

**The Indistinguishability Between God and Man  
in the Thoughts of Meister Eckhart**

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## Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>2.</b>	<b>Meister Eckhart on Indistinguishability: The background</b> .....	7
2(i).	Meister Eckhart: A Biography.....	7
2(ii).	Meister Eckhart: His development of Language.....	9
2(iii).	Meister Eckhart: His use of Apophaticism.....	11
2(iv).	Meister Eckhart: The key Influences.....	14
<b>3.</b>	<b>Meister Eckhart on Indistinguishability: Indistinction and Identity</b> .....	18
<b>4.</b>	<b>Meister Eckhart on Indistinguishability: Describing God</b> .....	22
4(i).	God as <i>Intellectus</i> .....	22
4(ii).	God as <i>Esse</i> .....	23
4(iii).	Intellect above Being.....	25
4(iv).	God as ‘The One’.....	27
<b>5.</b>	<b>Meister Eckhart on Indistinguishability: The Godhead</b> .....	30
5(i).	Godhead and the Ground.....	32
5(ii).	Godhead and the Soul.....	34
5(iii).	<i>Bullito</i> : The Trinity.....	38
5(iv).	<i>Ebullito</i> : The Creation.....	41
5(v).	Creation and Uncreatedness.....	44
<b>6.</b>	<b>Meister Eckhart on Indistinguishability: The Return</b> .....	46
6(i).	The Christology of Meister Eckhart.....	47
6(ii).	Detachment: The Birth of the Word of God in the Soul.....	49
6(iii).	Union with God: The Breaking-Through of the Soul to its Primal Source...	53
<b>7.</b>	<b>Conclusions</b> .....	56
	<b>Bibliography</b> .....	59

## **1. Introduction.**

This dissertation considers the work of the German 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century Dominican known as Meister Eckhart, with a particular focus on how Eckhart presents the indistinguishability between God and man. I have chosen to use the term indistinguishability because, although union with God involves identity and indistinction, the idea of indistinguishability provides a unique and clearer insight to the thoughts of Eckhart. This is a critical concept for Eckhart and pivotal to his thinking, but also one that led to the questions of orthodoxy because God is clearly distinct from, and not identical with creation. Pushing the boundaries of thinking inevitably led to questioning and ultimately the charge of disseminating dangerous doctrine declared by the condemnatory bull of Pope John XXII in 1329. After the bull his works had been largely either lost or ignored but recent study has unearthed a rich vein of thought that is both perceptive and radical.

Eckhart is an interesting and relevant character to choose because his works are gathering interest and credibility among modern scholars. His theology developed apophaticism to a different level and was shaped by the thoughts of influential Early Church notables such as Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. He also embraces Neo-Platonic ideas of the One, and movement towards the goal of union with this One. Another major influence on his work was the ideas of contemporary mystics such as Marguerite Porete. This combination of theology, philosophy and mysticism, along with how Eckhart developed the German vernacular, and his desire to induce a reaction from his listeners, produced a unique insight to the union between God and man.

The Meister proposes there to be a Godhead as well as God. The Trinity is begotten from the Godhead and likewise creation is of the same essence. Being of the same essence presents the idea of indistinguishability that Eckhart extends by suggesting the soul is one with the Godhead. He describes the birth of the word of God in the soul as the moment of spiritual birth and union with God, and this occurs both within and outside of time. This breaking-through to the Godhead connects the part of us that is eternal with our physical person within time but this is a return to the starting point for the soul. Distinction is evident at birth, so any indistinguishability cannot include the physical dimension and this has fostered the idea that the existence of the soul is both temporal and atemporal. Creation is framed by a distinguishable bubble of time but the eternal

essence of God extends to his creation and specifically to the human soul. Biblical texts on the post-existence of the soul naturally led to thoughts of the soul outside of time and questions of pre-existence. Also, because as humans we are clearly distinguishable from God, if there is any indistinguishability, then, “What is the nature of this indistinguishability?”

In order to explore the territory of indistinguishability, following this introduction of Chapter 1, it is essential to build a platform of background information. I do this in Chapter 2 by outlining the life of Eckhart and placing his works in the context of his experiences. This overview of Eckhart includes a consideration of the nature of the language he used and the influences behind his thoughts and style. Next, in Chapter 3, I consider how Eckhart used the apophatic terms of indistinguishability and indistinction and how this meets with the other related cataphatic ideas of identity and identicalness.

With this foundation in place, Chapter 4 of this dissertation focuses on how the Meister describes indistinguishability between God and man, beginning with a study of the different words used to describe God. He uses the terms *esse*, *intellectus* and *unum* which are common to theology and philosophy but furthered their understanding in both fields. Also radical was how the Meister spoke of God and the Godhead (*Got* and *Gotheid*), presented in Chapter 5. He linked *Gotheid* with the term, *grunt* to present the source from which everything that we comprehend has flowed. I consider how Eckhart connects the soul with the *grunt* as well as with the Trinity and creation. The idea of a shared essence or fused identity between God and man raises questions about the nature of the Trinity, creation and uncreatedness and so it is important to cover the aspects of these that connect with the issue of indistinguishability.

I move on to discuss how Eckhart presents God as not just being, but also becoming. God is active in the eternal sense as well as in creation which is temporal. Eckhart describes this immanent boiling, ‘*bullito*’ as the activity within the Godhead through which the Trinity exists and acts. Added to this, and still connected with this inner emanation of God, is the over-boiling, ‘*ebullito*’ in which creation is established as distinct from the Godhead. Eckhart includes every aspect of time and creation in the *ebullito* such that it fits the model of procession and return. This metaphysics of flow can be traced back through Aquinas, Pseudo Dionysius, and Augustine

to its Neo-Platonic background, although there is also a suggestion of similar ideas in the writings of St. Paul.<sup>1</sup>

Although there are not clearly defined boundaries between *grunt*, *bullito* and *ebullito* or *exitus* and *reditus*, I have used them to give structure to this section of the exploration into indistinguishability. The section covering *bullito* considers the Trinity, how it relates to the Godhead and how Eckhart included the soul of man in this aspect of divine activity. After this, I look at the *ebullito* by breaking it down into the different stages of flow (creation) and then the return, (redemption and union) which is covered in Chapter 6. Eckhart considers indistinction with God during each phase of the process and proposes the idea of detachment as the way to know the birth of the word of God in the Soul and the breaking-through of the soul to the divine ground. Finally, in Chapter 7, I draw conclusions on the thoughts of Eckhart regarding the indistinguishability between God and man.

While Meister Eckhart did not write a specific treatise or preach a sermon just to present his views on indistinguishability, what we do have is an abundance of relevant material scattered throughout his works. The primary sources for this dissertation are the various Latin and Middle High German (MHG) commentaries, treatises and sermons currently available. The life of Eckhart and his employment as a Dominican friar and university lecturer prompted bible commentaries, treatises and sermons although not every known work has a modern translation. Not all of the works of the Meister are known, and there are several documents falsely attributed, but a reliable bibliography of works available and translated has been produced by Markus Vinzent.<sup>2</sup> When reading Eckhart, gaining a clear view is difficult because not only is there no comprehensive volume such that everything said or written could be analysed, but even within what is known and translated, there are apparent inconsistencies. Rather than produce a systematic textbook, Eckhart placed greater emphasis on his preaching in which he aimed to influence and lead his followers into a deeper relationship with God. Some works are seen as

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<sup>1</sup> See: Romans 11.36, I Corinthians 8.6, Colossians 1.16.

<sup>2</sup> Bibliography of the works of Eckhart available at: [markusvinzent.blogspot.co.uk](http://markusvinzent.blogspot.co.uk) [Accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> November 2012], including all works translated into English available. When referring to the works of Meister Eckhart I have adopted the notation used by Vinzent with abbreviations as follows: DW for German works and LW for Latin works. This is based on the compilation of works: *Meister Eckhart: Die Deutschen und Lateinischen Werke. Herausgegeben im Auftrage der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft* (Stuttgart and Berlin: W. Kohlhammer, 1936- ).

more mystical than others though he always claimed to remain faithful to biblical doctrine. To the Meister, the occasion of each work was vital so, because he addressed each situation specifically, his language modifies according to its intended recipients. This lack of a system does not however leave us without an insight to his thoughts on spiritual matters and his theology, philosophy and mysticism permeated doctrine.

Among secondary sources available are works by leading commentators such as McGinn who is regarded as a historical theologian, and also Kelley and Mojsisch who unveil the Meister from a more philosophical angle. Not all commentators are in agreement and so my own reading of Eckhart, together with insights of notable scholars will provide the major input. The difficulties in attaining a clear account of Eckhart will be noted and the extent to which they hinder gleaning a definitive theology. Within this constraint the aim is to shed light on this enigmatic thinker and his doctrine of how God and man are indistinguishable.

## 2. Meister Eckhart on Indistinguishability: The Background.

### 2(i). Meister Eckhart: A Biography.<sup>3</sup>

Johannes Eckhart, or Eckhart von Hochheim was born in Hockheim, in the German region of Thuringia to a family of the lower aristocracy around 1260. He entered the nearby monastery at Erfurt as a young man, probably aged fifteen. Eckhart refers fondly to Albert the Great and so probably studied later in Cologne under Albert. Like Thomas Aquinas, who was about thirty five years his senior, he became a Dominican Friar. The Dominicans are known as the ‘Order of Preachers,’ and are particularly devoted to preaching and the orthodox teaching of the church. Eckhart studied the liberal arts and philosophy and gained a Master of Theology degree in at the University of Paris where he became a key lecturer and Chair of Theology. The first date definitely known is from when Eckhart preached the Easter Sermon at the church of St. Jacques in Paris on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 1294. The manuscript of this sermon describes him as *Lector Sententiarum* or ‘Reader of the Sentences’ which are the works of Peter Lombard. When students had completed their studies in the Arts they were required to lecture on these ‘Sentences’, which formed a standard theological textbook. This suggests that Eckhart had already been in Paris for several years, with 1286 being proposed as the year of his arrival.

In 1294, now as Meister Eckhart, he was made Prior at his home convent at Erfurt and his first German vernacular works are dated from this period. He returned to Paris in 1302 to take up the position of external Dominican Chair of Theology, *Magister Actu Regens*. In 1303 he was called back to be the first Provincial for a new province of Saxonia with forty seven convents and then, from 1307, he also became Vicar General of Bohemia. The General Chapter of Naples in 1311 posted Eckhart back to Paris for a second stretch as magister. The Dominicans held the right to appoint a Chair of Theology at Paris and Eckhart became only the second person to receive this honour twice following Aquinas. During the next two years he shared accommodation with William of Paris who, as Dominican inquisitor, had overseen the execution of Marguerite Porete. It is thought that he began to write his major tripartite work of commentaries during this second stay in Paris. Rather than return to his native province, in 1313 Eckhart served as a spiritual

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<sup>3</sup> Several sources have been used to compile this section including: Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, *Master Eckhart and the Rhineland Mystics*, trans. by Hilda Graef (London: Longmans, 1957) and Ursula Fleming, *Meister Eckhart, The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1988).

director for nuns and Beguines in Strasburg. Then in 1323 he moved to Cologne, where it seems likely he taught theology to the young friars in the Dominican *Studium*. It was here that he came into contact with Johannes Tauler and Heinrich Suso.

In January 1327, Archbishop Heinrich of Cologne undertook an independent inquiry that wrongly accused Eckhart of a connection with the Beghards, who were male versions of the Beguines and led lives of religious devotion without joining an approved religious order. He was then charged with heresy and so consequently, in the following month, from the pulpit of the Dominican church in Cologne, Eckhart repudiated the unorthodox sense in which some of his utterances could be interpreted. He retracted all possible errors, and submitted to the Holy See. In response to a list of errors, Eckhart published his defence and appealed to the papacy, then located in Avignon. When ordered to justify another series of propositions drawn from his work, he replied, "I may err but I am not a heretic, for the first has to do with the mind and the second with the will!"<sup>4</sup> His appeal was denied in 1327. Meister Eckhart died on an unknown date before the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1329, when Pope John XXII issued the bull, '*In Agro Dominico*', condemning seventeen of the propositions of Eckhart as heretical and eleven as ill-sounding, rash and suspecting of heresy. The bull speaks of Eckhart as already dead and states that he had retracted the errors as charged. The record of the defence of the Meister provides insight but also differences from earlier works that have been suggested reflect either a change of mind or possibly a troubled one. Followers of Eckhart have tried in vain to get the decree set aside and the status of Eckhart to this day remains unclear. In the late twentieth century, the Dominican order pressed for his full rehabilitation and confirmation of his theological orthodoxy. Pope John Paul II voiced favourable opinion on this initiative, but more recent correspondence with Pope Benedict XV has still not led to the desired outcome of a declared, rightful place in the Church.

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<sup>4</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW V, Response to the list of 49 Articles, taken from: Gabriel Théry, "Edition Critique des Pièces Relatives au Procès d'Eckhart Continues, dans le Manuscrit 33b de la Bibliothèque de Soest," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge Vol.1* (1926-27), p. 186.



## 2(ii). Meister Eckhart: His development of Language.

The Bible was the usual starting point for the sermons of Eckhart who shared a typically Dominican emphasis on exegetical preaching. He used sermons to teach, often using shock to challenge, provoke thought and cultivate rhetoric. His works are preserved in two languages with the more systematic works, mostly in Latin, including Bible commentaries from his time teaching theological students in Paris. The Meister varied his language according to his audience in that as master of the university he responded to questions of intellectuals seeking to establish truth in Latin, while as a preacher in the German vernacular there was a more pastoral aim of giving practical advice to his flock.

The sermons, preached mainly in MHG to nuns in various convents, reveal the cutting edge of Eckhart's thinking. He used this developing language to pass on meaning and effect listeners but without the precision needed when teaching his students. In his Latin commentaries he explored and dissected every word to retrieve any possible understanding and offer a variety of different solutions to encourage exploration. The Latin works have traditionally been considered to be moderate in comparison with those in German. Clark and Skinner emphasise the differences between the two sets of works by suggesting they could even appear to come from different authors.<sup>5</sup> Modern researchers, however, including McGinn have questioned this difference, with closer study of the Latin pieces also revealing the more challenging and controversial thoughts of the Meister. Likewise it was thought that Eckhart gave broader freedom of expression by introducing a word into the MHG vocabulary but Quint has concluded, like Steer, on the words used by Aquinas, that many of the terms were taken from or extended from existing Latin words. Ruh claims a greater spiritual value of the vernacular while Haug minimizes the differences between the two and McGinn maintains a blend to be the best option. The context of the work, in

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<sup>5</sup> For notes on The language used by Eckhart see: *Meister Eckhart, Selected Treatises and Sermons*, trans. by James Miggely Clark and John V. Skinner (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 27, Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500), Vol. IV of The Presence of God, A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), p. 117, Josef Quint, 'Die Sprache Meister Eckhart als Ausdruck seiner Mystischen Geisteswelt' in *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 6 (1928), pp. 671-701, Georg Steer 'Germanistische Scholastikforschung' in *Theologie und Philosophie*, 45, 1970, pp. 202-226, Kurt Ruh, *Meister Eckhart: Theologe. Prediger. Mystiker* (Munich: Beck, 1985), p. 45, Walter Haug, "Das Wort und die Sprache bei Meister Eckhart" in *Zur Deutschen Literatur und Sprache des 14. Jahrhunderts: Dubliner Colloquium* 1981, p. 39.

terms of time, location and audience always bears some significance and so it is not just a question of which language is used.

The Meister broke down each statement into fragments to be scrutinised and several different meanings were often suggested for each bit. McGinn suggests that Eckhart, “Dehistoricises and decontextualises passages into segments, fragments or individual words that he recombines with other biblical passages in a dense web of intertextuality.”<sup>6</sup> Eckhart used language at its edge and pushed its boundaries to produce daring and startling new perspectives and challenge our understanding of spiritual matters. He employed paradoxes, contradictions and oxymora alongside metaphorical, analogical and dialectical language and other forms of wordplay but his aim was always to bring insight to God. There is certainly playfulness in his turn of speech but, more importantly, there is no question to the thoughtfulness or seriousness contained within the message.

Quint used the term *Entkonkretisierung*<sup>7</sup> (de-concretisation) to present how Eckhart moved vocabulary into something more conceptual and less specific. This included moving concrete nouns and adjectives into more abstract and sometimes negative terms. One classic example of this occurs when Eckhart describes a recipe for detachment: “You should wholly sink from your youness and dissolve into His Hisness, and your ‘yours’ and His ‘His’ should become so completely one’ Mine’ that with Him you understand his unbecome Isness and His nameless Nothingness.”<sup>8</sup>

Milem compares the use of language by Eckhart, with that of the playwright Bertolt Brecht whose alienation effect prevented his audience from getting wrapped up in plot and, in doing so, miss its meaning. Brecht used techniques such as leaving production equipment visible and keeping actors distinct from the character they portrayed to produce a dramatic representation and keep the audience emotionally detached but always ready to engage, analyse and learn from the plot. In the way that Brecht reminded his audience they were watching a play, Eckhart used extraordinary language to keep his listeners inquisitive. Milem describes the sermons of Eckhart

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<sup>6</sup> McGinn, *Harvest*, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Quint, ‘Die Sprache’, p. 685.

<sup>8</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 83.

as being like dramatic performances in which each statement requires interpretation along with the event of the sermon containing the statements. He states, “Eckhart’s sermons are linguistic representations of the matter they discuss...this difficult manner of speech apparently obscures the relation between the sermons and their subject, ...(though) through the process of interpretation, interpreters can become active participants in the disclosure or construction of meaning that occurs in and through the sermons.”<sup>9</sup> Eckhart did not preach for the sake of preaching or aim for literary perfection but for the deeper spiritual engagement of his congregation with God.

### **2(iii). Meister Eckhart: His use of Apophaticism.**

Negative, or apophatic theology developed as a response to the realization that it is inadequate or even inappropriate to describe or affirm God in human terms. As humans we have nothing and no-one to compare with God and so we should apprehend God with negation rather than affirmation. Along with negation, other grammatical tools such as analogy, image and metaphor can be used to develop ideas alongside affirmation. Early Church figures especially from the Eastern tradition such as the Cappadocian Fathers developed Neo-Platonic thought from a Christian perspective. The ‘One’ of Plotinus was only a negation of plurality, not self-revealing, and beyond all knowledge and being such that, “The One is in truth beyond all statement.”<sup>10</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus included a more anthropomorphic idea when speaking of the need for negation, explaining that God hid Moses in the rock and revealed only his behind.<sup>11</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, who is often associated with the development of Christian apophaticism, declared that the divine unity is beyond being. He stated that we, “Should conclude that the negations are not simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Milem, *The Unspoken Word. Negative Theology in Meister Eckhart’s German Sermons* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America press, 2002), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, trans. by S. Mackenna and B.S. Page, available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.html> [Accessed: 03/12/2013], *Enneads V*, 3, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*, trans. by Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, *A Select Library of the Nicene and post-Nicene Father of the Christian Church*, ed. by Philip Schaff, available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.i.htmlat> [Accessed: 02/12/2012], Oration 28, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, from Pseudo Dionysius. *The Complete Works* trans. by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 136.

Aquinas referred to positive affirmations in scripture but often endorsed negative theology when quoting Dionysius. In the prologue to his *Summa Theologica* he said, “We cannot know what God is, but only what he is not.”<sup>13</sup> He pointed out that it was wrong to attribute God with univocal predicates because these were used for created things. Likewise, equivocal predicates do not reveal God because they use human language and so also are from finite creaturely experience. For Aquinas, describing God using analogy helps us by revealing something of God in human terms. With analogy creatures can possess the same attributes as God but not in the same way that God has them.

The Meister followed Thomas in using the ‘via negativa’ of Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius but was also aware of its limitations. In Sermon 83 he expresses this declaring, “God is nameless, because no one can say anything or understand anything about him....If I say, ‘God is good,’ that is not true, or ‘God is wise’ that is not true, and so to chatter about God is telling lies and sinning.” The Meister urges therefore, “Do not try to understand God, for God is beyond all understanding...some authority has said if they had a God they could understand, then this could not be God.”<sup>14</sup> Eckhart concluded the sermon by using apophatic tones that lead his listeners towards union with God. He urges, “You should love him (God) as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image, but as he is a pure unmixed, bright ‘One,’ ...and in that one we should eternally sink down, out of ‘something’ into ‘nothing.’”<sup>15</sup> This is an example of how Eckhart spoke about God by declaring what God is not and so embracing mystical and philosophical thought. It does not come from a commentary but a sermon that connects the soul with God, so apophatic language is used as a tool to encourage devotion as well as teach about indistinguishability.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), 1a, q. 3, prologue. NB. Aquinas quoted Dionysius one thousand seven hundred and sixty times in *Summa*.

<sup>14</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 83. Quint has reviewed different quotations from Augustine, Albert the Great and John Damascene saying something like this, but the exact source, and the authority referred to remain uncertain. See Bernard McGinn and Edmund Colledge, *Meister Eckhart, The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 341, Note 6. *Essential Sermons*, p. 341.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, DW III, PR. 83.

In typically Eckhartian, apophatic fashion, both God, and the means of union with God, detachment, are “Neither this nor that.”<sup>16</sup> For Eckhart the infinite is more real than the finite and it is revealed by the negation of the finite. God, then, is effectively the negation of negation because, as described by Milbank, he “Is more truly nothing than the nothingness of the *ex nihilo*.”<sup>17</sup> Eckhart used the negation of negation to signify the purest and fullest affirmation of God. He declares, “God negates the negation; he is one and negates everything other, for outside of God there is nothing.”<sup>18</sup> This statement negates everything other than God, and then affirms everything to be in God.

The dawn of postmodernism has seen a renewal of apophatic thinking and the need to go beyond our own understanding. The unwillingness of Eckhart to be labelled and state a concrete theology along with his openness to explore the unknown would place him comfortably among modern thinkers. Thoughts of a being beyond creation seem less unfashionable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century following the popularity of men like Jacques Derrida, who claims to be an atheist while presenting the possibility, and the need, for there to be a God beyond our knowing. Derrida regards apophatic theologemes as arrows, not an end in themselves but giving direction and capable of striking a target. He summarises, “Negative theology lets itself be approached (pre-understood) as a corpus largely achieved with propositions whose logical modalities, grammar, lexicon and very semantics are already accessible to us, at least for what is determinable in them.”<sup>19</sup> For Derrida, negative theology is more of an attitude than a technique, stemming from the thought that predicative language is inappropriate to approach God. This means God can only be approached using negative attributions and God becomes simply what God is not. The act of unknowing is in fact an unveiling.

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<sup>16</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 66, DW V, Von Abegescheidenheit,

<sup>17</sup> John Milbank, ‘The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek’ in *The Monstrosity of Christ. Paradox or Dialectic?*, Slavoj Žižek, ed. by Creston Davis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), p. 201, see also p. 137.

<sup>18</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, translated by John Leavey, ed. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 51.

## **2(iv). Meister Eckhart: The key Influences.**

The thoughts of Meister Eckhart betray a blend of philosophical, theological and mystical influences from ancient Greece through the Early Church to his own predecessors and contemporaries of mediaeval times. Clear influences can be traced from Augustine, who embraced theology with philosophy, Pseudo-Dionysius who added mysticism with philosophy to theology and Thomas Aquinas who collected these three strands into the major systematic theological work of the day.

Although his thoughts had been shaped by earlier experiences of Manichaeism and the works of Neo-Platonists, especially Plotinus, following his conversion in 387AD, Augustine of Hippo became a major influence on Western Christianity. He was able to apply his philosophical background to the developing theology of the Early Church and his important status in Church history is emphasised by Jerome who wrote that Augustine had, “Established anew the ancient faith.”<sup>20</sup> For Augustine incomprehensibility enables the comprehension of the incomprehensible.<sup>21</sup> Eckhart used this kind of apophatic paradox to describe God stating Him to be, “Wise without wisdom, good without goodness and powerful without power.”<sup>22</sup> It sounds paradoxical to suggest we know something by not knowing it, but in the case of God, using the term ‘without’ is a means for making the incomprehensible comprehensible.

This blend of theology and philosophy was then given a mystical twist by Pseudo-Dionysius, an unknown figure probably writing around the end of the fifth century. With language typical of Iamblichus he displayed both Neo-Platonic and Syrian influences connecting with the contemporary philosophy and Church practice in that region. In considering the style of Dionysius, Wear summarises, “The basic cosmic process of remaining, procession and return by means of which the universe is held together, and infused with the beneficent influence of God, is taken over without modification from Platonism, while the elaborate system of levels arranged in

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<sup>20</sup> Jerome wrote to Augustine in 418: "You are known throughout the world; Catholics honour and esteem you as the one who has established anew the ancient faith." (*conditor antiquae rursus fidei*)

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *The City of God and Christian Doctrine, A Select Library of the Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. by Philip Schaff, available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.i.htmlat> [Accessed: 02/12/2012].

<sup>22</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 67.

triads, initiated by Iamblichus, is modified into a distinctively Christian adaption.”<sup>23</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius used the initiation language of the mystery religions and took symbols and myths from their original contexts to incorporate a deeper mysticism within Christian doctrine. Turner describes how Eckhart developed the language of Dionysius suggesting the Meister, “Forces on it, breaks it up, recomposes it and tries to get it to say something, which by definition, it should not be.”<sup>24</sup>

The third notable Church figure to influence Eckhart was Thomas Aquinas, a fellow Dominican and his predecessor at Paris. Aquinas was more systematic than Eckhart in producing synthesized and comprehensive works on Christian thought including the unparalleled *Summa Theologica*. Likewise Eckhart stretched more into Platonism than his Dominican predecessor, for instance whereas Aquinas was concerned to preserve the difference between creatures and their transcendent creator, Eckhart emphasised that the created world remains within the creator. Aquinas used the writings of Dionysius to present the paradox that God exists outside of himself and yet he is omnipresent. This impossible exteriorisation means there is something other to God participating in God, otherwise creation would be God. According to McGinn, Eckhart departed from Thomas Aquinas and also Albert the Great, “In his insistence that in the ground of reality there is absolute identity between God and the soul,”<sup>25</sup> particularly the intellect, the highest part of the soul. It is in this difference from Aquinas that Eckhart points to the indistinguishability between God and man.

Eckhart championed the Dominican position that faith and reason do not have to be in competition because philosophy and theology do not contradict each other. In fact, philosophy is not, as is sometimes held, the enemy of theology and the two can be held in a tension, such that thoughts from philosophy enrich our understanding of God. It is not that the bible becomes a philosophy book but that what are regarded as philosophical ideas can be used to complement bible commentary. Philosophy is a tool that can break through the surface of the written word because, for the preacher, true philosophy is theology. Albert the Great, who was involved in the

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Klitenic Wear and John Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition, Despoiling the Hellenes* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), preface.

<sup>24</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God, Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 12.

setting up of the Dominican *Studium Generale* in Cologne, is credited by Davies as the first major western thinker to reconcile the sophisticated philosophy of Aristotle with the precepts of Christianity.<sup>26</sup> Albert developed the theory of the human intellect and Dietrich of Freiburg developed this such that the divine and human intellects are related. Dietrich added a Christian slant to the idea of Neo-Platonist Proclus that intelligences proceed from the 'One' so that all beings proceed from the intellect who is God.

As contemporary Dominicans and followers of Albert the Great, Meisters Dietrich and Eckhart must have been personally acquainted although Eckhart never mentions Dietrich by name while Dietrich is said to have used his influence to ensure Eckhart received significant posts within the Dominican Order. Eckhart inherited philosophical ideas from the Albertian school especially that the nature of God himself is intellect. According to Dietrich, the intellect knows its essence and all beings not only according to its essence, but also "In its principle, according to the mode of this very principle."<sup>27</sup> This superiority of intellect is marked by Eckhart who builds on Dietrich by showing how the intellect actually moves within itself and we as intellect are linked with God as intellect and partake in this divine knowledge.

Another clear philosophical influence was Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, known as Maimonides, who aimed to show how the Torah, Jewish mysticism and philosophy could be combined to reveal a deeper truth in his 12<sup>th</sup> century 'Guide for the Perplexed'. The Meister built on the brand of negative theology presented by Maimonides, whose views were respected while being treated with caution in both Christian and Judaistic circles.

As part of his work, Eckhart served the Beguines who were regarded by the Church as on the fringe of heresy. Early 13<sup>th</sup> century mystics Mechtild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch of Antwerp and Gertrude of Helfta incurred the wrath of the church for dangerous ideas that could be classified as mysticism rather than theology. From his time in Paris, Eckhart would know the French mystic, Marguerite Porete, who was associated with the Beguines and the Free-Spirit Movement. Following the publishing of the 'Mirror of Simple Souls,' which included her thoughts on the

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<sup>26</sup> Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> Dietrich of Freiburg, 'De Intellectu et Intelligibili', in *Opera Omnia* I, ed. by B. Mojsisch (Hamburg: 1977), pp. 175-177.



indistinct union between God and man, she was dissuaded by warnings from the bishops not to spread her teaching. In 1310, however, she was tried for heresy and became the first heretic burned in the Paris inquisition. Eckhart was briefed to bring orthodoxy to these women, but there is no doubt that influential ideas flowed in both directions, with mystical ideas of Porete being clearly evident in his thoughts on union with God.

### 3. Meister Eckhart on Indistinguishability: Indistinction and Identity.

The aim of this chapter is to consider how Eckhart uses different terms to express the sameness, or differences, between God and his creation. As part of creation we can distinguish between created things because we are created, but the created cannot distinguish between things that are created and uncreated. We cannot distinguish between God and man because God is unique and not a kind of thing. The word distinguish, points to the difference between two things. It is both the recognition of features as well as the features themselves that comprise the difference.

Distinguishability measures the extent to which two things are distinguished and so indistinguishability therefore must also measure the extent to which two things are indistinguished or identical. To illustrate how the terms relate, consider a horse and a camel.

They are distinct and the differences between a camel and a horse are distinguishable.

Indistinguishability considers the points of similarity rather than difference. The horse resembles and is indistinct from the camel in that it has four legs. They are not identical because they have characteristics making one distinct from the other.

The terms distinction and distinguished both present individuality but they are not identical. One way of describing the difference is that distinct emphasizes uniqueness while distinguished considers more the characteristics of that uniqueness. Eckhart connects the two together in his commentary on John stating, “The idea of being (*ens*) is something commonplace and indistinct and distinguished from other things by its own indistinction. In the same way, God is distinguished by his indistinction from any other distinct thing, and this is why in the Godhead the essence or existence (*essentia sive esse*) is unbegotten and does not beget.”<sup>28</sup> (It is worth noting that Eckhart says here that the Godhead does not beget, but elsewhere, in German Sermon 39, there is an inner emanation or begetting of the Trinity from the Godhead). God is different in the way he is the same as other things that are different. He is distinguished by being indistinct. In other words, things other than God are different from other things that are other than God. All things are other than God, but God is also indistinct because he retains a connection with all that he has created because it has emanated from Him.

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<sup>28</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Exposito Sancti Evangelii Secundum Iohannem*, LW III, n. 562.

This dialectic of indistinction and distinction is presented in Latin Sermon 4 in which Eckhart says God, is distinct from all things yet indistinct in his nature such that, “In him, all things in a most distinct way are also at the same time indistinct.” The Meister continues by presenting the reasoning behind this paradox saying, “The first reason is because man in God is God. Therefore, (secondly) just as God is indistinct and completely distinct from a lion, so too man in God is indistinct and completely distinct from a lion, and likewise with other things... (the third reason) because just as God is totally indistinct in himself according to his nature in that he is truly and most properly one and completely distinct from other things, so too man in God is indistinct from everything which is in God.”<sup>29</sup> Initially God is presented as being simultaneously distinct and indistinct but the explanation immediately draws attention to the thought of ‘being in God.’ Anything in God is absorbed by God and so a person in God has lost their own identity within the identity of God. Being in God is identified as being God.

The Meister broaches this issue in his commentary on Exodus by focusing on the Genesis creation text when God said, “Let us make man to our image and likeness”<sup>30</sup> He proposes, “Nothing is as dissimilar as the creator and any creature... Nothing is as similar as the creator and any creature... and nothing is as equally dissimilar and similar to anything else as God and the creature are dissimilar and similar in the same degree.”<sup>31</sup> In his explanation Eckhart points out that man and non-man are more distinguished than any two men as God is indistinct from every being and then adds, “Everything created, by the very fact that it is created, is distinct.”<sup>32</sup> There is also similarity between God and creature and so the conclusion of being both similar and dissimilar is drawn. Eckhart proposes that, “God is distinguished from everything created, distinct and finite by his indistinction and his infinity. The more dissimilar he is, the more similar he becomes... The more ways something is like God, the more it is unlike him.”<sup>33</sup> This explanation seems to present a paradox but it is typical of the speech dialectic used to draw the listener to a higher level of what could be termed ‘unknowing’.

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<sup>29</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, nn. 20-8, Sermo IV/1.

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 1.26.

<sup>31</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Expositio Libri Exodi*, LW II, n. 112.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, LW II, n.113.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, LW II, n.117.

Nicholas of Cusa, following Eckhart, considered how God is distinguished from creation and also explained paradoxically that God is distinct while also indistinct. He wrote, “In God we must not conceive of distinction and indistinction, for example, as two contradictories, but we must conceive of them as antecedently existing in their own most simple beginning, where distinction is not other than indistinction.”<sup>34</sup> Cusa acknowledged the work of Dionysius in showing that our understanding of God draws us, not to something, but to nothing. He used the term ‘not other’ to describe essence before time and creation because everything that exists is not other than itself, and so it points to God who precedes all things. ‘Not other’ cannot lack anything nor can anything exist outside of it. Unknowing is within intellect and knowing God is achieved by unknowing. In this case unknowing is not mere ignorance but the active dismantling of knowledge.

As well as apophatic terms, Eckhart also uses the idea of identity to fuel a positive slant on indistinguishability. He speaks of identity with God saying, “In the universe there are never two things completely equal and alike in all things for then they would not be two or related to each other. Identity is unity.”<sup>35</sup> There is distinction between God and the universe but indistinction in the *grunt* and so by equating unity with identity this is another way the Meister presents indistinguishability between God and man. In sharing the same substance of the *grunt*, man is one with God, and there is shared identity. This identification of man with God does not substitute man for God but rather proposes a paradoxical doctrine of divine-human identity. As Milbank says, “We are identical with God only because God (following the thought of Augustine) is our own deepest identity.”<sup>36</sup> Indistinction suggests one identity so the fused identity holds aspects of indistinguishability without possessing absolute distinction.

The ‘Identity of Indiscernibles’ principle of Leibniz<sup>37</sup> demonstrates how if two entities share the same properties they are of the same identity. In other words, if something is indistinguishable, any parts contained within it are identical. If something is different from something else they are

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<sup>34</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De Deo Abscondito, (On the Hidden God), Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. by H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 113.

<sup>35</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

<sup>36</sup> Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, p. 201, see also p. 209.

<sup>37</sup> Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz, Discourse on Metaphysics, in *Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters, Synthese Historical Library*, ed. and trans. by Leroy Loemker (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969), p. 308.

not the same and are distinct. In algebraic terms this is the pattern of negation in which A is not B. To consider the negation of negation means that A is not, not B. This does not automatically imply that A is B but that they are not necessarily different though possibly indistinct. This theory proposed around three hundred years after Eckhart is questionable in this context, though it sharpens the focus on indistinguishability as presented by the Meister. There is a difference between distinction and distinguishability when considering identity. By using negative terms, Eckhart presented a point of indistinguishability while retaining a distinction and difference in identity.

Some philosophers, such as Descartes,<sup>38</sup> have used this principle of Leibniz to equate God with his creation and over-emphasise a subjective view of humanity. When applied to Eckhart, because he connects God and his creation in substance before creation, the two must be indistinguishable, but participation in the divine essence does not automatically mean sharing the same identity. God is not the same as his creation. Despite being seen as a forerunner to modern subjectivity, Eckhart was more representative of the analogical rationality of the Middle Ages, a view supported by Nicholas of Cusa.

God, being God, has a different perspective from us as his creation. To us, God is other because we know nothing like him. To God, God is real and so, to some extent, part of us is continuous with God, while part is different. If our entire being were continuous with God then we would be God. There is an undeniable distinction between us and God but because we proceed from God and return to God, there is a sense in which we are in God and indistinguishable from God. The Meister was thoughtful and creative with his choice of words but the main aspect relevant to this study is to note his use of a word and its negation rather than the particular word. Distinction and distinguished do compare and contrast, but importantly, Eckhart uses these together with their negatives, indistinguished and indistinct, to present an idea or emphasise a particular point.

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<sup>38</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. by Stanley Tweyman (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 33-40.

#### 4. Meister Eckhart on Indistinguishability: Describing God.

In German Sermon 9, Meister Eckhart describes what happened when twenty four philosophers came together for a discussion about God. Eckhart summarised the conclusions and expanded on two key Latin words *esse* and *intellectus* (verb-*intelligere*) to present his own definition for God. In Middle High German he used the same basic terms, *Wesen* and *Vernünffticheit*, and also introduced the word *Gotheit*, (Godhead) to distinguish from the word *Got* (God). Another idea integral to the thoughts of Eckhart that is both biblical and Platonic is that God is ‘One.’ Other predicates used include *bonum* and *verum*, goodness and truth but these are less pertinent when considering indistinguishability.

Eckhart used human characteristics to speak of God because we understand them but he also used them paradoxically to emphasise that God is beyond comprehension. For example, God is both spoken and unspoken, an expanseless expanse and a beingless being and Eckhart speaks of, “a becoming without becoming, and this becoming is God’s essence (being).”<sup>39</sup> The Meister establishes that intellect, existence and oneness are connected in Latin Sermon 29 by declaring that, God is Existence, God is Intellect and God is One.<sup>40</sup> These three terms are almost interchangeable although each emphasises something different about the nature of God.

##### 4(i). God as Intellectus.

The Latin word ‘*intellectus*’ (MHG *vernünffticheit*) can be used for intellect, intelligence or understanding or consciousness. It was used to translate the Greek *nous* first encountered, though not used explicitly, in *De Anima* of Aristotle.<sup>41</sup> It is the faculty of the cognition of principles, and that which mainly distinguishes man from the beasts. The ‘agent’ or ‘active intellect,’ according to Aristotle, is the impersonal, intellect that has created the world.

Aquinas also used the idea of active intellect in contrast with passive intellect stating, “The supreme intellectual being, God, is pure act.”<sup>42</sup> Aquinas calls this intellect able to create other intellects, active intellect. He adds, “A being is intellectual for the reason that it is free from

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<sup>39</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 50. See also DW II, PR. 38, DW II, PR. 53, DW III, PR. 82.

<sup>40</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

<sup>41</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book III.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, trans. by Cyril Vollert, S.J. (London: B. Herder Book, 1947), ch. 80.

matter... immaterial substances hold the first place and are supreme among beings... the highest degree, and that which makes us most like God, is conferred by the intellect.”<sup>43</sup> The distinction between God and man is established in the way God is the intellect who actively pours himself into man, who is a different intellect.

For Eckhart, God is not an intellect, God is intellect, and in fact, totally intellect. He brings things into existence through intellect. As absolute principle or pure intellect there is the establishing of intellect ahead of any activity. Eckhart says that, “God alone truly is, and ... He is intellect (understanding), and ... He is (understanding) alone to which no other being is added.”<sup>44</sup> With God there is nothing other and a completeness implying indistinction. The term intellect maintains the idea that God is not a being and can remain the first principle. To be with intellect is the ultimate aim as the Meister urges his hearers to, “Rise up to intellect in order to be united with God.”<sup>45</sup> As this is a direction in a sermon it refers to the action of joining in union with God rather than possessing a shared existence. Intellect is wrapped up with existence, and intellect is indistinguishable from the divine, but any creature is outside or beyond intellect and so distinguishable from the divine. Therefore, according to Eckhart, while God to us is omniscient being, from our perspective intellect comes before being and God exists because he is intellect.

#### **4(ii). God as *Esse*, *Ens*, *Essentia*. (MHG - *Wesen*)**

Three different Latin terms for being help to clarify the uses of the word ‘being’ in English. *Ens* is used for an actual being while *esse* represents the act of existing and *essentia* is the essence of a particular being. Eckhart explained it was wrong to consider God as being because that relates to creatures that only exist because there is a creator God. He did however use the word *ens* because it, “In the most proper sense is God,”<sup>46</sup> although it was more commonly used for a created being. Following Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart used terms involving being to develop the idea of superessentiality, and present God as distinct from everything else. He stated that, “God works above being in vastness. He works in non-being. Before being was, God

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<sup>43</sup> Aquinas, *Compendium*, ch. 75.

<sup>44</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xliv.

worked. He worked being when there was no being.”<sup>47</sup> Also he says, “God is inside all things in that he is existence, and thus every being feeds on him. He is also on the outside because he is above all and thus outside all.”<sup>48</sup> Eckhart turned round the phrase, ‘God is existence,’ to the form, ‘Existence is God’, *Esse est Deus*,<sup>49</sup> to be the first proposition of his ‘Opus Tripartitum’ and emphasise that God is not an example of existence.

The Meister linked *esse* with other terms to add description such as *esse absolutum* to mean the absolute existence of God and *esse omnium* declaring God as existence of all. He took the term *ipsum esse*, meaning existence itself, from Aquinas who declared God is not only his essence, but also his existence. (*Sua igitur essentia est suum esse*)<sup>50</sup> In this sense *esse* should only be predicated of God and not creatures that have no existence of themselves outside of God. The difference between God and his creatures is vast in comparison with the difference between creatures but this is a poor comparison made from a human perspective. God remains incomparable and immeasurable to man, yet creation can compare with itself. Creation can claim to be alive, so along with the thought of Aristotle if a being is alive it can claim to exist. If existence (*esse*) is predicated to creatures then God is beyond existence and so does not exist.

Eckhart equates God with *esse* at times and yet at others he suggests it to be inappropriate. The Meister said, “If my life is God’s being, then God’s existence (*sîn*) must be my existence, and God’s isness (*istichheit*) is my isness, neither less nor more.”<sup>51</sup> This places my nature (essence) indistinguishable from the nature of God. Elsewhere, in his commentary on the self-revelation from God to Moses, “I am who I am.”<sup>52</sup> Eckhart said that, “Existence and essence are the same which belongs to God alone...in every created thing existence and essence differ.”<sup>53</sup> In the context of speaking about God it is appropriate to speak of God as *esse*, but in the context of creation God is not *esse* but beyond *esse*. It is difficult to harmonise how Eckhart used *esse* because he does not seem to use it consistently. For the Meister, God is being as well as beyond

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<sup>47</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 9. cf. *Expositio Libri Exodi*, LW II, n. 28.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, cf. *Sermones and Lectiones Super Ecclesiastici cap. 24*, LW II, n. 54.

<sup>49</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW I, Prologi in *Opus Tripartitum*.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, Of the Simplicity of God, Ia. 3.4.

<sup>51</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Exodus 3.14.

<sup>53</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Expositio Libri Exodi*, LW II, n. 14.



being and these are not mutually exclusive. This inconsistency could be a matter of perspective, depending on if considered from the viewpoint of God or creation.

#### **4(iii). Intellect above Being.**

Eckhart regards God to be intellect and defines a being as having intellect and so we, as humans, have being in God and are indistinguishable in essence. Man is thought of as possessing intellect if obviously limited in comparison with total intellect. This identification of being with knowing connects with the thoughts of Dietrich von Freiberg and further back to Aristotle who connected knowing something with becoming it, and also, along with Aquinas, that to know something meant knowing what is contrary to it. Eckhart uses Aristotelian thought to show that intellect has no manner of existence except its intentional character. This concept of intellect as character might appear to be a low view of intellect but all these strands of knowing, becoming and doing point towards an identity of intellect beyond being.

Eckhart develops the connection between *esse* and *intellectus* in the first ‘Parisian Question’ when he asks, “Whether in God, being (existence) and knowing (understanding) are the same?”<sup>54</sup> (*Utrum in Deo sit idem esse et intelligere?*) The initial response seems to suggest an affirmative answer. The Meister proposes, “The act of understanding is the existence itself of God,”<sup>55</sup> but he then develops his response based on the thought that the idea of existence implies something creatable. He says, “It is not my opinion that God understands because he exists, but rather he exists because he understands. God is an intellect and his understanding itself is the ground of his existence.”<sup>56</sup> While in this statement God is just, ‘an intellect’ in contrast with other sermons, understanding connects with ground which places it prior to existence.

In Latin Sermon 29 Eckhart says, “Every kind of existence that is outside or beyond intellect is a creature, it is creatable other than God, and is not God.”<sup>57</sup> God is the cause and the source of beings and the Meister relates *intellectus* with cause saying, “Only God brings things into

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<sup>54</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW V, *Parisian Questions and Prologues*, trans. by Armand A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontificate Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), p. 43.

<sup>55</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW V, *Parisian Questions*, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>57</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

existence through the intellect for only in Him are intellect and existence identical.”<sup>58</sup> This might seem a contradiction to first of all establish the difference then state they are the same which is the opposite way round from his later Parisian response, but Eckhart follows on in Sermon 29 by suggesting sameness does not imply equality. This is an example of how establishing a clear view of the thoughts of Eckhart clearly demands analysis of different texts and recognition of modification with time and context. Eckhart acknowledges a change in his thinking away from the thoughts of Aquinas by proposing understanding to be superior to existence but this, according to Maurer, puts him on the side of common sense.<sup>59</sup>

Eckhart used the image of nakedness to present the raw supremacy of intellect. In comparison with the will he concludes that in his opinion, “Intellect is nobler than the will. Will takes God under the cloak of goodness. Intellect takes God bare, when he is stripped of goodness and being.”<sup>60</sup> Intellect reveals God as he really is. Again in comparison with being he says, “Consequently, among perfections intelligence (*intellectus*) comes first and then being or existence.”<sup>61</sup> God is pure intellect but not pure being because he is above being. Eckhart compared the two by considering where God dwells. He stated, “When we grasp God in being, we grasp him in his antechamber, for being is the antechamber in which he dwells. Where is he then in his temple? Intellect is the temple of God. Nowhere does God dwell more properly than in his temple, in intellect.”<sup>62</sup> This analogy honours *esse* but then elevates *intellectus* to a higher level. Eckhart also establishes the superiority of *intellectus* over *esse* in terms of creation saying, “Understanding is uncreatable...and existence is the first of created things.”<sup>63</sup> In this text being is creatural, while understanding is related to the Godhead. It is a restriction for God to become being, even if this is determinate being, but understanding has no beginning.

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<sup>58</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

<sup>59</sup> Armand A. Maurer, *Parisian Questions*, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR 9.

<sup>61</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW V, *Parisian Questions*, p. 47.

<sup>62</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR 9.

<sup>63</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

#### 4(iv). God as ‘The One’.

While intellect and being draw differing conclusions, one generally accepted transcendental predicate attributed to God is that of unity (Latin - *unum*, *MHG* - *ein*). Eckhart uses the text of Ephesians 4.6 when St. Paul speaks of ‘One God and Father of us all’ to describe how the oneness of the number one points to God saying that, “Creatures change and have a negation but God is One. The One is the negation of negation. God’s property is unity. It is what makes God, God.”<sup>64</sup> The nature of being one is unique to God because nothing can be added nor taken away from one who is God, and so oneness identifies God. In Latin Sermon 29 Eckhart said that the one who unites everything is, “Higher, prior and simpler than the Good itself, and it is closer to existence Itself and to God, or rather according to its name it is one existence in or with Existence Itself.”<sup>65</sup> He quotes the *Great Shema of Israel*<sup>66</sup> to emphasise the oneness of God writing, “The Lord your God is one God. Unity or the One pertains to and is a property of the intellect alone...Intellect belongs to God and God is One...God is intellect and intellect is one God.” Eckhart connects oneness with intellect as if the two are interchangeable descriptions for God stating, “Unity or the One is a property of the intellect alone.” From oneness there is also a connection to the essence of God and Eckhart adds, “Essence is always one” and “The One is distinct from all things, and hence all things and the fullness of existence are found in it by reason of indistinction or unity.”<sup>67</sup> This places essence alongside intellect in the context of being within the One.

In German Sermon 40 Eckhart describes the oneness within the Trinity and between God and man. He states, “The three persons in God are three not in number but they are a multiplicity,” and, “Between that person and God there is no distinction, no multiplicity, and they are one.... his knowing is one with God's knowing, his working is one with God's working and his consciousness is one with God's consciousness.”<sup>68</sup> A difference in oneness is explained by using the term multiplicity. There is multiplicity within the Trinity but there is no multiplicity between God and man because of the changing nature of man. God is continually being born in man, who is continually being born in God and therefore changing. Man is like God in terms of image but

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<sup>64</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW 1, PR. 21.

<sup>65</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

<sup>66</sup> Deuteronomy 6.4.

<sup>67</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

<sup>68</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, Pr. 40.

this is tarnished in creation. Eckhart proposes that as man becomes like God in his actions, he lays God bare, and the image of God is seen increasingly. There is indistinction between God and man in a non-physical way and so this means a measure of indistinguishability.

The Meister connected oneness with omnipresence and this led to the accusation of Pantheism. He declares, “God is one (*Deus unus est*).... God is infinite in his simplicity and simple in his infinity. Therefore he is everywhere and is everywhere complete. He is everywhere on account of his infinity, and is everywhere complete on account of his simplicity.”<sup>69</sup> This omnipresence is amplified to being all-embracing later in Sermon 29 when he says, “All things are contained in the One, by virtue of the fact that it is one, for all multiplicity is one, and is one thing, and is in and through the One.”<sup>70</sup> In such cases it is best to take Eckhart as a whole rather than make a generalization from odd texts. The Meister states that God does flow into everything which is a tenet of Pantheism, but also that God is not everything and is distinct by substance and nature. Such accusations are not without grounds but Eckhart often connected indistinction with distinction and the wider aim was not so much to present that God is everything, but that we might see God in everything.

Plotinus, without explicitly defining ‘The One’, presented it as the source, or more precisely speaking, the eternally, ‘active making-possible’ of all things as well as being in all things<sup>71</sup> and Aristotle proclaimed “Superabundance belongs to The One alone.”<sup>72</sup> Eckhart embraces this concept to present God as ‘The One’. More than just being ‘The One’, God is orchestrating the process of drawing creation, which has flowed out from him, into unity with himself. A philosophical theme is given theological meaning. The idea of being one numerically reflects distinction while the idea of unity portrays indistinction. Oneness reflects God while unity reflects God with creation. Eckhart says, “The One is not distinct from all things. Therefore all things and the fullness of being are in The One by virtue of its indistinction and unity... The One descends into each and everything, yet remaining the one that unites what is distinct.”<sup>73</sup> God is

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<sup>69</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.2.1.

<sup>72</sup> Aristotle, *Top.* 5.5 (134b) from: Meister Eckhart, *Exposito Libri Sapientiae*, LW II, n. 147.

<sup>73</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

one without any aspect of creation and at this point is distinct, but once creation is considered, being joined in unity with creation means there is distinction and indistinction.

*Esse*, *intellectus* and *unum* are used by Eckhart as transcendental predicates for God in such a way that each is appropriate and revealing in a certain context. In applying them to God they should not be allowed to restrict, but magnify God in terms enabling us to contemplate Him. The Meister seems to use them in different ways and combine them such that the important aspect is not which one is used but, as McGinn declares, “In making use of each we grasp the ineluctably dialectical character of their application to God.”<sup>74</sup> These predicates apply in some respects to humans and so fit under the umbrella of analogy. Being and existence apply to man but God is beyond being. Man has intelligence but only God is pure intellect. Likewise we have human concepts of goodness and truth without being able to approach the measure to which they belong to God. As analogies they present as much the distinction between God and man as the similarity. Meister Eckhart moved beyond analogy and into the realm of mystery by introducing the term *grunt* to develop the concept that there is distinction, but also indistinguishability.

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<sup>74</sup> McGinn, *Essential Sermons*, p. 35.

## 5. Meister Eckhart on Indistinguishability: The Godhead.

Eckhart introduces the term *Gotheit* (Godhead) to develop the thought of there being God beyond God. Whereas God is personal, the Godhead is non-personal. God and Godhead are mentioned together in Latin Sermon 29 when the Meister says, “Observe that all that is a consequence of the One, or of oneness, such as identity, likeness, image, relation and the like, are properly to be found only in God and the Godhead.”<sup>75</sup> Here the two are likened but in other texts the difference is presented. Eckhart declares, “God and Godhead are as different as Heaven and Earth...they are distinguished by working and not-working.”<sup>76</sup> God works but the Godhead does not because there is nothing for it to do. The non-personal divine substance is not inactive but it is God who is active in out-flowing and return. In German Sermon 21 he mentions that there is a time before there is a flowing out from the one Godhead saying, “Nothing is yet flowing out.”<sup>77</sup> Mention of flowing out into the Son and the Holy Spirit suggests there is a time when the Godhead ‘is’, before flowing out. Creation connects with God as the work of God and this is when God becomes. Eckhart talks of his return to God adding, “When I enter the ground, the bottom, the river and fount of the Godhead, ...there God unbecomes.”<sup>78</sup> God becomes but the Godhead unbecomes. This phrase, *Got wirt und entwirt* portrays the difference between God and Godhead and affirms the idea that God and man are a mystical unity, indistinguishable in the Godhead. Outside of creation there is the Godhead which as the ground or source of God, there is something of man. As God becomes, creation, including the outer man, is formed.

God, by nature, does not and cannot just remain, He moves, He goes out, He gives birth. Eckhart says, “Only God flows into all things, their very essences. Nothing else flows into something else. God is in the innermost part of each and every thing, only in its innermost part.”<sup>79</sup> This explains how God is indistinct from his creation. There is an aspect of God in everything he has flowed into. It is in his very nature that God pours himself out from the divine source as the Meister says, “Whatever is in God moves him to beget; indeed from His ground, from His being and His nature the Father is moved to beget.”<sup>80</sup> In his Latin commentary of John quoted above

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<sup>75</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

<sup>76</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 56.

<sup>77</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 21.

<sup>78</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW IV/1, PR. 109.

<sup>79</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW IV, Sermo xxix.

<sup>80</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 39. See note 27, p. 18.

Eckhart says the Godhead does not beget yet here in German Sermon 39 God begets from his ground. He wants to maintain the distinction of the Godhead but also present how the Godhead by its very nature pours into what becomes other than Godhead. Outside of the Godhead there is distinction, but in the Godhead there is oneness and everything is of common nature and indistinction.

For the ground to be thought of as the divine source there must be becoming as well as being, as Milbank states, “The self-remaining is also that which ecstatically goes forth.”<sup>81</sup> God gives himself completely without diminishing himself in any way as Eckhart said, “It is a wonderful thing that something can flow out and yet remain within.”<sup>82</sup> The source of divine essence flows out as formal causality into the Trinity and as effective causality into creation. The Latin terms used to describe this action are *bullito* and *ebullito*. One way of using these terms is to say that the Godhead is actively boiling up into the Trinity and overboiling into creation, though in practice it is less simple because these aspects are connected without such clear dividing lines. Maintaining the *bullito* as the interior process with no pouring out emphasises the state rather than any activity of the Trinity. *Ebullito* is the word used by Eckhart to describe the over boiling of God. God being active, not static, flows out from himself and this boiling up (*bullito*) causes the Trinity and the over-boiling (*ebullito*) leads to creation. God is distinct from creation otherwise he would not be God but having created, he as the divine source cannot be indistinct from his creation.

Although the Meister tended not to impose boundaries, for the purpose of structuring this dissertation, there is a question as to where to position the soul and creation in terms of the *grunt*, *bullito* or *ebullito*. The *grunt* and the soul are discussed as aspects of the Godhead because of the indistinction between them. Eckhart presents the Trinity as the inevitable cause of the natural flowing out of divine essence and so, as the Trinity is distinct from the Godhead, it is featured as *bullito*. Creation is regarded as more distinguishable than the Trinity although the soul of man is connected with the Godhead. The soul in substance shares indistinguishability with the *grunt* and, in the same way as the Son of God, flows from this source, and yet also becomes part of

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<sup>81</sup> Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, p. 193.

<sup>82</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 30.

creation. The soul, as part of creation has crossed all borders. Creation features both in the *grunt* and the *bullito*, but because it undergoes the movement of procession and return it is covered more thoroughly in the section on *ebullito*.

### **5(i). Godhead and the Ground.**

The implication of there being both God and a Godhead does raise difficulties. From the ontological thought of Anselm,<sup>83</sup> if God is higher than anything else that could be thought, then how can there be a Godhead as well as God if they are not the same? Meister Eckhart presented God above being by introducing a divine depth or hidden source of divine essence from which all things advance and to which they return. He uses the MHG term ‘*grunt*,’ translated in English as ground, to present the innermost ground of God, an image of the Godhead. While generally the term ‘*esse*’ stands for the absolute essence of God the *grunt* of God is the source of divine essence.

Commentators of Eckhart seek to expand on the term *grunt* because it is intrinsic to the theology of the Meister, with qualities that are simultaneously basic and complex. For Quint it is a, “Mystical mine-field.”<sup>84</sup> McGinn presents *grunt* as, “A simple term of spatial and tactile immediacy and calls it a, “‘Master metaphor’...because it, focuses and integrates a whole range of creative language – strategies to describe the relationship between God and man.”<sup>85</sup> Blumenberg describes *grunt* as a ‘*Sprengmetaphor*’<sup>86</sup> or explosive metaphor because it breaks through the categories of even mystical speech. It is not a metaphor of containment but one that enables the preacher to release and activate the minds of listeners to seek God. It is typical of how Eckhart developed both mystical language and the MHG vernacular speech to go beyond the established concrete terms in order to extend known concepts. Köbele presents the semantic richness of *grunt*,<sup>87</sup> explaining it was used with two concrete meanings of the physical ground or the lowest side of something and from this there is a connection with hell, the bottom of the

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<sup>83</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion I*, trans. by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2001), p. 40.

<sup>84</sup> Josef Quint, ‘Mystik und Sprache, Ihr Verhältnis Zueinander, Insbesondere in der Spekultativen Mystik Meister Eckeharts’ In *Altdeutsche und Altniederländische Mystik*, ed. by Karl Ruh. Wege der Forschung 23 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), p. 141-143.

<sup>85</sup> McGinn, *Harvest*, p. 85.

<sup>86</sup> Hans Blumenberg, ‘Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie’, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 6, 1960, pp. 7-142.

<sup>87</sup> Suzanne Köbele *Bilder der unbegriffenen Wahrheit: Zur Struktur Mystischer Rede im Spannungsfeld von Latein und Volkssprache* (Tübingen / Basel: Francke, 1993), pp.17-18, 66-67 and 181-91.



universe. There are also two abstract meanings when *grunt* can be the origin or cause and also the inmost part or essence.

The Meister uses *grunt* in a way that is both depersonalised and abstract but perceivable as a substance from which everything else flows. It is paradoxical to describe a substance that is not a substance as we know substance but this was the means Eckhart used to help us comprehend the unknowable. McGinn suggests the aim of the Meister, “Was not so much to reveal a set of truths about God as it was to frame the appropriate paradoxes that would serve to highlight the inherent limitations of our mind and to mark off in some way the boundaries of the unknown territory where God dwells.”<sup>88</sup> His use of paradox and antitheses prevent the sense of a secure knowledge but this lack of security is meant to draw the receiver closer to God through increasing the desire to understand more fully. Describing the *grunt* as a mystical identity, such as the bottomless abyss, *abgrunt*, reveals and veils simultaneously. Tauler, a Dominican student of Eckhart, used *abgrunt* more frequently than the Meister and emphasised the mystery of a deeper region of total ungraspability beyond the *grunt*.<sup>89</sup>

Eckhart not only connected *grunt* with Godhead but also used it specifically to present the indistinct identity between God and man. The groundless ground, *gruntlos grunt*, is not a state or condition but the activity of grounding. God and the soul are together, indistinct in a fused identity that is the source of movement. Mojsisch refers to this form of a fused identity between God and man in the *grunt* as a, “Univocal-transcendental relationship of correlation.”<sup>90</sup> Eckhart states, “My ground and God’s ground the same...The knower and the known are one in knowledge...God and I we are one in pure knowledge.”<sup>91</sup> It therefore follows that in this ground, if God is there, and man is there, then there is an indistinguishability between them. This is oneness with God due to being of the same divine source. With the *grunt* there is no distinction and no difference in identity, so God and man are indistinguishable. Radler describes this fusion of identities as, “Dynamic, dialectical and continuous because indistinction is never

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<sup>88</sup> McGinn, *Essential Sermons*, p. 31.

<sup>89</sup> Johannes Tauler, *Die Predigten Taulers*, Ferdinand Vetter Edition (Berlin: Weidmann, 1910), V 9 (45.33-46.4).

<sup>90</sup> Burkhard Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart: Analogy, Univocity and Unity*, trans. by Orrin F. Summerell (Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner, 2001), p.135.

<sup>91</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 15.

static.”<sup>92</sup> She maintains the possibility of the distinguishability stating, “Eckhart’s dialectical mysticism proposes a naked intimacy and transparency between human and divine, while safeguarding otherness and distinction.”<sup>93</sup> It is a mystery how a fusion retains distinction but nature of the *grunt* in some respects can only remain incomprehensible to man.

Eckhart spoke as if he is there within the Godhead, and so because the Godhead is the source of God, this could seem to place him above God and his works. The existence of man within the Godhead could be rationalized by distinguishing between real and virtual and placing this virtual existence in the mind of God. To be of the same *grunt* as the Godhead connects essence and existence in a manner leaving no doubt as to the reality of the person without explaining the nature of this reality. The question then is how the *grunt* equates to the mind of God.

#### **5(ii). Godhead and the Soul.**

Eckhart presents the soul as being in the *grunt* before creation as well as being part of creation with the highest state of a return to the ground being the ultimate destination. The soul seems to be one with God, the Trinity and creation but in different ways and at different times according to different texts.

The Evans translation of the collection of Pfeiffer entitles Sermon 56, ‘The Emanation and Return’ because it deals with the nature and different phases of the soul and their connection with God. Eckhart uses the image of a mirror to illustrate both the distinction and indistinction between God and man. As the image reflected in the mirror derives all its reality from that which it reflects and can have no existence apart from it, so it is with all manifestation. He says, “I take a bowl of water and place a mirror in it and set it in the sun. The sun sends forth its light rays both from the ground of the sun itself and from the disc, and thereby loses nothing. The reflection in the mirror in the sun is, in the sun itself, sun; yet the mirror is what it is. Thus it is with God. God is in the soul (the intellectual structure) with his nature, with his isness, (being) and with his Godhead, and yet he is not the soul. The soul’s reflection is, in God, God, and yet the soul is what it is. There where God’s utterance is God, God is not the creature, the creature is

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<sup>92</sup> Charlotte Radler, ‘Losing the Self: Detachment in Meister Eckhart and its Significance for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue’, *Buddhist Christian Studies*, Vol. 26, 2006, pp. 111-117.

<sup>93</sup> Radler, ‘Losing the Self’, p. 115.

God.”<sup>94</sup> Eckhart proposes from these texts that there is something of the divine essence or *grunt* in the soul of man which implies an element of uncreatedness in the soul.

For God to be both in the soul and yet not the soul is partially resolved by the thought that while the soul shares the same properties of God it is not God. To consider Leibniz, there are points of identity but not overall identicalness. The soul could never be all there is of God though it is of the same *grunt* as God. To look at the soul is to look at God but as the sun is different from the sun in the mirror, they are not the same entity. The sun is seen in the mirror and God is seen in the soul. The image of the sun in the mirror is a true and representative image of the sun and similarly the image of God seen in the soul. The mirror and the sun are both real yet what is seen of the sun in the mirror is an image. The reality of God is seen by the image of God in the soul but this is just an image and God is not the soul. Both the image of God and God are real but the image only exists through the reality of God. Although God is active in creating he does not become creation but, because of its source, creation exists only through God and, to this extent, is God.

The Meister presents how the soul is borne up in the image of God in which the Father is power, the Son is wisdom and the Holy Ghost is goodness. The Trinity is suspended in being and the soul grasps the persons of the Trinity in the very indwelling of being. Eckhart declares this to be the mind of God or intellect. This is not enough though, and, “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’. There she grasps God as in the ground, where He is above all being. This is the highest perfection of the spirit to which man can attain spiritually in this life.”<sup>95</sup> From this, there is being with God and better than that, being in the *grunt*.

Having reached this high point, Eckhart then raises this mystical ladder even higher by saying this stepping beyond the Trinity into the ground of God is not the peak. The previous peak is raised further by the incorporation of body and soul uniting with God to become a personal being, spiritually one, just as the ground itself is one ground. This personal or man-God being,

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<sup>94</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 56.

<sup>95</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 67.

“Outgrows and soars above the outer man altogether,”<sup>96</sup> to become one substance with the bare substantial being of the Godhead. Being clinical about the layers of divine being and substance being transcended is difficult but the soul is in God and God is where the soul is and so the oneness being attained here is unquestionably indistinction. Talk of an inner being, outer being and a man-God being is used to shed light on the soul becoming one with the Godhead. As there is an inner and outer man there is God and the Godhead. The soul or inner man is connected with the Godhead while the flesh and the outer man relate to God. Distinguishing between the two in relation to the soul, Eckhart states that, “The soul is so pure and delicate that God could not enter unless stripped but the bare, pure Godhead could.”<sup>97</sup> Nakedness and purity are aspects of the Godhead setting it apart and above God who is restricted without them. Eckhart mentions different beings relating to Christ and man but the ultimate message is that our being needs to follow the example of Christ’s humility in becoming human, in order to attain perfection and oneness with God.

The soul is in the *grunt* of God but also this is something to be attained and so in this sense is temporal with a body in need of rescue, before becoming one with the Godhead. Eckhart confirms that the soul moving to the ultimate destination is through the work of Christ. He states, “Since God (Christ in MHG) dwells eternally in the ground of the Father, and I in him, one ground and the same Christ, as a single bearer of my humanity, then this (humanity) is as much mine as his in one substance of eternal being, so that the being of both, body and soul, attain perfection in one Christ, as one God, one Son.”<sup>98</sup> This sermon based on the text from 1 John declaring that, “God is love and he who lives in love, lives in God,”<sup>99</sup> presents Eckhart with the opportunity to declare the way it is possible for the soul to be perfected. Self-denial leads to a life of love in union with God.

Eckhart describes the meeting of eternal and temporal aspects in Sermon 52 saying, “When I stood in my first cause, there I had no God... I wanted nothing, I longed for nothing for I was an empty being (*ledic sîn*). But when I went out from my own free will and received my created

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<sup>96</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 67.

<sup>97</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 21.

<sup>98</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 67.

<sup>99</sup> I John 4.16.

being, then I had a ‘God.’”<sup>100</sup> The first cause is usually associated with being God and likewise to want for nothing. To have no God or no need for God means to be God. As a created being then there is the possibility of having a God. The preacher has gone from being God, to being part of creation and now distinct from God. As creation we have knowledge of God because of being created. The idea of a non-physical soul joining a physical body, or a non-created part joining creation was not new and the more difficult issue is that of the soul, or part of it, being uncreated. Eckhart was reluctant to describe humans as a composite of a created and uncreated bit and preferred to think of the same identity from two perspectives to avoid separation. This is a dualism of a soul that has fused bits from within and outside of time and then, stepping further into the unknown, these bits fuse outside of time and share the divine essence of God. Eckhart seems typically ambiguous in that both created and uncreated bits seem to coexist within time. Rather than just dualistic this is paradoxical for there to be a merger of non-physical bits in which the uncreated joins the created.

The orthodoxy of Eckhart was questioned because he spoke of the uncreatedness of the soul. In Sermon 13 Eckhart said that, “There is one power in the soul that I am fond of speaking of, and if the soul consisted entirely of that she would be uncreated and uncreaturely, but it is not so with the rest of her. She has a temporal aspect, a dependence upon time.”<sup>101</sup> The soul is attributed both human and divine elements in a kind of fused identity that is indistinguishable from God as *grunt* and distinct from God as part of creation. Likewise in Sermon 48 Eckhart declares, “Sometimes I have spoken of a light that is uncreated and not capable of creation and that is in the soul.”<sup>102</sup> Eckhart is placing the soul, or part of it with the *grunt* as also in his sermon titled, ‘The Nobleman,’ when he states, “In this experience, (blessedness) the soul receives all her being and her life, and draws all that she is from the ground of God, and knows nothing of knowledge, or of love, or of anything at all. She becomes entirely and absolutely passive in the being of God.”<sup>103</sup> The soul is with God in this place of nothingness.

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<sup>100</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 52.

<sup>101</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 13.

<sup>102</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 48.

<sup>103</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW V, *Liber Benedictus* II, Von dem Edlen Menschen.

As humans we tend to think of the mind as a concrete part of our being but because there is interplay between the ideas of intellect and being, then it is less easy to comprehend what we mean by the mind of God. Eckhart inter-changes terms for God and Godhead, soul, inner, outer man and God-man, *grunt*, mind and image, such that the overall picture remains unsettled. Clearly the soul exists in some form within the source of divine essence outside of creation and also becomes as part of creation as the work of God. As part of this emanation from God there is retention of the image of God as there is retention of the image of man, or the soul of man, within God or the Godhead. The nature of the return is further complicated by the thought that there is not just a non-physical resurrection. Whereas the soul can be thought of as remaining in the mind of God outside of time, any return to union with God incorporates thoughts of time and therefore transformed bodies and locations of heaven and hell.<sup>104</sup> The scope for this dissertation is indistinguishability and so any further exploration of the location of immortality is less pertinent than the description Eckhart provides of the nature of union, the loss of indistinction, the phases of relative indistinguishability and the restoration of indistinction.

### **5(iii). *Bullito*: The Trinity.**

According to Eckhart the Godhead remains One, while continually flowing out into the Trinity. In German Sermon 10 he probably refers back to a Latin sermon for Trinity Sunday when distinguishing between the Trinity and the Godhead saying, “Distinction comes from Absolute Unity, that is, the distinction in the Trinity. Absolute Unity is the distinction and distinction is the Unity. The greater the distinction, the greater the Unity, for that is the distinction without distinction.”<sup>105</sup> There is no distinction in the *grunt* so, because there becomes three, there is a change in identity and the Trinity is seen not as the One but coming from the One. The Meister presents the Trinity as God emanating from the Godhead. There is indistinction in the Godhead but distinction between the three persons of the Trinity. This seems to place the Trinity as caused by the *grunt* and therefore, questionably, following both the Godhead and something of the soul, depending on how these are perceived within the Godhead. Von Balthasar is critical of the Meister writing, “Unfortunately the whole Trinitarian process is clearly undermined in favour of

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<sup>104</sup> I Corinthians 15. 42-54, II Corinthians 3.18.

<sup>105</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 10.

a (Neo-Platonic) trend toward absolute unity.”<sup>106</sup> This apparent difference in status is partially explained in other texts by Eckhart who admits there can be no diversity in the One, continuing, “This is why the formal emanation in the divine persons is a type of *bullito*, and thus the three persons are simply and absolutely one.”<sup>107</sup> Eckhart also describes this by using the metaphor of being a pure virgin yet also a fruitful wife. The process of boiling produces overboiling though while this occurs the Godhead remains pure, and therefore indistinct.

Indistinguishability between the Trinity and the Godhead remains questionable depending on how the *bullito* is to be perceived with regards to the Godhead. Either the Godhead, *bullito* and *ebullito* are distinct or somehow not just sequential or connected but somehow merged. Sells states that the *bullito* is, “The interior process with no pouring out,”<sup>108</sup> but Eckhart suggests held this bubbling up does not just remain within but overflows to become an emanation. This is boiling or birthing itself and he also uses the term *ûzbruch* (‘break-out’) to add impact saying, “The first break-out and the first melting forth is where God liquifies and where he melts into his Son and where the Son melts back into the Father.”<sup>109</sup> If this continuous process being described is eternal and within the *grunt* then the *grunt* is not placed over the Trinity whose divine status is upheld. To be of this *grunt* is to be of the infinite acts of the *grunt* and therefore indistinguishable within the Godhead. God is outside of time and so this action, or circumincession, is always beginning afresh and yet always eternally complete. Caldicott believes this is the key to understanding how Eckhart seems to place the Godhead beyond the Trinity. He writes, “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.”<sup>110</sup>

The Meister seems to present different patterns for the relationships between the persons of the Trinity and the divine essence. In his exposition of John 14.8, he declares existence to be first, followed by the One who is equated with the Father, thirdly comes the True who is the Son and

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<sup>106</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Vol. 5 (San Francisco: Ignatius press, 1998), p. 443.

<sup>107</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Exposito Sancti Evangelii Secundum Iohannem*, LW III, n. 342.

<sup>108</sup> Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 152.

<sup>109</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 35.

<sup>110</sup> Stratford Caldecott, ‘Trinity and Creation: an Eckhartian Perspective’, *International Catholic Review*, Communio 30, Winter, 2003, p. 708.

fourthly the Good who is the Holy Spirit. (*esse-unum-verum-bonum*) Eckhart continues, “In the One there is no distinction...therefore the relations of the persons are not distinct in the essence or from the essence.”<sup>111</sup> Although the order given supports the idea of a Godhead from which everything including the Trinity flows, the text connects the One, the Father and the Godhead in essence. The One is the principle of all emanation and there is, “Being or existence, neither begotten nor begetting, and the One, not begotten but begetting, as Principle without principle...The Father is the first person in the Godhead.”<sup>112</sup> “The Father is appropriated to the One,”<sup>113</sup> and this explanation places the distinct Trinity within the indistinct Godhead.

In a different treatment, the One is not attributed to any particular Person of the Trinity and all three merge in the same essence. Eckhart states, “The works of the three Persons are undivided in the creatures of which they are one principle. Therefore, in creatures the being (*ens*) that corresponds to the Father, the Truth that corresponds to the Son, and the good that corresponds in appropriated fashion to the Holy Spirit are interchangeable and are one, being distinct by reason alone, just as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one and distinct by reason alone.”<sup>114</sup> (*ens-verum-bonum*) This Trinitarian model, of proposing three persons within the Principle, indistinct by essence but distinct by function, emphasises the essence, rather than the persons emanating from this essence. The Father / Son relationship is one we can understand as humans and is a revelation from God to us. This distinction between the persons and not the substance is possible if what proceeds is the same as what it is proceeding from. The oneness of God means the procession from God is a self-begetting. Dividing the Godhead is impossible and not within our human grasp as it is the ultimate image of oneness. Expressions from this oneness such as the Trinity and creation enable us to comprehend something of the Godhead.

Eckhart used the Latin term *principium* for the activity or *bullito* from the Godhead because this is used in Genesis 1.1, ‘In the beginning, God,’ and John 1.1, ‘In the beginning was the word’. This term signifies more than just the beginning of time and the Hebrew, בראשית (be-re-shiyt) and Greek ἀρχη (arche) incorporate ideas of the head or origin or first. He describes it as the

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<sup>111</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Exposito Sancti Evangelii Secundum Iohannem*, LW III, n. 548.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, LW III, n. 562.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, LW III, n. 546.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, LW III, n. 360.



‘beginning of all being’<sup>115</sup> and in his commentary on John he writes, “The One acts as a principle through itself and gives existence and is an internal principle. For this reason...it does not produce something like itself, but what is one and the same as itself...This is why the formal emanation in the divine persons is a type of boiling and thus the three Persons are simply and absolutely one.”<sup>116</sup> The Father is the source of the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Principle of the whole divinity. The Father is the Principle without Principle and the Son is the Principle from Principle. *Bullito* is a way of expressing activity within the divine source without separating the activity from the source. *Principium* is also used as the source of *ebullito* with meanings incorporating reason and intellect as well as duration. The nature of eternity means that *bullito* and *ebullito* happen simultaneously but this leads to the difficulty of creation occurring alongside the emanation of the Trinity. While the case could be built to the contrary, Eckhart uses the idea of *bullito* such that the Trinity presents distinction from creation.

#### **5(iv). *Ebullito*: The Creation.**

For Eckhart, the existence of creation is inter-woven with emergence of the Trinity. The inner *bullito*, in which the Trinity emanates, is the source of boiling over, the *ebullito*, of creation. By creation, God goes outside of himself and returns to himself. The Son is the action of God going outside of himself and returning to himself, and this is the action also of man. God shares himself entirely in giving without holding anything back because that is His nature. From the eternal Godhead, the Father gives birth and continually gives birth to the Son. As the Father begets the Son so he begets those who, by grace, receive the birth of God in their soul. The Trinity is a cause of the Godhead as God flows out and this flowing out also causes creation. When the Godhead utters, the triune God and creation happen. Eckhart states that the generation of the Trinity is simultaneous with the generation of man and part of the same act, saying, “God always spoke only once. His word is only one. In this one word He speaks His Son and the Holy Spirit and all creatures, and yet there is only one word in God.”<sup>117</sup> There is only one utterance but the internal utterance leads to the Son and external utterance leads to creation. This expression of the Godhead becomes the Father and the utterance is the Son. This suggests the events are continuous as well as simultaneous.

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<sup>115</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 22.

<sup>116</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Exposito Sancti Evangelii Secundum Iohannem*, LW III, n. 342.

<sup>117</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 30.

Eckhart maintains that creation is the continuous action of God so it is said to be ‘in the beginning’ rather than ‘from the beginning.’ God is the first and the last, the beginning and the end, “Therefore everything that he created past, he creates as present in the beginning, and what he creates or does now as in the beginning he created at the same time in the completed past.”<sup>118</sup> This implies God is creating now in creation as we experience it. The eternal nature of creation was proposed by Aristotle and developed by Augustine who said that to consider what God was doing before time was nonsense because time is only relevant to creation and time as we know it only exists as part of creation.<sup>119</sup> We can only begin to contemplate God within time but Eckhart often pointed us to consider the image of ourselves that exists in the mind of God outside of time.

Sills believes Eckhart uses the ‘*in quantum* principle’<sup>120</sup> (insofar as), with the example of the chest being in the mind of the chest-maker to illustrate how interior movement of formal causality within the trinity connects with the flowing out into creation. Eckhart states that, “Insofar as it (the chest) is in the Principle (its producer) it is not other in nature. A chest in its maker’s mind is not a chest, but is the life and understanding of the maker, his living conception.”<sup>121</sup> The life and character of the craftsman are present but this not an actual physical chest, pointing metaphorically to the idea that there is indistinguishability between God and the soul, in the mind of God. Kelley believes Eckhart places the existence of man outside of creation within the mind of God and summarises Eckhart saying, “This self, which the human knower 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.”<sup>122</sup>

Creation as an emanation from God remains within its Principle and therefore pure and yet it is an atemporal, continuous generation. Spatially we can only think that there is a change when something emanates from a substance but, as with the language of distinction used to describe this occurrence, there is both change and no change. In terms of image there is no distinction. The image of God in creation is indistinguishable from the image of God in the Godhead. To

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<sup>118</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Parisian Questions*, LW I, Prologi in Opus Tripartitum, p. 92.

<sup>119</sup> Augustine, *Confessiones*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11.10-13.

<sup>120</sup> Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 178.

<sup>121</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Exposito Sancti Evangelii Secundum Iohannem*, LW III, n. 6.

<sup>122</sup> Carl Franklin Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New York: Yale university, 1977), p. 66.

extend the analogy of Eckhart, the chest remains in the maker before it comes into existence, while it physically exists and even after its external existence is destroyed.

In Sermon 13 Eckhart compares God with creation saying that God had begat creation in his likeness. Creation and the Trinity come from God and are like God but, “Likeness falls short of sameness.”<sup>123</sup> Although sameness is connected with identity in eternity the context of the passage distinguishes between man and God. Whereas our name is ‘to be born’ the name of the Father is ‘born’ and this is where the Godhead glimmers in the first light-nature which is innocent of all light. There is likeness but not sameness and therefore distinction. The differences between God and creation are established by the nature of God. Eckhart commenting on John 1.11, stating that Jesus came to his own says, “Indistinct existence is proper to God and he is distinguished by his indistinction alone, while distinct existence is proper to a creature. It does not belong to what is distinct to receive what is indistinct.”<sup>124</sup> During creation there is distinction and the difference between God and man is highlighted. The relationship between creation and God exists because creation is the *ebullito* of God. God works or becomes and there is creation and this is distinct from God. The mark of God, however, is preserved throughout creation and so God is identified by creation. The acting of God and the becoming of man join God and man in the same event presenting both distinction and indistinction.

Eckhart speaks of creation as the, “Giving of existence after non-existence.”<sup>125</sup> If something else exists, then God is generating beyond Himself. This aporia, that God is all and yet also beyond all or something else, leaves the Trinitarian doctrine of Eckhart as paradoxical, however, it creates the platform to develop the idea of the eternal soul sharing the essence of God. Milbank describes how God is not just beyond or other to everything but also, “Not other”,<sup>126</sup> using the term of Nicholas of Cusa. Milbank states that Eckhart realised, “The God who is the giving source of everything must be the inner reality of everything - more each thing than each thing itself: more stone in the stone than the stone, and more man in the man than the man.”<sup>127</sup> Jesus

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<sup>123</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 13.

<sup>124</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Expositio Sancti Evangelii Secundum Iohannem*, LW III, n. 99.

<sup>125</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Parisian Questions*, LW I, Prologi in Opus Tripartitum, pp. 87-93.

<sup>126</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. by H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

<sup>127</sup> Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, p. 192.

was more a man than any other in that he was perfect man as opposed to fallen man. Also, since everything derives from the same source everything is equal and so the stone proclaims as much of God as a man. As creation, humans have a time span within time as a whole, but as this cause of God, we are rooted in the divine essence which must be outside of time.

### **5(v). Creation and Uncreatedness.**

The Neo-Platonic scheme of procession and return (*exitus* and *reditus*) gives scope to the thought that creation is in God before proceeding from Him. The debate of the pre-existence of man has often settled for what might seem to be a compromise position that all creation existed before time in the mind of the creator just as a painting exists in the mind of the artist before any paint meets the canvas. Eckhart describes how the soul remains in the present now and this is when the Father gives birth to his only begotten Son.<sup>128</sup> Creation is taking place and the soul is both observing and being part of it. He spoke of a formal existence and a virtual existence in his commentary on wisdom saying, “All things are in God as in the First Cause in an intellectual way and in the mind of the maker. Therefore, they do not have any of their formal existence until they are causally produced and extracted on the outside in order to exist.”<sup>129</sup> The sense of being around during creation, comes with being around having been created.

Eckhart moved the debate by not focusing on the question of pre-existence but the nature of this and more pertinently the nature of uncreatedness of man which was a key issue leading to ‘*In Agro Dominico*’. The bull of 1329 reported that Eckhart had proposed, “There is something in the soul that is uncreated and not capable of creation; if the whole soul were such, it would be uncreated and not capable of creation, and this is the intellect.”<sup>130</sup> This controversial proposition was an edited version of a statement censured at the trial in Cologne but the Meister denied making this statement. Eckhart did reply that he was talking about the pure intellect of God and not human intellect, and the intellectual soul participates in intellectuality having been created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>131</sup> Along with another statement attributed to the Meister, that he declared himself to be, “Not a wholly uncreated being,” but, “Before I was created I was

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<sup>128</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 10.

<sup>129</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Expositio Libri Sapientiae*, LW II, n. 21.

<sup>130</sup> Pope John XXII, LW V, The Bull, ‘*In Agro Dominico*’, 1329, taken from McGinn, *Essential Sermons*, pp. 77-81.

<sup>131</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Magistri Echardi Responsio ad Articulos sibi Impositos de Scriptis et Dictis suis*, LW V, n. 6.

uncreated,”<sup>132</sup> there is some difficulty tracing the actual words in a specific work though there are similar references to an uncreated power of the soul in several MHG sermons. In Sermon 10 he describes how the soul reaches God in his desert, in his proper ground and the Godhead, and there God touches the soul as himself, as “uncreated and uncreatable.”<sup>133</sup> Despite the denials and repeated desire to remain orthodox, evidence from his sermons confirm that the idea of the uncreatedness of the soul, or part of it, was indeed part of his thinking.

*‘In Agro Dominico’*, by taking texts out of context, also accused Eckhart of teaching that the world is eternal.<sup>134</sup> The Meister responded in defence that, “Creation indeed and every activity of God is the very essence of God, and yet it does not follow from this that if God created the world from eternity, the world is therefore from eternity, as the uneducated think. For creation is not an eternal state, just as the thing created itself is not eternal.”<sup>135</sup> God creates eternally but also within time as we comprehend it. We can look back to a time of creation but also recognise God continues to flow into creation.

There is a difference between God and creation but according to Turner this is because of a, “Sin-induced false consciousness.”<sup>136</sup> The difference in this case occurs at the time of creation. The Bible declares we are separate from God by our sin but this means that we are also separated from any uncreated bit of ourselves. However, what God is by nature, we are by grace and indistinguishability is partial which implies any aspect of us that is uncreated is in fact indistinct from God. Eckhart, in speaking of his uncreatedness did not seek to divide a person or more specifically a soul into a created and uncreated bit. He preferred to present the soul as undivided yet created or uncreated depending on the angle of perception. The eternal aspect could not be known by the finite, created aspect.

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<sup>132</sup> Notes from McGinn present a number of references that link with the words and thoughts of Eckhart on this subject in particular PR 13. See McGinn, *Harvest*, p. 550.

<sup>133</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 10.

<sup>134</sup> Pope John XXII, *In Agro Dominico*, LW V, taken from, McGinn, *Essential*, p. 78.

<sup>135</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW V, *Magistri Echaridi Responsio ad Articulos sibi Impositos de Scriptis et Dictis suis*, III, 8.

<sup>136</sup> Turner, *Darkness*, p. 147.

## 6. Eckhart on Indistinguishability: The Return.

All creatures, as created gifts of God, glorify God in their existence and especially in their ultimate return to God. Eckhart states that, “In the work of nature and creation, the work of recreation and grace shine out.”<sup>137</sup> While the *bullito* continues, the *ebullito* is active in procession (*exitus*) and return (*reditus*). In the same way as the *exitus* inter-mingles the *bullito* and *ebullito*, connecting creation with the eternal *grunt*, so too does the *reditus*. Christ is the key figure in the birthing of creation and likewise he is the key to the return. In typical fashion, the Meister sought to maintain biblical principles, embrace Neo-Platonic thought and add his own slant on the participation of man in the process.

The need to return to God is summarised by Eckhart in German Sermon 42 when he states, “Now know, all our perfection and our holiness rests in this: that a person must penetrate and transcend everything created and temporal and all being and go into the ground that has no ground. We pray our dear Lord God that we may become one and indwelling, and may God help us into the same ground. Amen.”<sup>138</sup> Although there is an implication of the fused identity in the *grunt*, clearly the emphasis is that there is a point at which a person is not within the *grunt* and in need of the return journey. The person makes the journey, but not without the help of God, and in this journey becomes united with God. Eckhart, in his sermon for Innocents’ Day, said, “Creatures do not contact God, not in their nature. That which is created has to be destroyed to liberate the good; the shell must be broken if the kernel, the goodness, is to get out.”<sup>139</sup> Not all of the body and soul of man are destined for oneness with God but within the person there is something active in the emanation from, and return to the Godhead. In our created state we gain knowledge of God in our mind and are an image of God but it is the soul that can return to become one with the Godhead and a true image.

The flowing out of God is seen in the work of God as he becomes. The return to God, or breaking-through, (*durchbrechen*) is stated in Sermon 52 as being nobler than the out-flowing. The Godhead becomes God and creation in out-flowing, and it is God who enables man to break-through to the silent, hidden source. This is return to the Godhead or *grunt* where God

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<sup>137</sup> Meister Eckhart, LW V, *Magistri Eckhardi Responsio ad Articulos sibi Impositos de Scriptis et Dictis suis*, IX, 27.

<sup>138</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 42.

<sup>139</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 13.

unbecomes. Eckhart says, “In the breaking-through, when I come to be free of will of myself and God’s will and of all his works and of God himself, then I am above all created things, and I am neither God nor creature, but I am what I was and what I shall remain, now and eternally.”<sup>140</sup> Breaking-through is the soul (or non-physical part of man) moving out into eternity while remaining in creation. This illustrates the paradox of being created while uncreated, temporal and yet atemporal, or in other words, simultaneously indistinct and distinct with God.

The *exitus* and *reditus* both involve the human intellect. Eckhart relates how this operates, saying, “There is a power in the soul, namely, intellect. From the moment it becomes aware of and tastes God, it has within itself five properties. The first is that it separates from here and now. The second is that it is like nothing. The third, that it is pure and unmixed. The fourth is that it is operating or seeking within itself. The fifth, that it is an image.”<sup>141</sup> These properties are common to God and the soul and so the divine intellect and human intellect are indistinguishable. It is the power in the soul, or intellect that that rises up to a higher state and breaks through into the Godhead. The *exitus* and *reditus* in this sense only include the non-physical existence of man.

The two key aspects involved with the events and activity of the return to God are, (with MHG equivalents), detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) from the world and breaking-through (*durchbrechen*) to God. Before these are considered though, it is helpful to present a brief outline of the Christology of Eckhart.

### **6(i). The Christology of Meister Eckhart.**

Eckhart does not present a great amount of Christological doctrine but leaves no doubt as to the mission of Christ. In echoing the Patristic motto, Eckhart asks, “Why did God become man? and then gives the personalised answer, “That I might be born God Himself.”<sup>142</sup> Christ, as Son of God, became human and similarly we as humans might become children of God as the Meister

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<sup>140</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR 52.

<sup>141</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 69.

<sup>142</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 29. Eckhart used the phrase, ‘God became man that man might become God’ in several sermons. He attributed it to Augustine but it can be traced further back to Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 8, (PG 25: 110) and possibly to Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, (PG7: 939AB). See McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart; The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), note 10, p. 244.

states, “Don’t think that there is one Son by which Christ is God’s Son and another by which we are named and are sons; but it is the same and is he himself, who is Christ, born as Son in a natural way, and we, who are sons of God analogically-being joined to him as heir, we are coheirs.”<sup>143</sup> Redemption by Christ means being transformed into being the same as Christ, and so becoming a Son of God by adoption. Within the context of time and creation it is easy to think that God simply responded to sin with a cunning plan for redemption. However, the incarnation is an eternal event and reality. According to Milbank, “The finite has been eternally conjoined to his logos in terms of its character, the elusive shape of its enigma, or in other words as “personality” – which is not after all, its own personhood, but instead that of the divine Son.”<sup>144</sup> Oneness with God is made possible by the atoning act of Christ.

Eckhart expounded the prophetic word of Jesus<sup>145</sup> about a grain of wheat falling in the earth to die in order to bear much fruit, to present our response to this act of reconciliation. He suggested that it was both a physical and spiritual suffering and that we must accept physical suffering to the point of death because that is nothing in comparison with what Christ suffered. Our spiritual suffering is the absolute abandonment to the will of God as the Meister states, “You should let God do as he wills with you, what he will, just as if you did not exist. God’s power should be as absolute in all that you are as it is within his own uncreated nature.”<sup>146</sup> He never promoted suffering as a way to meet God but preached that self-denial is the way to imitate Christ. Eckhart stated that as we suffer, God suffers, “My suffering is in God and my suffering is God.”<sup>147</sup> In suffering we are doing so for God but this is his will and therefore his suffering. He gave the illustration of a man who gouged his own eye out to demonstrate his love for his wife who had tragically lost an eye.<sup>148</sup> It was suffering for God to become man but he did so because he loves us. The suffering and love of Christ are to be ours and so our sonship is to be like his.

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<sup>143</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Processus Coloniensis* II, Acta n. 48, LW V.

<sup>144</sup> Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, p. 201. See also p. 214.

<sup>145</sup> John 12.24.

<sup>146</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 49.

<sup>147</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Liber Benedictus I, Daz Buochder Goetlichen Troestunge*, DW V.

<sup>148</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 22.



## **6(ii). Detachment: The Birth of the Word of God in the Soul.**

Eckhart summarised the solution to our greatest need by describing how the word of God must be born in the human soul. For the Son of God to be born within us we must be empty of our self so that God can fill the vacuum. This mystical birth of the Son of God in the soul of man can be traced back to Aquinas and further to Origen with the doctrine being based from biblical texts describing man's need to be born again by the Spirit of God.<sup>149</sup> It is not attained by following a prescriptive method or doing spiritual gymnastics but by what Eckhart called *abegescheidenheit* or detachment, the dispossession of self. This involves the passive abandonment, *gelassenheit*, of everything such that, nothingness, *eigenschaft*, is all that is left. Eckhart insisted to the seeker, "If God is to make anything in you or with you,..you must beforehand have become nothing."<sup>150</sup> In becoming nothing, or detached, the emptied soul becomes the fertile soul. Eckhart spoke of the need of the soul to lose her created being in order to see, "The light of the uncreated image, in which the soul finds her own uncreatedness, for all things are one in this image and in the nature of this image."<sup>151</sup> Indistinction in image is restored by detachment.

The idea of God being birthed in the soul of a person can only remain a mystery and Eckhart acknowledges, "No creature can comprehend how it carries God within itself."<sup>152</sup> The Meister does seek to shed light on the event from a human perspective. The location of the soul is made more complex because of the uncertain nature of the soul as it features within creation and time and also outside of time. Birth must take place within the scope of time as well as being effective outside of time. The effects of the birth of the soul occur during the lifetime of a person and then continue beyond.

While birth takes place in the soul within creation there is also movement towards God and the Meister follows the master of the banquet in a parable of Jesus by urging his hearers to, "Climb up higher."<sup>153</sup> The step to be taken is the one into the Godhead. Eckhart describes the work of grace in bringing the soul back to God. Because he is one, God has all abundance and this is to be gained by the soul that climbs up to be with the One. The Meister uses the teaching of Jesus

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<sup>149</sup> See Ezekiel 36.27, John 3.1-9, John 14.17, Romans 8.9, II Timothy 1.14, I John 2.27.

<sup>150</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 39.

<sup>151</sup> Meister Eckhart, Jostes, nr. 82.

<sup>152</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 21.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., reference to Luke 14. 10.

about humility to illustrate how it is better to take the lower place so that we might be called to a higher one. He likened this to God, when calling the soul to himself and indicating something could be added to God and where there is distinction, there can be addition. God pours himself into the soul so that we might be one with Him. This sermon has incorporated the thoughts of Aristotle, Boethius, and Aquinas, as the ‘master’ referred to, in order to present our distinction from God and how he has enabled us to return to him. Eckhart adds that only the pure Godhead can enter the ground of the soul, as if God might be unworthy. While presenting a difference between the Godhead and God, another essential point being made is the necessity of a place of absolute purity.<sup>154</sup>

McGinn states that, “Detaching and birthing should be seen not as successive stages in a mystical path but as two sides of the same coin.”<sup>155</sup> At this new birth, God effuses the virgin soul causing it to come alive in intimate union with God. This happens in our created life within time and also reflects what is taking place in the ground of God and of our being. New birth takes place in the soul or part of the soul or even more specifically in the part of the soul that is in the *grunt*. Eckhart connects this birth of the Word of God with the idea of *grunt* in Sermon 48 when he describes the simple ground as being beyond both persons and essence. He talks of how, by turning away from himself and all created things, a man will be blessed in the spark in the soul, which has never touched either time or place. “This spark, rejects all created things...and is not content with the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit or with the three persons so far as each of them persist in his properties... it wants to know the source of this divine essence, it wants to go into the simple ground, into the quiet desert into which distinction never gazed, nor the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit. This ground is simple silence.”<sup>156</sup> Being with the Trinity is not enough for a soul desiring only to be in the *grunt*, the ultimate place of oneness. Being detached completes the process of return, the restoration of indististinguishability.

Eckhart declared detachment, or the letting go of all attachments, to be the first aspect of his preaching. Woods proposes that Eckhart itemises seven aspects to this letting go.<sup>157</sup> Firstly we

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<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50, see note 95, *Godhead and the Soul*, p. 35.

<sup>155</sup> Bernard McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, p. 139.

<sup>156</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 48.

<sup>157</sup> Richard Woods, O.P., *Eckhart's Way* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 118-9.

must let go of things because our possessions belong to this world. Likewise we must let go of others to retain focus. Thirdly to remain humble we must let go of self. As part of this self-denial, fourthly, fifthly and sixthly, we should also let go of our emotion, willing and knowing. Finally, and maybe surprisingly, we need to let go of God and seek nothing. In the treatise, ‘On Detachment’, following the text of Matthew 16.25, this summary of detachment is declared, “You must know that to be empty of all created things is to be full of God, and to be full of created things is to be empty of God.”<sup>158</sup> This sermon is falsely attributed to the Meister, but despite a lack of authenticity it remains a reasonable representation of his view.

Eckhart used the MHG verbs, *entbilden* and *entwerden*, to present the need to un-form or de-construct in order to be transformed. It is by this action of relinquishing that detachment takes place and a person is, “Born in God and from God.”<sup>159</sup> Using aphophatic forms of verbs elevates the sense of mysticism of this experience which Wackernagel illuminates as, “A vision devoid of reflexive consciousness, that opens out into a sort of unknowing of the soul itself in the ground of divinity.”<sup>160</sup> Eckhart speaks of inward withdrawal or a withdrawal from sensory experience without describing any kind of mystical experience and also that any self-forgetfulness remains the work of God. This human action only occurs under the sovereignty of God as Eckhart states, “When the soul enters the light that is pure, she falls so far from her own created somethingness into her nothingness that in this nothingness she can no longer return to that created somethingness by her own power.”<sup>161</sup> Detaching is possible through Christ, but it involves a human response that seems both active and passive as illustrated by the Meister in his treatment of the account of when Jesus evaluated the contrasting actions of Mary and Martha. Eckhart seems to reverse the response of Jesus who commended the adoration of Mary rather than the bustling activity of Martha.<sup>162</sup> Forman suggests that when Jesus called her twice, “The first ‘Martha’ signifies that she had located the ground through a contemplative life and the second ‘Martha’ implies that she lives with it. Although she worked, she preserved her inwardness.”<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Von dem edlen Menschen*, DW V.

<sup>159</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Liber Benedictus I, Daz Buochder Goetlichen Troestunge*, DW V.

<sup>160</sup> Wolfgang Wackernagel, *Ymagine Denudari: Éthique de l’Image et Métaphysique de l’Abstraction chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: Vrin, 1991), p. 78.

<sup>161</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 1.

<sup>162</sup> See Meister Eckhart, *Intravit Jesus in Quoddam Castellum*, DW III, PR. 86.

<sup>163</sup> Robert K.C. Forman, *Meister Eckhart. Mystic as Theologian* (Rockport MA.: Element, 1991), p. 121.

The good works of Martha were her outward expression of what had taken place in her inner being as her 'letting go' led to action.

Eckhart builds on the beatitude of Jesus, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,"<sup>164</sup> to describe how poverty in spirit involves wanting nothing, knowing nothing and having nothing. To aim for nothing could be a contradiction in itself but the Meister emphasises this point by adding how it is wrong to seek God by striving when he says, "I pray to God that I may be free of God."<sup>165</sup> Eckhart showed that it is difficult to pray with a pure motive and we tend to treat God like a wishing well, or like a candle that we use and then dispose of, so it is, in some senses, better to pray for nothing and nobody. To be free of God is to remove the tendency to seek God for our own benefit. The explanation for this seems to be psychological but Eckhart provides insight relating to the dualistic nature of being. There are aspects of being that are temporal and aspects that are atemporal. Likewise, there are aspects that link creation with God and aspects that connect the soul with the Godhead. Eckhart claims, "I am the cause of myself in the order of my being, which is eternal, and not in the order of my becoming, which is temporal. And therefore I am unborn...I can never die. In my unborn manner I have been eternal, and am now, and shall eternally remain."<sup>166</sup> The 'I' who speaks during the sermon seems to switch between being human and being divine. At times there is no distinction between God and Eckhart. The soul allows God to work in it so that it becomes one with God. God works in the soul and so they cannot share the same identity although the outcome is indistinction. This work cannot take place in creation as it is an eternal activity and Eckhart refers to his own temporal being undergoing activity affecting the eternal being. The Meister uses a mention of being free from God to describe detachment and then move this thought further to explain how this draws man back into oneness with God. Detachment is the action between God and man, who are distinct within time, to restore indistinction outside of time within the Godhead.

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<sup>164</sup> Matthew 5.3.

<sup>165</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II, PR. 52.

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.*

### **6(iii). Union with God: The Breaking-Through of the Soul to its Primal Source.**

According to Eckhart the goal of life is breaking-through into the, “Naked, formless being of the divine unity,”<sup>167</sup> He speaks of the destination of the *reditus* saying, “When the soul is united with God, then it perfectly possesses in him all that is something. The soul forgets itself there, as it is in itself, and all things, knowing itself in God as divine, in so far as God is in it.”<sup>168</sup> Not that this can be achieved by human activity or even desire. It is the work of God for the soul to return to God and this grace is made available through Christ. The Meister describes this saying, “Grace brings the soul into God and brings it above itself, and it robs it of itself, and of everything that is creaturely, and it unites the soul with God.”<sup>169</sup> Our part in union is to be receptive but this seems to be through being passive because any attempt or effort would nullify the work of God.

Kieckhefer presents three different forms of being in union with God. There is the moment when everything seems to be filled with the presence of God or ‘ecstatic union’ while the continuous on-going way of life as a Christian believer can be termed ‘habitual union’. The third form, which, according to Kieckhefer, can be known as ‘unitive life’, “Ensues only in the highest state of mystical development, when the mystic enters a permanent state of intense bliss and awareness of God’s presence.”<sup>170</sup> Eckhart speaks of ecstatic moments, though not in any autobiographical sense. His teaching of the event when Jesus compared the worshipful contemplation of Mary with the busyness of Martha could be deemed to proclaim the superiority of habitual union. The permanent state of union with God could describe his idea of the indistinction between the soul and the Godhead.

Eckhart describes the nature of union analogously by saying, “There was never union so close; for the soul is far more closely united with God than are the body and soul that form one man. This union is far closer than if one were to pour a drop of water into a cask of wine; there we still have water and wine, but here we have such a changing into one that there is no creature who can

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<sup>167</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II PR. 83.

<sup>168</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW II PR. 58.

<sup>169</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW IV/1, PR. 96.

<sup>170</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, ‘Meister Eckhart’s Conception of Union with God’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 71, No. 3/4, Jul. – Oct., 1978, pp. 203-225.

find the distinction.”<sup>171</sup> The water, with these loosely given proportions, would have little effect on the wine as the two merge. The wine is analogous of the indistinguishability of the soul having been absorbed by God.

A similar analogy is given in German Sermon 82 when Eckhart takes up the thought of Dionysius to describe how the highest and the lowest flow into each other and are united in the highest.<sup>172</sup> The Meister describes how the soul, “Becomes wondrously enchanted and loses herself, just as if you were to pour a drop of water into a butt of wine, so that she does not know herself and imagines she is God.”<sup>173</sup> Two have become one, leaving a question as to the nature of the soul once merged. Detachment is the pre-requisite for union but self-abandonment must include some aspect of self-preservation. Eckhart proposes there are degrees of indistinguishability when he says, “To the extent that a person denies himself for God’s sake and is united with God, he is more God than he is a creature. When a person is fully free (even) from himself for God’s sake and belongs to no one but God, and lives for God only, then he is the same by grace as God is by nature, and God for his part recognizes no difference between himself and such a person.”<sup>174</sup> This speaks of habitual union or possibly unitive life and these are generally the priority for the Eckhart as a minister rather than extraordinary moments of ecstasy. Detachment and union are for life on earth as a reflection and foretaste of future perfect indistinguishability.

Eckhart seeks to unveil something of the mystery of union in his commentary on Genesis when he likens the union of the soul with God to the dialogue between a person and his image which remains separate. God is distinct otherwise he would not be God but having created, he as the divine source cannot be indistinct from his creation. Eckhart describes this union by saying, “This soul is dead and is buried in the Godhead, for the Godhead lives as no one other than itself.... She and God are a single blessedness and a single kingdom... Here the soul and the Godhead are one, and here the soul has discovered that she herself is the kingdom of God.” The soul seems to lose identity in this passage. Having confirmed union with God to be the destination for the soul, the Meister explains how this is the work of God. He continues, “Now

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<sup>171</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Die Rede der Unterscheidungen*, DW V.

<sup>172</sup> Pseudo Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Complete Works* trans. by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), ch. 7, p. 3.

<sup>173</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 82.

<sup>174</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 66.

someone may ask, ‘What is the best exercise we can do to help the soul attain this?’ The answer to this is that the soul must remain in death and not flinch from death... In God the soul receives new life. Here the soul rises from the dead into the life of the Godhead, and here God pours into her all his divine wealth.”<sup>175</sup> If the soul lost identity in death it has now been recovered in a new form. The movement of God towards man is taken up as the way for man to move towards God. The return journey is completed as the soul, which has taken up temporary existence in time, returns to timelessness though transformed in some way.

Man has been poured out from God but, within time, God continues to pour into man and there remains a level of indistinguishability. There is temporal and atemporal indistinguishability. During time there is the idea that there is indistinguishability between the image of God in man and image of man in the mind of God. The question of a difference in identity either side of time is difficult to quantify because of our limitation when trying to understand eternity. Our time as creation could seem to lack purpose if the nature of the soul within the Godhead is identical before procession and after return. Transformation takes place within time but the effects of this are effective and rest beyond what we know as time. Aspects of union between God and man exist throughout however events are phased in terms of time and eternity. The Meister deals with the issue of being absorbed into the presence of God at death by saying that temporal things are forgotten and the soul dwells and reigns eternally with God. He states, “The soul strides into God...and is completely dissolved in God and God in it.”<sup>176</sup> There is no question of not being conscious and there is the constant realisation of being in God.

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<sup>175</sup> Meister Eckhart, Jostes, Nr. 82.

<sup>176</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW III, PR. 84.

## 7. Conclusions.

It is possible to summarise the thoughts of Meister Eckhart with different conclusions because what we know of his works contains both ambiguities and contradictions. Some ambiguities are deliberate because of the nature of a preacher seeking to provoke a deeper comprehension of the mysteries of God and others are inevitable due to the context and use of language. Some of the contradictions are due to his use of paradox but others suggest a fluidity in his thinking that just seems to cloud the waters from producing a clear theology. As well as this, it seems that over the passage of time, maybe due to the pressure of being accused of heresy, he altered his views, and there are variations of thought making it more difficult to ascertain a clear picture.

Eckhart used apophatic language and mystical thinking to lead his audience into hidden aspects of existence outside of creation. He made statements that might seem shocking or just unorthodox but, by deconstructing the thoughts of his audience, he was aiming to draw them to the silence of the unknown. He provides no system to navigate a proposed theology but clues to unlock the mystery for those willing to explore. 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.”<sup>177</sup> The Meister presented a God uncontainable by human thought, theory and language with methods aimed to both reveal and retain the hiddenness of the mystery. He uses analogical and abstract pictures as well as the established ideas of intellect, being and oneness to guide our thoughts to God beyond our thoughts.

Meister Eckhart developed language to illuminate and heighten mystery, with terms such as *grunt* in particular, which already spoke of different things both abstract and concrete. McGinn believes gaining an understanding of what is meant by the *grunt* is the key to appreciating the thoughts of Eckhart on Indistinguishability. He writes, “What we find in Eckhart’s mysticism of the ground is a new creation designed to express the needs of a late medieval audience avid for total transformation into God.”<sup>178</sup> This *grunt* exists outside of time and creation and is the place where there is complete fusion between God and man. By using this more abstract term there

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<sup>177</sup> Leo Scheffczyk, *Creation and Providence* (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), p. 167.

<sup>178</sup> McGinn, *Harvest*, p. 121.



seems to be more scope for the thought of the soul being of the same source, rather than propose a location or nature of substance for something that is neither physical nor temporal.

The difficulty of understanding any fused identity is that it occurs outside of the realms that we, as created beings, can comprehend. Eckhart sought to stretch boundaries in order to explain matters beyond which we cannot know. He taught there is a non-physical part of us that exists that we might, in the vernacular of today, call virtual and this existence shares the same substance as the *grunt* of the Godhead. This leads to the thought of there being a Godhead and the soul, or a measure of the soul, prior to the Trinity. Eckhart clearly presents an existence of non-physical, non-temporal man within the divine source apart from the Trinity and creation.

According to Eckhart, indistinction occurs in the source of the divine essence of God, and the nature of this is according to how we perceive this *grunt*, because our ability to comprehend the nature of it is restricted to human perceptions. The Meister described atemporal existence in the *grunt* and also in the mind of God. Outside of creation all things pre-exist in the mind of God and this virtual existence is the image of their actual existence as created things. This is manifested in a unique way with humans who, as distinct from creation, are made in the image of God and there is part of the soul that is one with the substance of God. It is the nature of the existence of the soul within the divine essence that provides the measure of indistinguishability proposed by the Meister.

The nature of the soul and the way in which the *grunt* is equated as the mind of God is critical in placing the soul or part of the soul or the image of the soul within it. Eckhart states that the soul is of the divine essence and longs to return to the source of this essence. Being part of creation brings about a certain amount of distinction but, following detachment, the ultimate destination is no less than the starting point for the soul. While the pre-existence of the soul can be understood to reside in the mind of God it is difficult to comprehend this to be the place of return because the Bible speaks of a bodily resurrection as well as the immortality of the soul.

The Meister presents an existence which is both temporal and atemporal, saying, “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."<sup>179</sup> This is a clear statement advocating a pre-creation existence within God. Our human limitation of being unable to fully comprehend matters outside of time is a restriction on our understanding but this is the boundary that Eckhart sought to extend. Also, Eckhart asks, "What is the last end?" And answers, "It is the hidden darkness of the eternal divinity, and it is unknown, and it will never be known. God remains there within himself, unknown."<sup>180</sup> This statement supports the idea of an incomprehensible existence with God after a time span. There is a connection with God during time that is ours through being made in the image of God as well as a relationship received through the redemption of Christ. Our human existence is relating to God either side of, or outside of our existence within time. There is activity within God in the *bullito* and *ebullito* and also movement away from God and towards God in the *exitus* and *reditus*. Eckhart places the soul within the indistinct Godhead where there is nothingness, and also in creation, as active through each of these phases of movement, retaining a level of indistinguishability.

As humans, all features of atemporal existence cannot be fathomed within time, and the procession and return system of Neo-Platonism is only a model that provides, at best, a possible and partial solution. The Meister used this metaphysics of flow to develop his ideas but it provides some explanation rather than the key to unlock every mystery he opened. He speaks of being God within the *grunt* and being 'in God' through detachment. In each of these aspects of existence, temporal and atemporal, there is union of some form and to some extent between God and man. When seeking to fully comprehend the nature of this indistinguishability between God and man we are left with questions as well as answers but even more, a most intriguing, theological, philosophical and mystical contemplation and unique insight by the enigmatic Meister Eckhart.

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<sup>179</sup> Kelley, *Divine Knowledge*, p. 66.

<sup>180</sup> Meister Eckhart, DW I, PR. 22.

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