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FULLNESS AND EMPTINESS IN BONAVENTURE AND ECKHART

The tension between negative and positive theology permeated the thought of Western Christianity in the High Middle Ages. Medieval writers found their classical source for these two approaches in the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius, whose works had been introduced into the West by the translations of John Scotus Erigena in the ninth century. The *via positiva* was explored extensively in *The Divine Names*, on which Thomas Aquinas wrote a commentary and which provided the basis for his treatment of our knowledge of God's attributes in the early questions of the *Summa theologiae*. The *via negativa* was formulated much more concisely in *The Mystical Theology*, which influenced Bonaventure in his final stage of *The Soul's Journey into God* and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in formulating his method of contemplation.

The tension between positive and negative theology raises a cluster of issues. On the level of epistemology, it challenges our knowledge of God. As the Pseudo-Dionysius claims, the superessential divinity is beyond our concepts. How, then, can we know God in any positive way? On the other hand, this very superessential divinity has diffused his goodness in creation. Has he not, then, left his imprint on all created things, as Francis of Assisi and the early Franciscan theologians discerned? This is not merely a theoretical issue; for it affects the practice of prayer, touching the choice of techniques of contemplation. If God is beyond all created things, should we not, as *The Cloud of Unknowing* advises, negate all sense impressions, all concepts, all intellectual activities and pass over into the darkness of unknowing. Or should we rejoice in the beauty of God's creation and, like Francis of Assisi, in beautiful things see Beauty itself. The issues extend beyond epistemology and techniques of contemplation, touching the very path of the spiritual journey and the way of life one embraces. Should one seek the goal of the spiritual journey, as Eckhart enjoins, by radical detachment from all creatures; or should one climb to the

heights of paradise, as Dante did, through his love for Beatrice? Ultimately, these issues touch the very nature of God. As goal of the spiritual journey and the philosophical-mystical quest, is God the dark abyss or the fullness of radiating light? Is he the silent ground or the fire of love?

In the present study I will explore this tension from the standpoint of fullness and emptiness, for I believe that these are the ultimate categories behind positive and negative theology. On all levels, positive theology presupposes and points to fullness and negative theology presupposes and points to emptiness. I believe, furthermore, that fullness and emptiness are the ultimate religious categories: experiential, metaphysical, theological and mystical. In all realms, the issues point ultimately to these two categories: in the spiritual journey, techniques of contemplation, the epistemology of our knowledge of God the metaphysics of being and non-being, and the nature of God himself.

To explore the polarity of fullness and emptiness, I will choose two medieval theologians: Bonaventure as a classic example of fullness and Meister Eckhart as a classic example of emptiness. These two theologians, who flourished some fifty years apart in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, represent high points in the expression of the polarity between fullness and emptiness that underlies medieval Christian thought as a whole. I will first explore Bonaventure's approach to God and the world through fullness, contrasting it with Eckhart's approach through emptiness. Secondly, I will explore the theme of emptiness and fullness in Christology, indicating how the theological roles are somewhat reversed; for the Franciscans emphasized the kenotic aspect of the incarnation in poverty and suffering, while Eckhart emphasized the fullness of the birth of the Son in the soul. Thirdly, I will propose my own theory of the relation of fullness and emptiness in Christian theology, suggesting that they can be integrated from the standpoint of the *coincidentia oppositorum* of mutually affirming complementarity. Finally, I will close with an observation on the significance of fullness and emptiness for the dialogue of world religions.

Fullness of God and the World

In the tradition of Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure follows the path of fullness. When he looks at the richness of creation, he is filled with joy; for he sees in creatures a reflection of the fullness of God's self-

diffusive love. Gazing into the mirror of creation, he contemplates the fountain source of fecundity from which creatures flow. For both Francis and Bonaventure the basic religious experience of the world and God is one of fullness, and they follow a spiritual path through the fullness of creatures to the fullness of God. In his biography of Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure describes the saint's attitude towards creation :

Aroused by all things to the love of God, he [Francis] rejoiced in all *the works of the Lord's hands* (Ps. 91 : 5) and from these joy-producing manifestations he rose to their life-giving principle and cause. In beautiful things he saw Beauty itself and through his *vestiges* imprinted on creation *he followed his Beloved everywhere* (Job 23 : 11 ; Cant. 5 : 17), making from all things a ladder by which he could climb up and embrace him *who is utterly desirable* (Cant. 5 : 16).¹

In a similar vein, Bonaventure contemplates creatures in *The Soul's Journey into God*, seeing them as vestiges (footprints) of the Trinity in their power, wisdom and goodness. He concludes his meditation with the following observation : "Creatures are shadows, echoes and pictures of that first, most powerful most wise and most perfect Principle, of that eternal Source, Light and Fullness."² In his theological reflection, Bonaventure extends the notion of fullness further than Francis, tracing it into God's very inner Trinitarian life. The fullness of creation reflects not merely the fullness of God in general, but the fullness of the Father in the Trinity.

Bonaventure speaks of the Father's fountain-fullness (*fontalis plenitudo*).³ It is out of this fountain-fullness that the Trinitarian processions flow in the generation of the Son and the spiration of the Holy Spirit. The notion of the Father as fountain-fullness is at the base of Bonaventure's entire theological vision and is the ultimate principle for his interpretation of Francis's experience of fullness in the world and God. Bonaventure approaches the notion of the Father's fountain-fullness from two perspectives : the fecundity of

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1. Bonaventure, *Legenda maior*, IX, 1 ; English translation from *Bonaventure's The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York : Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 262-263.
 2. *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, II, 11 ; trans., p. 76.
 3. *I Sent.*, d. 27, p. 1, a. un., q. 2, ad 3.

primacy and the self-diffusion of the Good. In his early writings he proceeds through the principle of primacy:

...the more primary a thing is, the more it is fecund and the principle of others. Therefore just as the divine essence, because it is first, is the principle of other essences, so the person of the Father, since he is the first, because from no one, is the principle and has fecundity in regard to persons.⁴

For Bonaventure the Father, as the ultimate principle within the Trinity, is the most primary; hence he must be most fecund in communicating himself. This means that there must be a self-communication above creatures which is the source of creatures: a self-communication which is eternally actualized and consubstantial on the level of divine persons. Thus for Bonaventure the notion of fullness contains the element of dynamic self-communication in love. In *The Soul's Journey into God*, Bonaventure explores this dynamic self-communication according to the principle of the self-diffusion of the Good which he derived from the Pseudo-Dionysius. God is good in two ways: as possessing the fullness of perfection and as communicating this fullness in the highest manner. "The good is said to be self-diffusive; therefore the highest good must be most self-diffusive." Creatures cannot express the fullness of the divine communication, for "the diffusion in time in creation is no more than a centre or point in relation to the immensity of the divine goodness."⁵ Therefore there must be an eternal, actual, consubstantial self-diffusion within the inner life of God, a self-diffusion which has been revealed to us as the mystery of the Trinity. The fullness of perfection and dynamic self-expression, which is the Trinity overflows into the creation of the world. Thus the link is made between the fullness of the divinity realized in the Trinity and the expression of that fullness through creatures. It is this double experience of fullness — of both God and the world — that is characteristic of the early Franciscan movement.

Emptiness of God and the World

The Franciscan experience of fullness stands in sharp contrast to Meister Eckhart's experience of emptiness. Where Francis rejoiced in creatures, seeing them as a ladder for climbing to God, Eckhart

4. *I Sent.*, d. 2, a. un., q. 2; the translation is my own.

5. *Itinerarium*, VI, 2; trans., p. 103. Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *De caelesti hierarchia*, IV, 1; *De divinis nominibus*, IV, 1, 20.

called them "nothing" and advised absolute detachment from them. Where Bonaventure saw the Father as the fountain-fullness, Eckhart went beyond the Trinity into emptiness of the desert of the Godhead.

Detachment from creatures is a major theme in Eckhart. Although he presents detachment as a spiritual path, he does not limit his observations to pragmatic advice, but accompanies his spiritual guidance with metaphysical statements about the very nature of creatures :

Creatures are pure nothings. I do not say that they are either important or unimportant but that they are pure nothings. What has no Being is nothing. Creatures have no Being of their own, for their Being is the presence of God. If God withdrew from them, even for a moment, they would all perish.⁶

Detachment involves a radical emptying that is grounded on the very emptiness of creatures, for Eckhart discerns creatures as pure nothingness. This position caused suspicion among Church authorities. In 1329 Pope John XXII condemned the above proposition of Eckhart as temerarious and suspected of heresy.⁷ Although from a fullness perspective Eckhart's statement sounds problematic ; I believe that if it is situated within an emptiness framework, it can be seen to be sufficiently orthodox.

The emptiness of the world leads us to the emptiness of God. Beyond the divine nature, beyond even the Trinity of persons lies the divine emptiness. This is the Godhead above God, the abyss of the divinity, the desert of the Godhead. Eckhart states :

...it is stripped of matter that the soul attains to God. It is only thus that it succeeds in uniting itself to the Blessed Trinity. But its happiness can become even greater yet if the soul search out the naked Godhead, for the Trinity is only the manifestation of the Godhead. In the pure Godhead there is absolutely no activity. The soul attains to perfect beatitude only in throwing itself into the desert of the Godhead there where there are neither

6. Meister Eckhart, Predigt (Pr.) 4. as found in the critical text edited by Joseph Quint : *Meister Eckhart : Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* (Stuttgart : Kohlhammer, 1936-). Hereafter *Die deutschen Werke* will be abbreviated as DW ; this text is found in DW, I, 69-70 ; English translation by Raymond Bernard Blakney, *Meister Eckhart : A Modern Translation* (New York : Harper and Row, 1941), p. 185.

7. Cf. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, §. 526.

operations nor forms, to bury itself there and lose itself there in that wilderness where its ego is annihilated and where it has no more care than it had in the days before it existed.⁸

Where Bonaventure's path leads to the Father as fullness, Eckhart's leads to the emptiness of the desert of the Godhead.⁹ Here in this emptiness the divinity is stripped of all determination, even of the fountain of fecundity that Bonaventure described. This is the empty abyss of the divinity that lies beneath the divine ground; it is the silence of the divinity that precedes speech; it is the darkness of the divinity before the divine light. This, too, created problems for Eckhart with Church authorities; for although he affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity, he so emphasized the desert of the divinity that he seemed to subordinate the Trinity beneath the Godhead above God. As we shall see, I believe that it is possible to interpret Eckhart in an orthodox manner according to the coincidence of opposites of mutually affirming complementarity.

Emptiness and Fullness

It is important to point out that Eckhart's thought is by no means devoid of the theme of fullness any more than Bonaventure's is devoid of that of emptiness. However, for the Franciscan, fullness predominates and for the Dominican, emptiness. Yet in Christology the situation is somewhat reversed. Interestingly, it was not in the area of God and the world that the Franciscans developed the theme of emptiness, but in their devotion to the humanity of Christ in poverty, humility and suffering.

8. This quotation is from the sermon *Expedi vobis*, which is printed as #. 76 in *Meister Eckhart*, ed. Franz Pfeiffer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1924). Although previous editors considered this sermon to be Eckhart's, it was not listed by Quint among Eckhart's authentic works; yet it is from the Eckhart school and represents in a concise fashion the essence of his position.

9. For references to the image of the desert, which seems to occur only in the German works, where it is usually applied to God and only occasionally to man, cf. Pr. 10 (DW, I, 171, 172); Pr. 12 (DW, I, 193); Pr. 28 (DW, II, 66); Pr. 29 (DW, II, 77); Pr. 48 (DW, II, 420); Pr. 60 (DW, III, 21); Pr. 81 (DW, III, 400); pr. 86 (Dw, III, 488) and the *Lieber Benedictos* (Dw, V, 119); for these references, I am indebted to Bernard McGinn and his article "The God Beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart," *Journal of Religion*, 61 (1981), 1-19,

Although Francis experienced the fullness of creation and of God, he imitated Christ in emptiness. The poverty of Christ was his norm and goal. As Bonaventure writes in his biography of Francis: "The holy man [Francis] saw that poverty was the close companion of the Son of God, and now that it was rejected by the whole world, he was eager to espouse it *in everlasting love* (Jer. 31 : 3)." ¹⁰ Bonaventure is alluding to the allegory of Francis's love of Lady Poverty; who had been the spouse of Christ; widowed at Christ's death, she found no other suitor until Francis came upon the scene. Francis emptied himself through a life of radical poverty and austerity which could provide a dramatic example of Eckhart's advice on detachment.

This life style of imitating Christ through continual emptying reached a climax in Francis's reception of the stigmata two years before his death. Francis had so identified with Christ in emptiness that he was imprinted with the marks of Christ's wounds — the symbol of Christ's final emptying of himself in death. For Bonaventure the vision that Francis had at the reception of the stigmata of the six-winged Seraph in the form of Christ crucified became the symbol of the emptying of the ego in mystical death in order to enter into the contemplation of God. In the prologue of *The Soul's Journey into God* where he discusses this vision Bonaventure says: "The six wings of the Seraph therefore symbolize the six steps of illumination that begin from creatures and lead up to God whom no one rightly enters except through the Crucified." The six steps he refers to here proceed along the path of fullness which we described above, but this path leads through the emptiness of Christ crucified. "There is no other path," Bonaventure says, "but through the burning love of the Crucified." ¹¹

When Francis produced the Christmas crib in Greccio in 1223, the scene he created emphasized the poverty of the setting of Christ's birth. According to Bonaventure, "he had a crib prepared, hay carried in and an ox and an ass led to the place." ¹² When some forty years later Bonaventure composed his meditation on the birth of Christ in *The Tree of Life*, he too, in the spirit of Francis highlighted the theme of poverty and the emptying of the divinity through humility: "Although he was great and rich, he became small and poor for us. He chose to be born away from a home in a stable,

10. *Legenda maior*, VII, 1; trans., p. 239.

11. *Itinerarium*, prol., 3; trans., p. 54.

12. *Legenda maior*, X, 7; trans., p. 278.

to be wrapped in swaddling clothes, to be nourished by virginal milk and to lie in a manger between an ox and an ass."¹³

When Eckhart treats the Christmas theme, he emphasizes fullness. In a sermon on Christmas entitled *Dum medium silentium*, Eckhart does not focus on the human details of the birth in Bethlehem, but on the birth of the Son in the soul. This birth of the Son in the soul is derived from his eternal birth from the Father in the Trinity: "How does God beget his Son in the soul?" he asks. "As a creature might, with ideas and likenesses? Not at all! He begets him in the soul just as he does in eternity—and not otherwise." He continues: "God begets his Son through the true unity of the divine nature. See! This is the way: he begets his Son in the core of the soul and is made One with it. There is no other way."¹⁴ In his treatment of the eternal birth of the Son from the Father, Eckhart coincides with Bonaventure's treatment of fullness in the Trinity, and he extends this theme of fullness into human souls, for the soul is brought into the fullness of the eternal birth through the birth of the Son in the soul. "The soul who is in the here and now, in her the Father bears his one-begotten Son and in the same birth the soul is born back into God. It is one birth; as fast as she is reborn into God, the Father is begetting his only Son in her."¹⁵

Coincidence of Fullness and Emptiness

This reversal of roles on the part of Bonaventure and Eckhart suggests that the themes of fullness and emptiness are not separate or contradictory, but are two aspects of the total Christian vision. Ultimately, they are related as complementaries, according to what I have explained elsewhere as the coincidence of opposites of mutually affirming complementarity.¹⁶ By that I mean when you affirm one, by that very fact you also affirm the other. In the Middle Ages there was no single author who thematized the coincidence of fullness and emptiness on all levels of the Christian mystery. Some emphasized fullness in one sphere and emptiness in another, or fullness in one treatise and emptiness in another. The Pseudo-Dionysius explored fullness in his

13. *Lignum vitae*, 4; trans., p. 128.

14. Pr. 57 in Joseph Quint, ed., *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* (München: Hanser, 1963), p. 418; trans., Blakney, p. 98.

15. Pr. 10 (DW, I, 166); English translation by C. de B. Evans, *Meister Eckhart* (London: John M. Watkins, 1947), p. 209.

16. Ewert Cousins, *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978), pp. 18-22.

treatise *On the Divine Names* and emptiness in *The Mystical Theology*. Since his extant writings do not systematically examine the humanity of Christ, this area of fullness and emptiness is left unexplored.

I would like to sketch briefly the outlines of what could be an extended treatment of Christian theology from the standpoint of the coincidence of fullness and emptiness. This can be seen as a sketch of a *summa summarum* of medieval theology; it is more than an attempt to deal with the thought of a single theologian or the harmony of two theologians, for example Bonaventure and Eckhart. Rather, taking material from many theologians, it is an attempt to construct a pattern of the coincidence of fullness and emptiness that will clarify the Christian mystery they were exploring

We will begin with the emptiness of Eckhart's desert of the Godhead and Bonaventure's fountain-fullness of the Father. These can be seen as a complementary aspect of the Father: for it is out of the silence of the Father that he speaks his Word; it is out of the abyss of the Father that he generates his Son; it is out of the darkness of the Father that he expresses himself in the light of his Image. The Father, then, has two complementary aspects: emptiness and fullness. This coincidence of emptiness and fullness in the Father is the basis for all other coincidences of emptiness and fullness in the divinity, creation, the incarnation and redemption. The Father, as fullness, empties himself in the generation of the Son; and the Son, turns back to the Father, emptying himself in imaging the Father's abyss of creativity from which he sprang. Together each empties himself in the mutual love they breathe towards each other, a love which is the person of the Holy Spirit. The theme of mutual relations in the Trinity developed by Augustine and Thomas and the theme of mutual interpersonal love, developed by Richard of St. Victor, are embodiments of the dynamics of the mutually affirming complementarity of fullness and emptiness.

The fullness of creativity that has welled up in the Trinity from the abyss of the divinity overflows in the free act of creation *ad extra*. This involves a coincidence of fullness and emptiness. Creation is an extension of the fullness of the inner Trinitarian self-diffusion; it is a mirror in which one can contemplate the fountain-fullness of the Father, as Francis and Bonaventure did. But creation is also an emptying, a kenosis in which God empties his fullness into a finite, contingent mode of expression. If one penetrates to the depths of

this emptying, to the core of creaturely contingency, he can declare, like Eckhart, that creatures are nothing.

The pleroma and kenosis involved in creation reaches its climax in the incarnation. For here the person of the Word enters into hypostatic union with human nature. The word empties himself of his majesty and enters into the realm of creatures through a personal union. From another standpoint this is a realization of fullness, for it draws creation into a new relation with the fullness of the divinity and manifests the fullness of the divinity in human form. As the Franciscans perceived, this emptying expresses itself in Christ's humility, poverty and suffering, reaching its climax in his death on the cross. Yet the emptying of death leads to the fullness of the resurrection and the drawing of all things back to the fullness of the Father. The emptying of Christ's death penetrates to the roots of sin, restores the order of grace and draws the world to eschatological fulfilment.

This is merely a sketch of a vision which calls for extensive development and technical analysis. I suggest that such an exploration would have value for understanding in a coherent way the richness of Christian medieval theology and of Christian theology in its total historical and contemporary perspectives. But its significance lies beyond the horizons of Christianity, for it can open a fruitful perspective for the dialogue of world religions. On a generic level, theologians could explore how these basic categories are realized in the religions of the world. More specifically, for example, the coincidence of fullness and emptiness can establish a point of contact between Christianity and Buddhism. In its doctrine of God and creation, Christianity has taken the path of fullness, incorporating the theme of emptiness — especially in Western Christianity — through devotion to the humanity of Christ. On the other hand, Buddhism has taken the path of emptiness — so radically that it is difficult for Christians to relate to the inner core of the experience. Yet through the path of emptiness, Buddhism has incorporated fullness in its own way. Perhaps Christianity and Buddhism—and the other religions as well—can meet most intimately at the point where fullness and emptiness coincide.