

***Bullitio* and the God beyond God: Meister Eckhart's Trinitarian Theology**

Part II: Distinctionless Godhead and trinitarian God

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Our inquiry is about two aspects of Eckhart's theology of the Trinity. One aspect (treated in Part I, which appeared in last month's issue of *New Blackfriars* pp. 169—181) is his use of the notion of *bullitio* ('boiling') in the Latin treatises to explain personal procession and plurality within God. The other is the distinction in Eckhart's German sermons between the Trinity and the undifferentiated Godhead beyond the Trinity.

The conclusions drawn from the first part of this study were as follows:

Bullitio is a metaphor depicting the generation of the Son from the Father. It also depicts the procession of the Holy Spirit, but this aspect is less developed in the texts we have considered. The metaphor represents an attempt to explain and to understand not only the nature of this generation but also the reason for it. I have argued that Eckhart, unlike Aquinas, allies himself with the tradition of *a priori* proofs of the Trinity. *Bullitio* is a metaphor for the self-diffusiveness of the good, and is related to Bonaventure's notion of fountain-like fulness (*plenitudo fontalis*). Bonaventure finds in the latter attribute, which he regards as a property of the Father, the reason for plurality in God. There are no grounds to suppose that the idea of *bullitio* involves a distinction between God as Trinity and as the hidden Godhead.

Ebullitio, the first moment, as it were, of the creative emanation from God, is rooted in *bullitio*, and these two ideas are linked by that of formal emanation. The generation of the Son is a formal emanation; it is also the formal cause of creatures, insofar as this cause is considered in abstraction from their efficient and final causes. Nevertheless, the Persons and their relations pertain to the inner life of God, and creatures insofar as they are outside God look rather to his unity or common nature. But through grace rational creatures are able to participate in *bullitio* and in the inner life of the Deity.

With this in mind we may now consider the distinction between the Trinity and the Godhead in Eckhart's German sermons. Finally, I shall suggest how the two aspects of Eckhart's trinitarian theology are related

and what all this can tell us about the general character of Eckhart's trinitarianism.

The German Sermons³⁷

It is in the German sermons that we find an unequivocal distinction between the Trinity and the hidden Godhead beyond the Trinity. There are some problems to be noted at the outset. First, while the word 'Godhead' is a convenient term to designate the hidden or non-relative aspect of the Deity, we should not assume that whenever Eckhart uses the word *gotheit* some distinction between God and the Godhead is involved. The German word is equivalent to *deitas*, and it can carry a variety of senses: *deitas*, *divina natura*, *in divinis* etc. In fact Eckhart does not use the word *gotheit* to denote the non-relative aspect of the Deity in the texts that we shall consider below.

Furthermore, we cannot simply assume that whenever Eckhart distinguishes between God and the Godhead or the God beyond God the distinction is between the Deity as Trinity and as something beyond this. Eckhart sometimes distinguishes between God in himself and God as he is related to his work *ad extra* or as he is understood from without.³⁸ I believe, for reasons that will become clear, that all such distinctions are essentially the same. The crucial question to be asked here, however, is whether Eckhart really considers the distinction between the Trinity and the Godhead to exist within the Deity. Is the distinction rather between God in himself, as he truly is, and God as conceived from without?

I suggest that we should take Eckhart at his word. If we interpret him in the way suggested above, we attribute to him a kind of modalism: God only seems to be three Persons to us, while in himself he is an undifferentiated unity. It is surely unfair to foist this heresy upon Eckhart when nothing he says commits him to it. Furthermore, it is clear from discussions in the Latin works, including passages such as those discussed in Part I of this study, that in his view the relations that constitute the Trinity are entirely real.

We ought, indeed, always to take Eckhart at his word, and to understand what he says literally except where an obvious metaphor (such as *bullitio*) is involved. To do otherwise is to emasculate his daring and radical theology. The problem in this case arises because of the systematic and consistent manner in which Eckhart ignores the distance between the soul and God in the German sermons. This is not merely a rhetorical device. Frank Tobin puts the matter succinctly when he writes: 'The traditional distinction between God's activity as expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity and his activity *ad extra* is virtually ignored. And in a theologian as knowledgeable as Eckhart this has to be considered intentional.'³⁹ Thus the distinction between the Trinity and the Godhead is identified with a distinction at the level of spirituality. To the

generation of the Son in the Deity there corresponds the birth of God in the soul. Beyond this there is the breakthrough (*durchbruch*) of the soul, or more precisely of the soul's spark (*vüncelîn*) into the ground of God.

Beyond the Trinity

In Sermon 48 Eckhart describes the comprehension of God by the spark of the soul. The spark wants to grasp God as he is in himself. But it does not only turn away from creatures. It is not satisfied with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, nor with their relations, nor with the divine nature in its fruitfulness, nor with the simple divine being or essence (*götlich wesen*) in its repose. It wants to find *whence* this essence has come, and does so in the silent desert of the ground, where no distinction has ever looked, neither Father, Son nor Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ The uncompromising nature of this statement is remarkable. It should be noted that the ground of God is not the essence; rather, it is beyond the three Persons and their common essence.

We find the same uncompromising assertion that the soul must rise above everything that pertains to the Trinity in Sermon 67. Eckhart explains how the soul participates in the inner personal life of the Deity, from which the Persons have never emerged. But he posits another stage beyond this. I quote here from M. O'C. Walshe's translation:

Now mark my words! It is only above all this that the soul grasps the pure absoluteness of free being, which has no location, which neither receives nor gives: it is bare 'beingness' [*istischeit*] which is deprived of all being and all beingness.⁴¹

Since at the stage before this the soul comprehends the Persons as such, in the being from which they have never emerged, it is clear that the distinction between the Trinity and pure *istischeit* is considered to exist within God.

Breakthrough

It is in sermons describing what seems to be a retracing of the *bullitio* to its source that we find the notion of a breakthrough into the divine ground beyond the birth of the Son in the soul. Alongside this birth in the intellect Eckhart sometimes posits what might be called a procession of the Holy Spirit in the will. This notion is less developed, for the birth of the Son is the crux of both Eckhart's theology and his spirituality, but there is no subordinationism here. What happens in the will is in this case not said to be inferior to what happens in the intellect. We should not be surprised to find that the breakthrough beyond the Son is a breakthrough into the undifferentiated Godhead, for the Son is his relation of filiation to the Father. In other words, to pass beyond the generation of the Son is to pass beyond the Father as well as the Son. But in one problematic sermon the breakthrough is said to be to the Father.

We find the former pattern in Sermon 2, where Eckhart expounds his conception of the virgin-wife. The soul is a virgin-wife in its ground, where the Father eternally begets his Word. Eckhart posits two powers in the soul. Much of the language is obscure, but a careful reading suggests that the two powers are the faculties of intellect and will. In the former God is verdant and flowering in the begetting of the Son. In the latter God is afire and glowing with all his riches. But beyond these powers is another: the light or spark of the soul. This is said to be a citadel into which neither the power in which God is verdant nor the power in which God is afire can look. There is a characteristic ambiguity here, for it is not clear whether Eckhart is excluding the powers of the soul or the Persons themselves. We need not be scandalized at the suggestion that the Persons themselves are unable to look into the ground, for unknowing can be considered as a perfection. The citadel of the soul is also God's ground, and Eckhart removes any further doubts we may have as to his meaning by excluding the Trinity from the citadel. Again, I quote from Walshe's translation:

God himself never looks in there for one instant, in so far as He exists in modes and in the properties of his Persons.... But only in so far as He is one and indivisible, without mode or properties, (can He do this): in that sense He is neither Father, Son nor Holy Ghost, and yet is a Something which is neither this nor that.⁴²

The soul's transcending of its own, trinitarian powers is described in Sermon 83, where Eckhart exploits the analogy established by Augustine in his *De Trinitate* between the three faculties of the mind (memory, intelligence and will) and the three Persons in God. Eckhart speaks of the first faculty, memory, in the following way; I quote here from Edmund Colledge's translation, which is more accurate here than Walshe's:

This power makes the soul resemble the Father in his outflowing divinity, out of which he has poured the whole treasure of his divine being into the Son and into the Holy Spirit, differentiating between the Persons, just as the soul's memory pours the treasure of its images into the soul's powers.

Having identified the memory as the source of images, Eckhart considers what happens when all images are removed from the soul. Then the soul: contemplates only the Simple One, then the soul's naked being finds the naked, formless being of the divine unity, which is there a being above being, accepting and reposing in itself.⁴³

In Sermon 26 we find a similar psychology allied to the same notion of the soul's ascent to a nameless and hidden Deity, but in this case the hidden Deity is called the Father. The sermon is on John 4:23: 'Woman ... the hour is coming and now is when true worshippers will worship the

Father in spirit and in truth'. Naturally, the text is understood as a reference to the Trinity, and to the soul's involvement in it. Following Augustine, Eckhart distinguishes between the upper and lower aspects of the soul. The upper aspect, which he calls the *apex mentis*, looks toward God, while the lower aspect looks downward, as it were, and directs the senses. The apex remains in eternity. In it lies hidden the fount (*ursprunc*) of all goodness, an ever-shining light and an ever-burning fire. This fire, adds Eckhart, is the Holy Spirit. Having considered Sermons 2 and 83 we can now identify the light with the Son, and with the truth to which John refers in the text. As for the *ursprunc*: we may reasonably identify this with the source of *bullitio*, namely the Father.

Eckhart explains that two powers emanate from the upper aspect of the soul: the intellect and the will. He finds another, higher power than these, but instead of identifying it with a third faculty he describes it as the perfection of the powers, and states that it resides in the intellect. This third and unnamed power is not satisfied with God as Holy Spirit, nor with God as the Son, nor even with God as 'God'; that is, with God insofar as he has a name. It desires to break through to where God has no name, to the source of all goodness. It cannot know what it wants, for this is nameless. What it seeks is the Father. Hence Philip says: 'Lord, show us the Father and we will be content' (John 14:8). Since only the Son knows the Father we must become the Son, and to be the Son we must have the Father as our father.⁴⁴ But if God as the Son is named, why does Eckhart consider God the Father to be nameless?

I can see no explicit reference to a hidden Godhead beyond Father, Son and Holy Spirit in this sermon. Here I must beg to differ from Reiner Schürmann, a perceptive commentator on Eckhart's sermons. Earlier in this sermon Eckhart states that a man touched by truth, beauty and goodness can no more relinquish these than God can relinquish his *gotheit*. According to Schürmann Eckhart is here introducing the distinction between God and the Godhead, but there is no reason to suppose that Eckhart means more by *gotheit* in this case than 'divinity'.⁴⁵ According to Schürmann the name 'Father' in the passage outlined above is 'only an additional symbol for the unknowable Godhead, so that speech will not have to be broken off.' He explains that the Godhead is called 'Father', even though 'Father' designates a property, because Eckhart is constrained by his text, which includes the words 'when true worshippers will adore the Father'. Schürmann attributes Eckhart's usage in this instance to his customary 'malleability of expression'.⁴⁶

This interpretation, I submit, is unacceptable. We must presume that when Eckhart uses a term so entrenched in theology and so precise in its signification as 'Father' he means what he says. Moreover, in this sermon Eckhart gives a conventional account of the reciprocal relations between Father and Son, stating that for there to be a son there must be a father and vice versa. We must either accept that Eckhart's account of

the ascent to the nameless Deity in this sermon is not consistent with his account in other sermons or find some unifying interpretation which assumes that when Eckhart says 'Father' he means 'Father'. And even if we follow the former course, and if we allow that the sermon is authentic, we must attempt to account for what Eckhart says in a manner consistent with the general framework of his teaching and with the highly developed theory of the relations in the Trinity which was part of his theological inheritance.

Conclusion

My conclusion is in two parts. The first concerns the general character of Eckhart's trinitarianism, while the second concerns the relations between the two aspects of his theology of the Trinity discussed above.

We have noted three salient features of Eckhart's treatment of the Trinity. The first is his adherence, at least in spirit, to the tradition of *a priori* proofs of the doctrine. He does not offer a formal demonstration of it, but he does search for what Anselm and Richard of St Victor would have called its 'necessary reasons'. He tries to grasp why and whence the Trinity proceeds. The second feature is his reliance on metaphor in this quest. *Bullitio* is one such metaphor. And the third feature is his idea that the soul becomes caught up in the inner, trinitarian life of the Deity. We find the theoretical basis of the last idea in the Latin works. In the German sermons the theory is converted into rhetoric: Eckhart systematically and consistently blurs the distinctions between the soul and God and between the powers of the soul and the divine properties or relations.

According to a principle established by the Cappadocian Fathers, God's action *ad extra* is always the action of Father, Son and Holy Spirit acting together. Advances in the theology of the Trinity in the high middle ages led from this basic insight to a tendency to consider the Trinity as something exclusively pertaining to the inner life of the Deity. God's action *ad extra* was considered to be common or essential, for no relation of opposition in God intervenes. These advances involved, among other things, a clear distinction between essential acts and personal or notional acts in the Deity. For example, a distinction was firmly drawn between the essential love of God, by which he loves us, and the notional love which is or spirates the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ It is not difficult to see that this has implications for the conception of how the soul can be related to God. For example, one would find it hard in this atmosphere to sustain William of St Thierry's belief that the love by which we love God *is* the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸

At this theoretical level a clear and consistent distinction could now be made between the Persons or properties and the appropriations (that is, common attributes that we merely appropriate to the Persons). Thus

Bonaventure and Thomas can maintain that although pagan philosophers seems to have known something of the Trinity, they really only attained to the level of appropriations, for the properties as such can only be known through faith.⁴⁹ This has one curious result in the history of thought. The Fathers identified, *mutatis mutandis*, the Logos of John's Gospel with the Logos of Philo and the philosophers, and later with the *nous* of Plotinus. Thus Augustine, in Book VII of the *Confessions*, maintains that the Platonists (that is, Plotinus) knew of the eternally begotten Word.⁵⁰ From the perspective of thirteenth-century theologians, this cannot be so. Since the ideas are considered to pertain to the relation between creatures and God, they are essential rather than personal.⁵¹

It is with this clear distinction between God's personal life *ad intra* and his common or essential action *ad extra* in mind that we should consider Thomas's theory of the invisible mission of the Son. The theory was one source for Eckhart's idea of the birth of God in the soul. When the soul is sanctified through grace the Son and the Holy Spirit are said to be sent into it. According to Thomas's treatment of missions in the *Summa theologiae*, a mission must be analysed into two components: an eternal procession in the Deity and a new mode of presence in creation. Hence when God became man the Father sent his Son into the world even though, as God, the Son was omnipresent in it already. The Father generates the Son eternally, and the Son becomes present in creation in a new way by virtue of his incarnation. Likewise God becomes present in a new way, but invisibly, when through sanctifying grace he dwells in the soul. This indwelling is not proper to one Person, for the entire Deity indwells. But as the first Person in the Godhead, the Father cannot, by Thomas's analysis, be sent. The mission of the Son can be distinguished from that of the Spirit, according to Thomas, because intellectual gifts are attributed to the Son by 'a certain appropriation' (*per quamdam appropriationem*).⁵² As Ghislain Lafont has argued, Thomas's theory of the invisible missions is allied to his theory of appropriations.⁵³ From this point of view there is only an apparent involvement of the soul in the personal processions.

Eckhart's trinitarianism stands out sharply against this background. The relation between the formal cause of creation in the *ebullitio* and the formal emanation of the Word is more than mere appropriation. Furthermore, as Frank Tobin notes, Eckhart tends to ignore the distinction between the immanent action of God that is the Trinity and the action of God *ad extra*.⁵⁴ But we need to qualify this judgment. We have seen that in Sermon XXV Eckhart does apply this distinction, but he does so precisely in order to argue that rational creatures, uniquely, have access to the Trinity as such, and to the *bullitio* within God.

The source of *bullitio* is not the Godhead but the Father. This brings us to the question of how Eckhart's discussions of *bullitio*, in the Latin

works, are related to his descriptions in some German texts of an ascent of the soul to a hidden Godhead beyond the Trinity, beyond modalities, distinctions and relations. So clearly and unequivocally does Eckhart express this idea in Sermons 48 and 67 (discussed above) that only by a very strained interpretation could it be maintained that Eckhart is not making a properly theological distinction; that is, that he is not positing a real distinction within God. As well as finding the connection between these two accounts of the Trinity, we need to explain why Eckhart seems to refer to the hidden Godhead as 'Father' in Sermon 26.

There is one obvious difference of approach between the two kinds of statement. In the Latin texts Eckhart uses the metaphor of *bullitio* to explain how and why there is procession in the Deity. It is here that he describes how the monad begets a monad. In the German texts Eckhart's thought moves in the opposite direction. The soul is urged to retrace the procession of the Persons to its source. Herein may lie the relation between the two ideas. If the idea of *bullitio* is traced to its source, to the *ursprunc*, might one arrive at the notion of a hidden Godhead?

Since the source of *bullitio* is the Father, the return to the source of the Deity might be expected to end with the Father, as it seems to do in Sermon 26. But it should be remembered that the Father is a relation: he is his paternity, and paternity is a relation reciprocal to filiation. If there is a step beyond generation and beyond the relations it would not be to the Father but to an undifferentiated, non-relative monad. This monad would, as it were, become the Father only when the Son is begotten.

By the theory of relations there is no Father before he begets the Son. Thomas is careful to eradicate any notion of an absolute (that is, non-relative) fatherhood that is prior to the Father's relation to the Son. Thus he insists that the Father is constituted by his relation to the Son and not by his generative act, arguing that there must be a person before that person can act.⁵⁵ From this perspective, if the soul were to move within the Deity it would be involved in a kind of circumincession. It would never rest in a source.

There are, however, some features in Eckhart's discussion of *bullitio* that do suggest that there is a non-relative source. First, the *a priori* perspective he adopts invites one to begin by considering something in itself, such as a monad that will beget a monad or a good that diffuses itself. Secondly, by refusing to cash his metaphors by translating them into literal predicates he retains the idea of a process of becoming or a temporal generation in God. We know that we should not believe that there is in fact any change or becoming in God, but the metaphors remain. Where a 'boiling' or a 'thrusting out' is posited, we cannot but imagine what existed before the process began. Similar considerations might apply to Bonaventure's theory, were it not for the fact that Bonaventure heads us off from this line of thought. He identifies *plenitudo fontalis* in the Deity with the unbegottenness of the

Father, and then analyses the latter as a *relation* between the Father and the other two Persons.⁵⁶

I do not claim to have described the process of thought by which Eckhart arrived at the idea of a hidden Godhead beyond the Trinity. Indeed, I have set aside the question of how Eckhart's thinking about the Trinity developed and have treated the texts without regard to chronology. All that is offered here is an interpretation whereby the Latin statements about *bullitio* and the German statements about the Godhead can be considered in a unified way. This interpretation explains why Eckhart describes the return to the source of the Deity both as a return to the Father and as a return to a non-relative Godhead. We might say, paradoxically, that before the Father begets the Son he is not the Father. As Eckhart states in Sermon 48, the uncreated light in the soul 'lays straight hold of God, unveiled and bare, as He is in Himself, that is, it catches Him in the act of begetting.'⁵⁷ The notion that God becomes the Father only after the Son is begotten is detectable in Sermon 35:

The first outburst [*úzbruch*] and the first effusion *God* runs out into is His fusion into His Son, who flows back into the *Father*.⁵⁸

I have assumed, throughout the above analysis, that the distinction in question is considered to be a real one. However, this does not follow merely from the premise that the distinction is within the Deity rather than between God in himself and God as understood by human reason. The distinction between the Persons and the essence, according to Thomas, is only *in ratione* and not real, but both terms of the distinction are within God. It is interesting to note that Henry Suso, a disciple of Eckhart, argued that the distinction between God and the Godhead is not real. In his *Book of Truth* he states that 'God and the Godhead are one, though the Godhead does not act or give birth, only God does that. But this difference only follows from the names which our reason applies. In essence they are one....'⁵⁹

If Suso was not being faithful to Eckhart here, and if what has been described above is Eckhart's theology, there are no doubt many problems still to be considered. It may be argued that the distinction is ruled out by the premise that everything in the Godhead is common save where a relation of opposition intervenes. Or, on the contrary, it may be objected that a new relation is thereby posited in the Deity. The same objections, it may be noted, would apply to the distinction between the essence and the energy of God, which has been a cornerstone of Eastern Orthodox theology following Gregory Palamas.

Be this as it may, if Eckhart did posit a real distinction between the Trinity and the Godhead, this ought not to be unexpected, for he would have thereby remained true to the Neoplatonic part of his theological ancestry. From the point of view of a metaphysic of the One, there must in some way and in some sense be something beyond the Trinity. No

amount of discourse about relations and *esse ad aliquid* can suffice to show that an order of being in which there are real distinctions and real relations is an undifferentiated unity.

As to the orthodoxy of this theology: it is no more shattering to the commonsensical notion of a personal God than belief in a God who is Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Nor can Eckhart be justly accused of diminishing the doctrine of the Trinity. His aim is if anything to augment it.

- 37 These sermons are identified by their enumeration in *DW*.
- 38 See for example Sermons 52 (*DW* II, pp. 504–5) and 69 (*DW* III, pp. 159 ff); and the sermon on ‘Nolite timere eos’: n. 26 in J. Quint’s *Meister Eckhart: Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* (1955), and n. 56 in Walshe’s enumeration.
- 39 F. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Philadelphia Press, 1986), p. 86.
- 40 *DW* II, pp. 419–21.
- 41 Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M. O’C. Walshe, vol. 2 (Longmead: Element Books, 1987), sermon 70, p. 175. (*DW* III, p. 133.)
- 42 *Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 1 (Longmead: Element Books 1987), sermon 8, p. 77. (*DW* I, pp. 43–44)
- 43 E. Colledge and B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: the Essential Sermons* (1981), p. 206. (*DW* III, pp. 437–38.)
- 44 *DW* II, pp. 31–33.
- 45 R. Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart* (1978), p. 72.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 73 and 69.
- 47 See W.H. Principe, ‘St Bonaventure’s Theology of the Holy Spirit with reference to the Expression “Pater et Filius diligunt se Spiritu Sancto”’, in *S. Bonaventura 1274–1974*, vol. 4 (Grottaferrata, Rome: Collegio S. Bonaventura, 1974), pp. 243–69, esp. pp. 250–51 and 260–62.
- 48 *Epistula aurea*, *PL* 184:335C.
- 49 Bonaventure, I *Sent.* 3.1.un.4, resp. and ad 1^m, *Opera theologica selecta*, vol. 1 (1934), p. 55. Thomas, *Summa theol.* I.52.2, ad 1^m, *op. cit.*, p. 209a.
- 50 *Conf.* VII, 9(13) ff., *CCL* 27, pp. 101 ff.
- 51 Cf. Thomas, *Summa theol.* I.15.2, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 110–112.
- 52 *Summa theol.* I.43.5, resp and ad 1^m, *ibid.*, p. 274b.
- 53 *Structures et méthode dans la Somme Théologique de saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris/Bruges: Desclée De Brouwer, 1961), pp. 92–97.
- 54 See above, n. 39.
- 55 *Summa theol.* I.40.4, *ibid.*, pp. 255–56.
- 56 I *Sent.* 28.un.1–4, esp. 28.un.2, resp (vol. 1, p. 397a).
- 57 Trans. Walshe, vol. 2, p. 104. (*DW* II, p. 418.)
- 58 Trans. Walshe, vol. 1, p. 249. (*DW* II, p. 180.) Italics are mine.
- 59 Quoted from Oliver Davies, *God Within* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988), p. 105. I am grateful to Dr Davies himself for bringing this text to my attention.