

TRINITY AND CREATION: AN ECKHARTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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“The Christian faith reveals that the One known to every religion possesses an interior life as Trinity. If we are to transcend the creation when we return to the One, the Christian knows that all we are and do does not perish but is resurrected in the life to come.”

The appeal of the medieval Dominican preacher Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) does not decline, but rather grows with the passage of time. His vernacular sermons radiate a strong and vibrant personality of deep faith, striving to express things that often might have been easier and safer to leave unspoken. Quite apart from the impetus this may have given to the Reformation and the development of German Idealism, it provided, without his realizing or intending it himself, a possible basis for the interreligious dialogue that became unavoidable in the twentieth century, and is increasingly urgent in the twenty-first. This dialogue, I believe, can be advanced by continuing critical yet sympathetic study of Eckhart, forcing us to consider the deepest meaning of what we believe. Only at this level do the true similarities and differences between the religions reveal themselves.

Catholics need to recover a certain facility with metaphysics if they are to make an effective contribution to interreligious dialogue. At the same time they need courage, imagination, and empathy, both to appreciate the views of others and to defend their own. The reading of Eckhart can be a stimulus to metaphysical thought, to courage, imagination, and empathy. Eckhart, however, was not a careful, systematic thinker like his great predecessor

Aquinas, but a highly complex and even inconsistent stylist who takes a great deal for granted and often expresses himself in wild flights of rhetoric. What follows is not a systematic and scholarly study of Eckhart's thought, but an attempt at *creative retrieval*, motivated by an affection for the personality that reveals itself through his vernacular writings. Eckhart's fundamental insights, I believe, were both Christian and orthodox. Nevertheless, this exercise in retrieval will include an attempt to fill out somewhat the trinitarian dimension of his thought.¹

1. Eckhart's orthodoxy

Eckhart speaks of a *deitas* or Godhead beyond the Trinity: "the silent desert into which no distinction ever peeped, of Father, Son, or Holy Ghost" (Sermon 60).² In other places he appears to erode the distinction between Christ and the soul: "Between the only-begotten Son and the soul there is no difference" (Sermon 66). And again, he appears at times to imply the pantheistic doctrine that the world is God: "for he who has God and all things with God has no more than one who has God alone" (Sermon 10).

There is an extensive literature discussing the relationship of such statements to Christian orthodoxy, and the works of Bernard McGinn are especially helpful in this regard.³ The papal bull *In Agro Dominico* (1329) of John XXII, promulgated after Eckhart's death, did not formally brand him a heretic; but as far as the discussion of his ideas was concerned, it raised the stakes among his contemporaries, for whom even the suspicion of heresy was a deeply serious matter. Nevertheless, his works continued to be circulated and studied throughout Europe. His direct influence flowed through disciples such as Tauler, Suso, and Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, and his indirect influence was of course incalculable. During his life

¹I am particularly grateful to Adrian Walker for his extensive and insightful editorial help in the development of this article, to Reza Shah-Kazemi for his original inspiration, and to Philip Lyndon Reynolds and Derek Cross for their comments in draft.

²Eckhart's sermons will be quoted mainly from the English translation by M. O'C. Walshe (Watkins Publishing, 1979, reprinted Element Books, 1987).

³See, e.g., Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man From Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

Eckhart had replied to his critics robustly, denying any heretical intention whatever. He had no intention of founding a new school or sect, but remained a faithful Dominican to the very end. Indeed he often stands closer to Aquinas, and to a wider community of Dominican contemporaries, than one might think from reading isolated quotations out of context.

How then are we to read the kinds of statements already quoted, which seem to have shocked many of his readers? The passage already quoted concerning the “silent desert” may be read as saying little more than that the Trinity *does not divide the Unity of God*: a doctrinal proposition familiar from the very earliest centuries of Christianity.⁴ Eckhart himself may be cited in support of this interpretation: “I said that the distinction in the Trinity comes from the unity. The unity is the distinction, and the distinction *is* the unity. The greater the distinction, the greater the unity, for that is distinction without distinction” (Sermon 66).⁵

⁴The passage from Sermon 60 is an important one, and admittedly difficult to interpret. In it Eckhart refers to the uncreated “spark” in the soul: “It is this Light that discloses God unveiled and unmanifested as he is in himself; indeed, it discloses him in his act of Self-affirmation. Thus I can most truly say that this Light is indeed one with God rather than one with my soul-powers, which are nonetheless one with it in its isness . . . I swear that it is not enough for the Light to disclose even the unity of the processions of the divine nature. Indeed I will say more, and this may sound surprising: I say by eternal truth that it is not enough for this Light to disclose the impartible, immutable divine Being, which neither gives nor takes; it will rather disclose that from which this Being comes; it will penetrate directly into its unconditioned Principle, into the silent desert, in which no distinction ever enters, neither Father, nor Son, nor Holy Spirit. Only there in the Innermost, where no individualized one (or other) abides, is the Light fulfilled. . . .” This “silent desert” lies beyond the Trinity only in the sense that it is the interior or primal “moment” of the trinitarian act; not the Trinity apprehended, but the Trinity *apprehending*—God caught “in the act of begetting,” as Eckhart also says. It is the *esse* of which “Being” is an affirmation, but which transcends Being when the latter is taken as a mere concept.

⁵Bernard McGinn draws attention to this passage in his “Theological Summary” of Eckhart in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund College O. S. A. and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist, 1981), 36–37, as an example of the texts that hint at “a dialectical relation between the indistinct divine ground and the relational distinctions of the Persons.” This relation is not fully developed by Eckhart himself, but was clearly a part of his understanding of what he was saying about the Trinity. It is a mistake to read his other statements, which appear to suggest that the divine ground lies “behind” the Persons, as though this were not the case.

In the second passage (the one that appeared to identify Christ and the soul) Eckhart is again intending nothing unorthodox. He is speaking of *theosis* or divinization—the patristic doctrine that God became man so that man could become God. In the Incarnation of Christ, God took on human nature (not abstractly, but concretely in the man Jesus), so that we may find him in the ground of our soul. “And if His substance, His being and His nature are mine, then I am the Son of God” (Sermon 7). Yet he adds immediately that in order to enter into this nature, we must become “nothing.” Whatever he intends this to mean, it is not that the soul, beloved by God, is an illusion, or even that it is destined to be dissolved in God. For he also states categorically: “God is in the soul with His nature, with His being and with His Godhead, and yet He is not the soul” (Sermon 56). “Then the soul loses her name and her power, but not her will and her existence” (Sermon 94). He speaks, in other words, of the birth of God in the soul, not of the soul’s becoming God. He speaks of Christ’s assuming human nature, not of his assuming the individuality of each human being. Not even in *theosis* are we to be “absorbed” into God. “The unity is the distinction, and the distinction *is* the unity.”⁶

2. *Knowing God in God*

⁶Once again, other passages of Eckhart might be cited that seem at first sight to prove the opposite. In Sermon 5 he writes: “Where two are to become one, one of them must lose its being. So it is: and if God and your soul are to become one, your soul must lose her being and her life . . . Now the Holy Ghost says: ‘Let them be one as we are one.’ I pray Thee, make them *one* in us.” Thus, Eckhart continues, “there is no need to think of Henry or Conrad.” Notice, however, that he is speaking of the two becoming one “*as we are one*.” If Eckhart does not deny the existence of the Son as distinct from that of the Father, no more can he deny the existence of Henry or Conrad. It is the existence of the human individual *as understood in the world*, through images and names, that he wishes to deny. God does not know himself through any image (Eckhart writes in Sermon 1). The “disappearance” of Henry and Conrad is due to their being wholly absorbed into the participation in God’s life. But absorption is the assumption of all that pertains to the individual “ego” by personality. It is thus also an *expansion* of individuality beyond all worldly limits in the infinity of the divine Essence. In this sense, it is analogous to the way in which the divine Persons have always been “relations,” not individuals; in the end, God’s likeness in us will be perfected in this respect also. Then it will be truly “no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). I must die as Henry or Conrad, in order to receive “a new name” (Rv 2:17).

The impression of heterodoxy in Eckhart's writings, and particularly in his vernacular sermons, is largely created by the free, rhetorical, and dynamic manner in which he liked to express himself. Louis Bouyer views Eckhart as "at once one of perhaps the most paradoxical and the most coherent Christian theologians, and to quote him in isolation or to base one's interpretations on a few propositions abstracted from the full cycle of his thought is inevitably to travesty him."⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, though more critical of Eckhart than Bouyer, judges his experience to be "authentically Christian, even in its most daring conceptions," adding: "we have to divest Eckhart's wholly limpid and shadowless experience of God of its conceptual and verbal attire."⁸

For Balthasar, Eckhart opens up the possibility of dialogue with "Asian metaphysical ways of redemption."⁹ Eckhart is indeed

⁷Louis Bouyer, *The Invisible Father: Approaches to the Mystery of the Divinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 271. Similarly, in his *Creation and Providence* (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), 167, Leo Scheffczyk concludes: "Eckhart, therefore, did not wreck the Scholastic synthesis, he gave it a mystical interpretation. Into the relationship between God and the world he instilled a new dynamism which burst out of the static categories of Scholasticism"—a dynamism, it must be admitted, with mixed consequences.

⁸Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 30. Here and in *Theo-Drama*, especially vol. 5 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 433–462, he situates Eckhart in the school of Rhenish-Flemish mysticism (Tauler, Suso, Ruysbroeck), which draws upon the same experience but expresses it with more care, correcting the excesses and omissions of the Meister. In the present article, I am trying to read Eckhart as these other mystics did: in the light of the tradition to which he believed himself faithful. A summary of Balthasar's negative assessment of Eckhart may be found in Raymond Gawronski, S. J., *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter between East and West* (Edinburgh and Grand Rapids: T&T Clark and Eerdmans, 1995), 63–67. In his article, "Balthasar and Eckhart: Theological Principles and Catholicity," *The Thomist* 60 (1996), Cyril O'Regan examines Balthasar's negative and positive assessments of Eckhart (which he calls "conflicted" and "bifocal") as exemplifying an overall strategy of inclusiveness. Balthasar is reluctant to exclude any thinker from the Catholic symphony, even one as disrespectful of analogy and as "christologically underdetermined" as Eckhart. To pursue this strategy, Balthasar must to some extent turn a blind eye to Eckhart's deficiencies, drawing on the insights of a Thomas or a Maximus to compensate. My own strategy here is an extension of Balthasar's, despite the obvious danger of misreading Eckhart in historical terms.

⁹Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5, 52.

often cited in discussions with other religious traditions. But if he is to be truly helpful in our contemporary interfaith dialogue we need to clear away the common misunderstandings of his doctrine. And at the root of most of these is Eckhart's attempt to express, not our own knowledge as individual creatures (our theological knowledge as creatures *in via*), but the divine knowledge itself, meaning God's knowledge.

This he does by basing himself in the ground of the soul. God's trinitarian essence, which is his unlimited act of knowing, can never be for us an "object" to be grasped by our minds, as though we could stand outside it. It can be known only if the divine knowledge itself becomes our knowledge, as Scripture itself hints that it will.¹⁰ As Eckhart says, "only in the ground of the soul is God known as he is," for there "the intellect knows as it were *within the Trinity* and without otherness."¹¹

C. F. Kelley's *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* is a masterly study of exactly this point. But, as Kelley explains, "A genuine understanding of the principial mode, which is constituted as it were within Godhead, is an understanding of truth that is beyond the potentiality of human cognition, restricted as that cognition is to individuality."¹² Man would therefore have no possibility of knowing God "as God knows God"—and, furthermore, knowing the world in God as God knows it—if it were not for the self-revelation of the Word "in the ground of the intellective soul," a revelation which is inseparably linked to the Incarnation of Christ.¹³ It is the hypostatic union of divine and human natures that opens for us a way into the bosom of the Trinity.

Kelley (somewhat disingenuously perhaps) cites St. Thomas Aquinas in support of Eckhart's position. "Now the intellect which, by God's grace, is united to the divine essence understands all things

¹⁰Cf. Jn 3:13; 1 Cor 13:12; 1 Jn 3:2.

¹¹Cited in Carl Franklin Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (Yale University Press, 1977), 128.

¹²*Ibid.*, 115.

¹³*Ibid.*, 114. Eckhart makes it clear that the birth of Mary's Son and the birth of God in the soul are two sides of the same coin, and their common archetype is found in eternity, where God is born from God, Son from Father, in the divine Trinity. Thus, "The Father gives birth to the Son in the soul in the very same way as he gives birth to him in eternity, and no differently" (Sermon 65).

as from God's understanding."¹⁴ Aquinas draws a distinction between God's knowledge of things "from the point of view of the knower" (in which they are one with him) and his knowledge "from the point of view of the thing known" (in which they are distinguished from him).¹⁵ However, for Aquinas we normally cannot know from the point of view of the divine knower unless our mind is bathed in the Light of Glory, and so is not "in this life" anymore, but has arrived at final beatitude. Even when divine omnipotence brings it about that the human mind is united to the divine Essence in the present life *without* being bathed in glory, St. Thomas adds, this creates a state of "rapture" which separates it from that which naturally belongs to it (i.e., the activity of the senses).¹⁶ St Paul's experience, alluded to in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4, is the usual example Thomas gives of such a rapture.

The difference between Thomas Aquinas and Eckhart, then, seems to lie partly in Eckhart's claim that by situating ourselves in the Word made flesh, we may "think" metaphysically from the standpoint of the divine Essence *without being in a state of rapture*. This may be judged presumptuous, but it need not be heretical. Eckhart—who discusses Paul's rapture in his first two Sermons—is not speaking of attaining the Beatific Vision in this life, even as an exceptional experience or "passing impression" (as St. Thomas calls it). While we are still in this life, full intellectual realization remains "virtual," not "actual," in us.¹⁷ Even now, however, the "ground of the soul" is necessarily outside time, because even though our lives unfold in time, their unity is not simply the result of our temporal

¹⁴Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, 38. He gives as source *Perihermenias*, 1, 14.

¹⁵Aquinas, *Truth*, q. 2, art. 3, 2.

¹⁶Aquinas, *Truth*, q. 10, art. 11. Also see the whole of q. 13 on "Rapture." In q. 18, where he denies that Adam saw God through his Essence, St. Thomas writes that "It is proper to Christ alone to be wayfarer and possessor at the same time." However, in his commentary on the "Divine Names" of Dionysius, he writes of "that most divine knowledge of God, which is attained by unknowing in a union that transcends the mind, when the mind recedes from all things and then leaves even itself, and is united to the super-resplendent rays, being illumined in them and from them by the unsearchable depth of wisdom" (cited from *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. M. C. D'Arcy [London: Dent, 1939], 187). This sounds closer to Eckhart, perhaps because it is closer to Dionysius. But again St. Thomas may have in mind the state of rapture.

¹⁷Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, 210.

action, but enfolds all of that action from above. It is there, in that ground, which from the point of view of eternity must already “exist,” that we may understand all things “without otherness.” This is the “highest peak of the soul which stands above time and knows nothing of time or of the body” (Sermon 11).

3. *The creation in God*

Eckhart’s discussion of knowing God in God is not simply a matter of theological method. It is itself meant to be a reflexive unfolding or anticipation of the process of deification. Understanding this is crucial to grasping the point of Eckhart’s presentation of the God-world relation. For in Eckhart’s vision the beginning is understood only in the light of the end. Both are immediately present to God, of course, and to the uncreated intellect. Yet they cannot simply be juxtaposed in this static fashion, for between them lies the whole drama of *exitus* and *reditus*, which in the Christian perspective is a drama of divine and human freedom. For Eckhart these two cannot be separated. Eckhart thinks of the beginning in the light of the end, of creation in terms of deification. God creates in his eternity, where he already sees the intellectual creature as it “will be” when it has arrived at deifying union with himself. Each moment of the intellectual creature’s actual journey to God is thus at once a new event and a deeper realization of what has always already been true.

The paradox of creation and return—that they are one, precisely in their abiding difference—explains much of Eckhart’s insistence on the unity between God and the creature, which, if read apart from this paradox, can be misleading. As already suggested, it helps us to understand his notion of the uncreated intellect, since if *one day* I will be united with God in the divine Essence, that “one day” already exists in eternity, which may therefore be regarded as another level of my present existence, even if it still remains for me to do the work of integrating my present with God’s eternity. It also suggests how this insistence on unity may be opened to a genuinely trinitarian metaphysics of the God-world relation, as may become clearer in the next section (“Trinity: The giving of the gift”). For the moment, however, I will concentrate on the paradoxical relationship between creation and deification.

Above I quoted Eckhart as saying that “all things added to God are not more than God alone.” Now is this statement pantheistic, or monistic? To answer this question we have to be able to say something about the difference between “all things” and the “God alone” who creates them.

According to St. Thomas (and before him to Ibn Sina/Avicenna), God is utterly One because he is the sole reality whose Existence and Essence are one and the same. Consequently, we can say that God just “is,” without putting any limitation or restriction on that Act of existing. Any limitation, any definition of God’s nature, would make God a thing comparable to any other, and therefore in need of a cause for being *that* thing rather than some other. Thus for Thomas, the word “being” cannot be predicated univocally of God and any other thing whatever.

This implies that the difference between God and things in general is *infinite*. In other words, weighed in the scales next to God, every (created) reality is strictly “nothing.” So it seems that Eckhart is merely expounding St. Thomas (albeit rather boldly) when he says, “People think that they have more if they have things together with God, than if they had God without the things. But this is wrong, for all things added to God are not more than God alone.”¹⁸ In fact, as McGinn points out, Aquinas had said the very same thing in the *Summa*: “Each created thing, in that it does not have existence save from another, taken in itself is nothing.”¹⁹

This is quite a common theme in mystical literature of the most orthodox sort. Cardinal Journet writes of God that “He exists in a way other than everything else. All things *have* being; He alone *is* Being. The word here assumes a meaning absolutely unique, vivid, and thunderous like none other.” He continues by citing the *Dialogue* of St. Catherine:

“Know, my daughter, what thou art and what I am . . . Thou art what is not, and I am He Who is . . .” Yes, I am he who is

¹⁸*Meister Eckhart: Selected Treatises and Sermons*, trans. James M. Clark and John V. Skinner (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), 56, from “Sermon for St. Dominic’s Day.” So confident is Eckhart of the orthodoxy of this teaching that in his “Defense” against accusations of error in 1326 he turned the tables on his accusers: “to say that the world is not nothing in itself and from itself, but is some slight bit of existence is open blasphemy” (*Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 75).

¹⁹Cited in McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 105.

not. All these things about me: the sweetness of the air, the scent of roses, all these things that I love; and the anguish and the grief, so many lovely things, so many sad things, all these ravished lives and homelands, so many crimes, so many blasphemies, so many horrors—these things are not nothing; they are real; and yet there is always one point of view from which it is true to say that they all are *not*. It is rigorously true to say that, in the manner in which God *is*, they are not. The peace that the understanding of this gives is inexpressible. And this knowledge measures the abyss which separates the level on which the problem of evil binds us, from the infinite height whence it is seen to be resolved.²⁰

There is, nevertheless, a difference in perspective between Eckhart and Aquinas. St. Thomas lays great emphasis on the analogy of being. Created being has a certain claim to reality. It is made *ex nihilo*; it is not *nihil*. Secondary causes really are causes. There are, consequently, analogies between the things in the world and the Uncreated. Eckhart would not deny this, but he prefers a more dialectical approach, emphasizing the contrast between God and the world.²¹ The reason for this is not far to seek: Eckhart's "inverted" perspective on the world, which he views as if from the perspective of God. Theological analogies work only in one direction: from the world to God. God does not compare the world to himself, in order to see similarities between them. He knows the world in the unity of his own Essence, as a participation in himself.²² That is to say, he knows it, not as something else beside himself, but yet as other than himself. (The sense of this "otherness" can only become clear in the light of the Trinity, as we shall see in the next section.)

"God with His uncreatedness upholds her Nothingness and preserves her in His Something" (Sermon 6). In this paradoxical

²⁰Charles Journet, *The Dark Knowledge of God* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 7. Perhaps this is close to the fundamental insight of Vedanta, according to Eliot Deutsch in *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (University Press of Hawaii, 1969). The world is "unreal" because only Brahman is "real" in the sense of being eternal and infinite. It is an "illusion" in the sense that we normally mistake it for what it is not, projecting upon it a solidity it cannot possess (32-33). (A Christian might say, *anticipating* a solidity it does not *yet* possess.)

²¹See Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*. See also the article already referred to by Cyril O'Regan. In fact Eckhart is not rejecting analogy, but emphasizing the "greater dissimilarity" that it conceals.

²²See C. F. Kelley, "Inverse Analogy," in *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (Yale University Press, 1977), 167-172.

sentence Eckhart neatly captures the relationship between the existence and the non-existence of the world. He reminds us that created being is always hovering on the edge of non-existence (“Everything is perishing except His Face,” as the Koran puts it). Things eternally flow from him without diminishing his being, and return to him again. Things are not their own self-sufficient sources, and so Eckhart can describe them as being “insubstantial.” What this really means, though, is that their existence is nothing but gift, and that they are always in the process of receiving their being. The immutable essences of all things are clothed in sensible appearances in order to praise and glorify their creator. It is this state of radical dependency or fluidity, this state of continual creation, which characterizes all worldly substance, in Eckhart’s view. What Eckhart is saying is not that created things are not substantial at all, but rather that their very substantiality has no self-given existence apart from God. The relative truth of Aristotelianism is enfolded within, and grounded by, the more encompassing truth of creation out of nothing.

We have to distinguish two motions here, however, not one. Not only does creation continually flow from the Creator, but it also returns to God. That is why we find Eckhart saying that “the first beginning is for the sake of the last end. Yes, God never takes rest there where he is the first beginning; he takes rest there where he is an end and a repose of all being, *not that this being should perish*, but rather it is there perfected in its last end according to its highest perfection.”²³

It is this idea that Eckhart also seems to be struggling to express in one of his most confusing sermons, a sermon in which he asks God to make him “free of ‘God’ if we take ‘God’ to be the beginning of created things.” He is speaking of the return to God (which he calls “breaking through”), compared to the flowing out from God in the beginning. The crucial passage begins:

A great authority says that his breaking through is nobler than his flowing out; and that is true. When I flowed out from God, all things said: “God is.” And this cannot make me blessed, for with this I acknowledge that I am a creature. But in the breaking-through, when I come to be free of will of myself and of God’s will and of all his works and of God himself, then I am above all

²³Meister Eckhart: *The Essential Sermons*, 196. My emphasis.

created things, and I am neither God nor creature, but I am what I was and what I shall remain, now and eternally.²⁴

To “break through,” to become “deified,” is in Eckhart’s terms to be “neither God nor creature” but to enter a third category. I am not God, because only God is God. Yet I am not simply a creature, if by “simply a creature” is meant a sort of “pure nature” existing on its own apart from God. There is no such thing, as Thomas himself teaches, though his doctrine on this point was obscured for a long time by many of his Scholastic commentators. Indeed, through God’s grace I have become divine. And since “God” is that from which all creatures flow, I am “free of God,” since I have entered the repose of the divine Essence in which there is no flowing forth any more: the Son rests in the Father and the Spirit, and the Father rests in the Son, and the creature is there in its deepest ground.

4. *Trinity: The giving of the gift*

The most difficult thing to understand in Eckhart is probably this relationship between God (Trinity) and Godhead, between the flowing of the Persons and their repose in each other, which so often leads readers to assume that he is elevating an impersonal Absolute above the trinitarian God. (In that case the human person could not be deified by participation, but only dissolved into final nothingness as the Persons give way to That which transcends them.) It is here that Balthasar makes his strongest criticisms of Eckhart, writing at one point: “Unfortunately, the whole trinitarian process is clearly undermined in favor of a (Neoplatonic) trend toward absolute unity”²⁵ If this were the whole tendency of Eckhart’s thought, it would signify a significant betrayal of the Christian revelation.

Others have accused Eckhart of falling into what Louis Bouyer calls “the standing temptation of Latin Trinitarianism: putting prior to the Persons, or over and above them, an essence from which they in turn proceed and which, as is clear from Cajetan,

²⁴*Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 203. The “great authority” is possibly Eckhart’s joking reference to himself.

²⁵Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, 443. In general one might say that Balthasar draws a distinction within Neoplatonism between Proclus and Plotinus, regarding the influence of the latter as more benign.

is the equivalent of what we mean by person—a being subsisting in and by itself.” Bouyer does not believe he did this. “What he did do, in our view, was something quite different. His deity, with its sublime unity, consists in the dynamism, communication, communion which is simply identical with that ‘pure being’ which is the one being of God. Indeed, following the formula which was perhaps Eckhart’s greatest stroke of genius, God is being at its poorest, i.e., he who only possesses himself by giving himself.”²⁶

The word “giving” contains the clue to how we might elucidate (or expand) Eckhart’s trinitarian thought. Bouyer is right in drawing attention to it, for it captures the dynamic quality of Eckhart’s God, and at the same time explains how he was able to slip into sounding, at times, as though he were leaving the Persons behind.

One of the puzzles in Eckhart is that he at times describes the Father as the “One,” the supreme unity or even ground of the divine nature, and at others refers to the Father himself as emerging from or being born from the womb of the One, which appears therefore to transcend the Trinity. The point here is that each Person in himself (and the Father, of course, pre-eminently) is indistinguishable from the Godhead as such. But what does it mean to be indistinguishable from the Godhead as such? It means, in trinitarian terms, that each Person is centered or grounded not in himself but in the other. To be indistinguishable from the Godhead means to be the Infinite Act that consists in infinite self-outpouring. The “Godhead beyond God” is (evangelical) love.

Thus we may speak of the Persons continually appearing and disappearing into each other, or even “boiling” (*bullitio*), as Eckhart puts it. This vivid image reminds us that with God we are using human words based on the things we see in the world. When we speak of one Person “flowing” from another, “giving” himself to the other, “proceeding from” or “being generated by” the Father, such expressions are metaphors—sanctioned by revelation and tradition, but still metaphors. Furthermore, they are metaphors of *process*. God himself, however, is not in time and is not in “process.”

The “repose” of God is a metaphor too. Eckhart introduces it in order to correct or complete or balance the metaphors of

²⁶Louis Bouyer, *The Invisible Father: Approaches to the Mystery of the Divinity* (Petersham and Edinburgh: St. Bedes and T&T Clark, 1999), 270.

process. Effectively, he reminds us that in God all action is eternally-already complete, just as truly as it is also always beginning afresh. The circumincession of the Father and the Son will never come to an “end,” and yet we may speak of the completion that it promises as lying in some sense “beyond” it in a non-temporal, non-spatial direction. That, it seems to me, is the real function of Eckhart’s talk about the Godhead lying beyond the Trinity. It does not mean that there will come a day when the Trinity will stop circuminceding and sit still.

In fact, it is the Holy Spirit, the unity and the bliss of the Trinity, who is the repose of the Son in the Father and of the Father in the Son. The Spirit brings the circumincession to an “end”—not by stopping it, but by allowing it to be the infinite fullness it is. He is not beyond the circumincession, but is the *beyond of the circumincession*; he is its completeness, its infinite superabundance.

Let me try to express the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing about this fullness, this sheer excessiveness. To do so we must go beyond the letter of Eckhart, while remaining (I believe) faithful to his spirit and intention.

The mystery of the Trinity involves the fact that while the Father is other than the Son and the Spirit than both, each is also identical with the fullness of the one divine nature.²⁷ The distinctive character of the Son, the “otherness” of the Son from the Father, comes not from anything in the nature of the Son that would mark him out as something different from the Father, but simply from the fact that he *receives* this nature from the Father: he is *generated*. The Father, on the other hand, is necessarily identically the same as the Son in terms of nature, but he is the Son’s *source*. The Holy Spirit, in turn, is distinguished not by possessing some other nature than that of Father and Son, but solely by his relationship of dual origin. His

²⁷Eckhart: “the Father gave His only-begotten Son all that He has to offer, all His Godhead, all His bliss, holding nothing back In fact I declare: He utters the root of the Godhead completely in the Son” (Sermon 12). Eckhart’s trinitarian teaching is displayed most fully in, for example, his Commentary on John, part of which is translated in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist, 1986), 182–193.

source is not the Father alone, but also the Son. His end is not the Son alone, but also the Father.²⁸

We might say, with Augustine, that the second Person is so perfect an image of the Father that he gives of himself just as the Father does. He gives freely what he has received—in this case his divine nature—back to the Father.²⁹ However, this is not a mere passing back and forth of the same gift, which would be an image of sterility. (“Here, have this.” “No, you have it.” “No, I insist, you have it,” and so on for eternity.) The gift is distinct from the giver through being given. It is a total given-awayness that renders the giver (and the receiver) fruitful beyond their own subjectivity because it bears them both within itself, transformed by their communion in one another. This is the archetype of the way a child bears within himself the nature and image of the two parents, making him an (endlessly surprising) gift to each. Purely by virtue of the relationship to Father and Son, the gift which unites them becomes a third Person. Without ever being other than one and the same God, the Holy Spirit is the bond or medium of exchange between Father and Son—completing the trinitarian process in a

²⁸In this way the *filioque* tradition permits us to distinguish the Persons purely as relations within the Trinity. The Orthodox allege that this undermines our sense of the Father as the sole principle of the Trinity. The Latins might reply that by rejecting the *filioque* the East reduces the distinctive “spiration” of the Spirit to no more than another “coming forth” from the Father. Some theologians have suggested that the dispute could be solved by agreeing to speak of the Spirit proceeding from the Father “through” the Son. But this also has a disadvantage: it presents the Son as a mere way-station or tunnel. The metaphor of “giving,” as distinct from “generating” or “proceeding,” helps us remember that God is no impersonal substance but only and forever personal. But then, if the Son is truly to be the image of his Father, he must also be a giver in his own right, and not just a transmitter of the Father’s gift to himself. In *The Trinity* St. Augustine argues that even the procession of the Spirit is “part of what is given by the Father to the Son”: see *Augustine: Later Works*, ed. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 158–159. The Father remains the sole principle, because the Son has nothing he has not received from this source. But the Trinity is asymmetrical reciprocity, not a symmetrical hierarchy proceeding from the Father. Its asymmetry is precisely the root of its dynamism as eternal Act, eternal *perichoresis*.

²⁹The “principle of undiminished giving,” of which Neoplatonists sometimes speak, applies here in its highest form. God, being infinite, can give himself completely without diminishing himself at all. As Eckhart says in a sermon for St. Dominic’s Day, “It is a wonderful thing that something can flow out and yet remain within.”

“kiss” signifying their mutual delight and their eternal superabundant or “ecstatic” fruition.³⁰

The act of being, in its highest form, is an act of giving, an act of knowing, an act of love. It is trinitarian. The same cluster of metaphors illuminates the nature of created being, the dynamic relationship to God which is intrinsic to all existing things. Giftedness is the signature of God upon creation. But our being is not simply a gift to us; it is God’s gift to himself. Created or limited existence is a gift that the Father gives to the Son, along with his own divine nature. And it is a gift that the Son gives the Father, not least by being born as Man, dying on the Cross and being raised to new life. Creation is therefore gift both in relation to God, and in relation specifically to each of the Persons.³¹ Filled with the Holy Spirit in order to be given to the Father by the Son, it is transformed into the Son’s Eucharist or “thanksgiving.” The world indwelt by the Spirit is therefore now infinitely more than it was when it was created. It speaks not only with its own voice, but with the voice of the Son, who gives glory to his Father with this transformed creation.

5. *Breaking through*

On this reading, Eckhart is suggesting, with his strange talk of “breaking through,” a way of referring to the state of things “after” this return to the Father, *after* divinization. And he describes it as a state of rest or perfection, in which no words, no distinctions, any longer apply—even those of Father, Son, and Spirit. He does not mean either that the Trinity ceases to exist, or that we cease to exist in the Trinity.

³⁰As Eckhart says, “Each and every form of production cannot be understood without the mutual pleasure and love that is the bond of the producer and the thing produced and is of the same nature with them” (*Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, 185).

³¹In at least one translation of his extended sermon *The Nobleman*, Eckhart writes that “God gives being to every creature [in his mind as prototypes or ideas] and afterwards in time [as created beings in the visible universe], and even beyond time and beyond everything that pertains to it” (*Meister Eckhart: Selected Treatises*, ed. Clark and Skinner, 154–155). On these three modes of participation in God, see Stratford Caldecott, “Creation as a Call to Holiness,” *Communio* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2003). The creature is in God as the Son is present in the Father: as *logos* or Idea. It is in God as the Father is present in the Son: as *esse* received, i.e., as existence. It is in God as the Spirit is present in Father and Son: as *esse* given, i.e., as existence transformed by grace.

On the contrary, “In the same being of God where God is above being and above distinction, there I myself was, there I willed myself and committed myself to create this man.”³² That is not non-existence, but it is a state of existence that bursts the limits of human speech. In the ground of the Godhead, everything is one, not because distinctions collapse, but because they are revealed finally as what they truly are: not barriers to infinite self-outpouring, but internal modes of it. Eckhart can say that there is no distinction and therefore no creature and no Trinity—but that is because what he means is that we are here situated *within* the creature and *within* the Trinity, indeed within God’s own (trinitarian) knowledge of himself. That knowledge is not a grasping from without, but a simple Act of love, the eternal begetting of the Son from the Father, the knowing of the Father in the Son.³³

Hans Urs von Balthasar asks, at the very end of his *Theo-Drama*, “What Does God Gain From the World?” The question is answered in one way by Eckhart’s “all things added to God are not more than God alone,” and by his repeated insistence that God is “without a Why.” The divine nature, being already infinite, cannot be increased by any gift, however sublime. The creation is not added to the divine nature, but rather brought within the super-dynamic relationship of the Trinity as an expression of the Son’s inexhaustible love for the Father.

Applying this to ourselves, and reconciling it with Balthasar’s own answer to the question he has posed, it means that in God’s eternity *we are already what we will become in time and at the end of time*. For, “In reaching it we are only reaching something that has already been reached; becoming coincides with being.”³⁴ The original divine

³²Meister Eckhart: *The Essential Sermons*, 202.

³³After all, the divine consciousness, knowledge, and will are each identical with the divine Essence and are the same in each person. These three ways of being God (not three Gods!) are so utterly and completely different from each other that no worldly difference between things can be greater. Yet the difference lies entirely in being other, in being a relationally distinct pole of the total self-outpouring that is of the very essence of Deity; it does not imply that the divine consciousness of the Father is different *in its content* from that of Son or Spirit, for this would compromise the divine simplicity and make each Person less than fully God. Each Person is other than the other Persons, but not other than the divine Essence. Thus utter unity coexists with utter difference.

³⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5: *The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 512, quoting Adrienne von Speyr. Balthasar finds a similar understanding in Maximus: see *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus*

knowledge of myself, which is my “idea” in God’s essence, by which he knows me and creates me in the beginning, is also (from God’s point of view, of course, not mine as a creature still *in via*) the deified self that comes to be through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.³⁵

6. Conclusion

Eckhart’s position is summed up by Kelley as follows. “This self, which the human knower is, is born in time. But insofar as the self is now wholly absorbed in intellection, it is not born in time. ‘It proceeds from eternity.’ It necessarily is prior *in* that transcendent, ultimate, and ‘divine selfhood’ in whom there is no temporality or individuality.”³⁶ All things—and human knowers in particular—are in God not in their own selves but as God, as the divine Essence known by the divine Essence (in the Son).³⁷ They have overcome

the Confessor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 134. But if becoming ultimately coincides with being, being also coincides with becoming: the creature in God must not be thought of as confined to a static state, for “within the divine fruitfulness there is a kind of eternal ‘ever-more’, ‘everything that lives in heaven seems to be growing’; but this takes place ‘beyond time and space’ in the mode of being of eternal Love. And since God’s freedom and love require something like ‘super-times’ and ‘super-space’ so that his love can expand infinitely, we too shall experience, beyond our transitory nature, a kind of ‘elasticity’ of duration in which there will be a coincidence of the ‘eternal here’ and the ‘eternal now.’” (*Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, 400–401.)

³⁵The Scholastics speak of the divinized saints as seeing (and seeing by) God’s Essence, yet not in such a way that they comprehend it completely (*ST I*, q. 12, a. 7 ad 3). Knowledge of God is poured out on the creature, but can only be received according to its own limited capacity. The Orthodox, following Gregory Palamas, prefer to say flatly that the Essence of God is unknowable: divinization takes place through the Energies of God. Kallistos Ware, in “The Nearness Yet Otherness of the Eternal in Meister Eckhart and St. Gregory Palamas” (*Eckhart Review* 9 [2000]: 50), sees a parallel with Eckhart’s distinction of God “in himself” from God “present in his creatures.” For the Latin tradition, created nature is deified by participating in the intra-trinitarian act of love/knowledge made possible by the assumption of created nature in the Son and the pouring out of the Spirit, in eternity and on the Cross.

³⁶Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, 66.

³⁷According to St. Thomas, God knows all things as *possibilities of existing* which he wills to exist. He knows his essence as capable of imitation by a creature, and thus knows the “idea” of that creature in knowing himself (*ST I*, q. 15, a. 2). The

their own “selves,” meaning the inevitable limitations of an ego centered upon (and therefore closed upon) itself. The self, once opened up, by being centered on the Other, and in a sense “drowned” in the Other, becomes more substantially, more really, a Self than it could ever have been otherwise. In that sense, I am not God, but my “truest I” is God, and Eckhart does not tire of saying it.

In so doing, of course, he sounds very like the Hindu sage Shankara, for whom the highest insight of the Upanishads is the identity between the innermost Self (*Atman*) and God (*Brahman*). He even sounds a bit like the Sufi martyr Al-Hallaj, crying out “I am the Real.” These resemblances are intriguing, although problematic if we use them to short-circuit the discussion of important differences between diverse religious perspectives. Eckhart’s conclusion, I have argued, arises out of a trinitarian experience of God, and an intimate union with the Son of God made man. Are we to believe that Vedanta and Sufism attained the same insight, anticipating in some respects the Beatific Vision, without any reference to the Trinity or the Incarnation? Or do the apparent similarities disguise a deeper dissimilarity?

I do not want to anticipate the results of that discussion. Salvation is through Christ alone, and the Beatific Vision is an experience of participation in the inner life of the Trinity.³⁸ However, as we have recognized, the Beatific Vision does not involve seeing the three persons of the Trinity laid out before our eyes like fishes on a slab. It is a participation in God’s knowing of himself, in which transcendent Act he knows and loves us too. How far this participation may be possible for non-Christians is a question requiring profound study of the other traditions. I would only suggest that we cannot rule it out *a priori*.

Nevertheless, only some explicit knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity can save non-dualism from collapsing into the monism it becomes when otherwise elaborated into a systematic philosophy. The Christian faith reveals that the One known to every religion

creature as known by God is an idea contained within the divine Essence, and it therefore has existence in God more truly than it has in itself (*Truth*, q. 4, a. 6).

³⁸It should be noted that knowledge (*gnosis*), even the knowledge of which Eckhart speaks, is not what “saves” us, in the Christian sense. We are saved by the blood of Christ, and by a perseverance in faith and the other virtues which gradually integrates our whole personality with that knowledge.

possesses an interior life as Trinity. If we are to transcend the creation when we return to the One, the Christian knows that all we are and do does not perish but is resurrected in the life to come—upheld eternally in the embrace of the Trinity, “borne up in the Persons in accordance with the power of the Father, the wisdom of the Son and the goodness of the Holy Ghost” (Sermon 70). In the same Sermon, commenting on the text “God is love, and he who dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him” (1 Jn 4:16), Eckhart writes of the “highest perfection of the spirit to which man can attain spiritually in this life,” which is as we have seen to grasp God “as in the ground, where He is above all being.” But he continues: “Yet this is not the highest perfection: that which we shall possess for ever with body and soul. Then the outer man will be entirely maintained through the supportive possession of eternal being, just as humanity and divinity are one personal being in the person of Christ.”

It is sometimes said that Eckhart only ever preached one sermon. If so, it might have been based upon Luke 9:24. “For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.” To save one’s life, according to Eckhart, is to find it again in God. There is only a “place” for one’s life in God, however, because beyond all the multiplicity of this world there is the diversity-in-unity of the Trinity, in which everything is given and everything received.

Out of the ground the rod grows, which is the soul in her purest and highest. It shoots out of this primal ground at the breaking forth of the Son from the Father. Upon the rod there opens a flower, the flower is the Holy Ghost who will rest and repose there. Let us now pray to our dear Lord that we may so rest in Him, and He in us, as will redound to His praise and glory. (Sermon 61) □

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