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John Ruusbroec: his fourteenth-century context, mystical heresy, and contemporary perspectives on his mysticism

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**John Ruusbroec: His Fourteenth-Century Context, Mystical Heresy, and
Contemporary Perspectives On His Mysticism**

Thesis

Submitted to

The College of Arts and Sciences of the

University of Dayton

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree

Master of Arts in the Department of Religious Studies

by

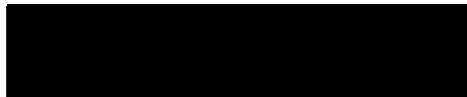
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ABSTRACT

The writings of John Ruusbroec, a Flemish priest and mystic, attack abuses of mysticism that he found in the spiritual practices and writings of the Free Spirit heretics as well as describe his teachings about mystical union. This study presents the controversy over mystical heresy in the historical context in which Ruusbroec lived. The study discusses these factors: some of the significant challenges to European society during the tumultuous fourteenth century; the struggles between Church authorities and increasingly influential lay movements, such as the beguines; and the widespread suspicions of mystical heresy that led Church leaders to formally define the Free Spirit Heresy and to associate all beguines with that heresy. The Free Spirits pursued mystical experience to the neglect of the sacraments and living of virtues; their experience led them to believe they had become identical to God. Ruusbroec's own mystical writings contain many examples of the same experiential and autotheistic language found in Free Spirit texts. These similarities led some critics, such as Jean Gerson, to suspect Ruusbroec of committing some of the same Free Spirit heresies that Ruusbroec himself had condemned in his writings. Contemporary scholars struggle to agree whether Ruusbroec's mysticism describes a unitive experience of God or presents union with God as a "transformation" of the soul by grace through analogous participation in God's own life. After presenting the scholarly perspectives, I present my view of their strengths and weaknesses and revisit the question of Ruusbroec's orthodoxy. This study shows the continuing difficulty scholars face when trying to articulate the ineffable nature of mysticism. The debate over the proper interpretation of Ruusbroec's mysticism most likely will endure for some time to come.

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INTRODUCTION

John Ruusbroec (1293–1381) lived and wrote in Belgium during the tumultuous fourteenth century. Little is known of his early life. Ordained in 1327, Ruusbroec served approximately twenty-five years as a diocesan priest. In 1343, he and two priest-companions left the city for a life of prayer in a forest about ten miles south of Brussels. Eventually, they adopted the Rule of St. Augustine.¹ Ruusbroec's writings provide spiritual direction, mystical teaching, and warn his contemporaries about the spiritual dangers of the Free Spirit Heresy.

Chapter I of this thesis presents an overview of the times in which Ruusbroec lived. The quality of European society declined precipitously during the fourteenth century, and the Church struggled to deal with the changes and the challenges of these times—particularly the increasingly influential lay movements such as the beguines, with which Ruusbroec had contact. Increasing tensions between Church leaders and laity focused on suspected heresies, and the beguines felt the Church's scrutiny first.

Chapter II explores how a new understanding of mystical union led Church authorities to become increasingly suspicious of it. These suspicions led, eventually, to the formal declaration of the Heresy of the Free Spirit and to the association of all beguines with that heresy. Two characteristics of the Heresy of

¹ Paul Verdeyen, S.J., *Ruusbroec and His Mysticism*, trans. André Lefevre (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 12, 15, 41.

the Free Spirit are particularly important: their radical claims to identity with God (autotheism) and their passive contemplation that neglected the sacraments and the practice of virtue. Scholars tend to agree that it is difficult to distinguish heretical from orthodox mystical thought. This difficulty led others, such as Jean Gerson, to suspect Ruusbroec of committing some of the same Free Spirit heresies that Ruusbroec himself had condemned.

Chapter III presents the diverse and sometimes opposed opinions of contemporary scholars over a proper interpretation of Ruusbroec's mysticism. One group argues that Ruusbroec describes union with God as an experience. The other group presents a theologically and philosophically-based interpretation that views Ruusbroec's mysticism as a "transformation" of the soul by grace through analogous participation in God's own life.

Chapter IV presents my own view of the strengths and weaknesses of the two scholarly interpretations and revisits the question of Ruusbroec's orthodoxy.

I first learned about John Ruusbroec and his teaching on mystical union during an undergraduate course on prayer. My interest in studying mysticism deepened during a retreat when a presenter made a too-facile connection, in my opinion, between becoming one with Christ and becoming one with Buddha. Historically, many religious traditions have struggled to understand believers' claims to union with the Other. In fact, Christianity is not the only religious tradition to have executed mystics because of their autotheistic claims. Scholars' continual debate over the correct way to interpret Ruusbroec's subtle mystical teaching is further evidence of the perennially contested nature of mysticism.

This thesis contextualizes and describes one late medieval chapter in that on-going debate, one that I have found most interesting to explore.

Chapter I: Major Events and Influences in Fourteenth Century Lowlands of Europe

Historians have aptly dubbed the fourteenth century as “the age of adversity.”¹ This period of misery dramatically affected all spheres of life, including the Church’s. In the midst of this tumult, the zeal with which people, especially the laity, pursued the spiritual life clashed with the desire of ecclesiastical authorities to regulate religious movements. Mysticism played a significant role in this controversy. Although whole volumes have been written to explain the history of Europe in the fourteenth century, focusing on five significant events of that troubled century will set the context for examining the Church’s life and the state of mysticism at this time in the Lowlands.

Five Major Events

The first significant factor, the earlier expansion of economic and urban life, shaped life in fourteenth-century Europe. Throughout the twelfth century, commerce and trade continued to grow as European life transitioned from a gift economy to a profit economy.² In the thirteenth century, this growth increased the population of the cities, which, in turn, affected religious life in two ways. First, the stability of Benedictine monasticism that had previously met the needs of “the

¹ Robert E. Lemer, *The Age of Adversity: The Fourteenth Century* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1968).

² Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 3, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 3.

dispersed rural life and . . . feudal structure of early medieval society" could no longer do so.³ In other words, urbanization and growing populations brought together more people in one place, just where secluded and rural monasteries were not. Second, vernacular literacy spread widely and systems of education changed,⁴ due in large part to one significant consequence of urbanization: industry.⁵ Much of the Southern Low Countries were highly urbanized. The textile industry played a major role in their economies, particularly in Flanders, and also in Brabant, where John Ruusbroec later lived and which was home to high concentrations of beguines, including Hadewijch, an innovative mystic and visionary, whose writings influenced Ruusbroec. Being highly mobile, the manufacturing industry contributed to population growth or decline dependant on where industry spread. Merchants and trading flourished and resulted in a variety of cultures, languages, and intermingling ideas.⁶

Second, physical distance between bishops and laity became a significant factor in the Late Middle Ages. Diocesan territories in the Southern Low Countries had been drawn in the Fifth and Seventh Centuries, but ". . . by 1100, social, political, and cultural change had rendered this system obsolete."⁷ For instance, the diocesan sees for cities in Flanders and Brabant were located

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200–1565* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2001), 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 12–13.

outside of those two counties.⁸ As a result, Church leadership was out of touch with its people, because nearly all the diocesan sees lay at the edge of the dioceses.

Pastorally, too, the situation was troubling. In 1302–1303, Pope Boniface VIII never answered a request to create a new diocese in Flanders.⁹ The Pope's failure to respond was symptomatic of a "wide spiritual gap [that] separated bishops and higher clergy from their flock."¹⁰ Simons remarks how the burgeoning independence of the laity, achieved through education, industry, and cultural exchange, had further consequences for the life of the Church:

At the crossroads of the multiple outside influences, highly urbanized, with a remarkable mobile population, the Southern Low Countries provided fertile ground for the spread of dissenting ideas about Christian religion and its implementation by the Church.¹¹

Third, at the beginning of the twelfth century, urban centers began challenging the educational monopoly of the Church. Public education grew at a rate ". . . that was unequaled in Europe, save perhaps for Northern and Central Italy."¹² Although higher education for women was not then a consideration, both men and women had similar opportunities at lower educational levels.¹³

A group of interrelated crises constituted the fourth significant factor that degraded life in northern Europe. Although medieval life had been improving during the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, it faced devastating changes on

⁸ Walter Prevenier, "The Low Countries, 1290–1415," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Volume VI, c. 1300–1415*, ed. Michael Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 570.

⁹ J. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 185, 1911–1914, in Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 13–14.

¹⁰ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 13–14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*

the horizon. Historians trace a series of mutually reinforcing factors and events that contributed to the rapid decline of life in the fourteenth century, decades before the onset of the plague.¹⁴ Population growth crested after 1300, which affected the Flemish wool industry;¹⁵ changing currencies and devaluation of coinage also affected the economy;¹⁶ the gulf between the rich and the poor—"the exploited and humiliated *popolo minuto*—grew wider every day. The first urban problems sprang from this gulf, provoked by countless injustices and the exploitation of the misery of the poor."¹⁷ The working class, which had benefited from earlier economic growth, demanded greater political power.¹⁸ Injustices against the poor and tensions between the patricians and the working class triggered widespread unrest in France and in the Low Countries.

A series of strikes, urban uprisings, and revolts broke out in the last third of the thirteenth century, especially in Flanders. Bruges, Douai, Tournai, Provins, Rouen, Caen, Orléans, Béziers in 1280, Toulouse in 1288, Rheims in 1292, and Paris in 1306 were all affected. The culmination was an almost general insurrection in 1302 in the regions which now make up Belgium.¹⁹

If this chaos were not enough, bad weather caused a famine in 1316 in Northern Europe. Significant numbers of people died of hunger, including ten percent of the population of Bruges and Ypres in the Low Countries.²⁰ Historians suggest that the effects of the famine, such as malnutrition and weakened

¹⁴ Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization 400–1500*, trans. Julia Barrow, 2d ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2000), 106.

¹⁵ Prevenier, "The Low Countries," 593.

¹⁶ Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization*, 107.

¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Leguay, "Urban Life," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Volume VI, c. 1300–1415*, ed. Michael Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 106.

¹⁸ Prevenier, "The Low Countries," 581.

¹⁹ Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization*, 107.

²⁰ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Plague and Family Life," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Volume VI, c. 1300–1415*, ed. Michael Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 129.

immunity, may have made people more susceptible to the plague a few decades later.²¹

The Black Death, or Bubonic Plague, is the fifth significant factor that affected life in the fourteenth century.²² Flea-infected rats carried and spread the plague, a bacterial disease.²³ Although the disease affected Europe most brutally from 1347–1350, the disease recurred in 1358, 1361, 1368–1369 (especially in the Low Countries), and 1374–1375.²⁴ Historians disagree on the precise way in which the plague entered Europe, but one commonly accepted theory proposes that it was carried into Genoa from Italian traders who were infected abroad during a battle with the Tartars. The plague spread in the Tartar camp during the fighting. The Tartars literally catapulted the diseased corpses of their fellows into the Genoese camp. Returning to Italy in 1347, the Genoese exposed their vulnerable countryside to the contagion.

As a consequence, the disease spread rapidly. Lynch explains “. . . the outbreak of the plague provoked mass terror.”²⁵ People would flee the place of infection oblivious that they were merely spreading the infection by doing so.²⁶ Historians lack sufficient data to accurately list the numbers of dead between 1347–1350—its most destructive period—or even to agree on the percentage of

²¹ Ibid., 129–130; Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization*, 107–108.

²² Below, I will discuss the plague's impact on the Church.

²³ Klapisch-Zuber, “Plague and Family Life,” 130–131.

²⁴ David Nicholas, *The Evolution of the Medieval World: Society, Government and Thought in Europe, 312–1500* (London: Longman, 1992), 403.

²⁵ Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992), 307.

²⁶ Ibid.

lives lost, but estimates range from twenty percent to one half of Europe's population.²⁷

By the middle of the fourteenth century, the plague decimated any areas in Europe that still had high populations. As Lynch notes, "The Black Death solved the Malthusian crisis. In a brutal way, the population was brought back into balance with the resources."²⁸

As the population of Europe plummeted from the plague, many jobs went unfilled, as there were few workers to do them. As a result, the lot of the working classes and the peasants improved, while that of the ruling classes and the rich declined.²⁹ This led to workers asserting demands that they would never have dreamed of centuries before under a feudal system. For example, once the plague receded in late 1349 textile workers in Flanders demanded the right to set their own hours that had previously been extended without their consent.³⁰ The rich responded to demands of this type by tightening controls to keep the workers 'down.'³¹

To exemplify and buttress this control, the rich emphasized the external differences between themselves and the peasants. Lynch explains how the rich protected themselves by closing off the entry of newcomers into their ranks and widening the gap between them, the nobility, and the peasants.

²⁷ Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe* (London: Arnold, 2003), 105–107; Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), xvi; Klapisch-Zuber, "Plague and Family Life," 124–130.

²⁸ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 308.

²⁹ Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 94.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

³¹ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 308–309.

[This was accomplished] by the splendid outer trappings of nobility: lavish armour, colorful tournaments, heraldry, concern for genealogy, reservation of good jobs in Church and state for nobles and conspicuous consumption in food, clothing, buildings and art.³²

The working class, however, continued to push for more rights. Not surprisingly, a clash of wills followed, unleashed through political strife, class violence, and war. Particularly in Italy and in the Low Countries, "... those who had political power protected their share of the shrunken economic pie by law and by force."³³ For example, the short-lived 1358 French peasant rebellion, known as The Jacquerie, was crushed by the nobles who exacted bloody revenge.³⁴ Lynch describes the increase in war and violence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as "almost endless fighting" between various countries or groups.³⁵

Despite the extraordinary upheaval resulting from the problems of the fourteenth century, Lynch remarks how there was still "continuity." He writes, "The basic structures of medieval society proved resilient enough to survive."³⁶

The Church in the Fourteenth Century: Changes and Challenges

During the fourteenth century, the Church, too, faced its own extraordinary changes due to the impact of societal chaos and internal challenges. These changes reflect the story of tension that had challenged the Church from the end of the twelfth century and were brought to a head in the fourteenth-century disputes over beguines, mysticism, and the Heresy of the Free Spirit.

³² Ibid., 309–310.

³³ Ibid., 310.

³⁴ Paul Freedman, "Rural Society," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Volume VI, c. 1300–1415*, ed. Michael Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97.

³⁵ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 311.

³⁶ Ibid., 314.

Bernard McGinn writes that many things were changing in religious life, including “. . . even the evaluation given to change was changing! . . . The theological debates of the early thirteenth century, those that helped shape the new mysticism, were concerned with the difference between good and bad innovation.”³⁷ These innovations were in large part a result of the societal move away from a feudal, monastic-centered culture to a more urban one. Catholic life was not exempt from these changes.

At the start of the thirteenth century Western Christianity was confronted with the necessity of ‘re-urbanizing,’ that is, of creating appropriate religious responses, both institutional and spiritual, to answer the needs of a rapidly changing, urbanizing society.³⁸

These responses signaled a “. . . shift from centering on an inward-looking community to an outward-looking encounter with the world.”³⁹ Nowhere was this shift more evident than in the *vita apostolica*.⁴⁰

The *vita apostolica* (apostolic life) movement fostered living the simple, poor and, even, itinerant life of Jesus and the Apostles.⁴¹ McGinn remarks that the movement was the central ideal for late Medieval spirituality.⁴²

The *vita apostolica* inspired a renewal of spirituality among the laity and generated or created new forms of religious life. However, its loose organization, which included in some areas unregulated lay preaching, seriously concerned

³⁷ McGinn, *Flowering*, 4.

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

³⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁰ For historical treatment of the different understandings of the term *vita apostolica* in monasticism, the new twelfth-century understanding that affected religious and lay life, and extended treatment of the *vita apostolica* movement, see M.D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1968), 202–269.

⁴¹ McGinn, *Flowering*, 5.

⁴² Ibid.

ecclesiastical leaders. According to M.D. Chenu: "It was difficult to distinguish public witness by the faithful from the function of teaching,"⁴³ proper to the ordained. As a result of this difficulty, Innocent III wrote a statute that distinguished between the two.⁴⁴ The movement was controversial enough that the only attention given to the *vita apostolica* at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) was a decree forbidding new religious orders.⁴⁵ McGinn comments on this development:

[It] was a clear sign of the growing tension in the thirteenth century between hierarchical attempts to limit and control the variety of ways to live the religious life, on the one hand, and the power of the appeal found in the *vita apostolica* on the other.⁴⁶

The evangelical thrust of lay involvement led, eventually, to criticism of clerical corruption. This criticism depended upon the growing opportunities for literacy during the previous century. The spread of literacy, a major change, eroded the power of the papal monarchy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁴⁷ Lynch summarizes the importance of literacy:

[It] created groups of people who were capable of formulating criticisms of the moral failings, financial demands and political positions of the church, including the papacy. Such people were not necessarily opposed to the church or the papacy, but they were increasingly independent and apt to be troubled by the gap between the gospel ideals and the contemporary reality.⁴⁸

The spread of the vernacular affected mysticism greatly. Many mystics (such as Eckhart) were motivated to share their message with a wider public.

⁴³ Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society*, 219.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 219.

⁴⁵ McGinn, *Flowering*, 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 318–319.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 319.

Using the vernacular made this possible. Eckhart's German sermons also influenced the burgeoning shape of German prose.⁴⁹

While for this movement "literate" meant the ability to read and write in the vernacular, Church authorities understood the meaning of "literacy" as the ability to read and write Latin.⁵⁰ This issue was significant because some lay people, including beguines, walked through the countryside preaching and criticizing the clergy. They were pressured to stop because they were, in the eyes of the authorities, "illiterate"—even though they were preaching from a vernacular translation of the Bible or using vernacular commentaries.⁵¹

In fact, Church leaders looked dimly on vernacular translations of the Bible; they feared its misuse by dissenters.⁵² Consequently, lay involvement in the *vita apostolica* ". . . is inseparably linked to the growth of popular heresy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries."⁵³ Church authorities were particularly concerned by lay preachers who supposedly preached on abstract theological ideas without the benefit of a scholastic theological education. This, indeed, was of major concern in *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*, the decree written along with *Ad nostrum* at the Council of Vienne (1311–1312).⁵⁴ The former document claimed that "some" beguines, "as if possessed with madness," were preaching "about the Highest Trinity and divine essence" and were leading the common

⁴⁹ Lerner, *Adversity*, 86.

⁵⁰ McGinn, *Flowering*, 323, note 12.

⁵¹ Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), 45–46.

⁵² Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 28.

⁵³ McGinn, *Flowering*, 6.

⁵⁴ I discuss *Ad nostrum* in Chapter II, below. See the eight propositions from *Ad nostrum* in Appendix I.

person into errors of faith.⁵⁵ This decree officially disbanded these types of beguines and prohibited them from returning to the beguine state:

Therefore, after hearing frequently from these and others about their perverted principles on account of which suspicion has rightly fallen on them, we believe that we must, with the approval of the holy council, prohibit forever their status and abolish them completely from the church of God. We must forbid these, and all other women, on pain of excommunication which we wish to impose forthwith on the recalcitrants, to retain in any way in future this status which they perhaps have long assumed or to be allowed to accept it again in any form.⁵⁶

The end of the decree includes what some name an "escape" or "saving clause"⁵⁷ that permitted beguines with a reputation for piety to continue living their lifestyle in chastity and in a communal setting.⁵⁸

In saying this we by no means intend to forbid any faithful women from living as the Lord shall inspire them, provided they wish to live a life of penance and to serve God in humility, even if they have taken no vow of chastity, but live chastely together in their lodgings.⁵⁹

Lerner argues, "This escape clause contradicts the whole purpose of the decree," and is either the result of a later revision or perhaps disagreement or uncertainty among the Council fathers over how to tell a "good beguine" from a "bad" one.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture: With a Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 524.

⁵⁶ As quoted in McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 524.

⁵⁷ McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 524; Lerner, *Heresy*, 47.

⁵⁸ Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Manchester University Press, 1967), 315.

⁵⁹ As quoted in R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 330.

⁶⁰ Lerner, *Heresy*, 47. Since Lerner's book, Jacqueline Tarrant argues that the decree presents complementary views of the two kinds of beguines. I will present her convincing perspective in my discussion of *Ad nostrum* and the Free Spirit Heresy in Chapter II.

The Papacy: Power and Problems

The power of the medieval papacy reached its zenith during the second half of the thirteenth century.⁶¹ This authority was reinforced by the widely held belief that the pope was Peter's successor and was the 'universal bishop' of the Church.⁶² His authority was buttressed in all its disciplinary expressions (e.g., interdicts, inquisitions, excommunications) by cooperation from lay rulers throughout the world.⁶³ The authority and place of the pope was so fixed in the life of the Church and society, "... no serious person in the thirteenth century could imagine the Church without the pope."⁶⁴ And yet activities the popes were already involved in were planting the seeds of disaffection among the laity and beginning to cripple this very power at its height.

The first major problem to plague the papacy was its finances. An international organization requires much money to maintain and grow. Viewing the Avignon papacy from the perspective of finances is a case in point.⁶⁵ In the aristocratic society of fourteenth-century France, people expected to live "... a lifestyle appropriate to their social class."⁶⁶ As a result, the Avignon popes built buildings and created an extensive bureaucracy. Pope John XXII remodeled and extended the episcopal palace in Avignon, which "became the basis of the

⁶¹ P. N. R. Zutshi, "The Avignon Papacy," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Volume VI, c. 1300–1415*, ed. Michael Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 570.

⁶² Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 315.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 316.

⁶⁵ Below, I will discuss the Avignon papacy itself as a significant problem for the papacy and its credibility.

⁶⁶ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 324.

construction of a massive new residence . . . the Palais de Papes.”⁶⁷ He also built six castles in the region surrounding Avignon, a summer palace, and a papal mint.⁶⁸ Despite these projects, popes such as John XXII, Benedict XII, and Urban V are not known for extravagance. “It is in the pontificate of Clement VI [1342–1352] alone that one can discern at the papal court truly convincing evidence of the profligacy, dissipation, and luxury of life that came to be associated with the Avignonese papacy *tout court*.”⁶⁹ Regardless of who was pope, debts were mounting. “The response of the Avignonese popes to their crushing expenses was to pull out all the stops in their search for revenue.”⁷⁰ Howard Kaminsky explains that the increasing need for revenue amounted to Church taxes on the clergy:

What drove [the Avignon popes] chiefly was the need for enormously higher revenues to finance the endless wars that they fought to subdue the Papal States in Italy. For at the core of Avignon’s papal monarchy was a rampant ‘fiscalism’ in which the steady extension of papal rights of provision to benefices steadily generated new or heightened impositions on clerical revenues.⁷¹

These “impositions” included eight different ways that popes collected monies from clergy, including various forms of collecting percentages of clerical revenue or requiring clergy to make direct payments to secular rulers.⁷² “Together with

⁶⁷ Zutshi, “The Avignon Papacy,” 654.

⁶⁸ Zutshi, “The Avignon Papacy,” 654–655.

⁶⁹ Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 43.

⁷⁰ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 324.

⁷¹ Howard Kaminsky, “The Great Schism,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Volume VI, c. 1300–1415*, ed. Michael Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 674.

⁷² *Ibid.*, note 1.

fiscal policy, provisions [to benefices] were probably the main cause of the unpopularity of the Avignon papacy."⁷³

The popes' involvement with the Papal States, increasingly controversial during the thirteenth century,⁷⁴ caused the second major problem for the papacy in the fourteenth century. The inhabitants of the territories comprised by the Papal States wanted independence. Based in Avignon, the popes had to try to control these territories from a distance, and these efforts were extremely costly. For instance, during a fourteen-year period John XXII paid nearly 2.5 million florins to a papal legate endowed with extensive power to represent papal interests in Italy. Despite the legate's efforts, in 1333–1334 the pope's army was "crushed" in battle and lost control of Ferrara and Bologna.⁷⁵

Despite wars and financial crises, the popes needed the Papal States. Lynch suggests that the papal court was "probably quite correct" in its belief that the papacy required sovereign territory.

[Otherwise,] it would lose its freedom of action and be subjected to whatever secular ruler governed the city of Rome. The possession of secular territories was perhaps unavoidable for the papacy, but it damaged its reputation and worsened its financial problems.⁷⁶

Although the Popes had to deal with disorder and strife within the Papal States, these dealings only reinforced the growing image of the pope as just another grasping ruler ". . . engaged in the unspiritual business of war and diplomacy."⁷⁷

⁷³ Zutshi, "The Avignon Papacy," 671.

⁷⁴ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 316–318.

⁷⁵ Zutshi, "The Avignon Papacy," 656.

⁷⁶ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 318.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

The first two problems that afflicted the papacy during the fourteenth century—financial crises and political entanglements with the Papal States—relate to the Avignon period of papal residency, the third major factor that contributed to a slackening of respect for Church leadership and authority. Spanning much of the fourteenth century (1309–1377), the Avignon Papacy began when Clement V (1305–1314) moved the papal household to Avignon, France to prepare for the Council of Vienne and also to escape the rising tensions in the papal territories.⁷⁸

Once more firmly established in Avignon, the papacy began claiming the right to appoint church leadership at every level and collected fees in doing so. This ended local appointments and inflamed resentment in the local clergy and laity whose anger was already simmering over the move to Avignon.⁷⁹

The system of benefices only added to the resentment. The word *benefice*, which means “reward,” was in this context a liturgical or pastoral responsibility awarded to higher clergy, such as a Cardinal, in places *outside* of Avignon.⁸⁰ Since the second half of the twelfth century, canonists had interpreted the rules governing the awarding of benefices to belong to private law—

. . . that branch pertaining to the protection of proprietary rights and enforced in the interest of the private suppliant. Hence the persistent, almost instinctive, tendency of medievals, clergy and laity alike, to conceive of the benefice in overwhelmingly material terms, to regard ecclesiastical office less as a focus of duty than as a source of income or an object of proprietary right.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ibid., 323.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 325.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 326.

⁸¹ Oakley, *The Western Church*, 31.

In practice, Cardinals typically would hire lower clerics to fulfill the liturgical responsibilities, but the former would receive most of the financial compensation. The Cardinals had a reputation for rarely visiting their benefices for the *cura animarum* and, even when they did, the laity resented receiving pastoral care from a foreigner.⁸² Both laity and clergy complained about these abuses.⁸³ For instance, John Ruusbroec frequently criticized clerical abuses.

In the early Church, the apostles and holy bishops walked across the world and converted people from unbelief. But now it's a different story. When a bishop or an abbot visits his people, he will arrive with 40 horses, extended family and at great expense. But he himself does not have to pay for it. The change for the better is in his purse but not in his soul.⁸⁴

It is unclear whether Ruusbroec's attack specifically targets an abuse of a benefice, but his words show that he was not shy in criticizing abuses by Church authorities.

Certain popes attempted to return the papal base to Rome. Both John XXII and his successor, Benedict XII, had these intentions, and Urban V returned to Rome in 1367 but left for Avignon three years later due to rebellion and other tensions.⁸⁵ In fact, conditions in Italy, and especially in the Papal States, were determinative factors in whether the pope could return the papacy to Rome.⁸⁶

Finally, Pope Gregory XI returned the papacy to Rome in 1377. Evidence suggests that Gregory believed that doing so "was a matter of conscience" and that he even attributed a serious illness that he suffered in 1375 to his failure to

⁸² Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 326.

⁸³ Oakley, *The Western Church*, 32–33.

⁸⁴ John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Tabernacle in Werken, Vol. II*, ed. D.A. Stracke, 2d ed. (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo, 1948), II, 324–325 in Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan Van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 15.

⁸⁵ Zutshi, "The Avignon Papacy," 654–655.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 655.

live in Rome.⁸⁷ However, it was only through the badgering of the mystic, Catherine of Siena, that he found the political will to leave Avignon.⁸⁸ The papal election after his death the next year was marked by bitterness and rioting as various factions competed for the new pope either to return to Avignon or to remain in Rome. The conflict culminated in the Great Schism (1378–1414), during which, at one time, three men in three cities (Rome, Avignon, and Pisa) claimed to be the true pope. The support of international religious orders for individual claimants differed according to country.⁸⁹ The Council of Constance (1414–1417) finally resolved the schism.

The Black Death and its Impact on the Church

While the popes' entanglements in finances, territorial disputes, and internal power struggles caused resentment and alienation among the laity, the Black Death's impact on the Church only worsened the popes' crises. Due to the severe drop in population resulting from the Black Death, demand for food plummeted and, therefore, so did prices. Money paid for renting land decreased. A shortage of workers also caused wages to rise. These drastic human and economic changes affected the Church's financial life because it received income from "tithes and landed estates."⁹⁰

As the times grew increasingly more harsh, so did the punishments for wrongdoers. The severity extended in both directions: Church authorities

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ F. Thomas Luongo, *The Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 57, 166.

⁸⁹ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 329.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 309.

punished laity or lower clergy for wrongdoing; the laity criticized the corruption of Church leaders. Lay criticism of clergy sometimes boiled over into riots that left clergy and even bishops dead.⁹¹

The tendency towards severity paralleled a growing need for certainty. "The Black Death . . . demanded an explanation."⁹² Some thought that the plague was a punishment from God. In his *Decameron*, Boccaccio wrote that the plague "began . . . because God's just anger with our wicked deeds sent it to mortals."⁹³ People began to search for scapegoats among the "wicked mortals." Tragically, those on the margins of society such as Jews, lepers, and heretics were blamed. Reprisals followed.⁹⁴

People's perceptions of time changed, too. Instead of viewing time as eternal, in God's realm, it became more captive to human control. People felt a sense of urgency and a new appreciation for the brevity of life. Salvation took on a much greater emphasis.⁹⁵ This may very well have influenced the severity of the asceticism practiced by many of the mystics and the urgency they felt in their spiritual lives.

The reputation of the clergy suffered as a result of the Black Death. Although many laypeople unfairly misjudged the clergy,⁹⁶ the laity had grounds for believing that the clergy failed them in two ways in the wake of the plague. First, the Church was responsible for training physicians, most of whom were

⁹¹ Ibid., 312.

⁹² Ibid., 313.

⁹³ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca (Florence, 1976), 9–10, in Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 307.

⁹⁴ Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 312–314.

⁹⁵ Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 87–88.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 87.

clergy. Nearly all medical approaches to the plague proved useless. Second, the Church did not meet the spiritual needs of the people since many priests fled their parishes to escape infection. Although “. . . flight might have been intellectually explicable, it was morally inexcusable” to abandon those without the means to flee elsewhere.⁹⁷ In certain dioceses in England, nearly 20 percent of the parish priests fled their responsibilities.⁹⁸

These failings led many people to question their adherence to Church authority and officially sanctioned religious practices. According to Gottfried, “A poorly behaved clergy made many people wonder about alternative means of salvation.”⁹⁹

Although corruption at the higher levels of Church governance drained lay respect, the experience most laity had with Church authorities was with parish clergy and friars. There were very close ties—at least sacramentally—binding together the local priest and the laity. For instance, people were expected to confess at least yearly to their own pastor and to receive communion at Easter at their own parish. R.N. Swanson notes that these expectations were so binding that one author in the early thirteenth century likened confession to a priest other than the local pastor to “a form of spiritual adultery.”¹⁰⁰ Adultery, indeed. Clergy corruption in certain areas was so deep, writes Swanson, “John of Abbeville’s

⁹⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁹⁸ A. Hamilton Thompson, “The Pestilences of the Fourteenth Century in the Diocese of York,” *Archeological Journal* 71 (1914), no pages numbers provided; A. Hamilton Thompson, “The Registers of John Gynewell, Bishop of Lincoln, 1347–1350,” *Archeological Journal* 68 (1911), no pages numbers provided, in Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 84.

⁹⁹ Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 88.

¹⁰⁰ R.N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215–c. 1515* (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 236.

legatine tour of Iberia in the 1220s discovered over 1,700 bastard clerics in the archdiocese of Braga: they were dispensed en masse, lest the whole pastoral edifice collapse. In some regions the battle to transform the priestly caste proved unwinnable."¹⁰¹ Hypocrisy and shameless immorality influenced laity to distrust local clergy and to seek holiness through means not directly dependent on the priesthood.

Lay Responses to the Plague and to Clergy Corruption

While the laity were resentful and disappointed with the failures of Church authorities, their faith in God and reliance on God grew. Lerner writes that most fourteenth-century people:

remained wholly mediaeval—which is to say profoundly religious. . . . they accepted unquestioningly the ultimate superiority of spiritual values in life. For this reason the humiliation of the papacy and the abuses of the clergy were traumatic. Their need for faith in God was if anything increased. . . .¹⁰²

People met their need for God by dealing with the devastation caused by the plague and by rebuilding their lives. In turn, acts of charity grew in importance in the wake of the plague and continued until the sixteenth century.¹⁰³ People made financial contributions to hospitals and built family chapels. Pilgrimages became an enormously popular expression of piety and a 'good work' that furthered one's salvation. But, all of these acts were independent of priestly mediation.¹⁰⁴

Since the end of the twelfth century, poverty as a spiritual ideal became

¹⁰¹ Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*, 237.

¹⁰² Lerner, *Adversity*, 83–84. See also Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 87.

¹⁰³ Joel Rosenthal, *The Purchase of Paradise: The Social Function of Aristocratic Benevolence, 1307–1485* (London: R.K.P., 1972), in Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 85.

¹⁰⁴ Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 86.

"... a more potent force. For many poverty became nothing less than 'the proper institutional condition of the Kingdom of God in this world.'"¹⁰⁵ In addition to poverty as a spiritual ideal, Simons explains that it also functioned as a type of social commentary or protest.

Voluntary poverty was relative . . . because groups who claimed to be poor did so, obviously, in relation to others perceived as wealthy. . . . To most of the voluntary poor in this age, the concept of poverty implicitly or explicitly contrasted with the lifestyle of the 'secular' Church (bishops, parish priests, and members of the lower clergy . . .); or with representatives of traditional monasticism, which theoretically excluded personal property, but allowed its adherents to live quite comfortably while the community was collectively endowed with sizeable, if not enormous, estates. In either case, electing to be 'poor' meant to question, to a lesser or greater degree, the property regime of the established Church.¹⁰⁶

Poverty proved to be a significant issue in the history of heresy and mysticism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. First, even before the fourteenth century, poverty reflected a degree of protest, since one defined oneself as poor in comparison to others, typically Church authorities. Second, poverty as both a lifestyle of the radical mystics, such as the Free Spirits, and as an important theological dimension of radical mysticism (i.e., the "annihilated soul" that is "naked" before God) led to at least misunderstanding and, in many cases, persecution and even execution.¹⁰⁷

Beguines: Setting the Stage for Heresy

The beguines, whose members rank among the best-known mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and who were also the recipients of much persecution as Free Spirit heretics, were a semi-religious movement of women

¹⁰⁵ McGinn, *Flowering*, 8.

¹⁰⁶ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 14.

¹⁰⁷ Bernard McGinn, ed., *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 13.

that originated around 1200 in Liège, Belgium as part of the flurry of religious groups inspired by the *vita apostolica*. The movement spread rapidly.¹⁰⁸ In addition to the impetus of the *vita apostolica*, the massive overcrowding of Cistercian, Dominican, and Franciscan convents provides a reason for the popularity of the beguine lifestyle.¹⁰⁹ Finances also kept many women from joining these established religious communities. Aspirants had to provide a secure income so that a cloistered community could support them. Therefore, only the wealthy could join.¹¹⁰ The beguines received papal approval from Innocent III not long after their genesis¹¹¹ and flourished between 1220–1318.¹¹² The origin of the name *beguine* is shrouded with uncertainty; however, scholars are confident that, at least originally, it was a term of derision.¹¹³ ‘Beghards’ were the parallel, male branch of the movement which, while vigorous, were not as numerous as the beguines.¹¹⁴ The beguines welcomed single women of all ages. They combined a contemplative life with earning a living as teachers or laborers

¹⁰⁸ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 35. Simons's book, published in 2001, stands alone as the best recent historical study of the beguines in English. Barbara Newman (among other scholars) praised the book as “an exemplary account of the beguine movement. . . . Exhaustively documented. . . . [It] will become indispensable for students of medieval religion and women's history.” (See Barbara Newman, review of *Cities of Ladies*, by Walter Simons, *Journal of Religion* 83 (July 2003): 440–442.) Therefore, I will depend primarily on his study to structure my historical narrative. A more recent historical work in English, but of lesser quality, is Hans Geybels, *Vulgariter Beghinae: Eight Centuries of Beguine History in the Low Countries* (Brepols: Turnhout, Belgium, 2004).

¹⁰⁹ Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. Steven Rowan, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 139.

¹¹⁰ Saskia Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert: The Spirituality of the Beguines* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1998), 17; Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 139.

¹¹¹ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, xi.

¹¹² Robert E. Lerner, “Beguines and Beghards,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner, 1983), 157–158.

¹¹³ Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert*, 26; Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 36.

¹¹⁴ Lerner, *Heresy*, 36.

in the booming textile industry; they took no solemn vows and could leave the community if they wished.¹¹⁵

Although beguines did not take solemn vows, they did live a voluntary life of poverty. "All that was required of them was restraint: They were to live soberly . . . to avoid the display of wealth, and to share" material possessions they did not need for their daily lives.¹¹⁶ Wealthy beguines viewed the life of the *mulieres religiosae* as a way to free themselves "from the social obligations of property. . . . Many of [them] marked their conversion by casting off their fine clothes in favor of the most wretched rags in a fashion closely resembling Francis."¹¹⁷ They were not opposed to property, but only to "its misuses and excesses."¹¹⁸

Beguine life cannot be facilely classified.¹¹⁹ A few early beguines initially traveled the countryside with no community base (e.g., Marguerite Porete and Hadewijch of Brabant);¹²⁰ others worked menial jobs during the day and retired to a convent in the evening; and some communities were—essentially—small, self-contained villages ("court beguinages").¹²¹ Beguine apostolic activity varied greatly, too. Some held vigil for the dead,¹²² worked in textile mills, or taught.¹²³ The Cistercian nun, Beatrice of Nazareth, whose mysticism may have influenced

¹¹⁵ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, ix; See McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards*, 270–277 for an extended treatment of beguine employment.

¹¹⁶ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 68.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65–66.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

¹¹⁹ Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert*, 26–31.

¹²⁰ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 135.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 79.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 48.

Ruusbroec, was educated by beguines.¹²⁴ The lifestyle of beguines was certainly rich and varied. In view of this, Simons observes, "The histories of some of these women demonstrate a unique willingness to experiment in a restless search for new experiences."¹²⁵

As the thirteenth century unfolded, characteristics of beguine life led to serious problems,¹²⁶ in particular, suspicion of sexual license and jealousy. The stage was already set for persecution. Church authorities were already suspicious of women leading religious lives outside of the cloister.¹²⁷ Suspicion culminated in their outright persecution in the second half of the thirteenth century and into the fourteenth century, because in the popular mind, beguines became synonymous with Free Spirit heretics, about which I will write more below.

First, beguines were suspected of sexual license. Many beguines pursued their lifestyle as "an alternative for, or rather, as an escape from marriage."¹²⁸ Simons believes there were two reasons for this. First, spiritually, sex and marriage were believed to be of lower merit, or even defiling, as compared to virginity. Second, many beguines were from well-to-do families that had property rights. A life of virginity freed them from marriage and the transfer of property that

¹²⁴ Ibid., 81. See McGinn, *Flowering*, 166–174 for background on Beatrice's life and theology, especially her use of *minne*, love, which was also a significant concept in Ruusbroec's theology.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 36–37.

¹²⁶ Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, 141–149.

¹²⁷ Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert*, 26; As the twelfth century progressed, the Church "...equated female chastity outside the convent with Catharism." See Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 22.

¹²⁸ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 70.

marriage involved.¹²⁹ These facts cast doubt on the widespread view of church leaders and inquisitors that beguines were sexual libertines. However, the statute that permitted a "fallen" beguine who became pregnant to raise her child in the beguinage (unless her partner was a cleric or married) lent credence to the suspicion. The statute enabled the mother to avoid an unwanted marriage or a life of prostitution. Simons suggests this practice, later dropped, may have contributed to the "suspicion of the beguines' 'loose' lifestyle."¹³⁰

Second, jealousy also contributed to the decline of the beguines. As the thirteenth century waned, so did Church support for the *vita apostolica*. The mendicants' early fervor was fading, yet many such groups still enjoyed "many ecclesiastical privileges."¹³¹ Church authorities began to restrict the friars, and the friars, in turn, began to attack the beguines and beghards. The latter responded by devoting themselves all the more to the *vita apostolica*. "The result was that they were charged with heresy not for laxity or religious indifference but for insubordinate zeal."¹³² Lerner describes this jealousy:

Excess, real or presumed, becomes easily resented and thus throughout the Thirteenth Century beguines and beghards were accused of having base motives and of leading immoral lives under the mantle of piety.¹³³

The uniqueness and strengths of the beguine movement provided, ironically, the perfect set-up for the accusation of heresy. The beguines, as women, were a vulnerable group in medieval life. They claimed to live chastely but without the protection and patina of respectability supplied by an enclosure.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 70–72.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 73–74.

¹³¹ Lerner, *Heresy*, 45.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 38–39.

They were zealous followers of the *vita apostolica*. Finally, the movement produced mystics of extraordinary giftedness and daring who were centuries ahead of their time.

Conclusion

Historians have rightly described the fourteenth century as an “age of adversity” in European society and in Church life. Earlier economic expansion, urban growth, and new systems of education changed social and religious life. A series of interrelated crises—economic strife, precipitous drops in population, civil unrest, famine, and, especially, the Black Death—threatened the structure of European society. The Church struggled to adapt to new changes, especially the *vita apostolica* movement and the spread of the use of the vernacular in the writings of lay persons about their spiritual experiences. It also suffered from financial and political crises that put special stress on the papacy. The impact of the plague severely strained relations between Church officials and laity, resulting in widespread criticism of Church corruption. The beguines, active in the midst of this ferment, followed the *vita apostolica*. As a loosely organized movement of chaste, religious women, they elicited jealousy and suspicion. Eventually, Church officials charged them with heresy. Chapter II explores how mystical writings and Church declarations connected the beguines with heresy. Taken together, Chapters I and II set the stage for an exploration of one of the leading mystics of the fourteenth century, Ruusbroec.

Chapter II: Mysticism, Beguines, and the Free Spirit Heresy

Chapter I introduced some of the significant historical issues that contributed to sweeping changes in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century life and that more directly affected the life of the Church. All of these developments form the context for understanding the preoccupation of church authorities with mystical heresy during the fourteenth century. Chapter II will examine how changes in the understanding of mystical union, including changes in language and the involvement of women, led authorities to become increasingly suspicious of heresy. Next, it will show how the spread of heresy, misunderstandings on the part of Church authorities, and the complicated history of certain Church documents led to the formal definition of the Heresy of the Free Spirit and to the identification of all beguines with that heresy. Then, the chapter will explain the difficulties involved in distinguishing between orthodox and Free Spirit thought. Finally, it will present the controversy concerning Jean Gerson's understanding of elements of John Ruusbroec's mystical theology. Having discussed in particular significant characteristics of heresy and the Heresy of the Free Spirit, Chapter II leads to an examination of how contemporary scholars understand Ruusbroec's mystical theology in Chapter III.

Developments in Mysticism and in Language

Mysticism played a significant factor in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century life. Until the thirteenth century, mystical union was understood as the *unitas spiritus*, a loving union of wills between God and the soul. This understanding recognized a clear separation between the substance of the divine and the human. As the thirteenth century progressed, however, mystics begin to understand union as a *unitas indistinctionis*, a union with God without distinction.

Bernard McGinn defines mysticism as "that part of [Christian] beliefs and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God."¹ The three parts of this definition fit well with the accusations made against mystics suspected of being Free Spirits, many of whom were beguines. First, they believed only rigorous asceticism could lead to mystical union (*unio mystica*); next, they claimed it was possible to achieve deification in this life (and that it was a permanent state); finally, they were accused by inquisitors of antinomian practices, typically sexual libertinism, once union had been achieved.

Mystical life, which was previously considered available to those who had withdrawn from the world² was, by the thirteenth century, now considered available "... anywhere and by anyone, if the proper dispositions were present

¹ Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), xvii. McGinn's definition of mysticism, while helpful, in no way settles the contentious debate over a proper definition. As Denys Turner wryly states, "...I do not know of any discussions which shed less light on the subject of 'mysticism' than those many which attempt *definitional* answers to the question 'what is mysticism?'" See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: A Study in the Negativity of Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.

² McGinn, *Flowering*, 12.

and grace was given.”³ The new understanding of Christian living influenced by the *vita apostolica* brought about this change in the understanding of the availability of God’s presence.⁴ Belief in this wide availability dovetailed seamlessly with the lifestyle and experience of the beguines.

With this wider availability came the greater danger of things going awry. Church authorities were quite concerned that this “unrestrained mysticism,” that is, without the formal structure of monastic life, would mislead people into believing union with God was possible on earth through one’s “. . . own efforts and without sacramental mediation.”⁵

Bernard McGinn describes a third type of theology (besides monastic and scholastic) that emerged in the Middle Ages: vernacular theology. In many ways it was born from the experiences of the beguines and other religious women who did not have access to Latin education, or from men who, though trained, wanted to reach the laity with their preaching (e.g., Meister Eckhart’s German sermons). As its name implies, this theology expressed itself in the developing vernacular languages; its media were poetry, hagiography, letters, vernacular sermons, and brief treatises.⁶ The vernacular languages, as emergent, were not as restricted by grammatical and linguistic rules as was Latin. They had “. . . remarkable potential for creative innovation. The mystics were in at the creation.”⁷ And, creativity was needed to describe the experience of *unio mystica*.

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lerner, “Beguines and Beghards,” 161.

⁶ McGinn, *Flowering*, 21.

⁷ Ibid.

In earlier monastic understanding, the love-embrace described in the *Song of Songs* symbolized the *unio mystica*.⁸ In the thirteenth century, beginning with women writers, a second meaning of mystical union appeared, "union without difference" (*unitas indistinctionis*). This is "the insistence that in the ground of reality there is absolute identity between God and the soul."⁹ Mystics who tried to express this "new" understanding of union used language and images at great variance from the clearer scholastic categories. In an age of inquisition, these images (e.g., the soul becoming annihilated in the darkness of the divine abyss) and language ("God is my Me")—daring enough on their own—only rightly heightened the suspicion of Church authorities.

The vernacular linked women, in particular, with heresy. As early as the twelfth century, women had access to vernacular documents that dealt with controversial religious ideas. They discussed movements such as Catharism, for instance, "And their potential for or against orthodoxy must have been evident to all."¹⁰ Since women could not attain ecclesiastical status or receive the same higher education as men, they "had to create new models and construct new theological categories"¹¹ to claim that their writings were authoritative. The vernacular made these innovations possible. Although nonclerical men relied on such figures as Bernard of Clairvaux to lend authority to their texts, women who presented a more radical mystical theology "had to dare more in order to get a

⁸ McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, 12.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 34.

¹¹ McGinn, *Flowering*, 154–155.

hearing."¹² Many women, such as Angela Foligno, appealed to visionary revelation to give authority to their mystical works.¹³

McGinn notes the following about the new, creative language women used to describe mystical union:

New forms of apophatic language that express the mutual infinity of God and the self were pioneered by women mystics. These expressions move beyond the usual accounts of the necessity for eradicating the fallen and sinful will to emphasize that what keeps us from full union with God is the very *created will* itself. Hence, many of the thirteenth-century women seem to find the traditional understanding of *unio mystica*, that of a loving union of spirits, finite and infinite, inadequate to describe the kind union they wish to attain—an indistinct identity with God in the No-self.¹⁴

The creative and daring language that McGinn describes, suggestive of annihilation, was expressed in the vernacular and often by women. Already by the second half of the thirteenth century, a factor that "especially" strengthened the opposition to the beguines was "the deeply ingrained medieval fear of women who stepped outside the carefully controlled roles prescribed for them by the church and society."¹⁵ As Chapter I shows, "carefully controlled roles" included the cloister and vows, but beguines were loosely organized, took no vows, lived chastely, and owned basic possessions. Even more challenging to Church authorities, some beguines, such as Marguerite Porete, lived itinerantly. The French Inquisition executed Porete in 1310 for recalcitrance in spreading her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.¹⁶ Her inquisitors called her a *pseudo-mulier*, or

¹² Ibid., 142.

¹³ Ibid., 154–155.

¹⁴ Ibid., 157.

¹⁵ Ibid., 245. On this same issue in the thirteenth century, see Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 127.

¹⁶ I will refer to Porete throughout this chapter, especially in my discussion of the similarity between orthodox and Free Spirit thought, below.

phony woman, "Apparently because her religious claims undermined traditional categories so radically."¹⁷ An example of these claims is one of Porete's formulations of the Trinity, in which she presents "a deity who is gendered male and female and who speaks through a female voice."¹⁸

Poverty, an important element of the *vita apostolica*, had radical implications for mysticism. For those living the *vita apostolica*, poverty:

. . . was among the most significant corollaries of the *unitas indistinctionis* understanding of mystical union, especially since the debate over the true meaning of poverty was one of the central religious concerns of the time . . . [This is so because] absolute metaphysical poverty, annihilation of the whole created will, true freedom, all have a theoretical ring. On the practical level of concrete expression in the vernacular, these mystical authors created a new and more potent way of saying the same thing—"To live without a why."¹⁹

In other words, the mystic's life was meant to be so utterly surrendered to God that her goal was really to possess nothing—not even a separate identity. The inherently fluid and paradoxical nature of *unitas indistinctionis* mysticism led many others to readily assign a reason "why." Their answer usually pointed—deservedly or not—to heresy.

The new religious movements in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries were led mostly by lay people and were directed against what many laity viewed as "an entrenched clerical establishment."²⁰ The tension between these two groups sometimes resulted in condemnations for heresy. Simons notes that in the eleventh-century Southern Low Countries, heresies were not based on conflict

¹⁷ McGinn, *Flowering*, 245; Michael Sells, "The Pseudo-Woman and the Meister," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994), 146.

¹⁸ Michael Sells, "The Pseudo-Woman," 131.

¹⁹ McGinn, *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, 13.

²⁰ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 15.

over doctrine but on lay criticism of higher clergy.²¹ This changed in the twelfth century as "... dualist heresies spread widely in the Southern Low Countries and turned the region into a hotbed of heretical activity and orthodox counter-propaganda."²² Lerner will argue farther below that the Free Spirits never actually existed as an organized group; that inquisitorial processes for examining purported heretics shaped this heresy; and that the Council of Vienne formally created it. Why was heresy thought to be so widespread?

Lerner argues that heresy became in the minds of Church authorities so prevalent because it was self-perpetuating. The medievals believed heresy was an unchanging phenomenon. Therefore,

... they often copied out names or whole passages from patristic catalogues rather than basing their descriptions of sects on actual observation. Just as Thomas Jefferson thought that the mastodon must somewhere be alive because it once existed, so medieval writers postulated the existence of sects like 'Tertulliani', which had been dead for a millennium.²³

Ecclesiastical authorities assumed, therefore, that contemporary heretics typically belonged to an organized, real heretical group, since in the past heretics actually belonged to organized groups. Below, the discussion will return to this issue as it relates to the Free Spirit Heresy.

²¹ Ibid. He mentions individuals condemned or killed for criticizing clergy in Arras (1024–25) and in Cambrai (1076–77).

²² Ibid., 16. On pages 16–18, Simons describes recorded instances of individuals accused of heretical activity and punished for it in Flanders (c. 1115) and Arras (1172); a heretical priest was imprisoned for seven years in Arras beginning in 1184. More significantly, recorded instances of groups of people, adherents of various heterodox positions, including Catharism, were accused of heresy in Arras (1163), Cambrai (1180), Liège (c. 1144–45), and Flanders (1162–1163); a group of Cathars left the Southern Low Countries and moved to Cologne in 1163; another group left for England a few years later.

²³ Lerner, *Heresy*, 4.

The Heresy of the Free Spirit

The Heresy of the Free Spirit was a phenomenon of fourteenth-century Medieval mysticism that largely disappeared by the end of the fifteenth century. Lerner writes that, although a heresy, it “. . . was far more typical of the late medieval search for God and godliness than has commonly been supposed.”²⁴ One characteristic the Heresy of the Free Spirit shared with the spirituality of that time was the influence of the *vita apostolica* movement. Like their orthodox counterparts, the Free Spirits did not regard the *vita apostolica* as an end in itself. Rather, for them, it was the means to an end, which was radical union with God. They sought to attain what the beguine Marguerite Porete described as the soul’s “annihilation” in God.²⁵

The beguines were at least a loosely organized group whose name became synonymous with the Free Spirits. The association of beguines with Free Spirits began with the condemnation and execution of Marguerite Porete for being a relapsed heretic. Her execution began a series of accusations leveled against beguines in general that charged them as members of the Sect of the Free Spirit.²⁶

The Free Spirits tended to be from the noble class. One of the most influential Free Spirits, in fact, a woman named Bloemardinne, Ruusbroec’s opponent, came from a leading patrician family in Brussels. Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror* is filled with examples showing her familiarity with nobility; her book has

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁵ Romana Guarnieri, “Il movimento del Libero Spirito,” *Archivio Italiano per la storia della pietà*, IV (1965): 524, in Lerner, *Heresy*, 226.

²⁶ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 120.

been described as "a sterling example of the marriage between mysticism and the courtly literary tradition."²⁷ The fact that many Free Spirits wrote books testifies to their educated and elite status, during a time when only the wealthy could afford education.²⁸ This tendency of the Free Spirits to be from wealthier backgrounds parallels the same tendency among women who became beguines. That both members of the Free Spirit and the beguines came from privileged backgrounds constituted one more reason beguines were commonly labeled Free Spirits.

Nevertheless, the Free Spirits were not an organized group, but individuals who, in pursuit of sanctification, pushed the limits of orthodoxy. *Sister Catherine*, one of the few surviving Free Spirit texts, contains what Lerner names as the three characteristics of Free Spirit Heresy actually supported by evidence: ". . . autotheism, or belief in the possibility of total identification with God on earth; their view that this identification could be lasting rather than momentary; and their frank circumvention of sacramental intermediaries in the mystical way."²⁹

While these three issues are characteristic of how people accused of Free Spirit Heresy understood their own mysticism, Church authorities saw it

²⁷ Lerner, *Heresy*, 232.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 218. Is it possible that mystics such as the author of *Sister Catherine* lacked regular contact with priests, and so had to find alternative, that is, non-sacramental, means for sanctification? If so, inquisitors—already suspicious of heresy—might have interpreted this alternative spirituality as a rejection of sacramental mediation. I did not find evidence of a priest shortage in my research of mystical heresy in the Low Countries, although this possibility presents an interesting follow-up for future research. It is not unusual today to hear often of complaints from women's colleges and congregations that it is very difficult to find a priest for sacramental ministry—which is not, of course, to suggest that many women's colleges and congregations embrace today the Heresy of the Free Spirit.

differently. The eight propositions listed in the decree *Ad nostrum*,³⁰ concerning “an abominable sect of malignant men known as beghards and faithless women known as beguines,”³¹ officially define the Heresy of the Free Spirit. *Ad nostrum* was written during the Council of Vienne (1311–1312), just two years after the execution of Marguerite Porete.

Specifically, the Free Spirit Heresy resulted from what McLaughlin describes as “the misuse and misunderstanding of the piety of deification.”³² This misunderstanding resulted in what authorities believed were instances of antinomianism. Antinomianism held that, as a consequence of union with God, the soul can “ignore the moral law.”³³ The combination of autotheism and antinomianism is the essence of the Heresy of the Free Spirit.³⁴ Both these practices are spelled out directly in *Ad nostrum*: “After attaining the highest degree of perfection, a person will have no more need of fasting or praying because the senses are now so completely subject to the control of the soul and reason that the body may be granted absolute liberty.”³⁵ Church authorities believed this “absolute liberty” took the form of sexual libertinism. According to *Ad nostrum*, the Free Spirits believed “sexual intercourse is not a sin as long as

³⁰ See Appendix I.

³¹ As quoted in Lerner, *Heresy*, 82.

³² Eleanor L. McLaughlin, “The Heresy of the Free Spirit and Late Medieval Mysticism,” in *Medievalia et Humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, Medieval and Renaissance Spirituality, ed. Paul Maurice Clogan, n.s., 4 (Denton, TX: North Texas State University Press, 1973), 37.

³³ Lerner, *Heresy*, 1.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum*, I, 267, in McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards*, 497.

nature demands it, especially if the person who indulges is strongly tempted, but when nature does not dictate it becomes a mortal sin."³⁶

In fact, the Free Spirits were widely believed to be sexual libertines. For instance, Lerner describes stories written by chroniclers not present during the reported events that were used as evidence during an inquisitional trial that took place in Cologne. These stories describe heretics involved in all sorts of bizarre sexual activities. The chroniclers of these texts referred to some of the participants as "beghards." According to Lerner, this linking of "beghard" (and just as commonly, "beguine") with lasciviousness led many writers, then and since, to conclude that beghards and beguines were Free Spirits. However, the meaning of "beghard" or "beguine" changed according to region. For example, Lerner reports one account by William of Egmont—used as evidence in the Cologne Inquisition—that describes a "beghard" and a "lollard" who participated in one of the orgies. "But in the Low Countries, where William lived, the words 'beghard' and 'lollard' were often used without relation to the Heresy of the Free Spirit as terms of abuse for scoundrels or presumed hypocrites."³⁷ As a consequence of this confusion of terms, Lerner concludes that the evidence connecting Free Spirits and sexual libertinism is inconclusive at best.³⁸

³⁶ Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture: With a Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 498. I have not found scholarly attempts to interpret this statement from *Ad nostrum*. Presumably, the statement, especially "as nature demands it" and "strongly tempted," refer to the vicissitudes of natural human sexual desire and not to someone or something else inciting sexual temptation.

³⁷ Lerner, *Heresy*, 31.

³⁸ Given the differences between men and women, is promiscuity more typical of men than women? Could a male hierarchy be projecting something they fear and know all too well of themselves onto women? Historians with a gender awareness might follow up on these questions.

Despite nearly one hundred years of beguine life stretching from their formation and spread early in the thirteenth century to the execution of Marguerite Porete at the beginning of the fourteenth (1310), no direct or credible evidence corroborates *Ad nostrum*'s charge that connects beguines with mystical antinomianism. Mystical heresy did, in fact, exist in the Swabian Ries in the late thirteenth century, "... but the Swabian heretics were not called beghards and beguines and the beghards and beguines ... charged with heresy [at this time] were not accused of upholding radical mysticism."³⁹ A sixteenth-century document is the only known source connecting mystical antinomianism to thirteenth-century beguines and beghards. This later text was based on a fifteenth-century source (now lost), so the evidence seems weak.⁴⁰ In fact, the only known source for the specific ideas in *Ad nostrum* is *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, but the *Mirror* does not promote antinomianism or sexual libertinism.⁴¹ The *Mirror*, however, is strongly autotheistic:

Reason: To whom does she belong, then? says Reason.
Love: To my will, says Love, which transformed her into me.
Reason: But who are you, Love? says Reason. . . .
Love: I am God, says Love, for Love is God and God is Love, and this Soul is God by the condition of Love. . . .⁴²

Depending on how the terms autotheism or deification were understood, they were not necessarily heretical. Many fourteenth-century mystics, including Ruusbroec, claimed deification as a possibility. The divisive issue was the nuances involved with *how* these mystics understood deification, especially as it

³⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁴¹ Ibid., 82.

⁴² Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), Chapter 21, 104.

related to the belief in an ongoing mystical union of God and the circumvention of the sacraments. Church authorities, however, seemed convinced of the presence of sexual antinomianism among the beguines and beghards and others. This conviction led to widespread persecution of beguines and others accused of Free Spirit Heresy after the promulgation of *Ad nostrum* and *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*.

Ad nostrum, in fact, was used as “the basis of most, if not all, inquisitorial investigations” of Free Spirit Heresy.⁴³ In the face of the testimony generated by inquisitorial trials, many wondered how anyone could doubt the guilt of those accused of Free Spirit Heresy. The answer lies in three forms of methodology used by the inquisitors. First, many confessions were obtained under torture or the threat of punishment for those who persisted in denial, despite what was presented as evidence. Second, the actual trial records were not verbatim accounts but summaries prepared by an inquisitor or a scribe. Third, the trial records were written in Latin, whereas testimonies—as well as the interrogations—were in the vernacular.⁴⁴ Summarizing vernacular theological discussion in Latin may have created serious problems. McGinn’s explanation above of the fluid nature of vernacular theology and the “creative linguistic innovation” of its images may have been extremely difficult to translate faithfully into the much more grammatically, linguistically, and theologically established Latin. As an example of this difficulty, Jean Gerson generated controversy by criticizing Ruusbroec’s teaching on mystical union in *The Spiritual Espousals*.

⁴³ Leff, *Heresy*, 316.

⁴⁴ Lerner, *Heresy*, 4.

However, Gerson read a Latin translation of the *Espousals*, not the original Middle Dutch. This fact contributed a small, but noteworthy, part in the controversy.⁴⁵

The formalized nature of inquisitional questioning presents an added problem when trying to decipher what the Free Spirits really believed. For example,

[Questions drawn directly from *Ad nostrum* were given] . . . to a wide variety of victims who ranged from the orthodox to the insane with the result that they all look at first sight from the protocols like cookies out of a mold. With such evidence scholars had no hesitation in putting all those specimens into the jar of the "Free Spirit" and then arguing that there was a widespread, tightly organized sect of that name.⁴⁶

Lerner argues that these deficiencies require corroborating evidence to support the results of the inquisitional hearings. However, the record shows no direct evidence but only confessions obtained under duress or stories of lasciviousness obtained second or third hand—many times written a century after the described event. Apparently, in those days no "statute of limitations" existed.

How, then, did inquisitors connect Free Spirit Heresy with sexual license if there was no direct evidence supporting such a connection? Bernard McGinn provides evidence for the origins of that connection. He argues that the controversy between the Church and the Gnostics, which arose during the earliest centuries of the Church, long before the late Middle Ages, played a significant role in the history of mysticism, as well as a role in the controversy

⁴⁵ See discussion in English in Ioannis Rusbrochii, *De ornatu spiritualium nuptiarum, Wilhelmo Iordani interprete*, CCCM 207 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 25–26.

⁴⁶ Lerner, *Heresy*, 5.

over the Free Spirits.⁴⁷ Of the role that Gnosticism played in this controversy,

McGinn states:

Christianity's emphasis on orthodoxy implies an ongoing dialogue between claims for mystical knowledge of God, on the one hand, and public and universal teaching—what later came to be called the magisterium—on the other. . . . One may say that Christian mysticism acquired a necessary relation to magisterium largely because the claims of early Christian Gnostics to esoteric saving knowledge came to be seen as inadmissible in a religion whose success was closely linked with the universality of its teaching and the coherence and solidity of its institutional structure.⁴⁸

Thus the controversial heritage of Gnosticism, rooted in its adherents' claims to esoteric saving knowledge and to their writings about the divinity of the soul, affected medieval mystics in their controversies with Church authorities over mystics' claims to deification and visions.⁴⁹

As a result of claims to private, saving knowledge, sexual depravity became linked to Gnosticism.

The cultural topos that equated secretive religious groups with illicit sexuality . . . was to reappear again and again in the debates over mysticism. Individuals or groups that are perceived to be making claims to esoteric higher wisdom lend themselves to being seen as antinomian.⁵⁰

McGinn also suggests that another heresy, Messalianism (condemned in the fifth century), which emphasized constant prayer to the detriment of the sacraments and Christian duty, also contributed to the late medieval suspicion and persecution of mystics.

⁴⁷ Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 4, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 55, 78.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 52–53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

Lerner gives numerous examples showing how throughout the thirteenth century medieval preachers treated heresy and fornication together as a *topos*.⁵¹ In fact, "Heretics of all stripes were simply assumed to be immoralists throughout the Thirteenth Century."⁵² Philip, the Chancellor of the University of Paris, wrote numerous, quite popular sermons about heresy. He considered heresy a consequence of three sins: lechery, gluttony, and avarice.⁵³ Sermons similar to Philip's—with the accompanying orgiastic stories—were "zealously" circulated among preachers, in part, to provide scintillating preaching material that would illustrate the dangers of heresy.⁵⁴

If both Lerner and McGinn are correct that there was a self-perpetuating nature to heresy, it seems reasonable to conclude that the heresies of Gnosticism and Messalianism influenced the drafting of *Ad nostrum*, which condemned the Free Spirits for some of the same troublesome aspects in these earlier heresies. Further research on the connection between the Gnostics' claims of esoteric saving knowledge and licentiousness and the Messalians' overdependence on prayer to the neglect of Christian action may advance the scholarship on the origins of the Free Spirit Heresy. Of *Ad nostrum*, Lerner concludes:

Ad nostrum is the birth certificate of the heresy of the Free Spirit since, technically speaking, heresy is defined by the Pope and the decree referred explicitly to heretics who spoke of their 'spirit of liberty.' But, as if it were in the theater of the absurd, there is a birth certificate without it being clear whether there was any child. Surely there were radical mystics among the beghards and beguines: in addition to those in Cologne and Marguerite Porete, there were

⁵¹ Lerner, *Heresy*, 20.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

probably others that we do not know about. Yet, so far as we can tell, inveterate hostility towards the beguine movement and unreal fears of antinomian heresy were forceful motivating factors in the shaping of the condemnation. Until we have more information about the actual deliberations of Vienne we must therefore regard *Ad nostrum* less as an accurate description of a flourishing heresy than as a document of enormous import in persecutions to come.⁵⁵

Additional research shows that what came after Vienne is more significant than the conciliar deliberations and had devastating consequences for the beguines. Jacqueline Tarrant reports the common opinion among scholars that after the council, Clement V made changes to Vienne's treatment of the beguines and beghards.⁵⁶ In 1317, John XXII officially promulgated Clement's revised version of the conciliar decrees, (*Ad nostrum* and *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*), known collectively as the Clementine Constitutions.

Tarrant's research on Vienne qualifies Lerner's view that placed sole responsibility on the Council of Vienne for the ensuing persecutions of beguines and beghards as Free Spirits. Further, she argues that Clement's revisions expressed diversity—not contradictions—about the beguines. Her research focuses on a Munich manuscript, *M*, written in 1312–1317, that reports the Council's decisions on the beguine issue. This document reflects the decisions of the Council before they appeared in the Clementine Constitutions.⁵⁷ Tarrant shows that there are discrepancies, sometimes serious, between *M* and *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus* and *M* and *Ad nostrum* regarding beguines. In fact, *M* does not report that the Council condemned the beguine movement; it shows

⁵⁵ Ibid., 83–84.

⁵⁶ Jacqueline Tarrant, "The Clementine Decrees on the Beguines: Conciliar and Papal Versions," *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 12 (1974): 300–301, 303–304.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 302.

that Vienne hardly dealt with the beguines.⁵⁸ According to Tarrant, reading the two decrees together shows that Clement V's revisions distinguished between beguines worthy of condemnation with the Free Spirit beghards (*Ad nostrum*), beguines who are prohibited from preaching and must disband (*Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*), and faithful beguines (*Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*).⁵⁹

However, Clement's careful distinctions did not prevent others from using *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus* to attack *all* beguines as heretics. Later, John XXII wrote a decree defending devout beguines from persecution and explicitly stating that Clement V did not intend to condemn such beguines.⁶⁰ Tarrant suggests that a glossator may have interpreted *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus* as an attack on all beguines. The official commentary of this glossator then became standard.⁶¹ Tarrant comments on this sad development: "Thus, in spite of the efforts of Clement V and John XXII, the beguines came to be regarded as a united and considerable threat to orthodoxy. Instead of their diversity being portrayed, the result was to make them all look equally suspect."⁶²

Tarrant's research into the complicated history of the Clementine Constitutions illuminates the controversy surrounding the beguines during the fourteenth century. Despite repeated papal attempts to clarify their status and protect them, the name *beguine* was apparently too suspicious and laden with controversy for other authorities to view *all* of them as anything other than

⁵⁸ Ibid., 302–303.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 304–306.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 307, 308.

⁶¹ Ibid., 308.

⁶² Ibid.

heretics. In addition to the persecutions based on *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*, *Ad nostrum* had devastating consequences for the beguines as well. Of these consequences, McGinn states:

The effect of *Ad nostrum* was to cement the connection between the Free Spirit heresy and the beguine movement. In the eyes of many in the fourteenth century all beguines and beghards were dangerous heretics. Hence, the period between the Council of Vienne in 1312 and the Council of Constance in 1415 has been characterized . . . as 'a hundred years' war against beghards and beguines.⁶³

A rather thin line separates those condemned as Free Spirits and those whom history has judged orthodox. For instance, while most Free Spirit texts were destroyed, some survived through attribution to approved and orthodox mystics. Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, for example, was attributed to Ruusbroec in the fifteenth century.⁶⁴ For many once considered orthodox—such as Tauler and Ruusbroec—the line blurred over time as they, too, were at times accused of Free Spirit Heresy. Therefore, Lerner suggests,

Perhaps . . . it is wrong in elucidating the origins of *Ad nostrum* to look for mystical *heretics* among beguines and beghards instead of looking for mystical beghards and beguines who were *orthodox*. Many who took the *vita apostolica* most seriously believed it was a mystical path. For them the imitation of Christ was not just a means for becoming *like* Christ, but more a means of becoming *one with* Christ or having immediate knowledge of Him.⁶⁵

According to Lerner, then, orthodox mystical texts may be the best indicator of what Free Spirit mystics actually believed.

One striking example of the similarity between Free Spirit and orthodox mysticism is the soul's union with God imaged as a drop of water that is

⁶³ McGinn, *Harvest*, 63.

⁶⁴ Edmund Colledge, et al., "Introductory Interpretive Essay," in Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), lxxx.

⁶⁵ Lerner, *Heresy*, 62–63.

absorbed into a vat of wine.⁶⁶ Such an unlikely group as Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of St. Victor, Jacopine da Todi, John Tauler, the condemned heretics Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, and the author of the Free Spirit text *Sister Catherine* all employed this image, with some variation. Ironically, the most daring use of this image is from the orthodox Tauler. In his explanation of Tauler's use of this image, Lerner states that after the mingling of liquids the soul "will 'continue to be,' [but Tauler] concludes by saying that it will become so unified that it will lose 'all distinction.'"⁶⁷ Tauler possessed the theological acumen to nuance sufficiently such paradoxical statements. Apparently many Free Spirits did not. Tauler also claimed that people who take the mixing of liquids image literally were heretical. Lerner writes, "No doubt this is a reference to Free Spirit heretics."⁶⁸

It seems, then, that in some cases the difference between Free Spirits and orthodox mystics was that the latter wrote that they were not Free Spirits! Lerner supports this:

. . . The predicament of the orthodox mystics lay in their desire to express a subjective religious experience and to keep clear of suspicions of heresy at the same time. They sought a way out of this dilemma by intense and sometimes exaggerated attacks on Free Spirits, which, because of their clearly ulterior motives, cannot be treated as reliable source material. But they could still not thoroughly clear their reputations because Free-Spirit thought was in fact embarrassingly related to their own. There were, of course, differences, but it is chastening to remember that even the admirable Ruysbroeck had to admit in a

⁶⁶ Robert E. Lerner, "Image of Mixed Liquids in Late Medieval Mystical Thought," *Church History* 40 (Dec 1971): 397-411.

⁶⁷ F. Vetter, *Die Predigten Taulers*, Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters, 11, sermon 7 (Berlin, 1910), 33, in Lerner, "Image of Mixed Liquids," 406.

⁶⁸ Lerner, "Image of Mixed Liquids," 406.

candid moment that some Free Spirits were impossible to detect without the aid of divine illumination.⁶⁹

Porete, Ruusbroec, and Orthodoxy

The Free Spirit case that is most related to orthodox thought is that of the beguine, Marguerite Porete.⁷⁰ She had been silenced around 1306 for spreading the ideas in her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Her persistence led to her second arrest in 1308. She refused to give testimony to her French inquisitors and was imprisoned for over a year and a half. Since she would not testify, her inquisitor picked certain texts from her book and presented them (out of context).⁷¹ Her book, written in French, survived the Middle Ages through numerous translations into Latin, Italian, and German, a testimony to its popularity. Indeed, according to the *Mirror's* prologue, she had it sent to three theological authorities, all of whom gave it their approval. Over time, the identity of the book's author was forgotten. In 1927 the Downside Benedictines published, without knowing who the author was, a new English translation of the *Mirror* that contained a *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*.⁷² Marguerite's authorship was re-discovered only in 1946.⁷³

⁶⁹ Lerner, *Heresy*, 199. For the statement by Ruusbroec, see Jan van Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, trans. Helen Rolfsen, O.S.F. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), b2146–b2148. This English translation is part of the recent translation project of Ruusbroec's works published in the *Corpus Christianorum* series. The Liturgical Press published the *Espousals* separately to provide the new translation, without the apparatus, to non-scholars.

⁷⁰ Porete "was called a beguine by so many independent sources that the designation may be taken as certain," Lerner, *Heresy*, 71.

⁷¹ Lerner, *Heresy*, 71.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷³ The discovery was made by Romana Guarnieri and published as "Lo Specchio delle anime semplici e Margherita Poirette," *L'Osservatore Romano* (June 16, 1946), 3; See Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., xlv.

The *Mirror* is a conversation between the personified characters of "love" and "reason" concerning a "soul." Two issues in particular troubled the authorities. First, the *Mirror* argues that the annihilated soul must let go of the virtues.⁷⁴ Although the book does claim this, Porete also explains, "But the Virtues have not taken leave of her [i.e., the soul], for they are always with her, but this is from perfect obedience to them."⁷⁵ Eleanor L. McLaughlin amplifies Porete's explanation:

The soul who has obeyed the virtues in the lower stages of the spiritual life has passed beyond concern with such matters. It is God, however, not the soul, who carries out the good works and ministers to the neighbor's need. The free soul does not disturb her rest in God with worry about such matters, and yet this soul is not without the virtues.⁷⁶

Porete, then, does not reject virtues; rather, McLaughlin shows that in the spiritually advanced soul, virtuous activity has its source in God, not the soul's effort.⁷⁷

Second, the annihilated soul has concern only for God—not for divine consolations or gifts, which only prevent the soul from giving God all its attention.⁷⁸ While the *Mirror* espouses a radical notion of deification and disregards the Church's mediation, it clearly explains that it is grace—not nature—that is what enables one to reach union. Also, the book contains no references to post-deification antinomianism or sexual libertinism that others,

⁷⁴ McLaughlin, "The Heresy of the Free Spirit," 38.

⁷⁵ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), Chapter 21, 103.

⁷⁶ McLaughlin, "The Heresy of the Free Spirit," 42.

⁷⁷ Porete's position, as explained by McLaughlin, is reminiscent of St. Paul's words, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Also, even though Augustine stated boldly, "love and do what you will," no one challenged his orthodoxy.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

especially church authorities, associated with the Free Spirits.⁷⁹ And yet, many of the same selections extracted out of context from the *Mirror* appeared either directly or indirectly in *Ad nostrum*, decreed approximately two years after she was burned at the stake on June 1, 1310.⁸⁰

Despite the lack of direct evidence in the *Mirror* of the full range of Free-Spirit characteristics, statements such as, "I never knew till free of you [i.e., the virtues] that there could be such liberty. Your bondage have I left, and now I am at peace, and peaceful I shall be,"⁸¹ certainly express the "liberty of spirit" *Ad nostrum* articulated. Lerner, however, argues that far from active sins resulting from antinomianism, the *Mirror* presents the opposite problem:

Rather than immorality, it is the position of passivity taken in *The Mirror* that is theologically most questionable. Because the soul is unified with God it has no independent needs or desires. It has become so free that it answers to no one and has absolutely no cares.⁸²

Hence, if Marguerite is guilty of heresy it seems clear it would be the passivity of quietism rather than the antinomianism of *Ad nostrum* and the Free Spirits.

While Marguerite Porete is the best-known author directly associated with the Free Spirit Heresy, Meister Eckhart—whose writings were condemned for other reasons—fell under some suspicion as well. Many Free Spirits were familiar with his writings and considered themselves his disciples, even despite

⁷⁹ Lerner, *Heresy*, 208; McGinn, *Harvest*, 508, note 58.

⁸⁰ Ellen Babinsky, introduction to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, by Marguerite Porete, trans. Ellen Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 5.

⁸¹ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., 16.

⁸² Lerner, *Heresy*, 204.

the fact that Eckhart condemns both antinomianism and certain understandings of autotheism.⁸³

Though he was not suspected by the Inquisition, Ruusbroec, whose teachings we will examine throughout Chapter III, was also linked with Free Spirits even though his expressed "hatred of heresy was probably the most intense of all Fourteenth Century mystics."⁸⁴ Ruusbroec directed much of his energy against teachings of Bloemardinne of Brussels. In his biography of Ruusbroec, Henry de Pomerio (1382–1454) includes a story about Bloemardinne in which he states "through my personal experience that [her] writings, though excessively baleful, have such an aspect of truth that no one can perceive in them any seed of heresy save with the grace and assistance of Him who teaches all truth."⁸⁵ While Ruusbroec does not mention Bloemardinne's name in his writings, his disciple, Jan van Schoonhoven, testified that Ruusbroec's aim was to uproot the "Sect of the Free Spirit" from Brabant.⁸⁶ Despite the energy Ruusbroec put into attacking the Heresy of the Free Spirit, he himself was later attacked by Jean Gerson for espousing similar heresy.⁸⁷ In fact, Lerner writes, "That Gerson was not the only one who thought that [Ruusbroec] was a radical mystic is shown by the crowning irony that Ruysbroeck was taken in Fifteenth-Century England and Sixteenth-Century Italy to have been the author of *The*

⁸³ Ibid., 182–183.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 190, 192–193; See, for example, lines 63–137 in Jan Van Ruusbroec, *The Little Book of Clarification*, CCCM 101, ed. G. De Baere (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo-Brill, 1981), 112–120.

⁸⁵ Henry de Pomerio, *De Origine Monasterii Viridisvallis, Analecta Bollandiana*, IV (Paris-Brussels, 1885), 286; English translation in McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 494.

⁸⁶ André Combes, *Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson*, vol. 1, (Paris: J. Vrin, 1945–1959), 729, in Lerner, *Heresy*, 192.

⁸⁷ McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 454.

Mirror of Simple Souls.⁸⁸ So, people ironically confused Ruusbroec, an author who frequently attacked the "spirit of liberty" in his writings, with a book that Church authorities condemned as a Free Spirit text.

Yet, the irony appears stronger than even Lerner reports. Ruusbroec wrote a treatise entitled, *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*—close to the title of Porete's book. In his *Mirror*, Ruusbroec condemns certain ideas⁸⁹—and even supports burning at the stake for proponents of those ideas—that align with Church authorities' interpretation of Porete's theology. These similarities suggest that Ruusbroec may have been aware of Porete's condemnation and demise and possibly had read Porete's book.⁹⁰ In light of these similarities, that later readers of Ruusbroec confused him as the author of Porete's book is *truly* the crowning irony.

Gerson, Ruusbroec, and Orthodoxy

In addition to later readers mistakenly attributing a Free Spirit book to Ruusbroec, Jean Gerson believed that the central part of Ruusbroec's masterpiece contained heretical ideas condemned by *Ad nostrum*. Gerson, eighteen years old when Ruusbroec died in 1381, provides an interpretation of

⁸⁸ Lerner, *Heresy*, 195.

⁸⁹ See Ruusbroec, *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, 231 in *John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. James A. Wiseman, O.S.B. (New York: Paulist Press, 1985). Ruusbroec does not actually use the words "spirit of liberty" in this passage, but the beliefs and activities he condemns are the same as those he condemns in *The Little Book of Clarification* (lines 86–92 and 112–120) as belonging to those who practice the "spirit of liberty."

⁹⁰ I have not found scholarship that addresses this possible connection, although Paul Mommaers affirms, "we may . . . assume that Ruusbroec was well acquainted with" the *Mirror*. See Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 212. If Mommaers is correct, my observation suggests that Ruusbroec might have written *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, at least in part, as a response to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. This presents an intriguing area for further research.

Ruusbroec from one who was nearly his contemporary. Therefore, Gerson's perspective reflects the anxiety toward heresy of an intellectual climate similar to Ruusbroec's. The remainder of Chapter II will explain Gerson's interpretation. Then, Chapter IV will return to the problems Gerson raises to introduce a discussion about contemporary scholarship on Ruusbroec.

Some twenty years after Ruusbroec's death, Gerson expresses serious reservations about Ruusbroec's ideas in a letter to his friend, the Carthusian Barthélemy Clantier, in March 1402. Gerson explains that he had obtained a copy of *The Spiritual Espousals* through Clantier and, after having read it twice, he tells his friend that he had "decided that my conclusion on this matter is not to be hidden from you. Otherwise it might happen that uncertain or false statements will be embraced as certain and divine truth."⁹¹ Gerson praised the first two parts of the *Espousals* but condemned the third part, which deals with the highest union with God the soul can reach. Although long, the following quotation from Gerson's letter summarizes his concerns with the *Espousals*.

The third part of the said book asserts that the soul which perfectly contemplates God not only sees him through the splendor that is the divine essence but also is the divine splendor itself. For the author imagines, as his writings make it sound, that the soul then ceases to be in the existence it formerly had in its own genus, and it is converted or transformed and absorbed into the divine being. In that divinity it is lost in the ideal existence it had from eternity in the divine essence. Of its being John says in his gospel, 'That what was made is life in it' (Jn 1:3). And the author asserts that this is the cause of our temporal existence and is one with it according to its essential existence. He adds that the soul of the one who contemplates is lost in such an abyss of divine being that it cannot be recovered by any creature. A comparison can be adduced, which, however, he does not use: If a little drop of wine be cast into the sea, it is clear that it is soon absorbed and converted into the sea.⁹²

⁹¹ Jean Gerson, Letter 13 in *Jean Gerson: Early Works, Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. Brian Patrick McGuire, (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 202–203.

⁹² Gerson, *Early Works*, 204.

Gerson is concerned that Ruusbroec teaches the soul becomes the “divine splendor itself”—that is, the soul becomes God—and loses its created nature, just as a drop of wine that falls into the sea is absorbed in the water and is no longer wine. Gerson believed this image smacked of autotheism, despite its orthodox use by such figures as Bernard of Clairvaux and John Tauler.⁹³ The following passage from Ruusbroec’s *Espousals* is representative of the ideas Gerson rejects:

For in this darkness there shines and is born an incomprehensible light which is the Son of God, in whom one contemplates eternal life. And in this light one becomes seeing. And this divine light is granted in the simple being of the spirit, where the spirit receives the brightness—which is God Himself—above all gifts and above all creaturely activity, in the empty void of the spirit in which it has lost itself through enjoyable love and receives the brightness of God without intermediary. And without cease, it becomes the very brightness which it receives.⁹⁴

Gerson, who apparently read only the *Espousals*, is quite concerned about these ideas. In fact, he rejects the third part of this book as a violation of Church teaching:

[It] is to be wholly rejected and removed. It is either badly expressed or plainly objectionable, deviating from the healthy teaching of the holy doctors who have spoken of our beatitude. It does not agree with the clear decision expressed in the decree that sets forth how our beatitude consists in two actions, vision and enjoyment, with the light of glory. And if this process is completed in beatitude, so that God is not our vision and splendor in essence but only its object, then how much more will this experience be from any incomplete grasp of beatitude that we might be able to taste here, on the way to heaven?⁹⁵

⁹³ Robert E. Lerner, “Image of Mixed Liquids,” 407–411.

⁹⁴ Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, c58–c64, 115.

⁹⁵ Gerson, *Early Works*, 204.

The decree to which Gerson refers is *Ad nostrum*, and the "decision" is a reference to the decree's condemnation of the fourth proposition,⁹⁶ which states "man is able to achieve in the present life the same blessedness that he will possess in life eternal."⁹⁷

In identifying some of Ruusbroec's ideas with those condemned by *Ad nostrum*, Gerson suggests that *Ad nostrum* might have been written to address Ruusbroec's and others' erroneous teachings.

[Ruusbroec] justly criticized in the end of the second part, people who arrogated to themselves the sublimity of contemplation. . . . They were from the sect of Beghards, which was once condemned by the church's decree. The author [i.e., Ruusbroec] was, as I think, close to them in time. It could be that in opposition to his fantasy about beatific or contemplative vision, which by chance he then held in common with many, the decree was expressly drawn up establishing that beatitude comes from two acts.⁹⁸

Gerson's chronology is, however, inaccurate, since the Council of Vienne ended in 1312 and Ruusbroec most likely wrote the *Espousals* in 1335.⁹⁹ However, because Gerson believes that Ruusbroec wrote before the Council of Vienne, he states, "It is not necessary that he be judged to have been a stubborn heretic before this matter was decided, if at that point or afterward he was always prepared to hear the church. Now, however, it would be different for others."¹⁰⁰

The "two acts" Gerson mentions refer to his statement (quoted above on p. 56), "our beatitude consists in two actions, vision and enjoyment, with the light of glory."

⁹⁶ McGuire, note 179, in Gerson, *Early Works*, 425.

⁹⁷ See Appendix I.

⁹⁸ Gerson, *Early Works*, 208.

⁹⁹ Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Gerson, *Early Works*, 208.

Gerson spends much of the letter criticizing Ruusbroec for attempting a task that properly belongs to professional theologians. Gerson summarizes this criticism:

In a word, that material of the third part deals not with those matters that are known and written down through affectivity and experience but through the inspired intellect in holy persons. But the knowledge of such things and their discernment are especially to be sought among trained theologians and not among devout persons alone.¹⁰¹

Ruusbroec, a priest, received some level of education but was not university-trained. Gerson's statement reflects earlier tensions in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries between Church authorities, concerned with orthodoxy, and lesser-educated laity, who preached or wrote about theological matters. In elaborating his statement about trained theologians, Gerson describes two types of contemplation: The first is the mystical union with God Ruusbroec describes, which any unlearned person can attain, and the second type is what theologians are trained to do: "The investigation of divine truths by which saving faith, as Augustine says, is conceived, nourished, defended, and strengthened."¹⁰² For Gerson, reflection on and the evaluation of the highest states of contemplation should be reserved for the trained theologian.

Jan van Schoonhoven, a member of Ruusbroec's community, read Gerson's letter and wrote an extensive reply, defending Ruusbroec.¹⁰³ Gerson read this defense and "felt obliged to take up the cudgels again in a second

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 209.

¹⁰³ This apologia has not been translated from its original Latin. See André Combes, *Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson*, 716–771.

letter" to his friend, Clantier,¹⁰⁴ replying to eight of Schoonhoven's points. In the letter, Gerson reproduces a sermon, written by an unnamed Carthusian, that criticizes a perspective on contemplation similar to Schoonhoven's. Gerson rhetorically ask the preacher, "If you, the author of this sermon, whoever you may be, if you had seen the letter recently shown to me, what would you have said? How could you have stomached its contents?"¹⁰⁵ The rest of the letter emphasizes Gerson's perspective on contemplation and defends the preeminent role trained theologians have in writing about mystical theology.

Conclusion

The Church in the fourteenth century dealt with the consequences of the collision between characteristics of the *vita apostolica* movement and a preoccupation with heresy. The emergence of the vernacular meant that many mystics, especially women and many beguines, used these burgeoning languages to explore new ways to express their union with God. At the same time, Church authorities struggled to understand how these new and daring ways of expressing that union (e.g., autotheism) could be orthodox. In many cases, such as Marguerite Porete and the author of *Sister Catherine*, the mystics, according to Church authorities, failed the test. The beguine way of life became associated with the Free Spirit Heresy and was swept up in persecutions. Although historians have not found evidence of antinomianism as articulated in *Ad nostrum* in the lives of fourteenth-century people, many mystics who lived and wrote during that time practiced a radical autotheism condemned by *Ad nostrum*.

¹⁰⁴ Lerner, "Image of Mixed Liquids," 408.

¹⁰⁵ Gerson, Letter 26, in *Early Works*, 252–253.

In a theological environment marked by new vernacular expressions of mystical union and a preoccupation with heresy, even John Ruusbroec, later beatified, was accused of violating a proposition of *Ad nostrum*.

Moreover, this chapter shows that the controversy between Gerson, the *Espousals*, and Schoonhoven's response highlights two important points about the Late Medieval consciousness about heresy. First, Gerson, as a trained theologian and a cleric, exemplifies the disquiet Church authorities felt toward those without formal theological training who preached or wrote about theological topics. The decree *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*, in fact, castigates some beguines for this very reason. Second, Gerson's criticism of part three of the *Espousals* reflects the close similarities between Free Spirit thought and those untouched by the Inquisition, such as Ruusbroec. After discussing in the next chapter how contemporary scholars interpret Ruusbroec, we will return in the final chapter to the problems Gerson raises and establish, with the help of contemporary scholarship, the best way to understand Ruusbroec's mystical theology.

Chapter III: John Ruusbroec's Mystical Theology:

Some Recent Scholarly Interpretations

The previous two chapters have set the stage for our appreciation of John Ruusbroec's mystical theology. Chapter I gave an overall picture of the times. Chapter II examined the vibrancy and contested character of the mystical movement in the Lowlands. Tension between Church leadership and laity led to suspicion and then persecution of heresy, particularly the Heresy of the Free Spirit. Ruusbroec, as a writer, was in the thick of this ferment, attacking the "spirit of liberty" in many of his writings. Ironically, Ruusbroec's own works were at times condemned as containing Free Spirit error. Chapter II presented the Church authorities' criticisms of the Free Spirit Heresy. The current chapter will present different scholarly interpretations of Ruusbroec, especially how he distinguished his own ideas from those of the so-called "false mystics" of the Free Spirit Heresy.

Ruusbroec wrote in Middle Dutch. As Chapter II pointed out, expressing mystical teaching using this vernacular language was partly to blame for Gerson's rejection of part three of Ruusbroec's masterpiece, *The Spiritual Espousals*. Recently, scholars have published work on a new critical edition of Ruusbroec's complete opus, including a new English translation of all his works.¹

¹ Published as volumes 101–110 in the *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* (CCCM) series.

Ruusbroec expresses his mystical teaching throughout his writings, but most significant for our study are *The Spiritual Espousals* and *The Little Book of Clarification*. Scholars will also draw significant ideas about his mystical teaching from *The Sparkling Stone*, *The Seven Enclosures*, *The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, and *The Twelve Beguines*.

Although most Ruusbroecian scholarship has been published in Dutch, there are a number of contemporary commentators and interpreters of Ruusbroec's thought in English. First among them is Paul Mommaers, a professor at the University of Antwerp and the University of Louvain. He has been studying and writing about Ruusbroec for over thirty years and wrote most of the English introductions for the new critical edition and re-translation of Ruusbroec's works. Mommaers interprets Ruusbroec as a "phenomenologist" of mystical experience and shows both Ruusbroec's appreciation for and condemnation of the natural contemplation of the Free Spirits.

Next, the Jesuit scholar from India, Jan Feys, provides a similar experientialist interpretation of Ruusbroec as Mommaers. Feys offers a focused interpretation of Ruusbroec that shows how the mystic used an appeal to the experience of love to distinguish his spiritual project from that of the Free Spirits.

Louis Dupré's contribution on Ruusbroec's mysticism is also included in this chapter. An eminent philosopher of religion and expert on Lowlands spirituality, Dupré gave several lectures, that by his own admission, drew "shamelessly" upon Mommaers. However, Dupré also includes his own

interpretation of how Ruusbroec goes beyond a purely apophatic understanding of theology.

Finally, we introduce the thought of Rik Van Nieuwenhove. Currently a lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Ireland, Van Nieuwenhove has written a number of articles on Ruusbroec, as well as the book, *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity*. He views Ruusbroec as a mystical theologian situated in the Neoplatonic-influenced theological context of the late Middle Ages. He stresses the impact this intellectual climate had on how Ruusbroec dealt with the Free Spirit Heresy.

Mommaers' widely accepted interpretation of Ruusbroec provides the principal source for laying out the mystic's understanding of union with God. Not all scholars, of course, agree with Mommaers, and we will discuss these objections found primarily in Van Nieuwenhove's work. This chapter, then, is mainly one of exposition. However, the chapter also necessarily draws heavily upon Ruusbroec's own words—both to allow Ruusbroec to speak for himself and as a basis for understanding better the various scholarly interpretations of his thought. In the next and final chapter, I will offer some of my own evaluative comments on Ruusbroec, the positions of his interpreters, and whether critics, such as Gerson, rightly accuse Ruusbroec of heresy.

The Three Stages of the Spiritual Life According to Ruusbroec

Before presenting the different perspectives contemporary scholars have of Ruusbroec's theology, it is helpful to have an overview of the stages of the

spiritual life according to Ruusbroec. Ruusbroec organizes his mystical teaching in the form of the three traditional stages that writers centuries before him used: the stages of purgation, illumination, and union. Ruusbroec, however, employs different words for each stage, and expresses them in a variety of ways. For instance, in different treatises Ruusbroec describes the first stage as the active life, the life of virtue, union through intermediary, and uses the metaphor of the faithful servant; he expresses the second stage as the interior life, the yearning life, union without intermediary, and uses the metaphor of the secret friend; and he presents the third stage as the contemplative life, the living life, union without difference, and uses the metaphor of the hidden son.

The Spiritual Espousals, Ruusbroec's masterpiece, provides an organized description of these stages. He bases his teaching on a line from the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, "See, the bridegroom comes; go out to meet him" (Mt. 25:6). The *Espousals* describes seeing Christ, his coming, our going out to meet him, and the mystical meeting that results. A brief explanation of each stage will be enough to give a general idea of the broader picture of his teaching.

The active life, the first stage in the spiritual life, "Is necessary for all who want to be saved"² and involves "the light of God's grace, a will freely turned (to Him), and a conscience unstained by mortal sin."³ Ruusbroec writes that the coming of the Bridegroom occurs in three ways in this stage: the Incarnation,

² Jan van Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, trans. Helen Rolfson (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 42.

³ Ibid, 60-62.

daily visits "according to one's receptivity to them," and at one's death.⁴ Rik Van Nieuwenhove points out that, according to *The Espousals*, a person, during the active life should "imitate . . . Christ exteriorly through the perfect practice of virtues and interiorly through charity and genuine humility."⁵ Paul Mommaers emphasizes that virtuous activity is part of all three "lives," but meditation and offering oneself to God in order to love, seek, and know God are the primary emphases in the active life.⁶ The active life ends when a person reaches "the boundaries of active prayer" and receives an increased desire to yearn for God.⁷

Ruusbroec calls the second stage "the inner life." James Wiseman comments that *inner* literally translates the Middle Dutch word *innighe*, but he adds that the word also connotes "desiring" and "yearning."⁸ In the "inner" or "yearning" life, Ruusbroec explains the meaning of "see, the bridegroom comes; go out to meet him" as follows:

In these words, Christ teaches us four things. In the first, He wishes our intellect to be enlightened by supernatural clarity. That is what we observe in the word which he speaks: 'See.' In the second, He shows us what we ought to see, that is, the inward coming of our Bridegroom, the eternal Truth. That is what we understand when He says: 'The Bridegroom cometh.' In the third place, He bids to go out in inward practice according to justice, and therefore He says: 'Go out.' In the fourth point, He shows us the purpose and reason for all this activity, that is, the meeting with our Bridegroom Christ in enjoyable unity of the Godhead.⁹

⁴ Ibid., 159.

⁵ Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 184.

⁶ Paul Mommaers, introduction to *The Spiritual Espousals*, by Jan van Ruusbroec, CCCM 103, trans. H. Rolfson (Tielt: Lannoo and Turnhout: Brepols, 1988), 28.

⁷ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 184–185; Paul Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 29–30.

⁸ James Wiseman, "To Be God with God": The Autotheistic Sayings of the Mystics," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 239.

⁹ Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, trans. Helen Rolfson (1995), b12–b20.

In the second stage, the coming of the Bridegroom occurs in three ways as well. The first visit of Christ affects the lower, or sensible, faculties of the soul through "sensible fervor and devotion, a superabundance of consolation and spiritual delight, powerful attraction to God, and a state of abandonment"¹⁰; at this point, prayer is affective. During the second visit, God's grace draws a person more deeply within him or herself. Grace affects the higher faculties, and prayer becomes more "inner," and simple.¹¹ During the second visit, the memory becomes unified and illuminated, which makes "this person aware that his spirit is *one*, lifted above the multitude of sense impressions"¹²; "the *understanding* is enlightened by grace, which results in knowledge of many modes of virtues and practice and contemplation of the nature of the Godhead and the attributes of the divine Persons; . . . [and the] will is enkindled in a quiet love,"¹³ which makes the person desire to serve others selflessly.¹⁴ Ruusbroec considers the above two visits as active, but the third visit in the inner life is "'essential,' the 'still essence of the spirit.'"¹⁵ The third visit results in the "divine touch," which is felt but not understood. The touch sets off a dialectic of activity and rest expressed in *epektasis*—since God feeds the soul's voracious desire for the divine but, as a result, thirst and desire merely deepen.¹⁶

¹⁰ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 185.

¹¹ Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 186.

¹⁴ Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 31–32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32; Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 187.

The third stage, or contemplative life, involves the union without difference. Ruusbroec teaches that three things are necessary for this union to take place:

The first is that he must be well-ordered from without in all virtues and unhindered within, just as empty of all outward works as though he were not working. For if he is busy within by any work of virtue, then he is assailed by images. As long as that is going on in him, he cannot contemplate. Secondly, he must cleave to God within by devoted intention and love, just like a kindled, blazing fire that can no longer be extinguished. During the time that he feels himself (to be) in this state, he can contemplate. Thirdly, he must have lost himself in a modelessness and in a darkness in which all contemplatives wander around in enjoyment and can no longer find themselves in a creaturely mode. In the abyss of this darkness in which the loving spirit has died to itself, there begin the revelation of God and eternal life.¹⁷

As a result of this growth, God draws the soul into the divine life: what Ruusbroec calls the “enjoyment” or “rest” of the Godhead and the outgoing “activity” of the Persons. For Ruusbroec, the essence of the human soul, despite its createdness, is one with the Image of the Son of God. As Van Nieuwenhove puts it, “This union is based on the fact that God’s ground is one with and indistinct from the ground of the soul.” During the union without difference in the third, or contemplative life, the mystic realizes the ontological union with God at the depths of his or her soul that was previously unrealized.

These stages are not independent from one another. In fact, in *The Spiritual Espousals*, the activities of the three stages repeat at ever-deepening levels in *each* stage. As Dupré puts it:

In this constant dialectic between the three forms of the spiritual life—the virtuous, the interior, and the contemplative—consists ‘the common

¹⁷ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, trans. Helen Rolfsen (1995), c45–c56.

life' . . . the specific mode of being and acting that follows the rhythm of the Trinity itself. Through it the soul attains the ultimate goal of its spiritual striving, namely, the highest possible identity with its divine Image.¹⁸

But as we shall see, scholars differ on how they understand Ruusbroec's teaching about the way in which the soul goes about attaining its ultimate spiritual goal.

Paul Mommaers

Mommaers' work on Ruusbroec seems to be a response to an interpretation that either minimizes or negates the role of experience in mysticism in general and in Ruusbroec in particular. Mommaers rejects such an interpretation, suggesting that those interpreters have "concocted" a false dichotomy between speculative and affective types of mysticism: "The sooner such ideas are laid to rest, the better."¹⁹ He names Hadewijch and Ruusbroec as two example of mystics whose work contains both forms of mysticism. He contends, "The opposition [between the two types of mysticism] can only be sustained by doing grave injury to the texts themselves."²⁰ In commenting on reading mystical texts, Mommaers states,

To read a mystical text as a theological, philosophical, or psychological treatise, or alternatively as a contribution to ethical, ascetical, or devotional literature, may make it easier to understand but is more likely to betray the aim of its author. The mystical author is not primarily engaged in arguing a point of view, analyzing an experience, or edifying public morals. If it is anything, the literary genre of the mystic is 'phenomenological.' Its native idiom is narrative, not archaeological or analytic. When a mystic puts pen to paper as a mystic, it is to unveil in language what has happened in the soul.²¹

¹⁸ Dupré, *The Common Life: The Origins of Trinitarian Mysticism and Its Development by Jan van Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 36.

¹⁹ Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 18–19.

²⁰ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

Concern for correcting this false dichotomy, in fact, appears to be the backdrop for everything that Mommaers writes about mysticism. For instance, in his "Introduction" to the *Little Book of Clarification*, Mommaers presents Ruusbroec's explanation of the problem he addresses in the book:

I have further stated that no creature can become or be so holy that it loses its own condition of creature and becomes God, not even the soul of our Lord Jesus Christ: it will remain eternally creature and other than God. Nevertheless we must all be lifted up above ourselves in God and be one spirit with God in love if we would be blessed.²²

Mommaers comments that Ruusbroec "puts his finger inexorably on a sore spot" in Christianity: the inability of creatures to become God seems to contradict Jesus' prayer that "all may be one" just as Jesus and the Father are one. Therefore, Mommaers asks, "Is it possible to bridge the [ontological] gap and to maintain it at the same time?"²³ Then, Mommaers writes that for Ruusbroec this problem:

. . . is not merely a speculative question, but an existential 'all or nothing.' For what is the mystic but precisely someone who has experienced the realization of the evangelical promise of oneness? . . . if scholastic ontology should have the last word, then mysticism can be no serious matter: the mystic's unitive experience is doomed to being a dubious phenomenon—a consolation prize, possibly, for sensitive, religiously-disposed souls, but no manifestation of the real relationship between God and man.²⁴

Mommaers provides Ruusbroec's solution, "simple as it is radical," for dealing with this dilemma:

The prevailing ontology gives a correct but incomplete view of the reality of God and man. Philosophers and theologians cast light on a fundamental aspect of the

²² Ruusbroec, *Little Book of Clarification*, 31–36 in Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book of Clarification*, by Jan van Ruusbroec, CCCM 101, trans. P. Crowley and H. Rolfson (Tielt: Lannoo-Brill, 1981), 27.

²³ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

relationship between Creator and creature, but very much—the most important thing!—escapes them. [Through experience, the] . . . mystic *knows* more than they . . . that between God and man something can *happen*, that *life*, too, is possible in the given structure.²⁵

So, Mommaers believes that the scholastic ontology is “correct” but “incomplete” without a mystical experience that brings “life” to the ontological structure of the human. He further emphasizes his point: “The doctrine on being does not have to be put aside but it behooves us well to complete it. We must realize that living and meeting are no accidental reality but the consummation.”²⁶ Throughout his presentation, Mommaers will explain mystical experience as the completion of the ontological component of being human.

Mommaers’ concern that ontology has the final say about mysticism encompasses, especially, contemporary research:

Recognized scholarship remains caught between the horns of a painful dilemma. . . . Either God is transcendent, and then man is doomed to remain alone; or else God is immanent, and then finally all that is human must merely disappear into the divine ‘Ground.’ According to Ruusbroec, there is only one way out of this aporia, this being-one versus being-other, which still taxes our thinking about the relationship between God and man, and between men mutually: to take seriously the model experience which is the mystical union with God and not squeezing it immediately into a philosophical framework but *describing* it. He will complete the unsatisfactory reflection on the problem of God-and-man by a genuine *phenomenology* of the unitive experience.²⁷

Mommaers, then, portrays Ruusbroec as a phenomenologist of mystical experience. Despite Ruusbroec’s concern with describing experience, Mommaers carefully points out that Ruusbroec’s work is not simply introspection. In fact,

²⁵ Ibid., 28.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

Neither the religious emotions of the mystic, nor his exceptional 'experiences' as such interest him, but rather the ultimate and strictly ontological reality—God *in* man and man *in* God—which manifests itself in the mystical consciousness.²⁸

In defining mysticism, Mommaers writes, "What makes the mystic a mystic is simply a particular kind of awareness. . . . In other words, mysticism is primarily a matter of consciousness. Something previously unknown and unexperienced is all of a sudden right there."²⁹ Mysticism also involves communicating the experience of that consciousness to others.³⁰ Mommaers explains that mystics emphasize the senses in their writings and appeal to sensual images to help them transmit the mystical experience to readers and to protect the experience from becoming "transfigured into some kind of 'spiritual' vision or 'speculative' construct."³¹ Mommaers repeatedly emphasizes that mystics fundamentally resemble other people. However, "What is distinct about the God of the mystic is the felt presence of the divine as a datum touching human perceptive consciousness."³²

Despite reporting serious criticisms³³ of William James' book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Mommaers uses James as an authority for his claims about mysticism. Mommaers calls James "the first outstanding modern student of mysticism . . . [who] introduced the one method that gives mystics their

²⁸ Ibid., 32.

²⁹ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 11. Although the previous discussion about Mommaers draws from some of his introductions to Ruusbroec's works, Mommaers most completely explains his mystical theory in the book, *Mysticism, Buddhist and Christian*. Chapter III will draw from this book for the majority of the remaining presentation of Mommaers.

³⁰ Ibid., 19.

³¹ Ibid., 12–13.

³² Ibid., 13.

³³ Ibid., 16 (See also note 9.); 22. For instance, Mommaers notes that James' philosophical assumptions bias his study of mysticism and that he separates mystical experience from doctrine.

due. He let the original accounts speak for themselves and tried to base his conception of mysticism on the mystic's self-description."³⁴ Mommaers applies that same method to his reading of Ruusbroec.

Although Mommaers views consciousness as central to mysticism, he carefully states that mysticism is also a divine grace. "When Christian tradition calls mysticism a grace, what is meant is that it is a (natural) gift given by God to aid the (supernatural) gift of the divine presence that is all of ours by birthright."³⁵ Following from that, he emphasizes that mystics do not aspire to achieve experience as their ultimate goal. "It is always and ever derivative of something more basic." That "something" is an "essential" relationship between a person and God, "hidden within each of us by virtue of our being born human beings. . . . Mystical experience may enable one to savor that relationship, but in no sense is it a causal condition."³⁶

Four Characteristics of Mystical Awareness

As a prelude to his discussion on Ruusbroec's mysticism, Mommaers discusses the four elements of the mystical experience: "Passivity, immediacy, unity, and annihilation."³⁷ Passivity touches on the major concerns in Mommaers' presentation, and so it will receive more attention than the other three, which will appear in summary form below.

In introducing passivity, Mommaers distinguishes it from activity. He writes that rather than a type of quietism, "Mystics refer to the passive nature of their

³⁴ Ibid., 16.

³⁵ Ibid., 17.

³⁶ Ibid., 17–18.

³⁷ Ibid., 49.

experience as a way of underscoring their inability to account for its origins."³⁸ He describes how mystics conceive of activity as the actions within prayer:

"Meditation, speculation, expressions of longing, and the like. In fact, all inner movement is classified as the activity that will eventually yield, in mystical awareness, to passivity."³⁹ Mommaers also recognizes that mystics affirm the necessity of cultivating virtuous attitudes and concrete moral actions.⁴⁰ In commenting on how Ruusbroec understands the relationship between activity and passivity, Mommaers writes,

In devoting the first book of *The Spiritual Espousals* to the active life and the second to the interior life, Ruusbroec is not implying that one begins by acting and then, advancing to a higher stage of contemplation, shakes free of the bonds of activity. The advance is rather one of awakening to a different inner dynamism, not an initiation into abstraction unhindered by the things of life. Throughout his entire oeuvre . . . the insistence that mystical life requires a life of virtue echoes like a constant refrain:

'Therefore all secret friends of our Lord are [always] faithful servants when the need arises. But the faithful servants are not all secret friends, for they do not know the requisite practice.'⁴¹

In other words, activity and passivity link together throughout the mystical life.

According to Mommaers, contemplatives cannot do anything that will produce the mystical experience. It arrives unexpected. Mommaers rhetorically asks whether activity is then necessary. He replies, "On one hand, no preparation, contemplative or otherwise, is a *sine qua non* for mystical awareness. On the other, the fact is that diligent practice generally precedes the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 50–51; quotation of Ruusbroec from *The Sparkling Stone* in *Vanden Blinkenden Steen* (The Sparkling Stone), *Vanden Vier Becoringhen* (The Four Temptations), *Vanden Kerstenen Ghelove* (The Christian Faith), *Brieven* (Letters), CCCM 110, trans. A. Lefevere (Tielt: Lannoo-Brepols, 1991), 318–20.

mystical state." He then suggests that contemplatives should be "ready but without any sense of being deserving."⁴² In Ruusbroec's words:

Whenever a person . . . dedicates himself to the honor of God . . . and seeks rest in God above all things, then, in humility, with patience, and in self-surrender, with confident hope, he should always await new riches and new gifts, always unconcerned [about] whether God gives or does not give. Thus one creates a readiness and [a] disposition for receiving the inward, yearning life. When the vessel is ready, noble liquor is poured into it.⁴³

Mommaers also discusses three other components of the mystical experience: annihilation, immediacy, and unity. Annihilation refers to a passive sense of loss of self that the mystic experiences. "They are first overwhelmed by an Other and as a result lose track of themselves. They disappear from their own consciousness because they are caught up in a living reality too different to be related to the ordinary self."⁴⁴

Immediacy does not refer to chronology but rather suggests "non-mediated." Ruusbroec expresses this concept with a Dutch word that "suggests something coming 'between' that is at once a help and a hindrance." Immediate, then, means that the mystic's knowledge of God is non-mediated, or direct.⁴⁵

Union results from a yielding of the distinction between the subject and the object in mystical awareness.⁴⁶ Ruusbroec expresses this meaning in his description of the "divine touch," which overwhelms the faculties.⁴⁷

The preceding section introduced Mommaers' description of mysticism as an awareness of the felt presence of God. Mommaers believes that the solution

⁴² Ibid., 52.

⁴³ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b81–b87 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 53.

⁴⁴ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 66.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 60.

ontology provides to the central problem confronting mysticism—the “aporia” of God’s transcendence and humanity’s finitude—minimizes the central importance of experience. He presents Ruusbroec as a proto-phenomenologist whose descriptions of mystical experience resolve the aporia by “completing” ontology, all the while respecting both God’s transcendence and human’s createdness.

Anthropology

The nature of being human plays a central role in Ruusbroec’s mysticism.

Mommaers explains that Ruusbroec’s anthropology:

. . . aims at nothing less than knowledge of human *nature*. . . Ruusbroec locates himself squarely in the line of psychology that reaches from Augustine and his disciples down to the Rhineland mystics and their recovery of interest in Neoplatonism. At the same time, his achievement marks a milestone in its own right. For even as he works out of that tradition, he is reworking it into a distinctive synthesis. . . .⁴⁸

Mommaers, then, emphasizes the central role psychology plays in Ruusbroec’s mysticism. Despite mentioning Ruusbroec’s intellectual context here, Mommaers does not explain the Neoplatonic tradition or how Ruusbroec “reworks” it in his mysticism. However, he views Ruusbroec’s view of the human as merely a “framework by which he can situate his descriptions” of union.⁴⁹ More specifically, Mommaers states: Ruusbroec’s “efforts at a meticulous exposition of human nature [are] no more than a prelude to a fuller, mystical way of seeing. His whole purpose is only to set the scene against which the greater drama is to be played out.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁹ Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 28.

⁵⁰ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 100.

Mommaers presents Ruusbroec's subtle anthropology by first introducing a long quotation from *The Spiritual Espousals* that succinctly describes Ruusbroec's view of the human. Afterwards, Mommaers interprets and explains its most salient points. Since everything Mommaers writes on Ruusbroec's anthropology is based on this quotation from Ruusbroec, it appears here in full:

Now note attentively: we find a triple unity in all people naturally. . . . The first and the highest unity is in God; for all creatures hang in this unity with (their) being, life, and subsistence; and if they should be cut off in this way from God, they would fall into nothingness and be annihilated. This unity is in us essentially by nature, whether we are good or evil, and it renders us neither holy nor blessed without our effort. We possess this unity in ourselves, and in fact, above ourselves, as a principle and support of our being and [of] our life.

A second union, or unity is also in us by nature, that is, the unity of the higher faculties, where they take their natural origin as to their activity: in the unity of the spirit or of the mind. This is the same unity which is hanging in God, but in the latter instance we understand it as active, and in the former as essential. Nevertheless, the spirit is totally within each unity, according to the entirety of its substance. We possess this unity in ourselves, above sensory perception, and from it come memory and intellect and will [. . .] In this unity, we call the soul 'spirit.'

The third unity which is in us by nature is the domain of the bodily faculties in unity of . . . heart, the beginning and origin of the bodily life. The soul possesses this unity in the body and in the natural vigor of the heart; and from it flow all bodily activity and the five senses. Here the soul is therefore called 'soul,' since it . . . animates the body. . . . These three unions exist in us naturally as one life and as one kingdom. On the lowest (level), we are sensitive and animal; on the middle (level), we are rational and spiritual; on the highest (level), we are upheld essentially. And this is natural in all mankind.⁵¹

Mommaers explains these unities in reverse order, since what Ruusbroec calls the first (highest) and the second are related and primarily occupy Mommaers' presentation.

In the lowest, most exterior level, "One finds the 'unity' of bodiliness, sensibility, mental life (feelings, inclinations, moods), and imagination."⁵² The

⁵¹ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b35–b58, in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 104. Paragraph indentations are mine.

⁵² Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 104.

second unity is the spirit and includes the “higher faculties” of memory, intellect, and will.⁵³ Ruusbroec uses memory in an Augustinian sense, that is, according to Mommaers, as “‘mind,’ for memory, is the most comprehensive of the spiritual faculties and makes self-consciousness possible.”⁵⁴ These faculties are united in what Ruusbroec calls the “unity of the spirit” or the “ground.”⁵⁵

The highest unity is the most interior, and is an “essential” unity that exists in God. Mommaers explains that Ruusbroec uses the word *essence* to mean “being” or “existence” but may also use it in its Thomistic sense of *essence* or *essential*.⁵⁶ For instance, Ruusbroec wrote *The Little Book of Clarification* for some Carthusians who were confused by his explanation of union without distinction in a previous book, *The Realm of Lovers*. Mommaers writes that most likely the Carthusian Brother Gerard, who expressed the community’s concerns, had studied philosophy and had learned the Aristotelian meaning of *essentia*: “Everything which really exists is also distinct, it must be either this or that, it must remain itself, separate from the rest, from any other ‘essentia.’”⁵⁷ Therefore, the phrase “union without distinction” troubled Brother Gerard because in light of his understanding of *essential*, union without distinction could only result in a form of pantheism—two essences that become one—or in annihilation of the soul’s essence into God’s.⁵⁸ Mommaers explains further:

Brother Gerard’s difficulties, and those of so many later commentators, are semantic in nature. He reads Ruusbroec . . . as far as the crucial words ‘essence’

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 20.

⁵⁵ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 105.

⁵⁶ Ibid., note 13.

⁵⁷ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 29.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

and 'essential' are concerned, as a Latin-writing scholastic author. He does not see that this language-sensitive mystic, who does not present a philosophy but an experience, uses the terms 'essence' and 'essential' deliberately and consistently in a many-faceted way.⁵⁹

For Ruusbroec, *essence* can refer to the Aristotelian *essentia*, but "can also simply mean a manner of being; it can have an existential meaning." *Essential*, too, can refer to its Aristotelian meaning, "But when Ruusbroec appropriates this term in his own version of the mystical experience, he refers to a reality which the mystic experiences—oneness with God in an unimaginably genuine way—not to a modification in the order of the 'essentia.'"⁶⁰

These three unities, then—senses and imagination (lowest); memory, intellect and will (middle); and human's "essential" existence in God (highest)—compose human nature. Mommaers will now unpack some of the significant or confusing aspects of Ruusbroec's quotation to clarify his anthropology.

Ruusbroec claims that we possess our "essential" union with God both "in God" and "in" and "above ourselves." This paradox shows "the ontological core of the human being (the essence we possess *in ourselves*) is not self-sustaining but depends on God to hold it in existence (the essence we possess *above ourselves*)."⁶¹ In other words, the essential union is a natural union with God by virtue of people's createdness in God's image, or as Dupré states, "At the point where his creating act results in my created being."⁶² Without this unity, we would

⁵⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 106.

⁶² Dupré, *The Common Life*, 33.

not exist. This essence is, according to Mommaers, not an "immobile core" in the soul but relationality: "By nature, we *are* a ceaseless relationship with God."⁶³

Mommaers will return to the concept of the essence and its relation to the soul as created in God's image, but first we must explain the crucial connection between the highest, essential unity and the second unity of the higher faculties; these unities together make people exist and allow them to be free. Ruusbroec bases his view of both the essential and the active on the essential unity of God's life and the activity of the Trinitarian Persons in revelation, about which further discussion will appear below. In addition, the dynamics of the mystical life, summarized in the three stages of the spiritual life earlier in the chapter, occur in and through these unities; therefore, each unity corresponds to a stage.

According to the quotation above, Ruusbroec understands the highest and middle unities as two expressions of the same source: an "essential" union with God that gives a person existence and an active union that is the source of the activities of the memory, intellect, and will. For Mommaers, the essential is the source of the active; yet, he cautions against "attributing all 'activity' to the faculties and viewing 'essence' as total rest":

For Ruusbroec the essence of being human consists in the irrevocable *fact* of the human spirit. The active mode of being is absolutely of a piece with the essential mode. There is no 'deep' or 'quiet' essence of the human at one remove from the 'not so deep' and 'restless' spirit.⁶⁴

According to Mommaers, these unities in Ruusbroec's mysticism make a person unique and free, despite the ontological union with God in the soul. The

⁶³ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 106.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

essential unity in God at the highest level makes humans ontologically dependent on God for existence. However, according to Ruusbroec, the active unity "subsists in itself as in its created personal being. This is the domain of the higher faculties."⁶⁵ Ruusbroec's notion of "created" explains a person's ontological independence.⁶⁶ Mommaers explains, "The second-level unity of the psyche, insofar as it is the source of one's activity, is the proper domain of the human. It is here that men and women have their own being, it is the locus of creativity where they 'subsist in themselves.'" Exercising the memory, intellect, and will express this "creativity." Mommaers elaborates:

To be a 'person' is to have one's own 'domain' where one can be 'creative.' It is to exist independently, by nature, as a human being. God's free gift to us of grounding our human being 'essentially' is so completely gratuitous and so completely given that it leaves us free to 'be something different from God.' . . . In Ruusbroec's terms, the essential and active modes are absolutely interpenetrated with each other; in fact, they are one and the same being.⁶⁷

Mommaers stresses the distinction he made earlier that argues against interpreting Ruusbroec's use of the essence as essential, or at rest, and the faculties as active:

The Neoplatonic opposition between rest and activity that has hampered many a reader from meeting Ruusbroec on his own ground, is clearly given the lie. . . . The mystic is enabled to exist simultaneously in the essential and active modes.⁶⁸

Mommaers' opposition to a Neoplatonic perspective will clash with the interpretation of Ruusbroec by Rik Van Nieuwenhove, presented farther below.

⁶⁵ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, trans. Helen Rolfson (1995), b1443–b1444.

⁶⁶ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 109–110.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 110–111.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

Human as Image of God

Ruusbroec's anthropology presents human nature as an integrated but threefold reality: an essential unity in God that makes us exist, a unity that gives rise to memory, intellect, and will, and a unity that directs bodily faculties. The soul's identity as "image" of God is located in the essential unity. Ruusbroec uses the metaphor of a mirror to express both humanity's image and likeness to God. We will return to Ruusbroec's notion of likeness below, but consider here his comparison of a person to a mirror:

He has created each person's soul as a living mirror, on which he has impressed the image of his nature. In this way he lives imaged forth in us and we in him, for our created life is one, without intermediary, with this image and life which we have eternally in God.⁶⁹

The image of the person as mirror reaches back in history at least to the patristic age and is based on Plato's understanding of what constitutes sight. According to this understanding, "Both the eye and the object [in the mirror] emit a ray of light and the seeing is caused by, or better, consists in the meeting of those two rays."⁷⁰ Mommaers argues that we must interpret Ruusbroec's use of the *mirror* in this Platonic way.

In the first place we have to interpret the 'image . . .' which exists in the human-mirror, as a reality in the genuine, ontological sense of the word. The 'image' is not an accidental, ethereal phenomenon. It really *is* in the 'mirror.' In the second place we have to understand the seeing — and the perception — the mystic is speaking about, as a kind of contact. True seeing is not a looking at something. It is rather a meeting of two congenial 'like' realities.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Jan van Ruusbroec, *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, in John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. James A. Wiseman, O.S.B. (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 237.

⁷⁰ Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 23.

⁷¹ Ibid. Mommaers' Platonic interpretation, apparently not shared by Gerson, may shed light on the criticism Gerson leveled (explained in Chapter II) about Ruusbroec's claim in the *Espousals* that God *is* the light by which we see. I will return to this issue in the Conclusion.

Mommaers adds that Ruusbroec's description of the image of God as "impressed" in us 'passively' underscores the point" that the image is ontologically real.⁷²

What of this image? Mommaers explains that the three higher faculties of memory, intellect, and will indicate that humans reflect the Trinity. Therefore, Ruusbroec:

. . . sees in the Creator the Holy Trinity. . . . The fact that for Ruusbroec the Creator is always the triune God, implies also that the impression of the 'image' of God in the human comes about through Christ, the uncreated Image of the Father.⁷³

In fact, Ruusbroec prefers to express human nature as made "to" the image, not "in" the image. Mommaers points out that the different preposition shows the dependence of humanity on the Creator.⁷⁴ Being made to the image of Christ—who himself is the Image of God—enables humans to share in the life of the Trinity.

Mommaers believes that Ruusbroec treats the image as an expression of our essential, or natural, union with God. In addition, we also have a natural likeness. Since we are made in the image of the Son, and the Son is one with the Persons of the Trinity, we also share a natural "likeness" to God. However, we also have a supernatural likeness that "points to a contingent, living dynamic in our active . . . mode of being" that results from the right use of the higher faculties through openness to God's grace. Just as in his interpretation of *essential* and

⁷² Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 118.

⁷³ Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 25.

⁷⁴ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 118.

active in Ruusbroec, Mommaers emphasizes that image and likeness are inseparable from each other: "The two are the warp and woof of the presence of the divine in the human."⁷⁵

Commenting on the same idea in another place, Mommaers connects the inseparability of image and likeness to the situation of the "false mystics." Because our likeness to God involves not only grace but our faculties, sin is possible. Sin prevents the supernatural union of the faculties with one's essential being. Therefore, according to Mommaers, "Now we understand why the false mystic, who wants to possess his own 'being (*wesen*)' without having this supernatural 'likeness,' never finds in it either the 'mirror,' or the 'image,' or the 'like' of an Other."⁷⁶ In other words, in order to attain to a supernatural mystical union with God, that is, beyond the natural union of the essence, one must cooperate with God's grace by a moral use of the faculties.

Mystical Union

The preceding sections discussed Mommaers' explanation of Ruusbroec's teaching on the unities that compose human nature and of Ruusbroec's view that the image of God is "impressed" in the essential unity. The mystical union takes place within these three unities. This next section presents some necessary background for understanding Ruusbroec's teaching on mystical union and sets the context for a detailed analysis (below) of how mystical union occurs in each stage of the spiritual life.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 120.

⁷⁶ Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 27.

Mommaers prefaces his presentation of Ruusbroec's teaching on the experience of mystical union by showing the integration of Ruusbroec's mysticism. Regarding union, "Oneness is no undifferentiated state, but a living reality composed of various aspects. It is not one ultimate instance—a cut-off point, an isolated climax—but the lasting interplay of distinct moments."⁷⁷ In Ruusbroec's mysticism, these "aspects" or "moments" appear as expressions in sets of twos, such as "in-going" and "out-going," or threes, such as "ebb," "flow," and "repose." Describing those united to God in perfect unity, Ruusbroec writes of this three-fold moment, "With God they will ebb and flow, and (will) always be in repose, in possessing and enjoying."⁷⁸ For Ruusbroec, "It is not the case that *after* the 'ebbing and flowing' there comes a moment of repose which should have nothing more to do with all the preceding movement, but rather that the 'possessing and enjoying repose' is *always* present, *in* both ebb and flow."⁷⁹

Ruusbroec calls these moments "contraries," and they compose the mystical union. Mommaers strongly emphasizes the important role these contraries play in Ruusbroec's work. "He never leaves any doubt about their distinction, nor does he ever confuse them one with the other. No matter how deeply he enters into analyzing the composition of the elements, he never compromises this radical duality. We do well to take seriously his choice of the

⁷⁷ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 32.

⁷⁸ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 438–439 in Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 32.

⁷⁹ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 32–33.

term *contrary*.”⁸⁰ These “contraries-in-opposition” are the pattern for three traits in mystical union: activity, transition, and rest.⁸¹

Activity and rest never occur in isolation. Therefore, Mommaers presents his thoughts on activity by describing it in the broader context of the activity and rest of union. “In Ruusbroec’s view all this inner activity, from its most affective moments to its most spiritual, rests on the one fundamental event of the ‘touch.’ This touch together with the reaction it provokes, is what Ruusbroec calls union. . . .”⁸² Union, for Ruusbroec, is not a static state but a process that “starts over again and again, each time more intensely than before. Union is not unfulfilled but rather incessantly fulfilled; it is not permanently frustrated but continually renewed.”⁸³ This continual renewal makes the soul more and more like God, an eternal process.

Earlier, the chapter discussed the activities of the higher faculties. The “reaction” provoked by the touch describes the activities of these faculties involved in union. Simply put, this activity involves a seeking and a longing for God that takes mystics beyond themselves and focuses them ever more on God. However, in the midst of this activity of love, God is active, too. Ruusbroec writes that God’s love “demands” a return from the mystic:

This flowing of God demands always a flowing back; for God is a sea that ebbs and flows, pouring without ceasing into all his beloved according to the need and the merits of each, and ebbing back again with all those who have been thus endowed in heaven and earth with all that they have and all that they can.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 156.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁸⁴ Ruysbroeck, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, trans. Dom C.A. Wijnschenck, II, 40. in Dupré, *The Common Life*, 31.

Apropos of this "flowing," Dupré comments that the "spiritual life is a cycle, not a finite line."⁸⁵ Throughout this cyclical relationship, God's love proves infinitely greater than what the mystic can return, and the mystic is exhausted by the effort. This leads to what Mommaers calls a "transition," in which the mystic's "activity is strained to the limits and yet still further provoked, until at last the contemplative comes to feel 'reduced to nothing in love.'"⁸⁶ Rest results.

The out-going, in-going, and enjoyable moments express the three forms of union Ruusbroec expresses in the *Little Book* and throughout his works,⁸⁷ as Ruusbroec himself writes:

They are all rich in virtues and enlightened in contemplation and simple where they rest enjoyably, for in their turning-in, the love of God reveals itself as flowing out with all good and drawing it into unity and (as) superessential and without mode in an eternal repose. And so they are united to God, by intermediary, without intermediary, and also without difference.⁸⁸

Thus, each level of prayer—active, inner, and contemplative—and each moment of union—ebb, flow, and repose—all express, at varying degrees, a mystic's three-fold union with God.

Both the Carthusians, who read *The Realm of Love*, and Jean Gerson, who read *The Spiritual Espousals*, viewed with suspicion Ruusbroec's explanation of the highest union, without distinction. Mommaers points out that the union without distinction must be read in connection to the other two unions. "The coexistence of the various modes of union, this uninterrupted interweaving of the most sublime union with the other two, is doubtless the most original and

⁸⁵ Dupré, *The Common Life*, 31.

⁸⁶ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 163.

⁸⁷ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 32.

⁸⁸ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 334–338 in Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 33.

important element in his presentation of the unitive experience.”⁸⁹ With Ruusbroec, everything is integrated. Mommaers does not precisely explain why it is so important to keep the three together, but suggests that had Brother Gerard noticed the “remarkable complementariness of the various modes of union,” he may not have been confused by Ruusbroec’s teaching on union without distinction.⁹⁰

The Three Stages of Prayer Revisited

At the start of the chapter, we saw an introduction to the three stages as shown in *The Spiritual Espousals*. This part of Chapter III presents some specific points about each of the three stages that highlight Mommaers’ perspective on Ruusbroec’s mystical teaching.

In *Mysticism, Buddhist and Christian*, Mommaers precedes his thoughts on Ruusbroec’s teaching on the mystical life as shown in the *Espousals*, by mentioning that Ruusbroec’s “writing can be read, and even savored, without belief in, or proper theological understanding, of the reality of divine grace” or of faith.⁹¹ Mommaers does not explain his claim, although he is quick to note that this does not mean that grace and faith are not important for Ruusbroec. In fact, Mommaers admits that the omission of discussing the significance of Jesus Christ in Ruusbroec’s mysticism is a “serious gap” in his presentation.⁹²

⁸⁹ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 33.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 145.

⁹² Ibid., note 9. A likely reason for the omission is that the book is a series of chapters by Mommaers about Christian mysticism followed by chapters about the Buddhist response to Mommaers’ contribution. A chapter that gives serious treatment about the place of Jesus Christ in Ruusbroec’s mysticism may have made a corresponding response from Buddhist mysticism exceedingly difficult, since the book is not a two-way interreligious dialogue. In a more recent

However, Mommaers offers definitions of theological terms in the context of his remarks: "Grace refers to the effective intervention in one's spiritual life of divine forces that one becomes particularly aware of in contemplative prayer and in the mystical state." He defines *gifts*, as used by Ruusbroec, as:

. . . the single effective presence of God differentiates itself into a multiplicity of stimuli on the different levels of the psyche, of which the contemplative gradually becomes aware. . . . [I]nasmuch as the intervention of grace is made by a divine Other, it is called *supernatural*." [And,] "*faith* signifies one's existential and also doctrinal acceptance of God's gracious 'coming' or 'inworking,' as Ruusbroec puts it."⁹³

These definitions provide a context for how Mommaers will interpret some of the theological dimensions in Ruusbroec's writings. Note that for Mommaers, the mystic's awareness of the realities expressed by the terms help define each term's meaning.

The Active Life: Union With Intermediary

During the active life, the lower and higher faculties are active in prayer, focusing one's senses or meditating on the passion of Jesus. These intermediaries connect a person to God.⁹⁴ Mommaers defines an intermediary as "that which exists between separate beings and, in so doing, brings them into contact with each other."⁹⁵ Although it brings the two together, it also "always maintains a certain distance . . . [since] it intervenes between the two. The link is

work (Paul Mommaers, *The Riddle of Christian Mystical Experience: The Role of the Humanity of Jesus*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, no. 29 (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2003), Mommaers discusses the humanity of Christ in Ruusbroec's mysticism. Although significant for Ruusbroec's general teaching, the humanity of Christ indirectly impacts our focus here.

⁹³ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 145.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 33.

also a screen."⁹⁶ Mommaers explains that Ruusbroec distinguished natural intermediaries (e.g., nature) and supernatural intermediaries. Supernatural intermediaries can be exterior, such as the humanity of Jesus, or interior ones, such as:

. . . remarkable, interior 'movements'; [the mystic] discovers 'influences' from within, 'touches' which are clearly not necessary and cannot be produced by any natural withdrawal into self. He receives astonishing spiritual 'gifts' which are evidently different from all that he can obtain through his own speculative or religious effort.⁹⁷

Mommaers comments on the following passage from the *Little Book*, which provides "one *description* of the manner in which the mystic experiences these supernatural intermediaries" and which "give[s] the phenomenological *structure* of this aspect of oneness. . . . 'For the love of God is always flowing into us with new gifts. And those who take heed of this are filled with new virtues and holy practices and with all good things.'"⁹⁸ Mommaers notes that God's gifts "flowing into us" require a response. "Taking heed" involves such a response—also an intermediary—shown by "going out" through desiring and seeking God. The person, according to Mommaers, is changed by such activity and is renewed and begins to become like God.⁹⁹

Ruusbroec states that the union with intermediary will take place even in eternity.¹⁰⁰ Mommaers emphasizes that because the union with intermediary links together two separate beings, it must always occur, otherwise, the person who rejects this kind of union:

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁸ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 417–419 in Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 35.

⁹⁹ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 60–62 in Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 35–36.

... unavoidably falls into one form or another of regressive unity. Narcissism and return to the womb are also traps for the mystic. Ruusbroec unmasks these temptations, not on the level of psychology, but rather on that of phenomenology.¹⁰¹

In fact, Mommaers argues that the "false mystics"—the Free Spirits—whom Ruusbroec condemns in the *Little Book*, fall into this very trap. They interpret the experience of rest that they find in their own essence as the highest mystical oneness with God. Therefore, they reject intermediaries as unnecessary.¹⁰² In Ruusbroec's words, they "pretend to be one with God without the grace of God and without the practice of virtues."¹⁰³

At a certain point, the enjoyable aspects of the active life dry up and the sense of God's presence disappears. Ruusbroec writes that this is an invitation for the person to move beyond the "activities to their ultimate reason, and from signs to the truth."¹⁰⁴ The person is invited to a deeper transformation and to live solely for God.¹⁰⁵

The stage culminates in the "meeting." Mommaers writes, "Not only is this term the key to the entire *Espousals* from the first page to the last, it is the heart of the mystical experience [Ruusbroec] has described in some ten other works. Everything he has written, literally everything, hinges on this notion of meeting."¹⁰⁶ Ruusbroec uses *meeting* "when there is something happening between God and the human person which does not as such belong to their

¹⁰¹ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 36.

¹⁰² Ibid., 36–37.

¹⁰³ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 474–476 in Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 37.

¹⁰⁴ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b1603–b1604 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 146.

¹⁰⁵ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 38–39.

¹⁰⁶ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 146.

natural, necessary relationship.”¹⁰⁷ In Ruusbroec’s wording, it is “supernatural.” For instance, the “divine touch” is a meeting, and in the *Espousals*, Ruusbroec appears to use both terms to describe the same mystical event.¹⁰⁸ The meeting repeats in each stage of prayer according to deepening modes of union. As a result of the meeting, desire for God increases. Ruusbroec uses the story of Zacchaeus to tell what the mystic should do in response to this desire. The mystic should climb the tree of faith (i.e., the creed) to see Jesus and “hold fast.” Jesus will come to him and tell him that God,

. . . according to His divinity, is incommensurable and incomprehensible, and inaccessible and unfathomable, and surpassing all created light and all finite comprehension. This is the highest knowledge of God that a person may have in the active life: that he recognize, in the light of faith, that God is incomprehensible and unknowable.¹⁰⁹

Mommaers does not remark on the apophaticism of this statement except to say, “The apophatic comment, needless to say, will not stay the pen of Ruusbroec from continuing to speak. . . .”¹¹⁰

In light of the unknowability of God, Ruusbroec continues his interpretation of the Zacchaeus story and has Jesus tell the mystic to “come down quickly.” The coming down refers to “a flowing-down with longing and with love in the abyss of the Godhead, which no understanding can reach in created light. But where intellect remains outside, there longing and love go in.”¹¹¹ Intellect must remain

¹⁰⁷ Paul Mommaers, *The Riddle of Christian Mystical Experience: The Role of the Humanity of Jesus*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, no. 29 (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2003), 213.

¹⁰⁸ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b1814–b1856.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 847–851 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 148.

¹¹⁰ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 148.

¹¹¹ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, 853–855 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*,

"outside" because the divine action within the essence of the soul is deeper than what the faculties can grasp.

The Inner Life: Union Without Intermediary

Mommaers remarks that the second stage of prayer begins with the "flowing-down" that Ruusbroec articulates. The activities of the higher faculties in the active life no longer can grasp what God is doing in the soul. In fact, the sense of God's presence is overwhelming: "The only thing a person faced with such overpowering presence . . . can still do is to allow himself to be acted upon: his attempt to make God his own must be completed here with . . . a 'yielding'—with a passive moment that puts him in a condition to receive more than he can contain."¹¹² Mommaers points out that it is not a total passivity such as a "paralysis,"¹¹³ but God draws the soul deeper into its essence and now does most of the work.

The union without intermediary, then, is a union with God without the intermediary of the faculties, as in the active life. This union occurs in the essence of the soul. Ruusbroec provides two examples to illustrate this union:

If he then wishes further to penetrate this enjoyable love with his active love, there all the powers of his soul must give way, and must suffer and endure the piercing truth and goodness which is God Himself. For, in the same way that the air is bathed with the sun's light and heat, and just as the iron is penetrated by the fire so that with the fire it does fire's work—for it burns and gives light like fire. I say the same thing for the air. If the air itself could reason it would say: 'I give light and I give warmth to all the world.' Nevertheless each keeps its own nature, for the fire does not become iron nor the iron fire. But the union is without intermediary, because the iron is within the fire and the fire within the iron. And in the same way the air is in the light of the sun and the light of the sun is in the air—so God is always in like manner in the essence of the soul.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 39.

¹¹³ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 152.

¹¹⁴ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 216–227.

Ruusbroec, then, articulates an intimate union between God and the soul that is deeper than the "powers of the soul" can grasp but still respects the ontological differences between divine and human nature.

The spiritual dynamics of the inner life unify the higher faculties of memory, intellect, and will into "a single receptivity."¹¹⁵ Mommaers explains that despite their inability to "lay hold of the source of [one's] own interior activity, the faculties are still very active and, in fact, not separated from the soul's essence. Otherwise, the mystical experience would be the illusory union with God practiced by the "false mystics."¹¹⁶ Finally, Mommaers comments, "The object of this gathering of faculties . . . [is] God as effectively present in the human 'essence.' In the third stage, the faculties will gather to focus on God as God exists above the essence."¹¹⁷

The Contemplative Life: Union Without Distinction

"After (or more exactly, together with) the moment of seeking (union with intermediary) and that of meeting (union without intermediary) comes that of being taken up into the Other."¹¹⁸ The union without distinction is an experience of beatitude. According to Ruusbroec, "Through this divine feeling [the mystic must] sink away from himself into an experience of motionless beatitude."¹¹⁹ Mommaers interprets *beatitudo* as an experience of total rest, in which "man no

¹¹⁵ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 152.

¹¹⁶ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 39–40.

¹¹⁷ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 153.

¹¹⁸ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 40.

¹¹⁹ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 282–283 in Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 40.

longer has the feeling that he is himself."¹²⁰ Sinking away from oneself is an experience of unknowing or darkness. But, Ruusbroec writes, "In the abyss of this darkness . . . there begin the revelation of God and eternal life."¹²¹

Because, in Ruusbroec's teaching, the human is made to the image of the Son, the revelation that now dawns in the soul during the union without distinction is a light that is the Son of God. According to Mommaers, "Like the previous phases of the mystical experience, this highest 'life' is a consciousness of union with God. It, too, is an experience—they see and feel and find. . . ."

Dupré shows how Ruusbroec uses darkness and light to explain this union and how it takes the soul, through the Son—in whose image it is made—into the Trinitarian life:

For the realm of silence and darkness is the Father, that is, a silence that expresses itself in the eternal self-manifestation of the Word, a darkness in which the light originates. Ruusbroec invites us to follow the Father's generation of the Son and the return of the Son to the Father. Unceasingly, we move into the darkness, abandon distinctions, and then move out again in the revelation of the Word. From God's rest to God's works and back into the rest, in a never-ending ebb and flow.¹²²

Ruusbroec appreciates the distinct but united Persons in God's essence. He writes, "The Persons yield and lose themselves whirling in essential love, that is, in enjoyable unity; nevertheless, they always remain according to their personal properties in the working of the Trinity."¹²³

¹²⁰ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 40.

¹²¹ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, c55–56 in Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 34.

¹²² Dupré, *The Common Life*, 26–27.

¹²³ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 287–289 in Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 41.

The "Natural Way"

Thus far, the chapter has presented Mommaers' understanding of mysticism in general and of Ruusbroec's mysticism as an experience. It has highlighted Ruusbroec's anthropology, which envisions humans as made "to" the image of God, and his concept of mystical union occurring through three stages of prayer. We must now consider Mommaers' understanding of how Ruusbroec treats "natural contemplation," or in Ruusbroec's words, the "natural way." Ruusbroec presented his teaching with a purpose: to refute an erroneous mysticism practiced by people he labeled as "false" mystics¹²⁴—people who embraced a "spiritual liberty"¹²⁵—what Church authorities earlier had condemned in *Ad nostrum* and which came to be known as the Free Spirit Heresy.

At this point in the chapter, we will begin to revisit the issues of passivity—which led people to reject the virtues—and, especially, autotheism, introduced in Chapter II, which were significant Free Spirit traits that impacted Ruusbroec through his association with Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* and Gerson's condemnation of part three of the *Espousals*. First, however, Mommaers will explain Ruusbroec's notion of natural contemplation and then will distinguish Ruusbroec's own mysticism from those who abuse the "natural way" as an end in itself.

Although the union without distinction is truly the high point of God's grace working in the soul, the natural way, or natural contemplation, refers to Ruusbroec's description of the progress people can make in the spiritual life as a

¹²⁴ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 26.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

result of their natural (i.e., essential) union with God, unaided by grace.¹²⁶

Mommaers acknowledges the theological difficulty in Ruusbroec's assertion of spiritual progress apart from grace. This issue is especially thorny in light of Ruusbroec's contention that heretics, pagans, and Jews were all condemned. Mommaers treats Ruusbroec's attitude toward these groups as a fourteenth-century bias¹²⁷ and presents two types of grace in Ruusbroec's work.

The first kind of grace is prevenient grace, which Ruusbroec explains is "a natural compunction for sin and a natural good will"¹²⁸ that result from the soul considering its finitude and sinfulness.¹²⁹ The second type of grace—which Mommaers points out that Ruusbroec distinguishes but does not separate from prevenient grace—overtakes people when their natural longing for God, in Mommaers' words, "comes to the end of its tether." At this point, "only something supernatural" can bridge "the separating abyss" between God and the person. As a result, God "comes" to the person, and trust and "heartfelt love" fill the person. Mommaers admits that he does not have an answer to the theological question of contemplation unaided by grace in Ruusbroec. However, Ruusbroec's teachings describe mystical experience; therefore, Mommaers proposes to read Ruusbroec's thoughts on natural contemplation phenomenologically.

Those who "turn inwards" in "natural contemplation" discover an inner stillness and rest in each of the three levels of the soul. The basis for the turning inwards is an "inclination" that Ruusbroec articulates as the "spark of the soul"—

¹²⁶ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 216–218, 230–231.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 214–215, 218.

¹²⁸ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, trans. Helen Rolfsen (1995), a113.

¹²⁹ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 216.

the inclination a person has for the immanent presence of God in the soul.¹³⁰

Mommaers carefully points out that Ruusbroec does not reject the natural way outright because its method is the same as that of graced contemplation.¹³¹ In fact, Mommaers wrote a chapter entitled, "Natural Mysticism: An Appreciation," to highlight its method and the "genuine experience of God" to which it leads.¹³²

However, he shows that Ruusbroec ultimately treats the natural way as insufficient, because in Ruusbroec's own words:

And all people can find and possess this rest in themselves in mere nature. . . .
But the loving person cannot rest in this, for charity and the inward stirring of the
grace of God do not lie still. And therefore, the inner person cannot long remain
in himself in natural rest. . . .¹³³

The Abuse of the Natural Way

Mommaers will now distinguish Ruusbroec's mysticism from those who practice a heretical version of natural contemplation. Mommaers does not refer to these mystics as Free Spirit heretics or "false mystics" as others do. He names them according to the method of prayer that they abuse: natural contemplation. In faithfulness to Mommaers' narrative, this part of the chapter will refer to them similarly.

Ruusbroec distinguishes natural contemplation from the method of heretics who contemplate "without grace." The latter contemplate naturally, too, but push the method to its extreme by rejecting grace and clinging to the rest that natural contemplation brings. They turn contemplation into an exercise of non-

¹³⁰ Ibid., 107, 226.

¹³¹ Ibid., 227.

¹³² Ibid., 211–231.

¹³³ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b1981–b1986 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 228. I omitted Mommaers' inclusion of Middle Dutch text at the end of this quotation.

activity.¹³⁴ These people reject the moral virtues associated with the lower parts of the soul and are liable to sin when their contemplation ends.¹³⁵

Ruusbroec was aware of heretical writings and, according to Mommaers, had access to them, including possibly Porete's *Mirror*, the German text *Sister Catherine*, and Eckhart's controversial Sermon 52, *Beati pauperes spiritu*, which scholars suggest Ruusbroec knew well.¹³⁶ In Mommaers' opinion, Ruusbroec presented the characteristics of heresies in these texts, including the Heresy of the Free Spirit, fairly in his treatises,¹³⁷ and uses his own experience to critique the experience of those who practice the natural way by seeking a personal religious experience.¹³⁸ Mommaers explains:

Natural contemplation implies that faith and grace, the basic supernatural gifts, disappear. But for Christian tradition it is precisely these gifts that are essential to the full relationship of the human being with God.

Faith and grace as such are not contemplative gifts. They do not require felt, mystical experience. They belong to us all in the form of the common and normally functioning spiritual ability to say yes or no to the Christian message. . . . In order to reach experiential union with God . . . [the natural contemplatives] must pass by these basic elements and concentrate all attention on experience.¹³⁹

Therefore, without faith and grace, natural contemplation as an end in itself is severely limited: "In Ruusbroec's striking phrase, 'However high the eagle soars, it cannot fly above itself.'"¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 224–225.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 223–224. Ruusbroec describes these heretics in *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, in *John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. James A. Wiseman, O.S.B. (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 231 and identifies them as practitioners of 'spiritual liberty' in the *Little Book* (lines 65–137 and 112–120).

¹³⁶ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 212–213.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Ruusbroec criticizes natural contemplatives in two related ways. First, he criticizes their preoccupation with what he calls "rest." This criticism extends to their one posture for prayer: "But now consider the manner in which a person surrenders himself to this natural rest. It is a sitting-still . . . without [(any)] practice within or without. . . ." ¹⁴¹ According to Mommaers, Ruusbroec, who advocated a variety of postures for prayer, believes using a single prayer posture contributes to the idleness and rest to which the natural contemplatives cling. ¹⁴²

Second, according to Mommaers, Ruusbroec criticizes the natural contemplatives for rejecting exercising the lower faculties (the irascible faculty, the appetitive faculty, reason, and freedom of the will) that practice the moral virtues (prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude). ¹⁴³ The natural contemplatives prefer to attempt to empty their senses of "images" which, as Mommaers presents them in Ruusbroec, describe both psychological content in the imagination and spiritual attachments. ¹⁴⁴ As a result, the natural contemplatives make themselves vulnerable to sin after contemplation ends. For instance, during contemplation, Ruusbroec states, "They fly as high as nature can fly. . . . [because] The enemy cannot tempt one who is unassailed by images." However, after contemplation, Mommaers writes, "then morality will have its revenge and show up the abstract nature of the one who follows the

¹⁴¹ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b1986–b1987 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 220.

¹⁴² Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 221.

¹⁴³ Mommaers, introduction to *The Kingdom of Lovers*, by Jan van Ruusbroec, CCCM 104, trans. H. Rolfson, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 17.

¹⁴⁴ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 222.

natural way: [According to Ruusbroec,] 'But as he comes down, he is proud and cunning, intolerant and using wild words.'"¹⁴⁵

Natural contemplation affects the higher faculties as well. Mommaers describes how, as a result of the lack of sensory perception, Ruusbroec teaches that memory, intellect, and will "turn toward idleness" and rest. Mommaers comments that this means that these faculties have nothing to do and, in Ruusbroec's terminology, feel "empty" and "idle." The result of this idleness is only an "enjoyable rest."¹⁴⁶ Finally, natural contemplation affects the higher part of the soul, the essence. In Mommaers words, "It is radical state of no-working," in which the contemplative is only aware that God holds him or her in being.¹⁴⁷

Mommaers concludes that his description of natural contemplation shows Ruusbroec's "conviction that mysticism is a matter of consciousness and therefore allows for a wide variety of forms."¹⁴⁸ Mommaers repeats that the only difference between Ruusbroec's teaching on contemplation and natural contemplation is that graced contemplatives do not reject "images" in the lower faculties when they go "inward" to pray. Otherwise, "Ruusbroec sees his own contemplative path as passing along the same psychological state as his adversaries."¹⁴⁹ However, Mommaers points out significant differences between Ruusbroec and the natural contemplatives over the issue of rest and the consequences of rest.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 224.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 225–226.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 226.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 227.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 227–228.

Why are the natural contemplatives so intrigued by this rest? Mommaers explains: "This deep, 'essential' quietude, free of the bustle of the faculties and of the inanity of ordinary busyness, produces an extraordinary and liberating delight. The satisfaction it brings to mind and body seem to justify itself."¹⁵⁰ As a result of soaking in the awareness of this rest, the natural contemplatives lose interest—even disdain—anything else, including good works, the sacraments, and Christian discipleship.¹⁵¹ Of the natural contemplative, Ruusbroec declares in *The Spiritual Tabernacle*, "He despises and deems ignoble all consideration, discernment, and rational practice that hinders or assails by images his naked sight," and instead of contemplation leading them to the enjoyment of God's presence, the natural contemplatives "find their own essence: an imageless stilled idleness. And there they think they are eternally blissful."¹⁵² Of the rest that leads to idleness in one's essence, Mommaers explains:

'Idleness' . . . is a methodological term that refers to a psychological state of turning inwards. 'Rest' . . . is a phenomenological term, which points to a particular aspect of the experience of being mystically one. And *wesen* (essence) is an anthropological term referring to the object of this experience. The relationship among them can be summarized simply: one needs to reach idleness in order to experience rest and to touch upon one's essence. If Ruusbroec does not always pause to draw the necessary distinctions, it is because he sees each one as entailing the others.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 249.

¹⁵¹ Ruusbroec, *The Four Temptations* in *Vanden Blinkenden Steen* (The Sparkling Stone), *Vanden Vier Becoringhen* (The Four Temptations), *Vanden Kerstenen Ghelove* (The Christian Faith), *Brieven* (Letters), CCCM 110, trans. A. Lefevere (Tielt: Lannoo-Brepols, 1991), 161–163 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 251; Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Tabernacle* in *Werken Vol. II*, ed. D.A. Stracke, 2d ed. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1948), 50:14–19 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 266.

¹⁵² Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Tabernacle*, *Werken* II. 366:22–25 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 249.

¹⁵³ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 250. Mommaers directs readers to *The Spiritual Tabernacle* in *Werken* II.40:26–29 for examples.

Thus, Mommaers interprets these terms in a strictly experiential way to highlight the natural contemplatives' overemphasis on pursuing mystical experience.

Mommaers sees in Ruusbroec a critique of the natural contemplatives who give themselves over to rest rather than "possessing" rest:

Ruusbroec directs a noncontemplative question at his opponents: If the height of the way inwards is stillness, then just *whose* stillness is it? Is the highest experience like a grin without a cat, a woman's smile without the woman? Does not the whole process take place from start to finish for a particular person, or is there some self-fulfilling method at work that makes the individual dispensable?¹⁵⁴

In other words, the mysticism of the natural contemplatives is suspect because they attempt to lose *themselves* in the experience.

Ruusbroec focuses on the source of the natural contemplatives' problem: the intention of the mystics. Mommaers points out that Ruusbroec, "with almost obsessive regularity," writes that natural contemplatives vitiate contemplation when the turning inwards is done:

. . . independent of everything else in the psyche, including the relationship of the person with the divine Other. He therefore asks his opponents to consider what is the object of their intention (*meynen*) on the way, and in so doing applies the same standard to them as to all ordinary 'good people.' By laying the stress on personal intention (*meyninghe*) rather than on privileged experience, Ruusbroec the mystic demystifies mysticism. He puts the mystics in what he feels is their proper place by facing them with the fundamental question of whether they are living their lives with or without grace.¹⁵⁵

In other words, *why* are these people pursuing the contemplative life? Ruusbroec describes people "that rest in themselves" as "unpracticed in virtue, or people who have not died to themselves, even if they have practised [sic] great penance

¹⁵⁴ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 256.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 256–257.

for a long time, but without the right intention and . . . love of God."¹⁵⁶ Ruusbroec also describes natural contemplatives whose practice has made them idle: "Charity never fails, but nature is unjust insofar as it turns its intentions on itself in contemplation. They value contemplation more than any work of charity, which is not right. . . ."¹⁵⁷

The primary issue, then, is whether one's intention for contemplating is to seek selfish ends, such as a spiritual experience, or to seek God. In Mommaers words, "Contemplation can never touch God if one does not have one's intentions fixed on God. Like all other natural activities, it is linked to personal will. . . . Contemplation is only a means by which a person intends God; it never constitutes that relationship itself."¹⁵⁸ In other words, Ruusbroec warns against seeking the consolations of God rather than the God of consolations.

Finally, Mommaers explains that the natural contemplatives' "self-satisfied enjoyment of the bliss of rest eliminates awareness of any intermediary between the human and the divine. Union with God is immediate, unqualified, and self-justifying."¹⁵⁹ The natural contemplatives, then, mistake the experience of rest as deification. In Ruusbroec's words:

For in the highest point in which they are turned, they feel nothing save the simplicity of their essence . . . hanging in the essence of God. . . . This absolute simplicity which they possess they regard as being God because there they find

¹⁵⁶ Ruusbroec, *The Four Temptations*, 172–175 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 257.

¹⁵⁷ Ruusbroec, *The Kingdom of Lovers in Werken, Vol. I*, ed. J.B. Pouckens and L. Reypens, 2d ed. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1944), 23:18–24:8 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 257.

¹⁵⁸ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 257.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 262.

a natural repose. This is why they consider themselves as being God in the ground of their simplicity, for they lack real faith, hope, and love.¹⁶⁰

In Mommaers' words, "Once rest is only possessed in idleness, all distance necessarily disappears and one feels as if one has become God."¹⁶¹

Paul Mommaers' approach to interpreting Ruusbroec relies on what Mommaers calls a phenomenological reading of Ruusbroec's works to highlight the experience of God that is central to mysticism. Mommaers takes issue with those who wish to dismiss mysticism in favor of a completely ontological explanation of how mystics unite with God. While not rejecting ontology, Mommaers argues that awareness of the experience of union constitutes true mysticism. However, as he shows by contrasting Ruusbroec with the Free Spirits who abused natural contemplation, mystics ought to pursue God—not experience—as the end of contemplation.

Jan Feys, S.J.

Jan Feys provides a similar approach, if less nuanced, to reading Ruusbroec as Mommaers. However, Feys' study offers a more focused look at how the heretical autotheism discussed in Chapter II touched Ruusbroec. Feys' article, "Ruusbroec and His False Mystics,"¹⁶² examines the similarities and differences between the mysticisms of Ruusbroec and the "false mystics" he excoriates in *The Little Book of Clarification*. As the title suggests, Ruusbroec wrote the *Little Book* to clarify his teaching on union with God without distinction

¹⁶⁰ Ruusbroec, *The Little Book of Clarification*, 81–86 in Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 262. I omitted Mommaers' inclusion of Middle Dutch text in certain places.

¹⁶¹ Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 262.

¹⁶² Jan Feys, S.J., "Ruusbroec and His False Mystics," *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 65 (1991): 108–124.

that he first expressed in the treatise *The Kingdom of Lovers*. Ruusbroec had not intended to distribute *The Kingdom of Lovers*, but, apparently, a scribe smuggled the work to a nearby Carthusian monastery. Ruusbroec was surprised and disturbed when, sometime later, while visiting this monastery, the brothers asked him to explain some confusing aspects of the book's teaching on union without distinction. He wrote *The Little Book of Clarification* in response. Feys derives the article's title from the fact that Ruusbroec spends over one sixth of the *Little Book* criticizing the mysticism of certain "false and proud" mystics.¹⁶³ Feys asks the question,

Why should a mystical treatise, composed with the avowed purpose of clarifying the author's *own* teaching, also endeavour to refute someone else's mystical doctrine? The suspicion arises that Ruusbroec's mode of expression — for the Carthusians pinpoint the offending words — is very similar to that of others. The respective import of these identical formulations is, however, entirely different. Ruusbroec would then be unable to explain which meaning *he* intends without at the same time indicating the sharp difference in the sense covered by apparently identical locutions of other mystical writers.¹⁶⁴

Feys' article, then, examines how Ruusbroec can use language of radical union with God similar to that used by false mystics yet still express a different understanding of union—one that recognizes the ontological distinction between God and the soul even in its most intimate union. In his discussion, Feys shows how Ruusbroec's seemingly contradictory teaching about mystical union is resolved by observing that his description of radical union tells of a felt experience of God, not a theological claim about indistinct union. Feys examines numerous aspects of Ruusbroec's mysticism. However, because Ruusbroec's

¹⁶³ Ibid., 109.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

name was associated with heretical autotheism based mainly on his description of the types of union, our discussion focuses on Feys' treatment of the three stages of prayer.

Ruusbroec, according to Feys, explains three modes of union with God in the *Little Book*: "The contemplative lover of God is united with God by intermediary, and again without intermediary, and thirdly without difference or distinction."¹⁶⁵ Feys reports that Ruusbroec teaches that the intermediaries uniting God and the soul in the first mode are God's grace together with the sacraments, the three theological virtues, and a life based on God's commandments.¹⁶⁶ The false mystics, claiming their advanced spiritual state, reject these intermediaries. Of the first mode, Ruusbroec does not use language similar to the false mystics. According to Feys, "There is no room for ambivalence of expression."¹⁶⁷ He rejects their position outright.

According to Feys, the difficulties in interpreting Ruusbroec begin when the mystic describes the second mode of union as one without intermediary, that is, as a sort of mutual compenetration, as of iron and fire. In that context, however, he is careful to note: "Nevertheless each keeps its own nature, for fire does not become iron nor the iron fire."¹⁶⁸ Feys reports that Ruusbroec also teaches that the humanity of Christ, as created, "Will remain eternally creature and other than God."¹⁶⁹ Feys concludes, "Creatureliness implies otherness with

¹⁶⁵ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 29–31 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 109.

¹⁶⁶ Feys, "Ruusbroec," 110.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 110–111.

¹⁶⁸ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 223–224 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 112.

¹⁶⁹ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 34 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 112.

respect to the Creator. A mode of union transcending this alterity would annihilate the mystic."¹⁷⁰

Another quotation that Feys includes from Ruusbroec about the union without intermediary will reinforce the distinction Ruusbroec affirms between the soul and God and will introduce Ruusbroec's use of *love*, the "felt experience" (Feys' term) of which is the hermeneutic in Feys' understanding of Ruusbroec's mysticism. "The creature does not become God, for the union occurs by means of grace and love returned to God. And for this reason the creature experiences distinction and alterity between itself and God in its inward vision."¹⁷¹

Feys' comment on this quotation about the role of love in union and his discussion of Ruusbroec's emphasis on divine/human distinctions based on nature reveals his perspective on Ruusbroec's mysticism.

Ruusbroec then firmly maintains the distinction between the creator and his creature, even in mystical union. One may not deem this doctrinal assertion to be particularly noteworthy. It may even be dismissed as a mere theological framework from which the mystic has not been able to emancipate himself. The remarkable thing is that while thus upholding distinction Ruusbroec also affirms identity.¹⁷²

So, the mystical experience, expressed in love—which requires both subject and object—is therefore the basis for distinguishing between God and the soul in Ruusbroec's mysticism. Feys views Ruusbroec's "doctrinal assertions," which distinguish between God and the soul on the basis of different divine and created natures, as unnecessary intellectual trappings.

¹⁷⁰ Feys, "Ruusbroec," 112.

¹⁷¹ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 367–369 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 112.

¹⁷² Feys, "Ruusbroec," 112.

At the end of the quotation above, Feys mentions that Ruusbroec "also affirms identity." Feys cites two brief quotations from Ruusbroec that appear to contradict the distinctions that Ruusbroec has previously affirmed: "Nevertheless we must all be lifted up above ourselves in God and be one spirit with God in love if we would be blessed";¹⁷³ and a similar text, "Where the mystic is said to be 'one spirit and one love with God.'"¹⁷⁴

Commenting on Ruusbroec's use of *love*, Feys remarks that although the language of "one spirit with God" is used in Scripture, ". . . Ruusbroec does not further qualify this unity where God and the mystic constitute one spirit without distinction. Does he then himself lapse into the error he professes to expose?"¹⁷⁵ Feys thinks not; the loving union Ruusbroec expresses is not "metaphysical" but a "felt experience." Therefore, love is the key that joins the divine and human in an experience of seemingly absolute union; and, because of the relational nature of love, love also guarantees that the two remain ontologically distinct.¹⁷⁶

Feys discusses how this distinction based on love impact differences between Ruusbroec and the false mystics with regard to their understanding of essence. Recall that *essence* refers to a natural connection between God and the soul due to God's presence in creation. As part of the second mode of union, mystics "turn inward" to their essence (as opposed to the "outward," action-focused union with intermediary). Both Ruusbroec and the false mystics acknowledge the necessity of this turning-inward. Feys points out a crucial

¹⁷³ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 34–36 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 113.

¹⁷⁴ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 248 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 113.

¹⁷⁵ Feys, "Ruusbroec," 113.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

difference, however. While the false mystics remain in their essence—the experience of which they misinterpret as deification, Ruusbroec emphasizes that because of love one must not remain in the essence but go beyond it to God.¹⁷⁷ Feys includes a statement by Ruusbroec that shows what the latter means: "This simple knowledge and experience of God is possessed in essential love and is exercised and maintained through active love."¹⁷⁸ In fact, Feys notes that Ruusbroec critiques the false mystics because their return to the essence results in "neither ardor nor devotion towards God, neither without nor within."¹⁷⁹ Feys interprets: "Both the true and the false mystic revert to their own essence there to discover the immanent God. But only the former goes beyond himself to One other than himself. Alterity, or better love, spells the difference."¹⁸⁰

So far, Feys mentioned Ruusbroec's first mode of union—with the intermediary of grace and an ecclesial life. Then, he discussed aspects of the second mode of union, the union without intermediary, such as union as achieved through love. Finally, Feys discusses an aspect of Ruusbroec's third mode of union, the union without distinction. "The 'superessential' dimension is *the* characteristic mark of the third mode of union" and is reserved for true mysticism only.¹⁸¹ Feys says little about what Ruusbroec means precisely by the union without distinction, but he includes these texts from Ruusbroec that hint at its nature: "All the elevated spirits in their superessence (*overwesen*) are one

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 118.

¹⁷⁸ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 229–231 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 119.

¹⁷⁹ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 80–81, in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 118.

¹⁸⁰ Feys, "Ruusbroec," 119.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 120.

enjoyment and one beatitude with God without difference"¹⁸² and "this beatitude is essential to God alone and to all spirits it is superessential."¹⁸³

These texts suggest that divine beatitude, which draws in the spiritually advanced, characterizes the union without distinction. Just as the soul returns to its *essence* during the second mode of union, Ruusbroec teaches that in the third mode "... all the enlightened spirits are raised out of themselves . . . into an enjoyment without mode."¹⁸⁴ The *superessence* is this "higher mode" into which the mystic is raised. Therefore, according to Feys, "If the same bliss belongs to God by virtue of his essence, but only accrues to the creature over and above its essence, then surely the distinction between God and creature is safeguarded within their blissful union."¹⁸⁵ Thus, the *experience* of union is "without difference," not the ontological status of God and soul.

Despite the similarity of language between Ruusbroec and the false mystics, Feys argues that Ruusbroec maintains an ontological difference between God and the soul. For Feys, the key to deciphering this apparent contradiction is to interpret Ruusbroec's description of union as a "felt experience." In this way, Ruusbroec can express a union that seems annihilating to the soul but that still respects an ultimate difference between it and God. "The mystic has not become God even though he now feels one with Him."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 404–406 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 121.

¹⁸³ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 393–394 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 121.

¹⁸⁴ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 402–403 in Feys, "Ruusbroec," 120. I omitted Feys' addition of Dutch words in this quotation.

¹⁸⁵ Feys, "Ruusbroec," 121.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

Louis Dupré

In his book, *The Common Life: The Origins of Trinitarian Mysticism and its Development by Jan Ruusbroec*, Louis Dupré discusses Eastern and Western approaches to Trinitarian theology and to the soul as the image of God. His book has value for our discussion because he argues that Ruusbroec synthesizes the two approaches and, contrary to Eckhart and the false mystics, presents the mystical union of the soul—the image of God—as participating in both the rest of the divine immanence and the activity of the Persons.

Dupré discusses the different starting points of Greek and Latin Trinitarian theology in the context of mysticism. He views the Greek approach as dynamic: “The Greeks conceived of the ascent to God¹⁸⁷ as taking place in the Logos through the Spirit”; the Latin approach is static: It begins “with a theory of the one God and add[s] the ‘distinctions’ later. But by that time they no longer relate to the primary object of spiritual theology, man’s approach to God.”¹⁸⁸

Dupré shows similar concerns about what Latin and Greek notions of the soul as “image” mean for mysticism. He argues that the Latin approach to the soul as image limits itself to external “resemblances” to God—memory, intellect, and will.¹⁸⁹ He shows, though, that the mature Augustine did not stay with the “resemblances” but went through them to God: “For Augustine the mind’s triune quality is a divine image, not because it remembers, understands, and loves itself

¹⁸⁷ He points out that Greek theology, as in Scripture, does not use *God* as a general concept or even as a reference to the three Trinitarian Persons but to the Father.

¹⁸⁸ Dupré, *The Common Life*, 10–11.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

... but because it has the power to remember, to understand, and to love *its Origin*.”¹⁹⁰

The Greek approach, however, reveals that the soul is God’s image because of “the indwelling of God’s uncreated Image.” Accordingly, “The ascent of spiritual life consists in what Ruusbroec calls a ‘living toward the Image,’ that is, in an increasing awareness of, and growing toward, that divine Image which holds the center of my very self.”¹⁹¹ Dupré prefers the Greek perspective, which emphasizes awareness because:

... we are united to God through the full *awareness* of Christ’s *presence* in the soul. ... In his revelation Christ grants all that is needed for the sacred knowledge of God’s inhabitation and of our participation in his nature. Through mystical reflection upon revelation (*gnosis*), man becomes transformed into what he seeks: like becomes like. To know God, then, is to possess him; to be one with him in knowledge means to be united with him in reality. In the awareness of identity my entire conscious existence comes to partake of the divine unity.¹⁹²

Dupré also mentions that in order for “like to become like,” the soul in contemplation must leave behind anything that is unlike God, that is, created, to become like God. As an example of the requirement to abandon createdness in the mystical journey, Dupré introduces Eckhart’s notion of the birth of the Son in the soul and notes that Eckhart’s teaching requires one to abandon everything, even created distinctions, in the mystical return to one’s source in God’s Image.¹⁹³ Dupré critiques this perspective in light of Ruusbroec’s understanding. Dupré mentions above that the process of detaching from all that is unlike God is a part of contemplation. However, in this theological presentation, he does not

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹² Ibid., 14–15.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 23.

explain other points regarding method or how one actually negates similarity and dissimilarity, for example.

As a result of this abandonment of all that is not God, the "soul moving toward identity with God moves in fact toward a state in which no more activity or form exist,"¹⁹⁴ what Eckhart calls a darkness.¹⁹⁵ The result of negating everything creaturely, everything that we know or can affirm of God, is darkness, but is that it? Does the mystical journey culminate in silent darkness? Dupré responds: "Is a purely negative theology not itself a 'creaturely' approach to God?" Yes, and according to Dupré, the soul must abandon even that negation and receive the Word that God has spoken.¹⁹⁶

At this point, Dupré introduces Ruusbroec as the best exponent of God's inner life in the Western theological tradition. The preceding discussion of Greek and Latin theological traditions and theology of the image provides context for his focus on Ruusbroec. Dupré now explains how, according to Ruusbroec, the soul participates in the intra-Trinitarian dynamic of silent darkness and spoken Word.

For the realm of silence and darkness *is* the Father, that is, a silence that expresses itself in the eternal self-manifestation of the Word, a darkness in which the light originates. Ruusbroec invites us to follow the Father's generation of the Son and the return of the Son to the Father. Unceasingly, we move into the darkness, abandon distinctions, and then move out again in the revelation of the Word. From God's rest to God's works and back into the rest, in a never-ending ebb and flow.¹⁹⁷

Dupré's explanation highlights a dynamic movement—moving from rest to works and back again—that permeates Ruusbroec's mystical theology.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 23, 25.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 26–27.

In light of Ruusbroec's understanding that balances the soul's entrance into the Father's silent darkness with the Son's generation, Dupré criticizes Eckhart's theology because "it placed the Absolute *beyond* the Trinity, the Godhead *beyond* the Father. . . . The theology of the Image leads to what lies beyond images. Negative theology is an essential part of it. But it is not the final way station on the soul's spiritual pilgrimage."¹⁹⁸

In Dupré's estimation, Ruusbroec shows a balance that Eckhart lacks because Ruusbroec "synthesizes" the Greek and Latin theological traditions in his mysticism by appreciating equally both the revealed Trinitarian Persons and the unity of God. Unlike Eckhart, Ruusbroec does not view the height of the mystical life as entrance into the unknowing darkness of divine unity.

True, there is a moment of unity without distinction, but for Ruusbroec spiritual life constantly moves beyond this static point. Those who refuse to follow this movement beyond unity, he claims, merely want to rest in themselves. Ruusbroec persistently polemicized against this kind of unitarian mysticism. 'When a man is bare and imageless in his senses, and empty and idle in his higher powers, he enters into rest through mere nature.'¹⁹⁹

"But," as Dupré points out, "God's life knows no rest. . . . For Ruusbroec true *contemplation* itself demands that we move out of the divine rest, but that we do so with the divine Persons . . . [and] grace will urge [us] on to 'works.'"²⁰⁰

Dupré believes that in Ruusbroec the Augustine-influenced Latin theological tradition and the Greek theological tradition, though with different starting points, achieves the similar end of uniting the soul, as image of God, with

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 30–31. Quotation is from *The Spiritual Espousals* in John of Ruysbroeck, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage, The Sparkling Stone, and The Book of Supreme Truth*, trans. Dom C.A. Wijnschenck (London, 1916), II, 66.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 31.

the Trinity. This union must lead from the darkness of unknowing in an apophatic theology, such as Eckhart's, and even beyond similarities between the soul and God, to union with the Trinity.

Rik Van Nieuwenhove

Van Nieuwenhove's book on Ruusbroec's mystical theology is significant if for no other reason than it is the first major study in English on Ruusbroec's theology written in the last fifty years—the last study having been written in Dutch by Albert Ampe, S.J. European scholars have produced a continuous stream of work on Ruusbroec since Ampe's work, but none has seriously engaged Ruusbroec's theology.²⁰¹ In fact, Ampe's study, which, according to Wiseman, viewed Ruusbroec "as a philosophically and theologically astute follower of a Neoplatonic" theological tradition via Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine, is essentially ignored by more recent scholars, such as Mommaers.²⁰²

Similarly, Van Nieuwenhove's book is also "controversial," as he admits,²⁰³ because he takes nearly the opposite approach to interpreting Ruusbroec's works as most other Ruusbroecian scholars, including Mommaers, Feys, and Dupré. Just as Mommaers is careful to distinguish Ruusbroec from those who privilege philosophy and ontology to the detriment of the "life" that only one who has experienced God knows, Van Nieuwenhove argues against the very position Mommaers and other Ruusbroecian scholars take by emphasizing Ruusbroec's Neoplatonic philosophical heritage and theology.

²⁰¹ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 3–4.

²⁰² James Wiseman, review of *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity*, by Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 4 (Fall 2004): 230.

²⁰³ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 2.

Van Nieuwenhove rejects the notion that a person can have an immediate, unmediated experience of God, and he denies that Ruusbroec's mystical theology describes such an experience: "The phrase 'experiencing God' is too vague and lacks in content, if only because 'God' is part of the equation (i.e., because God cannot be objectified, speaking of 'experiencing God' is fairly problematic . . .)."²⁰⁴ Van Nieuwenhove views the predominant position in Ruusbroecian scholarship as dependent on phenomenological presuppositions as found in William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which describe "mystical states of consciousness in terms of ineffability, noetic quality (or illumination), transiency, and passivity."²⁰⁵ Van Nieuwenhove's "main worry with James's account, and the understanding of mysticism it presupposes, is that it seems to imply that God can be turned into an object of experience and can thus be 'captured' or 'appropriated.'"²⁰⁶ Van Nieuwenhove goes on to suggest that one must have some kind of context or previous knowledge about God in order to make sense of an "experience" of God; hence, the impossibility of a direct and immediate, unmediated experience of God.

Van Nieuwenhove bases his position on evidence that he finds in Ruusbroec of the Neoplatonic teaching of God's utter transcendence from creatures. Van Nieuwenhove uses an argument from the theologian and philosopher, Denys Turner, who contends that the Pseudo-Dionysian-influenced Neoplatonic heritage, with its:

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 30.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 31.

... hierarchical worldview ... (and the underlying ideas of degrees of reality and of a scale of proximity to the primary cause), on the one hand, and the Christian idea of creation out of nothing, on the other, resulted in a specific discourse in which it is not inconsistent to argue that creatures may be nearer to or farther from God ontologically, but there cannot be any degree of proximity in which God stands to creatures.²⁰⁷

In other words, the Neoplatonic tradition provides support for teaching God's transcendence; therefore, the ontological chasm between God and creature rules out the possibility an immediate experience of God.

This point has further consequences for how Van Nieuwenhove views the possibility for experiencing God directly. He quotes Paul Mommaers, who writes that Ruusbroec solves the "aporia" of God's transcendence (which leaves humanity isolated) and God's immanence (which annihilates humanity) by *describing* the unitive experience rather than "squeezing it immediately into a philosophical framework."²⁰⁸ Van Nieuwenhove terms Mommaers' explanation "anti-intellectualism" and affirms that although Ruusbroec emphasizes both God's transcendence and our finite createdness, "Insofar as we are transformed in response to God's grace and participate in God through love and knowledge (which is altogether different from 'experiencing' God in the Jamesian sense), we definitely do not remain 'alone.'"²⁰⁹ Van Nieuwenhove states that Ruusbroec balances God's transcendence and our finite createdness through a "dialectic of presence and absence." According to Ruusbroec,

We are poor in ourselves and rich in God, hungry and thirsty in ourselves, drunk and replete in God. . . . And so we live completely in God, where we possess our

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 33. See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: A Study in the Negativity of Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁰⁸ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 45. See Mommaers, introduction to in *Boecksken*, 31.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

bliss, and completely in ourselves, [sic] where we practice our love towards God. And even if we live completely in God and completely in ourselves, yet it is only one life. But it is contrary and twofold according to experience.²¹⁰

Poverty and hunger/thirst are metaphors for God's absence, whereas to be rich, drunk, and replete are metaphors for God's presence. Van Nieuwenhove does not comment on the use of *experience* in this quotation, although he provides the Middle Dutch word for it in his book.

Van Nieuwenhove argues, "Ruusbroec does not offer a phenomenology of the experience of God, [but] he describes in great detail the nature of the transformation of the human person in response to the stirrings of divine grace."²¹¹ The difference between these two interpretations of Ruusbroec is crucial. For scholars such as Mommaers, the direct experience of God—and its description—form the heart of Ruusbroec's mysticism. Van Nieuwenhove argues that such interpretations of Ruusbroec provide "grist to the mill of his opponents"²¹²—the Free Spirit heretics—whose purported direct experience of God through natural contemplation leads them to conclude that they have become God and, therefore, no longer need the sacraments and virtues.²¹³ Van Nieuwenhove believes claims to direct "experiences of God" are laden with Jamesian baggage and are "typical of a Western culture in which religion has increasingly become a privatized source of consumerist consolation and spiritual self-gratification."²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Ruusbroec, *The Sparkling Stone*, 481–489 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 45–46.

²¹¹ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 46.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 56.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 70.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Instead, Van Nieuwenhove argues "that Ruusbroec does not describe a psychological *experience* in which memory, intellect, and will have an immediate contact with God but a *state* of the deified person who relates in an entirely new manner to God and world" through intending God and God's will in all things.²¹⁵ The key difference is this: the notion of an immediate experience with God suggests passivity, but according to Van Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec's mystical teaching:

. . . is not an ideal in which contemplation and action alternate but one in which they are fully integrated: throughout our activity we need to be focused on God solely. It is unclear how we are to make sense of Ruusbroec's ideal of the common life if one understands contemplation in terms of an isolated, transient, passive mystical experience.²¹⁶

Therefore, Van Nieuwenhove prefers to interpret Ruusbroec's work as a description of a transformation that divine grace effects in the soul. This interpretation situates the relationship between God and soul within a mystical theology that simultaneously affirms God's transcendence and the soul's transforming union in God. Van Nieuwenhove claims that this "gives mystical theology an anthropological turn that seems quite new in the history of Western spirituality."²¹⁷ The effect of this transformation is a type of detachment "that indicates how the Christian relates to God and the world in a nonpossessive manner without, however, renouncing the world."²¹⁸ Van Nieuwenhove prefers *transformation* and its related term *detachment* to *experience* or *consciousness* because the former terms were more widely used historically and because they

²¹⁵ Ibid., 75.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 194.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 46.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

"open up the notion of mysticism to entail every aspect of life."²¹⁹ The difference between the two perspectives, then, is that while other scholars argue for union as experience, Van Nieuwenhove favors union as analogous participation.

Elements of Ruusbroec's Trinitarian Theology

Van Nieuwenhove bases his argument on his claim that Ruusbroec's works show that our union with God is an analogous participation in the life of the Trinity through love and knowledge. The "anthropological turn" Van Nieuwenhove notices in Ruusbroec's writings flows, he believes, from Ruusbroec's Trinitarian theology. The structure of Van Nieuwenhove's book suggests this: the chapter that deals with anthropology follows the chapter on Ruusbroec's Trinitarian theology. Van Nieuwenhove even writes that Ruusbroec views our humanity as a "Trinitarian blueprint."²²⁰ Therefore, before discussing how the mystic participates in God's life through love and knowledge, Van Nieuwenhove presents Ruusbroec's understanding of the Trinity.

Van Nieuwenhove makes several significant points about Ruusbroec's Trinitarian theology, but these four points best explain the way in which the mystic's life mirrors God's own life: the Persons in their shared, modeless unity, the knowledge shared between the Father and the Son, the procession of the Holy Spirit from the shared love of the Father and the Son, and the concept of *regiratio*, or the doctrine "that the Spirit permeates the divine Persons and is the principle of their return into the divine essence."²²¹

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

In introducing Ruusbroec's Trinitarian theology, Van Nieuwenhove presents a long quotation from *The Twelve Beguines* in which Ruusbroec expresses his Trinitarian teaching. After describing God as "a fathomless whirlpool; whoever enters it loses himself in it," Ruusbroec also describes God's essence as both "idle" and "fruitful and potentiality of the Persons." Then, he emphasizes both the "oneness" of God's essence and the "threeness" of the Persons. Finally, he describes the Persons and their relationships:

The Father is an eternal beginning 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 Godhead.²²²

Throughout his book, Van Nieuwenhove makes an effort to point out Ruusbroec's indebtedness to theologians from earlier traditions, especially those who draw upon Neoplatonism. By doing so, Van Nieuwenhove intends to strengthen his position that Ruusbroec presents a mystical theology that expresses our transformation through grace, rather than one that claims an unmediated experience of God. In discussing the above quotation, Van Nieuwenhove mentions that Ruusbroec's description of the Father as the "fruitful" origin of the divinity comes from Bonaventure, who fused together elements of

²²² Ruusbroec, *The Twelve Beguines*, (Van Nieuwenhove's translation) in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 82-83.

Augustine—developed by Richard of St. Victor—with elements from Pseudo-Dionysius. He also states:

The Neoplatonic theme of *bonum sui diffusivum* [goodness is diffusive of itself] is used to explain the first procession, the generation of the Son. There can be little doubt that Ruusbroec was familiar with this line of theological thinking, and Ruusbroec's own ideas can be fully grasped only in relation to some of the main aspects of Bonaventure's doctrine.²²³

Thus, Ruusbroec describes the essence of God as both "idle" and "fruitful." Van Nieuwenhove observes that Ruusbroec refers to the Persons of the Trinity at rest in their shared essential unity as "modeless."²²⁴ He explains that Ruusbroec uses "modelessness" to mean "the divine essence *and* our knowledge and love of it."²²⁵ To highlight the unknowability of the divine essence, Ruusbroec characterizes "modelessness," in Dionysian fashion,²²⁶ as "without mode, neither this nor that, neither here nor there."²²⁷ This is significant because Van Nieuwenhove, as we shall see, will argue that Ruusbroec describes the union without distinction as an immersion into the "modeless abyss" of the divine essence in which our knowledge of God becomes an unknowing.²²⁸

What does Ruusbroec believe constitutes the divine essence? According to Van Nieuwenhove, it "is only in the other Person, and only *there* can Father, Son, and Spirit be one, as Mommaers correctly observed."²²⁹ In fact, the love between the Father and the Son "reveals itself as bottomless abundance" of the

²²³ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 84–85.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 162–163.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

²²⁶ See note 17, Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 210.

²²⁷ Ruusbroec, *The Twelve Beguines*, CCCM 107, 107A, trans. H. Rolfson (Tiel: Lannoo-Brepols: 2000), 1, 516–517 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 85.

²²⁸ See Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 384–394 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 85.

²²⁹ Van Nieuwenhove directs readers to Mommaers, introduction to the *Little Book*, 41–

divine essence. "According to Ruusbroec, then, the essence is nothing other than the inexhaustible transcendence of the other Person; beatitude is nothing other than a rest that reveals itself in activity."²³⁰

Although the "bottomless abundance" of the divine essence is unknowable, Ruusbroec himself also emphasizes that the distinctions between the Persons always remain:

And there you must accept that the Persons yield and lose themselves whirling in essential love, that is, in enjoyable unity; nevertheless, they always remain according to their personal properties in the working of the Trinity. And thus you may understand that the divine nature is eternally *active* according to the mode of persons . . . , and eternally *at rest* and without mode according to the simplicity of its essence/being. . . .²³¹

This text shows that Ruusbroec views his mystical theology as having two opposing moments or ideas that occur simultaneously. Van Nieuwenhove credits this to the Neoplatonic tradition as expressed by Pseudo-Dionysius, who uses a similar idea of activity and rest in the *Divine Names*.²³²

The Spirit and *Regiratio*

As further evidence of his argument that we should read Ruusbroec as part of the Neoplatonic-influenced theological tradition and not as a phenomenologist of experience, Van Nieuwenhove points out that Ruusbroec borrowed a model from Richard of St. Victor (through Bonaventure) to explain that the Holy Spirit emanates from the fruitful will of Father and Son.²³³ The Spirit is the principle of "return," or *regiratio*, of the Persons into their shared unity.

²³⁰ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 96.

²³¹ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 287–292 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 90. (Van Nieuwenhove's emphasis). Translation slightly modified by Van Nieuwenhove. I omitted Van Nieuwenhove's inclusion of Middle Dutch text in certain places.

²³² Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 90.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 91–92.

Before discussing aspects of Van Nieuwenhove's interpretation of Ruusbroec's pneumatology, it may help to review briefly Ruusbroec's Trinitarian theology. Van Nieuwenhove provides this concise summary:

The intra-trinitarian life, as outlined in the works of Ruusbroec, can best be characterized as a circular movement, in which the Father, out of his fruitful nature, gives birth to his Son, and from their mutual contemplation the Spirit flows as their bond of love; and in which also the divine Persons flow back into their shared being/essence through the Spirit.²³⁴

Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Eckhart all applied the concept of "return," a Neoplatonic theme, to their theologies.²³⁵ In his explanation of Albert and Aquinas's use of the term, Van Nieuwenhove writes that they used it to show that the created world—which comes from God—finds its perfection in returning to its source.²³⁶ Eckhart, too, used the concept, but for him the Word is the principle of return.²³⁷ Ruusbroec used the concept of *regiratio* as well, although with his own originality. In Ruusbroec's words,

There, the Father with the Son and all beloved are enfolded and embraced in the bond of love, that is to say, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. It is this same unity which is fruitful according to the bursting-out of Persons and in the return, an eternal bond of love which can nevermore be untied.²³⁸

In the above quotation, Ruusbroec refers to the Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son, a theme developed by Richard of St. Victor.²³⁹ The word Ruusbroec uses for this bond of love is *Minne*, which Van Nieuwenhove describes as uniting the Father and the Son and all good

²³⁴ Ibid., 91.

²³⁵ Ibid., 78.

²³⁶ Ibid., 78, 80.

²³⁷ Ibid., 82.

²³⁸ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 328–332 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 50.

²³⁹ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 93–94.

people.²⁴⁰ For instance, Ruusbroec writes, "There, the Father and the Son and all the beloved are enfolded and embraced in the bond of love, that is to say, in the unity of the Holy Spirit."²⁴¹ According to Ruusbroec, "The Father and the Son spirate one Spirit, which is the will, or love, of them both. And this Spirit neither gives birth nor is born, but, flowing out from both, he [sic] must be eternally spirated."²⁴² Ruusbroec also calls the Spirit "a love out-flowing, which has fulfilled heaven and earth with all that is good."²⁴³ Van Nieuwenhove comments that Ruusbroec believes the Spirit and the seven gifts of the Spirit are very involved in the world and with salvation.

Van Nieuwenhove explains the principle that underlies Ruusbroec's teaching on *regiratio*: "For Ruusbroec, 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*." The Spirit, then, according to Van Nieuwenhove, is not a "passive" love issuing forth from the Father and the Son but is active in their return to unity.²⁴⁴

Van Nieuwenhove points out that Ruusbroec's concept of love shown through "give" and "take" applies to humans as well as to the Persons of the Trinity and implies a "demand." In Ruusbroec's words, "God's grace is not being purposelessly or idly given. If we observe it, it will flow and give us all we need,

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 94.

²⁴¹ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 328–330.

²⁴² Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b926–b929 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 93.

²⁴³ Ruusbroec, *The Christian Faith* in CCCM 110, trans. A. Lefevere (Tielt: Lannoo-Brepols, 1991), 77–78 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 93.

²⁴⁴ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 95.

but it demands in return everything we can achieve."²⁴⁵ Ruusbroec explains that grace and the good works we perform unite us to God: "His grace in us and our love for him is a practice which we perform together."²⁴⁶

According to Van Nieuwenhove, "This bestowing [of grace] 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 the out-going ('generosity') movement of the divine life."²⁴⁷ Van Nieuwenhove describes love as "give" and "take" as "Ruusbroec's central intuition, which he elaborates in almost each area of his theology."²⁴⁸ For instance, in his Eucharistic theology Ruusbroec offers a striking description of the meaning of receiving the Eucharist as "eating and being eaten":²⁴⁹ "Although he gives us all that he has and all that he is, he also takes from us all that we have and all that we are and demands of us more than we can accomplish: he consumes us right to the depth of our being for he is a voracious glutton."²⁵⁰

Ruusbroec also shows this intuition in a passage suggestive of the common life, the simultaneous living out of contemplation and virtuous activity. He compares God to the sea to show that humanity is caught up in the divine life through the demands inherent in giving and taking:

²⁴⁵ Ruusbroec, *The Seven Rungs*, III, 259 in *Werken, Vol. III*, ed. L. Reypens and M. Schurmans, 2d ed. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1947) in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 136.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 136.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁴⁹ Ruusbroec, *The Kingdom of Lovers*, I, 52 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 139.

²⁵⁰ Ruusbroec, *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, CCCM 108, trans. A. Lefevere (Tielt: Lannoo-Brepols, 2001), 683–686 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 138.

This flowing of God always demands a flowing-back for 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 [that] they have and can do.²⁵¹

The common life consists of the "grace" and "good works" that unite us to God, which Ruusbroec referred to earlier. In a more specific passage, Van Nieuwenhove comments on how Ruusbroec shows that the common life mirrors the life of the Trinity: "God's Spirit drives us [lit., 'breathes us out'] towards loving and virtuous activity, and he draws us back in to rest and enjoy. . . . Therefore, to go in, in idle enjoyment, and to go out, in virtuous activity, and to remain constantly united with God's Spirit: this is what I mean."²⁵²

The Soul as Image of God

But, how does the soul mirror the Trinity? Consider this text from *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* that captures Ruusbroec's anthropology:

In this Image God knew us in himself before we were created, and now that we have been created in time he knows us as destined for himself. This Image is essentially and personally in all people and every person has it whole and entire, undivided; and all people have of it among them all no more than one person has. And thus are we all one, united in our eternal Image, that is the Image of God and the origin of us all: of all our life and our becoming; wherein our created being and our life are hung without intermediary as in its eternal cause. Yet our createdness does not become God, nor [does] the Image of God [become] a creature; for we are created unto the Image, that is: created so as to receive the Image of God, and that Image is uncreated and eternal: the Son of God.²⁵³

Van Nieuwenhove sees in this text Ruusbroec's dependence on Neoplatonic sources in his teaching on Image. He claims that Ruusbroec fused together elements of Augustinian exemplarism, that we have an "eternal life in God as

²⁵¹ Ruysbroeck, *Espousals*, b986–b990 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 137.

²⁵² Ruusbroec, *Seven Rungs*, III, 269 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 51.

²⁵³ Ruusbroec, *Mirror*, 855–865 (slightly modified by Van Nieuwenhove) in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 57–58.

idea,” and Pseudo-Dionysian-influenced teaching on the indistinct nature of God.²⁵⁴ These teachings are the foundation for how Van Nieuwenhove interprets Ruusbroec’s teaching on our union with God as an analogous participation through love and knowledge—not an experience. These teachings shape Ruusbroec’s theology in two ways.

First, Van Nieuwenhove argues that Ruusbroec’s teaching on Image reflects a “strict unity between our life in God as idea and our created life.” Van Nieuwenhove explains that this Image “is the exemplary cause of our being” and makes us exist. “It is, as Ruusbroec puts it in a Pseudo-Dionysian vein, ‘the supra-being of our being.’”²⁵⁵ As Ruusbroec states (above): “In this Image God knew us in himself before we were created, and now that we have been created in time he knows us as destined for himself.” Consequently, we are “naturally ‘attuned’ to participating in the Trinitarian life,” and we have a natural “inclination” to transcend ourselves as we grow “to” the Image of the Son in whom we are created.²⁵⁶ Van Nieuwenhove calls this a “Trinitarian blueprint, which has to be perfected through hope, faith, and charity.”²⁵⁷ Hence, Van Nieuwenhove’s repeated emphasis on the necessity of “transformation” in Ruusbroec’s mystical theology.

Second, Ruusbroec’s teaching on union follows from his understanding of God’s transcendence. Van Nieuwenhove argues that Ruusbroec draws from the

²⁵⁴ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 58.

²⁵⁵ Ruusbroec, *Mirror*, 881–882 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 44.

²⁵⁶ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 58.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Neoplatonic intellectual heritage, in this case Pseudo-Dionysius, to articulate his mystical theology.

There is no mode, no trail, no path, no abode, no measure, no end, no beginning, or anything one might be able to put into words or demonstrate. This is the simple blessedness of us all, the divine being and our supra-being, above reason and without reason. If we are to feel this, our spirit must be transported into that same being, above our creatureliness, in the eternal point, wherein all our lines begin and end, the point wherein they lose their name and all differentiation, and are one with the point and the selfsame one that the point itself is. Nonetheless, in themselves, they always remain converging lines. So, you see, we shall always remain what we are in our created being; nonetheless, losing our own proper spirit, we shall always cross over into our supra-being.²⁵⁸

Ruusbroec compares God's modeless being (supra-being) to the "eternal point."

Van Nieuwenhove comments that this language "has an unmistakable

Neoplatonic ring to it" and notices that Ruusbroec's use of the "point" suggests

the circle metaphor from the *Liber XXIV Philosophorum*,²⁵⁹ in which God is

described as a circle "whose center is every where and whose circumference is

nowhere."²⁶⁰ Also, Van Nieuwenhove notices similarity to the Dionysian teaching

on God imaged as the point in the center of a circle and people imaged as radii

extending out from the point. The closer they are to the center, the greater their

unity; separation increases as they move away from the center.²⁶¹ This Dionysian

insight has significant influence for Ruusbroec:

Dionysius uses this metaphor to explain that in the monad no differentiation or multiplicity exists: everything created participates in and preexists in a unified way in the first Cause in which there is utter simplicity. Ruusbroec concurs with

²⁵⁸ Ruusbroec, *The Seven Enclosures*, CCCM 102, translated by P. Crowley and H. Rolfson (Tietz: Lannoo-Brill, 1981), 800–811 (translation slightly modified by Van Nieuwenhove) in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 51–52.

²⁵⁹ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 52.

²⁶⁰ English translation of the Latin phrase in Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., "Finding Grace at the Center," 50 in Abbot Thomas Keating, OCSO, M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, and Thomas E. Clarke, SJ, *Finding Grace at the Center* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1978).

²⁶¹ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 59. See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 5.6.

this view and suggests that our created being is in its essence indistinguishable from the divine being that is nevertheless ontologically removed from everything created: it is our 'supra-being.' The quoted text [from Ruusbroec, above] does not outline a mystical experience but tries to indicate the implication of the non-distinguishability of God's essence/being in relation to the being of the soul.²⁶²

These words from Van Nieuwenhove, especially the last sentence, are vital for understanding his interpretation of Ruusbroec's mystical theology. According to Van Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec draws on Dionysian concepts to express that God so utterly transcends creation that there is no meaningful way to distinguish between God and creatures.

The preceding discussion has serious implications for how Van Nieuwenhove reads Ruusbroec's teaching on God's transcendence and our union with God. In fact, Van Nieuwenhove's interpretation places discussion about the "problem" of ontological separation and union, explained by scholars earlier in the chapter, in an entirely different light. According to Van Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec teaches in the *Espousals* "that it is not meaningful to distinguish between God and soul the way one can distinguish between two *loci* or two *res*, for that would be to misunderstand the relation between God'(s Image), who transcends our spatiotemporal categories, and the human soul."²⁶³ In Ruusbroec's words:

For wherever he comes, there he is; and wherever he is [there he comes; and where he never was], he never comes, for in him there are no chance nor changeability; and everything in which he is, is in him, for he does not go outside of himself. And therefore the spirit possesses God essentially in its bare nature, and God the spirit, for it lives in God and God in it. And with respect to its higher part, it is capable of receiving without intermediary, the brightness of God and all that God can give (it).²⁶⁴

²⁶² Ibid., 59–60.

²⁶³ Ibid., 60.

²⁶⁴ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b1409–b1416 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 60.

Van Nieuwenhove points out the implications this text has for union between God and the soul:

If God is truly transcendent, he is in the soul and the soul is in God. Because God dwells in the soul and continually keeps it in existence and because God radically transcends his creation (to the extent that one can no longer distinguish between God and soul—for you can only distinguish between things that have something in common), Ruusbroec can establish an essential unity—the unity between our life as idea in God and the created soul. . . . Therefore, our life as idea in God is both the condition of possibility and the fulfillment of the contemplative life.²⁶⁵

In this way, Van Nieuwenhove situates Ruusbroec squarely in the Neoplatonic philosophical and theological tradition. Therefore, Van Nieuwenhove can argue that mysticism is not an *experience* of union that bridges the ontological chasm between God and soul; rather, along with real ontological differences between Creator and creatures, the creature's essential life is indistinguishable from the utterly transcendent God in which it exists. Therefore, Van Nieuwenhove believes that understanding union as an experience, especially of an immediate nature, misses the mark.

What, then, is the role of mystical *union*? According to Van Nieuwenhove, being made *to the Image* means that "our created being . . . [must] be perfected through faith, hope, and charity."²⁶⁶ Therefore, "The contemplative life as a participation in the Trinitarian dynamics via our uncreated life in the Image is the acme of a graceful transformation that perfects our natural disposition." Thus,

²⁶⁵ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 60–61.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

"Ruusbroec describes a transformation . . . a conversion . . . a condition . . . not an experience."²⁶⁷

Despite Van Nieuwenhove's claims, Ruusbroec provides numerous examples of what appear, at least at first glance, as descriptions of experiences. For instance, Ruusbroec compares God's "essential love" to an immense fire that burns away all things. This fire that is God's love "is a becalmed, bottomless flood of richness and joy, into which all the saints together with God are swept in a modeless enjoyment. And this enjoyment is wild and waste as wandering. . . ." because it is beyond human ability to understand.²⁶⁸ According to Van Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec writes that the contemplative life is beyond what we can express or understand.²⁶⁹ Therefore, he presents our analogous participation in God not only theologically but metaphorically, as the allusion to fire shows. Following from this, Van Nieuwenhove writes that we must always be mindful of the analogous and metaphorical nature of Ruusbroec's mystical theology "and refrain from interpreting [these metaphors] as immediate, first-order descriptions of mystical union. But what does he aim to express, if it is not an experience? I have suggested that 'transformation' is a more useful category than 'experience' to grasp Ruusbroec's main ideas."²⁷⁰

What does Van Nieuwenhove mean by "transformation"? He provides another text from Ruusbroec that compares the Holy Spirit to fire and the soul to

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 57. I omitted Van Nieuwenhove's inclusion of the Middle Dutch words Ruusbroec uses for each term.

²⁶⁸ Ruusbroec, *Seven Enclosures*, 797–799 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 164.

²⁶⁹ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 163.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 164.

oil "that lives and boils in the fire of the love of God . . . Where it is hottest, there our spirit burns, and undergoes the love of God; and (when it is) more than hot, it is burned up and undergoes the transformation . . . by God."²⁷¹ According to Van Nieuwenhove, the purpose of the metaphors is to describe the conversion of the soul, not an immediate experience of God.

What place, then, does any kind of experience—even of a mediated nature—have in Van Nieuwenhove's interpretation of Ruusbroec? Van Nieuwenhove refers to Denys Turner who writes of "experiential feedback." In commenting on this phrase's applicability to Ruusbroec's teaching on deification, the inner life, and the divine touch, Van Nieuwenhove remarks, "Ruusbroec does inaugurate a new development," but he defines Turner's concept mostly by repeating his own interpretation of Ruusbroec: rather than reading Ruusbroec's mysticism in experiential terms, he describes the transformation of the person wrought by the effects of grace, "without wanting to imply that 'union with God' itself does not defy conceptualization."²⁷² The concluding chapter of this thesis will have more to say on the notion of "experiential feedback."

Participation through Love and Knowledge

The preceding discussion explains Van Nieuwenhove's interpretation of Ruusbroec's teaching on our union with God as an analogous participation in the Trinity, expressed both theologically and metaphorically. Van Nieuwenhove's interpretation, however, specifies that this analogous participation occurs through

²⁷¹ Ruusbroec, *Twelve Beguines*, 2b 786–2b 797 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 165. I omitted Van Nieuwenhove's insertion of the Middle Dutch word for *transformation*.

²⁷² Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 189.

love and knowledge in the union without distinction. Quoting Ruusbroec, Van Nieuwenhove states, "The contemplative life consists in 'nothing other than contemplating and gazing and cleaving to God in denuded love, savoring and enjoying and melting in love—and always remaining in this.'"²⁷³ The "contemplating and gazing" refer to sharing in God's knowledge, and the "savoring and enjoying and melting" refer to sharing in God's love.

Van Nieuwenhove emphasizes that, according to Ruusbroec, this sharing or participation results from grace unifying the faculties of memory, intellect, and will. As a result, the mystic focuses on God alone and meets God in contemplation:

And the Father together with the Son embrace us in the unity of the Holy Spirit in a blessed enjoyment which shall eternally renew itself, ceaselessly, in *knowledge* and in *love*, through the eternal birth of the Son from the Father, and the flowing [sic] forth of the Holy Spirit from them both.²⁷⁴

We participate in the Father's knowledge of the Son through "the Father's self-understanding from which the Son proceeds."²⁷⁵ This participation is made possible because of our eternal life in the Image of God. According to Ruusbroec:

For we find indeed that the bosom of the Father is our own ground and our origin, in which we begin our life and being. And out of our own proper ground,—that is, out of the Father and out of all that is living in him—there shines an eternal brightness, which is the birth of the Son. . . .²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Ibid., 167.

²⁷⁴ Ruusbroec, *Seven Enclosures*, 653–657 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 167.

²⁷⁵ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 165.

²⁷⁶ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, c136–c139 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 162–163.

Van Nieuwenhove also shows how Ruusbroec explains our participation in God's love through the Spirit. Ruusbroec writes that in our "going out" in contemplation and gazing we are "transformed and transfigured into the divine brightness. This going out on the part of the contemplative person is also a loving one."²⁷⁷ This going out shares in the Spirit's activity in the Trinity and the contemplative is also caught up in the Spirit's return.²⁷⁸

Van Nieuwenhove then explains that because of our limitations as creatures, we can know and love God only in a finite way. "Our union with God occurs beyond reason in a state of 'unknowing.'"²⁷⁹ Therefore, he explains, Ruusbroec shows that our knowledge and love of God takes place in faith, hope, and love. After discussing the role of these theological virtues, Ruusbroec describes the effect of our knowledge and love in union: "For where we pass away from all things in love and die to all consideration in unknowing and darkness, we are wrought and transformed by the Word eternal, which is an Image [sic] of the Father."²⁸⁰

Focusing one's intention solely on God enables one to participate in God's life through knowledge and love. As mentioned earlier, the knowing and loving of God occurs through the effect of grace on the faculties of memory, intellect, and will. Van Nieuwenhove explains that Ruusbroec does not describe this effect of grace as an "experience in which the memory becomes empty, the

²⁷⁷ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, c171–c174 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 226, note 23.

²⁷⁸ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 165–166.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁸⁰ Ruusbroec, *Sparkling Stone*, 445–447 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 168.

understanding enlightened, and so forth." Rather, grace results in a new intention towards God, others, and the world. Ruusbroec calls this having a "single intention" for God in all that we do. Acting in this way, we increasingly resemble God. Van Nieuwenhove believes the "single intention" is crucial to Ruusbroec's mystical theology. In Ruusbroec's words:

The single intention draws the scattered faculties together in[to] the unity of the spirit and places the spirit in God. The single intention is end and beginning and enrichment of all virtues. . . . That intention is single that intends nothing but God and everything as ordered towards God. . . . It is the foundation of all spiritual life. It contains faith, hope, and love within itself. . . .²⁸¹

In his comment on this quotation, Van Nieuwenhove focuses on a connection Ruusbroec makes between intention and rest in God that further supports Van Nieuwenhove's argument about union as a transformation and not an experience. A few lines after the above-quoted text, Ruusbroec writes, "Through the ground of a single intention, we go beyond ourselves and meet God without intermediary, and rest with him [sic] in the ground of simplicity; there we possess the inheritance which is prepared for us from eternity."²⁸² Van Nieuwenhove points out Ruusbroec's association of the phrases "rest in God" and "enjoyment of God's unity" (inheritance), which he states Ruusbroec always joins. Van Nieuwenhove interprets the significance this has for Ruusbroec's mysticism: "Now we begin to see what he has in mind: we 'rest' in God or 'enjoy' him when we, whichever acts we perform (willing, knowing), intend God alone.

²⁸¹ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b1534–b1548 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 63–64.

²⁸² Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b1555–b1558 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 64.

Resting in God means 'offering God all our life and works in single intention.'²⁸³

Through single intention, rest and activity occur simultaneously.

Interpreting "rest" as exercising single intention in all we do has a threefold significance for Van Nieuwenhove. First, it shows that "rest" and "enjoyment" do not describe experiences of idleness in which the faculties are inactive.²⁸⁴ This provides further support for his thesis that union is not an experience. Second, The effect of "going beyond ourselves," as Ruusbroec states, is selflessness. Focusing on God alone, we treat others with a non-possessive love²⁸⁵ and lose our self-centeredness.²⁸⁶ Third, Van Nieuwenhove's interpretation of rest runs counter to the practice of the Brethren of the Free Spirit.

The Free Spirit Heresy

Thus far, Van Nieuwenhove's argument situates Ruusbroec in a Neoplatonic philosophical and theological context in which his Trinitarian theology and teaching on the soul as image of God combine to articulate the soul's union with God through participative love and knowledge. Intending God alone in all things enables one to "rest" in God in the midst of virtuous activity. This discussion of Van Nieuwenhove's prepares us to examine how he views Ruusbroec's criticism of the Free Spirits, heretics who approached contemplation as an experiential end in itself.

Ruusbroec, according to Van Nieuwenhove, makes two basic criticisms of the Free Spirits. First, they turn mysticism into a "technique" that results in an

²⁸³ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 64.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 171–172.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 65–66.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

"empty," quietistic, pseudo-"rest." Although he points out Ruusbroec's teaching that people undergo "the working of God's grace passively," Van Nieuwenhove emphasizes that Ruusbroec "rejects a passivity that accompanies a supposed immediate experience of God. Grace is a gift that one receives; the natural mystical experience is induced—it is a technique."²⁸⁷ As a result of the experience the Free Spirits feel, Ruusbroec charges that they believe they have no need of "the sacraments and all virtues and all practices of the Holy Church."²⁸⁸ For instance, employing a metaphor no doubt familiar to his Low Country readers, Ruusbroec writes:

And therefore, 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. . . .²⁸⁹

Ruusbroec's charge echoes the ideas behind propositions VI and VIII of *Ad nostrum's* condemnation of the Free Spirits for rejecting virtuous acts and for refusing to stand in honor of the elevated Eucharist because that show of piety would distract their contemplation.²⁹⁰

Second, Van Nieuwenhove explains that Ruusbroec criticizes the Free Spirits for their alleged autotheism. They mistake an experience in which they "feel nothing save the simplicity of their essence, hanging in the essence of

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 73.

²⁸⁸ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 89–90 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 70.

²⁸⁹ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b2083–b2088 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 70.

²⁹⁰ See Appendix I.

God. . . . This is why they consider themselves as being God in the ground of their simplicity, for they lack real, faith, hope and love."²⁹¹

Van Nieuwenhove focuses on the relation between the Free Spirits' two erroneous claims—"The heretics draw ontological conclusions from their experience: quietism leads to autotheism"²⁹²—to show that Ruusbroec's work, despite using similar language as the Free Spirits, does not describe union as an experience. Relying on the research of Denys Turner, Van Nieuwenhove suggests, if "there were spiritual movements in the fourteenth century and later that 'cashed in' the apophatic language for religious experience, then it will be very hard to distinguish their approach from the more traditional apophatic writings."²⁹³ In other words, if Turner is correct, Van Nieuwenhove claims that rather than appreciating Ruusbroec's theology and its apophatic assumptions about God's transcendence, groups such as the Free Spirits interpreted his writings merely as descriptive of experience. For instance, Van Nieuwenhove points out that Ruusbroec exhorts people to surrender their own will. However, the Free Spirits "interpret this literally, as an experiential datum ('to be in a state without a will')." Van Nieuwenhove clarifies Ruusbroec's meaning: "He wants us to give up our *own* will/self-centeredness and lead a life that is radically theocentric."²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Ruusbroec, *Little Book*, 82–86 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 70.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*,

Finally, Van Nieuwenhove points out that Ruusbroec criticizes the Free Spirits because their contemplation falls short of true spirituality, the common life. God, according to Ruusbroec,

. . . demands of us enjoyment and activity, and not that the one should be hindered by the other, but rather always fortified. Therefore, the inner person possesses his life in those [sic] two modes, that is, in resting and activity. And in each, he is whole and undivided, for he is wholly in God where he rests in enjoyment, and he is wholly in himself where he loves with works. And he is admonished and bidden by God at every moment to renew both rest and activity.²⁹⁵

Thus, Ruusbroec emphasizes that contemplation and virtuous activity do not occur alternatively but simultaneously. Despite this, Van Nieuwenhove detects a similarity between the Free Spirit's approach to contemplation and contemporary interpretations of Ruusbroec's writings: "An irony of recent scholarship is that Ruusbroec himself was quite aware of a growing 'modern' or 'experiential' misunderstanding and was at pains to distinguish his own project from those who understood the goal of Christian life in psychological or experiential terms. . . ." ²⁹⁶

Not all scholars see it the way Van Nieuwenhove does. For instance, Van Nieuwenhove reports that the Ruusbroecian scholar, Joseph Alaerts, denies Neoplatonic or Dionysian influences on Ruusbroec. Alaerts claims,

What we are dealing with is a unitive-affective vocabulary, describing aspects of a union of loving experience. Moreover, our research seems to indicate that neither the conceptual framework of Scholasticism nor the Dionysian framework (more philosophical than mystical) can yield an adequate interpretation of the mystical ascent of the soul, as Ruusbroec describes it . . . He presents us with a brilliant phenomenology of encounter and mystical union, which utterly surpasses the philosophical and theological framework that is, nevertheless, present. The

²⁹⁵ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b1933–b1939 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 72.

²⁹⁶ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 3.

true [sic] Ruusbroec focuses on life, and on the spiritually enlightened person who experiences in a direct and passive manner the presence of God.²⁹⁷

Van Nieuwenhove comments that Alaerts' separation of the philosophical from the mystical is a decidedly modern, and therefore inaccurate, understanding at variance from how patristic and medieval writers understood their own mystical theology.²⁹⁸

Van Nieuwenhove identifies Mommaers as another scholar who thinks like Alaerts. He accuses Mommaers' identification of four characteristics of mystical experience as being in danger of "appropriating God's mystery" and because of his approach, Mommaers "takes for granted that it is meaningful to compare [descriptions of union with God as an experience] with 'similar' descriptions from other 'mystical' traditions."²⁹⁹ Van Nieuwenhove is referring to Mommaers and Van Bragt's book, *Mysticism Buddhism and Christian*, about which he states, "The authors seem blissfully unaware of the serious hermeneutical difficulties of applying a psychological theory of the twentieth century to medieval texts."³⁰⁰

Van Nieuwenhove also challenges Feys' appeal to experience to "resolve" apparent "contradictions" when Ruusbroec writes about the ontological gap between God and the soul on the one hand, and the radical union between God and the soul on the other. Van Nieuwenhove responds to two claims Feys makes about Ruusbroec's theological project.³⁰¹

²⁹⁷ Joseph Alaerts, "La terminologie 'essentielle' dans *Die Gheestelike Brulocht et Dat Rijkje der Ghelieven*," *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 49 (1975): 360–361; 350–351 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 52. Use of "[sic]" is Van Nieuwenhove's.

²⁹⁸ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 52.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 230, note 122.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

When Feys claims that Ruusbroec writes about experience while the false mystics are concerned with ontology, Van Nieuwenhove denies this on the basis of Ruusbroec's theology of the image and use of apophatic language. Van Nieuwenhove argues that Ruusbroec neither denies ontological distinction with God nor treats union as an immediate, unmediated experience of the divine.

What [Ruusbroec] describes is how the soul becomes transformed or deified in an analogous fashion. Ruusbroec is careful to indicate that in the contemplative life we do not *feel* or *perceive* any distinction between ourselves and the Son—but that does not mean that there is not a distinction.³⁰²

Citing the *Espousals*, Van Nieuwenhove bases his response to the other Ruusbroecian scholars mentioned above.

In the abyss of this darkness in which the loving spirit has died to itself, there begin the revelation of God and eternal life. For in this darkness there shines and is born an incomprehensible light which is the Son of God, in whom one contemplates eternal life. . . . [And,] he finds and feels himself to be that very light by which he sees[,] and nothing else.³⁰³

Of the numerous points Van Nieuwenhove makes about this text, four require our attention. First, he affirms "in self-transcendence the object-subject relation seems to disappear."³⁰⁴ In other words, the soul cannot distinguish between itself and God.

Second, Van Nieuwenhove briefly discusses Louis Dupré's contention about interpreting Ruusbroec in apophatic terms: "Here Ruusbroec decisively takes his distance from any terminally negative theology. . . . For in himself God is not simply darkness or silence. His silence has brought forth the eternal Word;

³⁰² Ibid., 54.

³⁰³ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, c55–c69 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 54.

³⁰⁴ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 55.

in his darkness shines the eternal Light.”³⁰⁵ Van Nieuwenhove interprets Dupré as believing that negative metaphors for God constitute apophatic theology, while positive metaphors constitute cataphatic theology.³⁰⁶ But, Van Nieuwenhove argues that Ruusbroec never distances himself from negative theology. Although Ruusbroec contrasts the darkness of the divine ground with the brightness of the Son, Van Nieuwenhove points out that Ruusbroec describes the Son using conflicting metaphors, such as “incomprehensible light,” in an apophatic strategy that clearly reflects negative theology.³⁰⁷

Third, as he argues above, Van Nieuwenhove states that for Ruusbroec the transformed soul cannot distinguish between itself and God; however, the two are still separate ontologically.

Self-transcendence does not refer to a psychological experience but to a radical transformation of the human person whose self-centeredness has been ‘burnt away’: [In Ruusbroec’s words:] ‘When the spirit *burns* in love it will find a distinction and an othemess between itself and God when it examines itself. But when it is *burnt* up it is onefold and there is no distinction left.’³⁰⁸

Finally, Van Nieuwenhove points out that the deification Ruusbroec teaches is permanent and “habitual.” Therefore, the notion of experience is inappropriate. In the context of deification Ruusbroec writes,

For if we possess God in immersion of loving, that is: lost to ourselves, God is our own and we are his own and we sink away from ourselves for ever, without return, in our possession that is God. This sinking away is essential, with habitual love. And it happens whether we are asleep or awake, whether we know it or not. And so this immersion deserves no new degree of reward, but it keeps us in the possession of God and all the good we have acquired.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ Dupré, *The Common Life*, 57 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 55.

³⁰⁶ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 55.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ruusbroec, *Sparkling Stone*, 98–100 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 56.

Emphasis is Van Nieuwenhove’s.

³⁰⁹ Ruusbroec, *Sparkling Stone*, 503–509 in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 56.

Rik Van Nieuwenhove takes the opposite position of most Ruusbroecian scholars. He believes this body of scholarship represents the Jamesian view of mysticism as a passive, immediate experience of God. He firmly rejects this interpretation of Ruusbroec's mystical theology. (Van Nieuwenhove rarely uses *mysticism* to describe Ruusbroec's œuvre.) Instead, he argues that we understand Ruusbroec's work accurately only when viewing it in light of his fourteenth-century Neoplatonic-influenced theological context. According to Van Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec's works, written in part to oppose the Free Spirit Heresy, actually serve to critique an experiential reading of his mystical theology.

Conclusion

John Ruusbroec expresses his mystical teaching primarily in three stages of prayer: the active life, the inner life, and the contemplative life. Writing to combat heretical understandings of contemplation, Ruusbroec shows that the mystical life is not a search for experience as its own end or a rejection of virtuous activities or the sacraments. While teaching the possibility of a profound union with God, he also rejects an autotheism that precludes the recognition of ontological differences between God and the soul. His teaching expresses a particular understanding of the harmonious combination of virtuous activity and contemplative rest—the common life.

However, scholars do not agree on the proper way to interpret Ruusbroec's teaching. One dominant school of recent scholarship, represented by Mommaers and Feys, argues that Ruusbroec's mysticism describes a unitive

experience of God. While not rejecting the role of ontology, these scholars believe that the awareness of union constitutes true mysticism. In addition, contrary to the Free Spirits who make autotheistic claims based upon their experiences of natural contemplation, these scholars argue that the importance Ruusbroec places on experience allows him to maintain ontological distinction between God and the soul while expressing profound mystical union.

Dupré shows that Ruusbroec balances the strengths of both Eastern and Western Trinitarian theological traditions. Ruusbroec shows this balance in his teaching that the spiritual life mirrors the life of the Trinity by emphasizing both activity and rest—not merely the exclusive rest practiced by Ruusbroec's opponents. Also, Dupré explains that Ruusbroec's mysticism shows that the mystic must go beyond the "darkness" of the divine unity expressed in apophatic theology to "go out" with the Persons into the light of generation of the Son.

Van Nieuwenhove disagrees with Dupré's interpretation of the relationship between apophatic and cataphatic theology and with Feys' interpretation of Ruusbroec. However, Van Nieuwenhove mostly disagrees with the scholarly interpretation of Ruusbroec represented by Mommaers. For Van Nieuwenhove, Mommaers uses a Jamesian model of passive and immediate experience to interpret Ruusbroec's mystical theology. Van Nieuwenhove argues that we cannot properly interpret Ruusbroec without honoring his Neoplatonic-influenced theological context. This context, based in part on an Augustinian- and Pseudo-Dionysian-influenced view of God's transcendence and the soul's eternal life in God, argues against reading Ruusbroec's mystical theology as descriptive of an

experience of God. Instead, Van Nieuwenhove believes Ruusbroec describes the soul's transformation as a result of God's grace. Therefore, Van Nieuwenhove's position also shows how Ruusbroec criticizes the Free Spirits for their single-minded pursuit of experience. In our next and final chapter, I will again take up Gerson's criticisms of Ruusbroec, and in the light of these scholarly interpretations, ask whether we are any closer to a consensus on how to understand Ruusbroec's teaching on mystical union.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

Mystical theology uses language to express God's hidden activity in the soul. Despite the ultimate impossibility of the task, mystical writers throughout the ages have wrestled with the challenges of articulating what remains an ineffable reality. Ruusbroec's twentieth-century commentators attempt the same task and, as we have seen in Chapter III, they do not agree among themselves. I am aware of the limitations of my perspective as I evaluate the interpretations of these scholars. First, I read neither Dutch nor Middle Dutch; I relied on English translations for this project. Second, despite my research, I am not sufficiently conversant with the historical context of Ruusbroec's mysticism that I briefly described in Chapters I and II. Third, although I have studied philosophy, I am not a philosopher. Moreover, I am no expert in scholasticism, neoplatonism, or the pragmatism of William James. Despite these limitations, I have learned how difficult it is to write about mysticism and the role that experience plays in mysticism. (And for the record, I am not a mystic either.) What I can do in this brief conclusion is to offer my reflections based on my study of Ruusbroec and on the strengths and weaknesses of some of his major contemporary interpreters, the first of which is Mommaers.

Of the many strengths of Paul Mommaers' scholarship, three stand out. First, his publications, including three books in English and most of the

introductions to the new English translations of all Ruusbroec's works, demonstrate a thorough familiarity with Ruusbroec's writings. This familiarity enables him to carefully situate his interpretation of Ruusbroec in the midst of a whole corpus of writing and not just on one or the other text. Second, Mommaers highlights the affective dimension of spirituality. He emphasizes that we cannot properly appreciate the mystical life if scholars reduce mysticism merely to discussions of philosophy. And third, his writing about Ruusbroec's mysticism shows a subtle understanding of what he views as the role of experience. Although relying on William James as a significant authority, Mommaers recognizes serious deficiencies in James' theory¹ and qualifies his use of Jamesian terminology. For instance, Mommaers discusses the role of "passivity" in the inner life, but he explains that this passivity is not "paralysis" but a "yielding" to God's overwhelming presence when mystics exhaust their own efforts to love God.² Also, although he affirms that mystical experience is "immediate" and "direct,"³ he nuances the meaning of *immediate* in other places, such as his discussion of the "meeting" in the *Espousals*.

Despite these strengths, Mommaers' interpretation of Ruusbroec suffers several weaknesses. Foremost among these weaknesses, he discounts the wider philosophical and theological conversation of the fourteenth century that influenced Ruusbroec. For instance, several volumes in the new critical edition of Ruusbroec's works contain a section on the sources Ruusbroec used for his

¹ See discussion farther below.

² Mommaers, *Mysticism, Buddhist and Christian*, 152.

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

writings. Scholars find evidence of significant influence from, among others, Bonaventure and Hadewijch,⁴ and Van Nieuwenhove discovers clear references to Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, whose works all show strong Neoplatonic strains. It seems unlikely that Ruusbroec could borrow ideas from these authors without also being influenced by them. Yet, in spite of this, Mommaers avoids seriously engaging Ruusbroec's intellectual sources and context.

Second, writing in the Jamesian tradition, Mommaers claims that Ruusbroec's only concern is to describe the experience of union with God. *Experience* is Mommaers' key term. If Mommaers' claim were accurate, it would make little sense for Ruusbroec to so carefully elaborate his Trinitarian theology in many of his works, such as *The Twelve Beguines* and, especially, in book three of the *Espousals*, in which Ruusbroec explains the "union without distinction."

Moreover, the inherently vague connotations of *experience* make it difficult to understand what Mommaers means by the term. Does he mean an affective, or "felt," experience of God? Does he mean what McGinn calls an "inner experience"?⁵ Does he mean the "experience" of living the virtues? Or does he mean "experiential feedback"—the "after effects" of God's grace working in the soul?⁶ *Experience* is an imprecise term fraught with interpretive difficulty, especially, it seems, when writing about mystical experience.

⁴ Joseph Alaerts, "Sources," in *The Kingdom of Lovers*, 498.

⁵ Bernard McGinn, "The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1 (2001): 156–171.

⁶ See Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 231, 245, 250.

Third, because of Mommaers' emphasis on experience, he interprets Ruusbroec's metaphors about union too loosely. It seems as though he treats most of Ruusbroec's descriptions of union literally, rather than as metaphorical descriptions that attempt to express the inexpressible.⁷

Fourth, Mommaers' writing about mysticism appears at times inconsistent. For example, he deplores the dichotomization of mysticism into affective and speculative varieties—and asserts that Ruusbroec represents the harmony of both.⁸ However, he limits his presentation almost exclusively to an experiential, and in many places clearly affective, reading of Ruusbroec. Giving serious consideration to what he maintains are speculative aspects of Ruusbroec's works would, in my opinion, give more balance to Mommaers' presentation.

Fifth, and related to the above weaknesses, Mommaers treats philosophy and theology merely as a backdrop for what he views as the heart of mysticism: the experience of God; for him, the intellectual and the experiential do not seem meaningfully related. For instance, in his discussion of Ruusbroec's anthropology and the way it is influenced by the neoplatonism of his times, Mommaers states that Ruusbroec's anthropology is "no more than a prelude to a fuller, mystical way of seeing. His whole purpose is only to set the scene against which the greater drama is to be played out."⁹ This interpretation minimizes Ruusbroec's clear dependence on Neoplatonic ideas for major components of his teaching on

⁷ According to Mommaers, "The mystic uses the straightforward language of the senses with an ingenuity that is often disconcerting in the extreme, and one who would understand them had better get used to taking them at their word. To relax back into the contemporary habit of reading such texts as symbol or metaphor is to misread." Mommaers, *Mysticism, Buddhist and Christian*, 12.

⁸ Mommaers, *Mysticism, Buddhist and Christian*, 18–19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

the soul's union with God: *regiratio* and the soul's eternal existence in God as idea.

Sixth and finally, based upon relegating theology to the background, Mommaers feels comfortable using Ruusbroec's mysticism in a book—his most significant scholarly work on Ruusbroec in English—that compares Christian and Buddhist mysticisms. In the book, Mommaers excludes the role of Christ and faith in his presentation of Ruusbroec's mysticism, which Mommaers chooses to represent the Christian tradition in his dialogue with Buddhists. Mommaers admits that this is a "serious gap" for any adequate presentation of Christian mysticism, but not serious enough, apparently, to preclude his placing Ruusbroec's works as the centerpiece of his project.

The article of Jan Feys, S.J., whose interpretation of Ruusbroec is similar to Mommaers, lacks the nuance that characterizes Mommaers' writing. Feys, in fact, most resembles the kind of purely experiential, Jamesian reading of Ruusbroec that Van Nieuwenhove opposes. Although Feys distinguishes Ruusbroec's teaching from the heretical teachings of the "false mystics"—whose autotheism appears quite similar to Ruusbroec's description of union—Feys presents all of Ruusbroec's descriptions of union as immediate, felt experiences of God's love. His explanations lack any suggestion that these descriptions may be metaphorical due to Ruusbroec's philosophy, which emphasizes God's transcendence from creatures.

Dupré shows that Ruusbroec "synthesizes" elements of the starting points of Eastern and Western Trinitarian theologies to his understanding of the

common life—as both activity and rest. He contrasts this with the Free Spirit's pursuit of experience to the exclusion of "good works." He also uses Ruusbroec to highlight shortcomings in Eckhart's apophatic teaching on union with God as ultimately only a dark unknowing. Although no Ruusbroecian scholar would disagree with Dupré's understanding of the Free Spirits, Van Nieuwenhove believes that scholars misunderstand the tradition when they argue that Western theology "recognizes the ontological primacy of essential unity over personal diversity in God . . . while Eastern theology . . . reveals a tendency to give a certain preeminence to the personal diversity over essential unity. . . ." ¹⁰ Van Nieuwenhove also disagrees with Dupré that the mystic necessarily leaves the apophatic behind in the highest mystical union. Deciding the merits of Van Nieuwenhove's and Dupré's positions is beyond the scope of the present research.

As I turn to Van Nieuwenhove's interpretation of Ruusbroec, I find a number of positive contributions to the scholarship. Most significantly, he recognizes that to properly understand a 650-year old body of writing, it is imperative to situate it in its intellectual context. Van Nieuwenhove goes to great lengths to explain the influence of neoplatonism on Ruusbroec's writings. Second, throughout his book, Van Nieuwenhove shows that Ruusbroec's philosophical assumptions preclude a purely, or even a primarily, experiential reading of his mystical theology. ¹¹

¹⁰ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 2–3.

¹¹ As a bizarre example paralleling the contemporary preoccupation with mystical union as an "experience," which Van Nieuwenhove rejects, near the conclusion of my project I discovered a

Third, Van Nieuwenhove's appreciation of the role of "intention" in Ruusbroec's mystical theology provides a convincing way, at least to me, to interpret Ruusbroec's attacks on the Free Spirits. Since Mommaers and Feys both emphasize experience as the defining characteristic of mysticism, neither of them criticizes the Free Spirits for their desire for experience. Both scholars recognize that the Free Spirits' errors lie in their search for experience as an end in itself that leads to passivity and heretical ontological claims of union. In fact, Mommaers argues the orthodox experience of union passes "along the same psychological state" as the Free Spirits.¹² However, Van Nieuwenhove explains the importance of the "single theocentric intention" for Ruusbroec's condemnation of the Free Spirits.¹³ This intention requires self-transcendence and, therefore, judges as inadequate "psychological experiences" of union, which suggest a strong element of self-awareness. This interpretation of intention also connects Ruusbroec's criticism of the Free Spirits with his teaching on the common life. For instance, the Free Spirits' experience of "rest" led them to

recent Canadian study that attempted to track neural correlates of the experience of mystical union in Carmelite nuns. Because the nuns informed researchers, "God can't be summoned at will," researchers directed the nuns to "remember and relive (eyes closed) the most intense mystical experience ever felt in their lives as a member of the Carmelite Order." (online page 3) In their concluding remarks, researchers wrote, "The main limitation of this study was the fact that the subjects were asked to remember and relive a mystical experience rather than actually try to achieve one. . . . In our view, this does not represent a major problem since the phenomenological data indicate that the subjects actually experienced genuine mystical experiences during the Mystical condition. These mystical experiences felt subjectively different than those used to self-induce a mystical state." (online pages 10–11) One can speculate Ruusbroec's profound disapproval of mysticism people "try to achieve." See Mario Beauregard and Vincent Paquette, "Neural Correlates of a Mystical Experience in Carmelite Nuns," *Neuroscience Letters* 405, no. 3 (September 25, 2006): 186–190, accessed on 8/30/06 from http://journals.ohiolink.edu:20080/cgi-bin/sciserv.pl?collection=journals&journal=03043940&issue=y405i0003&article=186_ncoameicn&form=fulltext#bib40.

¹² Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 227–228.

¹³ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 71.

eschew receiving the sacraments and living a virtuous life. However, those who live the common life simultaneously integrate both "rest" and "activity."

Ruusbroec's understanding of "intention" brings together both elements. He writes that intending God above all things enables people to "meet God in each work . . . and more nobly possess the enjoyable unity."¹⁴ As Van Nieuwenhove states, "We 'rest' in God or 'enjoy' him when we, whichever acts we perform (willing, knowing), intend God alone."¹⁵ The rest and activity of the common life is also participation in the rest and activity of the Trinity.

Fourth, his preferred term for mystical union, *transformation*, expresses a dynamic quality consistent with Ruusbroec's emphasis on grace and on both God's and the soul's activity during contemplation. Although not a perfect term, *transformation* better approximates the conversion at the heart of Christian life that Ruusbroec describes in his three stages of prayer.

Despite Van Nieuwenhove's positive contributions, his presentation also seems to have some weaknesses. Most significantly, he dismisses contemporary scholars' interpretation of Ruusbroec's writings because he claims that they reflect the Jamesian perspective that union with God is an experience characterized, among other traits, by passivity and immediacy. He spotlights Mommaers as most representative of this scholarship. However, Mommaers' understanding of mysticism varies from James'. Effectively, Van Nieuwenhove sets up Mommaers as a type of Jamesian "straw man" whom he knocks down through an appeal to Ruusbroec's Neoplatonic-influenced theological heritage

¹⁴ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, b1531–b1534, in Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 63.

¹⁵ Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 64.

"that contains the resources for a critique of our modern (mis)-understanding of the nature of mystical union in terms of an immediate experience of God. . . ." ¹⁶

Although I believe Ruusbroec's intellectual heritage does contain the basis for such a critique, sometimes it is not clear whether Van Nieuwenhove is criticizing James or Mommaers. ¹⁷ Despite calling Ruusbroec a "phenomenologist," Mommaers denies that emotions or experiences are central to Ruusbroec. Yet, one can see why Van Nieuwenhove would confuse James' approach with that of Mommaers. Van Nieuwenhove points out that Mommaers uses the same vocabulary as James: experience, passivity, and immediacy. Still, Mommaers clearly nuances this terminology. In fact, despite Mommaers' use of James as an authority, Mommaers distances himself from James' view of experience. ¹⁸ Van Nieuwenhove, then, hammers away at a Jamesian interpretation of Ruusbroec, one that Mommaers does not truly endorse.

Also, Van Nieuwenhove argues against contemporary scholars, especially Mommaers, who claim that union is an immediate experience. However, Mommaers affirms the constant presence of intermediaries in Ruusbroec's

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ According to Mommaers, "Neither the religious emotions of the mystic, nor his exceptional 'experiences' as such interest [Ruusbroec], but rather the ultimate and strictly ontological reality—God *in* man and man *in* God—which manifests itself in the mystical consciousness. This personally experienced reality of oneness with God possesses its own inner structure—it is a 'living life,' an articulated happening. And it is this structure which Ruusbroec, as a genuine phenomenologist before the word existed, will bring to light." Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 32.

¹⁸ For instance, Mommaers notes that Nicholas Lash describes James' view of experience as "systematically contrasted with thought." See Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 16, 60f. In Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 16, note 9. In this same footnote, Mommaers, suggesting his agreement with Lash's assessment of James, comments, "In that way James comes to identify personal experience with individual emotional states."

teaching on union.¹⁹ In the final analysis, Mommaers' interpretation of Ruusbroec is too nuanced and careful for Van Nieuwenhove to fairly classify it merely as Jamesian.

Second, Van Nieuwenhove rejects the use of the term *experience* as too vague, but then he himself uses the term *transformation* in a similarly vague way to account not only for the soul's conversion by grace, but for *any* *prima facie* description of experience—including directly affective descriptions. Van Nieuwenhove neither defines *transformation* nor explains how it works. He comes the closest to an explanation when he mentions Denys Turner's phrase, "experiential feedback," which Van Nieuwenhove uses to explain Ruusbroec's descriptions of deification, the affective nature of the inner life, and the "divine touch." Yet, Van Nieuwenhove provides no helpful explanation of the meaning of Turner's concept. Van Nieuwenhove would strengthen his position, it seems to me, by clarifying and explaining the role experiential feedback plays in mysticism.

In his review of Van Nieuwenhove's book, Wiseman notes as a weakness his unwillingness to recognize any meaningful role for experience in Ruusbroec. Commenting on a key text in Ruusbroec's *The Sparkling Stone*, in which he describes the "experience" of unity in self-transcendence, Wiseman points out that Van Nieuwenhove denies that self-transcendence can ever be a "psychological experience."²⁰ Wiseman instead argues that any experience must be in some sense psychological because of one's awareness of it. He suggests

¹⁹ Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 19.

²⁰ James Wiseman, review of *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity*, by Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 4 (Fall 2004): 231.

that Van Nieuwenhove could improve his argument by giving more room to the possibility of the experience of love as described by modern psychology, in which people in love "regularly experience a fusion of identities actually leading to such paradoxical expressions as 'I am you.'"²¹ Although I believe we best read Ruusbroec in light of the philosophy and theology of his own time—and not through the insights of modern psychology—I affirm Wiseman's contention that Van Nieuwenhove must allow for a greater role for experience in Ruusbroec—if only of a mediated kind.

If nothing else, this thesis shows that contemporary scholarship on Ruusbroec is hardly in agreement. I, too, struggle to arrive at an accurate interpretation of his work. Van Nieuwenhove emphasizes Ruusbroec's intellectual context but fails to account sufficiently for a clearly present affective component to Ruusbroec's spirituality. Mommaers fails to read Ruusbroec in his own intellectual context and so misreads his mysticism. However, Mommaers' writing on Ruusbroec is seductively attractive, perhaps because I am a twentieth-century reader, living under the influence of the way in which William James has led us to think about psychology. The way Mommaers nuances experience in Ruusbroec makes his approach seem tenable. In the final analysis, this debate will most likely not arrive at a definitive conclusion any time soon.

Chapters I and II described the tumult of the fourteenth century that challenged all aspects of European life, especially the life of the Church. These challenges, mixed with the controversial rise of lay spirituality through the *vita*

²¹ James Wiseman, review of *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 232.

apostolica movement, led to conflict between Church authorities and groups such as the beguines. Authorities condemned the beguines by associating them with the Free Spirit Heresy. Although Ruusbroec wrote to condemn the Free Spirit Heresy, his own daring theological descriptions of mystical union were themselves the subject of suspicion, especially from a later critic, Jean Gerson. In fact, Gerson believed Ruusbroec taught some of the same errors for which the Church condemned the Free Spirits.

Gerson found two errors in Ruusbroec's explanation of union without distinction in book three of *The Spiritual Espousals*: First, Gerson claimed that this union, as described by Ruusbroec, was heretical because Ruusbroec claimed that the soul became the "divine splendor" (light). God, then, could no longer be the "object" of vision and enjoyment in beatitude because the mystic would be one with that splendor. This violated *Ad nostrum's* fourth proposition that condemned the Free Spirits for believing they could achieve heavenly beatitude while on earth. Second, he charged Ruusbroec with claiming that the soul, once united without difference, forever loses its creaturely status—a statement the *Espousals* makes.²² Wiseman comments that Gerson's criticism "unquestionably had much to do with making [Ruusbroec's] writings suspect in the French-speaking world for centuries."²³ Based on the presentations of Ruusbroec's contemporary commentators, we may be in a slightly better position

²² Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, trans. Helen Rolfson, O.S.F. (1995), c53–c55.

²³ Wiseman, "To Be God with God," 236.

to decide the merit of Gerson's accusation of Free Spirit error in book three of the *Espousals*.²⁴

In his study of the similarity of the autotheistic claims of heretical and orthodox writers, Wiseman notes that Ruusbroec condemns the Free Spirits not simply because of their autotheism but because their claims resulted in quietism. Therefore, Wiseman concludes that the way to judge the orthodoxy of their claims to radical identity with God is to discern whether the mystic balances such claims with "orthopraxis."²⁵ Wiseman, then, gives some credence to Gerson's condemnation because book three of the *Espousals* lacks the balance between contemplative rest and virtuous activity present in other parts of the same work.²⁶ In fact, Wiseman states that Ruusbroec corrected this imbalance in his next work, *The Sparkling Stone*. For instance, Ruusbroec's opening sentence in this text describes the contemplative life in *four* stages—the new, fourth stage is the common life.²⁷ Therefore, Gerson's criticism, based only on book three, has some merit because Ruusbroec identified the soul with the divine brightness without balancing it with a description of virtuous activity that would support ontological differences between God and soul.

Even if book three is read apart from Ruusbroec's later works, however, the charge that Ruusbroec is a heretic is not sustainable. First, Wiseman mentions that Ruusbroec devoted himself to orthopraxy in his community,

²⁴ I will begin with the opinion of James Wiseman. Because of the close similarity between the positions of Wiseman, Mommaers, and Feys, Chapter III made only passing reference to Wiseman's interpretations. However, Wiseman offers an opinion of Gerson that others lack.

²⁵ Wiseman, "To Be God with God," 249–250.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 244–245.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

performing some of its humblest tasks, receiving guests, and carefully writing works for the spiritual direction and enrichment of others.²⁸ Second, Ruusbroec repeatedly asserts throughout his works that God does not become creature and the creature does not become God. And third, although Ruusbroec affirms we are the Brightness that we perceive, Van Nieuwenhove makes a convincing case that the soul only participates analogously in mystical union. Therefore, despite Ruusbroec's wording, grace effects union with God, and as a consequence, mystics never lose their creaturely status. In addition, Ruusbroec situates his affirmation in an apophatic discourse about the "darkness" and ultimate unknowability of the divine essence.²⁹

Finally, if Gerson did have access to Ruusbroec's other works, especially the *Little Book*, he might have learned that Ruusbroec never treats any one stage of union in isolation from the other two.³⁰ In Mommaers' words, "If Ruusbroec has one main idea in the *Espousals*, it comes down to just this: that the 'union with means' as well as that 'without means' both play a part — together, simultaneously, definitively, in eternity as well — in being one with God."³¹

In the midst of the chaotic fourteenth century, John Ruusbroec wrote daring and inspiring mystical treatises to critique the primary heretical movement of his day, the Free Spirit Heresy. Ruusbroec's notion of the common life—the simultaneous life of contemplation and virtuous activity—enabled him both to

²⁸ Ibid., 250.

²⁹ Ruusbroec, *Espousals*, trans. Helen Rolfsen, O.S.F. (1995), c53–c56, c100–c102, c144–c147, and c207–c226.

³⁰ Mommaers, introduction to *Little Book*, 33.

³¹ Mommaers, introduction to *Espousals*, 19.

reject the quietism and heretical autotheism of the Free Spirits and to affirm a radical union with God "without distinction." The beauty of his prose and the depth of his insights rank him among the finest mystical writers of Northern Europe. The writings of Ruusbroec obviously continue to be of interest to numerous scholars in our own times, and for good reason.

APPENDIX I

The Eight Propositions from *Ad nostrum*¹

- I. Man can attain in his present life such a degree of perfection that he will be rendered completely incapable of sinning and will no longer be able to make progress in divine grace. For they say, if a person can perfect himself indefinitely, he might in time become more perfect than Christ.
- II. After attaining the highest degree of perfection, a person will have no more need of fasting or praying because the senses are now so completely subject to the control of the soul and reason that the body may be granted absolute liberty.
- III. Those who have achieved this state of perfection and absolute freedom of spirit are no longer subject to obedience and law or obligated to follow ecclesiastical regulations, for where divine spirit rules, there is absolute liberty.
- IV. Man is able to achieve in the present life the same blessedness that he will possess in life eternal.
- V. Every rational being is in himself by his very nature blessed. The soul therefore has no need of the divine light to behold God and to enjoy him in bliss.
- VI. Virtuous acts are necessary only for the imperfect person; but the perfect soul no longer has need of virtues.
- VII. Sexual intercourse is not a sin as long as nature demands it, especially if the person who indulges is strongly tempted, but when nature does not dictate it becomes a mortal sin.

¹ P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum inquisitionis haereticae pravitatis Neerlandicae*, I (Ghent, 1889-1906), 267; English translation in Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture: With a Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 497. Presumably the English translation is McDonnell's, because he does not cite an English source.

- VIII. It is not necessary to rise when the body of Jesus is presented in divine service or otherwise to show respect to the host, for it would be a sign of imperfection to come down from the heights of pure contemplation to dwell on thoughts of the eucharist or the passion of the Savior.

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