

Jan van Ruusbroec on the Trinity, prayer, and the nature of contemplation

© Roy Hammerling (ed.), Brill, Leiden, 2008

Introduction

The end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries represent a watershed in the history of Western spirituality: it is at this time that we find the origin of a modern understanding of spirituality – an understanding in which mysticism and theology have become separate; and in which mysticism is all too often understood in terms of an immediate, private, unmediated experience of the divine.¹ The work of William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published in 1902, both chronicles and further reinforces this modern approach to mysticism. It is an approach that appeals to those who have grown disenchanted with the institutional Church and its religion. After all, James explicitly downplays the doctrinal elements, opening the door for what in the eyes of its critics at least seems nothing else but a solipsistic pursuit of religious self-gratification, strangely insensitive to the apophaticism that characterises traditional patristic and medieval theology.

Some authors writing in the fourteenth century display an awareness of major changes in the religious climate, including specific changes in the ways meditation and

¹ For a brilliant overview of the changing nature of mystical theology and the causes of this change, the reader should consult Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God. A Study in the Negativity of Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996)

mysticism are understood. One of these authors is Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381).² During his lifetime references to Neoplatonic discourse gradually disappear; a further severance of theology and spirituality takes place; and a more experiential, more subjectivist approach to spirituality becomes popular. Whereas Bonaventure, for instance, considered himself a “mystical theologian,” a scholastic and mystical author, deeply influenced by the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus that had been relatively recently revived in the West, authors like Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna, Richard Rolle and others clearly write in a very different climate.

Focusing on the writings of Ruusbroec will give me the opportunity to illustrate that he was aware of these changes which were to eventually lead to the present-day understanding of spirituality; more significantly, it will also allow me to examine his specifically Trinitarian response against what he calls “the natural way.” I will thereby be able to reveal the significance of his theology of the Trinity for his understanding of prayer, contemplation, and the acme of the spiritual journey, namely the so-called “common life.”

It is no coincidence that we must turn to an author of the Low Countries to find a witness to the changing nature of spirituality. In the thirteenth century Flanders (together with Northern Italy) had enjoyed an unprecedented economic growth due to a flourishing textile industry, coupled with growing urbanisation and increasing literacy among the laity. In general the period 1250-1450 was a period of cultural flowering: this is the time of the magnificent town-halls and cathedrals in Bruges,

² For a more in-depth overview of his thought, see my study *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003)

Ghent, and Brussels, and the time of artistic revolution in the world of painting with figures such as Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Hans Memlinc, and others.

As suggested it was also a time of religious change and fermentation. The Low Countries saw the origins of the fascinating Beguine movement and produced some of its finest exponents, such as Hadewijch, Beatrice of Nazareth, Marguerite Porete, and others. By the time of Ruusbroec's death in 1381, Geert Grote had already started the movement known as the Modern Devotion, the most famous exponent of which is *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas A Kempis. Despite the fact that Grote is reported to have visited Ruusbroec in his monastery in Groenendaal and translated some of Ruusbroec's key works (originally written in Middle Dutch) into Latin, we have effectively entered a new world. Whereas in Ruusbroec's works (such as *The Spiritual Espousals*) we encounter one of the last major representatives of the medieval tradition of mystical theology, freely drawing upon Neoplatonic and patristic sources, thereby developing a speculative and theologically informed spirituality, *The Imitation of Christ* presents us with a homely, practical spirituality devoid of any speculative elements. This new kind of spirituality clearly appealed to the new age. Whereas *The Imitation of Christ* proved extremely popular throughout Europe, Ruusbroec's writings exerted initially only a modest influence. During his lifetime his works were translated in German and Latin, and they exerted an influence upon Willem Jordaens, Hendrik Herp (Henricus Harphius), and the enigmatic author of *The Temple of Our Soul* and *The Evangelic Pearl*.³ Despite Surius's translation into Latin of Ruusbroec's complete works in 1552 which found a fairly wide

³ For these authors and others influenced by Ruusbroec, see K. Ruh, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik. Band IV. Die niederländische Mystik des 14. bis 16. Jahrhunderts* (München: C.H. Beck, 1999). Extracts of the works of these authors will be published in R. Faesen, H. Rolfson and R. Van Nieuwenhove (eds.), *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries* (New York: Paulist Press), in press.

dissemination (and which may have influenced the Spanish School) the theological and cultural climate had changed too much for Ruusbroec's thought to profoundly influence the theological scene. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that major Catholic theologians such as von Balthasar and Rahner have begun to take note of this fascinating author.⁴

In what follows I will show [1] how Ruusbroec specifically chronicles and rejects meditative practices that are experiential and quietist in nature, writing at a time when the nature of spirituality is changing from being apophatic and intrinsically linked with theology, the sacraments and the life of the Church, to being experiential and sometimes nothing but an individualistic quest severed from a proper significant theological and ecclesial context. To understand Ruusbroec's reservations about quietist practices we need to examine [2] his Trinitarian theology. This will pave the way for an exposition of Ruusbroec's description of [3] the spiritual transformation of the person in the active, inner and contemplative lives, which culminates in [4] the so-called "common life." When discussing the inner life we will also specifically examine how his Trinitarian theology also shapes his understanding of prayer.

1. The natural way: meditation and mysticism

The following extract is taken from one of Ruusbroec's major works, *Die Geestelike Brulocht* (The Spiritual Espousals). In it he describes the pursuit of what he calls the

⁴ Karl Rahner singles Ruusbroec out as one of a handful of authentically Trinitarian thinkers in his little work on the Trinity (London: Burns and Oates, 1980). Von Balthasar discusses Ruusbroec's theology in *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. V The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 67-78.

natural way, or what scholars today would call natural mysticism, in which people pursue *ledicheit*, i.e. sheer inactivity or emptiness:

All creatures are naturally inclined to rest, and therefore rest is sought by the good and the evil in many a way. Now consider: when a person is bare and unassailed by images with respect to his senses, and empty, without activity, with respect to his higher faculties, then he enters into rest by mere nature. And all people can find and possess this rest in themselves in mere nature, without the grace of God, if only they can empty themselves of images and of all works. (...) But now consider the manner in which a person surrenders himself to this natural rest (*naturlijker rusten*). It is a sitting-still without any practice within or without, in emptiness (*een stille sitten sonder oefeninghe van binnen ochte van buten, in eere ledicheit*), so that rest may be found and may abide unhindered. But rest practiced in this way is not lawful, for it produces blindness in a person, in ignorance, and a sinking down into himself without activity. And this rest is nothing but an emptiness into which a person falls and he forgets himself and God and everything with respect to any activity.⁵

I would like to clarify a number of issues. First, the quietist meditation Ruusbroec describes is not sinful *in itself*. After all, Ruusbroec asserts that this “rest” is natural, and everything created is good: “In itself, this rest is no sin, for it is in all people by nature, if they could empty themselves. But when one wishes to practice and possess it without acts of virtue, then a person falls into a spiritual pride and into a self-

⁵ *Brulocht*, b 2301-18 from *Jan van Ruusbroec, Opera Omnia*, Vol. III, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1985), ed. in chief G. de Baere, *CCCM* ciii, *Die Geestelike Brulocht*. The numbers refer to the relevant lines in the original Middle Dutch text.

complacency of which one is seldom cured.”⁶ Second, as I will attempt to show forthwith, Ruusbroec too sees “rest” as part of his spiritual ideal but he understands it in a radically different manner. In the text we have just quoted, “rest” is psychological in nature: our faculties (memory or mind; intellect and will) become empty, vacuous and quiet: we sit still, in quietness, becoming empty of all thoughts and imaginings. Whereas our faculties would normally be engaging with things and issues *outside* of ourselves they nevertheless also have an inclination to withdraw *within* into stillness. It is this “natural rest” that is being cultivated in quietist meditation: “they stand in a pure passivity without any activity upwards or downwards, just like a loom which itself is inactive and awaits its master, when he wishes to work. For if they did anything, God would be hindered in his activity, and this is why they are void of all virtue, and so empty that they wish neither to thank nor to praise God, and they have neither knowledge, nor love nor will, nor prayer, nor desire.”⁷

In his last work, *Vanden XII Beghinen* (The Twelve Beguines) Ruusbroec has offered a final sustained attack on those who pursue quietist meditation. First he once more briefly sketches the nature of this meditation: “We find several wrong and misled people, who have neither a contemplative nor an active life. Nevertheless, they consider that they are the wisest and the holiest in the whole world. These are the ones who are freed of images of all things (*die onverbeelt zyn van allen dinghen*) and who, in bare nature, without grace and without virtue, turn inwards above reason in their own being; thee they find inactivity, rest, and imageless bareness. That is the highest point to which nature, without grace and without virtue, can come. But since they are not baptised in the Spirit of our Lord and in true charity, they can neither see God nor

⁶ *Brulocht*, b 2339-41

⁷ *Brulocht*, b 2428-34

find him or his glorious realm in their being. But they find their own essence: an imageless and becalmed inactivity (*ledicheit*); and there they imagine that they are eternally blessed.”⁸

Insofar as they attempt to attain union with God without charitable activity and the aid of God’s grace, they sin against the Holy Spirit who bestows all grace; insofar as they look for the divine within themselves, in their own essence, they sin against the Father: “And this is our common belief from the beginning of the world, that God has created angels and all creatures; we have not made ourselves (...) And these people who do not want to be like [God] but to be God himself, are more evil and more damned than Lucifer and all his ilk.”⁹ The final sin Ruusbroec identifies is against the nature of God as Trinity. Whereas his opponents pursue quietist and passive meditation, Ruusbroec refers to the divine nature to refute this erroneous practice: God “is an eternal worker; he gives us his grace and demands of us eternal living works, that is, that we should confess, know and love, thank and praise him; these are eternal, living works, which he works in us and with us, for they begin in him, and through him they are brought to perfection in him.”¹⁰ As God himself is “eternal activity” (*een eewich werc*)¹¹ in his intra-trinitarian processions we too should engage in a practice of knowing and loving God and perform charitable works and acts of prayer and worship in distinct contrast to those who pursue inactivity and quietist emptiness – an inactivity Ruusbroec links with the nothingness of sin that Lucifer embraced: “Those who were disobedient, and despised God’s command and his works, by pride, fell down from heaven into the dark nothingness of sin and into a

⁸ *Beghinen*, 2a 27-38 from *Opera Omnia VIIA, Vanden XII Beghinen*, ed. in chief, G. de Baere (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).

⁹ *Beghinen*, 2a 113-19

¹⁰ *Beghinen*, 2a 312-16

¹¹ *Beghinen* 2a 347

false inactivity (*dat donckere niet der sonden ende in een valsce ledicheit*), so that they can never again know nor love, thank nor praise God, nor practice virtue.”¹²

To understand why he rejects this quietist meditation, and to see how we can properly develop the dynamic of out-going, in-going and “resting” of our faculties we need to examine Ruusbroec’s theology of the Trinity. Indeed, our faculties mirror the divine dynamic and intra-divine processions because we have been made in the image and likeness of the Trinity.

2. Ruusbroec’s theology of the Trinity

Like other medieval theologians Ruusbroec perceives a link between the two intra-divine processions on the one hand, and creation and salvation, on the other.¹³ For instance, in the third book of *Die Brulocht*, which I will discuss below, Ruusbroec first establishes the link between the generation of the Son from the Father, and our creation and enlightenment. He then (c 211-36) continues to make clear the link between the procession of the Spirit as Love from the mutual contemplation of Father and Son, and our loving participation in the divinity. The Father knows (through the Son) and loves (through the Spirit) the world he creates. Ruusbroec summarises: “For just as the Father beholds all things anew, without cease, in the birth of his Son, thus all things are loved anew by the Father and by the Son in the out-flowing of the Holy

¹² *Beghinen*, 2a 332-36

¹³ Here the reader should consult the magnificent work by G. Emery, *La Trinité Créatrice* (Paris: Vrin, 1996) and, in shorter form: “Trinity and Creation” from R. Van Nieuwenhove and J. Wawrykow (eds.), *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 58-76.

Spirit.”¹⁴ Therefore, in order to understand what he has to say on contemplation and prayer it is essential to sketch his theology of the Trinity first.

Ruusbroec espouses traditional medieval Augustinian ideas but develops them by adopting the scholastic notion of *regiratio* (or return, *reditus*, *epistrophe*) which he links especially with the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Like Bonaventure, Ruusbroec teaches that the Father generates the Word out of his fruitful paternal nature (divine nature as *bonum diffusivum sui*), and from their mutual contemplation the Spirit proceeds as a Bond of Love. However, where Ruusbroec radically differs from his predecessors is in his assertion that the divine Persons flow back (*regiratio*) into the divine being or essence in which they find an enjoyable rest or fruition. In short Ruusbroec identifies three “moments” in the intra-divine dynamics: an out-going moment (generation of the Word and procession of the Spirit); an in-going moment (through the Spirit as bond of Love between Father and Son the divine Persons flow back); and a moment of rest or fruition in the inner-divinity. Because of the fruitfulness of the divine nature, the Persons will then again proceed, in a never-ending dynamic of going-out (generation of the Word; procession of the Spirit), return into the divine unity, and blissful fruition in the perichoretic unity. As Ruusbroec puts it in a famous passage that reveals something of the extraordinarily dynamic nature of his Trinitarian thinking: “God is a flowing, ebbing sea, which flows without cease into all his beloved, according to each one’s needs and dignity. And he is ebbing back in again, drawing all those whom he has endowed on heaven and earth together with all they have and can do.”¹⁶ This passage illustrates the close link between the intra-divine processions and return, on the one hand, and our participation through grace in them, on the other. In another

¹⁴ *Brulocht*, c 231-36

¹⁵ See *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity*,...p. 77-99

¹⁶ *Brulocht*, b 1148-51

passage Ruusbroec describes in somewhat more scholarly fashion the intra-trinitarian dynamics as follows:

The noble nature of God which is the principal cause of all creatures, is fruitful; therefore it cannot remain in tranquility in the unity of paternity because of the stirring (*gherinen*) of fruitfulness, but it has to give birth without cease to the eternal Wisdom, i.e., the Son of the Father. The Son is always being born, has been born, and remains unborn; yet it is one Son. Insofar as the Father contemplates the Son, the eternal Wisdom, and all things in the same Wisdom, he is born and is another Person than the Father. (...)

Neither from the fruitful nature (this is paternity), nor from the fact that the Father gives birth to his Son, does Love – this is the Holy Spirit – flow; but because of the fact that the Son is born as another Person, distinct from the Father, in which the Father sees him as born and all creatures in him and with him, as the life of all things; and because of the fact that the Son beholds the Father as fruitful and giving birth, and himself [= the Son] and all things in the Father (this is a mutual beholding in the same fruitful nature): from this, Love, which is the Holy Spirit and a bond between the Father and the Son and between the Son and the Father, is brought about. With this Love the Persons are permeated and through it they embrace and flow back into the unity from which the Father is constantly giving birth. And when they have flown back into the unity, there is nevertheless no rest because of the fruitfulness of the nature.

This giving birth and flowing back into unity is the work of the Trinity; thus there is threeness of Persons and oneness of nature.¹⁷

As this quotation makes clear Ruusbroec's Trinitarian theology contains traditional Augustinian elements as developed throughout the Middle Ages: God the Father generates his Word out of his fruitful nature (a more Ps-Dionysian element developed also by Bonaventure), and out of the mutual contemplation of Father and Son, the Spirit proceeds as their Bond of Love. What makes Ruusbroec's Trinitarian theology unique is his claim that the divine processions of Son and Spirit are being "reversed": the Persons flow back into the divine unity in which they find enjoyable rest, from which they emanate once again, and so forth. This theology of the Trinity has implications for every aspect of his theology, including the way he sees role of prayer. This will be discussed later.

What is of special interest to us are the implications Ruusbroec's theology of the Trinity has for his understanding of his spiritual ideal, the "common life," and the rejection of quietist meditation it implies. Indeed, it is because the Trinity is characterised by both *activity* (in the divine processions of Son and Spirit and their return) and "*rest*" or "enjoyment" (in the perichoretic union) that Ruusbroec's has to reject a spirituality of merely quietist meditation.

3. The spiritual transformation of the person

3.1 *The active and inner lives*

¹⁷ Jan van Ruusbroec, *Werken*, Vol. I, *Dat Rijcke der Ghelieven*, J.B. Pouckens and L. Reypens, ed. (Tiel: Lannoo, 1944), p. 60 (my trans.). A critical edition of this work is in press and will appear in *Opera Omnia*, ed. in chief Guido de Baere.

Ruusbroec distinguishes between (a) an active life – by which he means both the inner struggle to master the passions and acquire virtue (the Evagrian *praktikè*), and a life of charitable service to our fellowmen; (b) an inner or God-yearning life (a life of growing interiority); and (c) a contemplative life (not to be understood in the sense of a life led by contemplative monks but rather used as synonymous with continuous contemplation.¹⁸ His major work, *The Spiritual Espousals (Die Geestelike Brulocht)* is structured accordingly into three books.¹⁹ However, this tri-partite structure is deliberately qualified by Ruusbroec’s claim that the so-called “common life,” which combines contemplation and activity, is the highest spiritual ideal. For a person who has attained the common life, “contemplation and action come just as readily to him and he is perfect in both.”²⁰

The tri-partite structure must be understood in the light of the three Trinitarian “moments” discussed earlier: the active life is an “out-going” life; the inner life as a life of growing interiority is “in-going” while the contemplative life is the state of “rest” or “enjoyment.” What complicates the issue is that each life, in turn, displays the three Trinitarian dimensions. For instance, the contemplative life (which is generally described as a life of rest or fruition) is in turn characterised by moments of “going-out” (the generation of the Word), return (through the Spirit) and enjoyment (in the unity of the divine essence), as we will see later.

When discussing the inner life Ruusbroec also examines a number of phenomena moderns have come to associate especially with mysticism, such the gift of tears,

¹⁸ *Brulocht*, b 2244-47: “Now understand: God comes *without cease* in us, with intermediary and without intermediary, and demands of us enjoyment and activity, and that the one should not be hindered by the other, but rather always be fortified” [my italics].

¹⁹ *Brulocht*, 47-55

²⁰ *Vanden Blinkenden Steen*, 948-49

jubilation, the “divine touch” (a notion later adopted by St John of the Cross) and so forth (...). The fact that Ruusbroec rejects an experiential, quietist understanding of union with God therefore does not mean that he does not acknowledge the effects of grace on our sensual or affective nature. Ruusbroec usually describes the workings of divine grace in the soul using the metaphor of the “divine touch”. This touch itself is beyond words and can never be grasped; but it does allow us to “place” affective states in the context of the workings of God’s grace: “you must know that the grace of God flows down to the lower powers, and touches the heart of man, and from that comes heartfelt affection and sensitive desire for God. And affection and desire penetrate the heart and senses, flesh and blood, and all the corporeal nature and cause in him strain and restlessness in his body, so that often he does not know what to do with himself. He is in a state of a man who is so drunk that he is no longer in possession of himself. And from this comes much eccentric behaviour, which these soft-hearted men cannot control, that is, they often lift their heads to heaven with eyes wide-open because of restless desire; sometimes joy, sometimes weeping, now singing and now shouting, now weal and now woe, and often both together at once...”²¹ These “phenomena” only belong to an intermediary state of the spiritual journey and we should not pay more attention to it than we should..[QUOTE]

3.2 The role of prayer

Prayer plays a central role in our growing interiority. Ruusbroec acted as a parish priest in Brussels for twenty-five years and as prior in the newly-founded monastery

²¹ *Boecskén der Verclaringhe*, 307-18 from Jan van Ruusbroec, *Opera Omnia*, Vol. I, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), ed. in chief G. de Baere, *CCCM* ci, There is almost a hermeneutical awareness here: we all undergo emotional states but the mystical theologian “places” them in the context of the workings of divine grace (and these workings themselves are beyond experience).

of Groenendaal for almost forty years. For him the need for prayer and faithful participation in the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church was quite simply a given. As we have seen earlier, throughout his works he condemns those who claim to be able to do without prayer, sacraments and the Church. Two elements make his views on prayer of particular interest. First, there is the fact that he sees prayer as a participation in the Trinitarian dynamics discussed earlier; and secondly, what Ruusbroec writes about the need to die to self-centredness and attachment also extends to prayer. Let's examine these issues in some more detail.

Prayer occupies a unique position in Ruusbroec's Trinitarian spirituality for it mirrors both the active or out-going aspect and the in-going dimensions of the Trinitarian dynamics.

Prayer, for Ruusbroec, is an essential aspect of our *active*, loving response to the bestowal of God's grace – a bestowal which is itself nothing but the result of the active procession of the Spirit or Love from the Father and the Son. Therefore, those who fail to respond to grace in prayer and virtuous activity, merely pursuing solipsistic quietism, fail to mirror the active dimension of the intra-trinitarian life.²² Behind this unwillingness to respond to God's grace lurks a profound pride that ultimately refuses to acknowledge one's created status. Claiming that he is divine by nature, the sinner claims: "I neither hope, nor love, nor do I have confidence nor faith in God; I neither pray nor adore, for I give God neither honor nor advantage above

²² *Beghinen*, 2a 48-63: "Now they imagine that they are above the Holy Spirit and that they need neither him nor his grace (...) This is why they do not want to know or ken, nor will nor love, nor thank nor praise, nor desire nor have, for they want to be above God and without God and neither seek nor find God anywhere and to be quit of all virtues."

myself. For in God there is no distinction: neither Father, nor Son, nor Holy Ghost; there is nothing but one God; and with him I am one, and the same one that he is.”²³

Ruusbroec also hints at the idea that praising and honoring God also represents a participation in the *in-going* dynamic of the Trinity: “Furthermore, just as the Spirit of our Lord sends us out to live in virtues and in all good works, so also he draws us into inward practices and demands and commands us, to thank and praise God, love and honor him eternally and always...”²⁴ Prayer constitutes the most important aspect of the “inward practices” by which we are drawn into God – thereby reflecting, and participating in through grace, the *regiratio* of the divine Persons. This kind of prayer is interior, and alien to those who merely “go through the motions.” Criticising those within the Church who adopt a worldly attitude to all things, including prayer, he states: “they pray with their lips, but their heart does not savor what it speaks about, namely the secret marvel that is hidden in Scripture and in the sacraments and in their office. They do not feel it at all. That is why they are so coarse and obtuse and unenlightened in divine truth.”²⁵ Finding “the secret marvel” through prayer is a matter of concentrated focus or intention. In a treatise written for a young Clare nun he admonishes her:

Furthermore, when you read or sing or pray, if you are able to understand the words, then observe the meaning of the words, for you serve before the countenance of God. And if you do not understand the words, or if you are elevated to a higher state, then stay with that and keep your simple sight on God as long as you can and mind and love always the honor of God. If alien thoughts and alien images fall into your mind during your office of hours or during your

²³ *Beghinen*, 2a 93-98

²⁴ *Beghinen*, 1, 694-98

²⁵ *Brulocht*, b 1307-11

practice, no matter about what, it is all the same: when you become aware of this, and come to yourself, do not fear, for we are unstable, but turn yourself back hastily with intention and love to God. For even though the fiend shows you his goods and his wares, if you do not buy of it with affection, it does not stay with you.²⁶

If we are to pursue “a higher state” and cultivate a loving devotion for God, we should nevertheless not become attached to this devotion or the consolations it brings. This brings me to the second point of significance. He considers people who pay heed to the spiritual consolations as imperfect for “they possess their interiority with attachment, because they consider clinging to God in love as the best and the very highest they can or want to reach. (...) And even if they always want to live in the service of God and please him forever, they do not want to die in God to self-centredness of spirit and live the life that conforms to that of God. And even if they count for little all the comfort and the repose that may come from outside, they count for much the gifts of God and their inner practices, the consolation and the sweetness they feel inside. And so they tarry by the wayside and do not die completely to be given the highest victory in a love that is bare and beyond manner.”²⁷ Persons who seek consolation and sweetness in their spiritual practices and prayer are considered “spiritually unchaste.” They will “pray and desire many special things from God” but they are nevertheless deceived: “in their lust, they are entirely inclined towards inward savor and towards the spiritual ease of their nature. And this is called spiritual unchastity, for it is a disordered inclination of natural love, which is always turned

²⁶ *Een Spieghel der Eeuwigher Salicheit*, 180-90 from *Jan van Ruusbroec, Opera Omnia*, , Vol. VIII, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), ed. in chief G. de Baere, CCCM cviii.

²⁷ *Vanden Blinkenden Steen*, 388-411

back upon itself and seeks its ease in all things.”²⁸ Again, Ruusbroec does not want us to dispense with prayer and participation in the life of the Church (including the sacramental life); but these “practices” should not become another source of attachment and spiritual self-gratification – for it is this kind of self-possessiveness that the mystical theologian hopes to transcend. Prayer and inner practices are ends in their own right, as is love itself: “live and praise, intend and love and serve his eternal honor, not for reward, nor for comfort, nor for taste, nor for consolation, nor for anything that might come to you from it. For true love does not seek what is hers; and therefore she has God and all things.”²⁹

3.3 The contemplative life

The third book of *Die Geestelike Brulocht* is dedicated to the contemplative life. For Ruusbroec contemplation is not a fleeting practice separated from the Christian life as a whole. Nor does it mean “contemplative prayer” to be pursued in the solitariness of a monastic cell. It is rather receptivity or openness, a theocentric disposition, which allows the core of our being to continually (*sonder onderlaet*)³⁰ participate in the processions of the divine Persons.

Contemplation “establishes us in a state of purity which transcends all understanding.”³¹ Few people can attain this state because of their incapacity and the hidden nature of the divine light.³² In order to understand it we must have died to ourselves and be living in God, turning our gaze to the eternal light which is shining

²⁸ *Brulocht*, b 2374-78

²⁹ *Spieghel*, 46-50

³⁰ *Brulocht*, c 111

³¹ *Brulocht*, c 8-9

³² *Brulocht*, c 26-28

in the ground of our spirit. Ruusbroec structures his description of contemplation in Book III of *Die Geestelike Brulocht* around the verse from Mt 25:6: “See/ the Bridegroom is coming/ go out/ to meet Him.”

First there is a preparatory stage [“See”]. Ruusbroec enumerates three elements necessary for a person to engage in contemplation: “The first is that a person must be interiorly well-ordered, interiorly unhindered, and as empty of all his interior works as if he were not even performing them, for if he is interiorly disturbed through any virtuous work he will be troubled by images, and as long as this lasts he will not be able to contemplate.”³³ Two observations ought to be made: firstly, Ruusbroec does not say that contemplation excludes exterior works (as if a life of charitable activity and contemplation were mutually exclusive, at least momentarily). Rather, he suggests that we should remain empty, or detached, from our works *as if* we were not performing them. Secondly, contemplation required an imagelessness which will make us receptive to the divine resplendence or light (about which I will say more below). The notions of imagelessness and the importance of divine light in contemplation are clearly reminiscent of a spirituality indebted to the Evagrian tradition.³⁴ The second element necessary for contemplation is the need “to interiorly cleave to God with devoted intention (*meyninghen*) and love.” As long as we maintain this theocentric focus or intention, we can contemplate.³⁵ The third element is closely associated with the first: we must lose ourselves in “a state devoid of particular form

³³ *Brulocht*, c 54-59; translation by Wiseman, p. 146-47

³⁴ This observation, if correct, challenges the usual accounts according to which Evagrian spirituality did not exert any significant influence (even if only indirectly) upon Western spirituality. See J. Bamberger’s “Introduction” to his translation of *Evagrius Ponticus, The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), p. lviii, note 141 where he observes the similarities between Evagrius and Ruusbroec.

³⁵ *Brulocht*, c 60-63

or measure, a state of darkness in which all contemplatives blissfully lose their way and are never again able to find themselves in a creaturely way.”³⁶

In the abyss of darkness where we have died to ourselves, the revelation of God begins [“The Bridegroom is coming”]. As a Christian Neoplatonist Ruusbroec develops a rich, exemplarist theology of the soul as image of God. This image-theology posits a close link between our eternal life in God as exemplar on the one hand, and our created being (which participates in this eternal exemplar) on the other hand. Also, the eternal coming of the Bridegroom in the soul is linked with the eternal generation of the Word from the Father. Thus, in order to understand Ruusbroec’s account of contemplation two doctrinal issues must be kept in mind: (a) our created existence participates in our eternal spiritual existence as idea in God; (b) this eternal existence as idea in God shares in the intra-trinitarian dynamics: the generation of the Son, the procession of the Spirit, and their return in the divine essence.³⁷ Hence the intra-trinitarian life also shapes the nature of contemplation, which is described in terms of “going-out” [part three of Mt 25:6] with the divine Word or Light:

We shall find that the bosom of the Father is our own ground and origin, in which our life and being have their beginning. From out of this ground, that is, from out of the Father and all that lives in him, there shines an eternal resplendence, which is the birth of the Son. (...) All persons who have been

³⁶ *Brulocht*, c 64-67; translation by Wiseman, p. 147

³⁷ *Brulocht*, c 135-41; translation by Wiseman, p. 149: “This eternal going forth and this eternal life which we eternally have and are in God apart from ourselves is a cause of our created being in time. Our created being depends upon this eternal being and is one with it in its essential subsistence. This eternal being and life which we have and are in God’s eternal wisdom is like God, for it both abides eternally and without distinction in the divine essence and, through the birth of the Son, flows forth eternally as a distinct entity (...)”

raised above their creaturely state into the contemplative life are one with this resplendence and are this resplendence itself. Through this divine light – and as regards their uncreated being – they see, feel, and find themselves to be the same simple ground from out of which the resplendence shines without measure in a divine way and in which it eternally abides devoid of particular form according to the simplicity of the divine essence. For this reason interior, contemplative persons will go out in accordance with the mode of their contemplation, above and beyond reason and distinction and their own created being. Through an eternal act of gazing accomplished by means of the unborn light, they are transformed (*ghetransformeert*) and become one with that same light with which they see and which they see. It is in this way that contemplatives pursue the eternal image to which they have been created; they contemplate God and all things without distinction in a simple act of seeing in the divine resplendence. This is the noblest and most beneficial contemplation which a person can attain in this life.³⁸

I would like to make a number of observations. First, it is significant that Ruusbroec writes that our contemplation extends to God *and all things*. This illustrates that Ruusbroec's concept is broader than merely a contemplation of God. There is also a contemplative way of seeing the things of creation. Second, when Ruusbroec writes that this contemplation is “above and beyond reason and distinction” we should not

³⁸ *Brulocht*, c 158-86; translation by Wiseman, p. 149-150. Ruusbroec's mysticism of light seems reminiscent of the Orthodox tradition. There are undoubtedly some interesting similarities with some major Eastern authors, including his contemporary Gregory Palamas (e.g., synergeia, distinction between divine essence (*wesen*) and operations or energies (*werken*), light mysticism, ...). Ruusbroec's approach, however, seems more interiorizing. For instance, when he discusses the Transfiguration on Mt Tabor – a key passage in Eastern spirituality of light – he interprets Mt Tabor allegorically as “the mountain of our bare mind.” See *Vanden Blinkenden Steen*, 838ff. A more direct source for Ruusbroec's mysticism of light may have been Augustine, Bk XII of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, especially XII, 31 (59). For a translation, see E. Hill, *St Augustine. On Genesis* (NY: New City Press, 2002), p. 499. Other “Eastern” elements, such as the idea of *synergeia* may have been derived from John Cassian.

interpret this in terms of mystical swoons or altered states of consciousness. What he means, rather, is that contemplation only occurs through the eyes of faith.³⁹ Faith predisposes us to approach (or: “to go out” towards) God and world with a distinctively receptive, and also loving, disposition. Thirdly, the vision of God is a vision “in a mirror,” an indirect vision of God in the soul itself, in the deified mind which is the image of God.⁴⁰ When comparing contemplation in this life to the beatific vision, Ruusbroec explicitly makes this point, quoting 1 Cor 13:12: “the state of the saints is transparent and glorious and they receive that brightness unmediated (*onghemiddelt*). Our state, on the other hand, is still mortal and coarse and this is the means (*middel*) which creates the shadow that overshadows our understanding so that we cannot know God or the things of heaven as clearly as the saints can, for as long as we walk in the shadow [of our mortal life] we cannot see the sun itself. ‘But our knowledge is in likenesses and in hidden things,’ says St Paul.”⁴¹

As the human soul mirrors the Trinity it does not merely participate in the generation of the Son but also in the procession of the Holy Spirit or Love. The soul actively loves and enjoys “the rich embrace of the essential Unity” through a sharing in the Spirit who is the unifying bond of Love between Father and Son.⁴² This is the fourth part of Mt 25:6, the loving meeting of the soul with the divine essence – “the abyss of

³⁹ In innumerable places throughout his writings Ruusbroec links “beyond reason” with faith. See for instance: “if we are to taste God or feel the life eternal in ourselves, we must go into God with our faith, above reason (*boven redene met onsen ghelove in gode gaen*). See *Vanden Blinkenden Steen*, 529-30 and *Boecksken der Verclaringhe*, 517-19: “For though reason and all corporeal feeling must yield to and make way for faith (*wiken moeten den ghelove*) and inward gazing of the spirit and those things that are above reason (*die boven redene sijn*), reason nevertheless remains without action in potentiality...” Similarly, in *Spieghel der Eeuwigher Salicheit*, 2035-37 we find: “if we want to behold eternal life and find it in us, then through love and faith (*overmids mine ende ghelooeve*) we must transcend ourselves beyond reason (*boven redene*) to our onefold eye.”

⁴⁰ This too is the Eastern view according to Tomas Spidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986), p. 338

⁴¹ *Vanden Blinkenden Steen*, 758-65

⁴² See *Brulocht*, c 240-42 and c 211-21

namelessness,”⁴³ “the fathomless whirlpool of simplicity,”⁴⁴ “the dark stillness in which all the loving are lost.”⁴⁵

For Ruusbroec contemplation is a foretaste of heavenly life, and the foundation of all holiness.⁴⁶ It in-forms or shapes our interiority and charitable activity. Rather than understanding contemplation merely as a free-standing, transient vision of the divine – a subject-object experience – we should interpret it as occurring on a transcendental level (to borrow a key concept from Rahner). Thus contemplation is not an experience besides our other experiences but it is a *disposition*, a way of looking and loving, which is the result of the *transformation* of our created being through faith and love (or better: the *uncovering*, if you like, of the uncreated and eternal foundation of our created being). This contemplative gaze and love then in-forms our whole life and the way we approach God and his creation.

Understanding contemplation in these terms helps us to see how contemplation does not compete with practices of virtue but is its foundation. What is more, contemplation is not the ultimate spiritual ideal for Ruusbroec. That ideal is what he calls the common life, a life which harmoniously integrates contemplation and charitable activity.⁴⁷

4. The common life and the critique of quietism

⁴³ *Brulocht*, c 242

⁴⁴ *Brulocht*, c 247

⁴⁵ *Brulocht*, c 253

⁴⁶ *Brulocht*, c 194 and 25

⁴⁷ H.U. von Balthasar translates the notion of the common life (*ghemeyne leven*) as the “universal” or catholic life in his *Glory of the Lord*

This is how he describes the common life, which, again, reflects the activity (in the processions) and the rest or fruition of the Trinity in the image of which we have been made.

God's Spirit breathes us out to love and perform virtuous works, and he draws us back into him to rest and enjoy: this is an eternal life, just like in our bodily life we breathe air in and out. (...) to go in, in idle enjoyment, and to go out with works, and always remaining united with God's Spirit: this is what I mean. Just like we open and close our bodily eyes, so quick that we do not feel it, likewise we die in God and live from God, and remain constantly one with God. Thus we will go out into our ordinary life and go in with love and cleave to God, and always remain united with God in stillness.⁴⁸

Thus, Ruusbroec's ideal does involve a moment of "rest" or "fruition" (*ghebruken*, as Ruusbroec has it in Middle Dutch) but this fruition differs radically from the natural "rest" of those who pursue "the natural way." In order to understand how they differ, I must recall the traditional meaning of *fruitio*. Augustine had drawn a distinction between "enjoying God" and "using things." He defines "enjoyment" as "clinging to something lovingly for its own sake." All else should be "used," that is, subordinated to that ultimate goal. When he states that only God should be enjoyed, Augustine thus means that only God should be our ultimate concern; all other things should be subject to this ultimate end, and we should refrain from turning them into idols (which is what we do when we "enjoy" a creaturely thing, e.g. money, prestige, career, the nation,...). In other words, we should never act or love without reference to God. In

⁴⁸ *Vanden VII Trappen*, p. 269 from: *Jan van Ruusbroec, Werken*, Vol. III, ed. L. Reypens and M. Schurmans (Tielt: Lannoo, 1948).

On Christian Doctrine he gives a helpful example of somebody who wants to return to his homeland. In order to attain this goal, all else will have to be seen in relation to it, and should not become an end in itself – for that would be a harmful distraction.⁴⁹ In short, “enjoying God” refers to taking God as our ultimate concern, as the sole genuine focus of our lives and attachments. It is in this sense too that Ruusbroec’s employment of the term should be understood, as I have tried to show elsewhere in more detail.⁵⁰

If this is a correct reading of fruition we can begin to comprehend Ruusbroec’s ideal of the common life: it is a life of both charitable activity and contemplation or fruition of God (in the Augustinian sense of the word) in perfect harmony with one another: “Every lover is one with God and at rest, and God-like in the activity of love; for God, in his sublime nature of which we bear a likeness, dwells with enjoyment in eternal rest, with respect to the essential oneness, and with working, in eternal activity, with respect to the threeness; and each is the perfection of the other, for rest resides in oneness, and activity rests in threeness. And thus both remain for eternity.”⁵¹

Understanding “enjoying God” or “resting in God” in the light of the Augustinian

⁴⁹ *De Doctrina Christiana*, translated by E. Hill as *Teaching Christianity* (New York: New City Press, 1996), I, 4: “Supposing then we were exiles in a foreign land, and could only live happily in our own country, and that being unhappy in exile we longed to put an end to our unhappiness and to return to our own country, we would of course need land vehicles or sea-going vessels, which we would have to make use of in order to be able to reach our own country, where we would find true enjoyment. And then suppose we were delighted with the pleasures of the journey, and with the very experience of being conveyed in carriages and ships, and that we were converted to enjoying what we ought to have been using, and were unwilling to finish the journey quickly, and that by being perversely captivated by such agreeable experiences we lost interest in our own country, where alone we could find real happiness in its agreeable familiarity. Well, that’s how it is in this mortal life in which we are exiles away from the Lord (2 Cor 5:6); if we wish to return to our home country, where alone we can be truly happy, we have to use this world, not enjoy it, so that we may behold the invisible things of God, brought to our knowledge through the things that have been made (Rom 1:20); that is, so that we may proceed from temporal and bodily things to grasp those that are eternal and spiritual.”

⁵⁰ *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian...*, 65ff. This is why Ruusbroec puts so much emphasis upon what he calls “a proper intention” (*meyninghe*): God alone should be the object of our ultimate concern.

⁵¹ *Brulocht*, b 1996-2002

tradition helps us understand that this does not refer to a transient, quietist experience of union with the divine but refers to a way of relating to God, world and self – a way that is free from every stain of self-centredness and possessiveness. Therefore, whereas his opponents pursue an experiential emptiness and inactivity in which the human faculties become passive and quiet, Ruusbroec wants us to attain a different kind of emptiness: we have to become empty of disorderly attachments to creatures.⁵² Similarly, while Ruusbroec wants the mind to become free of worldly images (*ongebeeldet*) – that is: to become free from creaturely attachments and distractions – his opponents interpret it in experiential terms as if our mind should become vacuous and idle.⁵³ Finally, when Ruusbroec writes that our will should die he again aims to make clear that we should relate to God and world without possessiveness; but he does not mean to suggest that we should not want anything. Ruusbroec is clear on the issue: “Without our own activity, love and knowledge of God, we cannot be blessed.”⁵⁴

5. Concluding observations

Ruusbroec was writing at a time when traditional “mystical theology” was being gradually replaced by a more experiential understanding of mysticism – a mysticism that had lost its ties with the world of theology, the sacraments, and the life of the church in general. Whereas his opponents interpret becoming free of images in terms of a psychological state in which the mind becomes vacant and inactive (*ledich*),

⁵² Ruusbroec has described this in a brilliant manner in a famous passage from *Vanden Blinkenden Steen* (265-476) in which he sketches the evolution from self-centredness to annihilation of selfhood through the metaphors of servants, friends and sons (imagery inspired by John Cassian). See *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian...*, 67-70 for a more in-depth discussion.

⁵³ Ruusbroec makes this point very well in his first *Letter* written to Margareta van Meerbeke. See *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian...*, 172ff.

⁵⁴ *Brulocht*, b 2535-46

Ruusbroec wants to convey that the mind should refrain from losing itself in creaturely distractions and be focused on God solely (which, of course, does not imply indifference towards creatures but rather a more mature, less possessive way of relating to them). Similarly, when Ruusbroec calls for annihilation of our will he does not want us to pursue a state in which our will dwells in stillness and passivity but he wants us to renounce our own will, our self-centredness.

In my view an engagement with Ruusbroec's oeuvre has proved relevant for a number of reasons: he is one of the first to chronicle and criticise a subjectivist pursuit of mystical experiences, and it seems clear that our present-day understanding of mysticism finds its roots in this period. Confronting Ruusbroec's critique and reservations will make us aware of the radically different nature of patristic and medieval mystical theology from later, more modern understandings of mysticism. Whereas the former aimed at a transformation of the human person by modelling one's life on that of Christ or God as Trinity through a participation in the life of the Church, the latter was more concerned with pursuing mystical experiences in a somewhat individualistic manner by engaging in quietist practices of meditation. Also, Ruusbroec draws on his highly original and dynamic theology of the Trinity to both propound his own ideal of the common life (a life in which contemplation of God is in perfect harmony with an active life of charity) and to criticise quietist meditation. This is perhaps his major achievement: the way he applies his sophisticated and abstract theology of the Trinity and makes it relevant for the everyday spirituality of ordinary Christians.

Rik Van Nieuwenhove,

*Department of Theology and Religious Studies,
Mary Immaculate College,
University of Limerick,
Ireland.*