

## THE RELIGIOUS SPECULATIONS OF JAKOB BOEHME

BY BIRGER R. HEADSTROM

**I**N his treatment of the religious problem, which had been initiated by the intellectual movement of the Renaissance, Boehme met with two seemingly insuperable difficulties: the remoteness of God, who dwells according to the learned, in the far away heavens and the insignificant place man occupies in Nature, and the struggle of good with evil, both in the world of men and in Nature; in other words, the question: How is the existence of evil compatible with the existence of God?

To him, however, God is not far, and Heaven is not in the sky but rather within oneself; we live in God and God in us, and if we are pure and holy, then we are God, for within us there stir the same powers as in God, and in the whole of Nature. The underlying thought of this is that God's power and essence move in all things, in us equally as well as in the outer masses, that God is not sundered from Nature but is as related to it as the soul is to the body. Fire, air, water, earth,—all is God, otherwise we cannot be God's image, for we cannot be of other matter than God Himself. Whenever we regard the earth, the stars, or the great depths we see God, and in this same God we are and live. That is, it is the force from which they derive their life that dwells in us; and furthermore, the inner motions in Man are the same as those which take place in God. Only in the spirit of Man is He recognized; in all the processes of Nature, He is concealed. Man can therefore understand nothing of God if his soul is separated from Him.

Boehme was aware, however, of the criticism which could be addressed to this line of thought for he wrote: "Hear and see, and note the difference. My writing is not heathen but philosophical. Moreover, I am no heathen, but have a deep and true knowledge of the one great God who is all!" This view had made the world alive

for him, and furthermore had shown him that the spirit within it is the one which moves at the heart of all things. Such a thought he had tried to put aside, but fear and anxiety had led him to its further consideration, until he gradually became convinced of its possibility as a solution to the tormenting problem which for a time had almost driven him to despair.<sup>1</sup> For in this idea, the religious longing after inner union with God agreed with the philosophical need of an interconnection between all things, both finding support in the naturo-philosophical doctrine of Paracelsus that man consists of the same elements as the universe.

It was largely due to the influence of Paracelsus that Boehme was able to proceed to the next step in his problem. He had already asked himself in what manner the outer world of sense had arisen, and why all things do not exist in such an inner and harmonious interconnection that anxieties, such as had tormented him, could not arise? Guided by the view of the alchemist that the differentiation of the elements had taken place through a process of separation, he gradually arrived at the question of the origin of evil, intensified for him as he desired to know nothing of God apart from the world and souls, conceiving, instead, the life of these to be part of God's own life. For the cobbler, evil is precisely due to the fact that we seek to separate ourselves from the whole complex to be a totality, though we are merely a part—thereby giving rise to disunion, dissension, and consequently the pain of the world. That he was at all able to discuss this question and solve its implications is attributable, as he explained, to that same spirit which not only moves in the world, and has done so since eternity, but which also moves within himself. That is, he employed his own inner experiences and struggles to explain Nature and its history, and to understand, as well, the innermost moving force of all things. And though he depicted a series of processes and catastrophes, a whole world-drama as it were, he did not imply that such actually happened at any definite time or place, nor that it developed historically and successively. He described rather what constantly is in progress everywhere, the eternal fundamental relations of the world-powers, the struggle which continues unceasingly. "My meaning is not that there is in heaven any particular place or a particular body where the fire of the divine life breaks forth . . . but I speak in this bodily fashion for the sake of my readers' lack of understanding; for thou canst name

<sup>1</sup> *Morgenröte im Aufgang*, chaps. xix, xxv.

no place—neither in heaven nor in this world—where the divine ought not to be and is not.” “And although I have written here how everything happened, and how everything became formed and shaped, and how the Deity burst forth—yet thou durst not therefore think that there is ever any rest or extinction and afterwards a fresh bursting forth. Oh no, but I must write bit by bit for the sake of ‘my readers’ lack of understanding.” “The birth of Nature takes place to-day, just as it did in the beginning.” “With the divine happenings there is no beginning, middle or end.” “Thou must know that I do not write this as a history, which has been related to me by some one else, but that I myself must always stand in the midst of this same battle, in which I, like other men, am often tripped up.”

Convinced that nothing can be explained out of an absolute unity, Boehme was thoroughly opposed to the theory of creation out of nothing. For him, there lies in the essence of God a plurality of moments, an inner, original antithesis that finds expression, so to speak, as a source of all life.<sup>2</sup> God is not only the positive moment Yes, but also No, for otherwise there would be nothing that could be decidedly prominent. Neither would there be a will, for pure unity possesses nothing in itself that it could will. This original element of opposition he called, in his mythological language, the wrath of God and the fundament of hell. In other words, wrath is as original with God as love; he is the fundament of hell as well as blessedness. For, he asked, where should anger come from, if it did not have its root in God? However, this wrath is only a moment which serves as a means to enable love to arrive consciously into prominence. The fundamental significance of Life requires such an opposition for otherwise in Nature there would be no motion, growth, and impulse in everything. Everything was resolved by him into active forces and tendencies; and without a plurality of qualities, i. e. difference of qualities,<sup>3</sup> no motion, no life, in fact, no consciousness would be possible.

The acceptance of this original unity of opposites still leaves, however, the question of how can such a unity be reconciled with our experience of the hardness and bitterness in the world, and particularly of the struggle between good and evil, both in the inner

<sup>2</sup> *Vide Theosophischen Fragen.*

<sup>3</sup> Boehme explained the word “quality” as expressing an inspired thought; “Quality is the mobility or impulse of a thing.”

and outer world, for obviously plurality can no more be deduced from absolute unity than discord from absolute harmony. In the drama in which the members of the Trinity (the primitive qualities) and the host of archangels all take part, the main point is that one of the elements in the original nature of the Deity, wrath, or the No, becomes desirous of ruling the whole, in other words, not satisfied with being a moment it aspires to be a totality. Essentially it is this: that Lucifer triumphs over the entire Deity and aims to a prouder and more splendid *Qualificierung*<sup>4</sup> than God Himself. The opposites, being dislodged from their original harmonious union, give rise to the pain and strife of the world and accordingly define the world as we now know it. For Boehme, then, evil existed before men, its germ is in Nature itself. Equally as well, the story of creation, as told in the first book of Moses, had little significance, for, according to him, "it runs contrary to philosophy and reason." Nor could he believe that "that worthy man Moses was its author." For the most part, he followed his own thoughts, having little use for the ways of the philosophers and theologians "since I have learnt nothing from them; but have another schoolmaster which is the whole of Nature."

The view, which many held, that God designedly chooses some men for blessedness, while ordaining others to condemnation, seemed to Boehme absurd, and he would not have believed it even had Paul or Peter written so, for to him God does not will evil, nor did He foreknow what had happened. Yet, evil must have its root in God, for He is the author of all things; but it is the negative moment, the "fundament of Hell" which is merely a divine element separated from the original harmony; it is "God against God," as he expressly wrote.<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that the struggle in the world is so stern and violent; divine power is fighting on both sides! And so arises the fear and pain from the struggle with self, and from which Boehme saved himself by taking refuge in the thought of the heart of God, unceasingly combating the hardness and bitterness of the world.

That the involuntary precedes the voluntary, Boehme was quite aware, for he found the origin of evil to lie in the involuntary ground of Nature, and not in God's free will. Yet he failed to grasp the significance of the gap from difference to strife, from contrast

<sup>4</sup> *Qualificierung* is the same as motion (*Bewegung*).

<sup>5</sup> *Morgenröte*, chap. xiv ¶72.

to separation; nor could he explain how Lucifer's pride arose. But in spite of this, he had embarked on a course of thought from which he could not deviate, and though he did not know whither it was leading he at least felt the new powers which his thoughts had initiated.

A faithful believer in positive Lutheranism, he saw, however, that if divine light and life serve as a balance to the hardness and bitterness which pervade the whole of Nature, admission to that light cannot be limited, that is, every man may work or grow through the "anger" to the "love." "He who has love in his heart and leads a merciful and gentle life, striving against evil and pressing through the anger of God into the light,—he lives with God and is one in spirit with Him, for God requires no other service." Though these words may seem "curious and without foundation" they have a secure place in Boehme's fundamental notions, and express as well that universalistic tendency that characterized the philosophy of the Renaissance, and which is closely linked up with the idea that Man once more believed in his natural powers and dared to use his own thoughts. At any rate, Boehme treated his problems with an intellectual force and freedom that carried him far beyond the limits of dogmatism, and lastly, his religious speculations only become really comprehensible when considered in connection with the new cosmology, especially with the ideas of Paracelsus and Copernicus.

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