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In the Image of God: The Trinitarian Anthropology of St Bonaventure, St Thomas Aquinas, and the Blessed Jan Van Ruusbroec (1)

The overall aim of this two-part article – the second part of which is to be published in the next issue of the ITQ – is to illustrate the varied approach to trinitarian theology of some major medieval thinkers and the significant place which that theology occupies in their understanding of the human person. Part one deals with the trinitarian theology, in the strict sense, of Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Ruusbroec.

Introduction

Karl Rahner, one of the theologians whom we can credit with the revival of trinitarianism in Catholic theology in the twentieth century, singled out St Bonaventure and the Blessed Jan Van Ruusbroec, together with a handful of other theologians, as genuinely trinitarian thinkers.[1] Given his remarks about the sequence of the treatise *De Deo uno* and *De Deo trino* in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, it should not surprise us that Aquinas is not included in this list. However, I hope to show, amongst other things, that Aquinas is as radical a trinitarian thinker as Bonaventure, although their trinitarianism is radically different. Also, and more importantly, I will bring their trinitarianism into dialogue with the strikingly original trinitarian doctrine of a figure whose writings deserve to be far better known, namely Jan Van Ruusbroec (1293-1381), one of the greatest mystical theologians of the late medieval period.

It may seem odd that I hope to compare Ruusbroec's trinitarianism with that of two major scholastic theologians. Ruusbroec, who wrote in the vernacular (Flemish or Middle-Dutch), is usually considered a 'mystic' and very few scholars have engaged with his theology in recent decades. In this article I hope to show that Ruusbroec does have an interesting theological doctrine, which well warrants comparison with some of the main theologians of the thirteenth century. Undoubtedly, Ruusbroec was not a scholastic and he never attended any of the major centres of learning (such as the universities of Paris or Cologne); but to conclude from this that he therefore does not have an interesting theology worth

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1. In his famous text, *The Trinity*, tr. J. Donceel (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), 10.

engaging with fails to do him justice.[2] Such an either/or approach (an author is either a 'mystic' or a theologian) is more typical of the modern era (in which an understanding of 'mysticism' dominates which is quite at variance with the patristic and medieval understanding of 'mystical theology') than of the time of Ruusbroec. After all, an author like Bonaventure was both a mystical and an academic theologian and he did not feel there was a major dichotomy between these two areas. Having said this, it is clear that the patristic and medieval tradition of mystical theology (which involved a harmonious synthesis of both theology and 'spirituality') was from the fourteenth century onwards gradually transformed, if not superseded, by a more experiential (and less theological) approach; a transformation of which Ruusbroec was very much aware and which he deplored, as his diatribes directed at the Brethren of the Free Spirit (who pursued solipsistic mystical experiences outside the traditional theological and ecclesial context) illustrate.[3]

My aim in this text is to expound the trinitarian doctrine of these three major theologians, including that of Ruusbroec, who must rank as one of the most radical trinitarian thinkers in the medieval West. In doing this, and by contrasting their distinct approaches, I hope to illustrate the richness and varied nature of medieval trinitarian thinking. The first part, dealing with trinitarian theology in the strict sense, is undoubtedly somewhat technical; however, this technical discussion is necessary in order to draw out, in the second part, the significance of their trinitarian theologies for our understanding of the human person and his ultimate fulfilment in God. To the extent I am successful in doing this, a critique of those who want to relegate trinitarian doctrine to an appendix of the Christian faith (e.g. Schleiermacher) is implied.

Part I: The trinitarian theology of Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and Ruusbroec

I will first outline the trinitarian theology of Bonaventure and Aquinas. Given the fact that Aquinas was familiar with Bonaventure's approach and decided to diverge from it, a treatment of their trinitarian theologies in one section seems a convenient way of contrasting their ideas. Seeing that the thought of Ruusbroec is not as well known as the thought of either Bonaventure or Aquinas, a separate treatment of Ruusbroec's trinitarian theology in a subsequent section is called for.

2. Despite the positive evaluation and occasional references to his works by major Catholic theologians such as Rahner and Balthasar (in Volume V of his *Theo-Drama*) a major study of Ruusbroec's theology does not exist in the English-speaking world. This is to some extent due to the fact that he wrote in the vernacular (Flemish or Middle Dutch). Work on the critical edition of the *Opera Omnia* (CCCM, 100-110) is in progress. This edition contains an English and a Latin translation by L. Surius (1552).
3. For a critique of an understanding of Ruusbroec's works along experiential or Jamesian lines, see my article 'Ruusbroec: Apophatic Theologian or Phenomenologist of the Mystical Experience?', *Journal of Religion*, 80 (2000), 83-105.

1. Bonaventure and Aquinas

Bonaventure developed his distinct trinitarian doctrine by fusing Pseudo-Dionysian and Augustinian elements. I will sketch this fusion in the following pages and indicate how it differs from Aquinas's approach. I will mainly focus on their treatment of the two processions because this is a doctrinal point that they clearly approach from a very different angle, given their different sources. As Ruusbroec's trinitarian doctrine appears more reminiscent of Bonaventure's, I will first deal with Aquinas's trinitarianism before turning to Bonaventure so as to allow us better to perceive both the similarities and the differences between the teachings of the great Franciscan and the Flemish mystical theologian.

How to distinguish between the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit – and how to distinguish between the Son and the Spirit themselves – is a problem that has occupied theologians at least from the time of St Augustine onwards. As is well known, Thomas Aquinas, indebted in this respect to Augustine, clarifies the difference between the two processions by referring to the difference between the actions of will and intellect:

> [T]he Word's procession corresponds to the action of the intellect. Now in us there is another spiritual process following the action of the will, namely the coming forth of love, whereby what is loved is in the lover, just as the thing expressed or actually understood in the conceiving of an idea is in the knower. For this reason besides the procession of the Word another procession is posited in God, namely the procession of Love.[4]

This quotation sets out the distinct approach of Aquinas: the processions of the Son and Spirit can be clarified – in so far as possible – by referring to the 'psychological' formation of a *verbum* (word or idea) in the intellect, and the movement of the will. Obviously, Aquinas uses this psychological analogy to illustrate a truth that he knows through revelation: the historical missions of the Son (in the Incarnation) and Spirit (in the life of the Church) reveal something of the two eternal processions within the Trinity. Aquinas's 'psychological' analogy is inspired by, and corresponds to, the revealed processions of Son and Spirit: 'There are only two such processions. ... We take one of them to correspond to activity of mind, and this is the procession of the Word, the other to activity of will, and this is the procession of Love.'[5] Yet the fact that Aquinas uses an analogy drawn from the activities of the human soul is no coincidence for we

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4. ST I, 27, 3. All translations are from the Blackfriars edition, 60 vols. (New York and London, 1963-1977).
5. ST I, 28, 4.

are created in the image of the Trinity; all of this illustrates his central claim that grace perfects nature.

Aquinas pushes this psychological analogy further by examining how intellect and will differ so as to illustrate how spiration differs from generation:

> [T]here is actual understanding when what is understood is in the intellect through its likeness, whereas there is actual willing, not because of a likeness of what is willed as such in the person who wills, but because the will in some way tends to what is willed ... the procession which corresponds to the will's action is not envisaged in terms of likeness, but rather of urge and motion towards something. And thus what proceeds in God as love does not proceed as begotten or son, but rather as a breathing of spirit.[6]

This understanding of the eternal procession of the Spirit in terms of 'urge or motion towards something' ties in well with Aquinas's views on the historical mission of the Spirit in the world and the Church in particular: we have not only been created through the Son and the Spirit but we are also sanctified and united with the Father through their historical missions.[7] These historical missions reflect the intra-trinitarian processions. This 'psychological' approach differs considerably from that of Bonaventure who explains the processions in a 'naturalistic' way. I will now discuss Bonaventure's outline of the two processions. First I will outline Bonaventure's discussion of the generation of the Son which is expounded in typical Pseudo-Dionysian language in terms of self-diffusive goodness; after this I will discuss the spiration of the Spirit according to Bonaventure by indicating his indebtedness to Richard of St Victor.

Bonaventure's Pseudo-Dionysian inspiration, so distinct from Aquinas's approach on this issue, is clear in the following quotation, despite the appeal to Aristotle who had distinguished three ways of generation, namely by nature, by art (= by will), and by chance.[8] Seeing that there is nothing fortuitous in God, there exist only two perfect modes of emanation, namely *per modum naturae et voluntatis:*[9]

> Therefore, since the perfect production, emanation and germination is realised only through two intrinsic modes, namely, by way of nature and by way of will, that is, by way of the word and of love, therefore the highest perfection, fontality and fecundity necessarily demands two kinds of emanation with respect to the two hypostases which are produced and emanate from the first person as from the

6. *ST* I, 27, 4.
7. This insight was developed in great detail by Aquinas in his first major work, the *Commentary on the Sentences*. See for instance I *Sent.* d. 14, q. 2, a. 2.
8. Bonaventure draws upon *Meta.* 1032a 12-13. This appeal to Aristotle is extremely tenuous – in this context Aristotle described a very different form of 'generation'.
9. *Brevil.* I, 3, 2

first producing principle. Therefore, it is necessary to affirm three persons.[10]

I will refrain from commenting on the cogency of the argument—Aquinas did not think highly of the 'necessity' of its conclusions; I merely want to draw attention to the fact that in Bonaventure's exposition the generation of the Son is ultimately conceived in terms of a necessary self-communication which arises by reason of God's very nature as self-diffusive goodness (bonum diffusivum sui). Zachary Hayes has convincingly argued that the term 'natural emanation' expresses an understanding of generation different from that of Augustine and Aquinas, both of whom prefer to speak of it as an emanation of the intellect. Bonaventure too sees the intellect to be involved but his guiding perspective is the concept of primal goodness: the intellect precisely as intellect is not fecund; it is so only in so far as it springs from the fecund nature of God. Thus, the primary principle of the Son's generation is the divine nature; the natural fecundity of the neoplatonic tradition dominates Bonaventure's approach.[11] Thus, according to Bonaventure the fruitful nature of the Father is the primary principle in the generation of the Son. The divine nature is necessarily self-communicative (a Pseudo-Dionysian legacy), while the model offered by Richard of St Victor (to be discussed shortly) will allow Bonaventure to move beyond this natural emanation to explain the procession of the Spirit as an emanation from a fecund will. While the Father's fruitful nature is the primary principle in the generation of the Son, the will is a real principle in the spiration of the third Person. In short, two emanations can be distinguished: one per modum naturae (the fecunditas naturalis of the Father is the 'cause' of the communication of the divine nature through generation) and another per modum amoris (the fecunditas voluntatis in the Father and the Son causes the procession of the Spirit).

As indicated earlier, Aquinas had explained the divine processions in terms of the processions within intellect and will. This is not to say that Aquinas does not use the distinction per modum naturae and per modum voluntatis; but when he affirms that the Son is generated by nature and not by will he is arguing against the Arian view that the Father begot the Son by will, i.e. that the Son is a creature.[12] This understanding of per modum naturae differs therefore considerably from Bonaventure's interpretation. The idea of the divine nature as the fruitful source of the Godhead, so prominent in the thought of Bonaventure, has disappeared almost entirely from Aquinas's Summa Theologiae.

So far in this section I have mainly dealt with the generation of the Son, which takes place per modum naturae from the fecundity of the divine nature according to Bonaventure, and as an intellectual

10. Saint Bonaventure's Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity, introduced and translated by Zachary Hayes (New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1979), 263.
11. Z.Hayes, 'Introduction' to Saint Bonaventure's Disputed Questions ..., 45
12. See ST I, 41, 2.

generation according to Aquinas. It is now time to examine the proces-
sion of the Spirit in more detail. We have already seen that Aquinas
describes the procession of the Spirit in terms of the action of the will, as
an urge or motion towards something. Bonaventure's language of the
Spirit as a 'bond of Love' and as 'Love bestowed but not bestowing' recalls
that of Richard of St Victor who exerted a considerable influence on the
Franciscan, as can be illustrated by the following quotation from the
Itinerarium mentis in Deum:

> Therefore, unless there were eternally in the highest good a pro-
> duction which is actual and consubstantial, and a hypostasis as
> noble as the producer, as in the case of a producing by way of
> generation and spiration, so that it is from an eternal principle
> eternally coproducing so that there would be a beloved, and a
> cobeloved, the one generated and the other spirated, and this is the
> Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – unless these were present,
> it would by no means be the highest good because it would not
> diffuse itself in the highest degree. ... If, therefore, you can behold
> with your mind's eye the purity of goodness, which is the pure act
> of a principle loving in charity with a love that is both free and due
> and a mixture of both, which is the fullest diffusion by way of
> nature and will, which is a diffusion by way of the Word, in which
> all things are said, and by way of the Gift, in which all things are
> given, then you can see that through the highest communicability
> of the good, there must be a Trinity of the Father and the Son and
> the Holy Spirit.[13]

Bonaventure, like Richard before him, argues from an analysis of the
divine essence as love to the existence of the Trinity. When two love each
other mutually there is love on both sides *(dilectio)*, but there is no shared
love *(condilectio)*. Shared love is properly said to exist when a third per-
son is loved by two persons harmoniously and in community and the
affection of the two persons is fused into one affection by the flame of
love for the third.[14] This *condilectio* is defined as nothing other than 'the
mutual coming together of intimate benevolence and supreme harmony'
(nisi intimae benevolentiae et summae concordiae mutua concursio).[15]

The distinction between the three modalities of love within the Trinity
is also adopted from Richard: *amor gratuitus*, i.e. the Father who freely

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13. *Itiner.* VI, 2; translation by E. Cousins from *Bonaventure. The Soul's Journey into God,
The Tree of Life, The Life of St Francis*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist
Press, 1978), preface by I. Brady, 103-104.
14. *De Trin.* III, 19; translation from *Richard of St Victor. The Twelve Patriarchs, The Mystical
Ark, Book III of The Trinity*, tr. G. A. Zinn, preface J. Chatillon, Classics of Western
Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 392
15. *Ibid.* Latin text and French translation in G. Salet, *Richard de Saint Victor, La Trinité.*
SC, 63 (Paris, 1963), 210.

gives without having received; *amor debitus*, i.e. the Spirit who is Love given but who does not give to Another Person; and *amor ex utroque permixtus*, i.e. the Son, whose personal property it is to proceed from another and to have a Person that proceeds from him.[16] Because Richard identifies these modalities of love with each of the three Persons,[17] the Spirit from whom nobody proceeds cannot share his love actively with another divine Person. What, asks Richard, could the Spirit, to whom the fullness of divine love has been communicated, return of the love he received?[18] This seems to lead to a very passive pneumatology (the Spirit is bestowed but he himself does not give within the Trinity) but Richard does argue that the Spirit can bestow love upon a created being, although not in its fullness. However, this leads to a major tension between the immanent procession and the economic mission: the Spirit *gives* 'historically' to human beings although it is characteristic of the third Person *not to give* to another Person within the Trinity. In other words, Richard's account leads either to a tension between the procession (in which the Spirit does not give) and the mission of the Spirit (in which the Spirit does give); or, if we grant that the Spirit does not historically give but is merely given by the Father and the Son to us (which does not appear to be his position) so as to avoid the previously mentioned tension between procession and mission, it seems to make Richard's (and Bonaventure's) pneumatology somewhat passive in nature: the Spirit is given by the Father through the Son but the Spirit himself does not give within the Trinity or in the history of salvation. The latter position, which, I believe, does not seem to be the one that Richard adopts,[19] avoids the tension between processions and missions at the expense of an active pneumatology. As will become clearer in what follows, it is here that Ruusbroec will part ways with both Richard and Bonaventure: according to Ruusbroec the Spirit is the principle of the 'return' of the divine Persons into the perichoretic unity.

16. *De Trin.*V, 19; SC, 350.
17. *De Trin.*V, 20; SC, 352: 'Oportet itaque absque dubio ut in summa simplicitate idem ipsum sit esse quod diligere. Erit ergo unicuique trium idem ipsum persona sua quod dilectio sua ... Quoniam ergo quaelibet persona, ut diximus, est idem quod amor suus et assignata singularum discretio constat in solis jam dictis tribus, sicut quartam proprietatem sic quartam personam nullatenus ibi invenire poterimus.' As this quotation makes clear, Richard uses this reasoning to argue against the claim that there are more than three Persons in the Trinity or that there is a 'quaternity' within the divinity.
18. *De Trin.*V, 18; SC, 348
19. Richard clearly affirms (in *De Trin.*V, 18; SC, 348) that the Spirit can bestow *amor gratuitus* on a *created* person, but obviously not in its fullness, for it would not be appropriate to love in such a degree that which is not worthy of this full love. Apart from the tension this statement creates between his account of the procession of the Spirit and the historical mission of the Spirit, one is bound to wonder whether this reservation ('not in its fullness') is compatible with the divine love as made known in the God made man and with the nature of love in general: 'Quid itaque indebiti amoris possit eis rependere, a quibus constat eam omnem plenitudinem gratis accepisse? Et quoniam proprium est ipsius, ut ante jam diximus, de se procedentem non habere, non est in divinitate cui possit plenitudinem gratuiti amoris exhibere. Et quidem erga creatam personam gratuitum amorem habere potest, sed gratuiti amoris plenitudinem erga creaturam habere non potest, quae inordinatum amorem habere non potest.'

In summary, Bonaventure fuses Pseudo-Dionysian elements (and the neoplatonic emphasis upon the divine nature as *bonum diffusivum sui*) with traditional Augustinian trinitarian theology (the Spirit proceeds from the mutual contemplation of the Father and his Word). This emphasis upon the fruitful divine nature is absent from Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* who describes the trinitarian processions in terms of a more strict Augustinianism – namely in terms of the processions of intellect and will. Whereas Bonaventure describes the first procession in terms of fruitful nature *(per modum naturae)*, Aquinas describes it in terms of intellect. This has profound implications for the status of the first Person (whose unbegottenness is already to some extent determinative of his Personhood for Bonaventure but not for Aquinas). This different perspective allows Bonaventure to emphasise the primacy of the Father in a manner foreign to Aquinas.

2. Ruusbroec

I will now examine Ruusbroec's trinitarian doctrine in some detail. Ruusbroec's trinitarian theology is extremely dynamic: he adopts the Bonaventurean idea that the Son is generated from the fecundity of the Father's nature and he accepts the idea that the Spirit proceeds as their mutual Love; but he makes a significant addition: the Spirit is also the principle of the return of the divine Persons into their perichoretic unity, from which the Son and Spirit proceed once again in a never-ending dynamic of ebbing and flowing. Because of this role of the Spirit within the Trinity, Ruusbroec's trinitarianism is far more dynamic than that of Richard and Bonaventure for whom the Spirit is the person who is (passively) given but who does not himself give (unlike the Father and the Son). For Ruusbroec, however, it belongs to the nature of Love to return what it has received in order to enable the Other to give once again, and so forth: *do ut des*. This notion of the Spirit as an active principle of *regiratio* is quite unique to Ruusbroec[20] and it has bearings throughout his doctrine, for instance on his understanding of grace (the gifts of the Spirit are bestowed in order that we 'return' them through a life of charity and good works), the relation between God and humanity, the Incarnation, Passion and Eucharist, all of which need to be understood in the light of the *do ut des* of intra-trinitarian Love. Thus the Spirit is not just the 'passive' love, proceeding from the mutual contemplation of Father and Son, but he is an active principle in their flowing back, which allows Ruusbroec to describe the intra-trinitarian life as a circular movement or even a 'whirlpool' – a metaphor especially dear to him. On the one hand, the Father out of his fruitful nature gives birth to his Son, and from their mutual contemplation the Spirit flows as their bond of

20. On the notion of *regiratio*, see my article 'Neoplatonism, *Regiratio* and Trinitarian Theology. A look at Ruusbroec' in *Hermathena* (2001), forthcoming.

love; on the other hand the divine Persons flow back into their shared being/essence through the Spirit. I will give an elaborate quotation which contains some of the main elements of his thought on these issues:

God is every being's super-essence *(overwesen)*. His Godhead is a fathomless whirlpool; whoever enters it loses himself in it. God is one in nature, threeness in Persons. Threeness remains eternally in oneness of nature, and oneness of nature in threeness of personhood. Thus nature is living and fruitful in eternity. The being *(wesen)* of God is inactive, eternal beginning and end, a living subsistence of everything created. And that same being *(wesen)* is nature and fruitfulness and potentiality of the Persons. And that potentiality is personhood and personal in three properties, namely paternity, filiation and, entailed in them, the third property, namely voluntary spiration. Nature cannot exist without the Persons, nor the Persons without their substance, for it is a living support of the Persons. Therefore the nature is one in itself, fruitful in threeness, and threeness in oneness, and oneness lives in threeness, and threeness is fruitful in itself; and it is not distinguishable according to things, but according to reason. For threeness is oneness of nature. It generates the Persons, distinct according to reason and in reality, namely the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: they are three distinct Persons and one Godhead whom one should not divide or separate. Thus we confess one God in three Persons. ... The Father is an eternal beginning *(beghin)* of the Persons and that beginning is essential and personal. ... He begets the eternal Wisdom, his Son who is equal and consubstantial with him. He knows his only-begotten Son as eternally unborn in himself, as ceaselessly being born from him, and as having been born from him as another Person, always one God in nature with himself. The Son is the Wisdom of the Father. He beholds and contemplates his origin, namely his Father. He sees himself as unborn within the nature, as out-flowing in personal distinction from the Father's substance, as a distinct Person from the Father and as always remaining with the Father within the nature. From this mutual contemplation of Father and Son flows an eternal pleasure, the Holy Spirit, the third Person, who flows forth from the other two. For He is one will and one love in both of them, eternally flowing out of them and flowing back into the nature of the Divinity.[21]

In the following pages I hope to unpack this fascinating quotation.[22] I will discuss the role of nature in relation to the First Person of the Trinity,

21. Jan Van Ruusbroec, *Vanden XII Beghinen*, 2a 568-612 from *Opera Omnia* VII, CCCM 107A, G. De Baere (ed.-in-chief), (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).
22. Elsewhere I have outlined Ruusbroec's trinitarian doctrine in contrast with the theology of Meister Eckhart. See 'Meister Eckhart and Jan Van Ruusbroec: A Comparison' in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 7 (1998), 157-193, esp. 178-84.

the distinctive character of the two processions and the three Persons, with specific attention to the Spirit as principle of the divine *regressus*. Ruusbroec's doctrine will be contrasted with the views of Bonaventure, Richard of St Victor, and Thomas Aquinas so as to highlight both the similarity and originality of his approach. It will become clear that Ruusbroec's doctrine seems more similar to that of Bonaventure than to that of Aquinas, although his contribution remains distinctly original.[23]

Ruusbroec shares with Bonaventure the idea that the fecundity of the divine nature is the source of the generation of the Word – in distinct contrast to Aquinas's approach. As a matter of fact, in the previous quotation Ruusbroec seems to suggest that the fruitful nature of the divinity generates the Son – an assertion at odds with the condemnation of 'quaternity' during the Fourth Lateran Council.[24] However, Ruusbroec's more considered teaching is that it is the Father who generates the Son out of the fecundity of his nature: 'The nature of the Persons is fruitful, eternally active according to the mode of the Persons. For the Father generates his Son as another (Person) from his nature; and the Son is born from the Father as the eternal Wisdom of God, a distinct Person yet one in nature with the Father.'[25] This emphasis upon the Father as the primary, fruitful, and unoriginated source of the Trinity also seems to indicate, although Ruusbroec does not explicitly deal with this issue, that the Persons are primarily constituted *per originem* and not solely *per relationes*: inchoatively the Father already seems constituted as a Person as the unoriginate fruitful source of the Trinity.[26]

Also interesting is that Ruusbroec distinguishes between the fruitful nature of the divinity and the modeless divine being/essence *(wesen)*. This distinction is, of course, merely conceptual but it indicates that Ruusbroec considers the divine unity from two angles: as the ground of the divine processions – i.e. the fruitful nature situated in the Father – and as the end of the divine *regiratio* in which the Persons lose themselves in fruition. God is, according to the fruitfulness of his nature, pure activity *(een puere werken)* while in the perichoretic or essential unity he

23. For a more in-depth study of the influence of Bonaventure on all major aspects of Ruusbroec's theology, see my article 'The Franciscan inspiration of Ruusbroec's Mystical Theology: Ruusbroec in dialogue with Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas', in *Ons Geestelijk Erf* (2001), forthcoming.

24. During the Fourth Lateran Council it was ruled that the divine essence is 'neither generating nor generated, nor proceeding, but it is the Father who generates, the Son who is generated and the Holy Spirit who proceeds, so that there be distinctions between the Persons but unity in nature.' See J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1996) no. 318; Denzinger-Schönmetzer, no. 804.

25. *Vanden XII Beghinen*, 2b 40-44.

26. For a passage which suggests that unbegottenness already constitutes the Father as a Person and distinguishes him from the other Persons, see *Die Geestelike Brulocht*, b 1071-6, *Opera Omnia* III, CCCM 103, G. De Baere (ed.-in-chief), (Turnhout: Brepols, 1987). I refer to this work as *Brulocht* … , followed by the relevant book (a,b,c) and lines in the Middle Dutch text.

is eternal rest: 'God is always active *(werkende)* and constantly enjoying *(ghebrukende)*.'[27]

Nevertheless, in their 'return' into the perichoretic unity the distinction between the divine Persons is never abolished:

> And here you must accept that the Persons yield and lose themselves whirling in essential love, that is, in fruitful unity; nevertheless, they always remain according to their personal properties in the activity of the Trinity. Thus you may understand that the divine nature is eternally active according to the mode of the Persons *(na wise der persone)*, and eternally at rest and without mode according to the simplicity of its being *(na eenvuldicheit haers wesens)*.[28]

This idea that we ought to think of God as both 'at rest' and 'active' seems to have remote neoplatonic origins, although the way Ruusbroec develops it is highly original. In *The Divine Names* we find for instance that God 'proceeds to everything while yet remaining within himself. He is at rest and astir, is neither resting nor stirring and has neither source, nor middle nor end.'[29] Ruusbroec's originality within this tradition lies in the fact that he situates this tension within the Trinity itself, by associating 'activity' with the (processions of the) divine Persons and 'rest' or 'enjoyment' with their shared being or essence.[30] The divine Persons express the modelessness of the divine being or essence in 'modes' *(wisen)*. They 'grasp' as distinct Persons the undifferentiated divine unity in which they 'rest' in enjoyment.

This tension at the heart of the Trinity will have profound implications for Ruusbroec's understanding of our spiritual goal, which is to love actively and to rest enjoyably:

> [E]very 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 threeness; and each is the perfection of the other, for rest resides in oneness, and activity in threeness. And thus, both remain for eternity.[31]

27. *Werken*, I, *Dat Rijcke der Ghelieven*. J. B. Poukens (ed.) (Tielt: Lannoo, 1944). Henceforth: *Rijcke* ... , followed by the relevant page: *Rijcke* ..., 72.
28. *Boecsken der Verclaringhe, Opera Omnia* I, CCCM 101, G. De Baere (ed.-in-chief), (Tielt: Lannoo, 1981). Henceforth: *Boecsken* ..., followed by the relevant lines in the Middle Dutch text: *Boecsken* ..., 330-6.
29. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 5, 10; translation by C. Luibhéid and P. Rorem from *Pseudo-Dionysius. The Complete Works* with introductions by J. Pelikan, J. Leclercq and K. Froelich; preface by R. Roques. Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 103.
30. See *Rijcke* ..., 72
31. *Brulocht* ..., b, 1996-2002.

I will draw out the full implications of this and similar texts in the second part of this article. However, let us first examine in some more detail Ruusbroec's trinitarian theology and the notion of *regiratio* in particular.

So far I have explained that Ruusbroec stresses the fecundity of the divine nature from which the Son is generated by the Father as his Word; and the Spirit proceeds from their mutual contemplation as their Love. These elements seem clearly reminiscent of Bonaventure's trinitarian theology in which Pseudo-Dionysian and traditional Augustinian elements became fused. I indicated that Ruusbroec's original contribution to trinitarian theology is to be found in the central role he attributes to the Spirit as the principle of the return of the divine persons into their shared unity. I now want to discuss this teaching in greater depth and briefly indicate how it differs from that of Richard of St Victor, Bonaventure, and Aquinas.

Ruusbroec does not use the term *regiratio* – the return of the divine Persons into their shared unity – as he wrote in Middle Dutch.[32] However, he translates it, quite accurately, as *wederboghen*, used as a verb or as a noun as in the following passage: 'There the Father with the Son and all the beloved are enfolded and embraced in the bond of love *(bande van minnen)*, that is to say, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. It is the same unity which is fruitful according to the bursting-out of the Persons and in the return *(wederboghene)* an eternal bond of love which can nevermore be untied.'[33] Whereas Richard, and Bonaventure after him, had argued that the Spirit is distinguished from the other Persons as Love given but who himself does not bestow love *(amor debitus)*, Ruusbroec argues that it belongs to the nature of Love to return what it has received: 'it is the nature of love always to give and take, to love and be loved; these two aspects are found in everyone who loves.'[34] In Ruusbroec's view, the Spirit who receives the fullness of love (to put it in Richardian language) from the other two Persons, returns what he has received to the other Persons of the Trinity; likewise the Spirit will give himself to us (Ruusbroec deals at length with the gifts of the Spirit throughout his works), but will demand back from us whatever he has given to us.

Before we go any further, it might be useful to compare briefly Ruusbroec's approach with that of Bonaventure and Aquinas. From the

32. The concept of *regressus* or *regiratio* was well-known to the scholastics. However, they usually associate it with the Word (and especially in his relation to the created world), not with the Spirit, which probably illustrates its neoplatonic roots (cf. *Book of Causes*, 15 (14)). See my article, 'Neoplatonism, *Regiratio* ...'.

33. A translation of this passage by Surius (1552), also to be found in the critical edition (p. 140), runs as follows: 'Ibi Pater cum Filio, et cum eis electi omnes circumplectuntur vinculo charitatis, in divina unitate: quae quidem secundum personarum emanationem foecunda est, in earum autem reflexione sempiternus ac insolubilis est nexus amoris.' Surius does justice to both the neoplatonic *(emanatio, reflexio)* and Richardian *(nexus amoris, vinculum charitatis)* vocabulary Ruusbroec uses.

34. *Spieghel der Eeuwigher Salicheit. Opera Omnia VIII*, CCCM 108, G. De Baere (ed.) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 723-5.

foregoing it transpired that Bonaventure fused Pseudo-Dionysian elements (the emphasis upon the fecundity of the divine nature from which the Father generates his Son *per modum naturae*) with Augustinian elements (the Spirit proceeds as Love from the mutual contemplation of Father and Son) and Richardian elements (the view that the three Persons are to be distinguished through the three modalities of love). Ruusbroec appears to be working in the same tradition: his language displays a neoplatonic influence (the Persons 'flow out', there is an emphasis upon the fecundity of the divine nature, and so forth), but, as we have seen, he introduces one significant and far-reaching change: he develops the idea of the *regiratio* of the divine Persons into the perichoretic unity with a persistency that gives his trinitarian theology a strikingly original and dynamic form. Thomas Aquinas abandoned the analogy of love (which Richard, Bonaventure, and Ruusbroec share) and developed a dynamic 'psychological' analogy. Instead of a *generatio per modum naturae* we find that the Son is generated as *Verbum* of the Father – an intellectual and not a natural procession.

Why did Thomas Aquinas abandon this love analogy? It has been suggested that this has to be seen in the light of the priority he attributes to intellect over will and this may very well be the case.[35] Perhaps he identified and wished to overcome the tension between the account of the procession and the mission of the Spirit to which I drew attention earlier. Moreover, he may have realised that the more mature Augustinian teaching (in *De Trinitate*) does not consider memory, intellect, and will as three distinct faculties but focuses rather on the processions of intellect and will as the locus of trinitarian anthropology, as I will explain in Part II of this article. Undoubtedly, this discovery had implications for the way he conceived of the trinitarian processions. Although Aquinas's 'psychological' approach may seem somewhat more anthropomorphic than that of Richard or Bonaventure (who develop the love analogy), at least Aquinas allows us to link closely together the intra-trinitarian procession of the Spirit on the one hand (described by Aquinas as 'an urge or movement towards something'), and the historical gift of the Spirit to the world, on the other. This link between the historical missions of Son and Spirit and the intra-trinitarian processions is crucial if we want to avoid the accusation that trinitarianism is nothing but mythology. As indicated earlier, the love analogy (which characterises the Spirit as 'Love given who does not give') also allows us to link procession and mission, but at the price of a rather passive pneumatology.

When we turn to Ruusbroec, we find that he too can relate the eternal processions with the historical missions, albeit in a different manner: both Son (John 12:45; 17:3b) and Spirit (John 16:7b; Acts 2) have been historically sent out and they also 'return' to the Father; this historical return

35. See for instance G. O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God. Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), 144-5.

then mirrors the intra-trinitarian *regiratio*. Ruusbroec's teaching implies that the Spirit is not only sent but is also returned to the Father. In contrast to the claim that the Son returns to the Father (John 16:5; 20:17), it is not easy to find a biblical quotation to support the latter claim – although Ruusbroec seems to be developing a Pauline theme along trinitarian lines. According to Ruusbroec all our good works, which have been made possible by sharing in the life of grace (= gifts of the Spirit), are a way of 'returning' the Love we have received from God and in which we share:

> God's grace is not being purposelessly or idly given. If we observe it, it will flow and give us all we need, but it demands in return everything we can achieve. ... We are united with him through his grace and our good works. He lives in us, and we in him, through mutual love, namely his grace and our works. ... His spirit and his grace perform our good works more than we do ourselves. His grace in us and our love for him is a practice (*werc*) that we perform together.[36]

This exchange of gifts is an idea particularly dear to Ruusbroec: God bestows his grace and we return our works; thus grace and good works continually grow and are renewed: 'God speaks to the interior man: "I give you my grace; give me your works." And he speaks further ...: "Give yourself to me, I give myself to you; if you want to be mine, I want to be yours."'[37] This bestowing and demanding is a reflection of the trinitarian life itself: God *is* both 'generosity' and 'greed', which has to be understood as an illustration of the in-going ('greed') and out-going ('generosity') movement of the divine life. Our heavenly Father is both avid (Jordaens: *cupidus*; Surius: *avarus*) and generous: he bestows his grace but he demands good works and gratitude in return, for 'God's grace is not being idly given'. If it belongs to the nature of love 'to give and take', God's essence must be likewise:

> But beyond all works and practices of virtue our heavenly Father shows his beloved that he is not only generous and avid in giving and demanding, but that he himself is avidity and generosity; for he wants to give himself and everything that he is to us, and he wants us to return to him everything we are. And thus he wants to be ours and he wants us to be his. Yet each remains what he is, for we cannot become God, but we can be united with God, with intermediary and without intermediary.[38]

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36. *Vanden VII Trappen*, *Werken*, III, L. Reypens and M. Schurmans (eds.), (Mechelen: Het Kompas, 1934), 259.
37. *Vanden VII Trappen*, 246.
38. *Vanden VII Trappen*, 259. Through the sacraments and charitable works (=intermediaries) we encounter God (=without intermediary).

Although I cannot develop this theme any further within the confines of this article, I would like to point out that the life and Passion of the God-man too have to be seen in the light of God's gracious Love which enables man to re-enter into a loving relationship with God. This illustrates that Ruusbroec's trinitarian thought and christology are well integrated with each other.

In Part II, I will examine the implications of these different trinitarian theologies for an understanding of the human person. This will further illustrate the significance of trinitarian theology for the ultimate fulfilment of human beings, and the richly varied nature of medieval trinitarian thinking.