

# Two Thousand Years of Heresy: An Essay

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The source of my interest in the study of heresiology originates in many years of research on the work and life of Meister Eckhart. It is therefore in an Eckhartian perspective, which presupposes a certain leniency, and even sympathy, towards the phenomenon of heresy, that I am going to give a survey of 'the other side of Christianity', from the Acts of Simon Magus, 'father of heresy', to the dawn of the second millennium, while exposing the medieval period in greater depth.<sup>1</sup>

What is a heretic, what is a schismatic, what is a non-Christian? Since the very first decades of Christianity these questions have preoccupied the Church Fathers, to such an extent that we have a considerable literature on this subject. Here we are confronted by a highly nuanced situation, of great complexity, so that each time that one studies this period as a historian or a philosopher it seems to become necessary to review one's judgement on some aspect or other of the question. I do not, therefore, wish to set myself up as an 'arbiter' of those great intellectual and theological controversies which took place at the end of the Roman Empire. It is rather a question of attempting to elucidate a few salient aspects, while being aware that we will generally be apprised of only one point of view, namely that of the Church, as constituted from its origins to the councils of the fourth century AD.

In an approach which strives for impartiality, it should always be borne in mind that heretics are by definition those who have 'lost' and that it is rare to be able to reconstitute their viewpoint other than by means of the writings of their opponents.

## The father of heresy: Simon of Samaria, called 'Magus' ('the Magician')

This is strikingly the case with Simon of Samaria, called 'Magus' ('the Magician'). He is the only heresiarch named in the first basic biblical text of the Christian Church, that is to say, the Acts of the Apostles, which would have been written up to six or eight decades after the events which they relate. The fact that, among the supposed alterations made in the interval, the name of Simon still appears in the Acts makes it possible to suppose that the issue was important and undoubtedly even current at the time of composition.

In effect, everything leads one to believe that the 'father of all heresies' – the name given to him by Irenaeus of Lyons in his *Adversus haereses* ('Against heretics') of the late second century – had spiritual offspring. He undoubtedly left in his wake some 'Gnostic school', still active when the Acts were written, and even later, since Hippolytus (100–65 AD) compares him to the 'grave Heraclitus' and Eusebius of Caesarea (265–340 AD) also sees him as the first fomenter of every heresy.

In the Acts of the Apostles (8: 4–25) Philip encounters Simon when he goes to preach to the Samaritans. It was a delicate mission, as ever since Jesus' lifetime the Apostles had been given orders to avoid those whom they considered to be strangers: 'Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' (Matthew 10: 5–6. For another point of view, see John 4: 1–42.) Here we already find a sort of foretaste of heresy, since – if we are to believe the exegetes on this point – the Samaritans seem long to have been considered 'the pariahs of Judaism'.<sup>2</sup>

To this negative prejudice was added a second difficulty, namely that the Samaritans already had their own prophet, for whom they had enormous respect: 'This man [Simon]', they said, 'is the great power of God'. Simon of Samaria himself was considered to be 'some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest', notably because for a long time he had 'bewitched them with his sorceries' (Acts 8: 9–10, 11). We know that the Apostles converted crowds by performing miracles, and Simon proceeded in a comparable manner by (according to the Apostles) performing 'sorceries'. But until then the matter was of no importance, since it would simply be a question of competition from an 'alien guru', easily refutable, since it was foreign to Christianity. But something occurred with Simon which meant that he was not simply someone from another religion – a 'magician' like innumerable others, a mountebank, someone with great charisma (though not as great as that of Christ) but who, none the less, succeeded in dazzling the crowds. What is important is that Simon was interested in what was to become Christianity, and he discovered an affinity with Philip, one of the twelve disciples of Christ: 'Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done' (Acts 8: 13).

There was therefore clearly an act of conversion here. There could have been competition – very clearly hinted at in this passage – and that would have led to rejection. Then it would have been sufficient to insist on the difference between 'miracle' and 'magic' to say that Simon was an impostor, like Pharaoh's sorcerers of long ago. But it happened that Simon approached Philip, and he was converted and even acknowledged Philip the better 'magician'. Simon believed and he was converted. This stage is presented in a single phrase, but it looks as if this phase must have taken some while. He was regularly close to Philip, which does not indicate merely a conversion but friendship. Simon could, potentially, have become a new apostle, one of the Church Fathers.

Simon was visibly inspired ('he is the power of God'), and what would also have made him attractive in the eyes of Christians was that he acknowledged the eminence of Christ. The fact of being a *magus* or 'magician' (which is the same thing) was not sufficient ground for rejecting Simon, since the Magi who came to adore Christ would have been in the same position. In sum, he might not only have become the thirteenth Apostle but also the fourth Wise Man.

What was the reason for Simon, who was initially welcomed by Philip into the Christian community, suddenly being thought so poorly of and even ferociously rejected? The next passage in Acts tells us: 'when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John' (Acts 8: 14). The two latter clearly did not have the same sympathy for Simon as Philip. Moreover, they did something more than Simon and Philip, namely they laid hands on the converted so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Simon is then supposed to have offered

money to receive this same power from the Apostles. But Peter said to him: 'Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money' (Acts 8: 20). His friend Philip would doubtless have informed him much more gently that this was not the right way to approach spiritual matters. The violence of Peter's reply allows us to sense grievances other than that openly expressed. In effect, his argument does not establish Simon as the 'father of heresy', but simply as the inspirer of 'simony' (a term which does, moreover, derive from precisely this episode). Let us add that this reproach is a classic *topos* – in the event it is not far removed from that which Socrates formulated against the Sophists.

Simon's reply, when all is said and done, is fairly humble: 'Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me' (Acts 8: 24). The real problem with Simon did not stem from the fact that he performed magic rather than miracles, nor even that he practised spiritual venality (a reproach repeatedly directed against the Church of Rome itself, notably by Luther). The real problem, which makes him the first of the heretics, is that he converted while remaining more than a simple Christian. With much personal experience, he would undoubtedly have founded his own school, thus becoming the first of the Christian gnostics.

As for the rest of what we are told about Simon in patristic literature (Pseudo-Clementine, Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Ambrose), it is difficult to assess it properly. Is it reality, invention, exaggeration or increasing misrepresentation of his character? In fact there are few historical figures for whom the process of negative mystification can be followed in such a tangible manner.<sup>3</sup> A fascinating narrative crescendo is the reason why the further one goes from the real historical existence, the more the portrait of Simon is filled out and embellished with new details to become the terrifying archetype of all heresies.

In one of the most famous legends our 'paleochristian Faust' went to the brothel at Tyre, where he met a woman called Helen. He saw in her a reincarnation of Helen of Troy – the woman who symbolized earthly beauty in Antiquity, but also the principal reason for the famous war of the same name. One undoubtedly authentic detail is that Simon saw in her a lost sheep and from this fact he linked her with the Christian theme of Redemption. This was an exaggeration of enormous symbolic significance: by coupling with her, he literally became 'the father of all heresies'. The brothel of Tyre symbolized Simon's 'venality'. Implicit in copulation with a prostitute was the disgrace of 'syncretism', 'procurring', even the 'Babylonian intermarriage' (from which the Samaritans had indeed originated). The name 'Helen' suggests Hellenic love, ancient Greek philosophy, or even other religions from before Christianity. One may think of Delphi, Dionysus, Hermes, Pythagoras, Zoroaster, Mithras, neoplatonism, astrology, the Chaldean oracles, the Orphic and Egyptian mysteries – or even perhaps some trace of Indo-Buddhism, implanted at the time of Alexander's conquests? The fact remains that Simon actually studied at Alexandria, the spiritual capital of Hellenist ecumenism, where he would have been initiated in the practices of magical healing, especially Arabic and Jewish.

Simon is undoubtedly not the only heretical figure from the paleochristian era. In a more extensive study, one would have also to mention the religious philosophy of the Gnostic movements, particularly that of Valentinus (died c.161). But there was also Marcion (c.85–160), who was so obsessed by the idea that the teaching of Christ had been falsified since the outset that he drew up his own expurgated compilation of the 'New Testament'

– a term which, moreover, he was the first to introduce to indicate its difference from the ‘Old’. We have to admit that Christ did not write a testament himself. But an expurgated compilation of the New Testament is itself a problematical issue. According to Harnack, Marcion nevertheless made an essential contribution to the establishment of the foundations of the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> The oldest dated Christian inscription comes from a Syrian Marcionite ‘synagogue’ (1 October AD 318). More specifically, ‘synagogue’ is a Greek word simply meaning ‘assembly’. So his ‘church’ lasted until the official start of Catholic orthodoxy, in the year 325.

### Concerning the Council of Nicaea

Strictly speaking, we could say that heresy preceded orthodoxy, since the official establishment of the latter began with the Council of Nicaea, ordered by the Emperor Constantine in the year AD 325. We must then examine this period, when the most serious dogmatic and political conflicts of the early history of Christianity took place. Although Constantine (280–337) was only officially baptized on his death-bed, he wanted to turn to his advantage the growing importance of Christianity to consolidate his power, a power increasingly presented by a rigid court ceremonial, where (from 330–337, in Byzantium renamed Constantinople) the emperor was honoured as a god. It was, therefore, from ‘above Christianity’ that Constantine settled by imperial decree the religious disputes of a part of his subjects growing in political significance. We should add that the claimed ‘imperial legitimacy’ of the Papacy goes back to Constantine. His supposed ‘Donation’, together with the scandalous ‘False Decretals’ which resulted from it, is undoubtedly the most important political falsification of the Middle Ages.

At the outset, Constantine favoured Christianity through political opportunism, but he was perhaps also motivated by the impression that this new religion offered ‘a more effective magic’ than the protection of the ancient gods of Rome. This at least is what Socrates Scholasticus, or ‘the Advocate’, seems to imply. In 312, after a vision of the *labarum* accompanied by the motto, ‘*In hoc signo vinces*’ (‘In this sign you will conquer’), Constantine made it his standard in the struggle against his enemies.<sup>5</sup> In the period of peace and official recognition which was gradually established for the Christians (for earlier they were often persecuted), a mere spark – a minor dispute between a priest and a bishop – was to cause a conflagration, a veritable schism which lasted at least three centuries.

In c.318 Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, attempted in a sermon to give an explanation of the ‘unity of the Holy Trinity’. In the discussion which followed, an African priest called Arius dared to contradict him, stating that if the Father had begotten the Son the latter had a beginning and there was therefore a time when the Son was not. In sum, while Alexander saw only the divinity of Christ, Arius sought to bring him closer to the human condition. For a mind fond of paradoxes, these points of view are not necessarily incompatible – but the same could not be said of the temperament of the two men who defended them. The first, whose *amour propre* had undoubtedly been wounded, ordered the second to change his mind; but the latter (who perhaps wanted to be ‘bishop in the bishop’s place’?) did nothing about it. Arius’ attitude does nevertheless seem to have been more hesitant, more contradictory and almost Kierkegaard-esque. Fundamentally, one

can ask whether initially Arius represented simply the right to have doubts, the freedom to speculate and have one own's opinion – and it was in this perspective, sympathetic to philosophy, that he had wanted to present to Alexander the antithesis of his thesis.

The decision of the bishopric of Alexandria (Alexander and then Athanasius), which had been founded since the beginning of the third century upon a considerable administrative apparatus, was not to go back on his decision, repeating and restating ceaselessly the same formulas and the same anathemas with 'heavy monotony'. In the long term this method proved relatively effective, but at what price! Arius was stripped of his functions and excommunicated. This spectacular sanction only aggravated matters, since everyone wanted to know the reason for it. It was doubtless not the first time that this Trinitarian question had been posed, but now that it had become a political matter everyone wanted to become involved in it. The backwash from this incident crossed Egypt and sowed disorder in other provinces of the Empire. There were even brawls in the streets and Christians became the laughing stock of the pagans, who amused themselves by parodying their disputes in the theatres.

To settle these disturbances of public order, Constantine assembled a council in his palace of Nicaea. In less than a decade the bishops thus went from the catacombs to imperial honours. They were received with great pomp, but they were also compelled to subscribe to the council's decisions.

Admittedly, the council's decisions were not the result of chance; they had been determined by tactical manoeuvres and imperial pressure. Constantine had every interest in ensuring that peace reigned and agreement was established in the State Church founded by him. Arius' condemnation and the profession of faith of Nicaea should have furthered this plan. But as they were waiting for the anticipated result, the emperor, falling in with the advice of his councillors, went back on the decision taken on the subject of dogma. Finally, Arius was to return to favour.<sup>6</sup>

So after five years of exile, Arius was invited to resume his functions. But on the day before that appointed for his official rehabilitation, he suddenly disappeared. According to a posthumous anecdote, put into circulation by his great rival Athanasius, Arius died in the latrines from a violent bout of dysentery. (Literal summary: 'melting into his excrement to disappear body and soul into the opening of a cesspit'.) It was for the reader to appreciate the symbolic significance of this fantastic end. Above all, he was not to be made a martyr. But this over-sudden 'descent into hell' only fed rumours of poisoning, so that after Arius' death energetic opposition was resumed and soon the whole empire was affected.

Arianism was the only heresy ever to become a state religion, under Constantine II (337–361). Under the reign of his cousin Julian (361–363) religious toleration was reestablished, which favoured a return to paganism – and earned the Emperor the epithet 'the Apostate' on the part of the Christians. He actually founded a pagan counter-church serving a cult of the sun and even wrote a treatise, *Adversus Christianos* ('Against Christians'). In 380 Arianism was once more forbidden in the East. All pagan cults were banned in 391, and Catholicism became the state religion.

A century later the Goths, converted to Arian Christianity by Bishop Ulphilas (c.311–83) before being chased from the south of Russia by the Huns, temporarily brought Arianism to Italy, especially in the reign of the Ostrogoth Theoderic (474–526). Because of a fresh condemnation of Arianism, his régime of tolerance – especially towards the Catholics



and the Jews – ended in tragedy. This resulted in the fall of the Ostrogoths.<sup>7</sup> We should add that after Justine (450–527, ruled 418–527), the Emperor responsible for these persecutions was his nephew Justinian (482–565, ruled 527–565), who even ordered the closure of the Platonic Academy in 529, after 916 years' existence. It was only reopened 930 years later, at Florence in 1459.

Other heresies, like Donatism, Manichaeism or Pelagianism, were combated by post-Nicaean patristics – but they never achieved the extent of Arianism. They will not be dealt with in this account.

### **In the slipstream of Albigensianism**

In the Middle Ages heresy passed from some great heretical individuals without any movement behind them to great heretical movements without clearly defined names.

Among the great names of solitary heretics, we should remember above all the monks Gottschalk and John Scotus Erigena (in the ninth century); as well as Pierre Abélard (1079–1142) the famous lover of Héloïse condemned several times, notably by Bernard of Clairvaux at the council of Sens (1140).

The greatest heretical affair from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries was by contrast 'a nameless movement', since it was not connected to the notorious personality of any founding heretic. At the outset, the Church did not even seem in a position to define clearly the doctrine of its presumed enemies, treating as (neo-)Manichaeans or Arians what later became Catharism or Albigensianism. It was the greatest heretical event in the Middle Ages because of the extent of the repression which it caused.

The thought that this heresy could be a kind of Manichaeism was not groundless, since there was indeed some sort of dualism, which could have sprung from tendencies inherent in Christianity itself, as well as from ancient Manichaeism, with its loans from Mazdean, Gnostic, Jewish, Christian or even Buddhist (note the concept of 'Pure Land') mythologies. This new form of Manichaeism was imported from the East at the time of the Crusades, especially by the intervention of the Bulgarian Bogomils ('friends of God'). It was because of this Bulgar origin that the Cathars were nicknamed 'bougres'. Others have seen in this an allusion to the Burgundians, also affected by the heresy. In fact, the latter was also disseminated in the north of Europe, since it was in relation to a burning of heretics at the stake at Cologne in 1163 that a Rhineland abbot first used the epithet 'Cathars' for them. The name comes from the Greek *catharos*, meaning 'pure'. In this sense, the Cathars have sometimes been considered as the precursors of the Puritans. These aspects of the question have been expounded in numerous works.

On the other hand, the presumption of Arianism is rarely advanced, but one can also find credible grounds for its influence. In this perspective, Catharism originally stemmed from 'gotharism', since the cradle of the southern variant of this heresy was in the ancient kingdom of the Visigoths. Catalonia, that is, Charlemagne's *Gothalunia*, was at this period 'the land of the Goths'. Their fortified towns became castles called 'cathars'. In fact, the Pog de Montségur – a sort of *Tempelburg* or fortified temple – was the only Cathar castle in the strict meaning of the term.<sup>8</sup> Rennes-le-Château was the ancient Rhedae, a Visigothic city of 30,000 inhabitants. In the nineteenth century, the Abbé Saunière found a treasure there, which gave rise to more fabulous speculations. Since the Carolingian period, Béziers

still passed for 'the capital of the margravate of Gothia', at least until the famous sack of 1209. Jean Guiraud even goes so far as to assert that the city of Castelnaudary (near Toulouse), seat of the first Cathar council, derived from 'Castel novum de Arrio' ('The new castle of Arius').<sup>9</sup> Whatever the case, 'Arriani' is recorded by several medieval authors to denote the Provençal heretics and notably in Henri de Clairvaux, who suggests that 'Arius lives once more in the western lands through the intervention of his heirs'.<sup>10</sup>

But in this matter, as in many others, the tracks have been considerably obscured, and the issues cannot be simplified by giving in to hasty conclusions. None the less, it seems that Catharism was first disseminated among the descendants of the Goths, since they were a 'traditionally heretical' people, and moreover more open to what might come 'from Bulgaria', since, before they invaded parts of the Roman Empire, their kingdom was on the Black Sea. It is nevertheless striking to note that those who administered the main Cathar rite (*consolamentum*) were called *perfecti* or 'good men' (*boni homines*). Now, if we translate the last term, we can see that 'Goths', 'good men' and *boni homines* are all the same thing. To this is added the Gothic (Latinized) assonance of names such as that of the Cathar bishop, Guilhabert (i.e. Wilhabert, like English William). This name even appears to have a ministerial connotation, since it could mean: 'he who had (divine) will'. The spiritual father of the ladies of Fanjeaux and of Esclarmonde de Foix, Guilhabert later took refuge in Montségur. But one must also acknowledge that as far as content was concerned, the new heresy did not resemble the old. Its content manifestly evolved over time and through the influence of other more recent cultures, or by older ones, even pre-Roman (Celtic, Hispanic, Gascon-Basque, *Volciani* and *Tectosagi* populations, etc.).

Thus in a land and period with a reputation for tolerance the rich medieval texture of Occitania developed, of which the itinerant weavers and troubadours were the best apostles. Rome, by contrast, deemed that the region spun poor cloth. The crusade which tore apart this 'fabric of heresy' started in 1209. It lasted more than a century, if all the subsequent actions are reckoned; from the great military campaigns to the stake at the episcopal castle of Villerouge, to which Guilhem Bélibaste, the last Cathar *perfectus* known in Languedoc, went in 1321 – indeed, even until 1340, if the anonymous person burned at the stake in Carcassonne is counted. This crusade 'caused million victims, it is said'.<sup>11</sup> It was precisely this which from 1231, by papal ordinance, gave birth to the 'apparatus for the cleansing of heretics' known as the Inquisition.<sup>12</sup>

### **Amaurians, beguines and the Brethren of the Free Spirit**

As the furious repression of the Amaurian school of philosophy (1210) began soon after the great Albigensian crusade, one may ask whether there is a connection between these two events – which means that the Amaurians constitute a sort of rhizome of the Albigensian heresy. Some indicators give us grounds for making the assumption at least.

On the one hand, the first rise of the universities before the Dominican tutelage of the Sorbonne paralleled that of Albigensianism. On the other hand, the path of Arabic Aristotelianism, which ran from Toledo to Paris, at least until 1209 crossed Albigensian territories. The Paris master, Amaury, Almaric, or Amalric of Bène (a friend of the king of France in his lifetime, who 'died of grief' in 1206 after his condemnation, and was then exhumed from the cemetery of Saint-Martin-des-Champs in 1210, in other words during

the First Albigensian Crusade) was one of the first at Paris before Siger of Brabant to become interested in Arabic Aristotelianism, better known under the name, 'Averroism'. His interpretations of Aristotle were criticized as neoplatonic (by John Scotus Erigena) and even 'pantheist', to such an extent that in 1215 the Papal Legate proscribed not only the writings of Amaurians such as David of Dinant, but also the reading of Aristotle's books. The latter was later rehabilitated 'against Averroism', notably by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.

Inspired by a Cistercian abbot, the Calabrian Joachim of Fiore (1130/45–1202), the Amaurians believed in the trinitarian prophecy of the three ages. The Age of the Father corresponded to the Law, the subject-matter of the Old Testament. The Age of the Son to the faith, the body of doctrine of the Church and the New Testament. The Age of the Holy Spirit, was to constitute a sort of 'New Age' which would abolish the law and the faith of the Old and the New Testaments. Foretold for the year 1260 (the date of the birth of Meister Eckhart), we can imagine how subversive this idea was for the established Church. By contrast with the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit was not to be incarnate in a single individual, but in the whole of humanity.

Besides the clearly Averroist connotation of an 'intellect' (*logos*) common to all humanity, this idea also harbours a considerable Arianist substratum, since making Christ human goes back to making the whole of humanity divine. To this should be added the gothic (i.e. 'good') connotation of Bène (the name of a place in the forest of *Carnutum*, near Chartres), while Amalric is fairly and squarely a Visigothic name. In 1211 a Magister Godinus of Amiens was burnt in his turn for Amaurianism, so that this heresy was afterwards also called 'Godinism'. In 1210 fourteen other priests and clerics had already been condemned on the same grounds. Four of them were imprisoned for life, while the other ten ended up burnt at the stake. The 'ignorant converts' were pardoned. Just as with the Cathars, there were numerous women among the latter. They would thus have continued – in a more covert and feminine way – to put into practice this mixture of pantheist philosophy, mystic rapture and spiritual intoxication inspired by the Amaurian heresy. The latter was then to resurface in different spiritual ramifications on the margin of the Church, to which (among others) the name of 'béguines' was given, which can also mean 'Al-bigen-sians'.<sup>13</sup>

That does not mean that the Amaurians carried on as a sect or as a well-structured clandestine organization. But a new form of religious sensibility was constituted, so that 'pantheist' spiritual circles continued to form, notably among women. Other appellations, such as the masculine equivalent *bégards* ('begards'), or the elusive heresy of the so-called 'Free Spirit', in fact signified something analogous (while suggesting the scandal of debauchery of the spirit and indeed of the flesh), since research has shown they have the same origin. In her important study of this heresy, Romana Guarnieri actually judges that 'the origins of the Free Spirit are enveloped in mystery to this very day: among the numerous opinions advanced none has succeeded in becoming a definite theory'.<sup>14</sup> An extended presentation of these different opinions follows. From this exposition it appears that Joachim of Fiore and Amaury of Bène were once again the principal inspirers of this movement.

Having clarified some broad outlines while trying to provide an original perspective, it must be acknowledged that this is not the sole perspective. To do otherwise would be to bypass reality, always complex, and fall into a kind of reductionism.



## Meister Eckhart or heresy in the Dominican order

While the Dominican order had initially been founded to combat the Cathar heresy, some of its members were in their turn accused of connivance with the heretics. Such was notably the case with Meister Eckhart (1260–1327), to a lesser extent with his disciple Heinrich Suso (1295–1366), and, later, with Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98) and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600). But until the trial of Meister Eckhart, the Inquisition had not yet struck at such a high level within its own order. This is why it is necessary to dwell a little on the question of Meister Eckhart's heresy.

After his second period as a master at Paris (1311–13), Eckhart would have mixed pretty freely with that form of marginal spirituality which his contemporaries classed with the beguines or the 'sect of the brothers and sisters of the Free Spirit and of voluntary poverty', since he lived mainly at Strasbourg, which had numerous beguinages at that period. Three years earlier, the Council of Vienne (1311) had placed under interdict and excommunicated all beguines and beghards. To have an idea of how many people were affected by this measure, we can cite the English chronicler, Matthew Paris, who as early as 1243 reckoned the number of beguinages at Strasbourg as eighty-five (as against seven Dominican convents). At Cologne there were 169, and the total number of beguines in Germany was estimated at a million (*milia milium*).<sup>15</sup>

The crisis deepened further when Pope John XXII published the decision of the Council of Vienne in 1317. This decision proving unrealistic, the following year it was specified that 'pious and honourable' beguines were unaffected by this measure. Nevertheless, the fear of suspicion and condemnation pushed the beguines further towards the mendicant orders – who were in their turn suspected of protecting heresy instead of fighting it.

In this sense, the destabilization of the Franciscans by the controversy relating to poverty (compare the *fraticelli*, the Joachimites and other Spirituals) which led notably to the arrest in 1323 of the General of the Franciscans, Michael of Cesena, his proctor Bonagrazia of Bergamo and the English provincial superior, William of Ockham, is strangely parallel to the destabilization of the Dominicans by the phenomenon of 'Rhineland mysticism' (of which the Dominican nuns, often former beguines, constituted the principal carrier), and which led at least from that same year 1323 to steps towards the preliminary investigations of 1326 against Meister Eckhart. As is well known, these two affairs overlapped at Avignon in 1327.

According to the testimony of Michael of Cesena and William of Ockham, the beghards and the Brethren of the Free Spirit quoted Meister Eckhart's doctrine as an authority.<sup>16</sup> This is what the bishop of Strasbourg had to say about them in 1317:

In our town and in our diocese a certain number of sectarian individuals may be encountered whom the people call 'beghards' and mendicant sisters, and who give themselves the name of the sect of the Free Spirit and brothers and sisters of voluntary poverty. Among their number there are to be found, to our great grief, monks and priests, and many married folk . . . We condemn all the doctrines and ceremonies of the sect; we command that these heretics be chased from their dwellings, that the houses which serve for their meetings be publicly sold for the profit of the Church. The books which bolster their doctrine should be surrendered to the priests within the space of a fortnight and burnt.<sup>17</sup>

The end of this quotation demonstrates once again that the heretics had a literary corpus, on which the Dominicans also drew to create a more orthodox mysticism. Moreover, we can understand why almost nothing of this literary corpus survived. The dialogue between Meister Eckhart and Sister Katrei (that is, Sister Cathar), as well as Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*, has sometimes been associated with the movement of the Free Spirit, but these texts are relatively late evidence from this point of view. Apart from these two texts, few testimonies have escaped the fire, except for a few legends and mystical poems from the same period. For example, this passage, which does not fail to make one think of Suso's dialogue with 'The Nameless Wild One':

My spirit has become wild  
it has abandoned all distinction:  
there, I am image-less  
in my being-ness . . .<sup>18</sup>

As far as Meister Eckhart is concerned, various elements show that he had some fellow-feeling for the beguines and for other forms of marginal spirituality that he had to meet in the course of his preaching. In this connection, it is also interesting to see the use without abhorrence of the word 'heresy', which appears only three times in the German work of Meister Eckhart. In the first passage he explains that heresy consists of clinging on to differences in an exclusive manner, that is, in a way that prevents all inner experience of the unity which underlies the diversity of beings. In another sermon, the same word appears again in a comparable context. The third quotation appears to reflect the sentiments of Eckhart himself when he was accused of heresy:

This is why I say: no saint has ever existed who has not been hurt by pain and delighted by joy, and to none will this not happen. Undoubtedly it does sometimes befall that, by love, inclination or grace, someone having come to say to another that he is heretical or whatever it may be, that this other may be flooded with grace and remains unmoved in their joy or suffering.<sup>19</sup>

After a preliminary investigation at Cologne in 1326, Meister Eckhart appeared at Avignon in 1327 before a commission of theologians appointed by Pope John XXII. After the hearing, an expert report pronounced on twenty-eight propositions extracted from the former's works. Afterwards another expert report was drawn up by Cardinal Jacques Fournier Novelli (the future Pope Benedict XII) on the basis of the trial records. It is interesting to note that three years previously this same Jacques Fournier was among the last to have led – for seven years – an Inquisitorial campaign against the Cathars in the Pyrenees, in his diocese of Pamiers between 1318 and 1325.

On 27 March 1329 the papal bull *In agro dominico* tells us that, before the end of his life, Meister Eckhart retracted and revoked everything heretical that he had written (a classic posthumous formula for heretics) and condemned seventeen propositions which 'as much by the terms employed as by the interlinking of their ideas, contain errors or are tainted with heresy'. The three first propositions concern the 'coeternity' of God and the world, the three following the relativity of works, while the rest censured propositions concerned with the divinization of man (7–13, with reference to the Free Spirit?), sin (14–15),

the spark in the soul (27=I) and the fact that God could not be called 'good' (28=II). Eleven other propositions, concerning 'interior acts' (16–19), divine filiation (20–2), the One in Three (23–4), love without distinction (25) and the 'nothingness' of created things (26), were deemed 'offensive, very rash and suspect of heresy, although by means of many explanations and additional information, they may take or have a Catholic meaning'.<sup>20</sup>

We should add that this took place at a period when nobody was safe from serious accusations. Thus the Pope who condemned Eckhart was in his turn accused of heresy and had also to retract. Although in our own time heresy is sometimes considered as a compliment, and so a good reason for interest in an author, current research tends to conclude that it would be unjustified to pay Meister Eckhart this 'compliment'.<sup>21</sup> In Plato there is the episode in which Socrates and Euthyphro meet at the Athenian law courts (*Euthyphro*, 7b), a little like Meister Eckhart and William of Ockham must have met in 1327 at the Avignon curia. Despite the difference in context, the resemblance is disturbing. After having agreed with Euthyphro that it is easy to put an end to disagreements relating to mathematical orders of magnitude (measurement, weight or other things that can be expressed in numbers), Socrates demonstrates that this is not the case for aesthetic or moral judgements – notably when it is a question of good or evil:

consider whether the present objects of disagreement are not what is just and what is unjust, beautiful and ugly, good and bad: is it not on the subject of our disagreements on that point and because of our inability, in these cases, to reach a decision between ourselves that we become enemies one of the other when we do, both you and I, and the whole of the rest of mankind?<sup>22</sup>

Such problems cannot be humanly treated other than through dialogue, through the discernment of the nuances in the complex interweaving of reality, and through the sincere quest of a compromise.

It has never been possible to explain the circumstances of Meister Eckhart's death, since, for a very long time, no one spoke openly of him. Nevertheless, one should mention the opinion of the palaeographer and collector of Eckhartian manuscripts, Daniel Sudermann (1550–1631), who asserted repeatedly that Meister Eckhart 'and many of his followers were burnt by the Inquisitors at Heidelberg'.<sup>23</sup> All this is perhaps just a conflation with a genuine condemnation of his writings by the town's theologians, a kind of legend, where real facts are mixed with what is imagined and exaggerated. But we cannot exclude the possibility that the famous Thuringian master returned from Avignon believing he had escaped the worst. On his journey he was accompanied or rejoined by his friends, indeed by other travellers presumed to be heretical. In accordance with Sudermann's allegations, and perhaps on the orders of the archbishop of Cologne (without doubt Eckhart's worst enemy), all these people were then intercepted by the Heidelberg Inquisitors 'to put an end to the propagation of heresy'.

## From the Reformation to the year 2000

We have seen from the outset of this survey that the main criticism formulated against Simon Magus concerned his venality. It is interesting to see that the event which was to unleash the Reformation movement was also linked to this problem. For although it was

to rebut Simon Magus that patristic scholarship gave birth to the first great heretical figure, it was by means of the reproach devised against Simon that the Roman Church was to fall.

When on 31 October 1517 Luther pinned his ninety-five theses to the castle church in Wittenberg the question of venality was raised once more, namely in relation to the harmful practice of indulgences. At first this resulted in a simple heresy trial which Luther ultimately eluded to initiate his programme of reform from 1520 onwards. This brought up a widespread reformation movement, with numerous divisions and famous reformers. The history of this movement lies well outside the scope of this article. I shall limit myself to observing that a triumphant heresy was rarely slow in generating its own heresies. Although Luther himself did not burn heretics, we know that Calvin blackened the Protestant cause, notably by calling at his own wish for the burning at the stake of Michel Servet on 27 October 1553.

Witchcraft trials, legalized in 1484 by a papal bull of Innocent VIII (but which had already started in *c.*1230) also broke the new denominational barriers. The theological justification always came from the same religious Law of Moses, stipulating that a witch could not be left alive.<sup>24</sup> Although in the historical sense of the word 'heresy' is a concept primarily associated with the Middle Ages, the fear of witches truly took off with the Renaissance and continued until the end of the eighteenth century. It is paradoxical to see that, although in the reputedly irrational Middle Ages heresy was, all in all, a fairly rational category, it was only with the Renaissance that, from this viewpoint, Europe and later America too tumbled into superstition and irrationality. While previously it was a heresy to believe in occult forces and the powers of witchcraft, henceforth it was a heresy to deny their existence. The outcome was a demonization of the inner life and an obsessional suspicion with one's neighbour, something like a religious illness against which few true Christians and healthy members of the clergy dared to take a stand for fear of suffering the worst cruelties in their turn.

As we know, it was not in this way, but with compassion, that Christ cured those who were possessed. He seems, moreover, to have been able to be in the company of these people, who displayed the strangest behaviours, without experiencing the least fear. Besides, none of his 'patients' ended up at the stake. By contrast, with torture as a means of 'proof', by which it was possible to force a 'confession' of anything whatsoever, and with the projection and doubtless also the practice of all kinds of misogynist, and indeed paedophile, sexual perversions, one ultimately ends up in believing in the existence of a manichean hypostasis of evil – with the difference that the latter did not seize hold of the poor victims but of executioners, Inquisitors and lawyers. This collective madness lasted so long that no single book could describe the horror or even enumerate its damages. On the grounds of mere denunciation everybody could go to the stake without rational justifiable reason and without any discrimination: idiots or scholars, men, women, children, the elderly, Catholics, Protestants, believers or non-believers.

With the Renaissance the notion of heresy became less appropriate since, in the strict sense of the term, the heretic was not to be confused with a non-believer or member of another religion or denomination, as in the figure of Simon Magus, who could only become a heretic because he had previously converted to Christianity. This also explains the special status of the Jews in the Middle Ages. While heretical movements were, if possible, totally annihilated, the Jews were – for complex psychological motives

– simultaneously persecuted and spared. As recent memory tells us, this was no longer the case in the twentieth century. On analogous grounds we could say that the atheism promulgated since the French Revolution is not quite what one might call a schism or heresy. A work such as *Le livre des trois imposteurs* (published c.1753), according to which three individuals have corrupted the world of men, namely a shepherd (Moses), a doctor (Jesus) and a camel-driver (Muhammad), also stands outside these categories. The same goes for the philosophical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), for whom freedom was to be conquered and a new ethic discovered in freeing oneself from the established values of Christianity.

However, even if it can be said that the concept of heresy is closely connected to the history of Christianity, it remains true that the same phenomenon is observable in other religions. Heresy comes from the Greek *hairesis*, which denotes the act of taking (this thing or that), a preference, an inclination, in other words ‘choice’ – particularly by a vote or an election. Choice can imply divergence, without necessarily being a source of conflict. In fact, *hairesis* is a natural consequence of plurality: whether it be the preference for a doctrine, a school of philosophy, a school of literature or a political party. In this sense, our individualistic era is that of the triumph of heresy. *Hairesis* only takes on a negative and conflictual meaning when this choice is extremist, or implies the exclusion of other possible choices. It is then that people talk of a dangerous political sect. But it should also be recognized that this qualification can lead in its turn to arbitrary persecutions – as for example that of the Christians in imperial Rome. Each time that a religious dogma becomes the norm for a given society, the fact of touching on or interpreting this dogma in a divergent manner risks disturbing the order of that society or the authority stipulating the norms applicable within it. All dissidence is then perceived as a heresy. In fact, the latter is inversely proportional to the freedom of thought enjoyed by a society. Ideally, there should be no heresy – in the negative sense of the term – in a healthy democracy.

Heretics, admittedly, are not always a blessing for humanity, above all if they are fanatics. But history has also demonstrated on many occasions that, as Tertullian put it, ‘there must be heretics’. The case of Galileo (1564–1642) is the most famous instance, but certainly not the only one. Among the ‘useful heretics’ going from the start of the modern period to the beginning of the twentieth century, we should particularly note Blaise Pascal (1623–62), Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), Voltaire (1694–1778) and Rousseau (1712–1778), as well as the Russian novelists Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1888). It is in one of the latter’s novels, *The Brothers Karamazov*, that the Grand Inquisitor tells Christ that he is the worst heretic of all.

In 1965 the Inquisition was reformed by Paul VI and became the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Catholic Church certainly still has its dissidents, as for instance Hans Küng or Eugen Drewermann. Dissidence is in some way part of the nature of things, it constitutes the logical opposite of every institution. But fundamentally, the means brought into play for the defence of orthodoxy have radically changed. This is why it is important to add that an in-depth study of heresy would remove nothing from the positive aspects that a major religion such as Christianity has been able to bring to humanity in two thousand years of existence. And in this optimistic perspective, I want to wish it good luck for the new millennium – while agreeing with the hermeneut, Hans-Georg Gadamer, that ecumenism (*oikumene*) does not only signify the reconciliation of the Christian denominations but, much more, ‘the entirety of the inhabited world’.



May the reader, having sampled these pages full of hypotheses and imperfections, of horrors and of 'heresy on the heresies', be convinced of the necessity of guaranteeing religious freedom, avoiding extremes and promoting the spirit of symbiosophy.

Wolfgang Wackernagel  
Geneva

(translated from the French by Juliet Vale)

## Notes

1. This article recapitulates a programme made for Radio Suisse Romande, Espace 2, 'Domaine Parlé', of Alphonse Layaz (interview by Serge Margel), broadcast from Monday 31 May to Friday 4 June 1999.
2. 'To carry the word to that city was an act of daring, for the Samaritans had for centuries been excluded from the community of Israel.' Bible, translated and annotated by Émile Osty and Joseph Trinquet (Éd. du Seuil: Paris), p. 2332 and notes.
3. See Walter Nigg's excellent book, *Das Buch der Ketzer* (Zurich, 1949), pp. 29–30.
4. Adolf von Harnack. (1924, 2nd edn 1996). *Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche*. Berlin.
5. See *Socrates Scholasticus. Ecclesiastical History. From the Accession of Constantine, A.D. 305 to the 38th Year of Theodosius II, Including a Period of 140 Years, Translated from the Greek sine nomine* (London, 1853), p. 3; (new edn: Edinburgh, 1989). By definition the advocate has to arrange facts in his client's favour. So one should not be surprised that the objectivity of this author has been challenged. His *Ecclesiastical History* is none the less an interesting source for the study of this period, stretching from the end of the Diocletian persecutions (309) to the year 439, that is, three decades after the sack of Rome by Alaric, king of the Visigoths (410). *Ibid.* p. 343.
6. See Hans von Campenhausen, *Les Pères grecs*, translated by O. Marbach (Paris, 1963), p. 99.
7. The Vandals experienced the same fate in 533–534. The Visigoths, Swabians and Lombards by contrast became Catholic during the papacy of Gregory the Great (590–604). Some traces of Ulphilas's church still survived in the nineteenth century, notably in Silesia. Only the oriental branch, known as 'Nestorian', has numerous faithful today, especially in Iran and the United States.
8. On this subject there is another interesting hypothesis, which suggests different sources of inspiration joined together: the *Pog* of Montségur is perhaps derived from *Bog*, which means 'god' in Slav languages (cf. *bogomiles*). In parallel with other languages, one can also associate it with the idea of wood (sacred), book and beech. We know that in ancient legends the god or some deified hero slept in a mountain, before returning 'at the end of time'. The possibility that onto this myth that of the Second Coming of Christ was superimposed cannot be excluded. Such a phenomenon is also observable in connection with the Eckhartian legends. See in this connection my article, 'Eckhart et son double. Mythographie comparative d'un non emblématique', in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 69e année, no. 2, Strasbourg, April 1995, pp. 216–226.
9. Jean Guiraud, *Cartulaire de Notre-Dame de Prouille, précédé d'une étude sur l'albigéisme languedocien aux XII<sup>e</sup> et XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Bibliothèque historique du Languedoc, 1: Paris, 1907), p. ccxxxi.
10. 'Revixit et Arrius in partibus occidentis, qui ab orientali judicio in propria persona damnatus, nunc in successoribus suis fines ultimos occupavit.' Quoted in Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1935), 4th edn, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt, 1977), n. 35, pp. 31–32.
11. See Fernan Niel, *Albigéois et Cathares* (Que sais-je? Paris, 1955), p. 6.
12. See Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (1888). French trans. Salomon Reinach (Société nouvelle de librairie et d'édition: Paris, 1900).
13. It is generally believed that *béguine* comes from the Dutch *beggaert*. However, Jan van Mierlo, a distinguished Dutch scholar, asserts by contrast that *begina* is derived from Al-bigen-ses. It is therefore not surprising that *béguine* has always preserved a suspect colouring (cf. the condemnations of 1311 and 1317), since the word has the same origin as *Ketzer* ('heretic') namely the Albigenian Cathars. Other epithets have also been in circulation, as this extract from a sermon given by Jacques de Vitry between 1229 and

1240 demonstrates: '... Sapientes autem ... huius seculi, prelati scilicet seculares et alii maliciosi homines volunt eam interficere et a bono proposito retrahere dicentes: Hec vult esse Beguina – sic enim nominantur in Flandria et Brabancia – vel Papalarda – sic enim appellantur in Francia – vel Humiliata – sicut dicitur in Lumbardia – vel Bizoke – secundum quod dicitur in Italia – vel Coquenunne – ut dicitur in Theotonia; et ita deridendo eas et quasi infamando nituntur eas retrahere a sancto proposito.' See Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, pp. 377 n. 47, 532 n. 19.

14. Romana Guarneri, *Il movimento del Libero Spirito, testi e documenti, storia e letteratura* (Rome, 1965), p. 7. The heretical aspect of the Free Spirit stems from the fact that it abolishes the idea of sin, so that the Church, the sacraments and penitence become useless. See also Raoul Vaneigem, *Les hérésies* (PUF, Que sais-je? Paris, 1994), bibliography.
15. Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, p. 533 and n. 29 (*Momumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores* 26, 234, 443).
16. For the differences between Eckhartian preaching and some theses attributed to beguines close to the Free Spirit – which Meister Eckhart attempted to correct, notably in *Sermons 5a, 29, 86* and in the *Sermon de l'homme noble* ('Sermon concerning the noble man'), see Marie-Anne Vannier, 'L'homme noble, figure de l'oeuvre d'Eckhart à Strasbourg', in *Les mystiques rhénans (Revue des sciences religieuses, 70e année, no. 1, Strasbourg, Jan. 1996)* (Paris, 1996), pp. 73–89.
17. Quoted from Auguste Jundt, *Histoire du panthéisme populaire au Moyen Âge et au XVIIe siècle (suivie de pièces inédites concernant les frères du Libre-Esprit, Maître Eckhart, les libertins spirituels, etc.)* (Paris, 1875; Frankfurt am Main, 1964), pp. 51–52.
18. *Poésies mystiques et prière de (et autour de) Maître Eckhart*, trans. and ed. Wolfgang Wackernagel (Geneva, 1998), pp. 93 ff. See also my article, 'Maître Eckhart et le discernement mystique. À propos de la rencontre de Suso avec 'la (chose) sauvage sans nom'', in *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, 129 (Lausanne, 1997), pp. 113–126. And in English: 'Some Legendary Aspects of Meister Eckhart: The Aphorisms of the Twelve Masters', *Eckhart Review* No. 7, (Oxford, Spring 1998), pp. 30–41.
19. 'Predigt 86', in *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen Werke, III (DW III)*, ed. Josef Quint (Stuttgart, 1958), p. 361, trans. Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, *Maître Eckhart: Sermons, III (Anc. 3)* (Paris, 1979), p. 178.
20. Maître Eckhart, *Traité et sermons* (Paris, 1993), trans. Alain de Libéra, pp. 407–415.
21. Cf. Winifred Trusen, *Der Prozess gegen Meister Eckhart: Vorgeschichte, Verlauf und Folgen* (Rechts- und Staatswissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Görres-Gesellschaft, new ser., 54; Paderborn, 1988); Heinrich Stirnimann and Ruedi Imbach (eds.), *Eckhardus Theutonicus, homo doctus et sanctus: Nachweise und Berichte zum Prozess gegen Meister Eckhart* (Fribourg [Switzerland], 1992).
22. Plato, *Oeuvres complètes*, trans. L. Robin and M.-J. Moreau (Gallimard-La Pléiade), vol. 1, p. 359.
23. Suderman having devoted a considerable part of his life to deciphering and copying old manuscripts certainly read this information somewhere. In the catalogue of his important collection he says that 'numerous good things [relating to Eckhart and Tauler] have been omitted in the printed books'. See Ingeborg Degenhardt, *Studien zum Wandel des Eckhartbildes* (Leiden, 1967), pp. 90–102, nn. 1 (p. 93), 2 (p. 94).
24. Exodus 22: 17–18, according to the Vulgate translation, the only biblical reference-work for the Middle Ages, 'Maleficos non patieris vivere'.