁵ Gehl, “*Competens silentium*,” p. 125.

³⁶ Ibid.

language.” It is an “active rhetoric directly related to a community’s needs for a common sense of purpose and common models of spiritual practice.”³⁷ To describe this process, Gehl considers a term which developed in the comparative study of Christianity and Buddhism and which has been popularized by Mary Carruthers in her work on memory in the Middle Ages.³⁸ This is the concept of orthopraxy. For Carruthers:

orthopraxis emphasizes a set of experiences and techniques, conceived as a “way” to be followed, leading one to relive [a] founder’s path to enlightenment. Because it seeks an experience, an orthopraxis can never be completely articulate; instead of normative dogma, it relies upon patterns of oral formulae and ritualized behavior to prepare for an experience of God, should one be granted.³⁹

Viewing spiritual texts through the lens of rhetoric and orthopraxis allows one to discover “how an interpretation, whatever its content, was thought to be constructed in the first place.”⁴⁰ Monastic rhetoric is identified by Gehl and Carruthers as *silentium* (silence) and as a kind of orthopraxy. For Gehl, silence “creates its own orthopractical ‘scripture;’” a rhetorical set of rules which inform the monk’s approach to God.⁴¹ Silence is therefore capable of providing the norm by which the monastic community, as well as the individual practitioner, can measure their spiritual progress. Ultimately, silence “is a primary, active rhetoric because it consists of linguistic actions for the direct moral good of the subject and the community he or she addresses.”⁴² Whilst it is primarily related to study and prayer, it

³⁷ Ibid, p. 126.

³⁸ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³⁹ Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 4.

⁴¹ Gehl, “*Competens Silentium*,” p. 158.

⁴² Ibid, p. 159.

also “persuades and offers further behavioral norms; it becomes moral habit and mystical ideal.”⁴³

Yet even should silence be conceived as an orthopraxis for Gehl, it is not so in the strictest sense. This is because, “the monastic rhetoric of silence never subsumes the verbal, dogmatic system into itself.”⁴⁴ Silence is not normative for the entire Christian community. In the monastic community it is a communicative ideal, whether through rhetorical techniques or contemplative practice. In Christian thought at large, Gehl argues, silence has a limited place in the spiritual journey. It has been pushed to the side, he believes, by the predominant role that speculative theology and passionate mysticism have played in Christian spirituality since the twelfth century.⁴⁵

My examination of the German Dominican School’s teaching on silence argues that this final assertion about silence’s role in Christianity at large is incorrect. By building upon the existing discussion of silence found in the German Dominican School, I show that Eckhart moves away from a conception of the strict imposition of enforced silence in monastic practice towards the inculcation of silence as a contemplative practice for all Christians. This is borne out by the wider concern amongst the German Dominicans to emphasise the silence which is the result of God’s ineffability, as demonstrated, primarily, by the attention that Eckhart gives to Psalms 64:2 in his theological writing. This in turn came to influence the sermons preached by the Dominicans of the Rhineland in the early to mid-fourteenth century about silence. I follow Gehl, therefore, in that I argue that this move takes place in response to what I call a Dominican “rhetoric of inexpressibility,” in so far as it is a “monastic response... to the need to speak of the unspeakable.”⁴⁶ And I

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 158.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 160.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 153.

follow Davies, Sells and Turner in so far as I argue that this rhetoric is informed by the German Dominican community's apophatic theology. Taken together these two trends constitute what I am calling, following Psalms 64:2, "the silent praise of God."

Theoretical Context for the Rhetoric of Inexpressibility

I argue in this study that the German Dominican attitude towards silence was a result of their engagement with the two significant medieval sources for the apophatic way. One is the *Corpus Dionysiacum* of the sixth century, which made inroads into the Latin West during the ninth century and was championed by Albert the Great at Cologne. The other is the *Guide of the Perplexed* written by the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, which featured prominently in both Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart's scholastic writing. The major figures in this study, including Albert the Great, Ulrich of Strasbourg, Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, engaged in different ways with these two sources. Both the Dionysian *Corpus* and Maimonides' *Guide* provided them with the impetus to explore the role silence played in theology and practice. In part, the rhetoric of inexpressibility was also an active recovery by these Dominicans of Jewish biblical understanding as it emerged from the reception of Judaeo-Arabic rational philosophy in the thirteenth century. Both Aquinas and Eckhart introduce Psalms 64:2, in the translation of Jerome's *Hebraica*, in their theological writing on the apophatic approach to God and acknowledge their debt to Jewish tradition. The following study, therefore, takes its departure from the "silent praise of God" which this Psalm verse contains.

In the Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, one finds at Psalms 65:2 what is generally assumed to be a call to the silent praise of God; *lekha dumiyya tehilla Elohim* לך דומיה תהילה אלוהים. The Psalm, traditionally ascribed to David, is understood to refer to the Israelites' return to Jerusalem from their enslavement in Babylon and is classified as a

Psalm of praise.⁴⁷ As Robert Alter explains in his translation of the *Book of Psalms*, “despite many divergent interpretations of the Hebrew noun [*dumiyya*], the most likely meaning, in view of other biblical occurrences of the verbal root it reflects, is ‘silence.’”⁴⁸ The noted biblical scholar Israel Knohl, in his discussion of silent cultic practice during the Second Temple period, agrees that “Jewish tradition generally understands the word [*dumiyya*] as ‘silence.’”⁴⁹ In the *Midrash Tehillim* the many Scriptural precedents for reading *dumiyya* as silence are spelled out in detail and the meaning of the verse is explained. “By the words *For Thee silence is praise*,” it says, “David meant: Thou art silent, and I shall be silent, as is said *Be silent to the Lord, and wait patiently for Him* (Ps. 37:7).”⁵⁰ At Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 18a, *dumiyya* is again read as silence. In a homily from Rabbi Judah of Kefar Gibboraya, Psalms 65:2 proves the importance of not overly praising God’s name (*HaShem*): “the best medicine of all is silence.”⁵¹

The silence of Psalms 65:2 was linked in Jewish medieval exegesis with the ineffability of God and with the negative way. Schlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) the famed Jewish exegete of the eleventh century known more commonly by the acronym Rashi, in his commentary on Psalms, interprets *dumiyya* as silence in Psalms 65:2. Rashi explains the verse demonstrates that “silence is praise for [God] because there is no end to [God’s] praise, and whoever multiplies [God’s] praise only, so to speak, detracts [from God’s praise].”⁵² The ascetic philosopher and Jewish Sufi Bahya ibn Paquda (eleventh century) in

⁴⁷ Mitchell Dahood (ed. and trans.), *Psalms II, 51-100*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 109.

⁴⁸ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: a Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 221. Other readings that have been offered include “bequeathing” and “waiting.” See David ben Raphael Haim HaCohen, “Praise Waiteth for Thee (Psalm 65:2),” trans. Mordechai Sochen, *Dor le Dor*, 16 (1989), pp. 179-82.

⁴⁹ Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 149, n. 101, where he relies on the authority of Moses Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*.

⁵⁰ *The Midrash on the Psalms*, trans. William G. Braude, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 530.

⁵¹ *Megillah* 18a, trans. Isidore Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo’ed IV* (London: Sonico Press, 1961), p. 109.

⁵² Mayer I. Gruber (ed.), *Rashi’s Commentary on the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), p. 436.

his *Kitab al-Hidaya ila Fara'id al-Qulub* (“Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart”) integrated the verse into his Neoplatonic understanding of Jewish religion, arguing that “when we try to apprehend some of these matters [about God’s unity] with our minds and discriminative powers, we fall short of grasping even a small part of His praise and glory.”⁵³ In his influential *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides follows ibn Paquda and does the same, offering Psalms 65:2 as a proof-text for his austere negative theology. However, until Aquinas in the thirteenth century, the Hebrew version of this Psalm was rarely cited by Christian theologians.

The concept of “silent praise” was lost from the Christian tradition of biblical exegesis because Jerome first translated Psalms 64:2 in his *Psalterium Gallicanum* as *Te decet hymnus Deus in Sion* (“A hymn, O God, becometh thee in Sion”).⁵⁴ This translation, which was part of the Psalter translated by Jerome into Latin sometime c. 386-391 from the Greek *Hexapla* prepared by Origen, was the form of the Psalms widely used in Christian liturgy from the eighth century.⁵⁵ Commissioned by Pope Damasus, Jerome describes the *Gallicana* as an *emendatio*, which suggests that he in fact revised the text rather than produced a full translation.⁵⁶ With the *Gallicana* Psalter, Jerome sought to produce a translation of the Greek Septuagint text in accurate Latin without deviating wildly from the *Vetus Latina* version of the Psalter already in liturgical use during the fourth century.⁵⁷ By the Middle Ages the *Gallicana* had become the most widely read version of the Psalms in Latin Europe and readers made no connection in Psalms 64:2 to the idea of silence.

⁵³ Bayha ibn Paquda, *al-Hidaya*, trans. Menachem Mansoor, *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), p. 142.

⁵⁴ Scott Goins, “Jerome’s Psalters,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. by William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 185-98.

⁵⁵ Cf. Raphael Loewe, “The Medieval History of the Latin Vulgate,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. by Geoffrey W. H. Lampe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 102-54.

⁵⁶ Jerome, *Incipit praefatio Eusebii Hieronymi in libro Psalmorum*, ed. Weber, *Biblia Sacra*, p. 767, ln. 1.

⁵⁷ Goins, “Jerome’s Psalters,” pp. 189-90

Jerome translated the verse anew from the Hebrew c. 392 as *Tibi silens laus Deus in Sion* (“May there be silent praise to you, O God in Sion”) in his second translation of the Psalter known as the *Psalmorum iuxta Hebraicum*. This Psalter attests both to his competence in Hebrew language and his overall commitment to the *hebraica veritas* (Hebrew truth).⁵⁸ The *Hebraica* did not enjoy widespread popularity in Europe during the Middle Ages until the thirteenth century and rarely formed part of liturgical practice.⁵⁹ This was despite its preservation in the biblical *correctoria* of the Carolingian theologian Theodulph of Orleans (d. 760).⁶⁰ The *Hebraica* did become popular among Christian Hebraists like Herbert of Bosham (active between 1162 and 1189), who produced a commentary on this version.⁶¹ In the thirteenth century the Hebrew version of Psalms 64:2 became known to certain members of the Dominican Order and they sought to re-emphasise the importance of silence in wider contemplative practice. In many ways, it was the result of wider Dominican attempts to “monasticize” the laity by bringing the spiritual practice of the cloister beyond monastic borders.⁶²

In the first of four chapters, I examine the concept of silent practice as it developed in the early writing of the Order of Preachers. I demonstrate the way silence was understood in the context of Christian monasticism and asceticism and then explain how the understanding of silence adopted by the Order of Preachers builds upon a combination of monastic and canonical discourse on silent observance. By examining early Dominican legislation against the backdrop of Augustinian ideas about contemplation, I ground the German Dominican reading of negative theology in their lived spiritual experience.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 191.

⁵⁹ Weber, preface to *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, p. xxxv.

⁶⁰ Frans van Liere, “Biblical Exegesis Through the Twelfth Century,” in *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception, and Performance in Western Christianity*, ed. by Susan Boynton and Diane J. Rielly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 165.

⁶¹ Cf. Eva de Visscher, *Reading the Rabbis: Christian Hebraism in Herbert of Bosham* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Deborah L. Goodwin, “Take Hold the Robe of a Jew”: *Herbert of Bosham’s Christian Hebraism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

⁶² Cf. Ames, *Righteous Persecution*, pp. 137-81.

The following chapter considers the promotion of apophatic silence in the theology of Albert the Great. It examines the development of the Dominican *studium generale* in Cologne and the Neoplatonism championed by its earliest members. I provide a brief introduction to the ideas about silence characteristic of Dionysius the Areopagite and the way his apophatic theology was presented by Albert and his pupil Ulrich of Strasbourg in the context of German Dominican education. I argue that whilst neither was particularly interested in the Dionysian imperative to silence itself, they did popularize his apophaticism and introduce the important distinction that God's ineffability and unknowability refers to the inability to comprehend the divine essence. Likewise, both Albert and Ulrich also argued for the Dionysian ascent into the divine through intellectual union.

In the next chapter I turn to the other source for the German Dominican rhetoric of inexpressibility, Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. I provide a brief history of the *Guide's* translation into Latin and explain why its Aristotelian "categorical" negative theology was so popular in thirteenth century scholasticism. By taking as my focus the re-discovery of the "silent praise of God" in Psalms 64:2 in Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart I explore how both theologians argue for the necessity of silence in theology. They do so through an attentive reading of Maimonides. Yet Aquinas ultimately dismissed the austere way of negation of Maimonides in favour of the apophaticism of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, whilst Eckhart attempts to craft a "dialectic" theology of silence based upon his reading of both Maimonides and Aquinas.

In the final chapter, I turn to the idea of inner silence as it emerges in the vernacular theology of the Rhineland Dominican mystics. I outline how the German Dominican preachers in their vernacular sermons and writing bring the debate about silence out from the realms of scholastic commentary and disputation and into the

devotional and pious sphere of lay religious practice. The “silent praise of God” here emerges in the German sermons of Meister Eckhart as the master metaphor for a life of spiritual poverty or detachment. I conclude by examining how Eckhart’s disciples Henry Suso and Johannes Tauler and certain treatises in the vernacular produced by members of the laity provide their own particular version of Eckhart’s teaching, demonstrating that detachment and silence had always been an integral aspect of German Dominican practice. Eckhart and his followers, I demonstrate, gave the rhetoric of inexpressibility a prominent role in late medieval German spirituality.

Chapter One

Silent Observance in Dominican Legislation and Instruction

The Order of Preachers was committed above all to the communication of religious doctrine and the salvation of souls through preaching. This commitment, however, has led a number of scholars of Dominican spirituality, as explored in the Introduction, to underplay the role of silence in the spiritual formation of the friars. I argue that a current of respect for silence emerges frequently within the Dominican tradition and that as an Order established for the purpose of preaching the friars needed to reconcile the need to speak and teach with the need to keep silent. In particular, the Order recognized in its legislation and instructional literature that silence could be useful for the cultivation of speech and that contemplative study was necessary to form effective preachers. This respect for silence in the Dominican tradition would subsequently develop into a rhetoric of inexpressibility among a group of Dominican writers in the thirteenth century, particularly those associated with the German Dominican School.

This chapter explores how the Dominicans developed their approach to silence by drawing on the traditions of the Rule of Benedict and the Rule of Augustine. Their attitude was founded, I argue, in an Augustinian recognition of the paradox inherent in the need to name the ineffable divinity and to avoid speaking of him. The Order used the twin discourses of silence developed in the monastic and canonical traditions to craft their own approach to silence. This silence was ultimately tied to the attempt to recover the contemplative persona of Augustine, who was seen by the Dominicans as the best model for their preaching vocation.

Silence in Monastic and Canonical Communities

Silence had a long history in the Christian world. In the monastic context, silence was valued as an intrinsic virtue and the *summo silentio* (height of silence) observed in the monastery would become synonymous with monasticism itself. In the sixth chapter of his highly influential monastic Rule of the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia counsels that “because of the importance of silence, permission to speak, even in good, holy, and edifying words, should be given rarely to seasoned disciples... for it becomes a master to speak and teach and it befits a disciple to be silent and listen.”¹ This silence was observed by monks for many reasons.² The most important was the avoidance of committing sin, where silence was seen as a way to regulate the unruly and dangerous tongue.³ Silence was also a means to practice the virtues of humility and obedience, which formed the foundation of monastic religious life alongside poverty. Silence allowed the monk to maintain an open and receptive state, it allowed them to listen to their superiors and to the Word of God. In silence one prayed or meditated. It was an important part of the contemplative life and the cultivation of silence was seen as an intrinsic good practiced for its own sake. Despite this, silence was never the end of monastic observance; it was not the ultimate goal of the religious man or woman, but a means towards the ends of humility and contemplation.

Benedict lists silence as one of the principal rungs on the ladder of humility in the seventh chapter of his Rule. On this “ninth step of humility,” he writes, “a monk should hold his tongue and, keeping silent, not speak until asked to.”⁴ Other rungs upon the ladder are likewise concerned with controlling the tongue. On the tenth, the monk is cautioned

¹ *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Bruce L. Vernerde (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 42-3.

² Wathen, *The Meaning of Silence in the Rule of Saint Benedict*, p. 161ff.

³ Scott G. Bruce, “The Tongue is a Fire: The Discipline of Silence in Early Medieval Monasticism (400-1100),” in *The Hands of the Tongue: Essays on Deviant Speech*, ed. by Edwin D. Craun (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), pp. 3-32.

⁴ *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Vernerde, p. 53.

“not to be easy or ready in laughter,” and on the eleventh monks are instructed to speak “gently and without laughter, humbly, seriously, in few words and reasonable ones, [and] not noisily.”⁵ In the Rule of the Master, which was perhaps an influence on Benedict’s Rule, silence emerges as one of the key “spiritual instruments” that the monks were to employ in “the workshop of the monastery.”⁶ Like Benedict, the Master sees silence as tied to the necessary virtues of obedience and humility, as well as the principal means to avoid sin. He links the tongue to the eyes, writing that as “the flesh of our poor little body is a sort of lodging for the soul,” so are these organs windows and doors to that lodging.⁷ In order to make account on the day of judgement before God, the Master writes, these organs must be controlled so that “thought, speech and sight must be carefully kept under guard.”⁸

Scott G. Bruce posits that silence was important because of its value in the individual and communal ethical formation of monastic communities. He argues that “silence emerged as an important aspect of monastic conduct in the earliest days of Christian asceticism.”⁹ Yet Bruce is quick to assert that silence was not simply seen as the suppression of human speech. “Rather,” he notes, “it involved the regulation of the desire to utter words that were harmful to the disciplined development of the individual monk and the prayerful purpose of the entire *coenobium*.”¹⁰ As C. H. Lawrence explains, “the preservation of silence in which prayer and reflection could flourish was one of the primary aims of all strict monastic observance.”¹¹ The many monastic rules which were observed throughout Christendom all contained, to differing degrees, instruction on appropriate speech and condemnation of excessive loquacity.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Rule of the Master*, trans. Luke Eberle (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977), p. 118.

⁷ Ibid, p. 125.

⁸ Ibid, p. 126.

⁹ Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1989), p. 118.

As an Augustinian canon of Osma, Dominic chose to adopt the familiar Rule of Augustine for his fledgling Order of Preachers in 1216.¹² The Augustinian Rule found its genesis in a series of documents composed towards the end of the fourth century.¹³ It was adopted by the clerical communities of regular canons that lived lives of shared property and observance and who engaged in pastoral duties, particularly preaching.¹⁴ The Rule basically comprises three texts, each with variations according to the gender to which they are addressed; the *Ordo monasterii* (Regulations for a Monastery), the *Praeceptum* (Precepts), and the *Obiurgatio* (a Letter to Quarrelling Nuns).¹⁵ In drafting the Rule, the author (generally understood to be Augustine, although this attribution has been questioned) sought to provide guidelines for a semi-coenobitic community of religious directly modelled on the early lives of the apostles detailed in the Book of Acts.¹⁶ The Rule is founded on the description of the apostolic life from Acts: 32-5: “they had all things in common and distribution was made to each one according to each one's need.”¹⁷ The Dominican vocation should not be read as simply monastic, but, as tied to that of the canons regular. By adopting the Augustinian Rule, the Dominicans were just one of many Orders who developed its resources for understanding the role of contemplation within an active life, rooted firmly in apostolic imitation.¹⁸

The linking of the Augustinian Rule to a regular canonical lifestyle began in the second half of the eleventh century after its promotion by Ivo of Chartres for his community of regular canons at Saint-Quentin in Beauvais. Ivo promoted a version of the

¹² Cf. Anthony Lappin, “On the Family and Early Years of Dominic of Calaruega,” *Archivum fratrum praedicatorum* 67 (1997), pp. 5-26.

¹³ George Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Monks, Canons, and Laymen in Search of the Apostolic Life,” in *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, ed. and trans. by Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 202-238.

¹⁵ Lawless, introduction to *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule*, p. 69.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 65-72.

¹⁷ *Praeceptum*, 1:3, trans. Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule*, p. 81.

¹⁸ Cf. Anthony Lappin, “The Dominican Path Towards Mendicancy,” in *The Origin, Development, and Refinement of Medieval Religious Mendicancies*, ed. by Donald Prudlo (Leiden: Brill: 2011), pp. 31- 58.

Rule which contained the *Praeceptum* and the beginning of the *Ordo monasterii* that became known as the *Regula recepta*.¹⁹ However, it was generally up to the discretion of the particular Orders that chose to follow the Rule of Augustine which of the three texts that made up the Rule would ultimately form the basis for their observance. For instance, the Premonstratensian Order, founded by Norbert of Xanten (c.1080-1134) in 1120 at Prémontré, chose only to recognize the legitimacy of the *Ordo monasterii*, whilst the canons regular of the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris, founded in 1111, chose to include both the *Ordo monasterii* and the *Praeceptum* in their reception of the Rule.²⁰

Silence in the cloistered community was not one of the major concerns of the Rule of Augustine and is rarely mentioned. Only four instances occur. The first two are found in the *Ordo monasterii*, which relate directly to the regulation of the monastery. This text was often regarded as inauthentic by the twelfth century, and was frequently ignored.²¹ The first instance states that “no one is to do anything with a murmur, so as not to perish from a similar judgement as those who murmured.”²² The second warns that members of the community “should not engage in idle conversation” and “ought not to stand around spinning tales, except perhaps to talk to each other about something useful to the soul.” It is desired, therefore, that “they should keep silence while seated at work, unless circumstances connected with the task require one to speak.”²³

The other two instances occur in the *Praeceptum*, which formed the bulk of the Rule of Augustine and was generally accepted as authentic by most canonical communities. In

¹⁹ Cf. Luc Verheijen, *La Règle de Saint Augustin*, vol 2. (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1967), pp. 19-20, 119-20, 213.

²⁰ Jakob Mois, “Geist und Regel des hl. Augustinus in der Kanoniker-Reform des 11. – 12. Jahrhunderts,” *In unam congregati* 6 (1959), pp. 55-6; Theodore James Antry and Carol Neel, introduction to *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality*, ed. and trans. by Antry and Neel (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), pp. 6-7.

²¹ Cf. Mois, “Geist und Regel des hl. Augustinus in der Kanoniker-Reform des 11. – 12. Jahrhunderts,” pp. 52-9.

²² *Ordo Monasterii* 5, trans. Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule*, p. 75.

²³ *Ordo Monasterii* 9, trans. Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule*, p. 77.

the first, the primary concern is conduct during meals: “Listen to the customary reading from beginning to the end of the meal without commotion or arguments.”²⁴ The second cautions against excessive and inappropriate speech: “Whoever has offended another with insults or harmful words, or even a serious accusation, must remember to right the wrong he has done at the earliest opportunity.”²⁵ Importantly, unlike in the Rule of Benedict, neither of these precepts directly flag silence as necessary, instead emphasizing the need to abstain from useless or harmful language. The Rule of Augustine is more concerned with the regulation of speech than the explicit observance of silence. Furthermore, the *Praeceptum* in general gave very little advice on the practicalities of religious life as its primary concern was laying the groundwork for apostolic imitation. These details were primarily found only in the *Ordo monasterii*. As such, the absence in canonical legislation of strictures regarding silence is unsurprising. The various communities which adopted the Rule of Augustine needed to produce a variety of supplementary literature, such as further statutes and customaries, in order to detail the organization of monastic life. This is exactly what the Order of Preachers began to do as early as 1216.

In their writing the regular canons developed an understanding of the necessity for silent observance which differed from that of the monks. Examples emerge from both the Victorine and Premonstratensian canonical communities, as well as others. Because of their commitment to lives of preaching and pastoral care the canons regular often moved beyond their monastic boundaries and the cloistered silence of the monastic *coenobium* would have been insufficient for their vocation.²⁶ By and large, they viewed silence as a hindrance to their preaching ministry.²⁷ Yet for the canons, as Bruce notes, silence was

²⁴ *Praeceptum*, 3:2, trans. Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule*, p. 85.

²⁵ *Praeceptum*, 6:2, trans. Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule*, p. 99.

²⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, “The Spirituality of Regular Canons in the Twelfth Century,” in *Jesus as Mother*, pp. 22-58.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 43-6.

“articulated... as a necessary preparation for wise and helpful words.”²⁸ Instead of adhering to a monastic ideal of complete silence, like the Benedictine monks, the canons “exercised the power of discernment... by condemning evil words and giving voice to good and useful utterances.”²⁹

The relationship between speech and silence became an important topic in the literature of instruction produced by the canons regular. One example, the *De institutione novitiorum* (On the Formation of Novices) written around 1125 by the canon Hugh of St. Victor (d.1141), developed a “taxonomy of harmful speech as a tool for the recognition and evasion of idle words of every kind.”³⁰ This breakdown of language includes “hurtful words,” “shameful words,” and “useless words.”³¹ As Stephen Jaeger argues, the central concept of Hugh’s *De institutione* was the use of discipline in both the learning and formation of virtue.³² This discipline largely related to the control of exterior and bodily *mores* (manners), which included control of speech. For Hugh, such restrictions upon behavior were embedded, Boyd Coolman explains, in “the language of measure, of balance, of composure.”³³

For Stephen C. Ferruolo, the canons regular of St. Victor also “embodied an intellectual tradition” and “educational ideal with a distinctive program of learning and teaching,” that would greatly influence the nascent University of Paris.³⁴ The Victorines placed great importance on the cultivation of a silent mind rather than a silent voice, as

²⁸ Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism*, p. 156.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. On the *De Institutione* see Boyd Taylor Coolman, *The Theology of Hugh of St. Victor: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 199-204. Cf. Hugh of St. Victor, *De Institutione Novitiorum*, PL 176, ed. by Jacques-Paul Migne, 925- 952B.

³¹ Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism*, p. 156.

³² Stephen C. Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), pp. 254-68.

³³ Coolman, *The Theology of Hugh of St. Victor*, p. 202.

³⁴ Stephen C. Ferruolo, *The Origins of the University: the Schools of Paris and their Critics, 1100-1215* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 28.

they believed this brought about the proper conditions for the acquisition of knowledge. As Hugh of St. Victor wrote in his great pedagogical treatise the *Didascalicon*, “a humble mind, an enthusiasm for inquiry, a quiet life, silent scrutiny, poverty or frugality, a foreign land: for many people, these practices open up the hidden places of learning.”³⁵ This arose, primarily, from Hugh’s concern in such treatises as his *De oratione* (On Prayer) and *De meditatione* (On Meditation) to place contemplation into a developed rational schema for spiritual progress.³⁶

The Premonstratensian Philip of Harvengt (d. 1183), one of the earliest converts of Norbert of Xanten and abbot of the community of Bonne Espérance, also wrote on the subject of silence. In his *De silentio clericorum* (On Clerical Silence) Philip asks “to what extent can silence be kept— with whom, when and why, and when on the other hand it should be set aside, since in the scriptures silence is both commended many times and on many other occasions reprovved.”³⁷ In his answer Philip provides a list of the different types of silence practiced by the canons and concludes with a discussion on the wisdom of effective speech.³⁸ Whilst silence can be positive, Philip writes, like the silence which refrains from negative actions or unnecessary chatter, the canon may also fall into the trap of practicing negative silence such as silence which refrains from good deeds or is harmful to one’s neighbour (for instance, by refusing to teach or preach when one should). As Bernard Ardure notes, for Philip “the silence that refrains from something good may be a sign of good judgement and a matter of discretion, but failure to speak can become

³⁵ Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon* 3:12, trans. Franklin T. Harkins, in *Interpretation of Scripture: Theory*, ed. by Franklin T. Harkins and Frans van Liere, Victorine Texts in Translation 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), p. 127.

³⁶ Cf. Hugh of St. Victor, *De oratione*, trans. Hugh Feiss, *Writings on the Spiritual Life*, ed. by Christopher P. Evans, Victorine Texts in Translation 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 331-43; Hugh of St. Victor, *De meditatione*, trans. Frans van Liere, in *Ibid*, pp. 387-93.

³⁷ Philip of Harvengt, *De silentio clericorum*, PL 203, ed. by Migne, 943-945, cited in Francois Petit, *Spirituality of the Premonstratensians: The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, ed. by Carol Neel and trans. by Victor Szczurek (Trappist: Cistercian Studies, 2011), p. 178.

³⁸ Paul F. Gehl, “Philip of Harvengt on Silence,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 2 (1985), pp. 168-81.

culpable and a sign of weakness.”³⁹ Silence, Philip concludes, can be dangerous and harmful; it is not the intrinsic good in itself practiced by the monk. For the canons, silence was not practiced fully for ascetic value. It was a means towards avoiding useless speech and, in the words of Caroline Walker Bynum, “of assuring that whatever talk takes place between brothers will be useful.”⁴⁰

According to Paul Gehl, Philip’s reliance on silence must be “put firmly in the monastic context of common religious life aimed at personal salvation.”⁴¹ Thus, “we could mistake [*De silentio clericorum*] for a monastic treatise if we had not explicitly been told otherwise.”⁴² This is contrary to Bynum, who argues that although Philip’s treatise was composed for clerics generally, it was “nevertheless a discussion of the clerical and cloistered life which is addressed by a regular canon to members of his own order.”⁴³ Gehl disagrees, arguing that there are strong links between the canonical understanding of the importance of silence for the cultivation of good and useful words and the monastic belief in silence as a means to control the sinning tongue. Silence, even for the canon whose primary religious duty was to preach, was an essential part of cloistered life. As Gehl summarises:

Like so many twelfth to fourteenth century writers on secular clerical and lay spirituality, Philip takes his inspiration from monastic ideals, especially those of humility and obedience. These must be adapted to the situation of life

³⁹ Bernard Ardure, *The Order of Prémontré: History and Spirituality*, trans. Edward Hagman (De Pere, Wisconsin: Paira Publishing, 1995), p. 114.

⁴⁰ Bynum, “The Spirituality of Regular Canons in the Twelfth Century,” p. 46.

⁴¹ Gehl, “Philip of Harveng on Silence,” p. 175.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁴³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Docere Verbo et Exemplo: an Aspect of Twelfth-Century Spirituality* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), p. 13.

outside the cloister, but rarely is the secular life allowed to suggest its own, independently arrived at, models of moral behavior.⁴⁴

Thus, the practice of silence was understood in different ways by the monastic and canonical communities. For the coenobitic monks, silence was a virtue practiced for its own sake, whereas the canons regular viewed silence as preparatory for the speaking and preaching that was their primary religious vocation. Yet during the eleventh and twelfth centuries both discourses on silence came into dialogue. The canons in particular, as demonstrated by Philip of Harvengt, developed an understanding of canonical silence rooted in the construction of silent practice begun in monastic legislation. As the following section indicates, this dialogue was particularly fruitful for the Order of Preachers who, like the monks, lived in cloistered communities, and, like the canons, had pastoral expectations.

Silence in Dominican Legislation

The earliest Customs of the Dominican Order, written in 1216, were adapted from the Rule of Prémontré, which Pierre Mandonnet has called “the last great reform of the canons regular.”⁴⁵ Because of this, the Dominican discussion of the role of silence in the religious life continues the negotiation between the clerical and monastic approach to silence began by Philip of Harvengt. In crafting the Customary for their Order, Dominic and his fellows sought to legislate the religious observance of the Preachers and the many ascetic practices of conventual life which the friars were to share with the monks and the canons regular. The legislation of the Order’s government and organization, including its commitment to preaching and study, would form the basis of the later Dominican Constitutions of 1220. Yet, as William A. Hinnebusch points out, preaching and study were ever at the fore-front

⁴⁴ Gehl, “Philip of Harvengt on Silence,” p. 178.

⁴⁵ Pierre Mandonnet, *St. Dominic and his Works*, trans. Mary Benedicta Larkin (St. Louis: Herder, 1944) p. 36.

of Dominic's mind. This is evident through "what he chose, deleted and added when he borrowed from the Customs of Prémontré."⁴⁶

It is a mistake, therefore, to understand the early Dominican Customary simply as a pastiche of quotations and adaptations of the Premonstratensian Rule. As Mandonnet notes, "even in the taking verbatim various elements from the texts of the Rule of Prémontré, the Preachers supplemented the articles by notations corresponding to their own end."⁴⁷ This is particularly evident in the chapter on silence. In the Rule of Prémontré silence was only discussed in the list of faults and their penalties, where the habitual flouting of the practice of silence was listed as one of the grave faults.⁴⁸ By developing a new chapter in their Customs devoted entirely to the practice of conventual silence, the Dominicans gave silence a prominence in their legislation which was not found in the Premonstratensian Rule.⁴⁹

The sixteenth chapter of the Dominican Constitutions begins by laying out the areas where silence must be observed by the brethren. Silence was to be held "in the cloister, in the dormitory, in the refectory, and chapel of the brethren."⁵⁰ However, the silence of the Dominican cloister was not total. If one of the friars needed to speak in these places, then he might do so, provided that what he wished to convey was "said quietly and in incomplete sentences."⁵¹ In many other parts of the convent, the Dominicans were free to speak. Yet silence was to be strictly observed at night.⁵² During the evening meal, the brethren had to eat in silence, including the prior of the community. Only he who was

⁴⁶ William A. Hinnebusch, *The History of the Dominican Order: Origins and Growth to 1500*, vol. 1 (New York: Alba House, 1965) p. 46.

⁴⁷ Mandonnet, *St. Dominic and his Works*, p. 36.

⁴⁸ Hinnebusch, *The History of the Dominican Order*, vol. 1, p. 46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 360-3.

⁵⁰ Francis C. Lehner (ed. and trans.), *Saint Dominic: Biographical Documents* (Washington D. C.: Thomist Press, 1964), p. 222.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

given the nightly task of reading to the brethren at dinner had permission to speak.⁵³ As in the Rule of Prémontré, a series of prescribed punishments were laid down for those who broke the silence. The first and second times a friar broke the silence, he was required to recite the *Miserere Mei* and the *Pater Noster*. For the third and fourth time, the friar received the discipline. Finally, should the friar break the silence a fifth, sixth or seventh time, “[he] shall fast for one day on bread and water, sitting with the community; and this at the noon meal and not at the evening meal.”⁵⁴ With the seventh breaking of the silence, the cycle of punishment was to begin anew.

Throughout the thirteenth century the Order’s superiors and its General Chapters repeatedly called for a stricter observance of the practice of silence among its members. This indicates both the importance silence was seen to play in the formation of the spiritual life of the Dominicans and the likely reality that silence was loosely practiced in Dominican convents.⁵⁵ For instance, the General Chapter of 1254 instituted the appointment of *circatores* in the Dominican priories as a means to police silent observance.⁵⁶ *Circatores* were also instituted for the female communities under Dominican care by the General Chapter of 1257.⁵⁷ Likewise, although the General Chapter of 1240 had eased the practice of silent observance during meals whilst travelling by sea, the General Chapter of 1271 chose to reinstitute it.⁵⁸ The Provincial Chapter of Pistoia of 1298 ordered that any friar who chose to speak idly be punished with manual labour and the removal of aids to study, such as books. In extreme cases, they were even to be removed from their cells.⁵⁹

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hinnebusch, *The History of the Dominican Order*, vol. 1, p. 361.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 362.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 362.

As Hinnebusch notes, Dominic in creating a new religious order, was seen by his contemporaries as combining “traditional and contemporary elements into a new unity.”⁶⁰ He argues that by instituting aspects of monastic observance into the Customs, Dominic “not only fulfilled their basic function of exercising the friars in the virtues,” but also provided an ideal environment for the study which would prepare the preachers for their active apostolate.⁶¹ Primarily for this reason the legislation and customs of the Order of Preachers came to combine aspects of monastic and canonical observance, including the practice of silence. The friars themselves and their supporters recognized the innovative way in which Dominic brought together the practices of the monks and canons.

In the highly popular pastoral handbook, the *Summa de vitiis* (Summa on the Vices) written by the Dominican William Peraldus (c.1190-1271) sometime before 1250, the final section of the chapter on the sins of the tongue (*De peccato linguae*) contains a lengthy section in praise of monastic practices of silence.⁶² Citing Jerome, William writes “let prescribed silence correct the cursing tongue,” and argues that in order to fend off the sins of speech, one should “hand the keys of the mouth” over to a superior or prelate. Thomas of Cantimpré in his *Defense of the Mendicants*, written around 1235 at the height of the bitter controversy between the mendicant and secular masters at the University of Paris, writes that the friars “study with the clerics, they devote themselves to the Divine Office with the canons, and, in common with the monks and other religious, they practice community life, with its accusations and beatings and fasting, and, in part, they also practice silence.”⁶³ Finally, the Dominican historian Stephen of Salagnac (c. 1210-1291), in his *History of Dominic and the Order*, highlights the manner in which Dominic was able

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 121.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 126.

⁶² William Peraldus, *Summa de virtutibus et vitiis* (Lyon, 1668), 418b-420. Available online through the William Peraldus Project at <http://www.unc.edu/~swenzel/peraldus.html> [accessed November 1st, 2013].

⁶³ Thomas of Cantimpré, “Defence of the Mendicants,” trans. Simon Tugwell, *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 133.

to bring the monastic and canonical traditions together through Dominican observance. He writes, with reference to 2 Kings 2:22 “Bring me a vessel...,” that the vessels Benedict (the monastic tradition) and Augustine (the canonical tradition):

brought [Dominic] when they filled him for the office of preaching by training him in the discipline of religious life. For as he was a canon by profession, so too was he a monk by the austerity of his life, in fasts, abstinence, apparel, bedding, the discipline of silence and daily chapter, and the other observances contained in the Rule of the blessed Benedict.⁶⁴

The silence of the Dominican cloister outlined in the legislation of the Order of Preachers was thus the effective combining of both the monastic and canonical attitudes towards silence. The Customs and Constitutions of the Order contained rules about when and where silence was to be observed, developed from the Rule of Prémontré and directly related to the Dominican need to preach. In the supplementary literature of the Order, as well as in the Acts of the General Chapter, there was a continued interest in and commitment to this silence. Finally, the Dominicans and their contemporaries themselves recognized the conscious adoption of monastic and canonical discourses of silence. This, ultimately, would continue in the literature of spiritual instruction composed by the Order in its early years, which placed particular emphasis on the Augustinian *vita contemplativa* and the paradox of preaching a God that cannot be described.

Dominican Spirituality: Preaching and the *vita contemplativa*

Silence was for the Order of Preachers an aspect of the life of contemplation, explained in the Dominican literature of spiritual instruction as a commitment to study and preaching. The combination of monastic and canonical approaches to silence in Dominican legislation

⁶⁴ Stephan of Salagnac and Bernard Gui, *De quatuor in quibus Deus Praedicatorum ordinem insignivit*, trans. Hinnebusch, *The History of the Dominican Order*, vol. 1, p. 121.

fitted into this spiritual framework. Michèle Mulchahey remarks in her examination of the development of Dominican education that by doing so the friars were to be “orthodox and theologically-informed evangelists.”⁶⁵ Dominic himself, she explains, believed that the Order’s mission of the salvation of souls through preaching could best be achieved by the formation of a “learned” preaching ministry.⁶⁶ He did so by promoting the contemplative dimensions of the Rule of Augustine. In similar vein, the fifth Master General of the Order, Humbert of Romans (c.1190s-1277), recognized in his writing on the Dominican vocation during the 1270s that “Augustine, being wonderfully learned himself, serves as a good example to the disciples of his Rule who would be preachers.”⁶⁷ The spiritual literature of instruction produced by the Order thus sought to recover the authentic contemplative tradition represented by the person of Augustine.

Part of this commitment to Augustinian contemplation was the keeping of silence and the recognition of when it was better to speak instead. This was ultimately a consequence of the adoption of aspects of both the monastic and canonical discourses on silence. That this was so is demonstrated by the *exempla* from the *Vitae fratrum* (Lives of the Brethren), a hagiographical collection about the early members of the Order composed between 1250 and 1260 by Gerald de Frachet at the request of the Dominican General Chapter in 1256.⁶⁸ One tale, a part of the *Legenda* of the Order’s founder, involves an account of the devil attempting to fool Dominic into speaking during the nightly prescribed silence.⁶⁹ After the friars had retired to their dormitories for sleep, Gerald writes, Dominic encountered the devil in the guise of one of the brethren pretending to pray before an altar. Gerald reports that “the saint was surprised that any brother should have stayed behind

⁶⁵ Michèle Mulchahey, “*First the Bow is Bent in Study*”: *Dominican Education Before 1350* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998), p. 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 12.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 14.

⁶⁸ Bede Jarrett (trans.), *Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers* (London: Blackfriars, 1995) and select excerpts in Tugwell, *Early Dominicans*.

⁶⁹ *Vitae fratrum* II: XV, trans. Tugwell, *Early Dominicans*, p. 91.

after the bell had gone, and signalled him to go to bed.”⁷⁰ The devil did so and the next day the founder of the Order reminded the friars that they should not tarry in the church after Matins. But Dominic caught the devil pretending to pray after the other members of the community had retired twice more. On the third night:

the saint came up to [the devil] and rebuked him. “What disobedience is this?”, he said; “I have already told you repeatedly that no one is to stay behind, and this is the third time I have found you here.” The devil laughed. “Now I have made you break the silence!” he cackled. The saint, perceiving his cunning, retorted, nothing abashed, “wretch, don’t let that make you too happy. It won’t do you any good. I am above silence and can speak whenever I see fit.” The devil retired in confusion.⁷¹

The conclusion to this story seems to intimate that the observance of silence mattered little for the formation of the friars. After all, Dominic could break the silence and speak at his own leisure. But other *exempla* drawn from the *Vitae fratrum* indicate otherwise and this particular tale of Dominic must be read in the context of these hagiographical examples. The earliest members of the community were offered by Gerald as sources of spiritual emulation. In this sense, the *exempla* set out the orthopractical models of the Dominican monastic observance of silence to be practiced by the brethren. At the conclusion of the *Vitae fratrum*, this purpose is spelled out plainly. “Ponder over these things and keep them ever in your minds and hearts,” it says, “for they have been written for our instruction, that we may also learn to do the same deeds that our fathers accomplished.”⁷² The *Vitae fratrum* was thus read alongside the Customary of the Order during meals and became one of the many books recommended to the friars as

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *Vitae fratrum* VI: VI, trans. Jarrett, *Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers*, p. 260.

instructional reading for their spiritual formation, including Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*, John Cassian's *Instituta* and *Collationes*, and most importantly of all, Augustine's *Confessiones*.⁷³

Silence was one of the important lessons taught by the *exempla* of the *Vitae fratrum*. Gerald writes how in the earliest days of the Order the friars “were all wonderfully rigid in keeping the silence.”⁷⁴ For example, Brother Giles of Spain, who, Gerald relates, “[w]hen idle conversation was started... would keep silent awhile, and then very quietly say a few words about God and holy things.”⁷⁵ By doing so, writes Gerald, Giles was able to bring “the offender back to some more becoming topic, and idle talk seldom tarried in his company, nor could it be shown that he had spoken a single idle word in a whole twelvemonth.”⁷⁶ Another example relates how an entire community of brethren maintained the silence of the cloister one evening when a friar was possessed by a demon and propelled screaming throughout the priory. Gerald recounts that “wonderful indeed was their fidelity to the silence, which after compline is always rigidly enforced, for during all that terrible commotion not a single word was spoken.”⁷⁷

The tale of Giles of Spain becomes a more remarkable *exemplum* for the importance of silent observance when it is revealed later in the *Vitae fratrum* that he had, in fact, great difficulty cultivating his silence. Gerald writes that before entering the Order, Giles “had been of a merry and lively disposition,” yet after he converted to the religious life “he tried to keep the silence, and refrain from passing remarks in jest.”⁷⁸ Unfortunately for Giles he found that “it was next to impossible for him to hold in his buoyant spirits” and “if he managed to keep quiet for any length of time, his throat and tongue became quite

⁷³ Mulchahey, “*First the Bow is Bent in Study*,” pp. 109-10.

⁷⁴ *Vitae fratrum* V: I, trans. Jarrett, *Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers*, pp. 134-5.

⁷⁵ *Vitae fratrum* V: III, trans. Jarrett, *Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers*, p. 138.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Vitae fratrum* V: VI, trans. Jarrett, *Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers*, p. 147.

⁷⁸ *Vitae fratrum* V: XVI, trans. Jarrett, *Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers*, pp. 171-2.

parched.”⁷⁹ Suspecting that the influence of the devil led to his outbursts of merriment, Gerald reports that Giles “firmly made up his mind to keep silence and stay in his cell, even though he were to be brought to death’s door in consequence.”⁸⁰ Because of this vow God rewarded Giles. “God took away his lightness of disposition to such an extent that silence became agreeable to him,” Gerald reports, “and he began to prefer his cell.” In fact, “he even surpassed the rest [of the brethren] in this respect.”⁸¹ Giles of Spain from that moment on was never “again known to have uttered one idle word to the end of his days, but kept heroic silence, except when cheering the downcast, or talking of heavenly things.”⁸² Thus, even if Dominic himself was “above silence,” other examples from the *Vitae fratrum* reveal the importance of knowing when and how to be silent. The very observance of silence which Giles mastered qualified him to impart good spiritual instruction and turn others away from vagrant speech.

The way that silence was to be practiced by the Dominican friars is also explained in the *Liber de eruditione praedicatorum* (Treatise on the Formation of Preachers) composed by Humbert of Romans sometime between 1263 and 1277.⁸³ It was composed as a polemical text, Tugwell explains, meant to reassure the Dominicans that their vocation as preachers could offer “a possible means of salvation for the preacher himself.”⁸⁴ But the treatise itself did not seem to be wildly popular and saw limited circulation amongst the convents of the Order.⁸⁵ This was because the *De eruditione* conformed to a number of different genres without really being a distinct part of any and the friars possibly did not know what to make of it. Despite this, Edward Tracy Brett argues that the *De eruditione*

⁷⁹ *Vitae fratrum* V: XVI, trans. Jarrett, *Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers*, p. 172.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Humbert of Romans, “Treatise on the Formation of Preachers,” trans. Tugwell, *Early Dominicans*, 179-355.

⁸⁴ Tugwell, *Early Dominicans*, p. 182.

⁸⁵ Cf. David d’Avray, *The Preaching of the Friars: Sermons defused from Paris before 1300* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 76.

“offers a lively picture of the mendicant preacher at work.”⁸⁶ For Tugwell, Humbert’s guide for the preacher “best deserves the title of Dominican spiritual classic.”⁸⁷

The first book of Humbert’s *De eruditione* deals explicitly with the qualities and virtues which should be possessed by the good preacher. Unsurprisingly, two of the principal skills of the preacher are “eloquence” and having “an abundance of things to say.”⁸⁸ Yet Humbert argues that before speaking the effective preacher must first learn how to be silent. In this way he presents an attitude towards silence in keeping with the Dominicans’ canonical roots. In fact, much of the treatise is structured around examples of inappropriate speech. Humbert, in a list of the factors which lead to good preaching, writes:

another contributory factor is knowing how to be silent. “I went to the exiles and sat where they were sitting, and I remained there for seven days, grieving in their midst; after seven days had passed, the word of the Lord came to me” (*Ezek. 3: 15-16*). Gregory comments, “He had been sent to preach, and yet he kept silence and grieved for seven days, because it is the man who has learned how to be silent who truly knows how to speak. The discipline of silence is a kind of cultivation of speech.”⁸⁹

This is so, he writes, because “[p]reaching is performed by means of the tongue, and the tongue goes astray extremely easily, unless it is directed by the power of God.”⁹⁰ Humbert’s reasons for the preacher’s need to cultivate silence are very similar to those encountered in the writing of the monks. For just as the likelihood of making an error

⁸⁶ Edward Tracy Brett, *Humbert of Romans: His Life and Views of Thirteenth-Century Society* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), p. 166.

⁸⁷ Tugwell, *Early Dominicans*, p. 24.

⁸⁸ Humbert of Romans, “Treatise on the Formation of Preachers,” trans. Tugwell, *Early Dominicans*, p. 249.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

increases when one writes with one's left hand rather than one's right, Humbert believes that "in the same way, it is difficult to do the job of preaching well, because it is done by means of the tongue, which is of all our limbs the most prone to error."⁹¹ Humbert, like Dominic before him, thus brings monastic and canonical approaches to silence together.

Yet Humbert does not advocate in the *De eruditione* a total and complete silence. He argues "that there is a right time for preaching, and this should be observed. There is, as it says in Ecclesiastes 3:7, 'a time for keeping silent and a time for speaking.'"⁹² Excessive observance of silence, whilst appropriate for the monk who lives in contemplative seclusion, would be destructive for the preacher. "It is a serious fault for a prelate not to preach," he writes.⁹³ Humbert argues that those responsible for the cure of souls "whose sound is not heard when he goes in and out dies, because he calls forth upon himself the anger of the unseen Judge, if he goes without the sound of preaching."⁹⁴ Humbert introduces three kinds of preachers. The first are "so silent, when they are not preaching, that they hardly ever say anything edifying in private conversation with anybody."⁹⁵ This type of behavior is condemned by Humbert. The second type of behaviour, however, is worse. These preachers "bubble over with words, as if they were not religious at all, not minding what they say."⁹⁶ It is only the final type of behavior which Humbert considers appropriate for the preacher. "There are some who observe the mean," he writes, "not being unduly silent, but equally not being careless in what they say, overflowing with edifying words. And this is excellent."⁹⁷

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, pp. 195-6.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 240.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 295.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Such silent practice was ultimately modelled on the spiritual life of Augustine, the author of the Rule adopted by the Order of Preachers. A current of silence runs throughout Augustine's writing on the spiritual life which also came to influence Dominican attitudes towards contemplation. For instance, Augustine acknowledges in his *De doctrina christiana* (On Christian Doctrine) that "although nothing can be spoken in a way worthy of God, he has sanctioned the homage of the human voice, and chosen that we should derive pleasure from our words in praise of him."⁹⁸ As Marcia Colish and others have noted, there is no single or systematic treatment of language or silence in the epistemological system developed by Augustine.⁹⁹ Despite this, silence played a role in Augustine's theory of the sign; Neoplatonic notion of silence generating and surrounding language in his *Confessiones*; and the discussion in the *De trinitate* about the mystical inner voice of the soul.¹⁰⁰ It is with these Augustinian teachings that Latin Christianity primarily grappled with the inability to name that which is transcendent, and which served as a platform for the various attempts to develop an apophatic approach to God. In particular, Gehl argues, Augustine's various teachings about silence "would find powerful expression in twelfth-century mystical literature," when "helped along by the powerful rhetoric of Pseudo-Dionysius's *via negativa*."¹⁰¹ Like other religious communities, Augustine provided the point of departure for Dominican discussion of divine ineffability.

One of the pertinent elements of Augustine's "rhetoric of silence," as Joseph A. Mazzeo has called it, was the project of representing the heart that lay behind the linguistic

⁹⁸ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* I: 14, trans. R.P. H. Green, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. by R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp.18-19.

⁹⁹ Marcia L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in Medieval Theory of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 49-50 and Marcia L. Colish, "St. Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence Revisited," *Augustinian Studies* 9 (1978), pp. 15- 24.

¹⁰⁰ Gehl, "Competens Silentium," pp. 129-134.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.134.

purpose of texts, which is “below the level of sound... to the level of truth.”¹⁰² This was the key aspect of Augustine’s theory of the sign, the idea that all creation (and not just the words we use in everyday language and which are encountered in Scripture) points towards the God who created all.¹⁰³ This ultimate truth, according to Mazzeo, manifested as interior silence for Augustine and he saw its verbal expression as running the risk of collapsing into paradox and obscurity. Although Mazzeo is incorrect to see in this schema a reliance on a Platonic theory of silence, which, as Colish notes, in all likelihood never existed, his basic assumptions about Augustine’s relationship to the inexpressible are sound.¹⁰⁴ Especially important is Mazzeo’s recognition that Augustine’s reflections on silence in the context of spiritual and contemplative experience, such as his meditative and prayerful approach to God and the interior life, provided the subsequent framework for a *vita contemplativa* mediated by Augustine’s own rhetorical training and adherence to the apostolic tradition of Paul and the early communities of Jerusalem.

For the Dominican Order who inherited these themes, Augustine’s connecting of the paradox of silence and praise to the context of preaching and teaching were highly important.¹⁰⁵ At the beginning of his *Confessiones*, the difficult task of understanding and explaining God is linked by Augustine to the necessary act of preaching. In order to preach, Augustine concludes that he will seek out God: “I will call upon thee, believing in thee: for thou hast been declared onto us.”¹⁰⁶ The paradox, as Augustine expresses it here, is which precedes the other; knowing God or calling upon God. This, ultimately, is the full

¹⁰² Joseph A. Mazzeo, “St. Augustine’s Rhetoric of Silence,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23 (1962), p. 186.

¹⁰³ Cf. Christopher Kerwin, “Augustine’s Philosophy of Language,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 186-204.

¹⁰⁴ Mazzeo, “St. Augustine’s Rhetoric of Silence,” p. 176-7; Colish, “St. Augustine’s Rhetoric of Silence Revisited” points to the more likely influence of Stoic and Neoplatonic philosophers, including Plotinus.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Wendlinger, *Speaking of God in Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart*, pp. 1-8.

¹⁰⁶ *Confessiones* I:1, trans. William Watts, in *Confessions*, ed. and trans. by William Watts, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 3.

expression of Augustine's notion of "faith seeking understanding," which would become from the earliest days of the Dominican Order one of the guiding principles of their preaching.¹⁰⁷ One novice book popular amongst Dominican friars, the *De instructione puerorum* of William of Tournai quotes Augustine directly by explaining that "faith [is] the beginning of all knowledge and the good root of the soul."¹⁰⁸ In order to gain this faith, the student must study doctrine and reflect upon it in meditative contemplation, as recommended in the legislation of the Order and in Humbert's *De eruditione*.

Augustine also provided an example of how contemplative silence could manifest as direct experience of the ineffable. This is apparent in Augustine's reflection on his troubled heart in the introduction to his *Confessiones*, as well as in his famous ecstasy at Ostia. Augustine, speaking to God at the beginning of the *Confessiones*, explains that God "hast created us for [himself], and our heart cannot be quieted till it may find repose in [him]."¹⁰⁹ As later Dominicans themselves recognized, this silent repose in contemplation ultimately brought about rapturous praise of God. In the words of Augustine in the tenth Book of the *Confessiones*, his confession to God "in thy sight is made unto thee silently: and yet not silently; for in respect of noise it is silent, but yet it cries aloud in respect of my affection."¹¹⁰ God speaks the truth into the silent and prepared soul and the voice must express it inwardly in words of joy. In this way contemplative silence led to preaching. "Be not foolish, my soul," Augustine admonishes himself, "and make not the ear of your heart deaf with the turmoil of your folly. Hear the Word itself; there is the place of imperturbable rest."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Mulchahey, "First the Bow is Bent in Study", p. 90.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ *Confessiones* I: 1, trans. Watts, *Confessions*, vol. 1, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ *Confessiones* X: 2, trans. Watts, *Confessions*, vol. 2, p. 77.

¹¹¹ *Confessiones* IV: 11, trans. Watts, *Confessions*, vol. 1, p. 177.

The height of silence for Augustine is expressed in his recounting of the mystical vision at Ostia he shared with his mother Monica. As numerous scholars have recognized, the ecstatic moment that Augustine describes in Book 9 of the *Confessiones* is deeply impregnated with the language of the Neoplatonists without always agreeing with their formulation of the soul's relationship to the supreme One.¹¹² Martha Nussbaum has described Augustine as “a disciple as well as critic of the Platonist ascent.”¹¹³ In conference with Monica, Augustine recalls how they both sought from God, “in what manner the eternal life of the saints was to be.”¹¹⁴ As their discussion progressed, each began through contemplation to break away from their bodily existence and approach the ineffable. At that moment, Augustine writes, he and Monica reached beyond “the highest pleasure of the carnal senses” and “by inward musing and discoursing upon [God]” excelled beyond their own souls.¹¹⁵ This, Augustine explains in a paraphrase of Plotinus’ *Enneads*, only occurs “if to any man the tumults of the flesh be silenced, if fancies of the earth, and waters, and air be silenced also.”¹¹⁶ Augustine, by reflecting on his ecstasy, concludes:

if the very soul be silent to herself, and by not thinking upon self surmount self: if all dreams and imaginary revelations be silenced, every tongue and every sign, if whatsoever is transient be silent to any one... we may hear [God's] own word; not pronounced by any tongue of flesh, nor by the voice of the angels... this one exaltation should ravish us, and swallow us up, and so wrap their beholder among these more inward joys... his life might be for ever

¹¹² Cf. Thomas Williams, “Augustine vs Plotinus: The Uniqueness of the Vision at Ostia,” in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. by John Inglis (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), pp. 143-151.

¹¹³ Martha Nussbaum, “Augustine and Dante on the Ascent of Love,” in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. by Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 63.

¹¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessiones* IX: 10, trans. Watts, *Confessions*, vol. 2, p. 47.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51. Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.1.2, trans. Stephen MacKenna in *The Enneads*, ed. by John Dillon (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 348-9.

like to this very moment of understanding which we [ie., Augustine and the reader] now sigh after.¹¹⁷

The ecstatic and unitive experience of the divine for Augustine is thus experienced in the silent soul. This is the ultimate height of the *vita contemplativa* and would become an important model for the writing of the German Dominican School, particularly Meister Eckhart.

The Dominican Order recognized the importance of silence in the life of contemplative study. Literature such as the *Vitae fratrum* offered the friars examples of exemplary silence to emulate, whilst Humbert of Romans outlined in his *Liber de eruditione praedicatorum* how silence and contemplation could be beneficial for a preacher's vocation. Ultimately, however, it was Augustine himself who offered the contemplative model desired by the Order. The Augustinian reflections on the need to open oneself up to the Word of God through silent contemplation became in Dominican spiritual instruction a necessary component of their evangelizing ministry. Augustine's recognition of the apophatic paradox inherent in the quest to name the ineffable God opened the path for the Dominicans to consider the silent praise of God. In the next chapter, I explore how this rhetoric of inexpressibility first began to develop in the scholastic engagement of Albert the Great with the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, the principle Christian source for mystical and negative theology.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Chapter Two

Reading Dionysius: Apophatic Silence in Albert the Great

The Dominicans were able to transform traditional ascetic practices of silence through an adaption of the monastic and canonical understandings of a life of spiritual interiority based in contemplation. The “silent praise of God” and the subsequent development of a rhetoric of inexpressibility must be considered in this context. In this chapter, I turn to the developments in theology and philosophy which instigated and informed the turn towards the apophatic, with particular attention to Dominican writing from and influenced by the *studium generale* of Cologne during the thirteenth century. Silence for these Dominicans was not only a moral and ascetic virtue, but also the proper response to divine transcendence. This was largely the result of the German Dominicans’ engagement with and promotion of two theological authorities on the naming of God; the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and the *Guide of the Perplexed* of Moses Maimonides. The influence of Dionysius and Maimonides on Dominican theology and practice was coterminous and figures like Albert, Aquinas and Eckhart recognized their compatibility (as well as their important differences) when they came to craft their own understanding of silence and negation.

This chapter considers Albert’s engagement with Dionysius and how it shaped the Neoplatonic attitude of the Dominican theologians of Germany. I argue that Albert’s decision to lecture in Cologne upon the entirety of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* significantly informed subsequent discussion about silence in German Dominican thought. I do so by outlining the important role Albert played in the establishment of Dominican education and the specific Dionysian ideas he promoted in his lectures. Albert argued that the silence of the Dionysian ascent refers to the unknowability of God’s essence; part of his concept of intellectual union with the divine. These ideas found further expression in the *De*

summo bono of Albert's student Ulrich of Strasbourg, who demonstrated that Albert's understanding of silence formulated in a philosophical sense had an important spiritual dimension.

Albert the Great: Neoplatonism, Dionysius and the German Dominican School

One consequence of the scholarly attention given to Thomas Aquinas in the intellectual history of the thirteenth century is the overshadowing of Albert the Great's reputation. In his own day Albert's prestige was as great as that of his famous student and disciple. James A. Weisheipl notes that Albert's fame "was higher than that of any other scholastic of the thirteenth century," he being the only person in the medieval period to be named "the Great" whilst still alive.¹ As is so often the case with intellectual figures of the Middle Ages, however, there is very little about Albert's life which can be known with historical certainty.² Although there is a brief biographical account of Albert's early life in the *Vitae fratrum*, the vast majority of sources which provide the details for Albert date from the mid-fourteenth century to the late fifteenth century.³

Albert was most likely born in Lauingen between the years 1193 and 1207 and died at the Dominican convent in Cologne in 1280. Although there are no details about Albert's parents, it is generally understood that he was born to a knightly family associated with the castle of Bollstadt.⁴ In 1223, whilst studying the arts at the University of Padua, Albert met the Dominican Jordan of Saxony, who had become Master General of the Order after Dominic's death in 1221 and who was in the city to recruit promising young students to

¹ James A. Weisheipl, "Albertus Magnus," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 1, ed. by Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Scribner, 1982-89), p. 129.

² Recent biographies include Irven M. Resnick, "Albert the Great: Biographical Introduction," in *A Companion to Albert the Great: Theology, Philosophy, and the Sciences*, ed. by Irven M. Resnick (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 1- 11; Simon Tugwell, "The Life and Works of Albert," in *Albert & Thomas: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. by Simon Tugwell (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 3-39; James A. Weisheipl, "The Life and Works of St. Albert the Great," in *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays 1980*, ed. by James A. Weisheipl (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), pp. 13-51.

³ Resnick, "Albert the Great," p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

the Friars Preachers. It was at this time that Albert probably took the Dominican habit.⁵ Tugwell notes, however, a conflicting medieval tradition suggesting that Albert obtained the habit in Cologne.⁶ Regardless of where he joined the Order, Albert was certainly sent to Cologne by the Dominicans in order to study theology. After completing this course of studies, Albert became a *lector* and held teaching positions at Freiburg, Regensburg and Strasbourg during the early 1240s.⁷

Albert incepted as a regent master of theology in Paris in c. 1245, filling the vacant chair of the recently deceased Gueric of Saint-Quentin, who was likely Albert's teacher at the school at St. Jacques. The first German to achieve this distinction in the Order, Albert would hold this chair until 1248.⁸ During this period Albert would have likely encountered the sources of his Neoplatonic theology and it was certainly as regent master that Albert began to lecture on the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. In 1245 Thomas Aquinas arrived in Paris, where he would first become acquainted with his renowned teacher. He almost certainly attended Albert's lectures on Dionysius during this time, copying them down in his own hand.⁹ After Paris, Albert was ordered back to Cologne by the Order to help establish a new house of study in 1248 at the convent *Heilig Kreuz*.¹⁰ Here Albert revealed himself not only as a competent theologian and philosopher, but also as a pivotal figure in the development of Dominican education.

In the absence of any real university in medieval Germany until the establishment of the University of Prague in 1348, the *studium* of Cologne must be viewed as the

⁵ Weisheipl, "The Life and Works of St. Albert the Great," p. 19.

⁶ Tugwell, "The Life and Works of Albert," p. 4.

⁷ Resnick, "Albert the Great," p. 5.

⁸ Resnick, "Albert the Great," p. 6.

⁹ Weisheipl, "The Life and Works of St. Albert the Great," p. 29.

¹⁰ John B. Freed, *The Friars and German Society in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1977), pp. 79-105; Walter Senner, "Albertus Magnus als Gründungsregens des Kölner *Studium generale* der Dominikaner," in *Geistesleben im 13. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Aertsen and Speer, pp. 149-69.

prevailing intellectual and cultural institution of the region. As Alessandro Palazzo and Loris Sturlese argue, the Cologne *studium* and the capillary network of provincial and convent schools founded by the Dominicans which were established in its wake were the main reason that the intellectual life of medieval Germany was so informed by the output of the Order between 1250 and 1350.¹¹ However, as the records and acts of the German provinces have largely been lost except for a few fragments, it is difficult to know with any detail the program for Dominican education or the organisation of *studia* for this period.¹² Walter Senner has provided a short summary of the various schools known to be operating in *Teutonia*.¹³ Thomas Kaeppli has edited a fragment from 1346 which confirms the existence of *studia* specialising in logic, philosophy and theology by this late stage.¹⁴ What little information that can be assumed about the *studia* during Albert's time must therefore rely on the output of the friars active in the German Dominican schools, including their *Summae*, disputations, pastoral work and preaching. Palazzo contends that "a large part of this literature must be related to the didactic activities in German schools and must be read as providing a textual basis and support for teaching."¹⁵

In his term as regent master in theology at the University of Paris 1245-48, Albert defended the need for theologians to employ a Christianised philosophy, especially that of Aristotle.¹⁶ At the convent of *Heilig Kreuz* in Cologne, Albert chose to lecture on the newly available full translation of Aristotle's *Ethica* by Robert Grosseteste; a decision

¹¹ Alessandro Palazzo, "Philosophy and Theology in the German Dominican *Scholae* in the Late Middle Ages: the Cases of Ulrich of Strasbourg and Berthold of Wimpfen," in *Philosophy and Theology in the Studia of the Religious Orders and at Papal and Royal Courts*, ed. by Kent Emery Jr., William J. Courtenay and Stephen M. Metzger (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), p. 78; Sturlese, *Homo Divinus*, pp.ix-xii.

¹² Palazzo, "Philosophy and Theology in the German Dominican *Scholae* in the Late Middle Ages," p. 75.

¹³ Walter Senner, "Die Rheinischen *studia* der Dominikaner im Mittelalter: Alternative und Vorläufer der Universitates Studiorum," in *University, Council, City: Intellectual Culture on the Rhine (1300-1550)*, ed. by Laurent Cesalli, Nadja Germann and Maarten J.F.M Hoenen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 8-9.

¹⁴ Thomas Kaeppli, "Kapitelsakten der Dominkanerprovinz *Teutonia* (1346)," *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 23 (1943), pp. 327-34.

¹⁵ Palazzo, "Philosophy and Theology in the German Dominican *Scholae* in the Late Middle Ages," p. 79.

¹⁶ Mulchahey, "First the Bow is Bent in Study", p. 254.

which Mulchahey notes was a radical departure from the standard theology syllabus with its focus on the *Sententiarum* of Peter Lombard. The decision to establish Albert as the first teacher at Cologne bears witness to the confidence the Dominicans placed in his capabilities and “their fundamental agreement with his position on the new learning.”¹⁷ Following this, in 1250, Albert began his attempt to translate, gloss and paraphrase for the theologians of the Latin West the entire *philosophia realis*, including physics, metaphysics and mathematics, contained in the philosophical writings of the Greeks and Arabs.¹⁸ This grand project, Albert explains at the opening of his *Physica*, was because of the repeated requests from his students and confrères to explain the philosophy of Aristotle.

Albert’s engagement with Aristotle indicates his overall approach to philosophical and theological authorities. His method was not simply to present commentaries on the texts of Aristotle and he rarely ever quoted or lemmatized the Philosopher’s treatises. Rather, Albert paraphrased the Aristotelian writings, often digressing to discuss difficult problems or issues which arose from the texts and supplemented ambiguous areas of Aristotle which he found wanting. If he thought that Aristotle was wrong on any particular point, Albert happily corrected him. As Mulchahey notes:

text by text, Albert built up a thoughtful and systematic interpretation of Peripatetic philosophy, the first in the West. And he succeeded in demonstrating not only that there were ways of interpreting Aristotle in accord with Christian doctrine, but, in the end, that secular learning might just be an absolutely necessary part of the Christian theologian’s intellectual apparatus.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 256.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 258.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 259-60.

But the Aristotle which Albert the Great taught was one that was deeply informed by his own Neoplatonic principles. For Alain de Libera, the Neoplatonism of Albert, “which corrects Plato by Aristotle and completes Aristotle with Plato,” allowed for the reception of “Peripatetic philosophy into the Christian, Platonist tradition.”²⁰ As Henryk Anzulewicz argues, however, “Albert should be understood, not as integrating the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition into a primarily Aristotelian philosophy, but rather as using an Aristotelian philosophy to explicate an ontotheological structure that is essentially Platonic/Neoplatonic.”²¹ This was a Neoplatonism, furthermore, deeply indebted to the philosophy of the Arabic rationalists.²²

It was principally during his time at the *studium generale* in Cologne that Albert advocated a vision of philosophy born out of a Neoplatonic blending of Aristotle, Avicenna, Alfarabi, Ibn Gabirol, Augustine, and Dionysius the Areopagite.²³ Anzulewicz sees in the overall structure of Albert’s theology a marked reliance on Neoplatonism, especially the scheme of *exitus*, *perfectio* and *reductio*, as he found it in the Dionysian *Corpus*.²⁴ Whilst lecturing at Cologne on the *Ethica*, Albert also taught the entire *Corpus Dionysiacum* in the translation of John the Saracen produced c.1166, a project he had probably begun in his final years as regent master in Paris. As Walter Senner remarks, after his lectures on the *Ethica*, Albert’s commentaries on the works of Dionysius are “the

²⁰ Alain de Libera, *La querelle de universaux : de Platon à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1996), p. 257, cited in Wayne J. Hankey, “Aquinas and the Platonists,” in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages: A Doxographic Approach*, ed. by Stephen Gersh, and Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), p. 295.

²¹ Henryk Anzulewicz, “Plato and Platonic/Neoplatonic Sources in Albert,” in *A Companion to Albert the Great*, ed. by Resnick, p. 600.

²² Cf. Amos Bertolacci, “Albert’s Use of Avicenna and Islamic Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Albert the Great*, ed. by Resnick, pp. 601-11.

²³ Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), p. 431.

²⁴ Henryk Anzulewicz, “Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita und das Struktur-prinzip des Denkens von Albert dem Großen,” in *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, ed. by Tzotcho Boiadjev, Georgi Kapriev and Andreas Speer (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 251- 95.

other, even greater project of the founding phase of the Cologne *studium generale*.²⁵ For Irven M. Resnick, it is significant that “Albert is the *only* Scholastic to have commented upon both the works of Pseudo-Dionysius and all the works of Aristotle.”²⁶

The apophatic dimensions of the Dionysian treatises, in particular, had received little attention from medieval theologians in the West before the thirteenth century and Albert’s work on the *Corpus* is an important witness to the developing interest in the negation of language amongst scholastic authors. As Gehl notes, the apparent lack of engagement with Scripture in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, especially the New Testament, meant that during the eleventh and twelfth centuries monastic circles showed little interest in the cosmology or metaphysics found in Dionysius.²⁷ By the thirteenth century, however, interest in Dionysius was revived, especially at the University of Paris.²⁸ This might partly be the result of a general turn in the schools which saw greater interest in the limits of human language. As Frank Tobin explains, “in the time of Abelard, at the latest... medieval philosophers had been relieved of any naiveté they may have had and could no longer simply assume that words corresponded to things.”²⁹ Attention turned, therefore, to how language could deal with the infinite and transcendent divinity.

It was in order to understand how language could be applied to the transcendent divinity that Albert turned to the mystical treatises of Dionysius. By lecturing on the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, Albert is generally understood to have developed a reading of Dionysius which emphasized the role of the intellect in divine union which would greatly influence subsequent engagement with the writing of the Pseudo-Areopagite. In doing so,

²⁵ Senner, “Albertus Magnus als Gründungsregens des Kölner *Studium generale* der Dominikaner,” p. 164.

²⁶ Resnick, “Albert the Great,” p. 6. (emphasis present)

²⁷ Gehl, “Competens Silentium,” p.154.

²⁸ H. F. Dondaine, *Le Corpus Dionysien de L’université de Paris au XIIIe siècle* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1853).

²⁹ Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p. 65.

Albert afforded Neoplatonism a secure place in scholasticism. As Étienne Gilson remarks, the Neoplatonism that Albert taught based upon his reading of Dionysius and the Arabic rationalists “decisively took the upper hand” from the Aristotelianism and Aristotelian terminology found in the scholastic writing of the early to mid-thirteenth century.³⁰ Importantly, his reading of Dionysius became the foundation for the particular interest in the *Corpus* present in later German Dominican writing. In what follows, I outline the important teachings regarding silence which Albert promoted in his lectures on Dionysius.

Apophatic Silence as Unknowing in Albert’s Dionysian Commentaries

Dionysius the Areopagite was active in sixth-century Syria during the intense debate over Monophysism.³¹ The author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* styled himself as the Athenian magistrate converted to Christianity by Paul in Acts 17: 34 and formed an important part of the persona of the author. Whereas Dionysius’ claim to be the Greek philosopher who worshipped the Unknown God of Athens orient and legitimate his philosophical authority, his status as Paul’s disciple lent him spiritual and theological authority.³² Medieval theologians especially accepted the attribution of the *Corpus* to the sub-apostolic figure of Dionysius, and the *Corpus* assumed near-canonical status once it entered the intellectual milieu of the Latin West. This is certainly what attracted Albert to Dionysius. Yet even in the Middle Ages there was some debate about the veracity of the attribution.³³

Albert takes two primary ideas from the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, which he advances throughout his entire oeuvre; that the ineffability of God requires the adoption of a

³⁰ Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, p. 433.

³¹ Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jean Leclercq “Influence and noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 25-32.

³² Cf. Charles M. Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: “No longer I”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³³ Georgios Makris, “Zwischen Hypatios von Ephesos und Lorenzo Valla. Die areopagitische Echtheitsfrage im Mittelalter,” in *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, ed. by Boiadjiev, Kapriev, and Speer, pp. 3-39.

negative theology which Albert properly terms “mystical”; and that union with divinity comes about via the intellect. This is demonstrated by Albert’s decision to instigate his commentary on *De mystica theologia* (On Mystical Theology) by quoting Isaiah 45: 15, *Vere, tu es deus absconditus, Deus Israel, salvator* (“Verily thou art a hidden God, the God of Israel the savior”). As David Burrell and Isabelle Moulin note, this opening “contains in a nutshell the program of Albert’s commentary.”³⁴ Albert’s purpose, in choosing this verse, is to outline how the human intellect relates to the divine intellect which is the sole producer of truth (*vere*); God’s hidden and transcendental nature which can only be understood through negation (*deus absconditus*); and the need to keep sacred truths hidden from the profane (*Israel*). This approach to the *Corpus* is especially significant, as it greatly differed to previous interpretations of the texts by Albert’s predecessors.

Unlike Albert, rather than stress the apophatic or mystical dimensions of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, many scholars of the twelfth century who commented upon Dionysius instead emphasized ideas about hierarchy and love. Important for this tradition of reading Dionysius was the commentary on *De coelesti hierarchia* (On the Celestial Hierarchy) composed by Hugh of St. Victor during the early twelfth century.³⁵ The only commentary completed by Hugh that does not take Scripture as its subject, it consisted of a general prologue and a word by word explanation of Dionysius directed towards beginners.³⁶ Although Hugh uses his commentary as a means to explore the importance of symbols and signs and briefly reflects on the significance of the ineffability of God, his principal concern is to reflect on Dionysius’ understanding of theophany. As Rorem notes,

³⁴ David Burrell and Isabelle Moulin, “Albert, Aquinas, and Dionysius,” in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. by Coakley and Stang, p. 105.

³⁵ Cf. David Luscombe, “The Commentary of Hugh of Saint-Victor on the Celestial Hierarchy,” in *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, ed. by Boiadjev, Kapriev, and Speer, pp. 160-75.

³⁶ Paul Rorem, “The Early Latin Dionysius: Eriugena and Hugh of St. Victor,” in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. by Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), p. 75; Paul Rorem, *Hugh of St. Victor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 167-75.

“the Victorine grants the Areopagite’s point about apophatic or negative theology... yet without ever applying it as rigorously as the Dionysian corpus does.”³⁷ Instead, Hugh stresses an affective reading of Dionysius’ writing, arguing by means of a misreading of the *De coelesti hierarchia* that *dilectio* (love) surpasses knowledge.³⁸ This affective reading which emphasized love would be especially influential in the works of Thomas Gallus and Robert Grosseteste, who produced their own commentaries and translations of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* in the early thirteenth century.³⁹

There was, however, one major individual before Albert who accentuated the apophatic element of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, the eccentric and controversial court-theologian John Scotus Eriugena (c. 815-c. 877). Eriugena, who produced a Latin translation of the entire *Corpus* in 862, would play a fundamental role in subsequent attempts to understand Dionysius. Like Albert, Dionysius was central to the theological project of Eriugena.⁴⁰ Highly conversant with the theology of the Eastern Fathers, Eriugena was the first in the Latin West to seriously reflect on the apophatic content of the Dionysian writings, especially the reflections on divine language.⁴¹ This is demonstrated by Eriugena’s attempts in his *Periphyseon* to incorporate Dionysian themes into his own theology, as well as his *Expositiones* on the Dionysian treatise *De coelesti hierarchia*.⁴² Even after the *Periphyseon* was condemned at the beginning of the thirteenth century for presenting dangerous Platonic ideas judged to be too pantheistic, Eriugena’s *Expositiones* found wide circulation and were influential in debates about hierarchy and theophany.⁴³ In fact, they served as an important basis for the commentary of Hugh of St. Victor.

³⁷ Rorem, “The Early Latin Dionysius,” p. 77.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 78.

³⁹ Leclercq, “Influence and noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages,” pp. 27-9.

⁴⁰ Cf. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, pp. 34-62.

⁴¹ Paul Rorem, “The Early Latin Dionysius,” p. 72;

⁴² Paul Rorem, *Eriugena’s Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2005).

⁴³ Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 84-9.

Furthermore, as L. Michael Harrington has shown in his critical edition of a “textbook” of Dionysius’ *De mystica theologia* belonging to the Dominican convent of St. Jacques in Paris, the text of Dionysius circulated with extracts from Eriugena’s *Periphyseon* and the Greek *scholia* on the text translated by Anastasius the Librarian in the ninth century.⁴⁴ Readers of *De mystica theologia*, therefore, approached Dionysius as mediated through Eriugena and a tradition of Eastern interpretation.

At the heart of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* lies Dionysius’ teaching about the ascent or uplifting of the soul toward God through apophasis. But this uplifting is only possible through the language and concepts of revealed Scripture as mediated through celestial and ecclesial guidance.⁴⁵ Dionysius explains in his *De divinis nominibus* (On the Divine Names) that “such a way guides the soul through all the divine notions, notions which are themselves transcended by that which is far beyond every name, all reason and all knowledge.”⁴⁶ This is why the writers of Scripture, called by Dionysius theologians in the strictest sense as “God-speakers,” prefer “the way up through negations,” since through this method “the soul is brought into union with God himself.”⁴⁷ In his *De coelesti hierarchia*, Dionysius further links the process of negation with the scriptural technique of ‘unlike likeness,’ writing that “God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility.”⁴⁸

Dionysius writes, in reference to God as cause of all being, that “we should posit and ascribe to [him] all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more

⁴⁴ Cf. L. Michael Harrington, introduction to *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), pp. 1- 38.

⁴⁵ DN 585B, trans. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 49.

⁴⁶ DN 961B, trans. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 130.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ CH 141A, trans. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 150.

appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since [he] surpasses all being.”⁴⁹ This does not mean that the practice of negation is the opposite of the practice of affirmation (*kataphasis*, in Greek). Rather, for Dionysius, it demonstrates that God “is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.”⁵⁰ The task of the apophatic ascent is revealed to be a move from affirmations and denials of the names of God towards the recognition that even the processes of apophasis and kataphasis are inappropriate. This process is paralleled by Dionysius with Moses’ ascent up Mt. Sinai, where one “breaks free of [sensual perceptions], away from what sees and is seen, and [one] plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.”⁵¹

For Dionysius, silence is an essential aspect of the negation and affirmation of language. This is evident from the opening invocation of his *De mystica theologia*:

Trinity!! Higher than any being,
 any divinity, any goodness!
 Guide of Christians
 in the wisdom of heaven!
 Lead us beyond unknowing and light,
 up to the farthest, highest peak
 of mystic scripture,
 where the mysteries of God’s Word
 lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
 in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
 Amid the deepest shadow
 they pour overwhelming light
 on what is most manifest.
 Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
 they completely fill our sightless minds
 with treasures beyond all beauty.⁵²

⁴⁹ MT 1000B, trans. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 136.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ MT 1000A, trans. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 137.

⁵² MT 997A-997B, trans. Luibheid *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 135.

In the *De divinis nominibus*, Dionysius frequently explains that God is unknown, inaccessible, immeasurable, unnameable, unsearchable, ineffable, and unutterable. As a result, he believes that silence is the wisest course of action for those who desire to name him. “With a wise silence we do honour to the inexpressible,” Dionysius explains, and in so doing, “we are raised up to the enlightening beams of the sacred scriptures, and with these to illuminate us... we behold the divine light.”⁵³ For, as Dionysius explains in *De mystica theologia*, “in the earlier books my argument travelled downward from the most exalted to the humblest categories... but my argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters.” In fact, “when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely.”⁵⁴ Thus, the negation of language in the Dionysian ascent to God through apophasis results in a profound silence. This echoes the claim of Denys Turner, discussed in the Introduction, that apophaticism leads to the exhaustion of language.⁵⁵

Importantly, the teaching about silence which Albert ascribes to Dionysius differs somewhat from that encountered in the actual *Corpus*. For Dionysius, the ineffability of God resulted in the recognition that words cannot approach divinity and that silence is most appropriate. Yet as Senner notes, Albert is not necessarily motivated by this imperative to silence in his commentaries on Dionysius.⁵⁶ Rather, in his commentary on the *De divinis nominibus*, Albert establishes that his interest lies instead in the relationship between God’s knowability and nameability.⁵⁷ This is directly expressed by Albert in his

⁵³ DN 589, trans. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, pp. 50-1.

⁵⁴ MT 1033C, trans. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 139.

⁵⁵ Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Walter Senner, *Albert des Grossen: Verständnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2009), pp. 18-9.

⁵⁷ Cf. Francis J. Catania, “‘Knowable’ and ‘Nameable’ in Albert the Great’s Commentary on the Divine Names,” in *Albert the Great: Commemorative Essays*, ed. by Francis J. Kovach and Robert W. Shahan (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), pp. 97- 128.

gloss on Dionysius' description of God as "*ineffabilis et ignotus*", which Albert argues refers to the divinity

which is "speakable" and "known" only in an extended sense of those words, that is, by knowing in an undefined way *that* [God is]. But [God] is "unspeakable" and "unknown" in the ordinary sense of those words because we don't know [of God] *what* He is or *on account of what* He is.⁵⁸

Rather than argue that the unspeakable element of the ineffable God leads directly to silence, Albert instead explains that speaking about God as "*ineffabilis et ignotus*" refers to man's inability to comprehend God's essence. Silence here does not imply the cessation of speech about God and is not necessarily the exhaustion of language or the end of theology. Instead, Albert takes the Dionysian silence to indicate that direct knowledge of divinity is impossible. Albert notes in his commentary on Dionysius' *De mystica theologia*, "all instruction is uttered by means of some kind of word, whether inner or outer" and Dionysius seems to contradict himself through his use of two incompatible terms "when he says 'instructed silence'" (as the reference to silence in the invocation to the Trinity is translated into Latin by John the Saracen). Albert explains that this is because "when a word is uttered, silence is broken."⁵⁹ He resolves this tension by noting that "there is 'silence,' simply speaking, because we cannot say of God 'what' he is; but it is, relatively speaking, an 'instructed silence' inasmuch as we can say 'that' he is."⁶⁰ Speech about God is possible for Albert and in so doing one may approach something which, as Albert explains in his commentary on Dionysius' *De mystica theologia*, is something *like* the

⁵⁸ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, trans. Catania, "'Knowable' and 'Namable' in Albert the Great's Commentary on the Divine Names," p. 100. (emphasis in original)

⁵⁹ Albert the Great, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, trans. Tugwell, "Commentary on Dionysius' Mystical Theology," *Albert & Thomas*, p. 143.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 144.

divine nature.⁶¹ This something, as Albert will clarify, is not itself the divine nature but does manifest that nature. Because of this, he argues, it is possible to approach some knowledge of God. This was an important concept in the subsequent Dominican engagement with Dionysius.

For Albert there is a twofold way that we may come to knowledge of God through creatures, taken directly from Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus*. These two ways are understood by Albert as attempts to push language beyond its original use, insofar as the two ways that God is knowable are only possible due to the way that language itself is structured. For "we use names according to the way the thing meant is found among those things which come within range of our intellect."⁶² Albert argues that "there is a difference between the way a thing of this sort is found in those things which transcend our intellect and the way a name is able to express meaning."⁶³ Because God's essence is beyond our knowledge, as Dionysius had argued, for Albert the names which are derived from the sensual experience of the world must express the reality of divinity in a way beyond their original context. This leads Albert to explain two ways in which we can consider "the thing meant by a name."⁶⁴ The first is "insofar as the thing meant is in [what is] an effect," which is the approach to God *per causam* (through causation), and "insofar as the thing meant is [named as belonging to] a cause which transcends the [physical] mode," that is, the approach *per omnium ablationem* (through the removal of all).⁶⁵ Albert explains that this is why Dionysius says:

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 192-4.

⁶² Albert, *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, trans. Catania, "'Knowable' and 'Nameable' in Albert the Great's Commentary on the Divine Names," p. 120.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Cf. Catania, "'Knowable' and 'Nameable' in Albert the Great's Commentary on the Divine Names," p. 121.

⁶⁵ Albert, *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, trans. Catania, "'Knowable' and 'Nameable' in Albert the Great's Commentary on the Divine Names," p. 121.

that the richest, that is the most perfect and true, knowledge of God is through ignorance, that is through remotion, because it is simply true according to what is signified through the name. Affirmations, however, are not true about [God] according to the way of signifying through the name.⁶⁶

Albert recognises that the approach to God through remotion cannot actually provide true knowledge of God. He argues that negations are helpful insofar as they provide affirmations through the negation of something else.⁶⁷ In his commentary on Dionysius' *De mystica theologia*, Albert explains how this is achieved. In negative theology, Albert explains, by "denying things of God, we have to begin with 'the most remote,' the lowest things... [and] 'ascend to the topmost.'"⁶⁸ For Albert, like Dionysius, the approach to God is thus an apophatic ascent. "In all the things that are known by their forms," he explains, "the forms themselves are images of God's own beauty, and by denying them we arrive at that hidden reality which was expressed in them in a veiled way."⁶⁹ Through negation, God can be known through unknowing and seen through not-seeing. For "he is not known, per se, as first principles are, nor do we know 'why' he is, because he has no cause, nor do we know 'what' he is, because he produces no effect which is proportionate to himself."⁷⁰ Knowledge of God is, instead, possible only through the light of grace and is "seen by the absence of natural seeing." God is seen, therefore, "only in a blurred and undefined knowledge 'that' he is" through the process of negation.⁷¹

So, for Albert, Dionysius did not strictly enforce silence with regards to the ineffability of God. Silence referred to God's transcendence and ineffability; the

⁶⁶ Albert, *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, in *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia XXXVII/1*, ed. by Paul Simon (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972), pp. 42-7.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Albert, *Super Dionysii Mysticam theologiam*, trans. Tugwell, "Commentary on Dionysius' Mystical Theology," *Albert & Thomas*, p. 170.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

recognition that God's quiddity cannot be known. Only the fact of God's existence is knowable and only in a vague way through negation. This is the apophatic ascent promoted by Dionysius, but the end goal is not presented as the cessation of speech. Instead, it is an intellectual union of knower and known through "un-knowing." This particular teaching about the apophatic silence of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* would become a defining feature of the German Dominican School, especially as it was developed in the work of Albert's student Ulrich of Strasbourg.

Ulrich of Strasbourg: Mediating Albert's Reading of Dionysius

Ulrich of Strasbourg, known also as Ulrich Engelbrecht, was born c. 1220 and entered the Order of Preachers sometime in 1245.⁷² As mentioned above, Ulrich was one of the most prominent of Albert's students in Cologne and became an influential lecturer in theology himself at the convent in Strasbourg. In 1272, Ulrich was elected as the Prior of the province of *Teutonia*, a position which he served in distinction for five years until sent to the University of Paris to continue his theological studies. However, in 1277 Ulrich passed away before he was able to begin his lessons and was subsequently never able to earn the title of *magister theologiae*. Regardless, he was able to garner a reputation as a learned lecturer and teacher. His theological masterwork was the *De summo bono* (On the Highest Good) which is divided into six treatises dealing with the essence of God, the divine persons, creation, the incarnation, and grace and the virtues. However, the work remains incomplete.⁷³ Two treatises on the sacraments and beatitude which were to conclude the *De summo bono* were probably never written and the sixth treatise on the virtues breaks off after the prologue.

⁷² On Ulrich of Strasbourg see Palazzo, "Philosophy and Theology in the German Dominican *Scholae* in the Late Middle Ages," pp. 79-90; Alain de Libera, *Introduction à la mystique rhénane d'Albert le Grand à maître Eckhart*, (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1984), pp. 99-162

⁷³ Ulrichus de Argentina, *De summo bono*, eds. Burkhardt Mojsisch, Alessandra Beccarisi, Furt Flasch and Loris Sturlese, vols 1-4 (Munich: Felix Meiner, 1987-2008). Translations from this text are my own.

Ulrich of Strasbourg was just one of the many students of Albert the Great who point towards the influence of Albert in the writing of the Dominican friars. Through the work of the so-called “Albertschule” which identifies a diverse network of Dominican scholars, including Ulrich, Thomas Aquinas, Dietrich of Freiburg (c.1250-c.1310), Berthold of Moosburg (d. 1361) and Meister Eckhart, the *studium* of Cologne must be understood as a principal site for the dissemination of Neoplatonic speculation as it was taught by Albert.⁷⁴ Like Ulrich, Albert’s students adopted Neoplatonic ideas and even directly cited “Bischof Albrecht” as a source of speculative and devotional theology.⁷⁵ For the German Dominicans of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, moreover, Albert was soon identified also as a source of spiritual and moral authority.⁷⁶

The *De summo bono* was probably written during the period 1262-72, after Ulrich had become *lector* at Strasbourg and before he was elected provincial for *Teutonia*.⁷⁷ As Sturlese notes, Ulrich’s writing, especially the fourth treatise of the *De summo bono* which discusses the role of the intellect, displays the teaching and personality of Albert.⁷⁸ Throughout the entire treatise, Ulrich draws upon a number of Albert’s major theological works, including the *Metaphysica*, *De intellectu et intelligibili* and Albert’s *lectiones* on the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Palazzo, through a reconstruction of the curriculum of the German Dominican *studia* via an examination of Ulrich’s writing, argues for the prominent influence of Albert’s Neoplatonism in German Dominican education.⁷⁹ In particular, he argues that the *De summo bono* is “a reflection of the lessons of Ulrich the lector in the Strasbourg *studium* and of tendencies emerging within the cultural policy of

⁷⁴ Sturlese, *Homo divinus*, p. x.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁷⁶ Cf. Dagmar Gottschall, “Albert’s Contributions to or Influence on Vernacular Literatures,” in *A Companion to Albert the Great*, ed. Resnick, pp. 723-57.

⁷⁷ Cf. Palazzo, “Philosophy and Theology in the German Dominican *Scholae* in the Late Middle Ages,” p. 28, n. 28.

⁷⁸ Sturlese, *Homo divinus*, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Palazzo, “Philosophy and Theology in the German Dominican *Scholae* in the Late Middle Ages,” pp. 79-90.

the Dominican Order and the province of *Teutonia*.⁸⁰ For this reason Alain de Libera has described Ulrich as one of the “co-founders of Rhenish theology” alongside Albert the Great.⁸¹ Ulrich was also a major influence throughout Germany, especially during the late Middle Ages, on issues relating to moral theology, pastoral care and penitence, which are discussed in Book VI of *De summo bono*.⁸²

Importantly, Ulrich should not simply be categorized as an unoriginal Albertist who simply rehashes and reformulates the doctrines of his master. Although Ulrich adopts a number of his key theological and philosophical statements from the pages of Albert’s writing, such as the assumption drawn by Albert in his *Metaphysica* that the link between God and the world is man and that man’s intellect is divine insofar as God is intellect, Ulrich also differs in many respects from his teacher.⁸³ For instance, whilst Albert’s commentaries are generally arranged as a series of pro and contra arguments in keeping with scholastic practice, Ulrich instead chose to draw up the *De summo bono* as a systematic treatise of consultation which could be employed as an aid to learning.⁸⁴ Similarly, whereas Albert drew a sharp distinction between the sciences of philosophy and theology and Platonism and Aristotelianism, Ulrich instead emphasized their concordance and argued for the necessity of grounding theological research in philosophical speculation.⁸⁵ Likewise, Ulrich asserted that Platonic philosophy is superior to the Aristotelian philosophy which succeeded it as the former is principally concerned with knowledge of the divine and the latter is based only on empirical observation of the

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 83.

⁸¹ de Libera, *Introduction à la mystique rhénane*, pp. 99-100.

⁸² Alessandro Palazzo, “Ulricus de Argentina... theologus, philosophus, ymmo et iurista.” Le dottrine di teologia morale e di pastorale penitenziale nel VI libro del *De summo bono* e la loro diffusione nel tardo Medioevo,” *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 55 (2008), pp. 64-97.

⁸³ Cf. Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* II: 4.1.4, p. 120.

⁸⁴ Alain de Libera and Burckhard Mojsisch, “Ulrich von Strassburg- Rezeption und Transformation des Denkens Alberts des Grossen im 13. Jahrhundert, in Ulrich von Strassburg,” *De summo bono I*, ed. Burckhard Mojsisch (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1989), pp. ix-x.

⁸⁵ Ibid, pp. xix-xxi. Cf. Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* I: 2.5, pp. 39-42.

universe.⁸⁶ Although Ulrich still acknowledged the authority of Aristotle and made liberal use of his writings, such a doctrine highlights Ulrich's inclination towards Neoplatonism and explains his own interest in Dionysius.

An examination of Ulrich's understanding of Dionysius is thus instructive in order to demonstrate how Albert's understanding of Dionysius became standard for the Dominicans in Germany. The first two books of the *De summo bono*, which are concerned primarily with the essence and existence of God, are heavily influenced by Ulrich's reading of Dionysius, especially as it is mediated by Albert's own *lectiones* which Ulrich had attended at Cologne. By closely adhering to the structure of Dionysius' *De divinis nominibus* in these books, Ulrich produced a commentary on Dionysius that Théry has described as similar to that of Albert.⁸⁷ Ulrich demonstrates at the beginning of his *De summo bono* comparable interests in the Dionysian *Corpus* as those of Albert presented above.

Despite ending the prologue of *De summo bono* with Dionysius' Trinitarian hymn which emphasises the "*occulte docti silentii caliginem*," Ulrich like Albert is not particularly interested in the Dionysian imperative to silence.⁸⁸ Rather, Ulrich employs Dionysius in his attempts to demonstrate that the intellectual knowledge of God, which Albert had posited in a purely philosophical sense, attains a validity which is equal to knowledge of God through faith. "God is capable of being known by us," Ulrich writes, "not only from the glory of perfection or the light of grace, but also by natural reason."⁸⁹ Ulrich's reflections on Dionysian mystical theology and on the divine names emphasise like Albert the limits of knowledge and language as they are applied to God. In particular,

⁸⁶ Cf. Irene Zavattero, "Bonum beatitudinis: felicità e beatitudine nel *De summo bono* di Ulrico di Strasburgo," *Memorie domincane* 42 (2011), pp. 283-313.

⁸⁷ Gérard Théry, "Originalité du plan de la "Summa de bono" d'Ulrich de Strasbourg," *Revue Thomiste* 27 (1922), pp. 376-97.

⁸⁸ Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* I: 1.1, p. 6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Ulrich reinforces Albert's reading of Dionysius that asserts that the unknowability of God relates to the inability to know God in his quiddity. As Ulrich explains, one can know God "because 'like is known by like,' according to the opinion of all the most ancient philosophers," and "our intellect, insofar as it has naturally within itself the likeness of God and gathers from without from creatures, is able to know of him."⁹⁰ However, it is impossible to comprehend God in such a manner, as Ulrich explains, "because this likeness of the excellent light remains more dissimilar than similar to God, more unknown than known."⁹¹

Ulrich concludes, "we cannot know by the guidance of natural reason 'what is' God" as this would entail comprehending God intellectually, which is impossible.⁹² Ulrich argues that to comprehend a thing through the intellect one must be able to inspect their boundary, that is, "its quantity with respect to the magnitude of its corporal limits or the boundary of its quiddity." However, this cannot be done of God "whose essence is not seen through itself or through likenesses, apart from those which are more dissimilar than similar to him."⁹³ Ulrich glosses, therefore, the Dionysian understanding of God as "*ineffabilis et ignotus*" in the same way as Albert, explaining these terms in relation to the knowability of God which is his primary concern:

He is also known to be incomprehensible by the intellect and ineffable. Incomprehensible indeed, because he is not known by even the highest knowledge, in which whatever creature can, except by perception of [God's] light which is perceived according to their possibility of creaturely reception; and therefore he is also ineffable, because he is not named, except as he is

⁹⁰ Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* I: 1.2, p. 7.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

known, namely by the names of his effects. Hence it is said in the *Liber de causis*: “The first cause is beyond description,” and again, “the first cause is above all the names by which he is named.”⁹⁴

This understanding of God’s ineffability, derived from Dionysius, grounds the doctrine of contemplative beatitude which Ulrich adopts from Albert and develops throughout the *De summo bono*.⁹⁵ As Sturlese argues, it plays an important role in the development of the characteristic “German mysticism” associated with the Dominicans of the Rhineland, especially in its “philosophical” dimensions.⁹⁶ For Ulrich, the various modes of theology outlined by Dionysius explain the path to intellectual union with divinity. Occupying a significant portion of Book I of the *De summo bono* these ways of knowing God rely heavily on Albert’s presentation of the teachings of the Areopagite in his *lectiones*. They consist in knowing God by negation as through symbolic theology,⁹⁷ knowing God by causation as through the theology of signification,⁹⁸ and knowing God by the way of eminence as through mystical theology.⁹⁹ These ways, especially mystical theology, significantly inform the subsequent German Dominican presentation of inner silence.

The way of symbolic theology, as presented by Ulrich in Chapter Four of Book I of *De summo bono*, is similar to the way of remotion which Albert emphasised in the writing of Dionysius. Ulrich clarifies that the way of negation through symbolic theology is “otherwise to natural reason,” insofar as it operates through the mode of division.¹⁰⁰ For, he explains, “negation certifies nothing in itself, yet through what is left through a place by

⁹⁴ Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* I: 1.8, p. 24.

⁹⁵ Zavattero, “Bonum beatitudine,” pp. 308-11.

⁹⁶ Loris Sturlese, *Storia della filosofia tedesca del Medioevo. Il secolo XIII* (Florence: Olschki, 1996), pp. 76-9, pp. 120-2.

⁹⁷ Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* I: 1.4, p. 13.

⁹⁸ Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* I: 1.5, pp. 14-15.

⁹⁹ Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* I: 1.6, pp. 16-18.

¹⁰⁰ Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* I: 1.4, p. 13.

division, it observes something,” and allows for a loose definition of a thing.¹⁰¹ Thus, as Ulrich explains, by negating certain accidental properties from God’s existence it is possible to know that he is a spirit, intellect, and other similar attributes taken to be a necessary part of the divine perfection.¹⁰² Ulrich argues, “this method leads us, as far as possible, to the knowledge of the quiddity of the divine.”¹⁰³

This way of negation is closely tied by Ulrich to the mystical theology of Dionysius, explained in Chapter Six of Book I of *De summo bono*. Here, once again, Ulrich elaborates on Albert’s understanding of remotion which would greatly inform subsequent discussions of silence amongst the Dominicans. Ulrich explains that it is through mystical theology that affirmations and negations must both be applied to God, insofar as “God is not called substantial, but supersubstantial, not essential, but superessential, and so forth for other qualities.”¹⁰⁴ This is the way of eminence, where statements about the divine majesty invoke another order of reality greater (more eminent) than that of creation. For this reason, as Ulrich describes in a direct citation of Albert’s commentary on *De mystica theologia*, “these negations which are referred to [by Dionysius] do not oppose affirmations, because they are not according to the same respect.”¹⁰⁵ This is so, because one affirms essence or substance of God with regard to a thing signified “which is primarily in God and in others from he himself,” but one negates these of God “with respect to the mode of imperfect existence, by which these [names] are in creatures.”¹⁰⁶ They are thus not negated of God because of any imperfection which exists in him, Ulrich explains, “but for the sake of his eminence” which “perfects” Dionysius’ teaching about

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* I: 1.6, p. 16.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

“what are in God” whilst the way of eminence teaches “in what way these things are in God.”¹⁰⁷

The way of eminence through mystical theology, Ulrich further outlines, is the way that the intellect is able to properly unite with God. Unlike Dionysius, and like Albert, Ulrich does not stress the heights of unknowing experienced by Moses in the dark cloud of Sinai as an ascent into silence. Rather, Ulrich explains that this union comes about by negations which allow one “to let go of all the senses and intellect as far as all things are known to oneself through created things” and transcend all beings, “not only the material things, but also the intellectual things.” This necessarily leads to becoming united to God “as the intellect and the thing understood are one.”¹⁰⁸ Ulrich explains that this is what is signified by Exodus 19:

where Moses seeing God in darkness, that is the excellence of light inaccessible, which to us is darkness, was made separate from the unclean and from the tumult of the people and also from imperfections, namely the priests, and entered the dark cloud by means of the aforesaid union with God.¹⁰⁹

Like Albert, therefore, Ulrich in his *De summo bono* emphasizes the apophatic ascent to divinity which occurs by means of negating the divine attributes. The ineffability and unknowability of God and the ways of negation and eminence which are its consequence for Dionysius through symbolic and mystical theology, are not presented by Ulrich as enforcing silence. Instead, the emphasis lies in union with the divine through the intellect and the inability to comprehend God’s quiddity. For Albert and Ulrich, the two influential founding members of the German Dominican School, Dionysian notions of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 17-18.

silence were not as important as the contemplative and unitive dimensions of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. However, as the next chapter demonstrates, these contemplative and apophatic notions did become more explicitly linked to notions of silence in the work of Dominican authors who were influenced by the other great scholastic authority on negative theology, Moses Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.

Chapter Three

Reading Maimonides: Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart and the Silent Praise of God

Alongside the reflection upon apophatic silence Albert the Great introduced in his *lectiones* on the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, the German Dominican rhetoric of inexpressibility was further influenced by the response to the negative theology of Maimonides. Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* offered an account of the negation of divine language, deeply influenced by currents in Arabic Peripatetic philosophy, which provided a useful parallel to the Neoplatonic apophaticism encountered by the German Dominican School in the writing of Dionysius. Whereas Albert and his student Ulrich of Strasbourg employed Dionysius in order to develop an intellectual understanding of divine union, the Dominicans who read Maimonides and incorporated his negative theology into their own writing nuanced this Neoplatonic belief through an attention to Aristotelian principles of logic and language. Importantly, they also re-emphasised the silence which resulted from the rhetoric of inexpressibility, especially through their recovery of the "silent praise of God" in Psalms 64:2.

In this chapter I discuss the influence of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* upon the ideas of negation and silence in the scholastic treatises of the Dominican theologians Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart. I argue that both figures bring Maimonides into dialogue with the Dionysian silence outlined by Albert in his *lectiones* by reflecting on the silent praise of God in Psalms 64:2. Whereas Aquinas' understanding of silence was primarily mediated by Dionysius, Eckhart integrated Maimonides' categorical negative theology into his approach to the ineffable divinity. Ultimately, Eckhart entered into conversation with Aquinas about the proper way to speak about God by offering Maimonides as an alternative to Dionysius in debates about negation and silence.

Moses Maimonides and his Reception in the Latin West

Born in the Almoravid city of Cordova in al-Andalus (Spain) sometime between 1131 and 1137, Moshe ben Maimon, known in the West by his Latin name Moses Maimonides, would become one of the most important Jewish philosophers and legal experts of the twelfth century.¹ In 1148, Maimonides and his family fled from Cordova after the city was conquered by the strictly Islamic Almohad regime, eventually settling in Fustat (Old Cairo).² In Fustat, Maimonides composed the two treatises which would ensure his fame as a Rabbinical authority throughout the Jewish world, his legal compendium the *Mishneh Torah* (“Repetition of the Law”) and his philosophical *magnum opus* written in Arabic, the *Dalālat al-Hā’irīn* (*The Guide of the Perplexed*). During this time Maimonides was appointed the head (*nagid*) of the Jewish community by the ruling Islamic Ayyubid dynasty of Salahaddin after they assumed control of Egypt in 1171.³ Although he lived for the rest of his life in Fustat, Maimonides identified himself as belonging to the rich and vibrant intellectual tradition of al-Andalus. As Sarah Stroumsa argues, Maimonides should be considered as a “Mediterranean thinker,” insofar as the many “cultures that fed into his thought were, by and large, those of the wider Mediterranean littoral.”⁴

Maimonides passed away in 1204 after spending much of his life composing letters and treatises on points of Rabbinic law, as well as guiding the Provençal philosopher Samuel ibn Tibbon in the translation of his *Guide* into Hebrew.⁵ His texts were translated into Hebrew, primarily for a philosophically minded Southern French Jewry who had little

¹ For the biography of Maimonides, see Joel L. Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: University Press, 2005).

² Kraemer, *Maimonides*, p. 145.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in his World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 7.

⁵ James T. Robinson, “Maimonides, Samuel ibn Tibbon, and the Construction of a Jewish Tradition of Philosophy,” in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and his Influence*, ed. by Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 291-306.

knowledge of Arabic. As a student of philosophy Maimonides' main influence was Aristotle. His Aristotelianism forms part of a wider Arabic reception of the Stagirite informed by readings of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius and ibn Rushd (Averroes).⁶ Also important for Maimonides' reading of Aristotle was his engagement with Neoplatonism through the works of ibn Sina (Avicenna). It is from ibn Sina that Maimonides adopts God's identity as "Necessary Existence," as well as the teaching that God "is only described by means of negating all similarities of Him and affirming to Him all relations."⁷ Other Islamic philosophers, most importantly al-Farabi and Ibn Bajja, also contributed to Maimonides' skepticism regarding the extent to which men can cognize immaterial entities, such as God.⁸ Likewise, Maimonides accepts the tenet of the unity of God formulated in Bahya ibn Paquda's *al-Hidaya* and his arguments for the necessity of the negative way, although he does not adopt all aspects of Bahya's teaching on the divine attributes.⁹

The entrance of Maimonides' writing into Europe was fraught with controversy and was met with open hostility by Rabbis of the predominant Ashkenazi school of conservative exegesis of Scripture.¹⁰ These Jews who had little exposure to the philosophical tradition making inroads into Andalusian and Provençal Jewish thought were scandalized by Maimonides' attempts to reconcile revelation and reason.¹¹ As Mauro Zonta notes, the debates about the place of Maimonidean rationalism in Jewish thought

⁶ Shlomo Pines, "Translator's Introduction: the Philosophic Sources of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. lvii- cxxxiv. (Hereafter, *Guide*).

⁷ Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-Shifa* 8:6, trans. Michael E. Marmura, *The Metaphysics of The Healing* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), p. 283. Cf. *Guide* I: 57, trans. Pines, p. 132-3.

⁸ Cf. Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 82-109.

⁹ ibn Paquda, *al-Hidaya*, trans. Mansoor, *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, pp. 132-49.

¹⁰ On the Maimonidean controversy, see Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: the Evolution of Medieval anti-Judaism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 53-9; Daniel Jeremy Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy, 1180-1240* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

¹¹ Silver, *Maimonidean Controversy*, p. 72.

directly paralleled similar debates in Christian society between the proponents of Aristotelian learning and the adherents of traditional faith in revelation.¹² The controversy over Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, which continued unabated for much of the 1220s and 1230s, came to an abrupt yet unresolved end in the 1230s when copies of the *Guide* were reportedly denounced to the Inquisition in Montpellier in 1233 and consigned to the flames.¹³ This traumatic event would later be conflated with the trial of the Talmud in Paris in 1240, and its subsequent burning in June 1241, by the Maimonidean partisan Samuel ben Hillel of Verona in a letter sent to a colleague during another controversy over Maimonides' orthodoxy in 1288-90.¹⁴

That Christians were induced to take an active role in debates about Jewish orthodoxy can be explained by their own concerns about Aristotle. Jeremy Cohen, drawing upon polemical accounts of supposed Inquisitorial disputations concerning Maimonides' *Guide*, notes that "the Inquisition must have had a clear and vested interest in what transpired [during the controversy]."¹⁵ J. L. Teicher has questioned whether the anti-Maimonideans would have even needed to turn over Maimonides' writings to the Inquisition, suggesting that the Inquisition would have been drawn into the debate of their own accord due to their own interest in Maimonides' Aristotelianism.¹⁶ Only after these disputations had taken place in the 1230s-40s did the full Latin translation of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, titled the *Dux neutrorum*, first emerge in the Latin West. In the same period the *Corpus Dionysiacum* was attracting renewed attention from Albert the Great. Unsurprisingly, these two treatises were accessed by the Dominicans interested in

¹² Mauro Zonta, "The Relationship of European Jewish Philosophy to Islamic and Christian Philosophies in the Late Middle Ages," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 7 (2000), pp. 127-40.

¹³ Silver, *Maimonidean Controversy*, p. 11.

¹⁴ Cf. Reimund Leicht, "Miracles for the Sake of the Master of Reason: Hillel ben Samuel of Verona's Legendary Account of the Maimonidean Controversy," *Micrologus XXI: The Medieval Legends of Philosophers and Scholars* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2013), pp. 579-98.

¹⁵ Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, p. 58.

¹⁶ J. L. Teicher, "Christian Theology and the Jewish Opposition to Maimonides," *Journal of Theological Studies* 43 (1942), pp. 68-76.

the debate about divine ineffability. From about the 1220s onwards references to *Raby Moyses* in scholastic writing became common, largely through engagement with two partial translations of the *Guide* known as the *Liber Maimonidis de parabola* and the *Liber de deo benedicto*, reaching their peak by the 1300s.¹⁷

George K. Hasselhoff notes that Dominican theologians demonstrated an especial interest in Maimonides' *Dux neutrorum*, pointing to the some 150 citations in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas alone.¹⁸ This overall engagement was likely the result of the Dominican interest in Aristotelianism, as well as their active involvement as Inquisitors during the Maimonidean controversy. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a number of theologians of the Order of Preachers found in Maimonides' *Guide* a discussion of silence and the way of negation which could easily be brought into dialogue with their reading of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. The *Guide* emerges as one of the most important non-Christian authorities in the works of Albert, Aquinas and Meister Eckhart. Both Aquinas and Eckhart, following in the steps of Albert, drew not just on Dionysius for their rhetoric of inexpressibility, but also on the writing of Maimonides which offered another perspective on worshipping God through silence. Albert, one of the earliest Christian theologians to make use of Maimonides, incorporated and paraphrased much of the *Guide*

¹⁷ For the reception of Maimonides into the Latin West see George K. Hasselhoff, *Dicit Rabbi Moyses: Studien zum Bild von Moses Maimonides im lateinischen Westen vom 13. bis zum 15. Jahrhundert* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004); George K. Hasselhoff, "Maimonides in the Latin Middle Ages: An Introductory Survey," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 9 (2002), pp.1-20; George K. Hasselhoff, "The Reception of Maimonides in the Latin World: The Evidence of the Latin Translations in the 13th to 15th Century," *Materia Giudaica: Bolletino del Associazione* 6 (2001), pp. 258-80; Wolfgang Kluxen, "Maimonides and Latin Scholasticism," in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, ed. by Schlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1986), pp. 224- 32. Wolfgang Kluxen provides a critical edition of the *Liber de deo benedicto* in "Die Geschichte des Maimonides im lateinischen Abenland als Beispiel einer Christlich-Jüdischen Begegnung. Rabbi Moyses, Liber de uno deo benedicto," in *Miscellanea Medievalia* 4, ed. by Paul Wilpert (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), pp. 167-82.

¹⁸ Hasselhoff, "Maimonides in the Latin Middle Ages," pp. 14-5.

in his wider philosophical writings.¹⁹ Ulrich of Strasbourg also made heavy use of Maimonides' *Guide* in his discussion of the divine name *Qui est* ("He who is").²⁰ However, in keeping with their general disinterest in silence, neither Albert nor Ulrich made much use of Maimonides' negative theology. Aquinas and Eckhart, on the other hand, demonstrate in their theological writing a greater awareness of these facets of Maimonides' thought and their rhetoric of inexpressibility is deeply influenced by Maimonides. Therefore, to understand Aquinas and Eckhart's teaching about the "silent praise of God" it is necessary to outline the ideas about negation and silence in the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

Negation and Silence in the *Guide of the Perplexed*

Maimonides' discussion of negation and silence in his *Guide* became, alongside the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, the other great authoritative treatise for apophaticism in thirteenth century scholasticism. Certainly, the heavily Aristotelian account of negative theology in Maimonides' *Guide* interested the theologians who employed his arguments. For, according to Daniel H. Frank, although Maimonides argues *contra* Aristotle that "the most important matters are beyond our ken and linguistic capacities" and thus rejects Aristotle's totalizing empiricism, Maimonides does so through recourse to the vocabulary and logic of Aristotelianism.²¹ Frank argues that Maimonides was "not an Aristotelian on account of any agreement with Aristotle on substantive issues, but rather on account of his creative use of Aristotelian categories and arguments for his own purposes."²² Furthermore, Maimonides accepted that the Neoplatonic treatise known as the *Theology of Aristotle* and

¹⁹ Caterina Rigo, "Zur Rezeption des Moses Maimonides im Werk des Albertus Magnus," in *Albertus Magnus, zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren: neue Zugänge, Aspekte Perspektive*, ed. by Walter Senner and Henryk Anzulewicz (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), pp. 61-146.

²⁰ Cf. Ulrich of Strasbourg, *De summo bono* II: 2.1.1, p. 27; II: 2.4.2, p. 40; Hasselhoff, *Dicit Rabbi Moyses*, pp. 149-50.

²¹ Daniel H. Frank, "On Defining Maimonides' Aristotelianism," in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition*, ed. Inglis, p. 3.

²² *Ibid*, p. 4.

the treatise called the *Kalâm fî mahd al-khair* (“Discourse on the Pure Good”), which would be translated in the Latin West as the *Liber de causis*, contained the authentic tradition of Aristotle. The common Judaeo-Islamic tradition of rational philosophy, therefore, was greatly influenced by Neoplatonic currents and Maimonides was no exception.²³ The *Guide* was also principally concerned with correctly interpreting the parables of Scripture, especially the attributes and names applied to God, which paralleled the purpose of Dionysius’ treatises.²⁴ Yet “*Raby Moyses*” was also renowned as an authoritative Old Testament exegete and expert on Jewish tradition, as an Aristotelian philosopher who cogently demonstrated the possibility of reconciling reason and revelation and as a medical authority.

In his *Guide of the Perplexed* Book I, Chapters 50-61 Maimonides expressly considers how language should be related to the divine. Scholarly debate about the exact nature of Maimonides’ negative theology and his arguments concerning the way man should subsequently orient himself to God has not reached any definitive conclusion.²⁵ Two general points of agreement are that it must be seen in the context of a theory of logic based upon the philosophy of Aristotle and that Maimonides strongly emphasizes that when it comes to speaking about God it is best to remain silent.²⁶ There is no agreement, however, about what this silence should entail. David Blumenthal argues that silence in Maimonides must be read as a stage on the way towards intellectual union with God

²³ Cf. Peter S. Adamson, *Arabic Plotinus: A Philosophical Study of the “Theology of Aristotle,”* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002); Jill Kraye, Charles B. Schmitt and W. F. Ryan (eds), *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages: the Theology and Other Texts* (London: Warburg Institute, 1986).

²⁴ Cf. Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 18-63.

²⁵ Cf. Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought*, trans. Joel Linsider (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 296-301; Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide*, pp. 204-32.

²⁶ Cf. Daniel Davies, *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 55-67; Josef Stern, “Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language,” in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, ed. by Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), pp. 173-226; Harry Austen Wolfson, “Maimonides on Negative Attributes,” in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, ed. by Isadore Twersky and George H. Williams, vol. 1. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 195-230.

through rational contemplation which he calls “philosophical mysticism.”²⁷ Such a reading would certainly explain why Dominicans like Albert, Ulrich and Eckhart found Maimonides to be a useful authority. Kenneth Seeskin argues that silence should be seen as the final stage in Maimonides’ hierarchical view of language.²⁸ For Donald McCallum, Maimonides recognizes that “our attempts to magnify and exalt God can never be entirely free of deficiency.”²⁹ Maimonides, therefore, formulates a strictly agnostic need for silence which McCallum compares with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s maxim that “what we cannot understand, we must pass over in silence.”

At the conclusion of his chapter about the need to negate attributes predicated of God, Maimonides writes:

We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden from us because of the intensity with which He becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes that are too weak to apprehend it... the most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalm, *Silence is praise to Thee*... For of whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him, may He be exalted, and on the other we perceive in it some deficiency.³⁰

Maimonides is here following the *al-Hidaya* of Bahya ibn Paquda. In his argument for the unknowability of God, as Absolute and Real One, Bahya cited the same Psalm verse as Maimonides and tied it directly to a Talmudic dictum (*Berakhot* 33b) meant to

²⁷ David Blumenthal, “Maimonides’ Philosophic Mysticism,” in *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), pp. 142-44.

²⁸ Kenneth Seeskin, “Sanctity and Silence: the Religious Significance of Maimonides’ Negative Theology,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (2002), pp. 7-24.

²⁹ Donald McCallum, *Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed: Silence and Salvation* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 49.

³⁰ *Guide* I: 59, trans. Pines, p. 139.

demonstrate the futility of excessive loquacity in prayer.³¹ Confronted by a member of his congregation who added extra words in praise of God to the three mandated by Rabbinic tradition, namely “Great,” “Mighty,” and “Awe-inspiring,” Rabbi Haninah cautions that even these epithets “would not have been used by us, had not Moses uttered them and the men of the Great Synagogue instituted them as part of the liturgy.” To add more to these praises, he chides, “is as if a human king had thousands upon thousands of gold dinars, and one would praise him for his silver.”³² For Bahya and Maimonides, excessive speech and praise infringes on God’s transcendent ineffability.

According to Maimonides’ *Guide*, one achieves through the negation of attributes predicated of God in Scripture a “certain knowledge with regard to God’s being One by virtue of a true Oneness, so that no composition whatever is to be found in Him.”³³ This is what Maimonides calls the “highest rank of speculation” and must be directly opposed to the anthropomorphic concept of God achieved through a literal reading of Scripture. The silent praise of God which Maimonides’ advocates in his *Guide* is directly contrasted to the tendency towards prolixity in speech he identifies in the Judaism of his day. For this reason Maimonides criticises those “preachers and poets” who take God “for an object of study for their tongues” and utter “such rubbish and such perverse imaginings as to make men laugh when they hear them... and to make them weep when they consider that these utterances are applied to God.”³⁴

Maimonides is at pains throughout his *Guide* to stress how an understanding of Scripture through parabolic exegesis, especially as it relates to descriptions of God, must be understood. In this way Maimonides is able to explain the five different ways attributes

³¹ ibn Paquda, *al-Hidaya*, trans. Mansoor, *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, pp. 132-49.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Guide* I: 50, trans. Pines, p. 111.

³⁴ *Guide* I: 59, trans. Pines, p. 141.

might be predicated of God in Scripture (Partial and Full Definition, Qualification, Relation and Actional/Causative), ultimately concluding that we may only properly speak of what God causes.³⁵ More importantly, however, Maimonides stresses in the *Guide* that these attributes must also be understood equivocally. Attributes applied to God, he argues, cannot posit an essential sameness between God and other creatures, or an accidental similarity between God and creatures, insofar as God as a necessarily existent and totally uncaused being has no essential or accidental attributes with which to compare to similar predicates applied to beings other than God.³⁶ Thus, Maimonides argues that “God, may He be exalted, is *said* to be merciful... It is not that He, may he be exalted, is affected and has compassion.”³⁷

Yet equivocal attributes of action predicated of God for Maimonides need also to be understood negatively. Because Maimonides believes that God’s “existence is identical with His essence and His true reality, and His essence is His existence,” God must be understood as existing “not through an existence other than his essence.”³⁸ The attributes predicated of God in Scripture, which are “intended for the apprehension of His essence” and which properly include terms referring to notions such as “existence,” “unity,” “firstness,” “life,” “power” and “knowledge,” signify for Maimonides “the negation of the privation of the attribute in question.”³⁹ Maimonides asserts that when one describes God as powerful, knowing, and willing, “the intention in ascribing these attributes to Him is to signify that He is neither powerless nor ignorant nor inattentive nor negligent.”⁴⁰ But such terms are also equivocal. To explain God as powerful demonstrates not only that God is not weak (the privation of power), but also that God is not powerful in the same way that a

³⁵ Cf. *Guide* I: 52.

³⁶ *Guide* I: 56, trans. Pines, p. 131. Cf. Joseph A. Buijs, “A Maimonidean Critique of Thomistic Analogy,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 41 (2003), p. 457.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 130 (my emphasis).

³⁸ *Guide* I: 57, trans. Pines, p. 132.

³⁹ *Guide* I: 58, trans. Pines, p. 136. Cf. Wolfson, “Maimonides on Negative Attributes,” p. 197.

⁴⁰ *Guide* I: 58, trans. Pines, p. 136.

creature other than God is powerful. As Josef Stern argues, this strategy of negating the attributes of God in Maimonides' *Guide* should be understood as a "categorical" negative theology.⁴¹

This "categorical" negative theology of Maimonides, therefore, results in the "silent praise of God" of Psalms 64:2 as cited in the *Guide*. This silent praise offers a resounding corrective to the anthropomorphic tendencies of those who read Scripture uncritically. Maimonides sees in this process of negation the only sure means, in his famous parable of the palace, to approach a true understanding of God. Those who "come to be with the ruler [God] in the inner part of the habitation," therefore, are those who have "ascertained in divine matters, to the extent that that is possible, everything that may be ascertained."⁴² To do otherwise, is to fall into the trap of mental idolatry. Of these people, Maimonides writes:

someone who thinks frequently and mentions God, without knowledge, following a mere imagining or following a belief adopted because of his reliance on the authority of someone else, he... does not in true reality mention or think about God. For that thing which is in his imagination and which he mentions in his speech does not correspond to any being at all and has merely been invented by his imagination.⁴³

Thus, Maimonides is especially critical of those like the man in the Talmudic dictum of Rabbi Haninah (*Berakhot* 33b), cited in Book I Chapter 59 of the *Guide*, who are especially deserving of censure because they demean God by "the loosening of the tongue with regard to God, may He be exalted, and the predicating of Him qualificative

⁴¹ Stern, "Maimonides on Language," p. 209.

⁴² *Guide* III: 51, trans. Pines, p. 619.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 620.

attributions above which He is exalted.”⁴⁴ As Maimonides clarifies, “he who praises through speech only makes known what he has represented to himself.” Instead, one should “[praise] God and [make] known his wonders without speech of lip and tongue.”⁴⁵ Ultimately Maimonides believes that “men ought rather belong to the category of those who represent the truth [of God] to themselves and apprehend it, even if they do not utter it.”⁴⁶ All that suffices is “silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellect.”⁴⁷ Silence not only honours the divine but also staves off any mental idolatry which may result from a literal interpretation of God’s attributes and names encountered in Scripture.

The important teachings about the silent praise of God from the *Guide* which form the major focus of the engagement of both Aquinas and Eckhart in their own theological writing are twofold. First, Maimonides’ categorical negative theology which asserts that the attributes predicated of God in Scripture are equivocal and refer only to the negation of a privation. Second, the incomprehensibility and separateness of God are such that any form of speaking about the divine is liable to misdirect the understanding towards an incorrect anthropomorphic conception of divinity. This, in turn, hinders man’s ability to unite with God through the intellect.

Thomas Aquinas: Apophatic Silence between Dionysius and Maimonides

The ideas about silence present in the theological writing of Thomas Aquinas demonstrate the rediscovery of the silent praise of God identified by Maimonides, as well as the Neoplatonic apophaticism of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* taught by Albert the Great in his lectures. As Jean-Pierre Torrell notes, during his time at the *studium generale* at Cologne

⁴⁴ *Guide* I: 59, trans. Pines, p. 142.

⁴⁵ *Guide* II: 5, trans. Pines, p. 260.

⁴⁶ *Guide* I: 50, trans. Pines, p. 112.

⁴⁷ *Guide* I: 59, trans. Pines, p. 140.

under Albert from 1248-52, Aquinas was “deeply impregnated with Albert’s thought.”⁴⁸ Although his stay in Cologne was brief, and his fame as a theologian is tied to his activities at the University of Paris, Aquinas should be seen as connected to the German Dominican School.⁴⁹ This is because Aquinas displays many of the hallmarks of Albert’s pupils, especially in his adoption of Dionysian metaphysics and interest in the reconciliation of philosophy and theology.

One must be wary of seeing in Albert and Aquinas two competing paradigms of theological reflection. This seems to be the case for de Libera, who problematically characterizes the speculative school of Cologne centered on Albert the Great as opposed to the thought of Thomas Aquinas, arguing that “anti-Thomism” was one of the major characteristics of Rhineland Dominican thought.⁵⁰ In particular, de Libera highlights the opposition to Aquinas which he identifies in the thought of Dietrich of Freiburg and Meister Eckhart. Whilst it is true that Aquinas was not accepted without question by Dominican theologians, as Elizabeth Lowe has cogently demonstrated in her analysis of the work of Hervaeus Natalis and Durandus of St. Pourcain, there was a movement towards establishing Thomas as theologically orthodox for the Order of Preachers by the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁵¹ By 1313 the General Chapter of the Dominican Order declared that the *Summa theologiae* of Aquinas should enter the conventual syllabus alongside Peter Lombard’s *Sententiarum*, even if the Order did not adopt Thomistic theology as absolutely binding until 1325.⁵² Especially in the case of Eckhart, one can identify the influence of Thomistic vocabulary and ideas. So a discussion of Aquinas’

⁴⁸ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 25.

⁴⁹ Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, p. 313.

⁵⁰ Cf. de Libera, *Introduction à la mystique rhénane d’Albert le Grand à maître Eckhart*.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Lowe, *The Contested Theological Authority of Thomas Aquinas: The Controversies between Hervaeus Natalis and Durandus of St. Pourcain* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁵² Cf. Mulchahey, “*First the Bow is Bent in Study*,” pp. 141-60.

approach to silence is instructive, as Eckhart's own understanding of language about the divine is mediated by his joint reading of Aquinas and Maimonides.

Aquinas' attitude towards silence, just like his teacher Albert, is primarily mediated by the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Unlike Albert who lectured on the entirety of the *Corpus*, Aquinas only produced a single Dionysian commentary on the *De divinis nominibus*. Yet Aquinas is indebted throughout his writing to Dionysius, whom he cites 1,702 times across his many works, including 562 times in the *Summa theologiae*.⁵³ Cornelio Fabro has recognised in Aquinas' engagement with Dionysius that the Pseudo-Areopagite offers Aquinas the hermeneutical tools necessary to re-read Platonism and Aristotle through a Christian monotheistic lens.⁵⁴ Wayne J. Hankey has noted the important influence of Dionysius and Neoplatonism on Aquinas's overall theological system,⁵⁵ whilst for Fran O'Rourke Dionysius provided the ground for the development of Aquinas' metaphysics.⁵⁶

Mulchahey places the composition of Aquinas' commentary on the *De divinis nominibus* during the period that Aquinas acted as *lector* at the Dominican *studium* at Santa Sabina in Rome, from 1265-66.⁵⁷ During this time, as Leonard Boyle and Mark F. Johnson have argued, Aquinas was instituting a pedagogical renewal of Dominican education through the production of the first part of the *Summa theologiae*.⁵⁸ This means the composition of the *Summa* roughly parallels the creation of Ulrich of Strasbourg's *De summo bono*, the other great Dominican pedagogical treatise which emerged out of the

⁵³ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Aquinas's Summa: Background, Structure & Reception* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2005), p. 78.

⁵⁴ Cornelio Fabro, "Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Thomism: Convergencies and Divergencies," *The New Scholasticism* 44 (1970), p. 98.

⁵⁵ Wayne J. Hankey, *God in Himself: Aquinas' Doctrine of God as Expounded in the Summa Theologiae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 8.

⁵⁶ Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

⁵⁷ Mulchahey, "First the Bow is Bent in Study", p. 292.

⁵⁸ Cf. Leonard Boyle, *The Setting of the "Summa theologiae" of Saint Thomas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1982); Mark F. Johnson, "Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* as Pedagogy," in *Medieval Education*, ed. by Ronald B. Begley and Joseph W. Koterski (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 133-42.

Albertschule. The commentary itself, Mulchahey remarks, is divided into *lectiones* and demonstrates throughout “some of the textual hallmarks of the classroom,” affecting “the language of the scholastic lecturer and disputant.”⁵⁹ The subject matter of this Dionysian treatise also complemented the discussion of the validity of the different ways of predicating certain names of God in the lectures on *I Sententiarum* Aquinas completed in c.1265.⁶⁰ Similarly, discussions of the divine names also constitute an early question of the *Summa theologiae* (Ia, q. 12), produced in the same period. Undoubtedly, Aquinas came to rely so heavily on the *Corpus* in his writing because of Albert’s lectures, which likely set the precedent for Aquinas’ own discussion in his commentary. But Aquinas takes Dionysius further than Albert had, as is evident by his interpretation of Dionysian apophasis and silence.

For Aquinas silence indicated an inherent lack or limit on our part; silence signified the unknowable and inexpressible; it imposed itself where words can no longer go.⁶¹ In his commentary on the *Liber de causis* (Book of Causes), the translation of an Arabic treatise composed of excerpts from Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* and attributed to Aristotle, Aquinas explains why this is so. Constituting Aquinas’ most mature reflection on Neoplatonic themes, it was composed sometime after 1268, when William of Moerbeke had translated Proclus’ *Elements* into Latin from the Greek. Importantly, Aquinas was also the first to call into question the attribution of the *Liber* to Aristotle.⁶²

The sixth proposition of the *Liber* argues that “the first cause transcends description,” and that “languages fail in describing it only because of the description of its

⁵⁹ Mulchahey, “First the Bow is Bent in Study”, p. 292.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Tiziana Suarez-Nani, “Faire parler le silence: à propos d’un paradoxe dans la pensée médiéval,” *Micrologus XVIII: Il silenzio/ The Silence* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2010), p. 273.

⁶² Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, p. 222.

being.”⁶³ Aquinas relates this proposition throughout his works to the negative theology of Dionysius.⁶⁴ In his commentary on the sixth proposition, Aquinas explains that “the most important thing we can know about the first cause is that it surpasses all our knowledge and powers of expression.”⁶⁵ This, Aquinas elaborates, is what Dionysius wished to express in his *De coelesti hierarchia*, when he argued that “negations in divine things are true, while affirmations are incongruous or unsuitable.”⁶⁶ Aquinas relates the term *narratione*, that is “description,” with *affirmatio*, affirmation. Because affirmation and description are only possible through speech, Aquinas argues that the author of the *Liber de causis* demonstrates that “since [the First Cause] transcends description, speech does not reach it.”⁶⁷ This is so, as speech is only possible through the intellect, which is expressed through “meaningful sounds.”⁶⁸ These sounds, Aquinas explains, result from the process of reasoning, and ultimately lead to meditation, which Aquinas understands as a mental process which works “through imagination and the remaining internal sense powers that serve human reason.”⁶⁹ This mental procession cannot occur regarding the First Cause, which transcends knowledge. Aquinas links this directly with the thought of Dionysius, who:

asserts this as well in Chapter 1 of *On the Divine Names*, saying: “And there is neither sense of [God] nor imagination,” which our author [of the *Liber de causis*] calls *meditation*, “nor opinion,” which he calls *reason*, “nor name,”

⁶³ Thomas Aquinas, *Super librum de causis expositio*, ed. and trans. Vincent A. Guagliardo, Charles R. Hess and Richard C. Taylor, *Commentary on the Book of Causes* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 45.

⁶⁴ Cf. *Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate* q. 2, a. 1, and discussion below.

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *Super librum de Causis Expositio*, trans. Guagliardo, Hess and Taylor, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, p. 46.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 47.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 45.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 49.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 50.

which he calls *speech*, “nor discourse,” which he calls *description*, “nor science,” which he calls intelligence.⁷⁰

Aquinas’ interpretation of Dionysius as presented here seems to correlate with that of Albert. It is because of the inability of apprehending *what* God is, he argues, that one must fall into silence. However, as is evident through an examination of Aquinas’ in-depth reading of Dionysius in the commentary on *De divinis nominibus*, he further develops Albert’s thoughts regarding silence. For instance, Aquinas argues that as a result of God’s ineffable transcendence, one must maintain, or fall into, silence, whereas for Albert silence was only the inability to comprehend God. At the very beginning of his commentary, in Chapter I, Lectio II, n. 44, Aquinas outlines how Dionysius enjoins men to “send ourselves out to the divine illuminations” through the observation of divine law. In this way, man must venerate “the unspeakableness of the deity by chaste silence, which [Dionysius] says since we venerate things when we do not scrutinize them and ineffabilities when we do not speak of them.”⁷¹ Aquinas writes in Chapter XI, Lectio II, n. 894, that Dionysius says “that it is neither lawful nor possible, not only to some human beings but also to any created existents, to say, to utter, and to think in the heart the divine peace itself.”⁷² This is so, Aquinas explains, “since we can neither utter God nor does God speak to us such that we can know God perfectly according to what God is.”⁷³

Yet, like Albert, Aquinas ultimately argues that knowledge of the insufficiency of language does not simply result in silence. Rather, for Aquinas, it leads to the necessity of exploring different possible languages which can be used to discuss and praise the divine. In his *Summa theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 91, a.1 Aquinas considers whether prayer for God

⁷⁰ Ibid. (emphasis present)

⁷¹ Thomas Aquinas, *In librum Beati Dionysii de Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, trans. Harry Clarke Marsh, Jr., *Cosmic Structure and the Knowledge of God: Thomas Aquinas’ In Librum beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus expositio*, (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1994), p. 278.

⁷² Ibid, p. 515.

⁷³ Ibid.

should be vocal. He writes that one can speak of God in two ways. “First,” Aquinas explains, one may speak of God “with regard to His essence; and thus He is incomprehensible and ineffable, and He is above all praise.”⁷⁴ The second way of speaking about God is accomplished “as to His effects which are ordained for our good. In this respect we owe Him praise.”⁷⁵ This second mode of speaking Aquinas relates to Dionysius’ arguments in the *De divinis nominibus* that “all sacred hymns...of the sacred writers’ are directed to God.” Ultimately, he concludes, “we need to praise God with our lips, as man will, in doing so, ascend in his affections towards God.”⁷⁶ However, this is mostly the case for efficacy in prayer. As Aquinas clarifies, “it profits one nothing to praise with the lips if one praises not with the heart.”⁷⁷

The first way of speaking about God, which is ultimately silent praise of the divine, is identified by Aquinas as that taught by Psalms 64:2 in the translation of Jerome’s *Hebraica*. Aquinas seems to be the first in the Latin West to make this claim in a theological treatise.⁷⁸ He may do so because of his reading of Maimonides. Yet Aquinas never ties this Psalm to the *Guide* and as his prologue to his *Commentaries on the Psalms* indicates, he was well versed in both the *Gallicana* and *Hebraica* Psalters.⁷⁹ It is also quite plausible that Aquinas gained his knowledge of the different versions of Jerome’s Psalter

⁷⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *STh IIa IIae*, q. 91, a. 1, ad. 1, trans. Laurence Shapcote, in *Summa Theologiae, Secunda Secundae, 1-91*, ed. by John Mortenson and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, Wyoming: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), p. 848. This edition of the *Summa* is based upon that of the *Corpus Thomisticum*, available online at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/>

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, q. 91, a. 1, ad. 2.

⁷⁸ According to a search of the Brepols Library of Latin Texts A and B, the phrase “tibi silens laus Deus” does not occur after Jerome’s use in the *Hebraica* Psalter in any scholastic treatises until Aquinas. Of course, such a search is only suggestive, as these libraries are far from complete.

⁷⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Postilla super Psalmos*, trans. Hugh McDonald, *The Aquinas Translation Project*, <http://www4.desales.edu/~philtheo/loughlin/ATP/Proemium.html> [accessed 18th Feb, 2015].

by reading the Dominican *correctoria* and *concordia* of the Bible, such as that produced under the direction of Hugh of St. Cher at the convent of St. Jacques in Paris c. 1240s.⁸⁰

Aquinas expounds further upon the meaning of Psalms 64:2 in his *Super Boethium de trinitate*, arguing that the proper mode of honouring the divine is by means of silence. This, he relates to Dionysius:

all honor ought to be given to God: but divine mysteries are honored by silence; wherefore Dionysius says at the close of Coel. hier.: “Honoring by silence the hidden truth which is above us”; and with this there agrees what is said in Psalm 64, according to the text of Jerome: “Praise grows silent before You, O God,” that is, silence itself is Your praise, O God; therefore we ought to refrain ourselves in silence from searching into divine truths.⁸¹

At this moment, Aquinas seems to fall more in line with Albert. He argues that the silent praise of God entails that “God is honored by silence, but not in such a way that we may say nothing of Him or make no inquiries about Him, but, inasmuch as we understand that we lack ability to comprehend Him.”⁸² In his *Summa contra gentiles* Aquinas, like Albert before him, advocates the method of remotion, arguing that “we are able to have some knowledge of [God’s essence] by knowing *what it is not*” and that “we approach nearer to a knowledge of God according as through our intellect we are able to remove more and more things from Him.”⁸³ In his commentary on the *De divinis nominibus*, Aquinas explains that Dionysius understood this as the mode by which the angels praised the

⁸⁰ Cornelia Linde, *How to Correct the Sacra Scriptura: Textual Criticism of the Latin Bible Between the Twelfth and Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 23-6; Richard Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, “The Verbal Concordance to the Scripture,” *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 44 (1974), pp. 5-30.

⁸¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate* q. 2, a. 1, arg. 6, trans. Rose E. Brennan, *The Trinity and the Unicity of Intellect* (St. Louis: Herder, 1946). E-Text available at www.dhspriority.org/thomas/BoethiusDeTr.htm [accessed Feb 18th, 2015].

⁸² *Ibid.*, q. 2, a. 1, r. 6, trans. Brennan, *The Trinity and the Unicity of Intellect*.

⁸³ Thomas Aquinas, *SCG I: 14, a. 2*, trans. Anton C. Pegis, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 96.

divine. For, “the minds of the saints conformed to God... according to the imitation of the angels... as far as it is possible in this life, praise God most properly through remotion from all existents.”⁸⁴ Thus, as Aquinas clarifies in the *Summa contra gentiles*:

if we say that God is not an accident, we thereby distinguish Him from all accidents. Then, if we add that He is not a body, we shall further distinguish Him from certain substances. And thus, proceeding in order, by such negations God will be distinguished from all that He is not. Finally, there will then be a proper consideration of God’s substance when He will be known as distinct from all things. Yet, this knowledge will not be perfect, since it will not tell us what God is in Himself.⁸⁵

As in the writing of Albert and Ulrich, the rhetoric of inexpressibility emerges in Aquinas as a statement of God’s unknowability. Aquinas develops this rhetoric, however, by employing Psalms 64:2 in his theology to indicate that at the same time one should not speak about the ineffable divinity. For Aquinas, the transcendent divine could not really be understood or described. Silence, therefore, was necessary in order to honour the divine.

Aquinas does not draw any fast connections between the silent praise of God and Maimonides. Despite this, as Avital Wohlman and Ruedi Imbach have both argued, the sections where Aquinas draws upon the tradition of the *via negativa*, especially in the *Summa contra gentiles*, were composed with Maimonides’ *Guide* on hand.⁸⁶ However, Aquinas is heavily critical of Maimonides’ negative theology in his *Summa theologiae*. “*Raby Moyses*” is identified with those who, according to Aquinas in Ia. q. 13 a. 2,

⁸⁴ Aquinas, *Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, trans. Marsh, Jr., *Cosmic Structure and the Knowledge of God*, p. 291.

⁸⁵ Aquinas, *SCG I*: 14, a. 3, trans. Pegis, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, p. 97.

⁸⁶ Cf. Avital Wohlman, *Thomas d’Aquin et Maïmonide : Un dialogue exemplaire* (Paris : Éditions du cerf, 1988), pp. 106-64; Ruedi Imbach, “*Ut ait Rabbi Moyses : Maimonidische Philosopheme bei Thomas von Aquin und Meister Eckhart*,” *Collectanea Franciscana* 60 (1990), pp. 99-115.

advocate a negative understanding of attributes applied to God. For Aquinas, reflecting on the “absolute and affirmative names of God” like “wise” and “good,” places Maimonides amongst those who taught that such names “although they are applied to God affirmatively, nevertheless have been brought into use more to express some remoteness from God, rather than to express anything that exists positively in him.”⁸⁷ Aquinas explains, therefore, “when we say that God lives, we mean that God is not like an inanimate thing; and the same in like manner applies to other names.”⁸⁸ Aquinas recognised that for Maimonides affirmations predicated of God simply indicate the privation of a negation. Aquinas believes that this doctrine is implausible, as is the view, also discussed by him in the same article, that affirmative predications signify the relation of God to creatures as supreme cause.⁸⁹

Aquinas instead contends “that these names signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full representation of him.”⁹⁰ This rebuttal to Maimonides needs to be seen, therefore, in the light of Aquinas’ understanding presented above that the silent praise of God is the recognition only that it is impossible to know God’s quiddity. Aquinas argues that “these names express God, so far as our intellects know Him” and “since our intellect knows Him from creatures, it knows Him as far as creatures represent Him.”⁹¹ As a result, to predicate any affirmation of the divinity such as “good,” is to recognize that the attribute affirmed of God “pre-exists in God, and in a more excellent and higher way,” than its imperfect expression in creatures.⁹² To call God “good,” as Aquinas understands it, does not demonstrate the privation of evil

⁸⁷ Aquinas, *STh* Ia. q. 13. a. 2, c.o, trans. Laurence Shapcote, in *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars, 1-49*, ed. by John Mortenson and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, Wyoming: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), p. 124.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

or that God has caused goodness, but instead stresses that goodness flows from God because he most properly possesses goodness.⁹³ This is Aquinas' celebrated doctrine of analogy, which builds upon the apophatic position of Dionysius as explained by Albert the Great.⁹⁴ For this reason, Aquinas does not avow the negativity of Maimonides, and does not relate it to Psalms 64:2. Instead Aquinas introduces the Psalm to highlight the understanding of silence he develops in response to his reading of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

The Scholastic Eckhart: Rabbi Moses and the Silent Praise of God

Unlike Aquinas, Meister Eckhart readily adopts the silent praise of God which Maimonides expresses in his *Guide of the Perplexed*.⁹⁵ As Bernard McGinn argues, "no Christian author of the Middle Ages... knew Maimonides better or reflected greater sympathy for his views than did Meister Eckhart."⁹⁶ For Yossef Schwartz, "Eckhart's encounter with Maimonides... is most fascinating precisely because it does not present some simple case of 'influence'... [but] instead confronts us with a most rich and complex intellectual encounter."⁹⁷ Eckhart cites Psalms 64:2 in Jerome's *Hebraica* translation a number of times throughout the scriptural commentaries of his theological masterwork the *Opus tripartitum* (Three-part Work) which he explicitly links to Maimonides' *Guide*.

Little is known about Meister Eckhart's early life, but he was a renowned theologian and preacher in his day.⁹⁸ He likely began his education in the Dominican

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Cf. Victor M. Salas Jr., "Albert the Great and "Univocal Analogy,"" *Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2013), pp. 611-35; Bruno Tremblay, "A First Glance at Albert the Great's Teaching on the Analogy of Words," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5 (1996), pp. 265-92.

⁹⁵ Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart: Die Geburt der <<Deutschen Mystik>> aus dem Geist der arabischen Philosophie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2006), p. 145.

⁹⁶ Bernard McGinn introduction to *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. by Bernard McGinn and Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 17. Hereafter *Teacher and Preacher*.

⁹⁷ Yossef Schwartz, "Meister Eckhart and Moses Maimonides: From Judaeo-Arabic Rationalism to Christian Mysticism," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. by Jeremiah Hackett (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 390.

⁹⁸ For the biography of Meister Eckhart, see Walter Senner, "Meister Eckhart's Life, Training, Career, and Trial," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Hackett, pp. 7-84; Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of*

convent at Erfurt, before being sent c. 1280s to the *studium generale* in Cologne where he may have possibly made the acquaintance of Albert the Great. Eckhart spent several years as Master of Theology at the University of Paris, holding the chair of the Dominican Order there on two separate occasions, and was entrusted with many administrative positions in his native Germany. During these periods Eckhart composed the vernacular and Latin treatises and sermons that contained his challenging mystical doctrine. Towards the end of his life, Eckhart was accused of heresy by the Archbishop of Cologne, Henry of Firneburg. Because of these accusations, he travelled in 1327 to stand trial before the Papal courts in Avignon, where in 1328 he passed away quietly in his sleep after a spirited defence of his teachings. The following year Eckhart was formally censured by Pope John XXII, in the papal bull of 1329, *In agro dominico*, for spreading teaching that was “evil-sounding, rash, and suspect of heresy,” including many of his radically apophatic statements.⁹⁹

Eckhart develops two primary ideas from his reading of Maimonides’ *Guide*, which complemented the Neoplatonic ideas he had inherited from his Dominican predecessors Albert and Aquinas. The first was his understanding of the intellect as the divine essence in humans, derived from Maimonides’ explanation in the *Guide* about the different levels of human intellectual conception and the relationship between comprehension based upon natural reason and that achieved through prophetic revelation and the divine will.¹⁰⁰ The second idea which Eckhart adopted from the *Guide* was the limitation of language about the divine when it comes to describe the transcendent, which in turn reflects the limitations of human perfections and the attributes and names of God

Meister Eckhart: the Man from whom God hid Nothing (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 1-19.

⁹⁹ *In agro dominico*, trans. McGinn, *Essential Eckhart*, pp. 77-81. See also Bernard McGinn, “‘Evil-sounding, Rash, and Suspect of Heresy’: Tensions Between Mysticism and Magisterium in the History of the Church,” *Catholic Historical Review* 90 (2004), pp. 193-212.

¹⁰⁰ Yossef Schwartz, *Lekha dumiyah! Maister Ekhart kore be-Moreh ha-nevukhim* (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘oved, 2002), p. 154. I thank Merav Carmeli for assisting me with the translation of this work from the Hebrew.

predicated in Scripture.¹⁰¹ By integrating the debates about these topics in the *Guide* with the ideas Eckhart gained from the Dionysian tradition of apophatic theology as offered in the writing of the German Dominican School, Eckhart crafted his own “dialectical” theology of silence which built upon that which he encountered in Maimonides, Dionysius and Aquinas.¹⁰²

The reliance of the Meister upon the *Guide* is evident from the 119 times the treatise is cited throughout the entirety of Eckhart’s existing Latin corpus, second only to his use of Augustine (567) and Aristotle (206) and far exceeding his citations of other philosophical and theological sources, including Aquinas (65) and Dionysius (21).¹⁰³ As Schwartz notes, Eckhart often prefers to quote or paraphrase Maimonides as the main authority on commonplace philosophical arguments, even when other Arab or even Latin sources are available.¹⁰⁴ It is particularly striking, given the conviction amongst scholars that there exists a strong link between the Meister and the Dionysian *Corpus*, based upon the superiority of the apophatic way in Eckhart’s writing and his interest in mystical union with the divine, that Maimonides’ *Guide* often serves in Eckhart’s Latin scholastic treatises as the main authority for arguments about contemplative union and the negation of divine language.¹⁰⁵ When Eckhart does cite from the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, his principal concern is to explain the intellectual union of man with God, although his scant citations from the

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, pp. 90-100.

¹⁰³ Schwartz, “Meister Eckhart and Moses Maimonides,” p. 392; Diana di Segni, ““verba sunt Rabbi Moysis”: Eckhart e Maimonide,” in *Studi sulle fonti di Meister Eckhart*, ed. by Loris Sturlese, vol. 2 (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2012), pp. 103- 40.

¹⁰⁴ Schwartz, “Meister Eckhart and Moses Maimonides,” p. 393.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Kurt Ruh, “Dionysius Areopagita im deutschen Predigtwerk Meister Eckharts,” in *Perspektiven der Philosophie: Neues Jahrbuch 13*, ed. by Rudolph Erlinger (Würzburg: Agora, 1987), pp. 207-23; Kurt Ruh, *Meister Eckhart: Theologe, Prediger, Mystiker* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1985), pp. 47-59.

De mystica theologia (there are only five) take up the themes of apophatic silence and unknowing.¹⁰⁶

Maimonides also offers to Eckhart the parabolic hermeneutic which forms the interpretative principle for Eckhart's scriptural commentaries.¹⁰⁷ The commentaries which make up the majority of Eckhart's *Opus tripartitum* provide an exposition of larger theological and philosophical themes present throughout the Bible and consist of verses selected by Eckhart "in order to bring to light the more hidden sense of some things contained in them in parabolic fashion."¹⁰⁸ Eckhart presents the verses of Scripture as golden apples laced with silver mesh, a metaphor which he adopts from Maimonides' *Guide*.¹⁰⁹ Eckhart explains, paraphrasing Maimonides, that "every parable has two faces... the external face must be beautiful in order to attract; the interior must be more beautiful."¹¹⁰ Furthermore, Eckhart does not offer glosses on the entirety of any book in his scriptural commentaries, but instead focuses on presenting selective verses and the "more useful authoritative interpretations" which he has taken from "the saints and venerable teachers, particularly Brother Thomas [Aquinas]."¹¹¹ The *Opus tripartitum*, therefore, is presented by the Meister as a synthetic scriptural commentary meant to elaborate upon the works of his predecessors and reveal the hidden philosophical truths within Scripture.

¹⁰⁶ Elisa Rubino, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Eckhart," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Hackett, pp. 299-309; Elisa Rubino, "'Dâ von spricht der liechte Dionysius': Meister Eckhart e Dionigi Areopagita," in *Studi sulle fonti di Meister Eckhart*, ed. by Loris Sturlese, vol. 1 (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2008), pp. 113-33.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart: Philosoph des Christentums* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009), pp. 142-59; Yossef Schwartz, "Zwischen Einheitsmetaphysik und Einheitshermeneutik: Eckharts Maimonides-Lektüre und das Datierungsproblem des 'Opus Tripartitum,'" in *Meister Eckhart in Erfurt*, ed. by Andreas Speer and Lydia Wegener (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 259-67.

¹⁰⁸ *Par. Gen.*, n.1, trans. McGinn, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *Guide I*: Introduction, trans. Pines, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ *Par. Gen.*, n.1, trans. McGinn, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 92.

¹¹¹ *In. Gen.*, Prologue, trans. McGinn, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 82.

In his *Expositio libri exodi* (Commentary on the Book of Exodus) Eckhart presents Maimonides' arguments about silence and negation as part of his commentary on the verses *Almighty is his name* (Ex. 15: 3) and *You shall not take the name of your God in vain* (Ex. 20:7). According to McGinn, whilst the "whole surviving corpus" of Eckhart's work explores the issue of how language comes to be used of God, only these verses are meant by Eckhart "to be taken together as a single extended treatise on [the] key theological issue, *De Nominibus Dei*, 'On the Names of God.'"¹¹² His decision to do so, Eckhart tells us, is "because Thomas [Aquinas] in [*Summa theologiae*] 1a, q. 13 bases his treatment of the names of God" on the same verse.¹¹³ This fits in with Eckhart's stated intention in the Prologue of the *Opus tripartitum* that he will build upon the work of his Dominican forbear and has led McGinn to argue that the discussion of divine language in the Meister's work on Exodus "might best be described as a three-way conversation among Rabbi Moses, Friar Thomas, and Eckhart."¹¹⁴ The discussion includes long paraphrases and citations from the *Guide* Book I, Chapters 50-61. Eckhart adapts the extreme metaphysics of transcendence of Maimonides and advocates his austere and strict theology of categorical negation. Yet, even as Eckhart accepted the ideas he found in the *Guide*, he would repeatedly direct them beyond their original formulations and meanings.¹¹⁵

Eckhart cites with approval "the opinion of Rabbi Moses who in *Guide* 1: 57 says: 'know that a negative proposition concerning the Creator is true; there is nothing doubtful nor does it detract from the Creator's truth in any way.'¹¹⁶ He concludes with Maimonides that "all positive statements about God are improper expressions, since they posit nothing

¹¹² Bernard McGinn, introduction to *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 4. See also McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p. 90; Tobin, *Thought and Language*, pp. 65-9.

¹¹³ *In. Ex.*, n. 34, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 53.

¹¹⁴ McGinn, introduction to *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 17.

¹¹⁵ Schwartz, "Meister Eckhart and Moses Maimonides," p. 400.

¹¹⁶ *In. Ex.*, n. 37, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 54. Cf. *Guide* I: 58.

in him.”¹¹⁷ Following Maimonides, Eckhart argues that affirmations predicated of God, unless they are understood as deriving from God’s actions, are “unsuitable, improper and not in keeping with the truth.”¹¹⁸ Like Maimonides, the Meister believes that whatever perfections are attributed to humans are no longer perfections when attributed to God.¹¹⁹ This is so, because God must be understood as incorporeal, as having no mutability or potentiality that is not in act, as having no privation or lack and as being entirely dissimilar from creatures.¹²⁰

However, Eckhart does qualify the negative arguments of Maimonides’ *Guide* by introducing the notion of “indistinct-distinction.” As God is the source of all being, Eckhart argues that “what is separate and distinct from God is separate and distinct from existence.”¹²¹ Insofar as it is impossible to compare anything to itself, God who is everything cannot be compared to anything. Eckhart stresses, therefore, that there is no true ontological differentiation between God and creation. God emerges then, not as unnameable, but as “omni-nameable,” for “the superior is not deprived of the inferior’s perfections, but precontains them in a more excellent way.”¹²² Eckhart reiterates the opinion of Aquinas that the attributes of God have a true foundation in the overflow of the divine nature.¹²³ In one of the Latin sermons that he likely delivered to his colleagues at Paris, Eckhart argues that “a person who truly loves God... no longer cares about or values God’s omnipotence or wisdom because these are multiple and refer to multiplicity.”¹²⁴ These claims lead Eckhart to advocate on occasion analogy rather than negative

¹¹⁷ *In. Ex.*, n. 44, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 57.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *In. Ex.* n. 40, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 55.

¹²² *In. Ex.*, n. 35, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 54.

¹²³ Tobin, *Thought and Language*, p. 43.

¹²⁴ Sermon XXIX, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 224.

theology.¹²⁵ For instance, Eckhart claims in his *Expositio libri exodi* that “affirmation, since it belongs to existence, is proper to God and divine things insofar as they are divine,” whereas, “negation is not proper, but foreign to him.”¹²⁶

Eckhart’s claim that “negation is not proper” does not mean that the Meister has abandoned negative theology. Rather, Eckhart builds Aquinas’ criticism of Maimonides’ categorical method of negation and preference for analogy into his own dialectical response to both figures. This is his celebrated doctrine of the *negatio negationis* (the negation of negation). Eckhart argues that the negation of negation achieves the fullest affirmation of God as Existence Itself by excluding the predication of “nothing” from God and denying that in God there is any privation.¹²⁷ As McGinn explains, in his claim that negation is not proper what the Meister means to imply is that no negation should be applied to “God *in himself* to whom only the negation of negation pertains.”¹²⁸ Eckhart thus concludes in his *Expositio libri sapientiae* (Commentary on the Book of Wisdom), “the term ‘one’ is a negative word, but is in reality affirmative” and that “it is the negation of negation which is the purest form of affirmation and the fullness of the term affirmed.”¹²⁹

Later in the *Expositio libri exodi*, Eckhart returns to a more explicit negative way based upon Maimonides. He explains that negations do not “produce knowledge” of something’s essence, or any accidents or properties attached to that essence, but rather “signify only the removal or privation of a perfection.”¹³⁰ Eckhart concludes with Maimonides that “we do not have any way to speak about God except through

¹²⁵ On Eckhart’s understanding of analogy as mediated by Aquinas and its relationship to negative theology, see Burkhardt Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart: Analogy, univocity, and unity*, trans. Orrin F. Summerell, (Philadelphia: B. R. Gruner, 2001).

¹²⁶ *In. Ex.*, n. 77, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 69.

¹²⁷ See Tobin, *Thought and Language*, p. 75.

¹²⁸ McGinn, notes to *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 136, n. 185.

¹²⁹ *In. Sap.*, n. 147, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 167-68.

¹³⁰ *In. Ex.*, n. 179, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 100.

negatives.”¹³¹ For “negations... only show that nothing of what is found in external things and grasped by the senses is in [God].”¹³² This leads Eckhart to assert the categorical negativity of Maimonides’ *Guide*, demonstrating that negative attribution when applied to God shows “that something exists in God... that excludes ignorance [and] capacity to change... just as light does darkness and good evil.”¹³³ For this reason, “whatever you add by way of negative names with respect to the Creator you come nearer to grasping him” than one who has not learnt “how to remove from God the perfections and attributes that have been proven to be far from him.”¹³⁴

Given this need to negate the names of God in order to grasp the truth of the divine essence, Eckhart concurs with Maimonides that “it is dangerous, harmful, and unfitting to hear someone piling up words about God, even in prayer, due to the imperfection which names and words entail and their distance from God’s simplicity.”¹³⁵ In support of this, Eckhart introduces Psalms 64:2, noting that “where we [ie. the Christian community] have ‘A hymn is fitting for you, O God,’ the text of Rabbi Moses has, ‘Silence is praise for you,’ or ‘To be silent is praise for you.’”¹³⁶ Unlike Aquinas, therefore, Eckhart demonstrates his recovery of the silent praise of God as being derived from his reading of the *Guide* and uses the verse to explain the negative theology he has adopted from his Jewish predecessor. Citing Maimonides’ own reading of the significance of the Psalm, Eckhart concludes:

“our every affirmative apprehension of God... is defective for drawing near to understanding him... Whatever we say of God in praise and exaltation...

¹³¹ *In. Ex.*, n. 178, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 99.

¹³² *In. Ex.*, n. 179, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 100.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *In. Ex.*, n. 183, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 101, citing *Guide* I: 58.

¹³⁵ *In. Ex.*, n. 174, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 98.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

diminishes what belongs to him and is a defect,” or withdrawal from knowing him.”¹³⁷

Eckhart cites Psalms 64:2 once again in his *Expositio libri sapientiae* and links it to Maimonides in a long list of biblical proof-texts for his commentary on Ws. 18:14-15.¹³⁸ Eckhart argues that “Wisdom comes into the mind when the soul rests from the turmoils of the passions and concern for worldly things, when all things are silent to it and it is silent to all.”¹³⁹ Thus, “it is necessary that rest and ‘silence keep all things’ so that God the Word can come into the mind through grace and that the Son can be born in the soul.”¹⁴⁰ Eckhart further notes that “all things are silent separately when particular created distinct things are silent to the soul.”¹⁴¹ He provides four reasons why this is so. Firstly, because God, by being above all things and yet existing in and as everything, is not particular and cannot come into a soul which is particular. Secondly, because God is uncreated and a non-silent soul is created. Thirdly, what loves indistinction and the Indistinct (God) cannot be distinct or love distinction (as the non-silent soul separate from the Word does). Fourthly, because the soul is naturally attracted to what is simply and absolutely good, ie. God. Eckhart argues that the verse explains why it is also necessary “that God and the Son may be born in us by coming into our mind.”¹⁴² This is because the Son is the image of the Father, and “the soul is [created] according to God’s image.”

The inner silence, or stillness, which allows for the Son to be born in the mind is only possible, Eckhart argues, without any medium. This idea became one of the principal arguments for the importance of maintaining inner silence for the Rhineland Dominicans of the fourteenth century and their followers. There can be no medium, Eckhart argues,

¹³⁷ Ibid, pp. 98-9.

¹³⁸ *In. Sap.*, n. 285, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 173.

¹³⁹ *In. Sap.*, n. 280, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 171.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 172.

¹⁴¹ *In. Sap.*, n. 282, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 172.

¹⁴² *In. Sap.*, n. 283, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 172.

“because existence of its nature is the First and the Last, the beginning and end, never the medium.”¹⁴³ Instead, Eckhart explains that it is “the Medium Itself by whose sole mediation all things are, are present within, and are loved or sought.”¹⁴⁴ However, God is “Existence Itself” and not “the Medium Itself.”¹⁴⁵ Eckhart further states that anyone who “loves a medium or even beholds a medium” is incapable of loving, seeing, or attaining God. For this reason, Eckhart argues that “those who accept theophanies are in general rightfully condemned, and even those who believe that God is seen in some way by means of a likeness are condemned by the more subtle theologians.”¹⁴⁶ Finally, Eckhart concludes “that it is contrary to the concept of a medium that anything is silent or at rest in it.”¹⁴⁷ As such, “it is necessary that the very idea of a medium be removed, given up, be silent and at rest so that the soul can rest in God.”¹⁴⁸

Unlike in his use of Maimonides’ silent praise of God in the *Expositio libri exodi*, Eckhart’s understanding of silence here does not refer to any cessation of speech or thought. As Anastasia Wendlinder notes, silence here refers instead “to an awareness of the silence permeating and lying at the centre of each word, each thought, and each creature.”¹⁴⁹ This is the silence of contemplative union which lies at the heart of the German Dominican School’s rhetoric of inexpressibility. It is the light “that shines in the darkness,” namely, “in a silence and stillness apart from the commotion of creatures.”¹⁵⁰ Here silence has a soteriological purpose where the one who listens to the divine Word of God in silence becomes transformed through the divine silence itself. In this sense, Eckhart looks back to Augustine, whose ninth book of the *Confessiones* he quotes at length: “if the

¹⁴³ *In. Sap.*, n. 284, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 173.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Cf. *In. Ex.*, n. 34, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 53.

¹⁴⁶ *In. Sap.*, n. 284, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 173.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Wendlinder, *Speaking of God in Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart*, p. 188.

¹⁵⁰ *In. Jn.*, n. 80, trans. McGinn, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 151.

soul be silent to itself and by not thinking of itself transcend itself... he may speak alone through himself in order that we may hear his Word.”¹⁵¹ It also echoes the “dark night of the soul” which Dionysius describes in the invocation to the Trinity of *De mystica theologia*, which Eckhart cites in his commentary on Ex. 20:21.¹⁵²

The Meister, therefore, develops an understanding of negation grounded in his reading of Maimonides’ *Guide* and a theology of silence rooted in the apophatic moment of the Dionysian ascent. This is in contrast to Thomas Aquinas, who saw silence purely in Dionysian terms, especially as mediated by Albert’s argument that God’s ineffability and unknowability refer to the inability to comprehend the divine quiddity. The rhetoric of inexpressibility in Eckhart, furthermore, is tied explicitly to the practice of silently praising God, whereas Aquinas advocated in his theological writing an analogical understanding of language about the divine, even if he occasionally recommended silence. However, Eckhart is not disagreeing with his Dominican predecessor, as his hermeneutical project seeks to build directly upon Aquinas’ own understanding of divine language. This is why Eckhart promotes alongside Maimonides’ negative theology the “indistinct-distinction” of a God who is “omni-nameable” rather than “unnameable.” This theology of silent praise in Eckhart is ultimately grounded in soteriological concerns; it is a silence that must be practiced. This is exactly the message the Meister taught in his vernacular sermons to the pious laity of the fourteenth century Rhineland.

¹⁵¹ *In. Sap.*, n. 280, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 171.

¹⁵² *In. Ex.*, n. 237, trans. McGinn, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 118.

Chapter Four

Preaching Silence: Detachment, Negation and Spiritual Poverty in Rhineland Mysticism

The soteriological understanding of silence which Meister Eckhart advocated in his scholastic writing as a result of his reading of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* also played a major role in his sermons in the vernacular. Eckhart adopted the "silent praise of God" throughout his preaching as a metaphor for his important teaching about spiritual detachment. Eckhart's major contribution to the German Dominican rhetoric of inexpressibility was that silence was not only the appropriate response to God's ineffability and transcendence, or an explanation for how to properly (un)know and understand God. Rather, for Eckhart inner silence emerged in his German sermons as a spiritual practice, born out of his desire to teach a life of detachment to those desiring direct union with divinity. Inner silence, alongside spiritual poverty, became one of the key components of the characteristic mysticism of the Rhineland which was taught by Eckhart and which was championed by his disciples Henry Suso (c.1295-1366) and Johannes Tauler (c.1300-1361) after his condemnation for heresy in 1329. The discussion of silence in Eckhart's sermons, therefore, witnesses the Meister's adaption for the pulpit of ideas originally explored in the milieu of scholastic debate.

This chapter explores the way that Eckhart and his disciples Suso and Tauler developed silence as one of the metaphors they used for spiritual detachment. I begin by explaining the general program of Eckhart's vernacular sermons and how the change in audience explains the different emphasis the Meister puts upon his teaching. Silence in Eckhart's vernacular theology emerged in the context of his teaching on detachment; that the soul must be free from images in a state of spiritual poverty which consisted in wanting, knowing and having nothing. I argue that Eckhart offered inner silence in his

German sermons as a metaphor for this state, especially the soteriological understanding of silence which he constructed in his scholastic writing. This teaching about inner silence came to be modified by Eckhart's students Suso and Tauler, who emphasised the devotional and practical dimensions of spiritual detachment. In a short analysis of texts that emerged from lay circles in medieval Germany, I conclude by demonstrating that the rhetoric of inexpressibility which the German Dominican School advocated in their writing transformed the practice of silence into a necessary spiritual virtue.

Detachment and Spiritual Poverty in the Vernacular Theology of Meister Eckhart

The Rhineland at the turn of the fourteenth century provides a useful case study for the attempt by preachers like Meister Eckhart to put their rhetoric of inexpressibility into practice. The period witnesses an explosion of vernacular literature which discusses the need for silence.¹ The Dominican and lay communities, especially the pious women known as Beguines, negotiated amongst themselves a new apophatic spirituality which sought to move beyond the established elite theology found in monastic and scholastic discourse.² In this new spirituality, the importance of cultivating inner silence shifted from the realm of monastic practice to a virtue to be emulated by the entire Christian community. For mystics of the Rhineland like Eckhart, the role of teaching and preaching was to turn people to a direct experience of God through the fostering of an active praxis of contemplation. The sermons and treatises in the vernacular of the Rhineland Dominicans witness their efforts to craft for the wider community an applied theology of silence.

¹ Cf. Uwe Ruberg, *Beredtes Schweigen in lehrhafter und Erzählender deutscher Literatur des Mittelalters: mit kommentierter Erstedition spätmittelalterlicher lehrtexte über das Schweigen* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1978).

² Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); Bernard McGinn, introduction to *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. by Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp. 1-14.

Whereas the Latin treatises composed by Eckhart were written with a scholastic readership in mind, the vernacular sermons target a different audience. The purpose of the sermons, delivered to the spiritually motivated religious and lay communities of the Rhineland, was to instill a full awareness of the divine presence and teach of the possibility for true union with the Godhead. This differs considerably from the intended aim of the *Opus tripartitum* that sought to further elaborate upon the authoritative theology of Eckhart's predecessors by explaining the ineffability and transcendence of divinity.

There is a change in focus in what McGinn calls Eckhart's "vernacular theology."³ The Latin treatises Eckhart composed, on the one hand, addressed issues around how one could speak about God, ultimately settling on the need for silence. The vernacular sermons, on the other hand, asked instead whether one *should* speak about God at all, ultimately concluding in the negative. This was mainly due to the different audiences targeted by Eckhart's theological writing. The Latin treatises were composed for the purpose of scholarly edification, whereas the vernacular sermons sought to express complex theological concepts for the spiritual instruction of the laity.⁴ Yet, as Wendlinder argues, the academic treatises and the vernacular sermons do not contradict each other insofar as Eckhart appeals in both projects to different "universes of discourse."⁵ The German works of the Meister, which stress the dynamic relationship between the Creator and humanity, support the scholastic commentaries' focus on God's "indistinct-distinction" and a complete understanding of Eckhart must take both discourses into account. As many of Eckhart's treatises and sermons in both Latin and the vernacular also targeted his Dominican confrères, Wendlinder argues that the Meister wished to detach his

³ For the definition of vernacular theology, see McGinn, introduction to *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, pp. 1-14.

⁴ Cf. Eliana Corbari, *Vernacular Theology: Dominican Sermons and Audience in Late Medieval Italy* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013).

⁵ Wendlinder, *Speaking of God in Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart*, p. 157.

own “students from reliance on formulaic interpretations of doctrine” so that they could impart to their own congregations and students the truth of God’s immanent transcendence within the soul.⁶ Eckhart, therefore, was primarily concerned in both his Latin and vernacular works with the language applied to the divine.

The language which Eckhart employed in his German works was deliberately challenging. Throughout his vernacular sermons and treatises he chose words and used metaphors that sought to stimulate his audience and destabilize their understanding of divinity. In the words of Oliver Davies, Eckhart delivered a “metaphysical shock” to his audience by using “one device after another in order to shake his listeners free from their assumptions.”⁷ Language was employed by the Meister not simply for descriptive purposes, but also in “an expressive way in order to effect a cognitive transformation within his audience.”⁸ Similarly, McGinn speaks of “a form of homiletic shock therapy” in Eckhart’s writing that instigates in his audience “the deconstruction that leads to silent union.”⁹

Meister Eckhart outlines the major theological concerns of his preaching at the beginning of his German Predigt 53:

When I preach, I am accustomed to speak about detachment, and that man should be free of himself and of all things; second, that a man should be formed again into that simple good which is God; third, that he should reflect on the greater nobility with which God has endowed his soul, so that in this way he may come to wonder at God; fourth, about the purity of the divine

⁶ Ibid, p. 185.

⁷ Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 129.

⁸ Ibid, p. 196.

⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroads, 2005), p. 142.

nature, for the brightness of the divine nature is beyond words. God is a word,
a word unspoken.¹⁰

Detachment (*abgescheidenheit*) was the main driving force of the radical mystical system which Eckhart constructed in his writing. Charlotte C. Radler argues that for Eckhart the “praxis of detachment” forms an ideal of temporal action harmonised with the inner contemplative life.¹¹ Radler believes this is because the Meister “appreciates the influence of the activities and situations of everyday life— including the community with its mores, traditions, history, economics, and politics— on the mystical life.”¹² For Markus Vinzent, detachment signifies more than just simple ascetic practice, but instead expresses “an ontological way of a projective life; in short, it is not an exercise, but an art.”¹³ Ultimately, he argues, Eckhart does not develop a morality grounded in metaphysics, but instead formulates through detachment a “lived ethical metaphysics.”¹⁴ The “art” or “praxis” of detachment, according to Eckhart, led to the stripping away from the soul of all that cluttered the spirit. The resultant uncovered spark (*funkeln*) was called by Eckhart the silent desert (*wueste*) and was the place where God’s Word could be spoken directly into the inner recesses of the soul.¹⁵

Eckhart’s soteriological understanding of the silent praise of God, especially as formulated in his commentary on Ws. 18: 14-15, is an important part of this spiritual detachment. Eckhart seeks to move his audience into a state of “detached intellection” beyond religious formulas, where all the words used of God and directed to God collapse

¹⁰ Pr. 53, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 203.

¹¹ Charlotte C. Radler, “Living From the Divine Ground: Meister Eckhart’s Praxis of Detachment,” *Spiritus* 6 (2006), p. 26.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Markus Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Pr. 2, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 177.

and give way to union with the divinity through a process of “unknowing.”¹⁶ As the Meister explains in his Predigt 24, “we must come into a transformed knowing, an unknowing which comes not from ignorance but from knowledge.”¹⁷ By doing so, one’s knowing becomes divine knowledge “and our unknowing shall be ennobled and enriched with supernatural knowing.”¹⁸ This is partly why Eckhart refers to God as a “word unspoken” in Predigt 53. In order to appreciate the teaching about inner silence which Eckhart preached in his vernacular sermons to the communities of the Rhineland, therefore, it is necessary to briefly outline the key ideas about detachment he conveys throughout his German works.

Eckhart’s earliest known work is the *Reden der Unterscheidung* (Counsels of Discernment). Delivered to novices whilst he was prior of the Dominican Order in Erfurt in the early 1290s and perhaps to members of the laity, Eckhart frames his discussion of detachment upon the religious virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience.¹⁹ “Obedience always produces the best of everything in everything,” says Eckhart.²⁰ “Take as humble a work as you like,” he continues, “[and] true obedience makes it finer and better for you.”²¹ In this text Eckhart defines true obedience as consisting of the abnegation of one’s own will, the relinquishing of the self. “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,” Eckhart explains; “when I empty myself of self, [God] must necessarily want everything for me that he wants himself.”²² Eckhart believes that there is no better form of the religious life than the

¹⁶ Wendlinger, *Speaking of God in Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart*, p. 157. Cf. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p. 140.

¹⁷ Pr. 24, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 220.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cf. Yoshiki Koda, “Mystische Lebenslehre zwischen Kloster und Stadt: Meister Eckharts ‘Reden der Unterweisung’ und die spätmittelalterliche Lebenswirklichkeit,” in *Mittelalterliche Literatur im Lebenszusammenhang*, ed. by Eckart Conrad Lutz (Freiburg: de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 225-64.

²⁰ *Reden*, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 247.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 248.

denial of the self and explains that this is why Jesus said “blessed are the poor in spirit.” “Whenever you find yourself, deny yourself,” says Eckhart, “[and] that is the best of all.”²³ Eckhart also identifies this “inward poverty” with a detachment from self and images (*bilde*). This detachment, he argues, is to be held distinct from the “external poverty” practiced by Christ and his apostles during their time on earth.

Eckhart’s Predigt 52 on Mt. 5: 3 *Beati pauperes spiritu...* (“blessed are the poor in spirit...”) focuses almost exclusively on the idea of detachment as spiritual poverty.²⁴ The sermon has been described as “a spirited reply to the accusations of heresy made against [Eckhart]” in his last embattled days preaching in Cologne.²⁵ It also gives witness to the ties between the mystical thought of the Beguines and the Meister.²⁶ As McGinn remarks:

a study of [Predigt 52], as well as other places where Eckhart and his followers talk about true poverty, shows that the theme of poverty provided another field within which the Dominicans could bring to speech the deepest aspects of their teaching about mystical transformation.²⁷

Eckhart begins his sermon by noting that two kinds of poverty exist. The first kind, external poverty, “is good and is greatly esteemed in a man who voluntarily practices it for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁸ Yet this first kind of poverty does not interest the Meister, who wishes to address “a different poverty, an inward poverty,” with which the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For a critical edition with commentary of this text, see Kurt Flasch, “Predigt Nr. 52 ‘Beati pauperes spiritu,’ in *Lektura Eckhardi: Predigten Meister Eckharts von Fachgelehrten gelesen und gedeutet*, ed. by Georg Steer and Loris Sturlese (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), pp. 164-99.

²⁵ Bruce Milem, *The Unspoken Word: Negative Theology in Meister Eckhart’s German Sermons* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), p. 22. See also Kurt Ruh, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 158.

²⁶ Amy Hollywood, “Suffering Transformed,” in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, ed. McGinn, pp. 87-113.

²⁷ McGinn, “Mystical Language in Meister Eckhart and his Disciples,” p. 227.

²⁸ Pr. 52, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 199.

verse from Mt. 5: 3 is directly concerned.²⁹ As Eckhart reports, “various people have asked me what poverty may be in itself and what a poor man may be.”³⁰ In answer, Eckhart disregards the words of Albert the Great, who had described the poor man as “one who does not find satisfaction in all the things God created.”³¹ Instead, he takes poverty “in a higher sense” by explaining that the truly poor man “wants nothing, and knows nothing, and has nothing.”³² As Eckhart explains:

they who are to have this [spiritual] poverty must live in such a way that they do not know that they do not live either for themselves, for truth or for God. They must be free (*ledic*) of the knowledge that they do not know, understand or sense that God lives in them. More than this: they must be free of all the knowledge that lives in them.³³

The Mittelhochdeutsch word *ledic* refers to a state of unattached, unencumbered, even unmarried, freedom.³⁴ Thus, *ledic* should be understood as the opposite of *eigenschaft* (ownership), which is the term Eckhart employs for the state of those not yet spiritually detached.³⁵ Such men and women are called elsewhere by the Meister “servants and hired hands.”³⁶ Describing this state of freedom, Eckhart explains that “when I stood in my first cause, I then had no ‘God’, and then I was my own cause. I wanted nothing, I longed for nothing, for I was an empty being.”³⁷ In this pre-eternal moment the self was the cause of its own being. There was yet to be any distinction between God and the self.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Cf. Albert’s definition of the poor in Albert the Great, *Ennarationes in evangelium Mattheum*, ed. E. Borgnet, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 20, 149b-151a and cited in Freimut Löser, “Poor Eckhart?,” *Medieval Mystical Theology* 21 (2012), p. 196.

³² Pr.52, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 199.

³³ Ibid, p. 205.

³⁴ Milem, *The Unspoken Word*, p. 27.

³⁵ Reiner Shürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), p. 13.

³⁶ Pr. 39, trans. Tobin, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 296.

³⁷ Pr. 52, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 200.

Therefore, the self had no God for it was identifiable with God. Because of this, Eckhart explains, “it was myself I wanted and nothing else. What I wanted I was, and what I was I wanted; and so I stood, empty of God and of everything.”³⁸ The will in this instance does not operate in the manner of creatures who only desire what is not theirs or what they are not. Instead, the will is directed to a desire for itself, a desire fulfilled by the very manner of the self’s being. This is what Eckhart takes freedom from the created will to express. It is a freedom from any desire for God and any created thing as, at that moment, one only wants what one is. As the Meister clarifies, “when I went out from my free will and received my created being, then I had a ‘God,’ for before there were any creatures, God was not ‘God’, but he was what he was.”³⁹ When creatures received their created being, only then did God become “‘God’ in creatures,” rather than “‘God’ in himself.” “God, so far as he is ‘God,’” Eckhart concludes, “is not the perfect end of created beings.”⁴⁰ Thus, one who desires to attain poverty of spirit must want nothing and “pray to God that we be free of ‘God,’ so as to reach the state of freedom from created will and become divine being.⁴¹ This argument parallels Maimonides’ concern in the *Guide* to combat the anthropomorphic mental idolatry which results from an overly literal reading of Scripture, with its “image of God in the imagination.”⁴²

In a sermon on Lk. 10: 38, *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum...* (“Jesus entered a certain village...”), Eckhart further explains the concept of being “as free as he was when he was not.”⁴³ Here the person who is free is described as a “virgin... a person who is free of all alien images.”⁴⁴ Rainer Schürmann argues that this statement from Eckhart calls for a philosophical interpretation as it “contains an allusion to the theory of the imprint which

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. Cf. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, pp. 187- 92.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. Cf. Milem, *The Unspoken Word*, pp. 28-9, n. 17.

⁴² See Chapter 3.

⁴³ Pr. 2, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 177.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

a representation places upon the intellect.”⁴⁵ The person who wishes to receive Jesus, for Eckhart, must become free from all representations. By describing this state as being “as free as he was when he was not,” Eckhart intends to describe a person who has no need to attach themselves to what Schürmann calls “the knowledge of sensible things by representations drawn from the sensible,” as they are already free from all images.⁴⁶ They are truly open and receptive to Jesus as Word. The key to achieving this state is detachment. Even should one comprehend every image “that all men had ever received, and those that are present in God himself,” the Meister explains, one “should be a virgin.” This is so, provided that one avoids clinging to these images with attachment, standing “free and empty according to God’s precious will.”⁴⁷ Thus, to be “as free as he was when he was not,” is a state of wanting, knowing and having nothing and being free of created images.

At the conclusion of Predigt 52, Eckhart takes the three aspects of poverty of spirit, wanting nothing, knowing nothing and having nothing, and unites them into a single term: the “breaking-through” (*durchbrechen*). Creatures’ separate existence from divinity is described by Eckhart by utilising the Neoplatonic concept of emanation. This is the “flowing-out” (*ûzyliezen*) from the Godhead.⁴⁸ “When I flowed out from God, all things said: ‘God is,’” the Meister explains, “and this cannot make me blessed, for with this I acknowledge that I am a creature.”⁴⁹ The state of “flowing-out” stands in direct opposition to the spiritual poverty that Eckhart has spent the entire sermon explaining. Poverty of will, intellect and being are three different ways to describe the stripping away of

⁴⁵ Schürmann, *Wandering Joy*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Pr. 2, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 177.

⁴⁸ For a full account of the Meister’s “metaphysics of flow” see McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, pp. 71-113.

⁴⁹ Pr. 52, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 202.

creatureliness and the recognition of the soul's identity with God.⁵⁰ This is "breaking-through." It is described by the Meister as the moment when one comes "to be free of will of myself and of God's will and of all his works and of God himself," where one is "above all created things" and is "neither God nor creature."⁵¹ Echoing Ex. 3: 14, Eckhart asserts that in the break-through "I am what I was and what I shall remain, now and eternally."⁵² "In this breaking-through I receive that God and I are one," the Meister concludes, "and that is the most intimate poverty one can find."⁵³

God as Unspoken Word: Silence in Eckhart's German Sermons

Inner silence emerges as one of the important metaphors Meister Eckhart employs in the discussion of spiritual poverty and detachment. Alongside the importance of detachment, Eckhart in Predigt 53 emphasises the importance of recognizing God's ineffability, one of the major concerns which arose in Eckhart's Latin scholastic treatises. Eckhart stresses in Predigt 53 that God is an "unspoken word," citing Augustine's claim, possibly derived from the *De doctrina christiana*, that "if one says that God is a word, he has been expressed; but if one says that God has not been spoken, he is ineffable."⁵⁴ God speaks his Word in the ineffable spark of the soul which man only recognizes through detachment from images. Eckhart preaches that God is both spoken and unspoken, for "wherever God is, he speaks this Word; wherever he is not, he does not speak."⁵⁵ "To the extent that I am close to God," Eckhart concludes, "so to that extent God utters himself into me."⁵⁶ Although "in Scripture God is called by many names," Eckhart argues that "whoever perceives something in God and attaches thereby some name to him, that is not God."⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Tobin, *Thought and Language*, p. 141

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Pr.53, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 204.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

For this reason, “we should learn not to give any name to God, lest we imagine that in so doing we have praised and exulted him as we should.”⁵⁸ Eckhart here reiterates in this German sermon the same understanding of silence he had described through recourse to Maimonides in the *Expositio libri exodi* and even produces a rare vernacular paraphrase of the *Guide* through his inclusion of the Talmudic injunction of Rabbi Haninah (*Berakhot* 33b):

We read of one good man who was entreating God in his prayer and wanted to give names to him. Then a brother said: “be quiet— you are dishonoring God.” We cannot find a single name which we might give to God. Yet those names are permitted to us by which the saints have called him and which God so consecrated with divine light and poured into all their hearts.⁵⁹

Yet in the vernacular sermons of Eckhart the predominant authorities on the importance of apophatic silence are Dionysius and Augustine. This is likely because a Jewish philosopher would have been an inappropriate source for spiritual edification in sermons directed to the Christian laity. Eckhart’s reference in Predigt 2 to the *göttliche namen* (divine names) when speaking about the ineffable part of the soul which shares in God’s divinity witnesses the dialectic approach to the negation of God’s names which Dionysius taught in his *De divinis nominibus* and which was so influential in the German Dominican School.⁶⁰ If God wishes to enter this “little village,” Eckhart argues, he must divest himself of all names, just as the soul must detach itself from all created images: “God himself never for an instant looks into it, never yet did he look on it, so far as he possesses himself in the manner and according to the properties of his Persons.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 205.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 204. Cf. *Guide* I: 59, and Chapter 3 of this study.

⁶⁰ Pr. 2, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 181. Cf. Milem, *The Unspoken Word*, p. 75.

⁶¹ Ibid.

In another sermon, Predigt 83 on Ep. 4: 23 *Renovamini spiritu* (“Be renewed in spirit”), Eckhart stresses the need to be silent because of God’s ineffability. “God is nameless,” Eckhart argues, “because no one can say anything or understand anything about him.”⁶² For this reason, Eckhart says that it is incorrect to say that “God is good” and that one must rather say that “God is not good.”⁶³ Eckhart even challengingly asserts that “I can even say: ‘I am better than God,’ for whatever is good can become better, and whatever can become better can become best of all. But since God is not good, he cannot become better.”⁶⁴ Eckhart claims that “good,” “better” and “best” are “alien to God... for he is superior to them all.”⁶⁵ Unfortunately for Eckhart, this contentious teaching found its way into the suspect articles of *In agro dominico*.⁶⁶ In support of these claims Eckhart cites Dionysius (although he claims the authority of Augustine) that “the best that one can say about God is for one to keep silent out of the wisdom of one’s inward riches.”⁶⁷ Eckhart counsels his audience to maintain silence: “So be silent, and do not chatter about God; for when you do chatter about him, you are telling lies and sinning.”⁶⁸

As Eckhart preached in another vernacular sermon on Prov. 31: 26, *Os suum aperuit* (“She has opened her mouth...”), through the process of negation the soul comes “to a state of amazement and is driven further and comes into a state of silence. With the silence God sinks down into the soul and is bedewed with grace.”⁶⁹ This sermon echoes the teaching about the silent medium which Eckhart had developed in his Latin commentary on Ws. 18: 14-15. However, Eckhart also produced a vernacular sermon on this biblical verse. Predigt 101, *Dum medium silentium tenerent omnia* (“While all things were quiet in silence”) is

⁶² Pr. 83, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 206.

⁶³ *Ibid*, pp. 206-7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 207.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶⁶ *In agro Dominico*, trans. McGinn, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 80.

⁶⁷ Pr. 83, trans. Colledge, *Essential Eckhart*, p. 207.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

⁶⁹ Pr. 95b, trans. McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p. 100.

the first sermon in Eckhart's Christmas cycle on the Eternal Birth (*Gottesgeburtszyklus*), a series of four complementary sermons which emphasise detachment and the birth of God in the soul.⁷⁰ As McGinn notes, the entire cycle is governed by the schema of *medium-silentium-verbum-absconditum* offered by Ws. 18: 14-15 and Eckhart "develops and orchestrates these themes through a series of deeper explorations and quasi-scholastic questions and answers" which ultimately ends in "peace and inward silence."⁷¹ In these sermons, especially in Predigt 101, Eckhart offers inner silence as the master metaphor for detachment and seeks to bring his scholastic teaching on silence to the awareness of his audience of religious and laity.

The major themes of Predigt 101 are the location in the soul where God speaks his Word, the proper conduct towards this speaking and whether one should co-operate with God's action and what the reward for this speaking entails.⁷² To convey this, Eckhart explains, "I shall make use of natural proofs, so that you yourselves can grasp that it is so, for though I put more faith in the Scriptures than in myself, yet it is easier and better for you to learn by means of arguments that can be verified."⁷³ Eckhart proceeds in the same manner as he had in his Latin commentaries and treatises. However, although he does make use of theological and biblical authorities in this sermon to explain his ideas through natural reason— like his Dominican predecessors Albert, Ulrich and Aquinas— Eckhart also undermines the authority of philosophers and the learned. "Those who have written of the soul's nobility have gone no further than their natural intelligence could carry them," Eckhart argues; "they had never entered her ground, so that much remained obscure and

⁷⁰ On this cycle, see Dagmar Gottschall, "Eckhart's German Works," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Hackett, pp. 161- 190; McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, pp. 54-7. For a critical edition and commentary on Predigt 101, see Georg Steer, "Predigt Nr. 101: *Dum medium silentium tenerent omina*," in *Lectura Eckhardi*, ed. by Steer and Sturlese, vol. 1, pp. 247-88.

⁷¹ McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p. 54.

⁷² Pr.101, trans. Maurice O'C Walshe in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, ed. and trans. by Maurice O'C Walshe and rev. by Bernard McGinn (New York: Crossroads, 2009), pp. 29-30.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 30.

unknown to them.”⁷⁴ Such criticism of institutional approaches to theology is common in Eckhart’s sermons, although it is unfair to identify any “anti-intellectualism” in the work of the Meister and his followers.⁷⁵ Eckhart’s concern was rather with the construction of theological and spiritual authority, as well as with the excessive wordiness of the scholastic tradition, to which he was very much an insider.

In Predigt 101, Eckhart answers directly an imaginary interlocutor who asks “But sir, where is the silence and where is the place where the Word is spoken?”⁷⁶ Eckhart’s response echoes what he had written in his *Expositio libri sapientiae*: “it is in the purest thing that the soul is capable of, in the noblest part, the ground (*grunt*)” that this silence lies.⁷⁷ For “in that ground [of the soul] is the silent ‘middle’: here nothing but rest and celebration for this birth, this act, that God the Father may speak His word there... Here God enters the soul with His all.”⁷⁸ Eckhart further explains, employing the vocabulary of detachment, that this ground “is by nature receptive to nothing save only the divine essence, without mediation.”⁷⁹ Eckhart counsels his audience to complete stillness, interiority and passivity. Eckhart employs here the word *geziehen* (“to be drawn up or out of”) and emphasises the importance of “becoming unaware of things.”⁸⁰ Elsewhere, in another vernacular sermon, Eckhart argues that “absolute stillness for as long as possible is best of all for you. You cannot exchange this state for any other without harm.”⁸¹ In concluding Predigt 101, Eckhart considers God as a “hidden word” (*verborgen wort*) by

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 36.

⁷⁵ Cf. Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, trans. T. L. Fagan (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1993), p.135; Ian P. Wei, *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris: Theologians and the University, c. 1100-1330* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 356-414.

⁷⁶ Pr. 101, trans. O’C Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, p. 30.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 31.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 33. Cf. McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p. 57.

⁸¹ Pr. 59, trans. O’C Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, p. 58.

once more reflecting on the apophatic currents in Dionysius.⁸² Invoking, like his Dominican predecessors, Dionysius' prayer to the Trinity from the *De mystica theologia* which asserts God's "hidden silent darkness," Eckhart addresses how "God [does] without images in the ground and in the essence."⁸³ He ultimately concludes that an answer to this question is impossible as the answer itself would be expressed in images. Eckhart preaches that what is important is not the knowing of God, but the search for knowledge of God.⁸⁴

The silence which lay at the heart of the rhetoric of inexpressibility thus appears in Eckhart's vernacular sermons as an important metaphor for the Meister's distinctive doctrine of spiritual detachment. Grounded in his scholastic understanding of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and Maimonides' *Guide*, inner silence for the Meister described a state where the soul was free from images and where God could speak and bring to fruition the birth of the Word. This soteriological understanding of silence, which Eckhart tied to his reading of Ws. 18: 14-15, was Eckhart's principle contribution to the German Dominican silent praise of God and formed a key component of subsequent engagement in the Rhineland with the spiritual practice of silence. In the section which follows, I turn to Eckhart's students Henry Suso and Johannes Tauler to explore how this challenging reading of silence was further popularized in medieval Germany through an attention to devotional, affective and practical spirituality.

Eckhart's Disciples: Henry Suso and Johannes Tauler on Silence

What Eckhart began in his sermons and treatises on detachment and spiritual poverty was eagerly taken up in the work of his German Dominican confrères and disciples Henry Suso and Johannes Tauler. Both figures were active in fourteenth century Germany, where they

⁸² Pr. 101, trans. O'C Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, p. 35. Cf. McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p. 58.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 34.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 35.

received their education and forged their own extensive spiritual networks. Like their teacher, Suso and Tauler both turned to the metaphor of inner silence in their own spiritual instruction. Through their own treatises and sermons they were able to make Eckhart's 'art' or 'praxis' of detachment more understandable and acceptable in the eyes of the Church and the laity. Both of Eckhart's students continued to emphasise the role silence played in the life of the spirit and the teaching and preaching of Suso and Tauler was ultimately responsible for the propagation and clarification of Eckhart's often quite challenging theology. As Joseph Schmidt notes, "Tauler's main merit lies in elucidating and transforming mystical concepts of the *vita contemplativa* into the domain of the *vita activa* and *publica*. [Suso], on the other hand, translated Eckhart's mysticism into devotional piety and practice."⁸⁵ Both were also responsible for introducing a Christological and pastoral component to Rhineland mysticism which had been absent in Eckhart.⁸⁶

Henry Suso: Devotional Silence

Henry Suso, also known as Heinrich von Berg or by the diminutive *Amandus* ("the sweet one") was born in 1295 nearby Lake Constance, possibly in the free imperial city of Überlingen.⁸⁷ He was admitted to the Dominican priory of Constance at the age of thirteen and studied theology and philosophy at the convent of Strasbourg between 1319 and 1321 and then again at the *studium generale* in Cologne c.1327 under Meister Eckhart.⁸⁸ He acted as the *lector* to the priory of Constance, where he was also possibly prior between 1330 and 1334.⁸⁹ In 1339 Suso, along with the rest of the friars of the convent, was expelled from Constance until 1342 as a result of tensions between Pope John XXII and

⁸⁵ Joseph Schmidt, introduction to *Johannes Tauler: Sermons*, ed. and trans. by Maria Shradly and Joseph Schmidt (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 2.

⁸⁶ See George H. Tavard, "The Christology of the Mystics," *Theological Studies* 42 (1981), pp. 566-7.

⁸⁷ McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, p. 197.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

the Holy Roman Emperor.⁹⁰ Suso was transferred to the convent in Ulm in 1348, where he died a year later. During the last decade of his life Suso cultivated a vast network of spiritual connections, including the *Gottesfreunde* (Friends of God) and several Dominican nuns throughout Germany where he seems to have had pastoral responsibilities.⁹¹ Suso is most well-known for his *Exemplar*, consisting of four vernacular treatises known as “The Life of the Servant,” (*Leben Seuses*), *Das Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* (Little Book of Eternal Wisdom), *Das Büchlein der Wahrheit* (The Little Book of Truth) and a *Briefbuch* (Book of Letters).⁹²

Because of the exemplary character of Suso’s writing the identity of the servant in the *Leben Seuses* cannot simply be ascribed to Suso. Alois M. Haas has called the *Leben* “Suso’s biography,” whilst for Kurt Ruh it is an “autobiography” because the exemplary function of the text filters its biographical nature.⁹³ The role which Suso’s spiritual daughter, the prioress of the Dominican convent at Töss named Elsbeth Stigel, played in the production of the text further compounds the issue of genre. The *Leben*, Suso explains, is comprised of an account of his life she had composed for her own spiritual edification based upon their intimate conversations.⁹⁴ Ultimately, Richard Kieckhefer and Tobin argue that the *Leben* is rather an “auto-hagiography,” for although it provides tantalising images of Suso’s life, its primary purpose is the edification of its readers.⁹⁵ The servant is constructed in the text as an ideal monk who offers an example on how to lead a spiritual life which the audience is called to emulate. The manuscript tradition of the *Exemplar* also

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Frank Tobin (ed. and trans.), *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

⁹³ Alois Haas, *Kunst rechter Gelassenheit: Themen und Schwerpunkte von Heinrich Seuses Mystik* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 14; Ruh, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik: Die Mystik des deutschen Predigerordens und ihre Grundlegung durch die Hochscholastik*, vol. 3 (Munich: C. H. Beck), p. 445.

⁹⁴ Henry Suso, *Leben*, trans. Tobin, *The Exemplar*, p. 63.

⁹⁵ Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 6; Tobin, introduction to *The Exemplar*, p. 41.

bears witness to a series of images accompanying the text, possibly commissioned by Suso himself, which had instructional and devotional significance.⁹⁶ As Jeffrey F. Hamburger remarks, “the whole of *The Exemplar*... invites interpretation as a discourse on the nature of imitation, understood in terms of the right relationship between models and their copies.”⁹⁷

The work of Suso and that of his teacher Eckhart are closely related. In his writing Suso seeks to make Eckhart’s challenging teaching about detachment more palatable and approachable for a wider audience, whilst also attempting to distance himself from Eckhart’s condemned heretical statements.⁹⁸ Sturlese argues that Suso explicitly in his *Das Büchlein der Wahrheit* defends Eckhart against the condemnation of *In agro dominico* and produced the treatise in direct response and in conscious contempt of the Papal Bull.⁹⁹ At least fourteen of the articles which are condemned in the Bull are discussed in Suso.¹⁰⁰ Certainly, Suso attempts to convince his audience of Eckhart’s virtuous and spiritual character. In his *Leben*, Suso describes Eckhart as both a *seliger* (blessed) and *heiliger* (saintly) Meister and even recounts a vision in the sixth chapter where Eckhart returns from heaven to inform his protégé that “he lived in overflowing glory in which his soul had been made utterly godlike in God.”¹⁰¹ In the twenty-first chapter the servant is comforted after ten years of suffering by Eckhart, who “helped him get free of it, and thus [the servant] was released from the hell in which he had lived for so long a time.”¹⁰² There is certainly no reason to accept Edmund Colledge’s claim that “Suso has been shown to

⁹⁶ Cf. Edmund Colledge and J. C. Marler, “Mystical Pictures in the Suso *Exemplar*. MS Strasbourg 2929,” *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 54 (1984), pp. 293-354.

⁹⁷ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “Medieval Self-Fashioning: Authorship, Authority, and Autobiography in Seuse’s *Exemplar*,” in *Christ among the Medieval Dominicans*, ed. Emery Jr. and Wawrykow, p. 431.

⁹⁸ Cf. Fiorella Retucci, “On a Dangerous Trail: Henry Suso and the Condemnations of Meister Eckhart,” in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Hackett, pp. 587-605.

⁹⁹ Loris Sturlese, introduction to *Das Buch der Wahrheit: Daz buchli der warheit*, ed. by Loris Sturlese and Rüdiger Blumrich (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1993), pp. ix-lxiii; Sturlese, *Homo divinus*, pp. 199-230.

¹⁰⁰ Retucci, “On a Dangerous Trail,” pp. 591-3.

¹⁰¹ Suso, *Leben*, trans. Tobin, *The Exemplar*, p.75; p.105.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p.105.

have defended his teacher's good name; but he did not beatify him" and that these visions refer to another friar by the name of Eckhart.¹⁰³

Two aspects of Suso's teaching which differ considerably from that of Eckhart are the devotional and the affective. The writing of Suso is often characterized as highly sensitive, possibly the result of the mainly female audience to which the *Exemplar* is targeted. Caroline Walker Bynum thus argues that the piety of Suso is "feminine— if we use the term *feminine*... to mean affective, exuberant, lyrical, and filled with images."¹⁰⁴ Tobin describes the progression in the thought of Suso "away from the scholasticism of his contemporaries and toward the older traditions of Christian asceticism and monasticism."¹⁰⁵ This led Suso to emphasise devotional practices throughout his writings such as the devotion to the "divine name of Jesus" which caused the servant in the *Leben* to carve the divine monogram IHS onto his chest, or the spiritual marriage of the servant to Eternal Wisdom.¹⁰⁶ That Suso's mysticism also had a heavily Christological emphasis is evidenced by the *One hundred-articles* appended to his *Das Büchlein der Wahrheit*, which contain a cycle of prayers that are directed towards Christ's Passion.¹⁰⁷

The story of the servant which Suso presents in the *Leben* is not simply one of asceticism. Rather, Suso stresses that the rigorous ascetic practices of the *Servant*, including a truly horrifying regime of bodily scourging and punishment, is only the first stage on the spiritual journey.¹⁰⁸ As Suso instructs his spiritual daughter Elsbeth Stigel in one of the letters which are included in the second book of the *Leben*:

¹⁰³ Colledge, introduction to *Essential Eckhart*, p. 18-9. Cf. Retucci, "On a dangerous trail," p. 589, n. 12.

¹⁰⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 105. (emphasis present)

¹⁰⁵ Tobin, introduction to *The Exemplar*, p. 50.

¹⁰⁶ Suso, *Leben*, trans. Tobin, *The Exemplar*, pp. 70-1.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Suso, *Buchlein*, trans. Tobin, *The Exemplar*, pp. 294-303.

¹⁰⁸ *Leben*, trans. Tobin, *The Exemplar*, pp. 97-9.

it is more useful for you and those like you to know, first of all, how one should begin, ascetic practices, good saintly models— how this or that friend of God also made a holy beginning; how they, first of all, practiced living and suffering with Christ; what they, like him, suffered; how they conducted themselves inwardly and outwardly; whether God drew them to himself by sweetness or sternness; and when and how mere images dropped from them.¹⁰⁹

The *Leben* moves from extreme and mortifying asceticism towards union with divinity based upon the notion of detachment.¹¹⁰ In the *Exemplar*, therefore, Suso attempts to place the ideas which he adopted from Eckhart, including detachment, the ground, the “flowing-out” and “breaking through,” into a devotional framework.

Suso’s ascetic teachings about silence are part of this devotional agenda. In the first part of the *Leben* Suso describes how the servant “had an urge in his interior life to attain real peace of heart, and it seemed to him that silence might be useful to him.”¹¹¹ In thirty years, Suso relates, the servant maintained complete silence at the times proscribed by the Dominican Rule, except for one time when he ate a meal with his fellow Dominicans on a boat.¹¹² Furthermore, Suso writes, “in order to master his tongue better in all situations and not talk carelessly or to excess, [the servant] introduced three spiritual masters into his contemplation without whose special permission he would not speak.”¹¹³ These masters were Dominic, Bernard of Clairvaux and the Desert Father Arsenius, each of whom the servant would petition before speaking in particular situations in emulation of the Benedictine Rule.¹¹⁴ During a ten-year period of seclusion which the servant undertook at the convent in Constance, the servant “got a painter to sketch for him the holy ancient

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.133.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Haas, *Kunst rechter Gelassenheit*, pp. 168-77.

¹¹¹ Suso, *Leben*, trans. Tobin, *The Exemplar*, p.86.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid, p.87.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

fathers and their sayings, as well as much other devotional material that motivates a person in suffering to be patient in adversity.”¹¹⁵ Suso provided a list of these sayings for Elsbeth, many of which include prescriptions from the Desert Fathers about speech:

The Old father St. Arsenius asked an angel what he should do to be saved. The *angel* said, “You should flee, keep silent, and remain composed.”

Agathon: A desert father said: “I have kept a stone in my mouth for three years so that I might learn to keep silent.”

Arsenius: I have often regretted speaking, but never remaining silent.

Senex: A disciple asked an old father how long he should observe silence. He answered, “Until you are asked a question.”¹¹⁶

Yet for Suso, like his teacher Eckhart before him, silence also occupies a significant place in the teaching about detachment he imparted to his student Elsbeth. These instructions stress the necessity of moving beyond the senses and detaching oneself from images.¹¹⁷ The instructions are also replete with accounts of the servant’s own unitive mystical experiences. Suso writes, for instance, about a period of ten years in which he repeatedly “sank so completely in God into eternal Wisdom that he was unable to speak of it.”¹¹⁸ Suso argues that “God’s intimate friends often experience such vivid visions, sometimes while awake, sometimes while asleep, in the calm repose and detachment of the outer senses.”¹¹⁹ Suso explains to Elsbeth that “direct sight of the naked Godhead: this is pure genuine truth without any doubts. And every vision, the more intellectual and free of

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.103.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, pp.137-9.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Niklaus Largier, “Inner Senses- Outer Senses: the Practice of Emotions in Medieval Mysticism,” in *Codierung von Emotionen im Mittelalter*, ed. by Stephen Jaeger and Ingrid Kasten (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), pp. 3-15.

¹¹⁸ Suso, *Leben*, trans. Tobin, *The Exemplar*, p.188.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.195.

images it is and the more like this same pure seeing, the nobler it is.”¹²⁰ Suso counsels that the truly detached must “be proper and calm in his senses and not casting about— this causes images to be drawn within one— so that the inner senses might have a leisurely journey.”¹²¹ For, as Suso will clarify, “letting one’s senses wander about far and wide removes a person from inwardness.”¹²²

Suso also explains to Elsbeth the mystery of the divine Trinity and “how the Trinity of divine Persons can exist in a oneness of being no one can express in words.”¹²³ He does so through recourse to Aquinas and Augustine, who explain that “when the Word pours forth from the heart and intellect of the Father, it must happen that God in his radiant knowledge of himself looks at his divine being in the manner of reflection.”¹²⁴ When pressed by Elsbeth in what manner it is possible to enter this “transfigured, resplendent darkness in the naked, simple unity” Suso responds with the teaching of Dionysius. Paraphrasing the opening to the *De mystica theologia*, Suso writes that Dionysius directed his disciple Timothy to “let go of the outer and inner senses, the activity of your own intellect, everything visible and invisible, and everything that is being and not being.”¹²⁵ Like Eckhart before him, Suso also emphasizes the inability to enter into detached passivity by recourse to institutional theology. The disciple steps “upward to the simple unity, into which you shall press with no awareness of self, into silence above all being and above all learning of the professors.”¹²⁶ In this state, Suso concludes, “by remaining wordlessly silent one hears wonders— wonders! One senses there new, detached,

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid, p.183.

¹²² Ibid, p.186.

¹²³ Ibid, p.193.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p.200.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

unchanging wonders in the resplendent, unlit darkness.”¹²⁷ Elsbeth, in order to experience the mystical union with God in detachment, must ultimately fall silent.

Johannes Tauler: Contemplative Silence

Johannes Tauler was born c.1300 in Strasbourg, where he entered the Dominican Order around the age of fifteen and received his initial education.¹²⁸ Tauler, like Suso, received theological training at the *studium generale* in Cologne and possibly also spent time studying in Paris, however it is not clear that he ever studied directly under Meister Eckhart.¹²⁹ Tauler’s preaching career began in Strasbourg during the 1330s, where he was responsible for the spiritual and pastoral supervision of eight convents of Dominican women, as well as several Beguine communities.¹³⁰ Like Suso, Tauler spent several years in exile as a result of tensions between the Pope and the Emperor, staying in Basel between 1339 and 1341 where he made connections with the *Gottesfreunde* and the secular priest Henry of Nördlingen.¹³¹ During the 1340s Tauler returned to Strasbourg, where he remained until his death in 1361, even during extensive years of plague and hardship. In the last decades of his life, Tauler also made several trips to Cologne in order to preach to the female communities of that city and possibly even travelled to Groenendaal to meet with the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec.¹³² For Tauler, no formal treatises remain, although several pseudonymous treatises are extant. The only authentic writings which can legitimately be ascribed to Tauler are a series of eighty vernacular sermons.

Tauler throughout his sermons emphasized the important role of detachment and silence in the life of the spirit, just as Eckhart and Suso had done in their own teachings.¹³³

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, p. 241.

¹²⁹ Sturlese, *Homo divinus*, p. 169.

¹³⁰ McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, p. 241.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 242.

¹³² Ibid, p. 243.

¹³³ Cf. Sturlese, *Homo divinus*, pp. 169-97.

He does so in sermons replete with pastoral imagery that reflects upon the active practice of the life of Christian contemplation, which is a remarkable departure from the approach of Eckhart's sermons.¹³⁴ The first of the Christmas sermons which Tauler delivered to the pious religious women of Cologne, *Puer natus est nobis* ("A Child is born to us"), specifically teaches the importance of silence in the *vita contemplativa*. As Caroline F. Mösch argues, these Christmas sermons are influenced by and thematically related to Eckhart's sermon cycle on the Eternal Birth.¹³⁵

The sermon begins with an injunction to live a life of contemplative detachment. "Should a going forth, an elevation beyond and above ourselves ever come about," Tauler explains, "then we must renounce our own will, desire, and worldly activity."¹³⁶ By doing so, he argues, "we can orient ourselves single-mindedly toward God, and meet Him only in complete abandonment of self."¹³⁷ Tauler cautions his audience that they "should observe silence," for "in that manner the Word can be uttered and heard within."¹³⁸ When one observes silence, as Eckhart had argued in his own sermons and in his commentary on Ws. 18: 14-15, "the Word can be uttered and heard within [the soul]. For surely, if you choose to speak, God must fall silent."¹³⁹ Tauler commends the observance of silence as the best act that the spiritually detached can perform. For Tauler, "there is no better way of serving the Word than by silence and by listening. If you go out of yourself, you may be certain

¹³⁴ Steven E. Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis: A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson and Martin Luther (1509-16) in the Context of their Theological Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), pp. 27-30.

¹³⁵ Caroline F. Mösch, "*Daz disiu Geburt geschehe*": *Meister Eckharts Predigetzyklus Von der ewigen geburt und Johannes Taulers Predigten zum Weihnachtsfestkreis* (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2006).

¹³⁶ Johannes Tauler, Sermon 1, trans. Shradly, *Johannes Tauler*, p. 37.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

that God will enter and fill you wholly: the greater the void, the greater the divine influx.”¹⁴⁰

Like Eckhart, Tauler also likens this state to spiritual virginity. “The soul should be a pure and chaste virgin,” Tauler argues, “bringing forth no outward fruit... but much fruit within.”¹⁴¹ Such a state, as Eckhart also taught, involved detaching oneself from external distractions and concerns. The detached woman “should live detached from the exterior world and from the senses. Her conduct, her thoughts, her manner, should all be interiorized.”¹⁴² To do this, Tauler recommends that the women emulate the Virgin Mary and, like Suso, expresses the characteristic teachings about silence derived from Eckhart in a devotional framework of exemplarity.¹⁴³ “Mary was betrothed; and so should we be, according to Saint Paul’s teaching,” he explains; “we should immerse our immutable will into the divine, immutable one, so that our weakness may be turned into strength.”¹⁴⁴ Likewise, Tauler argues, “Mary was also turned inwards, and if God is to be truly born in us, we must imitate her in this as well and live secluded from the world.”¹⁴⁵ This is afforded not only by retreating from the created and temporal world, but also by “interiorizing our acts of virtue.” As such, “what is truly needful is the creation of inner stillness and peace, a retreat protecting us from our senses, a refuge of tranquility and inward repose.”¹⁴⁶ Tauler ultimately names this state the “nocturnal silence, in which all things remain hushed and in perfect stillness.”¹⁴⁷ It is the place, as Eckhart had argued in

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 39.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Cf. Mösch, “*Daz disiu Geburt geschehe*,” pp. 229-31.

¹⁴⁴ Tauler, Sermon 1, trans. Shradly, *Johannes Tauler*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 40.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

his *Expositio libri sapientiae*, where “God’s word is heard in truth” and where “created things must give way.”¹⁴⁸

This is why, like Eckhart, Tauler is highly critical of the wordiness and attachments of the unspiritual. In another sermon on Mk. 16: 14 *Recumbentibus undecim discipulis* (“When the eleven disciples were sitting together...”) preached at Ascension, Tauler critiques his fellow religious for their inattention to their spiritual ground.¹⁴⁹ “It sometimes happens that men of high ‘culture,’ with their high-sounding words and sparkling minds, are cisterns like the rest [of society],” Tauler explains.¹⁵⁰ “They are quite pleased with their eminence,” he continues, “and with the impression they make all around.” However, Tauler complains, “people who have lived under the cloak of their celebrity, their brilliance and learning, full of sham holiness, they all [are] devoid of living faith, frauds and cisterns, and will be prey to the devil in the end.”¹⁵¹ Tellingly, Tauler sees such a state of affairs as common to those who profess to a religious life and one might detect a slight critique of the loquacity of his own Order of Preachers. “I know perfectly well that pretense and ostentation are common practice among those in religious states of life,” he criticizes, and “their attitude is superficial, hypocritical, and entirely bound to the senses.”¹⁵² Tauler argues that “religious are to be blamed in a very grievous manner if they are guilty of hardheartedness and unbelief.”¹⁵³ These people, who have lost their zeal for the divine, “perversely cling to their external unspiritual ways and observances; they live from the outside in, relying entirely on sensible images received from without.”¹⁵⁴ They are the exact opposite of the detached person reposing in silence. For, Tauler laments,

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. Cf. Mösch, “*Daz disiu Geburt geschehe*,” pp. 240-44.

¹⁴⁹ Tauler, Sermon 18, trans. Shradly, *Johannes Tauler*, p. 62

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 64.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 64-5.

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 62.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 63-4.

“they do not turn to their ground; they have neither desire nor thirst for what is profound and never go below the surface.”¹⁵⁵

Thus, the important teaching about silence which Eckhart developed in his vernacular sermons from his scholastic reflections on the rhetoric of inexpressibility were taken up and expanded upon by his disciples. Although Eckhart’s teachings were formally condemned, Henry Suso and Johannes Tauler continued to emphasise the important role silence played in the life of spiritual detachment. By giving the teachings a devotional and affective accent, in the case of Suso’s *Exemplar*, or by accentuating their practical and contemplative element in the case of Tauler’s sermons, these challenging ideas came to be more orthodoxly palatable. In this way the “silent praise of God” was able to enter into more mainstream spiritual awareness throughout Germany.

The Rhetoric of Inexpressibility in Practice

The vernacular spiritual guidebooks and treatises produced by the pious men and women of Germany witness the dissemination of the mystical instruction found in the works of Eckhart, Suso and Tauler. These numerous texts, including the Sister Catherine Treatise and the *Buch von geistlicher Armuth*, demonstrate that the teaching about inner silence as detachment which emerged from the rhetoric of inexpressibility cultivated by the German Dominican School was eagerly put into practice by the lay community of Germany. Importantly, each in their different way explicitly sought to impart the praxis of detachment. Ideas which saw their genesis in the scholastic debates of the Dominican *studia* and at the medieval University came to have a tangible impact upon the spiritual practice of the wider community.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 64.

The Sister Catherine Treatise

A text which arises from a female milieu is the so-called Sister Catherine Treatise, known also by its incipit: *Daz ist swester katrei maister eckhartes tovchter von strazbuerch* (“This is Sister Catherine, Meister Eckhart’s daughter from Strasbourg.”)¹⁵⁶ The treatise is an account of a dialogue between a confessor, often identified as Eckhart and his spiritual daughter, which includes meditations and practical instruction on several prominent Eckhartian concepts such as detachment, the Eternal Birth of the Word in the soul and the identity between God and man in the ground of the soul.¹⁵⁷ The treatise has been associated by Franz-Josef Schweitzer with the persecution of the Beguine community active in Strasbourg from 1317-19.¹⁵⁸ McGinn disagrees, however, arguing that the treatise rather gives witness to the debate about mystical authority in fourteenth century Germany.¹⁵⁹

In the treatise, the daughter asks her confessor what “the quickest way” to spiritual perfection consists in and is taught that it involves *imitatio Christi* and the adoption of spiritual poverty and complete abandonment.¹⁶⁰ However, after being rebuffed that this path is “not meant for women,” the daughter retreats into spiritual exile only to return later completely transformed and unrecognizable.¹⁶¹ After once again seeking confession, the daughter proceeds to instruct her confessor in the life of detachment, reversing the traditional role of teacher and disciple.¹⁶² The text inverts the male-female relationship which is witnessed in Henry Suso’s *Exemplar*. Yet, like the *Exemplar*, the Sister Catherine Treatise is concerned with “the *transmission* of a particular kind of unconscious

¹⁵⁶ “Schwester Katrei,” trans. Elivira Borgstädt, *Teacher and Preacher*, pp. 347-87.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. McGinn, introduction to *Teacher and Preacher*, pp. 10-14; Dagmar Gottschall, “Eckhart and the Vernacular Tradition,” pp. 549-51.

¹⁵⁸ Franz-Josef Schweitzer, “Schwester Katrei,” in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexicon* 8, ed. by Kurt Ruh (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 947-50.

¹⁵⁹ McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, pp. 343-9.

¹⁶⁰ “Schwester Katrei,” trans. Borgstädt, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 349.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 357.

knowledge of God and about competing *methods* of attaining and transmitting that knowledge.”¹⁶³ Thus, it is worth examining in order to understand how the Dominican teaching about silence came to be practiced and understood in the circles of pious lay women.

When her confessor asks after the daughter’s spiritual transformation and return whether her religious practices have changed, the daughter responds that she now “has nothing to do with angels nor with saints, nor with all creatures, nor with any of the things that were ever created.” She asserts in a manner reminiscent of Eckhart’s sermons, “I have nothing to do with anything that was ever spoken!”¹⁶⁴ The daughter elaborates for the confused confessor that she is now permanently “established in the pure Godhead, in which there never was form nor image.”¹⁶⁵ The daughter further explains that “whoever is satisfied with that which can be expressed in words alone... shall rightfully be called a nonbeliever.”¹⁶⁶ This is because “that which is expressed in words is understood by the lower powers of the soul, but it does not suffice for the highest powers of the soul.”¹⁶⁷ Ultimately, the daughter explains to her confessor, this is because “it is the soul, naked and empty of all expressible things, which stands [as] one in the One” and that “in such a way the soul flows forward, and flows for ever and ever, as long as God has ordained that it give the body its being in time.”¹⁶⁸ Silent detachment beyond images emerges here in the dichotomy between the “breaking-through” and the “flowing-out” which Eckhart preached in his own sermons.

¹⁶³ Sara S. Poor, “Women Teaching Men in the Medieval Devotional Imagination,” in *Partners in Spirit: Women, Men, and Religious Life in Germany, 1100-1500*, ed. by Fiona J. Griffiths and Julie Hotchin (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), p. 347. (emphasis present)

¹⁶⁴ “Schwester Katrei,” trans. Borgstädt, *Teacher and Preacher*, p. 361.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 362.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

Similarly, the daughter stresses the need to break free from the senses and guides her confessor in how this can be achieved. “Exterior works and exterior words,” she says, “the devil knows them well.”¹⁶⁹ The daughter argues that “interior practice is good when the soul raises itself internally to God and converses with God as intimately as it wants and God converses with the soul.”¹⁷⁰ Maintaining silence in detachment from images is, therefore, preferable. However, those confused by the devil and who are attached to exterior works, “they always do their deeds externally and speak their words externally. What they ought to say to God in their souls they speak with their mouths.”¹⁷¹ Thus, the daughter will conclude in her own reflection on Eckhart’s concept of negation:

I feel pity for the people who claim to see God with exterior eyes and who say that God has a mouth and nose, hands and feet. You must know if I had a God who could be seen with exterior eyes and comprehended with exterior senses and could be conversed with in exterior speech, and would thus be such a little God that he had hands and feet, I would never say a Hail Mary because of him!¹⁷²

Under such instruction, the confessor experiences his own mystical union with the divinity. The daughter tells the confessor “so much about the greatness and power and providence of God” that he loses his senses and spends an extended period of time unconscious in his cell.¹⁷³ This treatise, therefore, provides an example of practical mysticism grounded in the Dominican’s rhetoric of inexpressibility.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 375.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid, p. 381.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p. 383.

Das Buch von geistlicher Armuth

The teaching on detachment, spiritual poverty and silence found in the sermons of the German Dominicans is also present in one last important treatise in the vernacular from the fourteenth century Rhineland. Known as *Das Buch von geistlicher Armuth* (The Book of the Poor in Spirit), this text proved exceedingly popular and was throughout the Middle Ages and even into the early modern period attributed to Johannes Tauler.¹⁷⁴ In the late nineteenth century the prolific scholar H. S. Denifle, in his edition of the *Buch von geistlicher Armuth*, successfully challenged this assumption.¹⁷⁵ Denifle believed instead that the text was most likely of Franciscan origin because of its emphasis on poverty as a virtue in itself. The early historian of German mysticism James Clarke concurred. He even claimed that whilst the *Buch* demonstrates parallels to the teachings of Eckhart and Tauler, there was “no sign of direct influence.”¹⁷⁶ Scholarly consensus today disagrees, recognising in the book themes which are characteristically Dominican.

The treatise was most likely composed around 1350-70 by one of the *Gottesfreunde* attached to the Order, or perhaps even an anonymous friar who, like Suso and Tauler, was an avid pupil of Eckhart’s mysticism.¹⁷⁷ The treatise itself has been called a practical guide to Rhineland mysticism which is far clearer than the sermons of Eckhart and his followers.¹⁷⁸ In the words of C. F. Kelley, the author of the *Buch* was “the instructor, the Don who attempts to set down the perfectionist aims of his colleagues.”¹⁷⁹ The treatise expands upon the theology of spiritual poverty which Eckhart had formulated in his Predigt 52 and provides detailed instructions on how the state of true poverty can be

¹⁷⁴ *The Book of the Poor in Spirit by a Friend of God*, ed. and trans. by C. F. Kelley (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954).

¹⁷⁵ H. S. Denifle, introduction to *Das Buch von geistlicher Armuth*, ed. by H. S. Denifle (Munich: Literarisches Institut von Dr. Max Huttler, 1877), p. 51.

¹⁷⁶ James Clarke, *The Great German Mystics: Eckhart, Tauler and Suso* (London: Blackwell & Mott, 1949), pp. 104-5.

¹⁷⁷ Kelley, introduction to *The Book of the Poor in Spirit*, pp. 52-3.

¹⁷⁸ Kelley, introduction to *The Book of the Poor in Spirit*, p. 3.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

achieved. This treatise, in a very real way, served as the practical guide to living a life of detachment and bears witness to instructions directed to the wider spiritual community of religious and laity meant to put into practice the rhetoric of inexpressibility formulated by Eckhart and his followers.

In an almost direct paraphrase of Eckhart, the *Buch von geistlicher Armuth* begins by asserting that while God is detached from all creatures, “in the same way spiritual poverty is a state of being detached from all creatures.” The truly poor man “clings to nothing beneath him, but only to Him who is elevated above all else.” The poor man “understands nothing,” “wills nothing,” and “is God with God.”¹⁸⁰ In the *Buch*, this spiritual poverty is directly identified with the maintenance of inner silence. Like Eckhart, the author of the *Buch* argues that “the spirit of God speaks intimately in man without images and forms. And this speech is Life, Light and Truth.”¹⁸¹ However, as the author of the treatise recognizes, “one cannot very well say what life is in itself,” even though man by nature experiences it.¹⁸² Life, like God, is above language and cannot be explained by any image or form. Because of this, man lapses into a passive silence. As the *Gottesfreund* explains, “this is perhaps the best thing a man can do— be silent and endure that silence.”¹⁸³

According to the anonymous author, “silence and long-suffering are the most perfect acts that a man may have... if he really wants to live, he should always remain silent and suffer God alone to speak, for what God utters is life.”¹⁸⁴ If the spiritually poor man speaks, or lets others speak through him, then he becomes mortal and is separated from God. By doing so, he has fallen from a state of detachment into a state of attachment. The

¹⁸⁰ *The Book of the Poor in Spirit*, trans. Kelley, p. 53.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 130.

¹⁸² *Ibid*.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 131.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 132.

Gottesfreund writes that, whereas the misdirected man is recognisable through his prolixity for harmful and unvirtuous speech, the spiritually poor are recognised “by their humble silence, long suffering and abandonment to God.”¹⁸⁵ The author further explains that this is because the just, or poor man, “[realises] that their speech does not bear fruit.”¹⁸⁶ The truly silent and detached man is also more receptive to preaching, for “through the outer word that men hear they come to the inner word which God utters in the centre of the soul.”¹⁸⁷

As the anonymous author concludes:

In this pure and silent soul God the Father speaks and she [the soul] hears His voice. And this hearing is simply an inner feeling of God in the centre of the soul, a feeling which overflows into all her powers and with such a joy that she would gladly forgo her action and allow God alone to act, only attending to His leadings. The more she withholds from action, the more God acts in her.¹⁸⁸

This vision of the soul’s true essence is only possible through detachment. This is what the author of the *Buch von geistlicher Armuth* means when he writes that the poor man must “put aside all that is created.” One who is able to resist the temporal and creaturely distractions of the world lets God into the soul. By doing so, the author of the *Buch* writes, he “receives [a] living, godlike power from the Father who pours it into him.”¹⁸⁹ This inpouring into the soul of the life-giving divine overflow is God’s “*inspeaking* of a life full of joy and rapture.”¹⁹⁰ Eckhart referred to this state as being free and in his treatise the anonymous *Gottesfreund* does the same. He argues that “God is a free power. Poverty of spirit is also a free power, not bound by anyone, for freedom is its

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 71.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 132-3.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 134.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 133.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid (emphasis in original).

nobility.”¹⁹¹ Thus, “freedom is a perfect purity and detachment which seeks the Eternal.” It “is a withdrawn and separated being, similar to God or wholly attached to God.” In this state, our Friend of God argues, the soul is totally “isolated from creatures.”¹⁹² In order to be truly silent and detached, one must be, in the words of Eckhart, as free as one was when one was not.

The mystical literature in the vernacular which emerged out of the Rhineland in the fourteenth century bears witness to the broadening of the nature of silent practice. By meditating upon the “silent praise of God” which Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso and Johannes Tauler taught in their vernacular sermons and instructional literature, the wider community of medieval Germany put the lessons of the rhetoric of inexpressibility into action. Eckhart’s challenging theology of mystical union with divinity through freedom from images gave the virtue of silence a soteriological purpose for the wider Christian community far beyond its ethical role in monastic discourse. For Eckhart and his disciples, inner silence emerged as one of the principal metaphors for spiritual detachment. Silence became a personal ethical disposition for the pious laity of the Rhineland, a “lived ethical metaphysics” of detachment, rather than simply the proper response to God’s ineffability. This was the key contribution which the mystics of the Rhineland offered to the rhetoric of inexpressibility crafted by the German Dominican School and the fullest manifestation of the “silent praise of God.”

¹⁹¹ Ibid, p. 59.

¹⁹² Ibid.

Conclusion

In the theological debate and writing which emerged from the German Dominican School from 1250-1350 it is clear that silence played a crucial role in transforming both theological discourse and spiritual practice. As initially suggested in the Introduction, this rhetoric of inexpressibility had its ultimate expression in the silent praise of the divine and was not only characteristic of Meister Eckhart's treatises and sermons, but also of the philosophical and theological writing and preaching of the German Dominicans. Whilst the spirituality of the Dominican Order at large has been characterized by their commitment to preaching and teaching, German Dominican figures such as Albert the Great, Ulrich of Strasbourg, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso and Johannes Tauler demonstrate the role that silence played in the theology and practice of the Order. Their reflection on the important scholastic authorities for apophatic theology, Dionysius the Areopagite and Moses Maimonides, as well as the tradition of the silent praise of God recommended by Psalms 64:2 in the translation of Jerome's *Hebraica*, led these Dominicans to craft a mystical praxis of silent detachment for the entire Christian community. That the call to silent praise was accepted by the people of the fourteenth century Rhineland, to which the German Dominican message of silence was addressed, is evidenced by its expression in the vernacular literature of the region such as the Sister Catherine Treatise and *Das Buch von geistlicher Armuth*.

This message of silent praise was embedded in an existing respect for the role of silence in the life of the spirit that the Order adopted from ascetic, monastic and canonical literature. When Dominic adopted for his fledgling Order the Rule of Augustine, with its emphasis on a life of contemplation in service to active preaching, the Dominicans became inheritors of a tradition of silent observance as it was understood by canonical writers. Figures such as Hugh of St. Victor and Philip of Harvengt stressed that silence was

necessary for the preacher to cultivate correct speech; lessons taken to heart by the fifth Master General of the Order, Humbert of Romans, when he composed his *Liber de eruditione praedicatorum*. The hagiographical *Vitae fratrum* by Gerald de Frachet also emphasized a need for silence in its exemplary description of the early Dominican community, paying especial attention to the monastic concern to avoid sinful speech. Ultimately, however, it was the spiritual model of Augustine himself who provided insight into the mystical dimension of silence as it related to the ineffable divinity. All these considerations provided the orthopractical model of silent practice in which the German Dominican School grounded its specific rhetoric of inexpressibility.

The value placed on silence by the German Dominicans was a direct result of Albert's promotion of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* at Cologne in his cycle of *lectiones* on Dionysius during the early 1250s. By outlining an ontotheology grounded in Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism, Albert advocated a Christianized philosophy that became dominant in medieval Germany. Importantly, Albert stressed the idea, derived from reflections upon the apophatic ascent described by Dionysius, that God's ineffability and unknowability refer to man's inability to comprehend the divine essence. Whilst not directly concerned with the Dionysian imperative to silence, Albert did promote the need to engage in a negative theology properly understood as mystical and the possibility of uniting with God via intellectual union. These ideas were further reinforced by his pupil at Cologne, Ulrich of Strasbourg, who provided a summary of Albert's Dionysian position in his pedagogically motivated treatise the *De summo bono*.

Alongside this tradition of Dionysian silence, the Dominican theologians associated with Albert and the *studium* of Cologne also relied heavily on the negative theology found in the Jewish philosopher Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. This important treatise, translated into Latin sometime during the 1240s and of particular

interest to Dominican authors, argued explicitly for a silent response to God's ineffability grounded in an Aristotelian "categorical" negative theology. Importantly, Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, the two Dominicans who expressly engaged with this idea in the writing of Maimonides, related this silent praise to Psalms 64:2 and the apophatic silence of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Aquinas, for instance, offered Psalms 64:2 in the translation of Jerome's *Hebraica* as a proof-text for his heavily Dionysian understanding of apophatic silence, even as he disagreed with the exact nature of Maimonides' negative theology and promoted an understanding of divine ineffability based in the way of analogy. Eckhart, on the other hand, wholeheartedly accepted the silent praise of the divine he encountered in Maimonides' *Guide*, which he offered in his scholastic treatises as an alternative to Dionysius and Aquinas. The silence of Maimonides and Psalms 64:2 became for Eckhart an explanation for God's ineffability, as well as an explanation for mystical union with the divine.

The ideas about the silent praise of God which Eckhart advocated in his scholastic commentaries saw further expression in the vernacular literature and sermons he produced for the fourteenth century Rhineland. Here the silence of the German Dominican School emerged as a metaphor for Eckhart's ethical metaphysics of detachment. Interweaving the authorities of Augustine, Dionysius and Maimonides together in his sermons, Eckhart argued that the cultivation of an inner silence allowed God to speak directly into the soul. Although many of the ideas Eckhart developed in his vernacular writing and preaching were censured by the papacy in 1329, his ideas about silence were still promulgated by his disciples Henry Suso and Johannes Tauler. Both these figures, however, altered the mystical teachings of Eckhart by introducing devotional, affective and contemplative elements designed to make Eckhart's difficult theology more relevant to spiritual practice. That an audience existed for the German Dominican rhetoric of inexpressibility and who

eagerly put into practice the silent praise of God is demonstrated by the vernacular literature of the Rhineland. These texts gave to Eckhart's characteristic teaching new emphases and insights and the silent observance characteristic of monastic practice emerged as a spiritual virtue for the entire Christian community.

The story of the German Dominican School and its rhetoric of inexpressibility does not end with these figures. In fact a number of prominent members of the School have not been examined in this study, such as Berthold of Moosburg, who introduced a series of influential reflections on silence through his commentary on Proclus's *Elements of Theology*.¹ Neither were Aquinas and Eckhart the only Dominicans to actively reflect on the silent praise of God as it emerged in Psalms 64:2 and in Maimonides. The English Oxonian *magister* and Christian Hebraist Nicholas Trevet (c. 1257-1334), for example, incorporated Maimonidean reflections on negative theology into his commentary on Jerome's *Hebraica*.² Further research and reflection must be done on how these figures relate to the development of the rhetoric of inexpressibility in the German Dominican School presented here. Similarly, a broader consideration of the vernacular writing which emerged in response to these teachings in the Rhineland would offer a more in-depth understanding of how the rhetoric of inexpressibility was practiced, especially amongst religious and lay women, in the fourteenth century and beyond.

Meister Eckhart's message that it is only through silence that one can truly achieve union with God emerges as characteristic of German Dominican theological reflection. Furthermore, the practice of silence which these figures developed through their engagement with the ineffable divinity and with sources for apophatic theology was not

¹ Cf. Markus Führer and Stephen Gersh, "Dietrich of Freiburg and Berthold of Moosburg," in *Interpreting Proclus from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. by Stephen Gersh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 299-317.

² Cf. Alastair J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 85-6. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 346.

uncharacteristically Dominican. The inner silence of detachment distinctive of Eckhart's preaching and teaching was part of a wider theological tradition emerging out of medieval Germany and especially Cologne. The complexity of this tradition and its various influences and developments, which have been sketched above, attest to the important connections evident between theological reflection and debate at the school level and spiritual and mystical practice as it appears amongst the medieval laity. The silence taught by Eckhart and his disciples, grounded in the writing of the German Dominican School, found its fullest expression in the spiritual practice of the fourteenth-century Rhineland.

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