

ENCOUNTERING GOD IN THE THE NOTHINGNESS OF BEING:
MEISTER ECKHART

JOS HULS, O.CARM.

The spiritual way often has to do with letting go. To reach the inside, we have to let go of the outside. An image often used is that of an onion which has to be peeled, layer by layer. The question, however, is: what is meant by letting go. What *is* letting go, and what does it entail? Eckhart uses the term 'lâzen', which has a good deal of biblical background, but first and foremost it refers to the evangelical counsel to let go of everything.¹ Eckhart does not confine the meaning of this counsel to letting go of worldly possessions or material riches: what really matters is letting go of ourselves. He means that we should let go of our own free will. As long as we – uneasy about ourselves and our own situation – think that the encounter with God depends on some particular situation or condition, we have not yet let go of ourselves and are still seeking God outside of ourselves. When, however, we let go of this conditionality – knowing that nothing exists outside of God – then reality itself, as it appears to us in all its unconditionality, can become the space in which God speaks to us.²

In his sermon *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum*,³ which deals with the encounter between Martha and Jesus, Eckhart speaks of human receptivity as a precondition for the encounter with God. An important image here is that of a young, unmarried woman (*juncvrouwe*). Martha encounters Jesus in her virginal freedom. Like her, we have to be virginal and free if we are to be capable of receiving Jesus.

¹ Cf. Mt. 19; Lk. 18:28-30 and Mk. 10:28-30.

² Cf. ERIK A. PANZIG, *Gelâzenheit und abegescheidenheit, Eine Einführung in das theologische Denken des Meister Eckhart*, Leipzig 2005, 76-100.

³ MEISTER ECKHART, *Die deutschen Werke/ im Auftr. Der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft*. Stuttgart; Berlin; Köln; Mainz 1936 ff. (henceforth abbreviated as: *DW*); 24-41 (Pr. 2). The full title reads: *Intravit Jesus in Quoddam castellum et mulier quaedam, Martha nomine, excepit illum in domum suam. Lucae II.*

I have first quoted this saying in Latin; it is written in the Gospel and in German it means: "Our Lord Jesus Christ went up into a citadel and was received by a virgin who was a wife." Now mark this word carefully. It must of necessity be a virgin, the person by whom Jesus was received. 'Virgin' is as much as to say a person who is void of alien images, as empty as he was when he did not exist.⁴

A gifted preacher, Eckhart understood better than most the art of translating the speculative concepts he had gained from theology into a philosophy of life that could be understood by lay people. Because we modern readers often lack this speculative background, Eckhart's language comes across as abstract and philosophical. Yet his sermons have, first of all, to be understood as meditations on the gospel. In the aforementioned sermon, Eckhart starts with the opening sentence of the Gospel narrative about Martha and Mary. Proceeding from this sentence, he reflects on what it means to receive Christ or God into our life. The image of the young, still virginal woman who receives Jesus into her home exemplifies every human being's encounter with God. Eckhart considers it impossible to encounter God except in our virginal state. This may strike us as a rather liberal treatment of the Bible, but in fact it opens up a manner of reading Scripture that does not restrict us to the objective, historical meaning of the text.⁵ He reads this Gospel, first of all, as a mirror in which we directly encounter God. This requires us as readers to approach the Gospel not only in a rational discursive manner, but as a holy text which surrenders its meaning only when we are open to the immediate reality that is hidden from the objective eye and resonates within ourselves. Eckhart sets out to raise the question of dialogical reality in terms of the Gospel story about Martha and Mary.

Eckhart associates virginity with our capacity for forming images or objectifying. Only when we are emptied of all alien images can we receive God into our lives. This immediately brings us to what is meant

⁴ DW 1, 24,3-25,4 (Pr. 2): Ich hân ein wörtelîn gesprochen des êrsten in dem latîne, daz stât geschriben in dem êwangelîô und sprichet alsô ze tiutsche: "unser herre Jêsus Kristus der gienc ûf in ein bûrgelîn und wart enpfangen von einer juncvrouwen, diu ein wîp was". Eyâ, nû merket mit vlîze diz wort: ez muoz von nôt sîn, daz si ein juncvrouwe was, der mensche, von der Jêsus wart enpfangen. Juncvrouwe ist alsô vil gesprochen als ein mensche, der von allen vremen bilden ledic ist, alsô ledic, als er was, dô er niht enwas. Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, transl. & ed. by M. O'C. Walshe, Shaftesbury, Dorset – Rockport MA 1991, Sermon 8, 71-78.

⁵ Cf. MEISTER ECKHART, *Werke I*, Frankfurt am Main 1933, commentary by Niklaus Largier, 760.

by 'alien' images. Are these images alien because they distort reality, or are they alien because every image we make automatically distorts reality? In his sermon it becomes clear that Eckhart means the latter. He speaks of our original state in God. Before we are called into existence, we are already in God and it is to this immediate life, coming from God, that he will bring us back. The historical framework in which Eckhart speaks has to be understood in an ontological sense. First and foremost, we are the immediate life springing from God, who incessantly calls us into existence. However, this immediacy remains hidden from the objective eye. From this perspective all 'image making' is alienating because it separates our image-based reality from the immediate reality of God, who pervades the whole of created reality.

Here Eckhart faces a dilemma. He knows that nobody can live without images. Images are necessary. We need them to find our way in created reality. Without the images in our memory, we would have to keep re-inventing the wheel and would, moreover, be unable to build on the knowledge we have accumulated through experience.

Now the question may be asked, how a man who has been born and has reached the age of rational understanding can be as empty of all images as he was when he was not; for he knows many things, all of which are images: so how can he be empty of them? Note the explanation which I shall give you. If I were possessed of sufficient understanding so as to comprehend within my own mind all the images ever conceived by all men, as well as those that exist in God Himself — if I had these without attachment, whether in doing or in leaving undone, without before and after but rather standing free in this present Now ready to receive God's most beloved will and to do it continually, then in truth I would be a virgin, untrammelled by any images, just as I was when I was not.⁶

Eckhart is positive about our use of images – that is why he does not ask us to get rid of them. On the contrary, he heightens the effect.

⁶ *DW*: 1, 25,4-26,3 (Pr. 2): Sehet, nû möhte man vrâgen, wie der mensche, der geborn ist und vor gegangen ist in vernünftic leben, wie er alsô ledic müge sîn aller bilde, als dô er niht enwas, und er weiz doch vil, daz sint allez bilde; wie mac er denne ledic sîn? Nû merket daz underscheit, daz wil ich iu bewîsen. Wære ich alsô vernünftic, daz alliu bilde vernünfticliche in mir stüenden, diu alle menschen ie enpfiegen und diu in gote selber sint, wære ich der âne eigenschaft, daz ich enkeinez mit eigenschaft hæte begriffen in tuonne noch in lâzenne, mit vor noch mit nâch, mêr: daz ich in disem gegenwertigen nû vrî und ledic stüende nâch dem liebsten willen gotes und den ze tuonne âne underlâz, in der wârheit sô wære ich juncvrouwe âne hindernisse aller bilde als gewærlîche, als ich was, dô ich niht enwas.

He posits that even if our brains could contain all images of all people and of God, it would still be possible for us to be empty and free from these images. The problem lies, rather, in the way we deal with them. On the one hand, we find our way in created reality by means of them. On the other hand, images can function as a shield to keep us outside ultimate reality. When that happens, the images possess us and thereby lose their intermediary function. Therefore our virginity relates to our capacity to be drawn by the Other from our world of imagination. In the encounter with God we are always virginal, because the reality of the Other cannot be reduced to something of our own. In this way the Other shows himself in the cracks of our logic. Jesus touches Martha deeply. He turns her life upside down, because in Jesus she is confronted with a reality that cannot be reduced to something she is able to comprehend in terms of her own logic. At the same time this encounter is a kind of awakening, for the reality which Jesus opens up to her is the 'truth' of her existence: God himself, who in his immediacy is beyond all images.⁷

I. THE MYSTERY OF HUMANKIND

We human beings never possess ourselves. In his anthropology Franco Imoda speaks of human beings as a mystery⁸ – meaning not so much the impossibility of defining a human being as the mystery that human beings are to themselves. Animals find their destiny in satisfying their immediate needs, but human beings cannot be content with this. From the time they draw their first breath they are searchers who are impelled to discover their destiny. Our life is inevitably a journey in search of our being or truth.

Part of the human drama is the fact that it is a journey without end. The 'truth' of our being is certainly not within our reach; it lies beyond everything we can grasp or understand with our discursive minds. God is beyond all images; and likewise there is no single image that could contain a human being in his or her totality. In this sense the Judaeo-Christian tradition speaks of humanity as the mirror of

⁷ Cf. REINER MANSTETTEN, Meister Eckharts Stellingnahme zu Predigt 2: *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum* im Kölner Häresieprozess. Ein Essay über Wahrheit und Nachvollzug, in *Meister Eckhart: Lebensstationen – Redesituationen*, Berlin 1997, 279-301.

⁸ FRANCO IMODA S.J., *Human development, psychology and mystery*, Peeters, Leuven 1998, 10-32.

God's being. Created in God's image and likeness, we can only find fulfilment of our being in the sight of the Other who is the wellspring of our life.

There is a tension or strain between this longing for our deepest 'truth' and our fear of the loneliness that lies concealed beneath it. For the 'truth' of humanity is not a collective given. Individual human beings always have their own 'truth' which can be uncovered only when they are ready to discard everything that is extraneous to their own being. We are caught between semblance and reality. For fear of the nakedness which we are in the depth of our being, we put on heroics that make us important in the eyes of others. We want to be seen, to count; we want to justify our existence. So we adjust to the expectations of others or strive for positions that confer prestige in our society.

The need to be appreciated and affirmed is a primary one. We cannot do without the warm regard of others. To develop properly as human beings, we must feel in one way or another that we are accepted. A human being who has lacked this cherishing closeness, for whatever reason, risks suffering the consequences lifelong. But however important the appreciative eyes of others may be, they can also alienate us from ourselves; for our love of others is never unconditional. The more we depend on others, the more we risk losing the freedom to go the way of our own soul. Fearing the naked reality of ourselves, we choose the warm nest of affirmation.

Mystics especially – deeply conscious of the divine being in humanity – have pointed out the dangers of socialising. No matter how well human society is organised, we constantly risk adjusting so closely to the expectations of others that in the end we no longer know who we are. In this connection Eckhart speaks of the merchant mentality in human beings. We want to buy the love of others and the love of God by our behaviour, not realising that our total existence is an act of love from God. Our existence itself is the immediacy of God's love. That is why we do not need to seek our justification in the eyes of others. We do not have to prove ourselves, we just have to 'be' and be aware of living totally in the sight of the Other.

This awareness that in ourselves we are 'nothing' is diametrically opposed to the ideas of modern people, who consider themselves the authors of their own lives and experience every infringement of this assumption as an attack on their freedom. To mystics this is a form of ignorance which leads irrevocably to slavery – for individuals who deny their own origin, and therefore their own nothingness, have no point of reference except the significance they have in the eyes of

others. Not being anchored in their own being, they enslave themselves to others and get entangled in this web of mutual dependencies. Real freedom comes only through the recognition that we do not engender ourselves and in this sense are a mystery to ourselves. For anyone who is aware of having been called into being by the Other will also see that we can only become ourselves by heeding the voice of this unconditional love who, from the beyond, is the voice of our being. In other words, we live in the sight of the Other, and the more we dare to admit this loving regard, the more we can let go of our care for ourselves and thus be born in the sight of the Other.

II. TWO ATTITUDES

Returning to Eckhart's text, we see two opposing attitudes.⁹ The first is that of persons who absolutise their own logic and, in so doing, leave no room for the reality that lies beyond their images. This attitude is defensive. Because we dare not confront reality as being Other, we escape into a world which allows us to take a hand in its arrangement. This attitude is ultimately monolithic, because it evades the encounter as a dialogical event. However, that is not to say that it is limited to people who attach no significance to belief. Eckhart certainly speaks to a public that takes its faith very seriously. But explicit belief in God is not, to him, any guarantee of a really believing attitude to life. Such an attitude consists in daring to encounter a reality that breaches our own logic.

The other attitude consists in openness to reality as being Other. In this attitude, too, images are used, but used in the full knowledge that as images they refer to something else; they are not taken as absolute. Therefore these images retain their mediating function and remain channels for an encounter with God – open to immediate reality which cannot be captured in images. This second attitude is fundamentally dialogical in structure because of its openness. Martha meets Jesus in the body, which means that she has a certain image of him. Yet this, to her, is just the outside. What really concerns her is his transparency as God, and it is this transparency that leads her beyond the images of her own logic and allows her to be born in God.

⁹ Cf. AMY HOLLYWOOD, *The Soul as Virgin Wife, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart*, Notre Dame & London 1995, 146.

The immediate reality is invisible to the physical eye, and moreover cannot be objectified as something we can bring into our own world.

We cannot choose to hold either of these two attitudes to the exclusion of the other: they are in constant tension or conflict. We cannot decide to discard our defence mechanisms so as to open ourselves completely to God and love only him in everything. Neither are we able to retire undisturbed to a world to which the Other has no access. Something unexpected always happens to disturb this world.

III. THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE

To Eckhart the purpose of Scripture is to wean us from our own logic, for the Spirit speaks through Scripture. Therefore Scripture has, first and foremost, a mystagogical function. It sets out not to teach us a doctrine but to offer us a possibility of encounter. In it God can start speaking as the Other who addresses us from beyond. In this way it becomes something to be read again and again, a never-ending process. Time and again it appeals to us in a new way, because in its mystagogical dynamics we are transformed ever more deeply in God. The condition for this transforming dynamics is that we do not get fixated on the images of Scripture but look at them as doorways through which God comes to meet us.

To Eckhart Scripture is an essential source of inspiration. If we open ourselves to it, we are opened up by it and thus brought into contact with a reality that escapes our objectifying but, as an appeal, leaves a deep mark on us.¹⁰ In the Judaeo-Christian tradition this is called the voice of Love, which transcends the human logic of self-preservation and self-interest. Therefore the question is not whether our faith permits us to be led by images and representations, but rather how these images can open us up to the naked reality of the God beyond images. In this connection it is essential to acknowledge that the scriptures contain a hidden meaning which we can neither grasp nor understand in the categories of our discursive minds.

¹⁰ Cf. NIKLAUS LARGIER, *Kritik und Lebenskunst nach Eckhart von Hochheim, Heinrich Seuse und Margareta Porète*, in: Mariano Delgado & Gotthard Fuchs (Hrsg.), *Die Kirchenkritik der Mystiker, Prophetie aus Gotteserfahrung*, Fribourg, Stuttgart 2004, Band I Mittelalter, 141-155: 144-147. Id., *Intellekttheorie, Hermeneutik und Allegorie: Subjekt und Subjektivität bei MEISTER ECKHART*, in *Geschichte und Vorgeschichte der modernen Subjektivität*. Herausgegeben von Peto Luzius Fetz, Roland Hagenbüchle und Peter Schulz. Band 1, Berlin – New York 1998, 477.

However, this does not mean that we are talking about a speculative reality. The divine reality is beyond our reason, because in its immediacy it is prior to everything else. It is an appeal, a claim. This appeal is certainly mediated by the images of Scripture, but at the same time it is an event actuated in the reader directly as something that transcends its images.

When Eckhart speaks of the virginity of Martha, he is referring to this tension between the enclosed nature of the images of our own logic and the fundamental openness that is needed to let the divine scriptures enter into us. If the scriptures are to become really accessible to us, if they are to become the mirror of ultimate reality, we must not try to appropriate those images: the moment we lock ourselves into our own system, the images lose their transparency. By using the image of Martha's virginity, Eckhart clarifies that we can receive God only by the breakthrough of our own logic.

IV. DISPENSING WITH ATTACHMENT

A word that regularly recurs in Eckhart's vocabulary is 'attachment' in the sense of attribute or property (*eigenschaft*). With regard to our images we must learn to do without attachments, not to see anything in terms of attachments. Later on, mystics like Ruusbroec were to adopt this term to explain, for example, the distinction between secret friends and hidden sons of God.¹¹ The eminent Eckhart scholar Quint, followed by Frans Maas, translates this term as 'I-bonding'. But it is doubtful whether this or any translation does justice to what Eckhart tries to convey with the term. For attachment ('bonding') is not problematic in itself; the problem is the attachment to things, which imprisons us in ourselves and our own reality. It is more important to have a look at the Aristotelian background of the term. Aristotle distinguishes between characteristics or accidents (*συμβεβηκός*) and the essence or substance (*ουσία*) of things.¹²

¹¹ JAN VAN RUUSBROEC, *Vanden blinkenden steen (The Sparkling Stone)*, rr. 385-391 in: Jan van Ruusbroec, *Opera Omnia*, deel 10, Lannoo / Brepols Tiel / Turnhout 1991. 'Met eyghenscap' translated as 'in a self-conscious manner'.

¹² ARISTOTLE, *Categories* 4, 1b25: ten categories are distinguished, notably substance plus nine others, one of which is accidents. In principle, substance takes a more prominent place. All others are attributes. *Topica* I 9 (103b20) id. *Analytica posteriora* I, 22, 83a25: deals with the explicit relationship of substance to accidents. Aristotelian metaphysics presupposes this distinction.

Accidents are changeable, not inherent in the substance. To reach the substance, we have to let go of the accidents. Dispensing with accident does not mean that we are unbound, but rather that we bind ourselves to the essence by letting go of the accidents. One of the three vows a religious must take is to live 'without possessions' (*âne [ohne] eigenschaft*). Attachment to worldly possessions is forbidden to a religious. The purpose is not that they should be detached in all respects, but that in this detachment they should attach themselves to the one thing needful: God himself, who is the essence of all.

No-one can live without images, but there is a constant danger that images will become absolutes. When that happens, we exchange reality for a dream world of our own ideas. Often this is motivated by fear. For fear of what is strange we cling to the security of a fictional world which we ourselves have created. The more this fear takes possession of us, the more we enclose ourselves in the projection of our own images. In Eckhart's view this repression not only occurs in serious traumatic experiences; it is inherent in human existence as such. As finite creatures we are ruled by our urge to live, and for fear of death we are constantly safeguarding our own existence. However necessary this care for ourselves may be, it is the reason why the reality in which we live becomes the instrument of our goals and can no longer be contemplated in itself – that is to say, as the space of the Other. When Eckhart speaks of 'accident', he is speaking of this imprisonment into which reality, treated as an instrument, has been absolutised. We attach ourselves to the 'accidents' and therefore not the essence of people or things when we need them, consciously or unconsciously, for our self-preservation, and therefore we can only observe them from our own perspective. The repression means that, given this logic of self-preservation, we flee from reality as the immediacy of God's countenance. We seek security in creatures because they are visible and tangible, while the only one who can truly offer security is God himself, who is the hidden foundation of this intermediate created existence.

Eckhart lays great stress on the fact that we lock ourselves into ourselves and into the images of our own logic. Over and over again we have to be willing to let go of these images. Images which take root in us, thus becoming absolute, degenerate into idolatrous realities which prevent us from losing ourselves in God's unconditionality. The dynamics of self-interest and the necessity of holding on to images follow naturally from each other. Images become our property when, as a matter of self-interest, we view them as absolute. In that case we exchange appearance for reality and can no longer see it as a mirror

in which we are directly confronted with God. If we – knowing that God cares for us in everything – could let go of this anxious concern about ourselves, then the images too would not hamper the immediacy of our relationship with God. Freed from every attachment to self, we could freely be moved by God in everything. A life ‘without attachment’ is a life that has united itself completely with God. We are ‘without attachment’ when we let God move us freely in everything – God who, as an ever-receding perspective, forms the horizon of the images. This life no longer takes thought for itself because it has been totally consumed by Love. In the same way Eckhart speaks in his sermon of standing free and empty before God’s most beloved will.

V. WORKING VIRGINALLY

A true encounter is always a virginal event in which, time and again, we awaken from the dream world of our images to a profound awareness that we have locked ourselves into the quasi world of our own projections. Despite this tension, images and representations have a mediating function. Thus the image of the virgin shows us that God is received into the nothingness of ourselves. In the first place our life springs from God. He is the Being of our being; without his Being we vanish into the void. Consequently this ontological passivity pertains to every layer of our existence. Even the achievements we can boast of as human beings are only feasible through creaturely receptivity.

And yet I say that being a virgin by no means deprives a man of works that he has done: he yet remains virgin-free, offering no hindrance to the highest Truth, even as Jesus is empty and free and virginal in himself. Since according to the masters union comes only by the joining of like to like, therefore that man must be a maiden, a virgin, who would receive the virgin Jesus.¹³

Virginity implies a state of detachment. A virgin has not yet given herself to anybody, hence she can choose freely. In contrast to physical virginity, which is permanently lost through bodily union, Eckhart sees

¹³ DW: 1, 26,4-26,9 (Pr. 2): Ich spriche aber: daz der mensche ist juncvrouwe, daz enbenimet im nihtes niht von allen den werken, diu er ie getete; des stât er megetlich und vrî âne alle hindernisse der obersten wârheit, als Jêsus ledic und vrî ist und megetlich in im selber. Als die *meister* sprechent, daz glich und glich aleine ein sache ist der einunge, her umbe sô muoz der mensche maget sîn, juncvrouwe, diu den megetlichen Jêsum enpfâhen sol.

virginity as a potential that cannot be destroyed by any human act. Whatever people have done in the past and whatever images have been stored in their minds over the years, they all have the potential to return to the place where they stand naked before God and are just receptivity. In this spiritual virginity we meet truth face to face and are wholly filled by it. In the same way Jesus, too, was virginal and free in himself to receive God without impediment. Hence to Eckhart, virginity is an image of total receptivity. By nature we already have this receptivity at the level of our creaturely existence which we receive from the creator's hand every moment. In the first place we live by a Life that we in no way owe to ourselves. By the same token we can become spiritually conscious of our virginity by interiorising this ontological passivity – in which we are profoundly aware of living by the Other – at all levels of our existence. Another term associated with virginity is 'union'. In our virginity we are joined to God, because we are like him only in such a receptive state. Thus the phrase 'like to like' – said to form the basis of union – conveys the tension that characterises our spiritual journey. For however much we yearn for union with God, there is an absolute boundary between the images of our intellect or the works of our hands and God, who in his immediacy both fully penetrates and wholly transcends this creaturely reality.¹⁴ That is why we only encounter God in our virginity. There, beyond everything that we may regard as our own territory, we receive the Other and live directly by him.

VI. BECOMING FRUITFUL IN RECEPTIVITY

Now attend, and follow me closely. If a man were to be ever virginal, he would bear no fruit. If he is to be fruitful, he must needs be a wife. 'Wife' is the noblest title one can bestow on the soul – far nobler than 'virgin'. For a man to receive God within him is good, and in receiving he is virgin. But for God to be fruitful in him is better, for only the fruitfulness of the gift is the thanks rendered for that gift, and herein the spirit is a wife, whose gratitude is fecundity, bearing Jesus again in God's paternal heart.¹⁵

¹⁴ Cf. ERIK A. PANZIG, *Gelâzenheit und abegescheidenheit, Eine Einführung in das theologische Denken des Meister Eckhart*, Leipzig 2005, 70-74.

¹⁵ DW: 1, 27,1-27,9 (Pr. 2): Nû merket und sehet mit vlize! Daz nû der mensche iemer mê juncvrouwe wære, sô enkæme keine vruht von im. Sol er vruhtbære werden, sô muoz daz von nôt sîn, daz er ein wîp sî. Wîp ist daz edelste wort, daz man der sêle

The virginal receptivity of human beings is directly linked with their existence. Therefore they do not need to become virginal – virginity is inalienably part of their being. For the potential to become fecund, we have to be in contact with this divine layer. That is why the virgin has to be a wife. In Eckhart's imagery a wife is someone who receives God in her virginity and in fecund gratitude bears God again in God. It does not mean that wifeness destroys human virginity. On the contrary, virginity is what makes it possible to encounter God. But just as a mirror does not absorb the light it receives but reflects it, so humans too have to bear the light they receive from God in God again.

From the human perspective this relationship is marked by gratitude. Gratitude for the gift is what makes us bear God again in his paternal heart. Note that this should not be interpreted in a moral sense. Eckhart does not call on people to be grateful. Virginity makes us aware of life as an absolute gift, for when we look at our lives we are a gift and nothing but a gift. Hence the realisation that we are brought into existence by the Other is what makes us grateful and makes us realise that we live in the sight of the Other.

From other texts of Eckhart's we know that the birth of the Son in humans through the Father and the rebirth of the Son in the Father through human beings is actually a reciprocal movement.¹⁶ In other words, God and humans are born each in the other's countenance. Thus the structure is that of an encounter which does not stem from our intentionality but from the Other, who is our life apart from all peculiarities. We are born in God when we let ourselves enter into God without hindrance. In that exposure we bear God again as the immediacy by which we live.

Many good gifts, received in virginity, are not reborn back into God in wifely fruitfulness and with praise and thanks. Such gifts perish and all comes to nought, and a man is no more blessed or the better for them. In this case his virginity is useless because to that virginity he does not

zuo gesprechen mac, und ist vil edeler dan juncvrouwe. Daz der mensche got enpfæhet in im, daz ist guot, und in der enpfenclichkeit ist er maget. Daz aber got vruchtbarlich in im werde, daz is bezzer; wan vruchtbarkeit der gâbe daz ist aleine dankbærkeit der gâbe, und dâ ist der geist ein wîp in der widerbernden dankbærkeit, dâ er got widergebirt Jêsum in daz veterliche herze.

¹⁶ DW: 1, 375-389 (Pr. 22) Ave gratia plena. Cf. *Gelâzenheit und abegescheidenheit, Eine Einführung in das theologische Denken des Meister Eckhart*, Erik A. Panzig, Leipzig 2005, 244-247. This reciprocal movement is expressed in Dutch by Kees Waaijman as 'tegeninnigheid', cf. Kees Waaijman, *De mystiek van ik en jij*, Kampen 1990.

add the perfect fruitfulness of a wife. Therein lies the mischief. Hence I have said, "Jesus went up into a citadel and was received by a virgin who was a wife." It must be thus, as I have shown you.¹⁷

The distinction between the receptiveness of the virgin and the fruitfulness of the wife is comparable to that made in the parable of the seeds¹⁸ between those who hear the word but through some circumstance or other do not let it come to fruition, and those who let it bear fruit in their hearts. There are many who admit the word receptively, yet only a few in whom the word becomes truly fruitful. The parable also shows that the role of human beings is confined to that of the soil. They are not the seed, nor the fruit growing in the seed; they are the soil in which the seed dies and blossoms. Hence the human's role is one of 'allowing', so that the divine seed may bear fruit in us. This is also found in Eckhart, who links virginal receptiveness to wifely fruitfulness. We receive God in our virginity, but this divine gift becomes fecund in our wifehood and we bear God again in himself. The distinction between virgin and wife makes clear that we must differentiate between the God who, beyond all images, is the immediacy by which we live and the fruition of that immediacy in our lives. That only happens when we dare encounter the divine reality of our lives as the ground of our existence.

VII. WORKING FOR GOD OR WORKING FROM GOD

Married folk bring forth little more than one fruit in a year. But it is other wedded folk that I have in mind now: all those who are bound with attachment to prayer, fasting, vigils and all kinds of outward discipline and mortification. All attachment to any work that involves the loss of freedom to wait on God in the here and now, and to follow Him alone in the light wherein He would show you what to do and what not to do, every moment freely and anew, as if you had nothing else, and neither would nor could do otherwise — any such attachment or set practice

¹⁷ DW: 1, 27,10 – 28,6 (Pr. 2): Vil guoter gâben werdent enpfangen in der juncvröuwelicheit und enwerdent niht wider ingeborn in der wîplichen vruchtbarkeit mit dankbærem lobe in got. Die gâbe verderbent und werdent alle ze nihte, daz der mensche niemer sæliger noch bezzer dar abe wirt. Dâ enist im sîn juncvröuwelicheit ze nihte nütze, wan er niht ein wîp enist zuo der juncvröuwelicheit mit ganzer vruchtbarkeit. Dar an lît der schade. Dar umbe hân ich gesprochen: "Jêsus gienc ûf in ein bürgelîn und wart enpfangen von einer juncvrouwen, diu ein wîp was". Daz muoz von nôt sîn, als ich iu bewîset hân.

¹⁸ Lk. 8:5-15.

which repeatedly denies you this freedom, I call a *year*; for your soul will bear no fruit till it has done this work to which you are possessively attached, and you too will have no trust in God or in yourself before you have done the work you embraced with attachment, for otherwise you will have no peace. Thus you will bring forth no fruit till your work is done. That is what I call 'a year', and the fruit of it is paltry because it springs from attachment to the task and not from freedom.¹⁹

In this passage Eckhart introduces, in addition to the images of the virgin and the wife, that of the married couple. A couple does not bring forth more than one fruit in a year. Despite this realism Eckhart is not concerned with such primordial reality. His sole concern is how we relate to God and how God becomes active in our lives. Hence the term 'married folk' does not refer to a love relationship between two people but to the way we attach ourselves to people or things. A married couple is someone who is bound 'with attachment' to diverse outward religious observances, hence is no longer free 'to wait on God in the here and now'. That makes the married couple the antithesis of the virgin, who faces the supreme truth free and unfettered.

Despite this antithesis Eckhart does not condemn human works generally and does not espouse any kind of quietism. He is not concerned with our works but with our attitude in accomplishing them. For there is a world of difference between works that we perform of our own accord to reach some goal and works performed because of the immediacy of the appeal.²⁰ To clarify the distinction he reiterates the term 'attachment' (*Eigenschaft*). Just as we should be

¹⁹ DW: 1, 28,7-27,11 (Pr. 2): Êliche liute die bringent des jâres lützel mê dan éine vruht. Aber ander êliche liute die meine ich nû ze disem mâle: alle die mit eigenschaft gebunden sint an gebete, an vastenne, an wachenne und aller hande ûzerlicher üebunge und kestigunge. Ein ieglichiu eigenschaft eines ieglichen werkes, daz die vrîheit benimet, in disem gegenwertigen nû gote ze wartenne und dem aleine ze volgenne in dem lichte, mit dem er dich anwîsende wære ze tuonne und ze lâzenne in einem ieglichen nû vrî und niuwe, als ob dû anders nihet enhabest noch enwellest noch enkünnest: ein ieglichiu eigenschaft oder vûrgesetzt werke, daz dir dise vrîheit benimet alle zît niuwe, daz heize ich nû ein jâr; wan dîn sêle bringet dekeine vruht, si enhabe daz werke getân, daz dû mit eigenschaft besezen hâst, noch dû engetriuwest gote noch dir selber, dû enhabest dîn werke volbrâht, daz dû mit eigenschaft begriffen hâst; anders sô enhâst dû dekeinen vride. Dar umbe sô enbringest dû ouch dekeine vruht, dû enhabest dîn werke getân. Daz setze ich vûr ein jâr, und diu vruht ist nochdenne kleine, wan si ûz eigenschaft gegangen ist nâch dem werke und niht von vrîheit.

²⁰ Cf. NIKLAUS LARGIER, *Intellekttheorie, Hermeneutik und Allegorie: Subjekt und Subjektivität bei MEISTER ECKHART*, in *Geschichte und Vorgeschichte der modernen Subjektivität*. Herausgegeben von Peto Luzius Fetz, Roland Hagenbüchle und Peter Schulz. Band 1, Berlin – New York 1998, 469.

unattached to the images of our rational minds, so we must have no attachment to the ascetic religious practices that we perform. Here, too, the term 'attachment' seems to be caught in the contradiction of humans who imprison themselves in the fragmented world of existing things and the immediacy of the encounter with the divine that breaks into that insulated reality. Just as the images of our rational minds – when treated as absolute – lose their mediatory function, so our ascetic practices, when we regard them as *our* works and in that sense make them our property, prevent true immersion in God.

Eckhart distinguishes between the outward or material quality of practices and their inner orientation. Religious practices like fasting, vigils and the like are inwardly directed to detachment from material fixations and, in that exposure, concentrating on the sole reality: God, who gives himself to us totally in our lives. Hence he is not opposed to ascetic religious practices, but warns against an attitude that makes the practices an end in themselves, thus blocking encounter with God. The distinctive element here is 'freedom'. The practices are meant to free us for God, so that we can 'wait on God in the here and now, and ... follow Him alone in the light wherein He would show [us] what to do and what not to do'. The concept of freedom as used by Eckhart should not be confused with our modern concept of freedom. Modern people are free when they are their own boss and nothing prevents them from having their own way. This self-determination allows them to actualise themselves. But in Eckhart's sense the concept of freedom occurs in a context of letting go of self-will.²¹ For him people are truly free only when they are free for God and are no longer moved by anything except God's own light. From this it is evident that here too the term 'attachment' pertains to an attitude in which people incarcerate themselves in the images of their own logic. For it is this logic that separates us mentally from God and imprisons us in the world of existing things. As long as we regard religious exercises as 'our' works that we perform for God of our own accord we remain closed to their transforming dynamics. Although we appear to be the subjects of our religious exercises, essentially they seek to free us to the immediacy of God's action, which is beyond all images. That immediacy precludes any goals that human beings set themselves, because these automatically shackle them to their own images and thus destroy the free space of encounter.

²¹ Cf. ERIK A. PANZIG, *Gelâzenheit und abegescheidenheit, Eine Einführung in das theologische Denken des Meister Eckhart*, Leipzig 2005, 54-66.

Another important aspect that Eckhart associates with the fecundity of human receptivity is trust. People who, imprisoned in their own perspective, have nothing but their works to offer God trust neither God nor themselves. This is alienating, because from a human perspective it is actually a matter of mutual trust, otherwise they would not offer God their works. On the one hand they trust God to graciously accept their works; on the other they trust themselves and their own ability to accomplish the works. Nonetheless Eckhart speaks of a lack of trust, because he sees works done with attachment as a wall behind which people hide. Fearing their nakedness, they offer God their works rather than themselves. Put differently: through their works they miss out on a genuine relationship with God because they do not trust that they – just as they are – are worth God's while. Hence from the angle of a relationship with God there is a twofold deficiency. The first is not trusting in the unconditional love of God, who loves humans not for their works but for what they are. The second is not trusting that they – just as they are – are desirable to God. Hence instead of offering themselves they offer their works to gain God's favour.

To sum up: the term 'attachment' means an attitude whereby people tie themselves to their own works because of a lack of trust. That gives the works an instrumental function, so they lose their capacity to open us up to God's unconditional love. Thus we perform works with attachment when, out of self-concern, we feel obliged to take on ourselves, something we must do to earn God's love. Through this necessity we forfeit the freedom to let God bear fruit in us.

These, then, I call 'wedded folk' for they are bound by attachment. They bring forth little fruit, and paltry at that, as I have said.²²

To Eckhart wedded folk are those who marry their own works because they shrink from the nakedness of a relationship with God. They'd rather clothe themselves in works performed for God than brave the leap into a life lived in the immediacy of God. Because of this mental 'separation' between God and humans, 'wedded folk' bear little fruit. For fecundity stems from virginal receptivity and can only blossom when we let go of our grip.

²² DW: 1, 29,11-30,2 (Pr. 2): Dise heize ich êliche liute, wan sie an eigenschaft gebunden stânt. Dise bringent lützel vrühte, und diu selbe ist nochdenne kleine, als ich gesprochen hân.

VIII. BEING BORN IN THE FACE OF THE OTHER

A virgin who is a wife, is free and unfettered by attachment; she is always as near to God as to herself. She brings forth many and big fruits, for they are neither more nor less than God Himself. *This* fruit and *this* birth that virgin bears who is a wife, bringing forth daily a hundred and a thousandfold! Numberless indeed are her labours begotten of the most noble ground or, to speak more truly, of the very ground where the Father ever begets His eternal Word: it is thence she becomes fruitful and shares in the procreation. For Jesus, the light and splendour of the eternal heart (as St Paul says (Heb. 1:3), that he is the glory and splendour of the Father's heart and illumines the Father's heart with power), this same Jesus is made one with her and she with him, she is radiant and shining with him in one single unity, as one pure brilliant light in the paternal heart.²³

Although Eckhart uses terms like 'free' and 'unfettered', he in no way cherishes the modern ideal of human autonomy. On the contrary. To him people who base themselves on their own individuality and activities are their own prisoners and hence essentially unfree. True freedom comes only when we cease allowing our images to control us, thus becoming receptive to that which descends on us from beyond. Once again Eckhart conveys this idea with the term 'attachment'. Those who are unattached are as close to God as they are to themselves. In this sentence Eckhart is referring to the mental divide we usually introduce between God and humans. For judging by our lives we tend to take ourselves and our reality as a self-evident point of departure, banishing God from our world as a reality apart. Thus God may be the origin of our existence, but for the rest we are our own property, entering into an independent relationship with him as autonomous beings. This separation creates a contradiction between the works we offer to God and the goals we seek to reach by doing them. To Eckhart the separation between God and humans is at an ontological rather

²³ DW: 1, 30,3-31,8 (Pr. 2): Ein juncvrouwe, diu ein wîp ist, diu ist vrî und ungebunden âne eigenschaft, diu ist gote und ir selber alle zît glich nâhe. Diu bringet vil vrûhte und die sint grôz, minner noch mêr dan got selber ist. Dise vruht und dise geburt machet disiu juncvrouwe, diu ein wîp ist, geborn und bringet alle tage hundert mâl oder tûsent mâl vruht joch âne zal gebernde und vruhtbære werdende ûz dem aller edelsten grunde; noch baz gesprochen: jâ, ûz dem selben grunde, dâ der vater ûz gebernde ist sîn êwic wort, dar ûz wirt si vruhtbære mitgebernde. Wan Jêsus, daz lieht und der schîn des veterlîchen herzen - als sant *Paulus* sprichet, daz er ist ein êre eund ein schîn des veterlîchen herzen, und er durchliuhtet mit gewalte daz veterlîchen herze - dirre Jêsus ist mit ir vereinet und si mit im, und si liuhtet und schînet mit im als ein einic ein und als ein lûter klâr lieht in dem veterlîchen herzen.

than a physical level (as if God were a distinct entity in the reality of our existence). He is the immediacy of the world created in time and space and as such the immediacy of our creaturely existence. We exist in God and the more we entrust ourselves to this source, the more we dare let go of ourselves as autonomous beings over against God. To Eckhart such self-relinquishment is vitally important,²⁴ for it is the dichotomy between us and God that stops us from really descending into ourselves as the space where we are received by God. Only in God do we become truly ourselves and as long as we see ourselves as separated from him we cannot enter the space of receptivity. Thus the separation between God and humans is within us, not outside us. As long as we see ourselves as entities separate from God and remain imprisoned in our creatureliness we are unable to let go of our own perspective that is necessarily attached to the attributes of the goals we set ourselves. When we dare let go of ourselves in God, we receive ourselves from the Other who – beyond all images – is our life. In this immediacy we bear many fruits, because we are living by God's own power. All Eckhart's images show that he is speaking about an attitude in which humans in their own right play a passive role. We bear fruit when we let God be God within us and do not intervene ourselves. Just as a woman's fruit reaches full maturity without any intentionality on her part, so it is only in such receptivity that we become the space in which God may be born.

But that does not mean that humans are really passive in the physical sense. After all, we are speaking of the attitude with which we perform our works. If we put ourselves at the centre, we prevent the encounter and God cannot become fecund in us. If we risk losing ourselves in God, he becomes the power of our actions. This not passivity but rather a dialogical dynamics, in which our birth in God is also God's birth in us. By freeing ourselves in God the Other brings us to the matrix of our being, which in its receptiveness is the matrix of God himself. Eckhart gives this divine birth a trinitarian character by comparing the ground of a human being with the ground in which the Father begets his eternal Word. In the same way human beings, in this receptive state, become one with Jesus, who, in his singularity, is the reflection of divine light. Thus human beings in their virginity share in that divine life in which God is born to himself and pours forth into himself.

²⁴ See ERIK A. PANZIG, *Geläzenheit und abegescheidenheit, Eine Einführung in das theologische Denken des Meister Eckhart*, Leipzig 2005.

The dialogical structure we have outlined should make us wary of interpreting the virgin's unfettered state as a kind of indifference to all that befalls us. We are not free when everything is all the same to us and nothing touches our love. That may have been the Stoics' ascetic ideal, but it is not Eckhart's. As noted already, he in fact warns against overly rigorous ascetic practices, since these keep humans imprisoned within themselves. Asceticism should be practised discriminately. Only then will the exercises free us for God. The same applies to the virgin's unfettered state, which – as is evident in the Gospel about Martha – is directed to encounter. Hence it is not a question of whether we may attach ourselves to something or someone, but whether in our attachment we are prepared to let ourselves be exposed by the divine light. That is the distinction between our attachment to attributes and our attachment to God who, being the source of everything, is not to be trapped in these attributes. Thus the image of the virgin wife does not convey a state but a perpetually recurring process in human beings when, in abandoning their own images, they lose themselves in God.

IX. GOD IS THE CREATIVE GROUND OF OUR BEING

Elsewhere I have declared that there is a power in the soul which touches neither time nor flesh, flowing from the spirit, remaining in the spirit, altogether spiritual. In this power, God is ever verdant and flowering in all the joy and all the glory that He is in Himself. *There* is such heartfelt delight, such inconceivably deep joy as none can fully tell of, for in this power the eternal Father is ever begetting His eternal Son without pause, in such wise that this power jointly begets the Father's Son and itself, this self-same Son, in the sole power of the Father. Suppose a man owned a whole kingdom or all the goods of this world; then suppose he gave it up purely for God's sake, and became one of the poorest of the poor who ever lived on earth, and that God then gave him as much suffering as He ever imposed on any man, and that he bore all this to his dying day, and that God then gave him one fleeting glimpse of how He is in this power — that man's joy would be so great that all this suffering and poverty would still be insignificant. Yea, though God were never to vouchsafe him any further taste of heaven than this, he would yet be all too richly rewarded for all that he had ever endured, for God is in this power as in the eternal Now. If a man's spirit were always united with God in this power, he would not age. For the Now in which God made the first man and the Now in which the last man shall cease to be, and the Now I speak in, all are the same in God and there is but one Now.

Observe, this man dwells in one light with God, having no suffering and no sequence of time, but one equal eternity. This man is bereft of wonderment and all things are in him in their essence. Therefore nothing new comes to him from future things nor any accident, for he dwells in the Now, ever new and without intermission. Such is the divine sovereignty dwelling in this power.²⁵

Just as humans live by a Life that they can neither grasp nor comprehend – after all, they are not their own cause – so their essential ground as a reality of encounter is inconceivable to them. That is why we can only receive ourselves from the hands of the Other. In this context Eckhart speaks of a divine power in the soul. He is not the only one to do so. Many other mystical writers have spoken in similar vein – albeit often using different images – about the divine mystery in human beings.²⁶ At all events, they are all images – which we can

²⁵ DW: 1, 32,1-35,3 (Pr. 2): Ich hân ouch mê gesprochen, daz ein kraft in der sêle ist, diu berüeret niht zît noch vleisch; si vliuzet ûz dem geiste und blîbet in dem geiste und ist zemâle geistlich. In dirre kraft ist got alzemâle grüenende und blüejende in aller der vröude und in aller der êre, daz er in im selber ist. Dâ ist alsô herzenlîchiu vröude und alsô unbegrîfelîchiu grôze vröude, daz dâ nieman volle abe gesprechen kan. Wan der êwige vater gebirt sînen êwigen sun in dirre kraft âne underlâz, alsô daz disiu kraft mitgebernde ist den sun des vaters und sich selber den selben sun in der einiger kraft des vaters. Hæte ein mensche ein ganzez künicrîche oder allez daz guot von ertrîche und lieze daz lûterlîche durch got und wûrde der ermosten menschen einer, der ûf ertrîche iener lebet, und gæbe im denne got alsô vil ze lîdenne, als er ie menschen gegap, und lite er allez diz unz an sînen tôt und gæbe im denne got einen blik ze einen mâle ze schouwenne, wie er in dirre kraft ist: sîn vröude wûrde alsô grôz, daz alles diss lîdens und armüetes wære nochdenne ze kleine. Jâ, engæbe im joch got her nâch niemer mê himelrîches, er hæte nochdenne alze grôzen lôn enpfangen umbe allez, daz er ie geleit; wan got ist in dirre kraft als in dem êwigen nû. Wære der geist alle zît mit gote vereinet in dirre kraft, der mensche enmôhte niht alten; wan daz nû, dâ got den êrsten menschen inne machete, und daz nû, dâ der leste mensche inne sol vergân, und daz nû, dâ ich inne sprîche, diu sint glîch in gote und enist niht dan êin nû. Nû sehet, dirre mensche wonet in êinem liehte mit gote; dar umbe enist in im noch lîden noch volgen sunder ein glîchiu êwicheit. Disem menschen ist in der wârheit wunder abe genomen, und alliu dinc stânt weselîche in im. Dar umbe enpfæhet er niht niuwes von künftigen dîngen noch von keinem zuovalle, wan er wonet in einem nû alle zît niuwe âne underlâz. Alsolîchiu götlîchiu hêrschaft ist in dirre kraft.

²⁶ Mystical writers use all manner of images (L. REYPPENS, AME (son fond, ses puissances et sa structure d'après les mystiques), *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 1 (1937) p. 433-469) to indicate this: the extreme tip of the soul or *acies mentis* (Augustine), *apex spiritus* or *supremus affectivae apex* (Hugh of Balma, *acumen mentis* (Hugh of St Victor), *apex mentis seu synderesis scintilla* (Bonaventure), *die scherpfe des geistes* (Eckhart) or *la fine pointe de l'âme* (French mystic). Many mystics also call it a small spark of the soul (Bernard, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Eckhart, etc.). It is also called a hut, the centre, the citadel, the ground or soil, or the apex. Many names are given to this 'something in the soul', which nonetheless remains essentially ineffable and nameless. It is a light (*ein*

appropriate in the course of time – indicating that the *essence* of a human being has no defined structure but is dialogical. In this regard the Judaeo-Christian tradition refers to humans as the image of God. Just as God cannot be captured in any image, so every image falls short of human beings. What is important is that the distinction between icon and an-iconicity relates to an absolute division between the intermediateness of our creaturely condition and God's immediate reality. Thus Eckhart refers to a power in the soul flowing from the spirit, yet remaining in the spirit and being totally spiritual. By this he means that this power is qualitatively different and can in no way be captured in creaturely reality. That does not mean that Eckhart's view is dualistic, setting up spirit in opposition to body. His concern is with people's openness to themselves, being the space in which the Other emerges as their innermost source. Hence every attempt to take our lives into our own hands is to the detriment of the reality of encounter which, beyond all images, constitutes the ground of our humanity.

To Eckhart God's incarnation is not a historical event that once happened in time, but a process that constantly repeats itself in the Now of our existence. This is evident at a physical/material level. After all, there is no creaturely being that exists outside the Creator. But at a mental/spiritual level it is another story, for here we must first come to realise that this is so. It does not mean that lack of such realisation demolishes this inner reality. On the contrary, it is an ontological reality that – prior to human manipulation – was given with our existence. The ground of our being is the power of God himself, in which the eternal Father begets his Son without pause. The next sentence appears to emphasise that this is a perpetually recurring movement of God. Just as Father and Son are born to each other in the immediacy of reciprocity, so God's power is located in an abyss of

Lieht, Eckhart), i.e. an intellectual power in the soul that is both one and simple, like God himself. It is the human soul in its mystical receptiveness to God. It is the point where God touches humans in their very being and where humans can touch God without turning from themselves in manifold knowledge that juxtaposes impressions in time and space. This is also the bedrock of immediate knowledge of God, in which God is perceived directly in a unitary experience that transcends all multiplicity and differentiation. As a natural capacity it is a point within a human being, a 'something in the soul', but in actual fact is more like a dynamic event in which humans continually enter into a relationship with God. Cf. HEIN BLOMMESTIJN, *Découverte de soi-même ou quête de Dieu: l'itinéraire de soi en Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*, in: *Studies in Spirituality*, 1/1991/1, 75-95.; MEISTER ECKHART, *Werke I*, Frankfurt am Main 1993, commentary by Niklaus Largier, 763-771.

reciprocity in which Father and Son have totally lost themselves in each other. With this image Eckhart tries to indicate that God is on the one hand immutable in his eternal Now, but on the other, as the source of all creaturely reality in space and time, is a constantly flowing dynamics. To Eckhart these logically irreconcilable realities are simultaneously true. Put differently, the immediate reality of God that exists outside time and space is beyond our creaturely existence. To Eckhart this immediate reality that eludes our objective grasp is more real than our mediated creaturely existence, because as its origin it constitutes its inner core. Thus he writes that the uttermost destitution and suffering that can befall a person in this world is as nothing compared to one glimpse of the intimacy in which we see ourselves in this divine power by which we have been living for all eternity. The hyperbolic language stresses the puniness of the human perspective that, imprisoned in its creatureliness, cannot peer beyond its own limits. Only when we dare let ourselves be exposed by the divine light, knowing that it is only thus that we can truly come to life, does it become the power we live by, beyond our own controlling agency.

X. GOD'S ANNIHILATING ACTION

There is another power, immaterial too, flowing from the spirit, remaining in the spirit, altogether spiritual. In this power God is fiery, aglow with all His riches, with all His sweetness and all His bliss. Truly, in *this* power there is such great joy, such vast unmeasured bliss that none can tell of it or reveal it fully. Yet I declare that if ever there were a single man who in intellectual vision and in truth should glimpse for a moment the bliss and the joy therein, then all his sufferings and all God intended that he should suffer would be a trifle, a mere nothing to him — in fact I declare it would be pure joy and comfort to him.²⁷

²⁷ DW: 1, 35,4-36,7 (Pr. 2): Noch ein kraft ist, diu ist ouch unlîplich; si vliuzet ûz dem geiste und blîbet in dem geiste und ist zemâle geistlich. In dirre kraft ist got âne underlâz glimmende und brinnende mit aller sîner rîcheit, mit aller sîner sîezicheit und mit aller sîner wunne. Wærlîche, in dirre kraft ist alsô grôziu vröude und alsô grôziu, unmæzigiu wunne, daz nieman vollen dar abe gesprechen noch geoffenbâren kan. Ich spriche aber: wære ein einic mensche, der hie inne schouwete vernünftliche in der wârheit einen ougenblik die wunne und die vröude, diu dar inne ist: allez daz er gelîden möhte und daz got von im geliten wolte hân, daz wære im allez kleine und joch nihtes niht; ich spriche noch mê: ez wære im alzemâle ein vröude und ein gemach.

In parallel terms Eckhart indicates that there is another power in the soul that can likewise be identified with God. Whereas the first power was God verdant and flowering (*grüende und blüejende*), this divine power is fiery and glowing (*glimmende und brinnende*) in the soul. This power, too, is altogether spiritual, hence expressive of an immediacy that refuses to be pinned down to a 'something' in our creaturely existence that can be perceived by our senses or apprehended by the tools of our logic. Thus the distinction Eckhart is making does not relate to the power itself, but to the way in which it is active in us. God, who manifests himself in his singularity as power or transforming dynamics, acts in human beings in diverse ways. But the definitions do not really help us to differentiate between the two powers. The only connecting link is the manner in which they are described. Hence we can say that God's presence in us is creative (*grüende und blüejende*) on the one hand, and annihilating (*glimmende und brinnende*) on the other. The image of begetting that is focal in the first power is absent from the description of the second. Instead the operative image is that of fire or heat. In mystical literature this image usually refers to human transformation through love. Just as the cherubim and seraphim are a reflection of the fire of divine love, in which they are consumed through all eternity, so humans who lose themselves in God become one with this fire that devours and consumes everything they could call their own. To Eckhart the annihilating and the unifying dynamics of God are two sides of the same coin, for it is the annihilation that unites us with God. That is why Eckhart describes the annihilation – despite the painful accompanying process – in terms of great joy and immeasurable bliss. The annihilation frees us from ourselves and lets us live, in our nakedness, directly by God's love. This liberation outweighs any suffering that may befall us in our lives.

Despite the highly speculative nature of the discourse on the two powers of the soul, Eckhart seeks to stress that as human beings we relate directly to a divine reality that in its immediacy is ahead of us in everything. On the one hand it encompasses our entire lives, being the reality of our creaturely reality. On the other it is, in its unfathomability, an abyss of reciprocity that demolishes us to the ground in the light of its truth. This stripping of all that we consider our own brings us to the virginal ground of our being, where we participate in space and time in the creative power of love that is God.

XI. DISCERNMENT OF SUFFERING

This brings Eckhart to the question of discernment. For how do we tell the difference between an attitude in which we ourselves are centre stage and this exposure in God? It should be clear that the question is not confined to a particular period in our lives, but confronts us time and again in ever new forms. After all, God – the reality of encounter – forever eludes us. To Eckhart the answer to the question about discernment lies in the extent to which suffering has a hold on us. If you suffer for yourself, it is hard to bear. But if you suffer for God, the burden is light.

If you would know for certain whether your suffering is your own or God's then you can know by this: If you suffer for yourself, in whatever way, that suffering hurts and is hard to bear. But if you suffer for God and God alone, your suffering does not hurt and is not hard to bear, for God bears the load. In very truth, if there were a man willing to suffer purely for God's sake and for God alone, then although he were suddenly called upon to bear all the suffering that all men have ever endured, the collective sufferings of all the world, it would not hurt him or bear him down, for God would bear the burden. If they put a hundredweight²⁸ burden on my neck and another were to bear it on my neck, I would as willingly bear a hundred pounds as one, for it would not burden me or cause me pain. In brief, whatever a man suffers for God and God alone, He makes light and pleasant.²⁹

Looking at the structure of the sermon, the theme of suffering seems to come out of the blue. After all, up to that point the dominant

²⁸ The Middle German word 'zentener' derives from Middle Latin 'centenarius'.

²⁹ *DW*: 1, 36,8-38,7 (Pr. 2): Wilt dû rehte wizzen, ob dîn liden dîn sî oder gotes, daz solt dû her an merken: lîdest dû umbe dîn selbes willen, in welcher wîse daz ist, daz liden tuot dir wê und ist dir swære ze tragenne. Lîdest dû aber umbe got und got aleine, daz liden entuot dir niht wê und ist dir ouch niht swære, wan got treit den last. Mit guoter wârheit! Wære ein mensche, der liden wolte durch got und lûterliche got aleine, und viele allez daz liden ûf in zemâle daz alle menschen ie geliten und daz al diu werlt hât gemeinlich, daz entæte im niht wê noch enwære im ouch niht swære, wan got der trûege den last. Der mir einen zentener leite ûf mînen hals und in denne ein ander trûege ûf mînen halse, als liep leite ich hundert ûf als einen, wan ez enwære mir niht swære noch entæte mir ouch niht wê. Kürzliche gesprochen: swaz der mensche lîdet durch got und got aleine, daz machet im got lîhte und sîeze, als ich sprach in dem beginne, dâ mite wir under predige begunden: "Jêsus der gienc ûf in ein bürgelîn und wart empfangen von einer juncvrouwen, diu ein wîp was". War umbe? Daz muoste sîn von nôt, daz sie ein juncvrouwe was und ouch ein wîp. Nû hân ich iu geseit, daz Jêsus empfangen wart; ich enhân iu aber niht geseit, waz daz bürgelîn sî, alsô als ich nû dar abe sprechen wil.

theme had been joy. Those who realise that they live wholly by God's power are totally filled with this knowledge and cannot contain their joy. The figure of speech that Eckhart uses here is a contrasting parallelism. Those who have truly seen themselves in God know that all the suffering that befalls them in life is as nothing compared with this exposure that reveals the blindness of our own perspective. Thus Eckhart tries to remove the sting from suffering, so we can face it honestly. Not that Eckhart wants to deny the reality of suffering. He merely wants us not to fear it. For it is the fear of suffering that makes us flee into the projections of our own images.

The discerning question about the pain of suffering shows us that the spiritual way lies in the field of tension between human goals and God's action, which embraces us from within. The two are in fragile equilibrium. On the one hand we can only follow the way by making a move ourselves. On the other hand any move requires fundamental openness to the Other who appeals and embraces us in our endeavour. That is why the spiritual way does not lie in material exercises but in the structure of encounter that they expose. A major constructive element is that we are up against our limits and in this sense are frustrated in our own ego structure. For however much we may want to, we cannot bring about the encounter. Concentration on our own activity may even be counterproductive, in that it ties us to the self rather than freeing us from it. This intimate link between the *skopos* (working goal) and *telos* (ultimate goal) of our works shows how hard it is to discern objectively between suffering for ourselves and suffering for God. After all, they are not separate issues but a field of tension created by the very encounter with God. For by the light of truth we realise that ultimately our works are not for ourselves but for God, who transforms us from within. This exposure is at once painful and sweet. It is painful, because from our perspective every encounter violates our individuality. In the encounter we realise not only that all our intellectual images effectively screen us from the naked reality that is in God, but also that in ourselves we are nothing. At the same time the exposure is sweet, because it is God's union with us from beyond. In it we live by God's own power that speaks to us directly in everything.

To Eckhart suffering arising from ourselves pertains to self-will. For as long we ourselves and our own goals are focal, we suffer when they are frustrated. This applies both to goals that affect our personal happiness such as material wealth, health, recognition and the like, and more idealistic goals like peace, solidarity, love for others, et cetera. Either way we are projecting our own wishes and desires on

reality and they make us suffer when they are not fulfilled. Such suffering is always hard, because it infringes on our patterns of expectation. At the same time, from the perspective of the spiritual way such suffering is necessary, since only the abrogation of our own perspective can put us in touch with our receptiveness that lies hidden behind it.

In contrast to suffering arising from our drive to organise our own reality there is suffering for God and God alone. As noted above, the difference is not objective but lies in a change of perspective. As long as we remain imprisoned in ourselves we suffer from anything that encroaches on our own perspective. Exposed in God, we no longer demand that reality has to meet our stringent requirements but it becomes the face of God himself that addresses us directly in everything. In this non-grasping attitude we are united with God beyond ourselves and participate in the abyss of reciprocity that God is in himself. A crucial aspect of this surrender is the relinquishment of all self-interest. For when we realise that God is equally close to us in everything, everything, whatever it means to us personally, becomes a space for encountering him. In this regard Eckhart speaks of suffering that no longer causes pain because God is the one who bears it. That does not mean that in such union we have retreated into imperviousness. On the contrary, relinquishment of self-interest makes us all the more sensitive to others, who are no longer viewed in terms of their aspects or attributes but in their divine being. Suffering for God and God alone is marked by simplicity. Because in that union we are no longer focused on ourselves and our own position, we are free at last to view reality in God's light. Thus suffering for God does not entail a foreign will. We suffer not because God wills it, but because in our surrender we obey the voice of our divine being beyond ourselves, a voice that addresses us in everything. Put differently: in the surrender of union we live through the eyes of the Other who is born in our being. To Eckhart such immediate life in God that lies hidden behind our urge for manifestation is the unfathomable reality of our existence and those who are aware of this 'treasure' know that nothing can outweigh this intimacy that is the naked truth of our lives.

In expounding the divine powers of the soul and the discerning question about suffering Eckhart shows why human beings – when it comes to encountering the divine – have to be both virgin and wife. After all, to him the soul is where we touch God. It is not the antithesis of our bodily life but its unfathomable centre. For that reason it is insulated from the objectivising images of our intellect and can only be active in us if we are prepared to relinquish our own reality. The

image of virginity expresses the ontological fact that before all else we live through God and in that sense are purely receptive. The image of the wife, on the other hand, indicates the human capacity to have ourselves exposed by this divine dynamics. The guideline here is the discernment about suffering. For the more we surrender ourselves to God, the more we realise that our birthplace does not lie in ourselves or our own will but in the Other who looks at us from within our being.

XII. THE UNFATHOMABLE CENTRE OF THE SOUL

As I said in the beginning, in the opening words of this sermon: 'Jesus went up into a citadel and was received by a virgin who was a wife.' Why? It had to be so, that she was a virgin *and a* wife. Now I have told you that Jesus was received, but I have not yet told you what the citadel is, as I shall now proceed to do.

I have sometimes said that there is a power in the soul which alone is free. Sometimes I have called it the guardian of the spirit, sometimes I have called it a light of the spirit, sometimes I have said that it is a little spark. But now I say that it is neither *this* nor *that*; and yet it is a *something* that is more exalted over 'this' and 'that' than are the heavens above the earth. So now I shall name it in nobler fashion than I ever did before, and yet it disowns the nobler name and mode, for it transcends them. It is free of all names and void of all forms, entirely exempt and free, as God is exempt and free in Himself. It is as completely one and simple as God is one and simple, so that no man can in any way glimpse it. This same power of which I have spoken, wherein God ever blooms and is verdant in all His Godhead, and the spirit in God, in this same power God ever bears His only-begotten Son as truly as in Himself, for verily He dwells in this power; and the spirit gives birth with the Father to the same only-begotten Son, and to itself as the self-same Son, and is itself the self-same Son in this light, and is the Truth. If you could know with my heart, you would understand, for it is true, and Truth itself declares it.³⁰

³⁰ DW: 1, 39,1-41,7 (Pr. 2): Ich hân underwîlen gesprochen, ez sî ein kraft in dem geiste, diu sî aleine vrî. Underwîlen hân ich gesprochen, ez sî ein huote des geistes; underwîlen hân ich gesprochen, ez sî ein lieht des geistes; underwîlen hân ich gesprochen, ez sî ein vûnkeln. Ich spriche aber nû: ez enist weder diz noch daz; nochdenne ist ez ein waz, daz ist hœher boben diz und daz dan der himel ob der erde. Dar umbe nenne ich ez nû in einer edelerr wîse dan ich ez ie genante, und ez lougent der edelkeit und der wîse und ist dar enboben. Ez ist von allen namen vrî und von allen

Eckhart distinguishes between God as he has been in himself throughout eternity and the creative, transforming dynamics of God manifested in time and space. God, immutable in himself,³¹ is simultaneously – being the source – the dynamic element of the reality created in time and space. The earlier part of the sermon deals primarily with this divine dynamics that operates as a transforming power in the soul. In the concluding part he concentrates on the essence of this power, which, beyond its transforming dynamics, withdraws from the reality of existence. In other words, God is the reality of encounter and as such is always beyond creaturely reality. Eckhart relates this to the image of the citadel or citadel town (*bürgelîn*), to which Jesus ascends in the Lucan verse under discussion. There is a place in the soul where we are directly touched by God. That point is the unfathomable centre of the soul where God is born as a power in the soul. Other images used to convey this are ‘guardian of the spirit’ (*ein huote des geistes*), ‘light of the spirit’ (*ein lichte des geistes*) and ‘little spark’ (*vüinkelîn*). These images all express the point where humans touch God. At the same time we have to let go of the images, because this point of contact is beyond everything, hence cannot be objectified into something that can be grasped or apprehended by the tools of human logic. Here Eckhart speaks of something that is ‘neither this nor that’ (*weder diz noch daz*). The citadel of the soul, being the point of encounter with God’s immediate reality, is exalted above the reality of existence. To stress that this distinction is qualitative he uses the image of heaven and earth. Just as we cannot reach the heavens by climbing a mountain, so the distinction between the mediated reality of existence and God’s immediate reality is qualitative. The same applies to terms like ‘noble’ and ‘wise’, which, whilst seeking to convey the qualitative difference, fail to say anything positive about this reality that, in its immediacy,

formen blöz, ledic und vrî zemâle, als got ledic und vrî ist in im selber. Ez ist sô gar ein und einvaltic, als got ein und einvaltic ist, daz man mit dekeiner wise dar zuo geluogen mac. Diu selbe kraft, dar abe ich gesprochen hân, dâ got inne ist blüejende und grüejende mit aller sîner gotheit und der geist in gote, in dirre selber kraft ist der vater gebernde sînen eingebornen sun als gewæhrliche als in im selber, wan er wærlîche lebet in dirre kraft, und der geist gebirt mit dem vater den selben eingebornen sun und sich selber den selben sun und ist der selbe sun in disem liehte und ist diu wârheit. Møhet ir gemerken mit mînem herzen, ir verstüendet wol, waz ich sprichet, wan ez ist wâr und diu wârheit sprichet ez selbe.

³¹ It might be better to refer to a reality that transcends the dichotomy of mutability and immutability.

eludes the objectifying eye. Despite the impossibility of describing such an ever elusive, all surpassing perspective in human language, Eckhart persists in depicting it in words and images. But he warns the reader. Nothing that he writes here can be captured in objects. We are not to hang on to these images, as though they could render immediate reality tangible. They are rather meant to conduct us into a reality that, beyond images, is the abyss of God himself.

The field of tension between effability and ineffability makes Eckhart evolve a play on words that is designed to detach us from the stringent laws of our own logic. For it is that logic which imprisons us in the images of our discursiveness, cutting us off from the immediate action of God who is the real source of our knowledge. Thus Eckhart refers to the point of contact in the soul as absolutely 'exempt': it is 'free of all names and void of all forms, entirely exempt and free, as God is exempt and free in Himself'. In phrasing it thus he seems to ascribe exemption not only to the receptiveness of the soul, but also to God. We have dwelt at length on the need to be free of all images in order to receive God. As the reality of encounter, after all, God is always beyond everything we consider to be ours and can only be encountered by breaking down the images. But now God's very being is described as a naked void, free from every kind of conditioning. God has neither form nor mode and cannot be captured in any name. In that sense Eckhart calls God one and simple. Although God is the sustaining ground of everything in tempo-spatial reality, he is not reducible to 'something' in that reality and must therefore be regarded as a non-something. Yet despite this absolute divide between God and humans there is no question of distance, for the intimacy of the exposure makes us realise that God always lingers beyond our individuality.

But Eckhart does not stop there. He not only describes God as a reality beyond all images, but also indicates that God is a power that grips us from the centre of our souls and transforms us. Beyond our own images this inner power puts us in touch with God as the immediacy we live by. At the same time it makes us realise that God in himself is an abyss of reciprocity. In this context Eckhart uses the image of Father and Son, who are born in each other and, being creative power, are expressive of God's being. At the same time the various persons in the image are identical with each other and cannot be separated objectively. As a single reality God *is* Father, Son and the creative power generated by their encounter. Hence in order to grasp this image we have to let go of it. Eckhart does not want to speculate about the pre-existence of Father and Son, but seeks to

verbalise the dialogical reality within God himself.³² Thus God is not just the immediacy of our life, but in that immediacy also the never ending dynamics in which God eternally loses himself in himself as if in the eyes of the Other. Here Eckhart is up against the limits of language, because speech can never escape the images of our mediated existence. He therefore invokes a kind of knowledge that is not mediated by the senses but springs directly from the heart. This knowledge is participatory, for according to Eckhart we only get to know God in the immediacy of reciprocity. There, hidden from ourselves, we live by God, our innermost being, and come to know him as a boundless sea of reciprocity that permits no retroflexion to ourselves.

XIII. THE NOTHINGNESS OF GOD

Now pay attention! So one and simple is this citadel in the soul, elevated above all modes, of which I speak and which I mean, that that noble power I mentioned is not worthy even for an instant to cast a single glance into this citadel; nor is that other power I spoke of, in which God burns and glows with all His riches and all His joy, able to cast a single glance inside; so truly one and simple is this citadel, so mode- and power-transcending is this solitary One, that neither power nor mode can gaze into it, nor even God Himself! In very truth and as God lives! God Himself never looks in there for one instant, in so far as He exists in modes and in the properties of His persons. This should be well noted: this One Alone lacks all mode and property. And therefore, for God to see inside it would cost Him all His divine names and personal properties: all these He must leave outside, should He ever look in there. But only in so far as He is one and indivisible, without mode or properties, [can He do this]: in that sense He is neither Father, Son nor Holy Ghost, and yet is a Something which is neither this nor that.³³

³² Cf. REINER MANSTETTEN, Meister Eckharts Stellingnahme zu Predigt 2: *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum* im Kölner Häresieprozess. Ein Essay über WSahrheit und Nachvollzug, in *Meister Eckhart: Lebensstationen – Redesituationen*, Berlin 1997, 282-283.

³³ DW: 1, 42,1-44,2 (Pr. 2): Sehet, nû merket! Alsô ein und einvaltic ist diz bürgelîn boben alle wîse, dâ von ich iu sage und daz ich meine, in der sêle, daz disiu edele kraft, von der ich gesprochen hân, niht des wirdic ist, daz si iemer ze einem einigen mâle einen ougenblik geluoge in diz bürgelîn und ouch diu ander kraft, dâ ich von sprach, dâ got ist inne glimmende und brinnende mit aller sîner rîcheit und mit aller sîner wunne, diu engetar ouch niemer mê dar în geluogen; sô rehte ein und einvaltic ist diz bürgelîn, und sô enboben alle wîse und alle krefte ist diz einic ein, daz im niemer kraft

For the third time Eckhart calls on his readers to pay attention. As in the previous instances, he refers back to the biblical passage on which he is commenting (Lk 10:38). The first time, he emphasised that when encountering God human beings should be virginal, free and untrammelled by the images of their minds. Only then are they truly receptive to God. But that is not enough. Hence the second call was that we should become wives. Just as wives have the capacity to be fruitful, so human beings generally have the capacity to let God bear fruit within them. In the third and final call Eckhart, with reference to the image of the citadel, impresses on us that God is essentially one. Just as the citadel's walls enclose an empty space, so when it comes to the soul we must distinguish between the effect of God as a power within us and his essence, which is the eternal matrix of that power beyond time and space. This impalpable centre is the uncreated ground of God himself. No distinction can ever penetrate it and every mode falls away. Even the image of a triune God cannot exist in this oneness, inasmuch as it entails persons who are distinguished in terms of different 'properties'. Not that Eckhart denies the image of the trinity per se, but he wants to secure God as a reality of encounter. God can only be encountered as Other, so we have to leave behind even the image of a triune God in order to grasp the reality that it expresses. Here Eckhart repeats the term 'properties', this time in contradistinction to God's indivisible essence. To the extent that we still want to conceive of God, one way or another, in terms of his aspects, we reduce him to the reality of existing things and we cut off our minds from the immediate reality, the cause that constitutes the impalpable inside of our existence.³⁴

Eckhart goes further in that his image of the citadel also indicates that not only humans but also God himself cannot gaze into his indivisible essence. This daring proposition shows that we should

noch wîse zuo geluogen mac noch got selber. Mit guoter wârheit und alsô wêrlîche, als daz got lebet! Got selber luoget dâ niemer înen ougenblik und geluogete noch nie dar înen, als verre als er sich habende ist nâch wîse und ûf eigenschaft sîner persônen. Diz ist guot ze merkenne, wan diz einic ein ist sunder wîse und sunder eigenschaft. Und dar umbe: sol got iemer dar înen geluogen, ez muoz in kosten alle sîne gôtliche namen und sîne persônliche eigenschaft; daz muoz er alzemâle hie vor lâzen, sol er iemer mê dar înen geluogen. Sunder als er ist einvaltic ein, âne alle wîse und eigenschaft: dâ enist er vater noch sun noch heiliger geist in disem sinne und ist doch ein waz, daz enist noch diz noch daz.

³⁴ REINER MANSTETTEN, Meister Eckharts Stellingnahme zu Predigt 2: *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum* im Kölner Häresieprozess. Ein Essay über WSahrheit und Nachvollzug, in *Meister Eckhart: Lebensstationen – Redesituationen*, Berlin 1997, 291.

distinguish between God who, as the cause of creaturely reality, is beyond all existing things in his oneness and his creative power that keeps everything in existence. Thus it is a matter not of powerlessness but of ontological impossibility. God cannot gaze into himself because any form of reflexivity irrevocably implies division, which would destroy God's intrinsic oneness. Thus the image of the citadel refers to the absolute gulf between that which is caused and the cause (mediated and immediate). The two must never be confused, because they represent the ontological principle that vouchsafes God as a reality of encounter. Returning to the image of the trinity, it means that, while Eckhart does not deny it, he is critical of any interpretation that detracts from the indivisibility of God's being. After all, as the cause of all that exists God is without modes and properties. Hence the trinity can only be understood in terms of the negation which secures his immediate reality. The fact that God, the cause, is not the same as that which is caused does not mean that he has withdrawn from the created world. God supports existence and thus constitutes the inside of our reality. In the foregoing quotation, then, Eckhart explicitly indicates that in his capacity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – hence in the various properties of his persons – God can be active in our lives. But when it comes to the reality that forms the ground of his activity, quite apart from all this, Eckhart stresses his oneness. In this oneness not even the divine persons can glance inwards, because there all distinctive attributes fall away. In this sense no name is appropriate for God – the immediacy of temporally and spatially created reality – and he is neither Father, Son nor Spirit, because as the cause of all that exists he can in no way be objectified into something we can grasp or take hold of.

Although Eckhart seems to be raising an abstract theological issue way above the heads of his unsophisticated public, he considers it a vital matter for our inner life. For whether it concerns God, ourselves, others or the world around us, as humans we always tend to imprison ourselves in the images of our own reality. In the process we exchange human reality for an absolute and become blind to God who, beyond our images, constitutes the other side of reality. As long as we remain attached to the attributes of something or someone, we remain trapped in a multiplicity of externals. Only a fully bared face can receive God as he is, without modes or properties. Hence in order to live by God, beyond themselves, humans must leave behind all objectifying images that they use in an attempt to incorporate reality into themselves. Again the image of the citadel into which God cannot possibly gaze refers to the absolute boundary between the mediated

and the immediate. Just as God in his oneness does not permit any retroreflection into himself lest he cease to be God, so humans in the immediacy of union cannot tolerate any image, because any form of reflexivity such as distance – distinction – destroys the immediacy of reciprocity.

XIV. LIVING BY THE ONENESS OF GOD'S COUNTENANCE

See, as He is thus one and simple, so He can enter that One that I here call the citadel of the soul, but in no other mode can He get in: only thus does He enter and dwell therein. In *this* part the soul is the same as God and not otherwise. What I tell you is true: I call the Truth as a witness and offer my soul as pledge.³⁵

In his spiritual anthropology Eckhart distinguishes between God who makes himself felt as activity or power in human beings and the place where this power is born in them. His image of the citadel (*bürgelîn*) represents this point of contact with God. In the soul is a place where God is utterly one. Neither humans nor God can gaze into it, because in its immediacy it withdraws itself from the world of existing things. Although Eckhart is in fact saying that as a reality of encounter this point of contact with God remains obscure to us and we can perceive him only in his effects, his activity, he considers it vitally important that we should be aware of the distinction. However important it is to allow God to transform us on our spiritual journey, his activity does not coincide with his indivisible essence. Hence Eckhart wants to extricate us from this fixation as well so that, freed from it, we will realise that our entire being lives by an immediacy which, qua immediacy, constitutes the undivided inside of our existence. To Eckhart this means that the mediated reality of creaturely existence is the outside of a life that in its totality refers to this immediate reality.³⁶ In themselves humans are Nothing and their entire beings are suspended in God's being. It is at this point of our

³⁵ DW: 1, 44,3-44,7 (Pr. 2): Sehet, alsus als er ein ist und einvaltic, alsô kumet er in daz ein, daz ich dâ heize ein bürgelîn in der sêle, und anders kumet er enkeine wîse dar in; sunder alsô kumet er dar in und ist dâ inne. Mit dem teile ist diu sêle gote glîch und anders niht. Daz ich iu geseit hân, daz ist wâr; des setze ich iu die wârheit ze einem geziugen und mîne sêle einem pfande.

³⁶ Cf. ERIK A. PANZIG, *Gelâzenheit und abegescheidenheit, Eine Einführung in das theologische Denken des Meister Eckhart*, Leipzig 2005, 218.

Nothingness – what Eckhart calls the citadel of our soul – that we are like God.

Eckhart concludes his sermon with the customary blessing:

That we may be such a citadel to which Jesus may ascend and be received to abide eternally in us in such wise as I have said, may God help us to this! Amen.³⁷

True to the verse that he is commenting on, Eckhart leaves the initiative to Jesus. After all, it is he who ascends to the citadel (*bürgelîn*), and thus to the centre of the soul. Eckhart explicitly points out that in the process humans are at the receiving end, so the entire theme of his sermon must be viewed in that light. To Eckhart it is, above all, an ontological reality that is concomitant with our creaturely existence, for as human beings we are purely receptive and in everything we live directly by the Other. And it is this ontological reality that has to be brought to our consciousness. Thus the sermon is mystagogic in character.³⁸ The images of the virgin, the wife and the citadel of the soul all seek to make us realise that our creaturely reality is a receiving reality that does not exist in itself. This tension opens up space for life as a dialogic reality, for what applies at the physical, material level epitomises life as a whole. The spiritual way is depicted as a process in which we let the Other expose ever deeper levels of ourselves in light of the truth. From the human perspective this transformation is an annihilation that detaches us from our clinging to everything that God is not. All this Eckhart indicates by means of the term ‘attachment’ in the sense of property (*eigenschaft*). Property attaches us to someone or something when we seek to make it a means to our own ends and thus cut it off from its divine roots. In the same way property attaches us to God when the relationship is instrumental. As long as we still want something from God, and thus evade the confrontation with the reality that he is, we are fleeing from his unfathomable countenance that looks at us in everything. Hence the term ‘property’ should be seen as a distinction that makes us aware at ever deepening levels of the images of our own projections. Ultimately this process of exposure brings us to the naked space of God himself in which we realise, beyond our images, that God is the other side of

³⁷ DW: 1, 45,1-45,3 (Pr. 2): Daz wir alsus sîn ein bürgelîn, in dem Jêsus ûfginge und werde enpfangen und êwiclîche in uns blîbe in der wîse, als ich gesprochen hân, des helfe und got. Âmen.

³⁸ Cf. Reiner Manstetten, *ibid.* 293

our mediate existence. In this regard Eckhart speaks of the citadel of the soul. Inside us there is a 'place' where God grasps us directly. In its indivisible oneness this place is devoid of all images.³⁹ As a place of encounter it is the birthplace of what Eckhart calls divine power. This immediacy remains hidden from objectifying eyes – in other texts Eckhart calls it 'Nothingness'.⁴⁰ We participate in that Nothingness of immediacy when, stripped of ourselves and our own images, we become pure receptivity (*juncvrouwe*) and no longer make any distinction between ourselves as we are and God, who in his Nothingness is the birthplace of our being. Thus Eckhart's image of the citadel stresses the dialogical nature of human beings that vanished in the indivisible countenance of the Other, comes to life in the Other. Here we get to know God not as an extrinsic object but as the hidden inside of the dynamics by which we live directly.

³⁹ Cf. ERIK A. PANZIG, *Gelâzenheit und abegescheidenheit, Eine Einführung in das theologische Denken des Meister Eckhart*, Leipzig 2005, 264.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

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Jos Huls, O.Carm.
Titus Brandsma Instituut
Erasmusplein, 1
6525 HT Nijmegen
HOLLAND
E-mail: Jos.Huls@titusbrandsmainstituut.nl