Ah, beloved, that a pagan has understood this and arrived there, while we remain so far from it and so unlike it, is to us a disgrace and a great shame. Our Lord attests to it when he says, “The kingdom of God is within you”.¹

In a sermon preached on the Gospel for Trinity Sunday, the Dominican John Tauler (c. 1300 – 1361) began by introducing the feast as the end and goal of all celebrations in the liturgical year, just as Trinity is for the rational creature. It is impossible, he admitted, to speak of its dignity in adequate terms, for the feast receives its meaning entirely from the Trinity it celebrates, and no created intellect can comprehend the dynamic equality and distinction of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the joy that is theirs. For this reason, Tauler told his hearers, it is better for us leave the finer points of doctrine to the clerics who must defend the faith – better for us to experience or feel it (ze bevindende) than to speak about it, to have Trinity “come to birth in the ground” not in a rational way, but “essentially”, not in speech, but in reality.²

Notwithstanding these cautionary remarks, the preacher did not shy away from offering rational and self-critical guidance along the path.³ Continuing to develop the parallelism of celebration and celebrant, Tauler insisted that our approach toward the Trinitarian mystery must be through the image of God (imago Dei) in the soul. Just as the feast celebrating the Trinity is ineffable because of what it celebrates, so too for Tauler the image of God was not a way of making God manifest; it was rather the principle of an apophatic anthropology, according to which the ground of the soul is drawn up into the same darkness in which the Trinity dwells: “no one can speak in appropriate terms about the nobility of this image”. With this as his measure, Tauler invited his audience to consider three different descriptions of

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¹ John Tauler, Predigt 60d (Trinity Sunday), in Die Predigten Taulers. Aus der Engelberger und der Freiburger Handschrift sowie aus Schmidts Abschriften der ehemaligen Strassburger Handschriften, ed. F. Vetter (Berlin: Weidmann, 1910), p. 301, l. 1-3: Kinder, das ein heiden dis verstunt und darzuo kam, das wir dem also verre und also ungelich sint, das ist uns laster und grosse schande. Dis bezügete unser herre do er sprach: ‘das rich Gottes ist in úch’.

² John Tauler, Predigt 60d (Trinity Sunday), p. 298, l. 10 – p. 299, l. 34.

³ John Tauler, Predigt 60d (Trinity Sunday), p. 300, l. 5-27.
the *imago Dei*. The first, not attributed to any authority, claims the image consists in the powers of memory, intellect, and will, by which the soul is capable of receiving the Trinity. This is inadequate, argued Tauler, because it simply reiterates what is apparent to everyday experience. Such potentiality and transience are inadequate expressions of God. The second view, attributed to Thomas Aquinas, improved upon this, insofar as he stated that the image is only perfect when the powers are in act (*wirklich*). But Tauler was not satisfied with this either, apparently for the same reasons. Finally, he continued, there are other masters whose opinion is “unspeakably superior”. They hold that in the soul’s deepest ground (*grunde*), the soul has the Trinity “essentially, actually, and subsistently” (*wesentlichen und wirklich und isteklich*). According to their view, God has an eternal covenant (*ewigen ordemente*) with this ground, and he can no more be separated from it than he can be from himself. Grace arises in the soul in the extent to which a person abandons oneself to this ground and turns toward it, and so, Tauler concluded, that is what we must do.

Now, the preacher asked, how is one to approach this ceaseless activity? Even if it is beyond speech, by what tokens can it be recognised? At this point, on Trinity Sunday of all days, Tauler introduced the authority of Proclus. He paraphrased one of the *Tria opuscula*, the *De providentia et fato* (8.30–32), as follows: as long as we are occupied with images below us, we are incredulous that there is such a ground within us; if you want to experience this (*daz bevinden*), leave all multiplicity and cultivate the singular focus of intellect, and then abandon even this and “become one with the One” (*wurt eins mit dem einen*). In other words, follow the guidance of Proclus, who called this ground and its activity “a still, silent, dormant, divine, and frenzied darkness” (*eine stille swigende sloffende goetteliche unsinnige dunsternisse*).4

This was not an aberrant turn in Tauler’s preaching. There are five references to Proclus in Tauler’s sermons (*Predigten* 60d, 61, twice in 64, and 65). All of them, as Loris Sturlese has shown, provide clear evidence of his acquaintance with Berthold’s interpretation of the *Tria opuscula*.5 Indeed, Tauler’s valorisation of Proclus, and his placement of him ambiguously alongside the best of the Christian teachings about the *imago Dei* (that is, Dietrich of Freiberg’s

interpretation of Augustine) corresponds closely to the tensions we will find in Berthold’s anthropology. Beyond these doctrinal convergences noted by Sturlese, one may also say that Tauler’s sense of the ramifications of the acknowledgement that Proclus has achieved what he did, as “a disgrace and a great shame” to Christians of his time, was also in profound continuity with the spirit of Berthold’s *Expositio*.  

In Berthold as in Tauler we find something much more volatile than the domestication of a pagan philosopher for a Christian audience or, for that matter, an argument about pagan philosophy as a *praeparatio Evangelii*. Instead, both Dominicans presented Proclus’ achievement as a challenge for Christian self-understanding. The dignity of the soul that was known to Proclus and had been forgotten since the time of the ancient sages was regarded by these preachers as a more adequate expression of the truth of Christianity than what they saw around them in their own day. In other words, they used Proclean description of God’s hidden and abiding presence in the soul, his “eternal ordinance”, in an operation of reform directed at the Christian understanding of the human as *imago Dei*.  

6 See the parallel verdict in John Tauler, *Predigt 61* (Nativity of John the Baptist), ed. F. Vetter, p. 332, l. 21 – p. 333, l. 2: *Aber do kamen die grossen meister als Proculus und Plato und gaben das ein klor underscheit den die dis underscheit als verre nüt vinden enkonden. Sant Augustinus sprach das Plato das evangelium In principio al zemole hette vor gesprochen bis an das wort: ‘fuit homo missus a Deo’, und das was doch mit verborgen bedekten worten, und diese fundent underscheit von der heiligen drivaltikeit. Kinder, dis kam alles us disem inwendigen grunde: dem lebent si und wartent des. Das ist ein gros laster und schande das wir armen verbliben volk, die cristen sint und als grosse helfe hant, die grade Gots und den heiligen glouben und das heilig sacrament und als manig grosse helfe, und gont recht umbe als blinde huenr und erkennen unser selbes nüt das in uns ist, und erwissent dannan ab ze mole nüt: das machet unser grosse manigvaltikeit und uswendikeit, und das wir als vil mit den sinnen wúrken [...].* (*But there came the great masters like Proclus and Plato, and they gave a clear discernment to those who were not able to discern it so well on their own. Saint Augustine says that Plato had plainly explained the Gospel, *In principio*, as far as the phrase, *fuit homo missus a Deo*, which was however written there in hidden words. They also discovered the distinction in the Holy Trinity. Ah, beloved, all of this came from the inner ground, for whose sake they lived and which they waited upon. It is a disgrace and a great shame that we, humble successors that we are, who are Christians and have such great aids at our disposal, the grace of God, the sacred faith, the holy sacrament, and so many other great aids – that we go around in circles like blind hens, without knowing ourselves nor what is within us, and never know anything about it. This is the result of our great manifoldness and outwardness, and that we are much too occupied with the works of the senses [...]*).  

The spirit of Berthold of Moosburg’s own scholarly attitude to ancient wisdom and his views about the content of the Platonic philosophy which was the crowning achievement of that wisdom, can be summarised in a phrase from Dionysius he often cited:

one must see that our mind has a certain power for knowing, through which it examines things intelligible, but a union exceeding the nature of the mind (the other translation says: ‘a unity superexalted beyond the nature of the mind’), through which the mind is conjoined to those things that are above it. Therefore, it is necessary to think divine things according to this, not according to ourselves [non secundum nos], but our whole selves placed outside our whole selves and deified wholly. For it is better to be God’s and not our own; thus, divine things will be given to those made to be with God.8

For Berthold, the teaching that united the greatest philosophers and theologians (Plato, Paul, Dionysius, Augustine, Boethius) was that theology must proceed “intellectually”, by turning away from multiplicity and images, and by gazing upon the simple Form or Good forming all things. This intellectual progression was understood to culminate, only after great labour and even then not automatically, in a “divine frenzy” beyond the mind and in a union with the divine providence. At the same time, since the golden age of philosophy that had perfectly articulated the relation of the human to the divine world above
it was entirely in the past, “not according to ourselves” became an exegetical principle. Philosophy and exegesis were deeply intertwined in Berthold’s project of reform.

In the three prefaces to the commentary (Prologus, Expositio tituli, Praeambulum), Berthold used literary forms that gave him more freedom to articulate the larger aims of his project. In what follows, we will consider each preface in turn. We will find that, when they are interpreted in light of their sources, the same pattern appears in all of them. Berthold took concepts, arguments, and praises traditionally associated only with Christian theology and extended them into the domain of Platonism as such. But this was no revolutionary overthrow or demotion of Christian doctrine. Rather, it was a contribution to a reform of Christian philosophical theology through the recovery of an understanding of nature (the macrocosm) and humanity (the microcosm) that was held in common by the ancient pagan and Christian inheritors of Plato. Platonism was for Berthold in the fullest sense a natural or “philosophical revelation”, guiding the human toward something in its nature that it is naturally disposed to ignore. We recall the words of Proclus, cited approvingly by Tauler: as long as we are occupied with images below us, we are incredulous that there is such a ground within us. Turning then to the first preface, the Prologus, we will find nature presented as the outward manifestation of the inner, “supersubstantial world” or “house of God”. At its conclusion, we will find the contemplator (theoricus) seeking to enter this abode, first by turning inward, and then by going above himself, through the imago or trace of the One in the soul.