THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

The Shape of Spiritual Direction in the Mystical Theology of Jan van Ruusbroec

A DISSERTATION

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This dissertation considers the trinitarian mystical theology of the late-medieval mystical theologian Jan van Ruusbroec and how his trinitarian thought forms and animates his written spiritual direction. It particularly examines the relationship between Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and his post-Brussels written spiritual direction, which offers guidance to specific communities and persons in their pursuit of union with God through the life of prayer, worship, and service. In order to render a coherent account of this relationship and its primary characteristics, the work argues that one must read Ruusbroec as a mystical theologian. As a mystical theologian, Ruusbroec’s thought displays the natural integrity of theology and spirituality, as assumed by the majority of the theological masters of the Christian tradition, from its origins to the High Middle Ages. After dealing with the biographical details of Ruusbroec’s life and historical, cultural, and theological contexts, the study makes a foray into the works of Ruusbroec to show the primary characteristics of the Brabantine’s trinitarian mystical theology, the core of which is his teaching of essential love, the perfect, eternal simultaneity and harmony of activity and rest of the life of the Trinity.

The study then goes on to offer interpretations of three of Ruusbroec’s most important writings of spiritual direction from his post-Brussels period. It shows that the Augustinian canon’s written spiritual direction in these writings is intricately shaped by his trinitarian mystical theology. His spiritual direction is, so to speak, harmonically related to the “firm melody” that is his trinitarian mystical theology. Finally, the study offers some possible paths
forward for future research, based upon what the dissertation has found. The purpose of this work is to make a contribution to Ruusbroec scholarship that continues to illumine the shape, scope and beauty of his mystical theology as well as to contribute to the broader theological scholarship that has been, over the past five to eight decades, bringing to light the integrity of “spirituality” and “theology” within the Christian tradition.
This dissertation by Greg Voiles fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Spirituality approved by James Wiseman, O.S.B., S.T.D., as Director and by Raymond Studzinski, O.S.B., Ph.D., and Joshua Benson, Ph.D. as Readers.

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# Table of Contents

Preface.................................................................................................................................................. v

Chapter 1: The Life and Times of Jan van Ruusbroec and Methodology ............................................ 1
Introduction........................................................................................................................................ 1
I. The Life and Times of Jan van Ruusbroec .......................................................................................... 3
   A. Date, Occasion, Structural Considerations, and Content .......................................................... 129
   B. Theological Formation Beyond the Chapter School ................................................................. 150
   C. The Brussels Years as Chaplain Priest (1317/18–1343) ......................................................... 182
   D. The Years as Priest in Groenendaal (1343–1350) .................................................................. 186
   E. The Prior of the Groenendaal Monastery (1350–1381) ............................................................ 190
   F. The Heresy of the Free Spirit ..................................................................................................... 194
II. Methodology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology: Reading Ruusbroec as Mystical/Contemplative Theologian ......................................................................................... 198
III. The Contours of Spiritual Direction in the Christian Tradition .................................................. 204
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 204

Chapter 2: Swimming in the Flowing, Ebbing Sea: The Lineaments of Ruusbroec’s Trinitarian Mystical Theology .................................................................................................................. 89
Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 89
I. Ruusbroec’s Historical-Theological Context .................................................................................. 92
II. The Flowing, Ebbing Sea: The Trinitarian Shape of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology ............... 106
III. Exemplarist Anthropology ........................................................................................................ 137
IV. The Mystical/Contemplative Way ................................................................................................ 148
   A. The True Contemplative/Mystical Path .................................................................................... 150
   B. Counter-position to False Mysticism ...................................................................................... 173
   C. The Common Life .................................................................................................................... 178
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 185

Chapter 3: Cantus Firmus and Symphonic Harmony I: The Trinitarian Shape of Ruusbroec’s Spiritual Direction in Van den Geestelijken Tabernakel ................................................. 186
Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 186
I. Van den Geestelijken Tabernakel .................................................................................................. 189
   A. Date, Textual-Historical Considerations, and Occasion ......................................................... 190
   B. Structure and Content .............................................................................................................. 198
   C. Spiritual Direction in the Tabernakel ....................................................................................... 205
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 236

Chapter 4: Cantus Firmus and Symphonic Harmony II: The Trinitarian Shape of Ruusbroec’s Spiritual Direction in Vanden seven sloten—The Seven Enclosures, and Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit—A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness ......................................................... 238
Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 238
I. Vanden seven sloten ..................................................................................................................... 239
   A. Date, Occasion, and Structural Considerations ..................................................................... 241
   B. Spiritual Direction in Vanden seven sloten ............................................................................ 249
III. Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit .......................................................................................... 274
   A. Date, Occasion, Structural Considerations, and Content ..................................................... 275

iii
B. Spiritual Direction in the Spieghel................................................................. 298
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 321

Chapter 5: Swimming in the Flowing, Ebbing Sea Under Ruusbroec’s Direction:
Concluding Summary, Contribution, and Paths for Future Research.................. 323
Introduction ........................................................................................................... 323
I. Concluding Summary ....................................................................................... 324
II. Contribution ..................................................................................................... 338
III. Possible Paths for Future Research ............................................................... 339
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 341

Bibliography ........................................................................................................ 342
Preface

In this work I explore the trinitarian mystical theology of the late-medieval Brabantine contemplative theologian Jan van Ruusbroec and how his trinitarian thought forms and animates his written spiritual direction. More specifically, the work examines the relationship between Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and his post-Brussels written spiritual direction, which offers guidance to specific persons and communities in their pursuit of union with God through the life of prayer, worship, and service. In order to render a coherent account of this relationship and its primary characteristics, I argue that one must read Ruusbroec as a mystical theologian. As a mystical theologian Ruusbroec’s thought displays the natural integrity of theology and spirituality, as assumed by the majority of the theological masters of the Christian tradition, from its origins up through the High Middle Ages.

Ruusbroec (1293-1381) was ordained at St. Gudula in Brussels in 1317/18 and subsequently served as a chaplain priest at St. Gudula. In 1343 he left St. Gudula to pursue a more secluded life of simplicity and prayer in the Zonien Forest in the Groenendaal Valley, just one mile south of Brussels, where he and several like-minded confreres eventually formed an Augustinian community of prayer and shared life. During his years at St. Gudula's, as well as his time in the Groenendaal community, Ruusbroec wrote various works of mystical theology, most notably The Spiritual Espousals and The Sparkling Stone, which helped to confirm him as one of the great Western trinitarian mystical theologians.

Ruusbroec wrote at least six of his works after he left St. Gudula's to form and, eventually (1350), become prior of the monastery in Groenendaal. These include the remainder of Van den Geesteliken Tabernakel (The Spiritual Tabernacle), Van den Seven Sloten (The Seven Enclosures), Een Spieghel der Ewigher Salicheit (The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness, Van Seven
Trappen (The Seven Rungs), Boecsken der Verclaringhe (The Little Book of Clarification), and Van den XII Beghinien (The Twelve Beguines). The writings before this period address a general audience, whereas the later works are primarily ones of spiritual direction addressed to particular persons and communities (with the exception of The Little Book of Clarification).¹ Though I explore a number of Ruusbroec’s writings in the first and second chapters, the constructive portion of the writing is chapters three and four where I investigate the spiritual direction found in The Spiritual Tabernacle, The Seven Enclosures, and The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness.²

The purpose of this work is to make a contribution to Ruusbroec scholarship that continues to illumine the shape, scope and beauty of Ruusbroec’s mystical theology as well as to contribute to the broader theological scholarship that has been, over the past three to five decades or more, bringing to light the integrity of “spirituality” and “theology” for the Christian tradition and how this vision may be recovered and furthered in the contemporary world. While there have been works exploring Ruusbroec’s spirituality and theology, none has explicitly explored the relationship between Ruusbroec’s mystical theology and his way of giving spiritual direction/counsel to specific communities in his writings during his years in the Groenendaal community. Ruusbroec scholars generally agree that his description of the intra-trinitarian life of God - the perfect, eternal simultaneity and harmony of activity and rest in the Trinity - is key for understanding Ruusbroec's mystical theology.³ However, there have been no sustained

¹ This work is addressed to a community of Carthusian brothers but it is a clarification of his mystical doctrine rather than written spiritual direction.

² The Seven Rungs is likewise worthy of exploration. However, I do not examine it in this work due to its similarities shared with The Seven Enclosures and The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness.

³ For citations of the works of these and other scholars who write on the spirituality and theology of Ruusbroec, see the copious citations of their works in chapter two, where I introduce the reader to the primary elements of the Brabantine’s mystical theology.
evaluations of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction in light of historical and modern understandings of spiritual direction (the ministry of the care of souls that seeks after or listens for the guiding of the Holy Spirit in a particular psychological and spiritual situation, through which the directee is helped to enter evermore deeply into union with God). Moreover, there have been no studies of Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction and its relation to his trinitarian mystical theology.

The elements of the work unfold as follows:

I. Chapter one first maps and discusses the chronology of Ruusbroec’s life and corpus, along the way painting some of the contours of his historical and cultural setting. This is followed by a discussion of the “Heresy of the Free Spirit,” which was a significant part of church and culture during Ruusbroec’s life and times and a phenomenon he regularly addresses in his writings. With Ruusbroec’s biographical details and historical and cultural contexts in hand, I use the second major section of the chapter to communicate to the reader the methodological perspective from which my interpretation of Ruusbroec’s thought proceeds. I argue that the Flemish priest’s writing is best understood by reading him as a mystical/contemplative theologian whose work exemplifies the integrity of spirituality and theology. Therefore, we must understand that his written spiritual direction is intricately interwoven with and formed by his trinitarian mystical theology. In the final section of the chapter I give a relatively brief overview of the major characteristics of the practice of “spiritual direction” within the Christian tradition in order to help the reader understand what is being communicated by this term, which is somewhat nebulous, at least in the contemporary West.

II. Chapter two offers a close reading of Ruusbroec’s texts that articulate his trinitarian mystical theology and its central teaching of the perfect, eternal, and paradoxical
simultaneity of outgoing love and perichoretic, blissful embrace that characterizes the life of the Triune God. Various treatises are examined, though I pay particular attention to two major works, *The Spiritual Espousals* and *The Sparkling Stone*.

III. In light of the understanding of the Brabantine mystical theologian’s trinitarian mystical theology developed in chapter two, chapters three and four focus upon three of Ruusbroec’s writings from his time in Groenendaal, which contain a great deal of written spiritual direction. Through a close reading of these works I show how the spiritual direction offered therein is fundamentally shaped by the Augustinian canon’s trinitarian mystical theology. In chapter three I treat Ruusbroec’s largest work, *The Spiritual Tabernacle*. Chapter four goes on to engage *The Seven Enclosures* and *The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*. These chapters are the constructive heart of the project.

IV. In chapter five I seek to offer a judicious summary of the previous chapters and draw conclusions as to the nature of the relationship between Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction and trinitarian mystical theology as examined in chapters three and four. I then share with the reader what contributions I deem this research to make to Ruusbroec studies in particular and contemporary theological scholarship more generally. Finally, I end the work by suggesting possible paths for future research in light of what this work has contributed to the world of Ruusbroec scholarship and the broader conversation of the relationship between theology and spirituality.

It is my hope that this work will further stir theologians, those studying spirituality, and students of theology and religious studies to immerse themselves in the challenging, yet beautiful, world of Ruusbroec’s thought.
In truth this work began when, as a child, I began to contemplate God while exploring the beauty and wonder of the hills of the eastern portion of middle Tennessee, my childhood home. Of course I did not recognize it in my childhood, but these early years of becoming conscious or aware of the presence of God set me on a course in which my life would be spent exploring this presence and how we as humans talk about God. In other words, as a child, in conversation with my father and mother and other Christians, I began to develop an inchoate sense of how prayer and contemplation are connected to how we articulate, discursively, our understanding of God. In my late teens and twenties I studied theology at the undergraduate and seminary level. While in seminary and afterword I began to serve in pastoral roles in congregational setting, a homeless mission, and in a federal penitentiary. In these years I began to become acutely aware of how the Christian tradition affirmed that how our conversation with God and our talk about God were intimately bound to one another. This was confirmed and deepened in my own pastoral and contemplative practice. During my years of early pastoral ministry I began to discern, with the church’s help and my own spiritual directors, that I seemed to have a particular charism for giving spiritual direction. This, perhaps as much as any pastoral experience I have had, deepened my conviction that “spirituality” and “theology” are and must always be deeply intertwined.

When I entered doctoral study in theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, I pursued the study of the great mystical theologians of the Church and the integrity of spirituality and theology. I initially studied the thought of the fourth century “Cappadocian” father St. Gregory of Nyssa, whom I had been studying and writing about before entering PhD work. In addition, I began to immerse myself in the thought of the seventh-century church father St. Maximus the Confessor. In Gregory and Maximus I found two monumental figures whose thought embodied the integrity of spirituality and theology. However, I soon
discovered that Gregory and Maximus had been objects of much quality scholarly investigation in the English-speaking world. Therefore, I began to see that perhaps my doctoral dissertation needed to give its efforts to another figure besides Gregory or Maximus.

It was in a doctoral class with my eventual dissertation director, Father James Wiseman, O.S.B, that I read the works of Jan van Ruusbroec for the first time. Here was a mystical theologian whose work embodied much of what I found persuasive in the thought of Nyssen and Maximus. For Ruusbroec, like Gregory and Maximus, contemplation and theology were inextricably bound. He also, again like Gregory and Maximus, centered his theology in the triune God and our participation in the trinitarian life. Happily, Fr. Wiseman just happened to be an expert in Ruusbroec and agreed to be my dissertation director, which afforded me the opportunity to pursue the study of Brabantine master’s theology for my dissertation.

There are a number of wonderful people who have enriched my life and thought in ways that have helped me before and as I brought this work to completion. I would first like to thank my dissertation director Father James Wiseman, O.S.B. I am extremely grateful to him for his invaluable guidance through the past few years, in which my work has been inhibited at times by health problems. His wise and heartening guidance has challenged and encouraged me as a scholar and writer. Without his direction this work may not have been completed and certainly would not have been as good. Much of my understanding of Christian mystical theology in general, and Ruusbroec’s mystical theology in particular, has been enlivened and shaped by Father Wiseman as a professor during doctoral course work and as my director. Likewise, I would also like to give my heartfelt thanks to my dissertation readers, Father Raymond Studzinski, O.S.B. and Dr. Joshua Benson. Likewise, they were also my professors during course work. Father Studzinski taught me about the tradition of Christian spiritual direction, while Dr.
Benson opened the world of medieval theology to me in a much broader and deeper way than I had ever known. Their helpful criticism and encouragement has been essential in bringing this project to fruition.

Thanks go to Dr. Bernard McGinn for pointing me to his important work on Ruusbroec during and following a lecture he presented to the faculty and students in the department of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University of America in the Fall of 2009, which significantly influenced the ultimate perspective of the dissertation. His influence is very pronounced in this work, particularly in chapters one and two. Thanks also to the Rev. Dr. Mark McIntosh, whose work and guidance inspired me in the couple of years before I began doctoral study. The influence of his work is immense in this volume, even when not always explicitly cited.

Sincere thanks go to particular people whose friendship and conversations over the years have enriched and encouraged my theological thinking. These include: Brian Postlewait (a constant friend and mentor), Matt Jenson, Ed Couchenour, Daron Brown, Mark Bilby, Rusty Brian, Rob Kazee, Nell Becker Sweeden, Josh Sweeden, Tony Baker, D. Stephen Long, Steve Fowl, Trent Pomplun, Fritz Bauerschmidt, Paul Merritt Bassett (who introduced me to the riches of ancient Christian thought at Nazarene Seminary and is still my favorite professor), Steve McCormick, Susan Wessel (my patristics professor at The Catholic University of America), and Chad Pecknold. Thanks also to my fellow doctoral students at The Catholic University of America, who formed a small circle of scholarly friendship and community from 2007 to 2012. This group of friends included: Shannon Berry Sullivan, James Estes, Bonnie Brunelle, Brendan Sammon, and Kelly Wilson. Additionally from this group, special thanks go to Joshua Brockway and Daniel Wade McClain. Without their unfailing friendship, encouragement, and continued
theological conversation over the past few years I would undoubtedly be a poorer person and scholar. Josh’s grounded wisdom and support and Dan’s scholarly acumen and steadfast belief in me as a friend and scholar have been gifts that have helped sustain me.

In more recent days, after moving to Nashville, TN, friends, colleagues, and students from Trevecca Nazarene University and Blakemore Church of the Nazarene have provided continuous inspiration and conversation. I presented part of this material to a weekly theological gathering of faculty and students at Trevecca. The insights from this gathering were helpful as I finished this work. From these communities, thanks go to Dan Spross, Steve Hoskins, Tim Green, and Brad Daugherty. Special thanks go to my pastor, Rev. Dr. Ryan Hansen, and Professors Schuy Weishaar and Brent McMillian of Trevecca Nazarene University, whose friendship and theological conversation over the past two years have influenced my thinking for the better and have helped me to believe this was a worthwhile project. While all of the aforementioned people have enriched whatever is true and good in this work, any errors or inadequacies are, of course, my own.

I want to give a special thanks to my mother and father, Naomi and Ray Voiles, for the constancy of their love and support throughout the years, even when they have not always understood what I was thinking and why I was taking particular paths. They have shown me the love and tenderness of Christ throughout my life and I simply would not be the person I am today without them.

Finally, I especially am grateful to my wife, Charity Vaught Voiles. She has shown me more compassionate love than anyone I have ever known. Through her love and companionship I have been drawn more deeply into the flowing, ebbing sea of love that is the triune life of God. It is to Charity that I dedicate this work.
Chapter 1: The Life and Times of Jan van Ruusbroec and Methodology

Introduction

What is the relationship between Jan van Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and his written spiritual direction given to communities and individuals in his later writings? This is the central question of the present study. In order to answer this question it is necessary to orient ourselves by grounding our exploration of this question in the soil of an accurate understanding of four things: (1) Ruusbroec’s historical and biographical context, (2) how one should approach his thought hermeneutically in order to most fruitfully comprehend his theology, (3) what exactly is meant, in the Christian tradition, when we employ the term “spiritual direction,” and (4) the core or primary elements of his trinitarian mystical theology. The last of these elements, the constituent features of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology, are explored in chapter two. In the present chapter we will occupy ourselves with the other three.

These background elements of the first and second chapter of our study are key for comprehending the shaping of the Brabantine priest’s later written spiritual direction by his trinitarian mystical theology. As we seek to show here in chapter one, understanding his biographical and historical contexts is vital, for it illuminates how the contemplative theologian’s comprehension and deployment of the rich mystical theological tradition of the Christian faith came to fruition, though we do not have the amount of biographical data for which one would perhaps wish. Following the biographical and historical sections, the first chapter will unpack the methodology of the dissertation, particularly with regard to the hermeneutical perspective with which we will approach Ruusbroec’s texts. We will argue that Ruusbroec was a mystical theologian whose work exhibits the integrity of spirituality and theology that is always...
concerned with the central teachings of the Christian faith regarding God’s triune nature, the missions of the Son and Spirit, and, through the work of the Father in the Son and Spirit, how humans may become participants in the divine nature. Ruusbroec’s mystical theology is written in order to give genuine help to believers in their relation with the divine as they grow in union with God. Therefore, we argue that his written spiritual direction works within this interconnection of spirituality and theology. It is but a component of his mystical theology. As a result, the Augustinian canon’s direction is integrally associated with and shaped by this same trinitarian mystical theology.

We have already used the term “spiritual direction” multiple times in this introduction. However, within the context of North American culture in general, and North American Christianity in particular, it is not at all clear that those who use the term mean quite the the same thing. Therefore, given the fact that this work seeks to describe how Ruusbroec’s theology shapes his written spiritual direction, a description of what is meant when we use this term is in order. To accomplish this, the final portion of this first chapter will comprise our providing a brief aerial view of some of the central features of the major streams of the tradition of Christian spiritual direction. This, of course, will not be comprehensive, but, given the centrality of this concept for the present study, we will round out this section with an examination of what Kenneth Leech calls “the marks of the spiritual director.”¹ Since he perhaps provides the best sketch in contemporary literature of the tradition of spiritual direction, we will rely here on Leech for the rudimentary framework of this aerial view, though other sources will be consulted along the way, adding manifold perspectives to our depiction, thus elevating it to the level of a multilayered tapestry. The layout of the land in the synopsis will show variety amidst

commonality in the exercise of spiritual direction/guidance in the streams of the history of the Christian tradition. After exploring this unity amid diversity, the characteristic marks of the spiritual director will be recapitulated. The commonality within the diversity of spiritual direction and the marks of the spiritual director will define how the designation of “spiritual direction” is used in the present study. We will then be in a position to unfold the vital elements of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology in chapter two.

I. The Life and Times of Jan van Ruusbroec

Jan van Ruusbroec (sometimes alternately spelled “Ruysbroeck” in English) lived his entire life in and within a few miles of Brussels. Unlike other figures in the Middle Ages such as Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, Ruusbroec remained rooted within a small geographical radius of his original birthplace. Ruusbroec’s works are so focused on spiritual topics that they give us little information about any involvement he may have had in the social and governmental affairs of his day. In fact, one could read the majority of Ruusbroec’s writings and have little insight into the major historical events of the late Middle Ages, during which Ruusbroec’s life occurred. Furthermore, we have nothing like the amount of biographical information on Ruusbroec one may find on other medieval Christian figures such St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Bonaventure.²

Ruusbroec was born in the small village of Ruisbroek in the Duchy of Brabant, just south of Brussels, in 1293. He The Brabantian mystic died at the age of eighty-eight in 1381. His life had four notable periods: 1. His childhood and formal educational period (1293–1317), 2. The years

Company, 2012), 5-61. Warnar’s work listed above, Ruusbroec: Literature and Mysticism in the Fourteenth Century, is currently perhaps the best monograph on Ruusbroec’s life. Also helpful is Paul Verheyen, Ruusbroec and his Mysticism (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994). Two recent works have become quite helpful in research on the Brabantine mystical theologian’s life, context and writings for my writing of this work and Ruusbroec research in general. Of particular note is the collection of essays on the current state of various areas of Ruusbroec studies. See John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, eds. A Companion to John of Ruusbroec (Leiden: Brill, 2014). Also helpful, particularly in Ruusbroec’s critique of mystical heresy, is Satoshi Kikuchi, From Eckhart to Ruusbroec: A Critical Inheritance of Mystical Themes in the Fourteenth Century (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014).

3 There were a number of localities in the vicinity of Brussels that bear the name “Ruisbroek.” Following John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, it seems that the most likely one is a village just outside the old city wall of Brussels. See John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” in A Companion to John of Ruusbroec, eds. John Arblaster and Rob Faesen (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 50.

4 Ruusbroec is sometimes referred as a “Flemish mystic” and a “Brabantian mystic” and I will use both designations throughout this work. This may seem odd given the fact that present day Flanders and Brabant are different geographic provinces and were in Ruusbroec’s day as well. However, both designations are used due to the fact that throughout history the boundaries of each have shifted and changed. In Ruusbroec’s day the cultural characteristics of Brabant were thoroughly influenced by Flanders. For a brief but helpful explanation of the historical and cultural climate of Brabant and Flanders in Ruusbroec’s time see Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 10-14. Nieuwenhove says: “During his lifetime, Ruusbroec witnessed major political, economic, cultural, and religious changes, which are important for a proper understanding of his thought. In 1300 Brabant roughly contained the present-day province of Brabant (the area around Brussels, Mechelen, and Leuven), part of the present-day province of Antwerp, all the way to the Rhine in the Netherlands (including Breda and Den Bosch). Although Brabant was not part of Flanders, its linguistic and cultural ties lay firmly with Flanders (containing Aalst [Alost], Brugge [Bruges], Gent [Ghent], Kortrijk [Courtrai], Doornail [Tournai], Rijssel [Lille], Bouvines).” Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 10. This shows that Ruusbroec may be referred to as either “Brabantian” or “Flemish.”

5 Though, as shown later in this chapter, Ruusbroec likely continued study beyond his formal education. This can be seen in how at home he is in the world of speculative Trinitarian theology and metaphysics. This is where Nieuwenhove’s Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian and Bernard McGinn’s chapter on Ruusbroec in his most recent volume of his history of Western Christian mysticism are so helpful. See Bernard McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350—1550), vol. 5 of The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism (New
as chaplain priest in Brussels (1317–1343),\(^6\) 3. His period of priesthood in Groenendaal (1343—
1350), and 4. The time as prior of the Groenendaal monastery, after the community adopted the
Rule of St. Augustine (1350—1381).\(^7\) It is generally accepted that Ruusbroec composed three

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\(^6\) De Baere, “Introduction,” 18 and Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 2 date Ruusbroec’s
ordination to the priesthood from 1317 while Warnar, Literature and Mysticism, 35 and McGinn,
Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 5 date his ordination from 1318.

\(^7\) These periods will be explored in more detail in what follows in this chapter but for
now it is important to see that this division of Ruusbroec’s career diverges a little from the
traditionally dominant way of charting Ruusbroec’s life. Ruusbroec scholarship has traditionally
divided his career into two periods: His period as a priest in Brussels and the Groenendaal
period. Geert Warnar began to change the landscape of Ruusbroec scholarship a bit however
when he argued that his career should be divided into three parts (periods 2–4 I noted above).
While one should not overestimate the difference between the older, more established way of
dividing up Ruusbroec’s career and Warnar’s division, the latter’s description is helpful in
distinguishing a difference between the first seven years in Groenendaal and the remaining
thirty-one years (though this distinction should not overshadow the significant continuity
between the two periods in Groenendaal). See Geert Warnar, “De Chronologie van Jan van
Ruusbroec’s Werken,” Ons Geestelijk Erf 68 (1994): 185–99. The traditional division of
Ruusbroec’s life can be seen for example in Guido De Baere’s introduction to the Opera Omnia.
Nonetheless, Warner’s division and other parts of De Baere’s introduction are complementary in
an interesting way. Though De Baere notes that we lack precise information on why Ruusbroec
and his companions Jan Hinckaert and Vrank van Coudenberch left the cathedral in Brussels to
go to the valley of Groenendaal, “The Green Dale (Valley),” an area southeast of Brussels in the
Forest of Soignes (also called in English “The Zonian Forest”) we can make a reasonable
conjecture. The key difference is that the first seven years were spent by Ruusbroec and his
friends trying to develop what they believed to be a healthy small scale parish where Brabantian
Christians could be part of a community developing a life open to contemplation and authentic
experience of God. This is what they believed the city of Brussels and the area of Brabant, as
well as the larger Catholic Church, needed (given the problems of heresy on the one hand and
lack of piety and Christlike example in much Church leadership, in Ruusbroec’s view, on the
other). The three canons did not start out with a desire to start a monastery. Again, there will be
more on this below but Warnar’s division acknowledges this difference between the first seven
years and the following thirty-one years. As a result De Baere’s description of the years in the
Groenendaal period shed light on why Warnar’s divisions of Ruusbroec’s career are helpful. See
works and part of a fourth in his time as a chaplain priest in the cathedral of Saints Michael and Gudula in Brussels. These works are, in chronological order, *Dat rijeck der ghelieven—The Realm of Lovers, Die Geestelike Brulocht—The Spiritual Espousals* (generally regarded as his masterpiece), *Vanden Blinkenden Steen—The Sparkling Stone*, and part of *Van den Geesteliken Tabernakel—The Spiritual Tabernacle*. In the remainder of the Fleming’s life in Groenendaal he finished. It is less certain as to when Ruusbroec wrote the two shorter treatises *Vanden kerstenen ghelove—On the Christian Faith* and *Vanden vier becoringhen—The Four Temptations*. De Baere dates *Vanden kerstenen ghelove* during the Brussels period and *Vanden vier becoringhen* from the Groenendaal years, while Wiseman dates both from the Brussels years as priest at the church of St. Michael and St. Gudula. McGinn dates both “from around the time of the retreat to Groenendaal.”

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8 I will hereafter simply refer to this church as “St. Gudula.” It is also sometimes spelled “Gudule.”

9 This is now a matter of debate for Nieuwenhove who, following Warnar’s schema of the periods of Ruusbroec’s life, believes that *Van den Geesteliken’s* first portion was written in the first seven years in Groenendaal and the remainder was written after Ruusbroec and his friend’s changed the parish at Groenendaal into a monastery. See Nieuwenhove, 10.


12 McGinn, *Vernacular Mysticism*, 7. For a thorough discussion of the issues of manuscripts and dating see the various essays by a number of significant scholars currently writing in Ruusbroec scholarship in the highly illuminating collection of critical essays in John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, eds., *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). See especially the essay by Arblaster and Faesen entitled “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works” (pp. 47-80) and the essay by Loet Swart entitled “Overview of Ruusbroec Research” (pp. 303-338). Swart’s essay is particularly helpful in that it divides up the history of Ruusbroec scholarship into various subjects and traces each subject throughout the history of research. This collection,
eeuwigher salicheit—A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness, Vanden seven sloten—The Seven Enclosures, Van seven trappen—The Seven Rungs, Boecksen der verclaringe—The Little Book of Enlightenment, and Van den XII beghinen—The Twelve Beguines were written during the Groenendaal period.

Among the meager amount of material concerning Ruusbroec’s life two biographies have been preserved. One was composed during Ruusbroec’s lifetime by Brother Gerard (Geraert van Saintes). Gerard was a friend of Ruusbroec and a Carthusian from Herne. The other biography was written by an Augustinian from Groenendaal named Henricus Pomerius (Hendrik Utenbogaerde) who lived from 1382 to 1469. The “prologue” by Gerard was written during Ruusbroec’s lifetime, probably around 1363, and seems to be a relatively good biographical resource, given that it is does not contain the typical extravagances normally found in works of hagiography.

It is interesting to note that the sources maintain discreet silence regarding what could possibly have been an illegitimate birth. Geert Warnar and Rik Van Nieuwenhove both note the strangeness of this silence regarding the circumstances of the birth of Ruusbroec. Warnar not apart from the Opera Omnia, in terms of breadth and depth, is undoubtedly the most significant collection of critical scholarship on Ruusbroec published in English.

The work by Pomerius, De Origine Monasterii Viridis Vallis, was published in Analecta Bollandiana 4 (1885): 257-334. Die Prologe van her Gerardus was published by W. de Vreese in Het Belfort 10 (1895): 7-20. These two works have since been translated into Dutch by Benedictines in Bonheiden as Geraert van Saintes & Hendrik Utenbogaerde: De Twee Oudste Bronnen van het Leven van Jan Van Ruusbroec door zijn Getuigenissen Bevestigd, Mystieke Teksten met Commentaar, no. 4 (Brugge: Uitgeverij Tabor, 1981). Cited in Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 198.

Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 7.

Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 9; Warnar, Literature and Mysticism, 12.
only notes this but also claims that this silence was “very likely meant to conceal an illegitimate birth.”\textsuperscript{16} This is within the realm of possibility, though too strong of a conclusion to be drawn from the evidence, of which there seems to be none according to John Arblaster and Rob Faesen.\textsuperscript{17} Regardless, in Pomerius’ writing Ruusbroec’s father is never mentioned while his mother is described as a single parent who reluctantly let her son leave the village of Ruisbroek to attend school in Brussels at the age of eleven. At this point the young boy moved in with his relative, an uncle, Jan Hinkaert. Hinkaert was a chaplain in Brussels at the Church of St. Gudula.\textsuperscript{18} Though this may have meant that there was not an extreme separation from his mother, moving to Brussels would have been a significant change for the young Ruusbroec. The village of Ruisbroek was but a small hamlet. Brussels, on the other hand, was a large city by the standards of the fourteenth century, containing trade industry, which was flourishing and a growing allure as the new dwelling place of the dukes of Brabant. Moreover, young Ruusbroec now found himself to be part of a patrician family of substantial wealth. Geert Warnar gives a helpful description of this new context when he says,

Gerelm, the father of Jan Hinckaert, had repeatedly served as an alderman. He was the pater familias of the seven clans (or lineages) from whose ranks the members of the Brussels city council were appointed. Within this oligarchy there was a complicated network of interdependent kinships and relationships based on what we today would consider a broad definition of family.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 12.


\textsuperscript{18} Some have thought that perhaps Hinkaert was Ruusbroec’s father rather than his uncle, though Nieuwenhove notes that this seems unlikely given that Ruusbroec later is so vehement in his criticisms of priests who shamelessly house and support their illegitimate children with the funds of the Church. So it seems unlikely that Ruusbroec was what Germans call “ein Pfaffenkind” (the child of a priest). Nieuwenhove, \textit{Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian}, 9.

\textsuperscript{19} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 12.
Regardless of exactly how Jan Hinckaert was related to Ruusbroec, this new situational context in Brussels, both geographical and familial, was one in which Hinckaert provided for Ruusbroec the access to the ecclesial and educational formation which would allow Ruusbroec to begin to flourish as a mystical theologian, priest, and writer. Young Ruusbroec’s life certainly took a turn for the better in many ways upon his transition to Brussels.

 Warnar explores the question of Ruusbroec’s relation to Hinkaert and his larger, wealthy, patrician family in more detail than is warranted here. However, his investigation does open up a wider view of understanding Ruusbroec’s context in Brussels and how it creates the ground out of which Ruusbroec’s maturation as a mystical theologian, priest, and spiritual director blooms. This is true even though we cannot know the details of Ruusbroec’s exact relation with Hinckaert’s patrician family with certainty. Three of the interesting issues Warnar raises are Ruusbroec’s relation to Jan Hinckaert, other possibilities for Ruusbroec’s biological father, and the possibility of a biological sister that Warnar believes scholars have overlooked. The difficulty with determining Hinckaert’s relation to Ruusbroec centers on the vague ways in which the various manuscripts of De origine refer to the ties between the two. Some of these manuscripts simply refer to a ‘family relationship’ (affinitas generis). However, one particular manuscript of De origine says that Hinckaert was a blood relation of Ruusbroec (cognati sui) and neve, which can mean Ruusbroec is a ‘nephew’ or ‘cousin.’ However neve can also mean, in a broader sense, ‘friend’ or ‘relative.’ Warnar also points out that the patrician family tree of which Hinckaert was a part does include a cousin of Hinckaert named Jan. The father of this Jan was Willem van Eleghem, who is probably another illegitimate descendant of Gerelm Hinckaert. Warner says that this Willem has often been put forward as a strong possibility as the mystic’s father. However, he is by no means the only candidate for this role. Lastly, Warnar notes that he believes that in the midst of all the fruitless effort of scholars to determine Ruusbroec’s ancestry these researchers have overlooked what seems to be much more concrete evidence about a Poor Clare named Margriet van Meerbeke, who may have been Ruusbroec’s biological sister.

 Ruusbroec wrote The Seven Enclosures for this nun from Brussels Cloudenklooster. A fifteenth-century copy of the work describes it as ‘an epistle which the priest Jan Ruusbroec sent to his sister.’ Although this could simply be affectionate language for a nun, Warnar believes it is understandable how the scribe could have drawn this conclusion since Margriet is addressed by Ruusbroec three times as ‘dear sister’ (lieve zuster). According to Warnar the writing contains such an intimate tone and personal subject matter that one can reasonably conclude that Ruusbroec was compelled to write the treatise out of concern for the spiritual well-being of a kinswoman. Other than the Enclosures there is nothing that indicates that Margriet is Ruusbroec’s sister or half-sister. Even if she was, it does not solve the conundrum of his paternity. Warnar, Literature and Mysticism, 13-14.
A. Ruusbroec’s Formative Education

In assuming the role of protector and provider Hinckaert saw to it that Ruusbroec received a place in Brussels at St Gudule’s Church. Warnar describes this when he says,

Jan Hinckaert assumed the role of foster father and protector, seeing to it that his protégé received holy orders and was given a position as vicar choral at the Collegiate Church of St. Gudula, meaning that, in the absence of one of the canons, Ruusbroec took his place in the liturgical offices. To begin with, however, Hinckaert sent his young ward to school, for it was there that the foundation was laid for a career in the Church.21

It is undoubtedly true that Ruusbroec would have likely attended a parish school in his native village of Ruisbroek, but his going on to further education and development was entirely because of Jan Hinckaert and his wealthy patrician family. Hinckaert began Ruusbroec’s further education by sending him to a chapter school in Brussels. Unlike other mystical authors of his day—such as Johannes Tauler or Meister Eckhart—Ruusbroec did not enter a religious order at a young age. Figures such as Tauler and Eckhart were German Dominicans whose mystical inclinations would have been nurtured from a young age by their religious orders through being immersed in constant fellowship with like-minded friars and intensive study. This was due to the fact that the Dominicans prepared them for a lifetime of preaching. Ruusbroec’s context of being first a vicar choral and later a chaplain would probably have been less inspiring, but living as a devout young cleric in Jan Hinckaert’s household would have given him the opportunity to be immersed in scripture as well as the liturgy of the Church. The part played by Hinckaert in Ruusbroec’s formation as a spiritual writer and mystical theologian cannot be overestimated. Around 1400 Dirck van Delft, Holland’s court chaplain, wrote that the duties of a cleric included serving as an assistant to the priest during the Mass and Divine Office.22 In addition to this

21 Warnar, Literature and Mysticism, 14.

22 Warnar, Literature and Mysticism, 14-17.
assistance provided in Mass the students were expected to study the holy scriptures and canon law as well as chant the psalms on their own.

It is undoubtedly true that Warnar’s claim that Ruusbroec would one day enlarge the boundaries of Middle Dutch literature was due in large part to his innate disposition but also from his deep rootedness in theology. Hinckaert’s role in providing the means for Ruusbroec’s rooting in the depths of the soil of the Christian theological tradition is described by Geert Warnar when he writes:

…This achievement would have been impossible without a profound knowledge of theology. This phase in Ruusbroec’s development as an author unfolded chiefly under the tutelage of Jan Hinckaert - in whom the mystic had found both a Maecenas and a mentor, for even though the wealthy priest’s primary concern was to look after young Ruusbroec as a member of the family, he must soon have perceived the boy’s exceptional character.\(^\text{23}\)

Not only did Hinckaert provide immediate benefits for Ruusbroec as his caretaker, he additionally provided for Ruusbroec and the entire community at Groenendaal by using his wealth to donate what the archives reveal as a very substantive contribution to Groenendaal’s library by giving marvelous manuscripts for the study and celebration of the liturgy. In 1350 Ruusbroec’s benefactor also donated a gorgeous chalice to the community. The donor of such valuable objects and texts would likely have been both a wealthy man as well as a pious and devoted priest. Warnar points out that, even if it could be afforded, it was not customary for clerics to own a personal reference library for the liturgical office. From the priestly belongings of Hinckaert it seems that he took his priestly work with devoted seriousness and this would have undoubtedly provided a powerful example for the young Ruusbroec to emulate.\(^\text{24}\)

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\(^{24}\) Warnar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 17-18. Warnar spends a substantial amount of time exploring possibilities of Ruusbroec’s paternity such as Hinckaert and others in the wider family lineage(s) of the geographical context. As already noted, it would take this project too far afield
During Ruusbroec’s early years in Brussels the provisions by Hinckaert, from which the development of Ruusbroec benefited, consisted primarily within what Warnar calls “the triangle formed by the house of Jan Hinckaert, the Church of St. Gudula and the chapter school, which was housed in a former granary.” The education in this chapter school would have provided an important formational launching point for Ruusbroec’s development into one of Western Christianity’s greatest mystical theologians. These chapter schools were used primarily as a way to fund the Church with people to function in its activities such as its liturgical life. There was such an intertwining of school and the Divine Office that the person who filled the role of cantor could also be the same person to fulfill the duties of Latin master.

Life as a schoolboy in one of the chapter schools in the Low Countries would have meant a very strict ordering of the life of young Ruusbroec. While there would have been a substantial amount of edification, there was also a significant supply of regimentation that formed the day to day life of the students. The Latin master would have probably felt a strong propulsion to rule with an iron hand, given the fact that his duties were many and he rarely would have been to spend copious amounts of time on this topic, particularly given the fact that much of it, while fascinating, is still within the realm of speculation. It is interesting however to note that should Ruusbroec have been an illegitimate birth it would have been incredibly difficult for him to get past the exclusion from the priesthood that illegitimate sons experienced, “as long as the problem of their defectus natalium had not been solved by dispensation. This could be obtained by submitting a petition to the department of the papal Curia specially created to handle dispensational procedures: the penitentiaria apostolica. The granting of dispensation entailed costs that, for many, proved an insurmountable obstacle on the path to ecclesiastical office.” Warnar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 18. If illegitimacy was indeed the case, which seems likely, though it seems impossible at this point to say with certainty just who Ruusbroec’s father was, then Hinckaert and his patrician family would have been an enormous help in Ruusbroec receiving his priestly ordination.

provided an assistant. Furthermore, as the Late Middle Ages progressed, the variety of pupils under the direction of the teacher expanded from the choristers, which the chapter schools had been originally established to educate, to other students who were aspiring canons who needed more education as well as those such as Ruusbroec who were underage vicars choral. So, while the forcefulness of discipline would perhaps be distasteful and morally problematic in the contemporary West, without such means it would have been difficult for these lone teachers to keep the peace amongst the students.

These students of various ages were formed in an education that had a three-fold shape. The three primary components of the school’s program were grammar, music, and dialectics. The largest proportion of the classes and lessons was spent in working with grammar, which included reading, writing and speaking Latin correctly but was composed of a great deal more than this. With the development of an intense acquisition of Latin the instructor would often move on to lead the pupils into an expansion of the grammar lessons into forays of writing composition, stylistics, skills of oratory and related disciplines of rhetoric.

Given the fact that much of the particularities of the curriculum was shaped by the person in charge, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to paint a clearer picture of Ruusbroec’s education. The material discussed in classes was drawn from a text book that was compiled by the master/teacher himself and the teacher provided commentary and glosses as he deemed necessary. Therefore, this compilation or curriculum varied to a large extent based upon the

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26 It is interesting to note, following Geert Warnar, that miniature statues from the medieval era portray teachers as wielding canes as keepers of order. “Even Ruusbroec had vivid memories of the master’s arsenal. Later on, in *On the Spiritual Tabernacle*, he continued to link the symbolic meaning of *ferula* (the giant fennel plant) to obedience, because its stalks were used to make the rods ‘with which they beat schoolboys’ (*daer men die scoliere mede sleet*).” Warnar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 24-25.
religious order of the teacher, his preferences, and his expertise.\textsuperscript{27} Regardless of all the specific
details of curriculum, it is clear that the medieval chapter schools retained the highest place in
the culture of Brussels for educating boys in higher levels of Latin and clergy education. This
was the case in Ruusbroec’s time in the chapter school of St. Gudula and remained so after Duke
Jan III’s decree in 1320, which led to a differentiation in education in the city. This decree
established a cluster of primary schools in response to a controversy involving the dissatisfaction
with instruction at the chapter school on the part of several citizens.\textsuperscript{28} Even with the development
of secularization, beginning in the 1300’s, the Church continued to provide the Institutional
framework necessary for the training and education of clergy. And this had a significant
influence upon Middle Dutch literature.\textsuperscript{29}

Given the structure and composition of the curriculum, Ruusbroec, and other students like
him who studied at the chapter or “Latin” schools, would have been steeped in the language and
learning of the Church at the end of his four-year course of instruction. However, those
following scholarly ambitions would have found this education to require further study if they
were to make significant scholarly contributions to Latin literature. This would lead them to the

\textsuperscript{27} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 25.

\textsuperscript{28} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 26. For further treatment of and insight into this
controversy in Brussels see A.M.J. van Buuren, “‘Want ander kosten sign my te hoghe’. De
staedschool in de Nederlanden in de late Middeleeuwen”, in \textit{Scholing in de middeleeuwen}, eds.
R.E.V. Stuip & C. Vellekoop (Hilversum, NLD: Verloren, 1995), 221-238.

\textsuperscript{29} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 26. For more on the history of Dutch literature in
general see the helpful compilation (especially the first two sections on the Middle Ages) by
Theo Hermans, ed. \textit{A Literary History of the Low Countries} (Rochester, NY: Camden House,
2009), 1-152. For the wider environment of mysticism in the Low Countries following the death
of Ruusbroec and the impact of his and Hadewijch’s thought upon this later Netherlandish
mysticism see the important collection \textit{Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries}. Rik van
Nieuwenhove, Robert Faesen, and Helen Rolfson, eds. \textit{Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low
Countries}, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 1-35.
faculties of the universities. Ruusbroec did not seek this education in the universities and neither did most Middle Dutch authors.

This level of education was generally not enough for them to make a serious contribution, as Jan van Brussel [a fellow townsman and possibly fellow pupil of Ruusbroec’s] did, to Latin literature, but this did not relegate the Middle Dutch language and its literature to the sidelines of intellectual history. The wealth and depth of the Dutch literature stemming from Ruusbroec’s century is certainly due to the authors’ high level of education.\textsuperscript{30}

In the next section of the present chapter, I will explore the Flemish mystic’s possible theological education and formation beyond his chapter-school years. For now, it suffices to say that, given his contribution not only to the history and content of Middle Dutch literature but also to the larger Christian mystical tradition, Ruusbroec had a strong educational background.

As noted above, the curriculum in the medieval chapter school was largely determined by the master or teacher. The texts used by the master ranged widely over general historiography, biblical history, rhetoric, ethics, medicine, astronomy, geography, biology, hagiography, and, of course, theology (which would have included what today are often separated, erroneously, into “theology” and “spirituality”).\textsuperscript{31} Warnar helpfully describes how these various subject areas had become part of the context of the chapter school, particularly in the medieval Dutch context. He states,

\ldots[These subjects had] permeated Dutch literature at the turn of the fourteenth century through the works of Jacob van Maerlant, whom Jan van Boendale referred to as the ‘father of Dutch literature altogether’ (vader der dietsche dictren algader). Around 1330 Boendale combined a large number of these subjects in Der leken spiegel (The Layman’s Mirror), an encyclopaedic work in the form of a didactic poem. Other pedagogical

\textsuperscript{30} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 27.

\textsuperscript{31} Below, in the methodology section, I will discuss the problematic nature of the contemporary separation of theology and spirituality and how this would not have been operative for Ruusbroec in particular and the broader tradition of Christian thought in general.
writings in Middle Dutch opened up windows to the world of ethical and religious issues.\(^\text{32}\)

Warnar notes that this kind of reading was a dimension of the spiritual formational activities of the laity rather than the school curriculum. Nevertheless, the Latin of the school lessons was also interspersed with such vernacular writings.\(^\text{33}\)

The curriculum of the chapter school and Middle Dutch literature overlapped in a number of ways and this can be seen throughout Ruusbroec’s writings as well. For example, he opens his first work, *The Realm of Lovers*, with a sketch of Creation, which was a standard topic of encyclopaedic literature of the Middle Ages. Just as Jan van Boendale had done in *Der leken spiegel*, though admittedly in a more simple way, Ruusbroec examines the Trinity, the heavenly spheres, the four elements, choirs of angels and the nature of humanity in a fixed order through a customary medieval genre that described a number of aspects of the medieval vision of the world. Additionally, Ruusbroec concludes his last writing, *The Twelve Beguines*, with an adaptation of the Middle Dutch Harmony of the Gospels.\(^\text{34}\)

In spite of the fact that Ruusbroec uses a technique of exploration of the natural world that is similar in style to Boendale in *Der leken spiegel*, the focus on factual information about the natural world in works like that of Boendale is not that of the Flemish mystical theologian. Rather, Ruusbroec’s attention is drawn to his transcendental view of the world as porous to the divine reality of the Holy Trinity and to characteristics of the human soul that are reflective of the Triune God. This is the heart of Ruusbroec’s work rather than a description of nature that is more focused on the realm of nature in terms of its physical makeup. Ruusbroec would have


\(^{\text{33}}\) Warnar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 27.

received instruction at the school that delved into deep reflection upon the Holy Trinity and the
nature of the human soul at a fairly high level as part of his theological formation.

An important characteristic of the formation in the chapter school, which needs to be
highlighted, is that prospective priests were not instructed in the practice of scholastic debate.
They were formed rather in the Church’s liturgy. They were trained to take part in the praise of
God through the celebration of the Divine Office. The instruction in theological truth that the
young clerics received was made up of the truths on which the liturgy was based. As Warnar
helpfully elucidates,

Their religious ideas were nurtured more by the liturgy of the Church than by the
scholasticism of the university. This is demonstrated by Maerlant in his strophic Vander
drievoûdiche (On the Trinity), when he clarifies the relationship of Father, Son, and
Holy Ghost in verses patterned after church hymns rather than Petrus Lombardus’s
Sententia, the handbook of academic theology, whose chapters on the Trinity must have
been studied intensively by [someone like] Jan van Brussel during his university years in
Paris.

Ruusbroec certainly had more in common with Maerlant than Lombard, given the fact that he
was trained in the same type of religious education and Divine Office. Because of his rhetorical
training and Latin in the chapter school as well as his consistent immersion in the Divine Office,
Ruusbroec’s world was saturated with the language of Scripture. This language is what forms
much of the content and shape of Ruusbroec’s early writings. However, as Ruusbroec matured

35 Warnar, Literature and Mysticism, 29-30.

36 Warnar, Literature and Mysticism, 29-31. Warnar also notes interestingly that not only
did the Psalms influence the structure and content of Ruusbroec’s writings but also had a
significant influence upon many Dutch vernacular authors. He also notes that the sources of
Maerlant’s Strofische gedichten (Strophic Poems) can be found in the same field of hymns that
inspired Hadewijch. A blooming forth of religious verse came upon the Dutch vernacular scene
that occurred in imitation of the great Beguine poet and this undoubtedly had an influence on
Ruusbroec as well, according to Warnar. For more on Ruusbroec’s relation to and reliance upon
Hadewijch, particularly her metaphor of courtly love, see Jessica A. Boon, “Trinitarian Love
Mysticism: Ruusbroec, Hadewijch, and the Gendered Experience of the Divine,” Church History
72 (2003): 484-503. For further exploration of the connection between Ruusbroec and
as a mystical theological writer, writing in verse became one of only a number of genres that he wove into his writings. For instance, in *The Realm of Lovers* and *The Twelve Beguines* we see a variety of styles and genres such as allegory, sermon, treatise, dialogue, prayer, and meditation. All of this seems to be firmly rooted in Scripture for Ruusbroec, which is congruent with the fact that the Brabantine mystic was reared in the chapter school and the Divine Office. He always seemed to be shaped by and captivated by the Church’s liturgy.

**B. Theological Formation Beyond the Chapter School**

While Ruusbroec undoubtedly received a strong education in matters of theology from the chapter school, his writings betray a deeper orientation to matters theological than the chapter school would have been able to grant him during his time there. He did not receive the formal education of the schools in Paris for instance. However, as Warnar notes,

> Learned brothers in the mendicant orders were embroiled in a lively debate on the metaphysics of mysticism, and their ideas found their way into the vernacular through sermons and tracts. Close examination of the *Espousals* reveals just how surprising its theological content really is, especially if we recall that Ruusbroec’s training as a chaplain made him an intellectual lightweight compared with the well-schooled Dominicans who set the tone in contemporary mystical theology. A well-known name in Ruusbroec’s milieu was Hendrik of Leuven, who around 1300 was serving as prior of the Dominicans in his native city. This former lector at the prestigious stadium generale of the Dominicans at Cologne certainly surpassed Ruusbroec in erudition and expertise, but as an author of Middle Dutch prose Hendrik of Leuven - whose only writings in the...
vernacular consist of a single sermon and a letter to a female confessed - could not hold a candle to the chaplain.\textsuperscript{38}

While it is certainly true that this superiority in comparison to the vernacular writings of the Dominican may be seen as evidence of God’s gracious empowerment of Ruusbroec, the theological sophistication of writings such as \textit{The Espousals} and \textit{The Sparkling Stone}, for instance, shows that the Flemish mystic most likely had theological training beyond that of the chapter school, as helpful and enriching as the chapter school education would have been. In Pomerius’ more hagiographic account of Ruusbroec’s life we are told that the mystic chose to study at the school of the wisdom of God after gaining only vain intellectual advantages with little to no spiritual benefit from formal education.\textsuperscript{39} It may be that this attitude of Pomerius points to what Bernard McGinn describes as the growing tensions, in Ruusbroec’s time and the remainder of the 14\textsuperscript{th} and on into the 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries, between the more formal theology of the Schoolmen (\textit{scholastic theology}) and that of the major mystics (which tended to be \textit{vernacular theology}).\textsuperscript{40} Nonetheless, there was a complex relationship between the three major modes of

\textsuperscript{38} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 36-37.

\textsuperscript{39} This is pointed out in Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 37.

\textsuperscript{40} Bernard McGinn, “The Significance of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology,” \textit{Louvain Studies} 31 (2006), 22. It must be acknowledged however that one must avoid caricaturing too large of an opposition between the three dominant modes of medieval theology (scholastic, monastic, and vernacular). As McGinn notes, “The three modes of medieval theology had complex interrelationships, mutual conversations, that put the lie to any simple oppositional model. Bernard of Clairvaux opposed Peter Abelard, but he was also a correspondent and admirer of other early scholastic masters, such as Peter Lombard. Many of the thirteenth century female vernacular theologians, such as Mechtild of Magdeburg, were aided by learned Dominicans in setting down and disseminating their message. The conversation between men and women that characterized vernacular theology is also evident in the case of Ruusbroec, who composed four texts for the Poor Clare of Brussels, Margriet van Meerbeke. There was also a conversation between the Latin of the international clerical class and the developing vernaculars. This conversation began in the late twelfth century when Bernard’s \textit{Sermons super Cantica} were translated into French. In the thirteenth century some vernacular mystical texts, such as Mechtild’s \textit{Flowing Light of the Godhead}, were put in Latin to make them available to an
medieval theology (scholastic theology, monastic theology, and vernacular theology), and Ruusbroec’s writings show that he likely ventured much further in his theological formation than his exposure to the fundamentals of Christian theology by his Latin master would have given him, which points to the benefit of this set of complex relationships to Ruusbroec’s development. The sources on his life give no indication of further theological education so we cannot be certain about further training. However, though we cannot have absolute certitude, it seems that after his school years Ruusbroec most likely continued to study theology, given the theological profundity of his writings.

If we grant that it is highly likely that Ruusbroec received additional theological training beyond the chapter school (and given the profundity of theological awareness in writings such as The Realm of Lovers, The Espousals, and The Sparkling Stone, to name only three, we certainly should) then it behoves one’s exploration of Ruusbroec’s theological formation to ask questions about what other resources for theological formation would have been available to him. There were, by the beginning of the fourteenth century, a number of Brussels clerics who made the trek international audience. Among the paradoxes of vernacular theology was the fact that its audience was both wider in the sense that it was available to those who did not have formal higher education and yet also narrower because it was limited to a particular language domain. The conversations that existed between formal scholastic theology and the new vernacular theology, however, while never eliminated, were increasingly strained during the course of the fourteenth century—another important aspect of Ruusbroec’s historical context that deserves comment.” McGinn, “The Significance of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology,” 22. McGinn does a better job of describing this complex relationship and holding to the complex relational vision while describing particular figures such as Ruusbroec than does Jean Leclercq in his monumental work The Love of Learning and the Desire for God. This highly illuminating work of Leclercq’s begins by acknowledging that one must acknowledge that there were not impermeable barriers between monastic theology and scholastic theology, Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 3. However, the work tends to proceed in a way that leaves the reader wondering if in fact there was not an insurmountable barrier between the two modes. While Leclercq has done the academy a wonderful service with his classic exploration of monastic theology, one must commend McGinn’s work more than that of Leclercq in terms of giving a fuller picture of this complex relationship between the various modes.
to Paris to try their hand at university but these were not numerous. However, though we cannot know with certainty, Geert Warnar has mounted a convincing case that one could at least say that a likely scenario could have been that there was enough of a connection between Paris university education and Brussels by the time of Ruusbroec’s theological formation that the Flemish mystic could have sat at the feet of a Paris educated theological master in Brussels. Warnar argues that there is growing evidence in secondary scholarship that a significant dimension of the development and growth of Middle Dutch literature around 1300 was influenced by more significant ties with Paris. However, while there were clerics who made the trek from Brussels to Paris, Warnar informs us that this was not done en masse. These ties between Middle Dutch literature and Paris came through the mendicants. Warnar explains:

> Many lines ran from Paris — in Ruusbroec’s day the pre-eminent centre of learning in general and theology in particular — to networks outside the academic world. The most notable intermediaries were the mendicants, who were taught by university-trained lectors in preparation for their prime task of preaching God’s word. ⁴¹

So, in order to discern at least a plausible scenario for Ruusbroec’s theological education/formation beyond the chapter school it is helpful to look to the Brussels convents/friaries ⁴² of the Carmelites and Franciscans. As noted by Warnar, these were the local centers where mendicant orders distinguished themselves as guilds of professional preachers of the highest order. ⁴³

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⁴² Note that “convent,” while used mostly in popular contemporary English to denote a house of religious sisters or nuns, can describe a house of religious brothers or sisters living under a rule and typically referring to mendicants, as distinguished from monastics. I am using the term in this sense.

This focus on preaching was no side issue in the development of theological masters/teachers (magistri) who came to teach in the universities that developed out of the cathedral and monastic schools during the High Middle Ages. As Frederick Bauerschmidt has shown, preaching had developed in this period as a key component to the identity of the theological magistri.\textsuperscript{44} This was due partly to the growth of confidence in human reason’s graced/God-given (though the human was in some sense still fallen in acknowledgment of the continuing Augustinian influence) ability to come to discern the way and presence of God through Creation/Nature, which resulted in a renaissance in the realm of high culture.\textsuperscript{45} However,

\textsuperscript{44} Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt sheds light upon the three primary tasks of theological magistri that developed and came to be expected in the universities of the High Middle Ages (Bauerschmidt particularly explores what was expected of the faculty of the University of Paris) when he declares, “The magistri of the theology faculty at Paris had the tasks of explicating scripture (legere), conducting public disputations (disputer), and preaching (predicate), tasks that were first outlined in the twelfth century by Peter the Chanter.” Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, \textit{Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ} (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.

\textsuperscript{45} Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, \textit{Thomas Aquinas}, 2. Bauerschmidt describes this growth in “high culture” as composed of the integration of life in Europe in terms of government and education which arose out of the cathedral and monastic schools and grew into the universities (and in his description of what he calls this “ferment” of the Middle Ages that helped give rise to the figure of Thomas Aquinas he relies particularly on the work of Marie-Dominique Chenu and R.W. Southern, among others). Curriculum in these schools came to be composed of the trivium—composed of the linguistic arts of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic—and the quadrivium—the mathematical arts of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. The developments that led to the European context for this high cultural ferment is articulated helpfully by R.W. Southern when he lists the said developments, “[There was] a large and continuing growth in population and wealth, the cessation of attacks on the heartland of Europe, the new opportunities for large-scale government and for meeting the intellectual challenges within Christendom, and growth in the Latin-based and clerically populated schools which produced an integrated system of thought that—despite the contempt of later critics—was one of the most formidable and coherent intellectual and governmental structures that has ever been produced.” R.W. Southern, \textit{Foundations}, vol. 1 of \textit{Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe} (Oxford, UK: Wiley Blakwell, 1995), 141. Quoted in Bauerschmidt, \textit{Thomas Aquinas}, 2. Another work that is helpful in tracing the emergence of scholasticism, of which Bauerschmidt makes prominent use as well, is Marie Dominique Chenu, \textit{Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
it was due in large part to the renewed focus upon and recovery of the apostolic life (vita apostolica) by religious orders of the mendicant variety. As Bauerschmidt notes,

The twelfth century was not only a renaissance in the realm of ‘high culture,’ the realm of schools and masters and texts. It was also a time of religious movements that sought a rebirth of the vita apostolica— the “apostolic life” — which grew out of the eleventh century Gregorian reform’s emphasis on the primitive Christian community depicted in the Acts of the Apostles as an enduring model for the Church. In the eleventh and early twelfth centuries this ideal was largely interpreted in terms of the communal life and austerity of the monastery, giving birth to such communities as the monastery of Cîteaux. But as the twelfth century proceeded, the emphasis shifted somewhat from the common life of the apostolic community depicted in Acts to the preaching activity of the apostles. The religious revival sparked by the Gregorian reform took on a distinctively “evangelical” cast, both in its emphasis upon the gospels as the model for the Christian life, and in the emphasis placed on preaching.46

46 Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, Thomas Aquinas, 8.

47 Bauerschmidt describes the difference between emphases of the Franciscans and Dominicans when he states, “The two great mendicant orders of the thirteenth century, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, both embraced poverty, though out of somewhat different motivations. For the Franciscans, there was a mystique—even a mysticism—of poverty that saw the renunciation of goods as a way of identifying with the poor of Christ. The Dominican approach was far more prosaic: renunciation of goods gave the friar the freedom needed for the primary task of preaching. As Simon Tugwell puts it, while both Franciscans and Dominicans are embodiments of the quest for the vita apostolica, the primary focus for Francis is on vita—the life lived in imitation of Christ—while for Dominic the focus was on apostolica—the apostle’s task of preaching.” Bauerschmidt, Thomas Aquinas, 15.
Carmelite convents. Warnar is worth quoting at length when he purports to show this connection (or at least to show the strong probability of such) when he states,

Ruusbroec demonstrates commensurate expertise [in terms of formal skills acquired for the task of preaching] from the very first sentence of his written oeuvre. *The Realm of Lovers* begins according to the principles of the thematic sermon. Ruusbroec divides a biblical text into five sections, bestowing the individual sections with deeper meanings that will be the subject of his argument. If this were an incidental introductio thematis, one might suppose that Ruusbroec had stumbled accidentally on a model sermon while leafing through the books in the chapter library or listening to the friars who preached at set times at the Church of St. Gudula. The Realm, however, displays a complex system of divisions and subdivisions based on the rules of the medieval *artes praedicandi*. The highly praised structure of the *Espousals* betrays equally great exegetical adeptness; moreover, Ruusbroec’s longest work, *On the Spiritual Tabernacle*, was the first biblical commentary written in the Dutch language. The most significant indication of the nature of Ruusbroec’s expertise is to be found in the opening of the *Tabernacle*, which begins with an interpretation of I Corinthians 9:24: ‘So run, that ye may obtain’ (‘Loept alsoe dat ghi beg ripen moeget’). Following the *artes praedicandi*, Ruusbroec divides the biblical passage into three parts: the running itself (run/ loept), the way in which it is done (so/ alseoe) and the object of running (begripen in the sense of ‘grasping,’ both literally and figuratively). The Franciscan Petrus de San Benedicto had explained the same aspects of this passage as actus, modus, and fructus in a sermon he gave in Latin around 1280 at the University of Paris. 48

This awareness of the forms of sermon composition from the *artes praedicandi* is one piece of evidence that shows that Ruusbroec may have had further theological training (even if on an unofficial basis which was provided by the hospitality of the Carmelite or Franciscan convents) from either or both the Franciscan or Carmelite convent. It is perhaps possible that Ruusbroec developed this ability to write treatises in the forms discussed in the *artes praedicandi* from compendiums of sermons or mystical theological writings from the Christian mystical tradition (such collections were common and, as mentioned above, would have been part of the teaching tools of theological masters in the chapter schools, monastic schools, cathedral schools, and the developing universities) in the Groenendaal library or the libraries of the aforementioned convents in the Brussels area. However, given the level of sophistication of the use of these

structures in writings such as the *Espousals*, whose structure gets quite complex in its spiraling commentary of the 3 “unities” explored through the sections of the parable of the virgins and the bridegroom in Matthew 25:6, the *Tabernacle*, and *The Sparkling Stone,* it seems unlikely that Ruusbroec would have been able to glean this level of structural expertise by simply coming across some compiled sermons, a glossed Bible, or some commentaries in a library, though he would likely have been allowed to peruse such books not only at Groenendaal but also in libraries of the mendicant orders such as the Franciscans. These books were available in the libraries of mendicant orders in order for traveling friars to avail themselves of the works to gain greater knowledge and to hone their skills as preachers in various stopping places along their journeys.\(^49\)

Furthermore, not only does Ruusbroec display a proclivity for awareness of sermon and writing structure seen in manuals such as the *artes praedicandi*; he also exhibits a profound knowledge of Franciscan mystical theology:

Judging by the expertise he brought to bear on his subject matter, Ruusbroec was as familiar with Franciscan theology as the now forgotten Petrus de San Benedicto. Apart from similarities in treatment and technique, Ruusbroec’s writings have much in common with the mystical theology of the Friars Minor. Their greatest authority, Bonaventure, had written masterpieces — the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and *De triplici via* — on the contemplation of God. In the Espousals in particular, Ruusbroec aimed at creating a Dutch counterpart to these magisterial syntheses of devotion, erudition and literature.\(^50\)

It seems natural that Ruusbroec would have drawn inspiration from the sources of Franciscan mysticism given the fact that he could have become acquainted with them near Jan Hinckaert’s residence. This would have been the case since the Friars Minor settled in Brussels near the Grand Place as early as 1238. Though it may not seem to be the case from unearthed foundations

\(^49\) Warnar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 43.

\(^50\) Warnar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 43-44.
uncovered in the mid to late twentieth century, the Franciscan convent was the second most important religious institution in the city during Ruusbroec’s day. It was second only to the collegiate church at St. Gudula and was rivaled as a center of learning in Brussels only by the convent of the Carmelites. In fact, the Carmelites had appointed two lectors in theology in 1329. Both of these brothers had earned their doctorates in divinity in Paris; their names were Matthias of Cologne and Johannes Guldenaere. These two alternated as lector and prior at the Carmelite convent of Brussels from 1320 to 1350. And while it may be the case that Ruusbroec would have found a kindred spirit in Guldenaere, given his love for the Divine Office, he would have been too young to be Ruusbroec’s teacher.

It seems that the most viable candidate for being the teacher of the Flemish mystic beyond his chapter school years was a Franciscan called Henricus, who served the Friars Minor in Brussels as lector around 1315.\textsuperscript{51} Henricus’ foremost responsibility was of course to the friars he was training at the convent. However, clerics such as Ruusbroec, who were not officially affiliated with the convent, would have been welcome to sit in on his classes.

Thus it is conceivable that Ruusbroec was present as an auditor at a Franciscan course of Bible study aimed at the acquisition of preaching skills (such as those used in the Realm and the Espousals) and generally relying on exegetical textbooks like the Historia scholastica (the main source of the Tabernacle). Ruusbroec could have learned much from Henricus that would prove useful later on. There is even a chance that Henricus brought up the topic of mystical theology in his lectures, since it was a subject on which his previously mentioned colleagues Rudolf of Biberach and Bertram of Ahlen had written important works. The latter, in particular, deserves special mention in connection with the Franciscan influence on Ruusbroec. It was in his capacity as lector that Ahlen wrote his mystical work, full of references to Dionysius.\textsuperscript{52}

It may very well be the case that Ahlen’s confrere Henricus shared a similar interest in Denys when teaching his students. While we cannot be sure, it seems that this route of post-chapter

\textsuperscript{51} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 44.

\textsuperscript{52} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 44-45.
school study is fairly plausible. This is particularly the case when we consider that Ruusbroec’s work the *Realm* contains clear traces of the influence of Franciscan mystical theology. Warnar is certainly correct when he notes that, “…it is all the more regrettable that the information on Henricus is limited to the statement that in 1315 he represented his convent at a chapter meeting in Fulda — a meeting, interestingly enough, also attended by Bertram of Ahlen.”

As a vernacular mystical theologian and author the Brabantine mystic rarely cites sources. Nevertheless he shows familiarity with classical mystical texts of thinkers such as Augustine, Denys (also called “Dionysius” and “Pseudo-Dionysius”), Benard of Clairvaux, and Bonaventure. Of particular influence in his mystical theology are the works of the beguine mystical theologian Hadewijch and William of St. Thierry. In chapter two I will say more about the influence of such figures when I articulate the general contours of the Flemish mystic’s trinitarian mystical theology. For now, the possibility of Ruusbroec’s sitting at the feet of a Franciscan theological master, though conjecture, helps us to see a reasonable possibility for Ruusbroec’s post-chapter school theological formation, given the clear traces of Franciscan and Dionysian influence to be found in his writing. This admittedly incomplete construction of

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54 I will primarily refer to the monumental late 5th to early 6th Christian mystical theologian as “Denys” rather than “Pseudo-Dionysius.” After years of scholarly consensus that this figure was not actually a direct disciple of the Apostle Paul, it seems to me that the designation “Denys” or “Dionysius” is used much more in reference to the 5th to 6th century figure rather than the biblical character. Thus, the label “pseudo” no longer seems necessary and can be more confusing than helpful at this point in the history of Christian mystical scholarship.

55 One glaring omission from the mostly insightful, though not without its problems, work of Nieuwenhove, *Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian* is the failure to acknowledge the significance of Hadewijch’s influence upon Ruusbroec. For a brief but illuminating critique of Nieuwenhove’s failure to acknowledge Hadewijch’s influence upon Ruusbroec see the review of Nieuwenhove’s book in Amy Hollywood, “Rik van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian of the Trinity, ” Scottish Journal of Theology 59, no. 4 (2006): 490-493.
Ruusbroec’s theological training after the chapter school shows us that the reception of teaching at the Franciscan convent is at least plausible. Because of their excellent facilities and sufficient supply of trained friars, the mendicant orders had an abundance of academic scholarship at their disposal. Ruusbroec shows the influence of such scholarship on his thinking.\textsuperscript{56} Furthermore, Brussels was a flourishing city at this time with a number of good libraries that would have helped give him a solid education.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{C. The Brussels Years as Chaplain Priest (1317/18–1343)}

Ruusbroec’s years as chaplain priest in Brussels may be ones which overlapped with the period not of his formal education as a priest in training but with the possible additional \textit{formative} education of continued reading in the library of the Franciscan convent or the other libraries in Brussels as well as sitting under the tutelage of a theological master there (as well as the Carmelite convent).\textsuperscript{58} It is in this period that the Flemish mystic composes \textit{Dat rijcke der ghelieven}—\textit{The Realm of Lovers}, \textit{Die Geestelike Brulocht}—\textit{The Spiritual Espousals}, \textit{Vanden Blinkenden Steen}—\textit{The Sparkling Stone}, and part of \textit{Van den Geesteliken Tabernakel}—\textit{The Spiritual Tabernacle}. These earliest writings of the Brabantine priest and mystical theologian date from around the end of these years in Brussels. \textit{Dat rijcke der ghelieven} was his first work and is thought to date from the late 1330s. Ruusbroec had avoided sharing this work widely and

\textsuperscript{56} Warnar, \textit{Literature and Mysticism}, 45.

\textsuperscript{57} McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 5.

\textsuperscript{58} Regarding other possibilities for Ruusbroec’s education beyond the chapter school, “Some have suggested that he may have moved to the renowned Abbey of Saint-Victore in Paris for a study period; the abbey had a long tradition of combining intellectual and spiritual life. Unfortunately, the page of the abbey’s ‘guest book’—which also records the students who studied at the abbey school—for the period Ruusbroec may have been at the abbey, was cut out and is lost.” Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 51.
eventually had to clarify some of its teachings for a group of Carthusians at Herne. Nevertheless the work contains the primary ideas of his mystical theology and teaching. The Rijcke prepared the way for what is undoubtedly one of the great works of trinitarian mysticism in the history of the Western Church, Die Geestelike Brulocht. The Brulocht is considered Russbroec’s, at least in contemporary world, masterpiece and for good reason. Geert Warnar claims, “As an architect of literary texts, Ruusbroec had no equal in Middle Dutch.” This is due to its comprehensive, cathedral-like structure. Warnar poetically describes the masterpiece:

From just one biblical passage Ruusbroec develops the all-embracing composition of the Espousals in three books, each structured according to the same divisio thematis. From this superstructure arises a logical progression that Axters describes as the ‘verticality’ of the Espousals — on the level of the active, the yearning and the contemplative life — in a threefold exposition of the same scriptural passage. Appearing before the reader’s eyes is a three-part structure with its own divisions and coping-stone, just like the façade of a church in which the arches, rising one above the other, gradually recede from view.

The work was of substantial popularity and readership as there are thirty-six surviving Dutch manuscripts in addition to translations into Latin, Middle High German, and English. Yet during his lifetime the work that was considered the Brabantine mystic’s crowning achievement was the Tabernakel. The Tabernakel was also his most circulated work. During the Brussels period he also produced the Steen, a much smaller work than the Brulocht, yet a profound work of mystical theology that shows in a relatively brief form the primary lineaments of Ruusbroec’s mystical

59 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 6.

60 Warnar, Literature and Mysticism, 110.

61 Warnar, Literature and Mysticism, 110.

62 John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” in A Companion to John of Ruusbroec, eds. John Arblaster and Rob Faesen (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 66. “In so far as the preserved manuscripts of Ruusbroec’s works give a reliable image, the Tabernakel was his most widely disseminated work. With its forty-two manuscripts, the Tabernakel exceeds the Brulocht (37) and the Spieghel (28).” Thom Mertens, “Introduction,” Opera Omnia 5. Tabernakel, 67–68.
teaching. It is a significant treatise “…which is occasionally referred to as the best-written and most insightful synthesis of Ruusbroec’s thought…”

There is little that we know concretely about his years as a chaplain or canon priest in the cathedral of St. Gudula. Nevertheless, the context of life in the city of Brussels helps us understand what perhaps gave rise to Ruusbroec’s early writings. It was a city that fostered a growing interest in a deeper spiritual life and movements of apostolic reform. According to his less trustworthy biographer Henry Pomerius, Ruusbroec had strongly criticized and accused of mystical heresy a mysterious female teacher, most likely a beguine, named Heilwig Bloemarts (or Bloemardinne). Whether or not this story actually happened, and it almost certainly did not, like so many fourteenth-century mystics Ruusbroec’s writings show that he was very concerned about the dangers of mystical heresy, particularly the movement (better described as spectrum of groups and individuals sharing “mystical sensibilities”) known as the “Heresy of the Free Spirit,” to be discussed further below. De Baere argues convincingly that this seeking for a deeper spiritual life of Christians in Brussels made them susceptible to being drawn into the errors such as the sensibility of the Free Spirit heresy and that this hunger for authentic mystical experience was connected to a lack of healthy examples in the leadership of the Church of authentic mystical awareness.

In his writing Ruusbroec is clear that he believes his mystical theology and teaching to be rooted in the orthodox teaching of The Catholic Church. He is also committed to living and dying as a faithful Catholic priest who is committed to the Holy Church. In the Boecsken he explicitly recognizes the authority of the Catholic Church when he writes: “Concerning all the

63 Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 64.

64 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 5-6.
things that I understand, and feel, and have written, I submit myself to the judgement of the saints and of the Holy Church. For I wish to live and die Christ’s servant in the Christian faith and I desire to be, by the grace of God, a living member of the Holy Church.\textsuperscript{65} However, this did not keep him from critiquing what he perceived to be abuses and glaring neglect of developing a “taste” for God in mystical contemplation and experience in the leadership of the church, from priests to the religious and even bishops. Even during this period as priest in Brussels he speaks in his early masterpiece, the \textit{Brulocht} (though in a more moderate tone than his later writings) about the poor state of the clergy. However, from the \textit{Tabernakel} (partially written during his time as priest in Brussels at St. Gudula’s) forward his tone becomes much sharper. He speaks of parvenus among the laity who come to Mass to show off their costly wardrobe during the liturgy. He speaks also about the rich and how they

\begin{quote}
…take good notice that the whole world bows down before worldly goods: pope and bishop, princes and prelates, clerics and laity bend low before them. The rich man gets his share of all spiritual goods: they sing and read Masses for him and all the exterior practices of Holy Church are at his disposal. He also obtains letters which guarantee him absolution from purgatory and sins.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

People of such mindsets and practices it seems would need to receive authentic Christian catechesis and mystagogy to have the opportunity to repent. This should come from the clergy, but Ruusbroec has strong words of critique for them as well: “Their instruction is similar to their life. For their false interpretation, they change the proclamations of God and of Holy Scripture…” He believes that the secular clergy are slaves to money (one hears here not only the experience of his time in Brussels as priest but also the influence of Franciscan thought upon the

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Brabantine priest). Rather than concern for the righteousness of the faithful, the princes of the Church are too caught up in the love of money and the lust for power: “When a bishop or a distinguished abbot visits his people, he rides with forty horses, with a large escort, and at enormous expense. He does not pay it himself, naturally! The change is in his purse, and consequently souls are not touched.” The lower clergy are described in this way: “We also find other priests who stand in church, waiting for money, with such a slavishness as though they were blind and crippled.” Morality is found wanting not only in terms of the love of money: “Those who live from the goods of the Holy Church, and who ought to be pure in body and soul,—some of them at least—support their children in their own house, openly and unblushingly, as proud as if they had them from a legitimate spouse.” Not only does Ruusbroec harshly critique the princes of the Church and the lower clergy, he also critiques the religious. De Baere writes: “Among religious, with the exception of a precious few—for example, Poor Clares and Carthusians—it is just as pitiful. Money plays the main role, ‘crafty hypocrites’ come to power and ‘all those who come near them must bow and scrape.’”

With such glaringly aberrant behavior and misdirected desire among the clergy and princes of the Church it is perhaps not surprising that lay Christians in and around Ruusbroec’s Brussels would fall prey to the wiles of the promise of mystical depth in false teachings. And Ruusbroec is clear why the laity are falling prey to error. They are not drawn into the mystical depths of the Catholic Church because the clergy does not offer them the way nor the exemplary lives that would guide them. According to the Flemish mystic this is the case because the cause of the problematic practices of church leadership “is nothing other than a total lack of personal spiritual life. Almost no one among the numerous ‘believers’ seems himself to have any religious

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experience. And how should a faith which does not properly exist, which has no interior reality, express itself genuinely and effectively? Ruusbroec uses the language of the tradition of the spiritual senses in describing the cultivated desire for God in his works and when describing the dire state of the clergy in the Brulocht he says that they lack any “savor” in religious things:

They are totally turned outwards towards the world, and they do not fathom the things they have right in their hands. That is why they pray with their lips, but their heart does not taste what it means, namely, the hidden miracle that lies enveloped in the Scriptures, in the sacraments, and in their function,—that they do not experience at all. And therefore they are coarse and rude and unenlightened by divine truth.

This lack of “taste” for the mystical contemplation of God also afflicts the religious and draws them continually out of their cloisters. In the tabernakel he states, “Look, for these people their cloister is a prison and the world a paradise. For they have a taste neither for God nor for eternal blessedness.” The focus upon critique of the “Heresy of the Free Spirit” and the shortcomings of the clergy and church leadership both point to a key reason why Ruusbroec writes in Brussels and throughout the rest of his life. As Guido De Baere says: “So, Ruusbroec will write, then, in order to confront the deepest need of the faithful — interior life — and in so doing to fortify them against the delusions and practices of the ‘Free Spirit.’”

Dealing with this deepest need by combatting heresy and the poor state of church leadership (clergy, bishops, and the religious) are two key reasons why Ruusbroec writes and

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69 For a helpful survey of the use of the language of “the spiritual senses” in the thought of various thinkers throughout the history of Christianity, primarily in the West, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakely, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).


thus seeks to address the need. However, there is a third, related way, he addresses this deep need, which has heavy bearing upon the present work. Namely, Ruusbroec writes as a *spiritual director*. In his period of priesthood in Brussels he already appears as a contemplative/mystical theologian who is engaged in personal spiritual direction. Brother Gerard states that this is the manner in which *Vanden blinkenden steen* came to be written: “Once Master Jan sat conversing over spiritual things with a hermit. When they took leave of each other, the brother asked him with a good deal of insistence that he would write down what they had treated there, and so, clarify it further…”\(^72\) One can hear echoes of the conversation between Ruusbroec and the hermit, whose identity Gerard does not share, in the text of the *Steen*. The hermit seems to be beyond the level of a novice in the practice of contemplative prayer and so seems to push Ruusbroec beyond the straightforward description of the four-fold relationship of the believer to God as hireling, servant, friend, and son and how the believer should seek to integrate these different types of relationship to God. Ruusbroec’s instruction seems to have come full circle:

‘Ende in deser redenen’ – that is to say, ‘with these words’ or ‘by this reasoning’, or ‘in this talk’ (the last option being the most likely translation, given the genesis of the *Stone*) – ‘I have explained to you what I said before in the beginning, namely that every man must, of necessity, obey in all things God and the Holy Church and his own reason . . . And with this I let be all that has been said.’\(^73\)

In response to this however one can hear the echoes of the hermit calling for Ruusbroec to go further in his description of growth in the contemplative life of prayer when the text of the *Steen*

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\(^72\) The quotation from the prologue of Brother Gerard’s is found in De Vreese 1895, 16: ‘Ende als sy sceyden souden badt hem die broeder herde seer dat hi hem die redenen die si dair ghehandelt hadden, woude verclaren met enighen ghescriften op dat hi ende anders yemant dics ghebetert mochten werden.’ Quoted and translated in Warnar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 165.

\(^73\) *Steen*, 472–74, 474–76: ‘hebbic u verclaert dat ic vore seide inden beghinne, dat was dat elc mensche van node ghehoorsam moet sijn in allen dinghen gode ende der heiligger kercken ende sijre eynhenre redenen . . . Ende hier mede latic sijn al dat gheseghet es.’ Quoted and translated in Warnar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 167.
states, immediately following a seemingly definitive conclusion, an objection which most likely echoes and can be ascribed to the hermit: ‘But I would still like to know how we can become hidden sons of God and possess the contemplative life’ (Maer ic soude noch gherne weten hoe wij werden moghen verborghene sonen gods ende een scouwende leven besitten). Ruusbroec gives a detailed answer to this question, and concludes the Steen with a word about ‘a common life, which I promised to tell you about in the beginning’ (een ghemein leven, daer ic u ave ghelofde te segghen inden beginne). At the beginning of the Steen he had in fact held out the possibility for this. Ruusbroec responds by going into more depth about how to become hidden sons in the contemplative life. He ends the work with discussing how the person who has ascended such heights in the contemplative life will be a person who lives a ‘common life’ (ghemeyn leven), which is his final answer to the question. In this work we see the Brabantine mystic as not only offering spiritual direction to novices in the life of prayer but to those further along the way. As his life continues Ruusbroec will be requested to articulate teaching on growth into the depths of the contemplative life (and beyond, into the common life) quite often. This episode and writing of the Steen bring into bold relief what was to come as Ruusbroec grew into the spiritual leader, mentor, and director who would be the center of the new community that he and two fellow priests, his uncle Jan Hinckaert (d. 1350) and Vrank van Coudenberg (d. 1386), would found just southeast of Brussels in the Sonien forest. This community was a venture in practicing the vita apostolica that the three had, according to Pomerius, already begun in Brussels, which was perhaps, as Geert Warnar argues, the center of a “Friends of God” (Gottesfreunde) community developing amongst people such as pious patricians, beguines and beghards (banished and otherwise), mendicant friars, clerics and canons from the collegiate

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church and others in Brussels. For Warnar such a diverse community of *Gottesfreunde* was the most likely audience for the *Brulocht*, which would have been the perfect backdrop for the work. The fact that the Flemish mystic wrote it in the vernacular Middle Dutch would have given all these variety of educated Christians who were interested in prayer and contemplation a text to gather around, explore, and be guided by. This is speculative on the part of Warnar but it does point to Ruusbroec being the spiritual guide/director of this community in Brussels. Regardless of the exact circumstances, Warnar states well this emerging identity of Ruusbroec as spiritual master who offers spiritual direction in writing and conversation to those seeking to ascend the heights and plumb the depths of prayer when he says:

> The Groenendaal episode has brought us to a new phase in Ruusbroec’s life, in which he will emerge as the spiritual leader of a new community. He wrote the *Stone* while still a chaplain in Brussels, energetically attacking the major questions in the metaphysics of mysticism. However, both the text and the meeting with the hermit that prompted him to write it show the author for the first time in his role as mentor and ideologue. Seen in this light, the *Stone* was not only the crowning of Ruusbroec’s teachings thus far, but also a new beginning.

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**D. The Years as Priest in Groenendaal (1343–1350)**

Ruusbroec and his confrères and fellow priests Jan Hinckaert and Frank van Coudenberg, who had served with him at St. Gudula, desired to retire from the hurried city life of Brussels in the early 1340s. It seems that Ruusbroec wanted a place in which he could more easily devote himself to prayer and contemplation, though our sources give no clear reason for leaving

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75 Warnar remains the best monograph in exploring the history and cultural context of Ruusbroec’s life and writings. For a very detailed and well-argued account of the formation of a community of common life which Ruusbroec, Hinckaert, and Coudenberg shared in Hinckaert’s house in Brussels, which was the seed of what flowered in the community of Groenendaal as well as this community’s centrality in relation to the likely community of *Gottesfreunde* formed around them and Ruusbroec (as the spiritual guide/director) see Warnar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 133–171.

Brussels if one takes into account the hagiographical nature of Pomerius’ account. Brother Gerard’s account only states: “Later, he wanted to remove himself from public life.” Following this statement Gerard simply says: “Thanks to the intervention of another devout, but wealthier chaplain by the name of Frank van Coudenberg, they were able to acquire a modest residence located to the south-east of Brussels, about one mile into the Sonian Forest, in a valley called Groenendaal, where a hermitage had once stood.” So, while we may make educated guesses, there is more historical work to be done in this area. Whatever the case may be, the three moved to a modest dwelling about ten kilometers (6.2 miles) southeast of Brussels into the Sonian forest in the valley of Groenendaal (“The Green Dale”) to pursue the contemplative life outside the


78 “The Prologue by Brother Gerard of Saintes,” in A Companion to John of Ruusbroec, trans. John Arblaster (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 378. Pomerius’ account, which was written to give a positive account of the Groenendaal Priory and defend Ruusbroec’s orthodoxy, describes the move thus: “Ardent in the practice of love towards one anther, deeply religious and as examples to their neighbors, they endeavored every day and with great joy, each according to their rank, to pray the canonical liturgy of the hours with great care in the aforementioned Church of Saint Gudule and thus to serve the Lord with psalms and hymns. But when, in addition to the restless activity of a number of chaplains in the church and the noise and hubbub of the people, a chaplain named Godfried Kerreken also disturbed them very often during their prayers—the man undoubtedly had a voice like a trumpet, but untrained and false—their consciences repeatedly compelled them to reread what they had already read or to beginning the hours again privately. Ultimately, it began to irk them so much that together, they started looking for a satisfactory solution.” Qui cum essent invicem caritate fervidi, Deo devoti et proximis exemplares, quotidiem singuli devotissime, secundum differentias suorum graduum, in dicta ecclesia Sanctae Gudilae, psalmis et hymnis Domino servientes, omni vigilante horas canonicas solvere divinisque alacriter interesse satagebant. Verum, cum praeter alias in eadem ecclesia fieri solitas capellarorum inquietudines ac secularium strepitus et rumores, capellanus quidam, nomine Godefridus Kerreken, eos saepissime in suis exercitiis perturbaret (habuit nimirum idem ipse vocem tubalem, rudem et dissonam), ipsi frequenter lecta relegere aut seorsum horas suas in privato dicere, cogente conscientia, sunt compulsi. Unde tandem victi taedio, coeperunt pro salutari remedio invicem cogitare. Pomerius, De origine (1885), 275. I have used the translation of Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 56. While the situation was likely more complex, Pomerius’ account does point to what may have been tensions between the trio of Ruusbroec, Hinckaert, and van Coudenberg and the other chaplains and canons in the chapter of St. Gudula.
city. Warnar argues that the pursuit of community and contemplation at Groenendaal, first in the form of a chapel and community and eventually in forming a monastery by taking on the rule of St. Augustine, was not perhaps as large a shift in Ruusbroec’s life as some have suggested.

According to Pomerius (who again writes in a hagiographical mode, though this certainly does not mean there is not at least some degree of accuracy in his account), the three had already taken on a common life of seeking to live out the apostolic life and may have exposed a number of their fellow chaplains and priests of St. Gudula as lacking in attention to the life of prayer and worship. De Baere agrees with this account as well. Warnar writes:

Such discrepancies often led to tension, as was perhaps the case in Brussels, when Ruusbroec and his friends provoked the collegiate clergy by demonstratively choosing a new way of life, for the three priests were still in Brussels when they began to practice the *vita apostolica* recommended by Ruusbroec in his Groenendaal texts. The turning point seems to have been not so much the licence granted by Duke Jan III [to use land for a chapel] in 1343 as Hinckaert’s previously mentioned conversion to a better life in about 1335. He and Coudenberg had renounced their prebends and resolved to live communally...which...marked the beginning of Groenendaal, [and] must have been experienced by the clerics of the Brussels chapter as a painful infringement of their *esprit de corps*.

It may be that a number of the other members of the chapter of chaplains and canons of St. Gudula were more interested in business affairs and their personal income than in praying the office of the Divine Hours and pastoring the faithful.

While Pomerius describes the move to Groenendaal by Ruusbroec and his companions as a decision the trio came to completely on their own initiative, it may very well be that there is more historical work to be done in this area and that his description may need to be corrected.

Given the possible conflict that the three priests shared with the other priests in the chapter of St. Gudula it could be that the situation was a more complex matter than Pomerius leads us to


believe. Arblaster and Faesen convincingly argue that the dissatisfaction between Ruusbroec and his confrères and the chapter of St. Gudula’s may have been mutual. Marguerite Porete and Eckhart, who were condemned in 1310 and 1329, are sometimes seen as being diametrically opposed by Ruusbroec. However, according to Arblaster and Faesen, Ruusbroec’s thought is intimately connected not only with Hadewijch’s but with that of Porete and Eckhart as well. While Ruusbroec undoubtedly critiques heterodox mystical heresy such as the Free Spirit tendencies Arblaster and Faesen also note that:

The fact that he occasionally refers to statements that may appear heretical if taken out of their context—we know this befell both Eckhart and Porete—is intended not as a repudiation of these authors but, rather, as an attempt to critically reformulate their positions in order to demonstrate their orthodoxy. This undoubtedly contributed to the condemnation of Ruusbroec’s works themselves, since they were deemed heterodox for the same reasons Eckhart and Porete had been.

Though Ruusbroec rarely cites his sources, his colleagues who were familiar with his work may very well have recognized many references to Eckhart and Porete in his writings. Arblaster and Faesen point out that though the following passage is placed by Pomerius after the three priests had left Brussels, the ridicule and derision it describes may have taken place before the move to Groenendaal:

After Reverend Frank was appointed father and director of the others, the enemy began to sow weeds on the Lord’s fields. Some said that they were good people, but others denied it. And thus a violent storm rose up against the new foundation. When they had lived there together for five years as secular priests, not only laypeople, but also conventuals and clergymen cried out against them and they were mocked.

81 See the Arblaster and Faesen brief discussion of the close resemblance between Ruusbroec’s Steen and Porete’s Mirror of Simple Souls in Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 54.


This passage contains no further explanation, which raises the question as to why such rumors would have been spread only after the transition to Groenendaal. It may very well have been the case that the Brussels clergy had already taken Ruusbroec to be problematic while still in the city and this may have contributed to the decision of the three priests to leave the city. Arblaster and Faesen note that: “Within the historical context, the choice to move to Groenendaal may indicate that Ruubroec’s contemplative life and teaching were considered unacceptable, just as Eckhart’s and Marguerite Porete’s had been. Though Ruusbroec was never tried for his mysticism, he was clearly outside the city’s mainstream ecclesiastical life.”

As discussed earlier, De Baere persuasively argues that Ruusbroec saw the problems of mystical heresy and lack of faithful leadership in the church as rooted in the same issue, the lack of “savor” or “taste” for the depths of God in the interior life. In seeking to practice a life together that cultivated a “savor” and “taste” for prayer and contemplation the small community of priests began to attract other members. When thinking of this community at Groenendaal it is easy to simply focus on the period of 1350 onwards when the community became a priory. However, while one need not deny the significant continuity between the first seven years of the community’s life and the following years when the community became a priory, it is important to note at least some distinction between the two periods. As Guido De Baere explains in his general introduction to the life and works of Ruusbroec in the Opera Omnia, there is no evidence that the three priests began their community at Groenendaal with the intention of starting a monastery. Arblaster and Faesen concur when they state:

We must guard against the idea—suggested by Pomerius—that the move to Groenendaal prefigured a monastic foundation, as this was not the priests’ initial intention. The duke

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[Jan III] had granted them permission to live at the hermitage on the condition that they built a chapel and a house for five religious men. The bishop appointed Frank van Coudenbergh as the priest responsible for the chapel.\(^\text{86}\)

The priests lived then for seven years with no official ecclesiastical status. If Ruusbroec and his friends had wanted to become part of the monastic life they certainly could have entered any number of the religious communities in the area.\(^\text{87}\)

Given the close proximity of Groenendaal to Brussels we are right to take notice of the fact that, as Bernard McGinn states:

Ruusbroec’s retreat to Groenendaal did not cut him off from the spiritual circles of the Low Countries, nor from wider European contacts. He had relations with the nearby Carthusian house at Herne [Brother Gerard’s community], and also with several communities of Poor Clare Franciscans (Ruusbroec, like many late medieval male mystics, found a large part of his audience among religious women.).\(^\text{88}\)

Furthermore, not only did Ruusbroec have these connections, he also had connections with the Gottesfreunde in Strassburg. We also know that in about 1378 he had a visit from the founder of the Modern Devotion Geert Grote.\(^\text{89}\) And though it is disputed it is possible that he had a visit

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\(^{86}\) Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusborec’s Life and Works,” 58.

\(^{87}\) Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusborec’s Life and Works,” 58.

\(^{88}\) McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 7. For a helpful discussion on the Brabantian mystic’s connections with women see Wanar, *Literature and Mysticism*, 242–270. In discussing some of Ruusbroec’s works and letters directed toward women readers Wanar says: “Apart from the question of whether Elisabeth van Heverlee really was the Clare who had begged Ruusbroec for the Mirror, the profile of the intended readership gives us every reason to assume that this work circulated among the same groups of readers as the Enclosures and Ruusbroec’s letters: the Brussels Clares [who were “Rich” Clares rather than “Poor” Clares, meaning they could collectively own property in their community] and their entourage of devout women from the upper crust of society. Ruusbroec’s letter to Margriet van Meerbeke marked a new phase in his writing. Up to and including the Tabernacle, he had written for like-minded friends of God and Groenendaal clerics. In middle age, however, he emerged as an adviser to religious women” (p. 254).

\(^{89}\) McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 7. For more on Ruusbroec’s relationship with Strassburg Friends of God see Thom Mertens, “Ruusbroec under de Godesvrienden,” in *Die spätmittelalterliche Rezeption niederländische Literatur im deutschen Sprachgebiet*, ed. Rita
from John Tauler. While we have no sure details as to why the trio went to Groenendaal, along with De Baere and Arblaster and Faesen, we can make an educated guess. De Baere is in harmony with McGinn when he insightfully comments: “It is one thing to withdraw from a particular social circle and quite another to renounce all contact with men: these priests explicitly did not want to disappear into an unreachable desert as cenobites, much less as hermits (Groenendaal was—and is—a marvelous and very accessible spot).” If we connect the idea of the probability of the conflict of Ruusbroec and his friends with the Brussels clergy at St. Gudula with the insight of De Baere that Ruusbroec believed the malaise of Christian people lay in the atrophy of the interior life due to a lack of “taste” for God then we may, with De Baere, make an educated conjecture about the kind of communal life the trio of priests were seeking to cultivate in the first seven years of the Groenendaal period.

Rather than start a foundation for a monastery, perhaps De Baere is right in drawing the conclusion that in the beginning their prime concern “…was to found a sort of small model parish where they, as priests, could approach the faithful in a new, undistorted way, where they could fittingly say the office in choir.” As noted above, Duke Jan III had granted the priests permission to live in the hermitage in Groenendaal with the understanding that they were to build a chapel and a house for five religious men. Frank van Coudenberg was appointed by the bishop Schlusemann and Paul Wackers, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 47 (1997): 109-30.


as the priest responsible for the chapel.\textsuperscript{93} The community began to attract more members and the small community of priests eventually did evolve into a monastery/priory when the bishop of Cambrai made Ruusbroec and Coudenberg Augustinian canons and the community adopted the Rule of St. Augustine, thus giving the community ecclesiastical status in 1350. Coudenberg was appointed provost of the community and Ruusbroec became the novice master and later prior.

\textit{E. The Prior of the Groenendaal Monastery (1350–1381)}

According to Brother Gerard, Ruusbroec was not in favor of the evolution of the community into a priory and its steady growth. Arblaster and Faesen note that it is understandable that Coudenberg, due to the growing number of postulants who were drawn to the community, would see wisdom in becoming a monastery, since the project had been dependent upon him thus far and in the event of his death it was not clear what would become of the community. “Along with canonical recognition, however, the community also obtained a clear financial regulation, and it could officially admit new members.”\textsuperscript{94} Brother Gerard shares that Ruusbroec was not a proponent of expansion but “he did not attempt to prevent them because he was convinced that Reverend Frank desired to increase many people’s love of God.”\textsuperscript{95} Though the Brabantine mystic had misgivings about the growth and expansion, it seems that he always supported the spiritual growth and maturation of the community. Ruusbroec did this through his spiritual direction of the community and through his literary and intellectual

\textsuperscript{93} Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 58.

\textsuperscript{94} Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 59.

work. As the Augustinian community steadily grew and became a noted center of piety in the area so grew the fame of Ruusbroec as its spiritual center. The stories in Pomerius’ *Vita* testify to this reality and, though certainly some of the stories are typical hagiographical commonplaces, the consistent words of spiritual guidance that the community received from Ruusbroec as the spiritual center were of notable significance for its development. Pomerius states:

> When his brothers or visitors asked him to speak a stimulating word to them he was usually happy to oblige. Words then flowed so abundantly and easily from his mouth as if he was a vat of young wine whose seams are bursting because of fermentation. Such were the words from his mouth when he spoke to us about the Lord Jesus Christ….Sometimes his words were so fiery that they could even move a heart of stone and he could strike sparks from a pebble.  

Visits from people from outside the Brussels area from Grote and others such as two students from Paris show that even during his lifetime Ruusbroec was becoming known outside the borders of the duchy of Brabant.

Ruusbroec continued to write mystical theological treatises for over a quarter of a century in Groenendaal. While it is arguable that some of his early writings may have been addressed to the spiritual needs of particular groups, it is more certain that most, if not all, of his later works were written to give spiritual direction/guidance to specific communities and/or individuals. His longest work, *Van den Geestelijken Tabernakel*, was begun in Brussels but finished in his years at Groenendaal. The large spiritual-allegorical interpretation of the constructing of the ark of the covenant and the services and offices connected with it was the first biblical commentary written in Dutch. Though we cannot be sure it may be that even this work ended up being addressed to his monastic community at Groenendaal. While there is some debate about the exact identity of

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the communities and/or individuals to whom they were written, Ruusbroec gives spiritual
direction/guidance to address the specific needs of these people in most of his later writings,
which include *The Seven Enclosures* (*Vanden seven sloten*), *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness
(*Een speighel der eeuwigher salicheit*), *The Seven Rungs* (*Vanden seven trappen*), *The Little
Book of Enlightenment* (*Dat boecsken der verclaringhe*), and *The Twelve Beguines* (*Vanden XII
beghinen*). *Beghinen* is a work that we are not sure about in terms of whom the work is addressed
to (or if it is a complete work or a collection of his works).\(^9^8\) It is so poorly structured and
digressive that some have doubted whether it is one of Ruusbroec’s works. However, as McGinn
states, the work “…contains important reflections on contemplation and had many arresting
passages, as well as giving Ruusbroec’s longest attack on the false mystics who concerned him
for his whole career.”\(^9^9\)

We know that the *Sloten* was written to the Poor Clare Margriet van Meerbeke whose
Clare community was in Brussels (as well as some of his letters. The Flemish mystic’s letters are
written to Meerbeke and other women and they generally give guidance concerning the spiritual
life). *Spieghel* is considered by most scholars of Ruusbroec’s work to be addressed to Meerbeke
as well, though Arblaster and Faesen believe the audience is more likely a community of
religious males. Likewise, though sometimes thought to be addressed to Meerbeke, it is more
likely that *Seven trappen* is addressed to a group of male readers. It is strongly substantiated that
the *Boecsken* is addressed to Brother Gerard’s Charterhouse of Carthusians at Herne after they
requested clarification on some of Ruusbroec’s statements in the *Rijcke*. We will address some of
these issues, at least with regard to the Tabernakel, the *Sloten* and the *Spieghel*, in more detail in

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\(^9^8\) Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 78.

chapters three and four below. For now, it is important to see that most of these later works are thought to be addressed to specific individuals and communities, offering spiritual direction/guidance on maturation in the life of prayer, contemplation, and virtuous service. And as we shall see, Ruusbroec’s spiritual guidance is always shaped by and intertwined with his trinitarian theology. Indeed, the Brabantine mystical theologian, like the Fathers of the early Church, does not see dogmatic and (what we today would call) systematic theology and spirituality as two distinct modes needing to be integrated. One is always implicated in the other. These later works are all written by Ruusbroec within the context of being the spiritual guide and center of the Groenendaal monastic community. It is within this community that he lived for the last thirty-two years of his life and it is there that he died in 1381 at the age of eighty-eight.

F. The Heresy of the Free Spirit

In discussing Ruusbroec’s historical context and life, it is important to explore another factor that affected his writings in terms of medieval Christendom. One reality of great importance for the life of the Church in Ruusbroec’s day was the rise of segments of heretical teaching in Europe, particularly the teaching that came to be known as the “heresy of the Free Spirit” (also referred to as the “Brethren of the Free Spirit”). Ruusbroec’s writings are sometimes quite critical of what he understood to be the teachings and dangers of this heretical mystical sensibility.

James Wiseman (relying upon the work of the Oxford historian R.W. Southern) helps us discern the elements of the historical and cultural context that provided the fertile ground for the arising of such heretical sects when he notes that there was a great expansion in the various areas of European life and culture which began in the middle of the eleventh century. This

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100 As noted in Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 3.
consolidation and flourishing of medieval Christendom was fertile ground for optimism and by the early twelfth century new and vibrant religious orders as well as various associations of lay people were growing out of this fertile soil. By the first quarter of the thirteenth century the last and most significant of these orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans, had come about and were quickly beginning to spread throughout the European continent. This was a time of exuberant optimism for the Church. However, the situation shifted as decades passed:

A century later, the picture was very different. By then the mendicant orders had lost much of their initial fervor and were coming under increasingly frequent attacks for precisely that accumulation of wealth which their founders, especially St. Francis, had so feared…Nor was this decline in the overall fervor and reputation of the mendicant orders the only, or even the major, reason why the fourteenth century was a period of great turmoil that has led later historians to call the fourteenth century “the age of adversity,” “an age of unrest…” It was in that century that the Hundred Years’ War began, that the Black Death caused millions of deaths throughout the European continent, and that large uprisings of peasants took place in France and the Low Countries.101

The “Babylonian Captivity” of the popes in Avignon lasted for the majority of a century (from 1309 to 1377). This period was followed by the Western or “Papal” Schism, with two and at times three men each claiming to be the rightful Pope. This ferment created an opening for the development and growth of heretical sects ranging from more organized groups such as the Lollards to less organized pursuits such as the heresy of the Free Spirit.102 Describing the situation and the growth of heresies Robert Lerner says, “In an age of incessant war, famine, and plague, as well as sharp economic insecurity, extremist systems become attractive.”103 It is within this setting that the thought of what is termed the heresy of the “Free Spirit” arose.

101 Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 3-4.
102 Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 4.
103 Robert Lerner, The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 243. Noted in Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 4. In his illuminating reflections upon the Free Spirit and the conditions which give rise to it Bernard McGinn notes that Lerner’s work is an example of more recent studies on the heresy that
That Ruusbroec was concerned with what he perceived as the dangers of the Free Spirit heresy cannot seriously be doubted for he treats the differences between authentic and false forms of awareness of inner connection with God in almost all of his works. However, Ruusbroec differed from his contemporaries in his assessment of the contact with God that the Free Spirit heretics claimed. As Bernard McGinn states,

Unlike some of his contemporaries, he did not claim that the contact with God claimed by the Free Spirits was fictitious, feigned, or always the product of demonic spirits (though demons could make use of it to deceive humans). No, a human person without charity was sufficiently demonic to misuse the essential presence of God within the soul.¹⁰⁴

Here we are wise to heed the guidance of John Arblaster and Rob Faesen when they call for a sober assessment of Ruusbroec and his relation to mystical heresy. He certainly is critical of false emphasize the constructed view of it and thus question whether there ever was a Free Spirit heresy in terms of an actual social group. This more recent trend is counterposed to earlier literature on the subject which tended to take the inquisitorial sources as accurate and thus see the Free Spirit as a widespread heretical social movement. Historiographical works that represent this older stance are to be found in Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954); and Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), vol. 1, chap. 4. McGinn also points out that, though it is disorganized, much helpful material can be found in Romana Guarnieri, “Il Movimento dello Libero Spirito dalle Origini al Secolo XVI,” *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà* 4 (1965): 353-708. For sources which examine the inquisitorial processes for mystical heresy see Herbert Grundmann, “Ketzerverhörte des Spätmittelalters als quellenkritisches Problem,” *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 21 (1965) and Eleanor McLaughlin, “The Heresy of the Free Spirit and Late Medieval Mysticism,” *Mediavalia et Humanistica* n.s. 4 (1973): 37-54. For more recent treatments of the inquisitorial processes see Walter Senner, “Rhineland Dominicans, Meister Eckhart and the Sect of the Free Spirit,” in *The Vocation of Service to God and Neighbor: Essays On The Interests, Involvements, And Problems Of Religious Communities And Their Members In Medieval Society: Selected Proceedings of the International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, 14-17 July 1997*, ed Joan Greatrex (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 121-33; and Martina Wehrli-Johns, “Mystik und Inquisition: Die Dominikaner und die sogenannte Häresie des Freien Geistes,” in *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang*, ed. Walter Haug and Wolfram Schneider-Lastin (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), 223-52.

mysticism and is keen to guide his readers into true contemplation, but his depiction by Pomerius as, in the words of Arblaster and Faesen, a “heresy hunter” is unfortunate for it gives a one-sided picture of Ruusbroec. Arblaster and Faesen convincingly argue that the conception of Ruusbroec as a heresy hunter must be revised for two reasons. First, the supposed female heretic ‘Bloemaerdinne,’ whom Ruusbroec supposedly battled, seems to be a strange mistake on the part of Pomerius. The actual lady known as Bloemaerdinne, a certain Heilwigis Bloemarts, actually lived on the same street as Hinckaert and Ruusbroec. Arblaster and Faesen state:

She was not, however, a heretic. On the contrary, she was a socially committed woman who had founded a home for the city’s elderly poor, which was transferred to the management of the chapter of Brussels after her death. The chapter annually celebrated a Mass in her memory at least until the reign of Charles V.

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106 Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 53. Pomerius states: “While Ruusbroec still lived in the world a heretical woman lived in the city of Brussels, who was popularly known as ‘Bloemaerdinne.’ She was held in such high esteem that people claimed two seraphim accompanied her to the altar when she went to take the Eucharist. She wrote extensively on the ‘Free Spirit’ and about perverse, sensual love, which she called ‘seraphic.’ As the instigator of new doctrine, she was revered by her numerous followers […] The orthodox man was greatly perturbed by this error and battled this heretical doctrine from the outset. Despite much resistance but protected by the shield of truth he unmasked the deviations and heresies she had circulated for many years in her so-called ‘inspired’ writings, which are completely contrary to our faith.” Pomerius, De Origine (1885), 286. Quoted in Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 52. After pointing out the Heilwigis Bloemarts was not a heretic but a socially conscious woman Arblaster and Faesen continue: “Furthermore, there is no evidence whatsoever that she wrote any treatises, let alone one about the movement of the Free Spirit. Pomerius’ motives for presenting such an obvious mistake are unknown, though…his biography may have been part of a wider propaganda campaign at Groenendaal to clear their former prior of any suspicion after Jean Gerson’s condemnation. On this reading, Pomerius simply used Bloemaerdinne as a tool to demonstrate Ruusbroec’s orthodoxy.” Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 53. Arblaster and Faesen also note that the concept of Ruusbroec as heresy hunter inspires the statue of the Brabantine mystic that now stands in the Cathedral of Saints Michael and Gudula in Brussels. The statue depicts Ruusbroec gazing toward heaven with his pen his right hand and his right foot trampling over an allegory of heresy. Arblaster and Faesen go on to state another problematic element of this image as interpreted through Pomerius’ depiction when they state: “Moreover, Pomerius’ identification of heresy with a concrete female figure—Bloemaerdinne—has paved the way for discussion of gender issues: the male priest Ruusbroec trampling the female mystic Bloemaerdinne.”
Secondly, while in a number of references throughout his writings Ruusbroec does reject heterodox teaching, he does not present himself as heresy hunter. As discussed above, aspects of Ruusbroec’s thought are very similar to parts of the thinking of figures like Porete and Eckhart. We must remember that “Ruusbroec’s thought was not universally accepted during his lifetime and was explicitly rejected after his death; the emphasis on Ruusbroec as a heresy hunter may simply have been an attempt to exempt him from suspicion.”107 So without a doubt Ruusbroec critiques and corrects heretical teaching such as that of the Free Spirit, but we must not allow what is most likely a one-sided and simplistic depiction by Pomerius to cloud our vision of what is undoubtedly a more complex picture. With this more full picture of Ruusbroec in view we can more accurately understand his critique of the Free Spirit heresy.

To begin to understand Ruusbroec’s response we must look more closely at the characteristics of the “Free Spirit” heresy itself. In another volume of the magisterial series cited above (The Presence of God), Bernard McGinn provides helpful wisdom for understanding why heresy of various sorts, and the heresy of the Free Spirit in particular, periodically arises in the history of the church when he states,

The history of mystical heresy in medieval Christendom, though historically discontinuous with the quarrel of the early church, is still theologically connected to them, not only because of the influence of patristic writers, but also through the persistence of the issues of esotericism, antinomianism, antisacramentalism, and suspect forms of prayer.108


However, as McGinn goes on to show, there were new aspects of Western mystical heresy that emerged during the Middle Ages that would continue to cause suspicions within Christendom of various groups and individuals within the stream(s) of Christian mysticism in the period between the mid-thirteenth century and the mid-eighteenth century. One particular new aspect that seems to have been at the root of a number of other dangers that troubled church authorities in late medieval and early modern mystics was the view of personal annihilation of the soul. This notion seems to have played a central role in teachings such as the heresy of the Free Spirit (which gave rise to other aspects such as antinomianism and anti-sacramentalism).

The notion is important because it draws our attention to perhaps the central idea of heretical medieval mystics. In discussing the key issue of medieval mystical heresy McGinn states that a couple of different proposals have been put forth. While some mystics have been accused of pantheism, perhaps based on a few statements by inquisitorial authorities, which sound pantheistic, there is very little evidence in the mystical texts that affirm the presence of

which saw the need for defenders of the One True Faith against old heresies as well as new heresies such as the Free Spirit view(s) (though he does not discuss the Free Spirit heresy in particular) see Jaroslov Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology*, vol. 3 in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 229-42. Ruusbroec certainly saw himself as a defender of the one true catholic faith and the unity of the church in his critique of the heresy of the Free Spirit.

109 McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, vol. 4 of *The Presence of God* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), 55. This “long arc of Western mystical heresy,” as McGinn describes it, could also create the conditions in which the defender of orthodoxy became the accused. This happened in the case of Ruusbroec when, after his death, Ruusbroec’s work came under the scrutiny of Jean Gerson in the latter part of the fourteenth century. Gerson found particularly troubling parts of book three of *Die geestelike bruoloth* (*The Spiritual Espousals*) which, when taken out of context, could lead one to believe that Ruusbroec fell prey to the same heresy he critiqued in the Free Spirit thought that will be described further below. On this see Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 20, 32. See also Albert Ampe, “Les rédactions successives de l’apologue schoonhovienne pour Ruusbroec centre Gerson,” *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* 55 (1960): 402, as noted in Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 32.
pantheism in the classic philosophical sense of the identification of God with the entire universe in a non-distinguishable way. Others have put forth the notion, which is more plausible and precise, that the key perspective of which these heretical mystics are rightfully charged is that of autotheism, “that is, identifying themselves with God to the extent that they share in all the prerogatives of the divine nature, including freedom from law and regulation—libertas spiritus.” While McGinn rightfully acknowledges that there are tones of autotheism in some of the texts of late medieval mysticism, he asserts that we will gain a more thorough and accurate appraisal of the errors of this mystical heresy (particularly the error of the Free Spirit heresy) by turning to language that they actually used.

The ideas, which McGinn discerns as the root of error in the perspective of the Free Spirit heresy, are found in the language of indistinction and annihilation. In acknowledging the validity of autotheistic tones in the heresy, yet pushing beyond this to the actual language of the texts, McGinn offers a key bit of illumination when he states,

> There is certainly an autotheistic element in some late medieval mystical texts, but it may be more helpful to view the mystics’ claims for some kind of identity with God in terms of vocabulary they actually used and to see their language of indistinction and annihilation of the created self as forming the essential problem. Indistinction means that one can reach an interior state in which, at least on some level, there is no distinction, or difference, between God and the self—a union of identity deeper than the mystical uniting in love of two entities that maintain their separate substances, the view advanced

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10 McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 56. Rik van Nieuwenhove makes the case that, relying upon Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 27 and Ruusbroec’s own writings, the Flemish mystic criticizes the Brethren of the Free Spirit for combining quietism with autotheism. Autotheism is Nieuwenhove’s word, not Ruusbroec’s. Nieuwenhove, *Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian*, 70-74. McGinn critiques the use of autotheism to describe the Heresy of the Free Spirit not because it is altogether incorrect (there are passages with autotheistic sounding tones in some late medieval mystical texts) but because he thinks the actual language of the mystical writers, particularly ones who fell into heresy, will help lead one to the root cause of the error. McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 56.

by most previous Christian mystics, such as the monastic writers of the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{112}

McGinn believes that the soil in which the emphasis upon mystical identity, found in the late medieval mystics who were deemed heretical, began to grow was that of their language of annihilation. Particularly, it was the focus upon the annihilation of the created will that gave impetus toward mystical identity that was not satisfied by the traditional Augustinian notion in which the fallen will was cleansed and redirected or harmonized to and by the love of and for God. For these mystics the problem was not simply in the idolatry of love directed toward that which is less than the Trinity, which needed redemption. Rather the problem was with the will as created per se:

the process of interior stripping and decreation intended to produce a situation in which the soul in some way no longer exists, but God himself becomes the place from which divine action flows into the world, as Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and some others taught.\textsuperscript{113}

And while there were a few exceptions to the rule, such as Catherine of Genoa and John of the Cross, the use of the language of annihilation without incurring censure was a rare accomplishment in the centuries from 1300 to 1700.

This quickness on behalf of the magisterium to censure mystics if there was any hint of the language of annihilation of the created will and mystical identity was due not only to the emergence within the 13\textsuperscript{th} century of new mystical themes. A factor that also strongly shaped this atmosphere was changes in the institutional fabric of the church. These changes were connected with procedures used for ensuring orthodoxy. These two factors, the emergence of the new themes in mystical teaching and this change in the institutional fabric of the Church, gave

\textsuperscript{112} McGinn, \textit{Harvest of Mysticism}, 56.

\textsuperscript{113} McGinn, \textit{Harvest of Mysticism}, 56.
shape to the tenor of debates over mysticism for over four centuries. Central to the strategies and structures that were used to guarantee orthodoxy was, without a doubt, the organization of the inquisitorial hunting down of perceived heresy (*inquisitio hereticae pravitatis*). If the pursuit of heresy in this fashion was missing from the historical context, the story of the conflict would have perhaps been very different. Due to the methodology of this pursuit it is an arduous task to discern what the actual beliefs of perceived heretics really were. McGinn incisively describes the situation when he states,

> To be sure, it is difficult to recover what “heretics” under inquisition actually believed, because many aspects of late medieval heresy investigations were designed to make the accused admit what the accusers thought they held. Among these were the extract method for the determination of doctrinal error, and the fact that the judges made their decisions based on what sounded like heresy (*prout sonat*), regardless of the intention of the defendant. Suspected heretics were investigated on the basis of inquisitional formularies (*interrogatoria*) of what heresy was supposed to be, rather than what they themselves might have said on their own.

The Council of Vienne’s decree *Ad nostrum* had taken on canonical status as the litmus test in cases of mystical heresy. Given the dubious nature of the process of inquisitorial extraction,

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114 For a general investigation of not only the historical account of the medieval Inquisitorial Office but the Enlightenment period use of the medieval Inquisitions in ways that mythologize it for the purposes of buttressing the perspective of Enlightenment views of tolerance see Edward Peters, *Inquisition*, (New York: Free Press, 1988). For further help in understanding and misunderstanding the nature of the Inquisitions of the Middle Ages in terms of their actual scope and power (along with critique of reputable scholars whose work is uncareful at times and thus fuels the fire of a mythological understanding of the Inquisition as something more centralized than it actually was in the medieval world) see H. Ansgar Kelly, “Inquisition and the Persecution of Heresy: Misconceptions and Abuses,” *Church History* 58 (1989): 439-51. On the suppression of mystical heresy see Richard Kieckhefer, *Repression of Heresy in Medieval Germany* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), chapter 3, “The War against Beghards and Beguines.”


116 The council was called in 1308 by Pope Clement from his exile in Avignon and took place in Vienne from October 1311 through May 1312.
McGinn reminds us that the inquisitorial sources must be read with a strong hermeneutic of suspicion.\footnote{McGinn, \textit{Harvest of Mysticism}, 57. In terms of the sources McGinn states, “Sources of the Free Spirit heresy fall into three broad groups: inquisitorial records, contemporary chronicles and other historical records, such as antiheretical treatises; and texts produced by Free Spirit heretics themselves. Marguerite Porete’s Mirror is the only sure document in the third group, because it comes from someone formally executed for heresy. Other texts said to be of the Free Spirit, such as the Schwester Katrei…were never formally condemned and are often no less orthodox than many other mystical texts.” McGinn, \textit{Harvest of Mysticism}, 506. Regarding Marguerite Porete, Mark McIntosh has convincingly argued that her thought should not be understood as arguing for the annihilation of created will and thus absorbed into God. Rather, McIntosh shows that her language of the soul’s ultimate destiny is rooted in the fact that the origin of the created soul is its eternal origin as one of the divine ideas in the Eternal Logos and thus its telos/consummation in that Eternal Logos is such that the will is in such harmony with the will of God that the Holy Spirit aligns the soul’s patterns of existence with the Trinitarian patterns of existence and thus the soul becomes completely transparent to God. Yet this transparency does not constitute the annihilation of the created self. See Mark McIntosh, \textit{Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology} (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 222-226.}

It has been noted above that Ruusbroec was himself highly critical of the “Brethren of the Free Spirit.” However, the times were such in Ruusbroec’s day that not even he, who was critical of the heresy as he perceived it, was beyond the pale of scrutiny when it came to suspicions of this kind of heresy in his own writing. This is especially true if one took some of his reflections on the union of the soul with God in love out of context. For instance, to point to but one of a number of possible examples, in the \textit{Brulocht}, while commenting on the attainment of the soul’s Eternal Image in the “contemplative life,” Ruusbroec states,

\begin{quote}
All persons who have been raised above their creaturely state into the contemplative life are one with this divine resplendence and are this resplendence itself. Through this divine light—and as regards their uncreated being—they see, feel and find themselves to be the same simple ground from out of which the resplendence shines without measure in a divine way and in which it eternally abides devoid of particular form according to the simplicity of the divine essence.\footnote{Translated by James Wiseman in Wiseman, \textit{John Ruusbroec}, 150.}
\end{quote}
If taken out of context, these very words of Ruusbroec could be interpreted as articulating some of the very elements of the Heresy of the Free Spirit of which the Brabantine mystic was so critical (this again should temper the notion of Ruusbroec as a “heresy hunter”). The fact that Jean Gerson would later level heretical charges at the thought of one so critical of the heresy in question was a sign of how the historical and ecclesiastical landscape had taken shape in the times in which Ruusbroec himself lived. This new environment was due to both increased mechanisms of control by the Magisterium and the questionable and problematic contexts in which this language had begun to arise from anonymous sources as well as suspects and sources which were known, such as Porete’s *Mirror*. Both the teachings of anonymous suspects and known suspects such as Porete began to be detected for errors both old and new.  

The historical details of Ruusbroec’s biographical and historical context, given thus far in this chapter, are important, for they assist us in understanding the matrix in which Ruusbroec’s spiritual-theological development takes shape. As will be explicated in the next section of the present chapter, he most emphatically is not simply a “spiritual writer.” He is a mystical theologian, whose theological insights undergird and form his spiritual direction. However, these theological insights are not simply given to Ruusbroec ex nihilo. Rather, they are mediated to him through years of formal and informal theological education and formation. This helps us recognize the traditional voices, from the Christian mystical theological tradition (examined in chapter two of the present work), which inform Ruusbroec’s own theology. Comprehending these biographical and historical details is necessary for our study, for it has shown us when, where, and how the Augustinian canon encountered the two interrelated factors in the life of the

119 Though see the footnote just above in this same chapter regarding the present author’s agreement with the lucid argument by Mark McIntosh and others who convincingly describe Porete’s work as being misunderstood by inquisitorial sources and as capable of being read fruitfully within an orthodox mystical theological framework.
larger church that would animate his ministry, teaching, and writing for the rest of his life (including the content and shape of his mystical theology and written spiritual direction). These issues were the lax spiritual life of the clergy, prelates, and religious, which led to the same lack of “taste” for God among the laity. In Ruusbroec’s understanding, these two factors were what led to a third element, covered just above in this section of the present chapter, that continually occupied the writings of the canon, namely, the rise of the sensibility of the “Heresy of the Free Spirit” and the vulnerability of the laity to such false teaching. As we have seen, it appears that these factors were part and parcel of what led the Brabantine and his colleagues to Groenendaal, in order to start a chapel where proper liturgy and priesthood for the laity could be practiced. Given the crucial role these factors play in Ruusbroec’s life and writings, they will, as will be shown in chapters two, three, and four of our study, have enormous implications for the content and shape of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and, therefore, his written spiritual direction which it shapes.

Our exploration of Ruusbroec’s biography and historical context has also been important inasmuch as it has brought to light that, in the midst of his time as chaplain priest in Brussels and his transition to Groenendaal, Ruusbroec not only began to grow and mature in the life of contemplation and theological reflection; he also commenced becoming a spiritual guide or director to not only novices in the contemplative life but also to those further along in the journey, such as the hermit addressed in the Steen. As we investigate the canon’s writings in our subsequent chapters, these biographical/historical dynamics will enrich our grasp of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and the written spiritual direction for which they serve as the root and dynamic vitality.
II. Methodology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology: Reading Ruusbroec as Mystical/Contemplative Theologian

As should be clear from the title of this work and the last part of the previous section of the present chapter, I claim that Ruusbroec’s thought is accurately described as what I am calling “mystical theology” or what some call “contemplative theology.” As stated in the previous section, it should be noted that by this I emphatically mean to say that Ruusbroec’s thought is theology in its own right and not simply “spirituality.” The fact that I must state this with such clarity is a sign of the times in contemporary Western intellectual culture. That one can speak of Christian “spirituality” without necessarily speaking of Christian “theology” and read a Christian thinker such as Ruusbroec as emblematic of one rather than the other shows how utterly different our intellectual milieu is from his. The Flemish mystic’s thought is properly theology because it is an example of the deep integrity of spirituality and theology that was simply the assumed norm for what constituted theology for the vast majority of Christian history. In this section of the chapter I want to discuss some of the primary contours of this previously assumed norm for Christian theology and why Ruusbroec is properly understood within this broad tradition of the integrity of spirituality and theology. His thought is mystical theology and not simply spirituality.120

120 Thanks to my dissertation director Fr. James Wiseman, O.S.B. for helpful conversations about the general conceptual distinction between “theology” (what is believed about God and articulated) and “spirituality” (the practices and patterns of lived faith) and how these are intertwined in Ruusbroec’s writings. What the Brabantine mystical theologian has to say about specific guidance in the life of contemplative prayer is always intertwined with what he believes to be the truth about God as Trinity. For a helpful discussion of the aspects of a given author’s spirituality (the first aspect being the lived reality or experience in the Spirit and the second aspect being the author’s teaching on prayer, stages of development, practicing the virtues, etc) which helps us see the “whole organism” of an author’s context and perspective rather than simply a “microscopic view” see Walter Principe, “Broadening the Focus: Context as a Corrective Lens in Reading Historical Works in Spirituality,” in Minding the Spirit: The Study
We begin with a quotation of a poignant biographical passage discussing an episode in the life of a profound twentieth century Christian mystic and scholar:

Two SS officers arrived at the door of a Carmelite convent in Holland. It was five in the afternoon on 2 August 1942. They had come to transport two of the sisters on a fateful journey; within a week the two had both perished at Auschwitz. Both nuns were Jews. One had been a leading intellectual in pre-war Germany, a graduate assistant to the highly influential phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, with a growing scholarly reputation of her own. Her name was Edith Stein (1891-1942). The other nun was her sister by birth, Rosa. At the moment of arrest, Rosa apparently began to grow deeply distressed. To comfort her sister, and perhaps the rest of her convent, Stein is reported to have taken her sister by the hand and said, ‘Come, Rosa. We’re going for our people.’

With this quotation from the biography of Edith Stein (also known as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, O.C.D.) Mark McIntosh begins his illuminating study of the recovery of “mystical theology” as a vital source for navigating the difficult waters in contemporary Christian systematic theology. McIntosh tells of how on the very afternoon of her arrest Stein was laboring in her study of one of the prime Christian mystical writers, the Spanish Carmelite Priest St. John of the Cross. Furthermore, at this point of being called away to her own death Stein was writing about John’s death. McIntosh goes on to point out the fact that the 16th century Carmelite mystic advanced an exceedingly nuanced understanding of the soul’s abandonment into the darkness of an unknown and imperceptible divine presence. Mysteriously and astoundingly,

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…Stein’s analysis of this spiritual trajectory had now reached the point of intersection with her own spiritual journey, and it is most appropriately at this crossing that this book begins—at the point where the integrity of spirituality and theology is made manifest.¹²³

What McIntosh is endeavoring to show, through the life of Edith Stein/St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, is that one of the contemporary modern/postmodern assumptions in the West, which has grown significantly over the past two to three decades (in and out of the academy) and seems to assume ‘spirituality’ and ‘theology’ are two distinctly different domains,¹²⁴ is not as self-evident as it may seem. In fact, this assumption leaves us bereft of understanding the tradition of Christian spirituality and theology. According to McIntosh Christian mystical theology has always been, at its best and properly understood, rooted in and sprung forth from “the integrity of spirituality and theology.” Thus, McIntosh goes on to ask and reflect upon the question,

Was Edith Stein a spiritual writer or a theologian? The explicit dichotomy of this question is undone by the unflinching integrity with which Stein held these two elements of her vocation together. Her work as an interpreter of major theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (c.500), Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-74), and John of the Cross was all of a piece with her spirituality. The mysterious beckoning of divine love in Stein’s life led her out of herself towards the other, both the divine other and the human other, and especially the divine by way of responsibility for the human other: ‘Come Rosa. We’re going for our people.’ Her theological understanding of what she saw as the self-sacrificing pattern of divine life grew increasingly more incarnate in her own spiritual stance…Her theological perceptions and her spirituality of self-giving love

¹²³ McIntosh, Mystical Theology, 3.

¹²⁴ Think of the saying that is so popular amongst people in the United States at the time of this writing which says, “I am spiritual but not religious.” This saying perhaps assumes this dichotomy between spirituality and theology for it seems that theology would be assumed to be part of institutional religion. However, there are varying opinions on this. For two helpful works on the contemporary phenomenon in the West which explore issues of theological thinking, culture, and the traditions out of which this phenomenon arises see Linda A. Mercadante, Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Courtney Bender, The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
represented the theoretical and the practical forms respectively of one unified journey of encounter with God.  

So in the life of saints like Stein we see figures in whom a theological understanding and articulation of the true God whose Triune Life of self-giving Love is revealed to and shared with God’s creatures, such that they may share in this Triune Life of God’s Love, and a mystical encounter with and participation in the Life of this God are, in the words of Thomas Merton, “…simply two aspects of the same thing.” These words from Merton come from within a larger quotation which is quite instructive. Merton claims:

Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one another. On the contrary, they are simply two aspects of the same thing.  

McIntosh claims that the integrity of spirituality and theology is such that both have their common ground in the church community’s encounter with God, what Merton calls, in continuity with earlier eras of Christian thought, ‘contemplation.’ McIntosh describes the two sides of the coin of this natural integrity when he states:

Spirituality is the impression that encounter has in the continual transformation of the members of the church; theology is the expression of that encounter in the attempt to understand and tell something true of the mystery whom the believing community encounters.  

125 McIntosh, Mystical Theology, 3-4.


127 McIntosh, Mystical Theology, 11. McIntosh distinguishes his approach to drawing genuine theological insight from the “anthropological approach” to the study of spirituality put forth by Sandra Schneiders in essays such as Sandra M. Schneiders, “Spirituality as an Academic Discipline: Reflections from Experience,” Christian Spirituality Bulletin, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall, 1993): 10-15. He rightly critiques Schneiders’ approach for depending too much on Enlightenment notions of “the self” and squelching Christian spirituality’s rich theological insights by focusing too intently on self-transcendence of this self. Schneiders has enriched her account a bit and tried to articulate more clearly the need for theology as a source for
This definition of ‘spirituality’ is more in harmony with the range of meaning found in the early church use of pneumatikos (‘spiritual’) in the New Testament which was connected with the pneuma who was understood to be in Jesus and who was also understood to be the gift of the Risen Lord to the church, to mediate the new life of Christ’s filial relationship with the Father and form the community into the new identity, the new life of the Risen Christ.

‘The “spiritual” is what is under the influence of, or is a manifestation of, the Spirit of God.’128 It is important that in both the Pauline and later Christian writings ‘the “spiritual person” (e.g., 1 Cor. 2. 14-15) is not someone who turns away from material reality but rather someone in whom the Spirit of God dwells.’129

This understanding of pneumatikos (in Latin spiritualitas, the translation of the Greek concept,) was used to denote the power of God which animated the Christian life. In the twelfth century, along with this early usage, spiritualitas and its vernacular also came to be used for describing whatever pertains to the soul as contrasted with the body. Bernard McGinn notes that “…during the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth [centuries] there seems to have been a gradual shift of ‘spirituality,’ both in Latin and in the vernaculars, toward signifying only the inner dispositions,


129 Philip Sheldrake, Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method New York: Crossroad, 1992), 35. Quoted in McIntosh, Mystical Theology, 6.
the interior states of the soul.” So McIntosh’s reconnection with the earlier notion is significant here. It roots his use in a more holistic, communal reality.

For McIntosh this integrity of spirituality and theology is seen from the very beginning of the Church, the gathering of Jesus followers who were Jesus’ fellow Jews as well as Gentile believers. The early Church evinces an awareness of God characterized by a sense of God’s remarkable vivacity. In the synoptic gospels Jesus’ teaching often uses images of unexpected reversal and hidden abundance. The narratives of his feeding and healing likewise show a liberating and transforming power that climax in Jesus’ own abundant resurrection life out of the grave of death. For St. Paul, this re-creating and transforming power of God’s life is at work in this world through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6). This life is poured out among and within the followers of Jesus as the Holy Spirit gifts within them a share in the relationship Christ has with his Father (Romans 8). Paul shares, in classic formulation: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives within me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:19-20). Here we can see not a bifurcation, but a perfect integrity of theology and spirituality. This is true because the theological vision of God’s saving action, at work through the self-giving love of Jesus, cannot be separated from the spiritual transformation

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130 Bernard McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline” in Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 27. McGinn and Sheldrake have already given treatments of the history of these terms that are standard so I will not rehearse all the lines of detail that they trace. It should simply be noted that this use by McIntosh, which seems to use the term ‘spirituality’ in a broad sense, reconnects with the earlier usage.

of the identity of Paul and its new life, which continually springs forth from the hidden or mystical presence of Jesus Christ. It is illuminating to see how connected and reciprocal these two aspects are. It is exactly the transforming spiritual power of the presence of Christ that allows an authentic theological understanding of what God has accomplished in Jesus.

Conversely, the theological reflection of the community on God’s saving action in Christ creates the environment or matrix within which followers of Jesus learn how to mature through the spiritual practices of discipleship. It is the Spirit that enables all of this. The Spirit is the ultimate theologian, who glorifies Christ by illuminating the Father’s love for him within the very life of the church. There is no room for the separation of the furthering of theological understanding and spiritual transformation within the community who is experiencing this light of the Spirit, which glorifies Christ and illuminates the Father’s love.132

In later figures such as Athanasius, Augustine, or Bernard of Clairvaux, this integrity of theological understanding and spiritual growth anchors their entire endeavor. This is certainly true of the Cappadocians. A quote from Gregory Nyssen’s brother Basil is a good summary for the best of the Christian tradition on this integrity.133 In commenting on a John 14 and the words of Jesus on how the world will not know the Spirit, Basil says:

By “world”... [Christ] means those who are tied down by a material and carnal life, and restrict truth to what is seen by their eyes. They refuse to believe in the resurrection, and become unable to see the Lord with the eyes of their hearts... A carnal man’s mind is not trained in contemplation, but remains buried in the mud of fleshly lusts, powerless to look up and see the spiritual light of truth. So the “world”—life enslaved by carnal passions—can no more receive the grace of the Spirit than a weak eye can look at the light of a sunbeam. First the Lord cleansed His disciples’ lives through His teaching, and then He gave them the ability to both see and contemplate the Spirit.134

132 McIntosh, “Theology and Spirituality,” 392-393.

133 McIntosh, “Theology and Spirituality,” 393.

So once again, we hear the intimate and intrinsic connection between appropriate theological vision and spiritual healing and maturation. For the best of the Christian saints through the early church up through the early Middle Ages (and presumably continually in the East) this has been the case.\footnote{McIntosh, “Theology and Spirituality, 393.} Furthermore, notice how, in the above reflection on the integrity of spirituality and theology in the early church, the spiritual transformation or new identity of the community and its theological vision springs forth from this ‘hidden’ or ‘mystical’ presence of Christ in the community. It is from this fertile soil that the understanding of theology as “mystical theology” grows. The hidden, mystical presence of the Trinity comes to be seen as the One in Whose self-giving relations the transformation (understood through the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of Christ) of the community takes place (as well as the creation of the Cosmos). This mystical dimension comes to be understood as the depth dimension of all Christian spirituality.\footnote{McIntosh, \textit{Mystical Theology}, 8.} The hidden depth is ultimately the Trinity and therefore the mystical dimension is the hidden depth that unveils the truth of reality in its giftedness. For the early church and the church fathers this mystical dimension was partaken in by the Body of Christ through the mysteries of the Scriptures, the sacraments of baptism and eucharist and, in figures such as Denys the Aeropagite and Maximus Confessor, the whole of the Church’s liturgy.\footnote{It is beyond the scope of the current work to trace the lines of the development of mystical theology but for fine works that tell the lineaments of this story see Andrew Louth, \textit{The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys}, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Bernard McGinn, \textit{The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century}, vol. 1 in \textit{The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism} (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 3-130. Rather than the “Hellenistic Invasion” of Christian faith and theology the early church up through the patristics shows a creative...}
McIntosh shows this to be the case as he traces the development of mystical theology in the early church, the New Testament, and through figures such as Denys the Aereopagite, Hadejwich, Bonaventure, William of St. Thierry, and Maximus the Confessor. What he discovers is what he calls Christian mystical theology’s characteristic stance. He propounds the idea when he states, with assistance from the twentieth century Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky:

What exactly are we looking for? Perhaps I might call it a characteristic theological stance: a way of grounding all the doctrines of Christianity in God’s plan to draw the whole world to Godself in Christ. It is a way of writing about the depth of revelation that equips the believing community to live into the mystery…mystical theology is characterized by the very definite plumb line it uses to measure all theological discourse: namely, how well does it safeguard the possibility for all Christians of becoming ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1.4). The concern of mystical theology ‘is always the possibility, the manner, or the means of our union with God.” […] What is paramount are the central doctrinal truths of Christianity: There has been a true incarnation in true humanity of the true God, and that the church can only live as the true body of this incarnate Word by living ever more truthfully into Christ’s dying and rising—thus to participate in that self-giving love which is truly the life of the triune God. ‘All the history of Christian dogma unfolds itself about this mystical centre,’ and it is this approach to theology that, following Lossky, I would term mystical theology—doctrinal reflection that is constantly alive to its spiritual sources and goals…What theology has to say about the divine should be an enormous help in relating oneself to the divine. Mystical theology in this sense is theology that lets its own speech be questioned and even stripped away by the mystery of God—who can never really become the scientific ‘object of study’ for theology, but always remains the acting Subject.

synthesis of the Hebrew tradition with the best of Hellenic and Hellenistic thought, all of which was accepted or rejected (and there is much of each) by filtering it through the Incarnation, Life, Death, Resurrection and sending of The Holy Spirit, which was the authoritative event of Salvation and Truth for the early church fathers.

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139 McIntosh, Mystical Theology, 39-62.

140 McIntosh, Mystical Theology, 40. The quotations from Lossky are from Vladimir Lossky, Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church (Crestwood, NJ: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 10-11.
So, Christian theology is, when it is blooming into that which it is meant to be, a participation in God the Father’s Speech (The Son in The Spirit). And this is best understood as ‘mystical theology.’ For McIntosh theology as mystical theology, as it is found in the theological masters in the Christian tradition, evinces this natural integrity between theology and spirituality.

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141 When I use the term “tradition” as in “Christian tradition” I use the term in both the sense of Alasdair Macintyre’s understanding of the concept as well as the understanding of the concept of historical theologians such as Yves Congar and Jaroslav Pelikan. Though Macintyre’s thought on the concept of a living tradition can be quite complex, he also has some relatively concise descriptions such as the, now classic in twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy, definition we find in Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (in which he theorized more on the concept of tradition than he had articulated in his classic, and probably still most widely read work, After Virtue): “A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress tradition is constituted. Such internal debates may on occasion destroy what had been the basis of common fundamental agreement, so that either a tradition divides into two or more warring components, whose adherents are transformed into external critic’s of each others positions, or else the tradition loses all coherence and fails to survive. It can also happen that two traditions, hitherto independent and even antagonistic, can come to recognize certain possibilities of fundamental agreement and reconstitute themselves as a single, more complex debate.” From Alasdair Macintyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 12. However, it still remains helpful to put alongside this more elaborated definition another, more concise, definition he gives in After Virtue, for it enriches our understanding of what Macintyre understands by “tradition. In After Virtue he defines tradition thus, “A living tradition is then an historically extended, socially embodied argument and argument precisely in part about the goods that constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Here the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part.” Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 222. Macintyre is a Roman Catholic philosopher and so would, one assumes, commend a theological understanding of tradition as suffused, metaphysically, with the Triune Love, which provides, at least in terms of a Christian theological understanding, its ultimate Good or Telos, which is the Beatific Vision. However, Macintyre is a Thomist who seems to fall more within the orbit of “Neo-Thomism,” which tends to draw a harder line of distinction between “Nature and Grace” than the perspective of Thomists influenced by the Nouvelle Théologie of figures such as Henri du Lubac, and tend to see a more firm distinction between philosophy and theology. So Macintyre tends to keep his philosophical enquiry separate from theology. Thus, I would want to
Within this understanding doctrines are vitally connected to and address the realities at the center of human life. Doctrines, in mystical theology,

…would be seen, in Rowan Williams’ words, as ‘a set of instructions for performance.’ The performance in question is not an isolated event but the life-long drama of the journey into union with God. Doctrines are interpreted by mystical theology as a language for describing and participating in this encounter with God, as an itinerary giving an indication of the major landmarks along the journey.¹⁴²

So Christian theology as mystical theology, throughout the best of the Christian mystical tradition, lives within the integrity of spirituality and theology and blooms within the Church’s participation in the eternal knowing and loving that is the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It seeks to speak truthfully of this mystery and assist the members of the Body of Christ in their growing consciousness of the Triune God and ever-deepening participation in union with God, participation in the relations of love that is the Trinitarian ousia, the divine way of being.

And this is the angle of vision within which the present author sees and understands the work of Jan van Ruusbroec. For Ruusbroec is influenced by a number of the key figures in the great tradition of Christian mystical theology (particularly, as we shall see in the next chapter, by the likes of Augustine, Denys the Aereopagite, Bonaventure, William of St. Thierry, Hadewijch, etc.) and is firmly rooted within this tradition. As the title of this work and the heading of this section suggests, Ruusbroec’s theology offers itself most fruitfully to the reader supplement Macintyre’s rich and insightful understanding with that of Yves Congar and Jaroslav Pelikan. Congar is a representative of the Nouvelle Théologie. For Congar’s perspective see Yves Congar, Tradition and Traditions: The Biblical, Historical, and Theological Evidence for Catholic Teaching on Tradition, 2nd ed. (San Diego, CA: Basilica Press, 1998). For Pelikan’s position, which is similar to that of Congar’s and rooted in Eastern Orthodoxy, see Jaroslav Pelikan, The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹⁴² McIntosh, Mystical Theology, 40. The quotation from Williams is from Rowan Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” chapter in Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church, ed. Jeffery John (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992), 36.
when it is received as the gift that it is, mystical theology. The Flemish mystical theologian’s various works are intended to be theology that guides, nurtures, and serves as a means through

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143 The present author’s understanding of Ruusbroec as trinitarian mystical theologian comes from reading the Flemish mystic’s texts. However, my perspective has also been influenced and enriched by the work of Bernard McGinn, whose work has already been noted numerous times above, both in his broad assessment of the characteristics of Western Christian mysticism, and in his particular reading of Ruusbroec as evinced in his Bernard McGinn, “The Spiritual Significance of Ruusbroec's Mystical Theology,” Louvain Studies 31 (2006), 19-41 and McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 5-61. It has also been influenced broadly by the aforementioned former student of McGinn, Mark McIntosh. McIntosh has written very little in terms of direct investigation of Ruusbroec’s mystical theology. However, he has explored a number of other great Christian mystical theologians, some of which had a significant influence upon Ruusbroec (Denys the Aereopagite, Augustine, William of St. Thierry, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Maximus Confessor, Bonaventure, John Scotus Eriugena, and Angela of Foligno, to name but a few), from which he has gleaned the notion that there is, throughout the best of the Christian tradition of theology, both Eastern and Western, a natural integrity of theology and spirituality. This central characteristic of the tradition’s mystical theology no less characterizes McIntosh’s own constructive theology, which seeks to recover (and one sees here the influence on his work of contemporary thinkers such as Rowan Williams and McIntosh’s former teachers at the doctoral level at the University of Chicago, Bernard McGinn and David Tracy) the significance of the spiritual masters of the Christian tradition as perhaps surprisingly fruitful conversation partners in responding to seemingly intractable difficulties in contemporary systematic and philosophical theology. The works of McIntosh that have given fundamental shape to the present author’s methodological assumptions are Mark A. McIntosh, Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004); Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998); idem, “The Maker’s Meaning: Divine Ideas and Salvation,” Modern Theology 28:3 (2012): 365-384. Another influence upon the present author’s understanding of Ruusbroec as a trinitarian mystical theologian, and his place within the development of trinitarian mysticism in the tradition that preceeded him, has been Louis Dupré, The Common Life: The Origins of Trinitarian mysticism and its Development by Jan Ruusbroec (New York: Crossroad, 1984). Though Dupré’s small book does not go into the depth of Ruusbroec’s thought as deeply as some other sources, it is invaluable nonetheless. Finally, a significant work which has influenced the present author’s perspective, and one which focuses particularly upon Ruusbroec as a “mystical theologian of the Trinity” is that of Rik Van Nieuwenhove, Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian of the Trinity (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003. What is illuminating about Nieuwenhove’s exploration of Ruusbroec is reading the Brabantine as lying clearly within, and developing further, the mystical theology of Trinitarian Christian Platonism of those who preceded and influenced him such as Augustine, Denys the Aereopagite, Bonaventure and others. Though curiously absent is Hadewijch. For a critique of this glaring absence from Nieuwenhove’s account see the helpful review by Amy Hollywood, “Rik van Nieuwenhove, Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian of the Trinity,” 59:4 (10/2006): 490-493. See also the instructive and illuminating work by Barbara
which God may draw the recipients of his writing deeper into the Triune life of working and
enjoying, into union with God. There are a number of passages from Ruusbroec’s writings that
could illustrate this, but none are better than a passage from The Spiritual Espousals (Die
Gheestelike Brulocht) in which Ruusbroec draws the reader into his dynamic trinitarian
mysticism or mystical theology when he states:

Every lover is one with God and at rest, and God-like in the activity of love; for God, in
his sublime nature of which we bear a likeness, dwells with enjoyment in eternal rest,
with respect to the essential oneness, and with working, in eternal activity, with respect to
threeness; and each is the perfection of the other, for rest resides in oneness and activity
in threeness. And thus both remain for eternity. And therefore, if a person is to relish
God, he must love; and if he is willing to love, then he can taste.\footnote{144}

This passage is illuminating for it shows Ruusbroec as both trinitarian mystical theologian and
spiritual director. And there is a deep sense in which Ruusbroec unites the two. The passage puts
forth a number of the terms that are central in his trinitarian mystical theology such as love,
activity, rest, enjoyment, likeness, working, essential oneness, threeness, and taste. The text also
shows the goal that the Flemish mystical theologian holds out and hopes for his readers: namely,

\footnote{144} Jan van Ruusbroec, Die Gheestelike Brulocht. Opera Omnia III, CCCM 103. ed. J.
a union that is trinitarian in nature. There is no conflict for Ruusbroec between the threeness and oneness, the activity and rest. This is precisely the case because each is the perfection of the other. Ruusbroec goes on to conclude the passage by maintaining to the reader that we are enabled to enter into the inner life of this eternal interaction of outgoing love and joyful rest of the three who are one precisely through the power of love (minne). *The Spiritual Espousals (Die Gheestelike Brulocht)*, as well his other works of mystical theology, are both trinitarian through and through as well as offering guidance in terms of the characteristics of the mystical journey and avoiding errors such as those of The Free Spirit along the way.\(^{145}\) We shall see in the next and the following chapters the trinitarian nature of Ruusbroec’s mystical theology and how it shapes the spiritual direction or guidance that he gives to his readers of his mystical theology; for at every turn the guidance given in cultivating a life open to the consciousness of and participation in loving union with God is shaped by this “ebbing flowing sea” of outgoing love and unifying rest that is the triune life of God. The vocations of trinitarian mystical theologian and spiritual director are joined in the mystical theology of Ruusbroec.

In the next chapter we will venture deeper into the characteristics of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology. Then in the following chapters we will explore how this trinitarian theology shapes the spiritual direction/guidance Ruusbroec gives to his readers. However, the very description “spiritual direction/guidance” itself is, given the contemporary twenty-first century setting, language that needs to be clearly defined in terms of what we mean by such terms, particularly when used in the *Christian tradition.*

\(^{145}\) Paul Mommaers, in his introduction to the critical edition of the *Brulocht*, notes that Ruusbroec wrote the *Brulocht*, “…with a view to the greatest need of the faithful—inner life—and in order to strengthen them against the fallacies and practices of ‘The Free Spirit.’” Paul Mommaers, “Introduction,” in Ruusbroec, *Opera Omnia III, CCCM* 103, 13.
III. The Contours of Spiritual Direction in the Christian Tradition

This work seeks to articulate, specifically in chapters three through five, the implications that Ruusbroec's trinitarian mystical theology has for the spiritual direction or guidance that he gives to various communities and individuals in some of his later writings. Before doing this, however, some clarification is needed. The subject of spiritual direction has gained a resurgence of interest in the past thirty to forty years (from the 1970’s to the continued renewal in the early twenty-first century) across multiple streams of the Christian tradition (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant). With this resurgence and wide usage of the term “spiritual direction” there has come much vitality and spiritual renewal amongst Christian communities and individuals. However, this revived interest in spiritual direction has also brought much potential confusion. What is meant by “spiritual direction?” In ways similar to the widespread use of terms such as “spirituality” and “mysticism,” “spiritual direction” is a term often used but much less clearly defined. Given the fact that this work will be exploring Ruusbroec's trinitarian mystical theology and its determination of the shape of the Flemish mystic’s spiritual direction or guidance in the life of prayer and contemplation, it seems necessary to define what this term means as it is used throughout this exploration. To this end, this section will give a brief aerial view of some of the primary characteristics of the major streams of the tradition of Christian spiritual direction. This will be nothing like exhaustive given the fact that such an investigation would mean another work entirely. I will round out this section with an examination of what Kenneth Leech calls “the marks of the spiritual director.”

146 While relying on Leech for the elemental framework of this aerial view (for he does perhaps the best sketch in contemporary literature on the tradition of spiritual direction), I will consult various sources along the way, for

This will add multiple perspectives to our picture, thus enriching it and making it a multilayered tapestry. The layout of the land in the overview will show variety amidst commonality in the practice of spiritual direction in the streams of the history of the Christian tradition. After exploring this unity amid diversity I will summarize the characteristic marks of the spiritual director. The commonality amidst diversity of spiritual direction and the marks of the spiritual director will define how I use the designation of “spiritual direction” in this work.

There are many divergences that one can find in the various streams of Christianity but one consistent theme that is virtually universal is the necessity for the Christian to seek the guidance of another, more mature, Christian while seeking growth in the life of prayer. There have been times in the history of the various streams of the Christian tradition when emphasis upon this guidance has been less pronounced, but it is virtually universal nonetheless. Christians have called this practice by various names but the most common is “spiritual direction.”

Depending on one’s tradition, ‘spiritual direction’ may be done in a group setting or on an individual basis between a director and directee. Generally however, it is done on an individual basis and is normally applied to the ‘cure of souls’ (pastoral ministry) when it involves the specific needs of one person. Spiritual direction is the aspect of the cure of souls that is the seeking after or listening for the soundings or the guiding of the Holy Spirit in a particular psychological and spiritual situation. In defining spiritual direction in the first few hundred years of the Church, George Demacopoulos articulates an expression that would need to be broadened in describing all of Christian spiritual direction throughout the church’s history but is helpful in understanding the activity nonetheless. Demacopoulos says: “by spiritual direction, I mean the modus operandi by which religious authorities (in both lay and monastic communities) sought to
advance the spiritual condition of those under their care."  

Building upon Demacopoulos it is important to note that, according to Kenneth Leech’s description of the general characteristics of spiritual direction throughout Christian history, the seeking is mutual in spiritual direction. The director is not simply the expert who shows the novice all of the riches of his/her wisdom. The one who is being directed as well as the one who is directing are listening for the Spirit’s soundings.  

…They are both parts of a spiritual direction, a current of spirituality, a divine-human process of relationship. “Spirituality” and “spiritual life” are not religious departments, walled-off areas of life. Rather the spiritual life is the life of the whole person directed towards God.  

Spiritual direction arises out of the fact that Christianity is an inherently social faith. This social nature of the Christian faith is rooted in both creational and salvific dimensions. It is creational in that Christianity confesses humans to be created in the imago dei. The God in whose image humans are created is the Holy Trinity, the one God who is, in His very being, a communion of three. While the Three of the Trinity are not three egos or “individuals” in the modern sense, Christian confession claims that humans image the Trinity as one humanity made up of many humans. After the Fall we are encountered by the salvific aspect of the Christian affirmation of the social, for God begins to gather unto Himself not simply an individual. Rather, He calls Abraham and Sarah in order to create a community through which to redeem the fallen.

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148 Leech, *Soul Friend*, 34.

149 Leech, *Soul Friend*, 34.

*imago dei.* In the coming of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit we see this communal redemption come to its apex and continuation in Christ and the creation of His Body, the Church.

In guiding the whole person towards God there is the necessity of skill and training. The Anglican Kenneth Leech makes the case that spiritual direction is not a fringe activity for a select few, but is rather vital to the ministry of any ordained clergy. He says:

> Similarly, I believe that prayer, study, and ascetical theology are vital to the ministry of any priest, and that without these disciplines, pastoral work is bound to wither or become superficial. Spiritual direction is therefore not a fringe activity, a “specialized” form of ministry (though there will be specialists here as in other areas)... \(^{151}\)

So spiritual direction is integral to the work to which all priests/ordained clergy are called, for they are called to the ‘cure of souls,’ which involves spiritually directing growing Christians. To suggest this means that all ordained clergy are in fact called to be theologians. \(^{152}\) This is also true for Christian *lay* spiritual directors.

It is within this context of the Scriptures and the early Church that the figure of the “spiritual director” arises. \(^{153}\) Purgation, illumination, and union (the traditional ‘Three Ways’) are not alien mystical forms artificially imposed on the Christian gospel. Rather, they arise out of the very heart of the gospel, which is repentance, life in the Spirit, and perfection. The notion of

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\(^{151}\) Leech, *Soul Friend*, 35.

\(^{152}\) Although there may be a distinction to be made between “pastoral counseling” and spiritual direction (although I am not entirely sure about whether such a distinction is ultimately useful) spiritual direction must always be part of the skill and practice of pastoral ministry. For discussion of spiritual direction which makes such a distinction somewhat convincing and helpful for understanding the nature of spiritual direction in various traditions see the work by Gary Moon and David Benner, eds., *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

\(^{153}\) What I refer to as “spiritual director” has been called by various titles, as will be shown in the following sketch of the history of the tradition, in the various periods and streams of the Christian tradition of spiritual direction. This figure has been called everything from *pneumatikos pater* (‘spiritual father’) in the Desert Fathers and Eastern Orthodoxy and *Staretz* (‘old man’) in Russian Orthodoxy to Soul Friend in the Anglican stream of the tradition.
spiritual progress (which is found in abundance in the Fathers such as Gregory Nyssen, Maximus Confessor, Irenaeus, etc) is an essential part of biblical revelation, which is concerned with God’s people’s progress. Their progress is marked by sin and repentance, wilderness and exile, by death and resurrection. This all comes to its apex in the Incarnation. The New Testament describes the Christian’s journey as one of progress. Luke 9:62 describes it as not looking back once one has put her hand to the plough. Matthew 24 describes it as enduring to the end, while Philippians 3:15 calls us to be perfect (spiritual maturity). This process of maturing spiritually is the very purpose of spiritual direction. The spiritual director is a guide concerned with the process through which the community and individual are being made one in love with the Trinity.\textsuperscript{154} It is within the common life of the flock that we see the shepherds like Paul and others in the New Testament arise to care for the progress of the spiritual maturity of believers. The Pauline letters are of particular importance because they are essentially pastoral spiritual direction for early Christian congregations and individuals within those congregations. So from the earliest days of Christian faith spiritual direction is done not only in person but through writing. This is poignant, for much of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction is done through writing to particular recipients.

The first significant sign of spiritual direction in the Christian tradition after the Scriptures is seen in the Desert Fathers of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria in the fourth and fifth centuries. These holy men of the desert were sought out for their wisdom and advice by disciples. The central concept was spiritual fatherhood and they were sought more for purity of heart and holiness than for teaching. The \textit{pater/mater pneumatikos} (‘spiritual father/mother’) was

\textsuperscript{154} Leech, \textit{Soul Friend}, 37.
strongly established in patristic writing by the fourth century. These men and women were looked to by disciples primarily for discretion, which was seen as an essential feature of the

155 Though it is common today to hear the designation “desert mothers and fathers,” it is difficult to know if the spiritual mothers (matera pneumatikai/Ammas) to whom some sayings are attributed in the Apophthegmata (Theodora, Sarah, and Synclética) technically can be said, with certainty, at the level of historical accuracy, to have actually lived in the desert. It seems quite evident that by the fourth century we do have the influential presence of a number of women who could accurately be described as spiritual ammas (matera pneumatikai) leading groups of female ascetics in monastic settings and other ascetical enclaves. Thus, there is no doubt regarding the presence and prominence of these female ascetic masters in the life of the Church. It must be acknowledged, however, that the Apophthegmata is written from the perspective of the male monk, so we cannot say with certainty that there was an equal amount of influence in the desert setting between ammas and abbas. Furthermore, we, at this point, cannot be certain that these three spiritual ammas were desert ammas in the sense of living in the desert. It seems they were leading groups of spiritual daughters (though Amma Sarah seems to have been an anchorite), which were more likely to have lived in the ascetical enclaves of the roads leading into villages and cities. This is not to say that there were not desert female ascetics or even a significant number of them. It is only to say that it is difficult to say, on the level of historical actuality, whether these three ammas lived in the desert. William Harmless offers a nuanced assessment of the situation and what we can or cannot say with certainty when he, after having discussed the difficulties, with each particular amma, of asserting with certainty that these three ammas lived in the desert and were of equal influence as their male counterparts in the desert, states that: “The Apophthegmata's accounts of desert mothers, while intriguing, are sparse. It raises the question whether it is even accurate to speak of ‘desert mothers.’ The editors of the Apophthegmata, of course, were not trying to write a balanced history of desert monasticism, but to gather wise sayings and stories that could inform the spiritual journey of their readers. It may well be that there were many more women in the desert than the text reports. But this category of ‘desert’ can distract us from where the real evidence lies. In fact, there are frequent reports of women ascetics, and some of these women were active at a very early date. Athanasius reports that after Antony had sold his family property but before he apprenticed himself to the local ascetic, he sent his younger sister to ‘respected and faithful virgins.’ to be raised ‘in virginity.’” William Harmless, Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 442. Harmless quotes Athanasius here from, Athanasius, Vita Antonii 3 (SC 400:136; trans. by Harmless). Recent decades have seen a pouring forth of scholarship, which has dramatically altered our understanding of the contribution of women in the movements of early Christian asceticism. Benedicta Ward was the first to begin drawing significant attention to the influence of spiritual ammas in early ascetic Christianity. For more on this discussion see, Benedicta Ward, “Apophthegmata Matrum,” Studia Patristica 16 (1985): 63–66. Reprinted in Signs and Wonders: Saints, Miracles and Prayers from the 4th Century to the 14th (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain : Brookfield, Vt: Routledge, 1992). See also Susanna Elm, Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity, Oxford Classical Monographs (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Columba Stewart, “Desert Mothers: The Portrayal of Women in the Sayings and Stories of the
spiritual father/mother from the time of St. Anthony the Great onwards. Through prayer and pastoral care the spiritual father/mother sought to help shape the inner life of his/her “sons/daughters.” The spiritual director was not simply someone who taught a spiritual technique. In this context one sees the spiritual director as the abba/amma. These abbas/ammas are the charismatic holy men and women of the wilderness and/or enclave or monastery whose sayings provide practical answers and wisdom for the difficulties of the ascetical life. In this tradition of desert spirituality the two names that stand out as spiritual guides are Evagrius Ponticus (345-99) and his disciple John Cassian (360-435). Evagrius was known for his great wisdom and understanding. In him we find the eight types of evil thoughts, which become the basis for the later development of the “seven deadly sins.” We also find in Evagrius the intricate exploration of battling with demons and evil thoughts. In Cassian we find a figure who spends substantial time in the desert with the Desert Fathers and who collects and somewhat synthesizes their sayings in his Institutes and Conferences.

It is in the tradition of the Desert Fathers that the ‘Spiritual Father’ (and ultimately ‘Spiritual Mother’ as well) of the Eastern Orthodox tradition finds its roots. In the Eastern tradition there is a heavy emphasis upon the need for anyone seriously seeking growth in the ascetic life to have a spiritual guide. There is much talk of the folly and danger of one who seeks

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157 Leech, Soul Friend, 41-43.
to grow in prayer with only himself as a guide. In the eleventh century St. Symeon the New Theologian, who is typical of the Eastern perspective, strongly urged being obedient to a spiritual father and asserts that ‘to put everything in the hands of your spiritual father, as in the hand of God, is an act of perfect faith… A man who has acquired active faith in his father in God when seeing him thinks he sees Christ himself.’ For Symeon the spiritual guide should be ‘an experienced teacher with knowledge of the passions,’ ‘a saintly instructor free from passions…is it therefore possible to think that a man leads a Divine life, in accordance with the Word of God, if he lives without a guide, pandering to himself and obeying his own self-will?’

In the 8th century the spirituality of the Jesus Prayer, which had been established on Mt. Sinai in the 7th century, had been incorporated into the spiritual life of Mt. Athos. By the fifteenth century, this tradition of the Jesus Prayer and the spiritual direction associated with it had also spread to Russia. In practicing the life of the Jesus Prayer there was in Russia, as in other parts of the East, a strong emphasis upon practicing it under guidance as well as being regular penitents and communicants. It is within this context that we see the spiritual director as staretz arise. ‘Staretz’ is simply the Russian word for ‘old man.’ Becoming a staretz is the fruition and culmination of a long life spent in the cultivation of humility and simplicity. It is the culmination of a life devoted to acquiring the Holy Spirit. The staretz provides assistance in battling with evil and acquiring the Holy Spirit. As the spiritual father the staretz is one to whom the directee should openly and vulnerably share all of his inner struggles and wounds. In this

158 Leech, Soul Friend, 44.

159 Kadloubovsky and Palmer, Writings from the Philokalia, (1961), 100-3, 93, 174-5, quoted in Leech, 45. Unfortunately, Leech does not give all of the bibliographic information for this source. However, the work has been republished as E. Kadloubovsky and G.E.H. Palmer, trans., Writings from the Philokalia: On Prayer of the Heart (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992).
vulnerable sharing the staretz should love his spiritual sons even more than the natural parents of
the son for he must give account to God for his spiritual care of the son. The power of the staretz
in Russian Orthodoxy was immense. Amvrosy (1812-91), who was a staretz to the Optina
monastery for about thirty years, was sought for guidance by both Fyodor Dostoevsky and
Vladimir Solovyov.\footnote{For more on the influence of the Optina Monastery as the spiritual center of Russia
during the renewal movement in Russian Orthodoxy beginning in the early nineteenth century
through the Bolshevik revolution in the early twentieth century and its influence even on
philosophical and literary figures see Rowan Williams, \textit{Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and
Fiction} (London, UK: Continuum, 2009) and Leonard J. Stanton, \textit{The Optina Pustyn Monastery
in the Russian Literary Imagination: Iconic Vision in works by Dostoevsky, Gogol, Tolstoy, and
Others} (New York: P. Lang, 1995).} It seems very likely that Amvrosy was one of the physical models for the
character Zossima in Dostoevsky’s \textit{The Brothers Karamazov}.\footnote{Leech, \textit{Soul Friend}, 45-48.}

So in the Eastern tradition there seem to be three essential features to the spiritual father.
First of all, he is to be a man of discernment (\textit{diakrisis}) who can see into the heart of another.
This gift is one which is acquired through the practice of prayer and ascetic struggle. Secondly,
the spiritual father is a man with the ability to love others and enter into their suffering, thus
making them his own. In The \textit{Brothers Karamazov} (through the mouth of Zossima) Dostoevsky
says, ‘A staretz is one who takes your soul and your will into his soul and his will.’ The staretz is
to share in Christ’s passion and death. Thirdly, the spiritual father is the one who, through his
participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, has the power to transform the cosmos with
the intensity of his love.\footnote{Leech, \textit{Soul Friend}, 44.}
In the Western tradition it is sufficient to touch upon the seminal figures of St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis de Sales. In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola we find not only a detailed and understandable rendering of the role of the director, but also a framework sensitive to the needs of the directee and the multiple dimensions of spiritual direction. In the Exercises the director is to arrange the retreat according to the maturity of the retreatant and stay in the background and encourage the retreatant, focusing on playing a mediatorial role between the retreatant and God. However, this role as mediator is not done in a way that calls attention to the director; he or she is to stay in the background, providing balance between the person and God. The retreat is focused on facilitating discernment of the soundings of the Spirit. The qualities of a commendable director are illumined clearly. The director is to be experienced in the exercises as well as adept at giving them and explaining their method. She is to be cautious, discreet, and gentle. She should be able to relate well personally with the directee but also preserve the character and position of a master. The director should put great trust in God and not take credit for anything as simply her own effort, always focusing upon directing the directee to God rather than herself. She should also take time to get to know the directee in order to know how to best serve her as well as inquiring as to the methods the directee has been using in meditation and prayer. There should be consistent encouragement of the directee and vigilance in noting any overstraining or violence to oneself in the life of prayer. So the Ignatian way provides a model that sees the life of asceticism as one that should lead to wholeness and fullness of life. It develops the characteristics of the director in a way that is sensitive to the other that is the directee, which is a nuance added to the more austere descriptions one finds in the Desert

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163 There are other streams of direction in Anglicanism and the Reformation that deserve treatment such as John Wesley and his band meetings, Luther, Bucer, and others, but this would take us beyond the limits of the present study.
Fathers. The practice of spiritual direction is a complex endeavor which calls for a stance which takes account of theological as well as interpersonal dynamics.

This trend of taking account of the multiple dimensions of spiritual direction is further developed in St. Francis de Sales. As much as perhaps anyone in the tradition, St. Francis insists on the universal necessity of spiritual direction as an aid to the growth of the Christian. So there is great stress placed on the need of a director, and yet he sees the relationship between director and directee as one of friendship. In finding a spiritual friend and describing the qualities of this director Francis says,

For this purpose [direction/spiritual friendship] choose one out of a thousand, as Avila says. For my part, I say one out of ten thousand, for there are fewer men than we realize who are capable of this task. He must be full of charity, of knowledge, and of prudence; if one of these three qualities is wanting in him, there is a danger. I tell you again, ask God for him, and having once found him, bless his Divine Majesty, stand firm, and do not look for another, but go forward with simplicity, humility, and confidence for you will make a most prosperous journey.164

In establishing friendship between director and directee as crucial he thought that it was important to avoid changing confessors if possible. So the friendship is to be nurtured over a period of time. That being said, Francis was not opposed to getting direction from different sources, should one have a director who was not ideal. Francis was, in the trajectory of Ignatius, known to put much emphasis on allowing the Spirit to have freedom in nurturing souls. So (especially for de Sales but for Ignatius as well) the director is revered but certainly does not have all the answers for every situation. There should be humility on the part of the director and the director should be gentle, adjusting her practice according to the working of the Spirit.165 In the spirit of adjusting the practice, given various factors, Francis also did not restrict spiritual


165 Leech, Soul Friend, 59-60.
direction to the spoken word only (and this puts him in the company of Ruusbroec, much of whose spiritual guidance in the life of prayer came through the written word). In Francis and Ignatius we see the synthesis between the theological and interpersonal dynamics blossom. Like the staretz, Francis’ and Ignatius’ directors were to be wise and gentle shepherds who are concerned with the Spirit’s moving toward the directee as well as the directee’s Spirit-enabled response to God through Christ.

To summarize, spiritual direction within the framework of Christian practice is the aspect of the cure of souls that is the seeking after or listening for the soundings or the guiding of the Holy Spirit in a particular psychological and spiritual situation. The practice was bequeathed to us historically from the writings of the New Testament and the movement of desert monasticism. It is within the spirituality of the East that the pneumatikos pater emerges, later becoming the staretz of the Russian stream of the tradition. It is in the West that we encounter spiritual direction in the contemporary sense, with its close association with the confessional and the additional growth of the Counter-Reformation movement of direction particularly focused on the guidance of contemplatives. The twentieth and, so far, twenty-first centuries have seen much reflection on the place of spiritual direction within the life of the Church.

Kenneth Leech tells us that, given the larger tradition, there arise particular “marks of the spiritual director.” The tradition teaches us that the spiritual director first appears as a person possessed by the Spirit. Thus the first essential characteristic of the spiritual director is closeness.

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166 For instance, in his later works Ruusbroec addressed The Seven Enclosures to the Franciscan nun Margareta van Meerebeke as well as, possibly (though this is less certain), The Seven Rungs and The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness. The Seven Enclosures gives Margriet spiritual direction/guidance on her daily routine as a nun and how this routine may be a means of union with God. McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 7.

167 Leech, Soul Friend, 84.
to God or holiness of life. The East claims that this is also what makes a theologian. The director, in the mode of the Russian startsy, helps the directee not primarily by what he says but by the radiation of inner peace and sanctity. Secondly, the spiritual director is a person of experience who has struggled with the difficulties of seeking after Christ through life and prayer. Thirdly, the spiritual director is a person of learning. However, this learning is never an end in itself, but must always be wed with spiritual maturity. The director must be steeped in the Scriptures and wisdom of the tradition. Fourthly, the spiritual director is a person characterized by discernment. *Diakrisis* occurs over and over throughout the history of the practice, from the Desert Fathers onwards. The director is a person of insight who can read the writing on the walls of the soul. Finally, the spiritual director is a person who gives way to and allows for the leading of the Holy Spirit. The relationship of direction is to be one in which the “the channels of grace are opened, and the Holy Spirit is able to move freely in the Christian person, drawing him to a closer union and greater freedom as a child of God.” The practice of spiritual direction is a complex endeavor, which calls for a stance that takes account of theological as well as interpersonal dynamics. Spiritual direction is listening for the soundings of the Spirit in a way that takes the makeup and history of the directee (or group of directees in a group setting) seriously and gently points the person or group ever toward the voice of God. It is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means to an end and that end is none other than friendship with and a sharing in the Love of the Triune God, whose service is perfect freedom.

These various dimensions have been explored in an aerial fashion in which some of the major currents and figures in the history and practice of spiritual direction have been brought to

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light. For all the variety of emphases in spiritual direction there is also a profound unity in terms of core characteristics expected of the director and direction in these various streams of the Christian tradition. With these characteristics of spiritual direction within the broad Christian tradition clarified, the reader of this work will now be in a position to have a relatively clear understanding of what constitutes “spiritual direction/guidance” as it is used to describe some of the writings of the medieval Brabantine trinitarian mystical theologian Jan van Ruusbroec as this work unfolds below, though, historically, he does come before the developments one finds in Ignatius and de Sales. This should temper our expectations of supposing to find written spiritual direction in Ruusbroec’s work that shows the awareness of the unique psychological make-up of the one(s) receiving spiritual direction and the multiple dimensions of the practice one would find in practice post-Ignatius and Francis. Nevertheless, the Flemish mystic’s writings evince a deep understanding of the way of maturation in the life of contemplative prayer. And this understanding is always wed to and shaped by his understanding of the mystery of the Triune God.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have elaborated on the fundamental significance of the particulars of Ruusbroec’s biographical and historical context, for they help us understand the environment in which Ruusbroec’s spiritual-theological development takes shape. We have noted how his theological insights are not simply given to the canon in an unmediated fashion from God, nor do they arise, in a sui generis fashion, from his individual genius. Rather, while God may very well have given them, these insights are mediated to him through years of formal and informal
theological education and formation and his personal development. This will assist us in recognizing the figures from the Christian mystical theological tradition that inform Ruusbroec’s own mystical/contemplative theology. Furthermore, and this is most essential for accurately interpreting the prior’s trinitarian mystical theology and the spiritual direction it shapes (the evidence for this statement will be shown in the following chapters). Comprehending these biographical and historical aspects has shown us when, where, and how the Augustinian canon encountered the two interrelated issues in the life of the larger church catholic that would enliven his mystical teaching, writing, and ministry of spiritual guidance for the rest of his life. These issues were the slack spiritual life of the clergy, prelates, and religious, which led to the same lack of “savoring” God among the laity. As we have shown, from Ruusbroec’s perspective, these two factors were what led to the rise of the sensibility of the “Heresy of the Free Spirit” and the vulnerability of the laity to such false teaching. As we have seen, it appears that these factors were part and parcel of what led the the Brabantine priest and his confrères to Groenendaal to found a chapel where suitable liturgy and priesthood for the laity could be practiced. Given the crucial role these factors play in Ruusbroec’s life and writings, they will, as will be shown in chapters two, three, and four of our study, have immense repercussions for the substance and shape of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and the written spiritual direction that it orients.

Furthermore, the chapter’s examination of Ruusbroec’s biography and historical context has, additionally, been important inasmuch as it has made us aware of how the Brabantine commenced his development as a spiritual guide or director to novices in the contemplative life as well as those more mature in practicing the life of prayer, such as the hermit spoken to in the

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170 Of course, as we shall see in the next chapter, a choice between either God or the immanence of the created order as cause is a false dichotomy, given the radical transcendence of God.
As we investigate them in following chapters, all of these biographical/historical dynamics will enrich our grasp of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and the written spiritual direction for which they serve as the root and dynamic vitality.

In this chapter we have also argued that the Flemish priest’s writing is best understood by reading him as a mystical/contemplative theologian whose work exemplifies the integrity of spirituality and theology. In doing so we have sought to give a robust description of the contours of what we mean by “mystical theology.” As a result, we have claimed that we must understand his written spiritual direction as intricately interwoven with and formed by his trinitarian mystical theology if we are to accurately assess this aspect of his ministry in the care of souls. It is but an aspect of his larger spirituality, all of which is deeply connected with his trinitarian mystical thought.

Finally, in the concluding portion of this opening chapter, we offered the briefest of aerial views of some of the primary features of the major streams of the tradition of Christian spiritual direction. In so doing we sought to distill for the reader the “marks of the spiritual director.” We conferred with a number of sources along the way, which allowed us to bring to light the enriched, multilayered tapestry of the Christian tradition of spiritual direction/guidance. Because of this, we found that the topography of the overall tradition is characterized by variety amidst commonality in the practice of spiritual direction within the streams of the history of the Christian tradition. It was only after exploring this unity amid diversity that we summarized the characteristic marks of the spiritual director. As we noted, the commonality amidst diversity of spiritual direction and the marks of the spiritual director will define how we use the designation of “spiritual direction” throughout this work. With the elements of biographical/historical context, methodological/hermenieutical perspective, and our understanding of spiritual direction
in hand, we may now turn, fruitfully, to delineating the contours of Ruusbroec’s vision of trinitarian mystical theology in the next chapter. It is this mystical theology that orients his written spiritual direction, as the *cantus firmus* (firm melody) positions the symphonic harmonies of a great orchestral work.
Chapter 2: Swimming in the Flowing, Ebbing Sea: The Lineaments of Ruusbroec’s Trinitarian Mystical Theology

Introduction

Ruusbroec scholars generally agree that his description of the intra-trinitarian life of God — the perfect, eternal harmony of activity and rest in the Trinity (what Ruusbroec calls “The Flowing, Ebbing Sea”) — is key for understanding Ruusbroec's mystical/contemplative theology.¹ It is this trinitarian mystical theology that grounds Ruusbroec’s understanding of the

¹ I add “contemplative” to “mystical” in order to remind the reader of the nature of Christian mystical theology as contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity’s Love in which the Father, through the Son, in the Love of the Spirit creates and redeems humanity and the entire cosmos. I draw the idea of Ruusbroec and other mystical theologians as “contemplative theologians” from Rob Faesen, Jan van Ruusbroec: contemplatief theoloog in een moeilijke tijd (Kampen, NLD: Uitgeverij Kok, 2007). This points also to how the early church up through the Middle Ages understood that the Mystery is also mediated through the “mysteries” of the scriptures and the Church’s liturgy. And this mystery, as seen in Denys the Aeropagite’s work and Maximus Confessor’s The Church’s Mystagogy, extends to understanding the entire creation/cosmos as a theophany and therefore a mystery mediating divine glory and love. The holding of the two terms “mystical” and “contemplative” together, in light of these theological, cosmological and liturgical characteristics, is also a way to distinguish contemplation from a notion of contemplation as denoting “mystical experiences” of the purely individual sort (usually associated with a panoply of paranormal experiences). It also is to distinguish “mystical theology” from an understanding in which “mystical” and “mystical theology” are technical subcategories of moral theology describing the “revered and chilly reward of grace after untold ascetic struggle” of the individual soul. This quote is found within a larger discussion of the reduction (“reduction” in the contemporary sense of that word, not in the sense that a Medieval theologian such as Bonaventure uses the term) of “mystical” to the narrow senses of the technical or the experiential in Mark A. McIntosh, Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 5–9. The quote is found on page 8. For an account of the theological moves made in late medieval theology which led to equating ‘mystical’ ‘experientialism’ in the way McIntosh describes, along with a critique of this conception, see Denys Turner, The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 186–273. For the writings of Denys (the Corpus Dionysiacum) in English see Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, trans. Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988). For The Church’s Mystagogy by Maximus see Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings, trans. George Charles Berthold (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 181–214.
Christian’s contemplative journey of deeper and deeper participation in the Triune life of God, the journey of and toward mystical, deifying union with the Trinity. For Ruusbroec this is deification or transformation into Godlikeness (god gelike/godformich) and is a journey in which the Christian is made holy through her participation in the mysterious Triune Life of the perfect, eternal harmony of outgoing Love of the Triune Persons as they simultaneously rest by flowing back into their common essence (wesen). The Christian contemplative participates in this Flowing, Ebbing Sea of Triune Life as a creature whose ground is in the Son/Word eternally begotten of the Father, in whom the exemplars or eternal ideas for all creatures, including the eternal idea/exemplar of the Christian contemplative/mystic, lie.

The origin and telos of the human creature is found in living from and toward actualizing the image and becoming all that God, the Father, through the Son, in the bond of Love that is the Holy Spirit, has created all humanity and the contemplative to be as idea and image. The eternal idea of humanity is to be the living vibrant image of the Son, Who is the perfect Image of the Father, in the Love of the Spirit. Through this imaging or mirroring humanity is ultimately created to image the Trinity. In light of the Fall, Ruusbroec teaches that the contemplative/mystic is redemptively drawn by the Holy Spirit deeper into participation in the Triune Life. Thus, her life becomes more and more characterized by her continuous going out to her neighbor in love while simultaneously resting in the bosom of the Triune God, a reflection of and participation in the eternal harmony of outgoing Love shared amongst the Father, Son and Spirit and the concomitant rest and enjoyment, by means of the Spirit, of the Persons in their essence (wesen) or unity. This deifying union is possible because of God’s redemptive work in and through the incarnation of the Son. Ruusbroec calls this spiritual ideal of deified life the “Common Life” (ghemeyne leven) and this Christian the “Common Person” (“Common Man”), for she reflects
the Triune Life and Love of God. This life continually entails participation in the worship and sacraments of the Church as well as communal and individual prayer. This common life is a contemplative life in all its dimensions, not just in specific times more properly called contemplation.

Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology lies within the broad and deep tradition of Christian Neoplatonist theology. Significant reasons for the distinctive elements of the Brabantine contemplative’s mystical theology are due, along with his theological giftedness, in large part to where he found himself culturally and historically (explored in chapter one), the figures from the Christian mystical/contemplative tradition on which he draws as sources, and his context of medieval theology and the place he occupies among the dominant modes of theology in his time. This must be taken into account along with the particularities of Ruusbroec’s theological education and formation and the ongoing difficulties with how mystical theologians in late medieval Christendom distinguished themselves from what was deemed false mysticism such as the sensibility of the heresy of the Free Spirit, explored in the first chapter.

In light of these considerations and in order to explore them in more depth, the first portion of this chapter will delve more deeply into Ruusbroec’s historical-theological context by locating Ruusbroec’s contemplative-mystical theological vision within the dominant modes of monastic, scholastic, and vernacular theology. His is a vernacular mystical theology, written in his native Middle Dutch. The remainder of the chapter, which will draw the vast majority of our attention, will be devoted to delineating the lineaments of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology. This will take place by first delving into the trinitarian shape of his theology, which will lead us organically into an examination of his view of humanity as the image of God. The Flemish canon’s anthropology is trinitarian and exemplarist in the sense that the human is the
“image of the Image.” The human is created to the image of the Son, Who is the perfect Image of the Father. In being the image of the Image, the Son, humanity is thus created to the image of the Trinity and so Ruusbroec’s is a relational anthropology. Finally, we will explore the contours of the mystical/contemplative path according to Ruusbroec. This exploration of the lineaments of Ruusbroec’s mystical/contemplative theology will serve as the larger theological vision, which will guide us as we then explore the Flemish mystical theologian’s Groenendaal writings and how the spiritual direction they contain is shaped by the trinitarian nature of his mystical-contemplative theology.

I. Ruusbroec’s Historical-Theological Context

It has only been in the past few decades, of the mid-to-late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that the awareness has grown amongst scholars that the intellectus fidei of Christian theology in the Middle Ages was done in the voices of three predominant modes of expression. These are the scholastic, monastic, and vernacular modes. It is commonly accepted that Ruusbroec’s mystical theology lies within the vernacular mode or family. This is particularly important for understanding Ruusbroec and his medieval theological milieu, for there was roughly a century (ca. 1840–1940) in which the scholarly enquiry into medieval theology acknowledged only one mode of authentic theology, that of the scholastic variety. The broadening of vision began with the important pioneering work of Etienne Gilson and his student Jean Leclercq, as well as others who discerned the distinctive character of monastic theology.

scholarly awareness as the third major mode of medieval theology. It is within the orbit of vernacular theology that Ruusbroec moves.

Vernacular theology is distinguishable from the modes of monastic and scholastic theology in a couple of different ways. The first, and perhaps most obvious, way in which vernacular theology is distinct is its expression within the vernacular languages of medieval Europe and the developing vernacular literature of these various areas. Vernacular theology was also the first mode of theology in the history of Christianity in which women were able to find a significant voice as theologians. This is related to another dimension of distinctiveness of vernacular theology, the educational background of its practitioners and the various genres these vernacular theologians used in order to give voice to their theological visions. This mode of medieval theology begins to bloom within the works of a few twelfth century voices but it is in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries that vernacular theology really came into its own and blossomed. Bernard McGinn states:

In terms of achievement, one may well say that the fourteenth century saw the apogee of vernacular theology. In England, this was the “Golden Age” of English mysticism, as well as of the great vernacular theological poem, “Piers Plowman.” In Germany, the first three decades of the century witnessed Meister Eckhart’s preaching, and the last seven saw a flood of mystical teaching and preaching in the vernacular, both among Eckhart’s followers and in other traditions. Italy was graced with the towering figure of Catherine of Siena. In the Low Countries the fourteenth century was the age of Ruusbroec and his followers, both in the Groenendaal community and in the early stages of the devotio moderna.4

A watershed event occurred in the fourteenth century when the majority of mystical writings shifted from being written in Latin to being composed in the vernacular. One of the last contemplatives to evenly distribute his writings between writing in Latin and the vernacular was


Richard Rolle, who most likely received a similar level of education to that of Ruusbroec. Both Walter Hilton and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* had shifted to writing in English, though both were capable of writing in Latin. Hilton did write at times in Latin but primarily composed his work in English. In Germany, John Tauler was even scholastically trained and yet never wrote in Latin and, though a gifted stylist in both Middle High German and Latin, Henry Suso only produced one treatise in Latin, that being a revised version of one of his vernacular works. While this work by Suso, *Horologium Sapientiae*, was a popular mystical work, second only to *De imitatione Christi* in number of manuscripts and translations, Suso’s preference of the vernacular was of marked significance. Vernacular theology’s ascendance to being the predominant mode of theology was certainly due to the fact that a wider audience had arisen, in both the upper and middle classes, who were ardent readers of spiritual writing and desired to dive into the depths of the contemplative life. However, there were multiple factors at play in the successful ascendance of vernacular theology.\(^5\)

Though it has been extremely helpful for the study of medieval theology to become aware of the three families or modes of theology (scholastic, monastic, and vernacular) it is important to avoid a simplistic model in which these ways of doing theology are put in strict opposition to one another. The unfolding development of the three modes is not one in which there are impermeable boundaries between the three. As Bernard McGinn aptly notes: “The three modes of medieval theology had complex interrelationships, mutual conversations, that put the lie to any simple oppositional model."\(^6\) McGinn goes on to note that while a figure like Bernard of


\(^6\) McGinn, “The Significance of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology,” 22. For a perspective that critiques the use of the schematic categories such as ‘monastic theology,’ ‘scholastic theology,’ and ‘mystical theology,’ see Kent Emery, *Monastic, Scholastic and Mystical Theologies from the Late Middle Ages* (Aldershot, Hampshire; Brookfield, VT: Variorum,
Clairvaux may have stood in opposition to Peter Abelard, Bernard was simultaneously an admirer of other master scholastics such as Peter Lombard, with whom Bernard shared conversation through correspondence. Additionally, as mentioned above, women found their voice in the vernacular mode of theology that arose out of the environment of the “New Mysticism” and its practitioners’ desire to live out the *vita apostolica*. Among the voices of women vernacular theologians, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg, was the relatively common phenomenon of their being aided by learned Dominicans. This helped some like Mechthild to put their theological reflections and visions into writing, which allowed their thought to be disseminated. So a key characteristic of vernacular theology was the conversation between men and women. This characteristic is seen significantly in Ruusbroec’s life and thought in that he arguably composed four of his texts for Margriet van Meerbeke, a Poor Clare of Brussels.

Furthermore, with the translation into French of Bernard’s *Sermones super Cantica* in the late twelfth century a conversation was started between the vernaculars and the Latin of the international clerical class. As this conversation continued the thirteenth century saw some texts of vernacular mystical theology translated into Latin in order to foster the awareness of these texts internationally. An example of this translation into Latin was Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Flowing Light of the Godhead*. An interesting paradox of the literature of vernacular theology is

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that its audience was both wider and narrower than the Latin texts of monastic theology and scholastic theology. It was wider in the sense that it made available to people who did not have the higher formal education of the clerical class significant writings of contemplative/mystical theology. However, its audience was narrower in the sense that it was limited to a particular language domain of people from a particular geographical area.\textsuperscript{9}

As noted above, the boundaries between the modes of monastic, scholastic, and vernacular theology were porous and were sites of continued conversation between practitioners of the three modes. However, and this is significant for Ruusbroec and his historical/theological context, while the conversations between the mode of scholastic theology and various streams of vernacular theology were never completely eliminated, there was a significant and growing sense of opposition between the two modes that increasingly strained the conversations. As one reads the major mystical/contemplative theological works of the fourteenth century one key note that comes to the fore of the “music” is the sense among the vernacular theologians that there is a growing opposition between the theology of the universities and their own attempts to provide coherent and sound teaching to the larger swath of less educated people reading only in the vernacular language(s).\textsuperscript{10} There has been much “ink spilled” by theologians from the early-to-mid twentieth century to the, now, early twenty-first century on the historical-theological development and consequences of the “divorce” between doctrinal/academic theology and spirituality. Some of the commentary has noted that, while this separation was not created in the fourteenth century, this time period was one in which the separation became progressively more

\textsuperscript{9} McGinn, “The Significance of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology,” 22.

\textsuperscript{10} McGinn, “The Significance of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology,” 22.
While there were efforts by particular figures to hold together holiness/sanctity and speculation, the widening gap between the two modes is definitely discernable. This split was to

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have some unfortunate repercussions in the coming centuries. The character of the theology being done in the universities by the schoolmen was a kind from which the vernacular mystical theologians felt evermore estranged.\textsuperscript{12}

The passage from \textit{Tabernakel} cited and discussed above in chapter one, in which Ruusbroec criticized all the ranks of the clergy, is widely known.\textsuperscript{13} In his earliest stage of his career, in the \textit{Rijcke}, Ruusbroec is also critical of the clerics who “appear to be shepherds, but who are robbers and criminals.” In this context Ruusbroec is describing the lettered priests who are trained in the exegetical methods of the schools. These priests clarify the Scriptures “by means of an abundance of references and the cleverness of … understanding and long practice in the school.” These clergyman lack grace and the desire for a transforming consciousness of God. Therefore, when elucidating Scripture, they cannot fathom “the fruit and sweetness hidden within it.”\textsuperscript{14}

Two other examples whose writings are witnesses to the growing gulf between spirituality and speculative thought were the Dominicans John Tauler and Henry Suso. These two contemporaries of Ruusbroec, and great vernacular mystical theologians themselves, were both influenced by the work of their elder Dominican Meister Eckhart. Suso and Tauler wrote in the wake of the condemnation of Eckhart, who was the last figure whose theology bridged the spheres of vernacular and scholastic theology. The two Dominicans critiqued fellow members of their order for being overly fixated on an academic theology which Suso and Tauler considered

\textsuperscript{12} McGinn, “The Significance of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology,” 23.

\textsuperscript{13} In addition to the critical edition, for a partial translation and survey of the \textit{Tabernakel}, see Paul Verdeyen, \textit{Ruusbroec and His Mysticism} (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 142–158.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Rijcke}, IV, 2628–2656.
to be of no value for the pursuit of the spiritual life. The beginning of the second book of Suso’s *Horologium Sapientiae* contains an illuminating example of their critique; it comes in the form of the allegory of the golden sphere. In the allegorical vision the disciple of Wisdom sees a large gold sphere, which is ornamented by precious gems and contains “countless masters and students of all arts and sciences.” The sphere contains lower and upper mansions, with the lower mansion containing the liberal arts and applied sciences. The upper mansion contains “the school of theological truth” where Eternal Wisdom is sovereign. This upper mansion of theological truth has three divisions of teachers and students. In the first division the disciple of Wisdom sees a group composed of those sitting near the door and staring out into the street. This group signifies the students “interested in speculation about what can be known…utterly cold to true love.” The second group is made up of those who seek to find what is necessary for salvation in academic exercises but who are not fervent for the more lofty gifts. The students of the “true and highest philosophy” compose the third group and are those “who exert themselves with all the love of their hearts and with all their might to attain the things that belong to perfection, taking care and pains that their love may be as full of divine Wisdom as their intellect is of knowledge.”

This description is of utmost importance for “these are the true spiritual philosophers and theologians— and they do not appear to inhabit the universities.”

While the opposition of Ruusbroec and other vernacular mystical theologians to what they perceived as sterile and lifeless forms of theology coming out of the universities did not


16 For the vision of the golden sphere see Henry Suso, *Heinrich Seuses Horologium Sapientiae*, ed. Pius Künzle (Freiburg, CHE: Universitätsverlag, 1977), Book II, chap. 1, 519–526. This and the preceding quotations in this paragraph from this work are cited in McGinn, “The Significance of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology,” 23–24.

influence the shape of their vernacular theology to the same extent as did the threat of mystical heresy in the sensibility of the Free Spirit, this is an important factor that must be considered when interpreting the theology of vernacular mystical theologians in general and Ruusbroec in particular. And yet, as noted above, vital to the development of vernacular theology was its relationships with monastic theology and scholastic theology and the influence of these modes upon it. This is no less true for Ruusbroec for, along with the distinctiveness of his theology, we find (though he very rarely cites his sources) the influence of the two major streams of Christian Neoplatonism, Augustinian and Dionysian, upon his thought.\(^\text{18}\) These two streams are mediated

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\(^{18}\) The influence of Neoplatonism has been a contentious area of debate amongst Ruusbroec scholars. An early twentieth century example that expatiated the position of the dual influence of Augustinian and Dionysian Neoplatonism on Ruusbroec was A. Wautier d’Aygalliers, *Ruysbroeck l’Admirable* (Paris: Perrin et Cie, 1923). An English translation of this work can be found in A. Wautier d’Aygalliers, *Ruysbroeck the Admirable* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1969). The perspective of the present work endorses this dual influence, though in distinction from much of what d’Aygalliers argues, particularly in regard to his ascription of influence of scholastic theology (though he admittedly ascribes less influence to scholastic theology than to Augustinian and Dionysian Neoplatonism). I do not doubt that there is a general influence of scholastic theology upon Ruusbroec given his emphasis upon virtue in the “active life” in places like the first section of the *Brulocht*. This section is helpfully translated by James Wiseman in *John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. James A. Wiseman, O.S.B. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 54–66. This emphasis upon virtue is seen throughout his writings, along with the emphases of an articulation of grace as “perfecting nature” and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, we must understand the influence of scholastic theology upon Ruusbroec in the way articulated by Pak when he states “It would be difficult (and in all probability almost impossible) to ascertain which particular scholastic theology (for instance, Bonaventure’s or Thomas Aquinas’s) Ruusbroec subscribed to. In this area, too, we need to keep in mind the fact that Ruusbroec was a synthesizer, and that he refrained from adopting any particular theology in its entirety while drawing upon whatever elements he found useful for his own theological practice from his sources, scholastic theology included. Obviously Ruusbroec’s corpus itself is not intended to be a treatise in scholastic theology by reason of whose systematic exigence a theologian defines terms in a precise and technical manner and relates them to each other as a systematic whole. In truth, it is not altogether clear precisely where Ruusbroec stands with regard to particular theological issues. In general, Ruusbroec’s texts do not lend themselves to such precision. Many theological ideas Ruusbroec took from the scholastic sources pertain to the common stock of contemporary theological knowledge available in theological manuals. We know that Ruusbroec read a widely propagated theological manual of the late medieval period, Hugo Ripelin of Straatsburg’s (d.1268) *Compendium theologicae*
to him no doubt through figures such as the Victorines, Bonaventure (who combines in his writings Augustinian and Dionysian, primarily “affective” Dionysianism), William of St. Thierry, Bernard of Clairvaux and Hadewijch along with their own influences upon his thinking. Bonaventure,19 William,20 and Hadewijch seem to have had a significant influence upon Ruusbroec.21 There can be little doubt as well that Ruusbroec knew the writings of Bernard of veritatis. Although Ruusbroec borrowed some ideas from this theological compendium, its influence on Ruusbroec’s theology appears negligible. Moreover, the detailed theological knowledge exhibited in his works that stems definitely from the milieu of scholastic theology seems to go beyond the limits of the manual” Pak, 201. Pak discusses how this general pool of late-medieval theological language, influenced heavily by the theology of the schools, informs Ruusbroec (without our being able to discern particular sources) in his discussions throughout his corpus of “theology of Christian life (grace, theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit); and second…anthropology, that is, a theological understanding of the human person in relation to God, and a view on the structure of the human soul,” Pyong-Gwan Pak, “The Vernacular Mystical Theology of Jan van Ruusbroec: Exploring Sources, Contexts and Theological Practices” (Ph.D diss., Boston College, 2008), 202. I am broadly in agreement with Pak that Ruusbroec drew from monastic and scholastic theology. We must keep in mind however that Ruusbroec is a vernacular mystical/contemplative theologian and not a scholastic theologian. An extremely helpful recent resource which explores the history of various areas of Ruusbroec scholarship, including the scholarship on Ruusbroec’s sources is Loet Swart, “Overview of Ruusbroec Research,” in A Companion to John of Ruusbroec, ed. John Arblaster and Rob Faesen (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 303–338.


20 William of St. Thierry has been shown to be a major formative source and influence upon Ruusbroec by Paul Verdeyen, “De invloed van Willem van St. Thierry op Hadewijch en Ruusbroec,” Ons Geestelijk Erf 51 (1977): 3–19; and Pyong-Gwan Pak, “The Vernacular Mystical Theology of Jan van Ruusbroec: Exploring Sources, Contexts and Theological Practices” (Ph.D diss., Boston College, 2008), 467–526.

21 For studies that deal with the influence upon Ruusbroec by the beguine Hadewijch and discussion of their similarities and differences see Stephen Axters, “Hadewijch als Voorloper van de Zalige Jan van Ruusbroec,” in Dr. L Ryepens-Album, ed. Albert Ampe (Antwerp: Ruusbroec-Genootschap, 1964), 57–74; J. Reynaert, “Ruusbroec en Hadewijch,” Ons Geestelijk
Clairevaux and Eckhart. Some of these influences will be discussed below as needed in describing the primary contours of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology. It is beyond the scope of this work to discuss the manner and measure of the influence of these figures in great detail. There is much work to be done in this area since there has only been a small, modest amount of work over the past century; though these have been helpful offerings.


It seems that much of this lack of exploration has been due to a way of reading Ruusbroec over most of the past century that has focused more on Ruusbroec as a mystical author writing works of spirituality and discernment of stages of mystical experience rather than reading him as a theologian as well. This way of reading the Brabantine canon also looked less at his being part of the wider Western Christian tradition of mystical theology and more on his writings unto themselves. This methodology has been helpful, for it has brought forth a number of studies that have made us more aware of how Ruusbroec uses particular terms throughout his corpus as well as his method of examining the stages of deepening mystical consciousness.\textsuperscript{23} The sensibility has also given us the extremely helpful critical edition of Ruusbroec’s oeuvre.\textsuperscript{24} However, these terms and his way of describing the journey of the contemplative into deeper awareness of union with God need to be understood in their medieval context. This context points us to the fact that in order to interpret Ruusbroec’s writings in the most fruitful manner we must enrich the insights and discoveries of the methodology of focusing Ruusbroec’s works in and of themselves with the awareness that Ruusbroec is a vernacular mystical theologian who arises within the tradition of

\textsuperscript{23} This way of reading Ruusbroec with relatively little attention to the wider tradition has been the dominant mode of the Ruusbroecgenootschap scholars such as J. Alaerts, A. Deblaere, T. Mertens, G. De Baere, P. Mommaers, and F. Willaert. There is perhaps no better representative of this methodology than Paul Mommaers. See Paul Mommaers, \textit{Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Union with God} (Leuven: Peeters, 2009).

Western Christian Neoplatonic mystical theology, with its complex rootedness within the theology of Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite.\(^{25}\) We will now turn to rendering the core

\(^{25}\) For discussions of this heritage and the relationship and distinctions between the “Intellectual Dionysianism” and “Affective Dionysianism” see Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)* vol. 5 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 78–87 and Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216–26. Fortunately there has been a widening of scope in Ruusbroec scholarship since the turn of the millennium toward redressing this imbalance and reading Ruusbroec as a mystical theologian within the wider Western mystical theological tradition and its undeniable Neoplatonism. Until this recent focus on Ruusbroec as theologian the last major study of the Brabantine canon’s theology was the work of Albert Ampe. See Albert Ampe, *Kernproblemen uit de Leer van Ruusbroec*, 4 vols. (Lane, Tielt: Drukkerij-Uitgeverrij, 1950–57). For the small but growing scholarly literature on Ruusbroec’s theology see Gist Cook, “Essential Love”; Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003); Pak, “The Vernacular Mystical Theology of Jan van Ruusbroec”; Rob Faesen, *Jan van Ruusbroec: contemplatief theoloog in een moeilijke tijd* (Kampen, NLD: Uitgeverij Kok, 2007); McGinn, “The Significance of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology”; idem, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350—1550)*, vol. 5 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012), 5-61; Lieve Uyttenhove, *Embraced by the Father and the Son in the Unity of the Holy Spirit: A Study of the Trinity and the Mystical Life in the Works of Jan van Ruusbroec* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2012); and Kikuchi, *From Eckhart to Ruusbroec*. See also Denys Turner, “Dionysius and some late Medieval Mystical Theologians of Northern Europe,” *Modern Theology* 24:4 (2008): 661–665. Turner shows how Ruusbroec’s theological vision, much formed by the Christian Neoplatonism of Dionysius mystical theology, necessitates that he make such claims about the union of the soul with God without distinction precisely because of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The Trinity’s otherness from creatures is irreducibly, mysteriously other than the way that creatures are other to one another. Thus Dionysian language about God’s otherness, and therefore the soul’s union with God, has an unavoidable paradoxicality about it caused by the failure of language to be able to adequately describe the “being” of God, which is the source of all creaturely being. It is precisely the Creator/creature distinction, which, in a Dionysian key, necessitates this paradoxical language in mystical theologians such as Ruusbroec. For Dionysian mystical theology the Source (God) transcends creaturely identity and distinction. Turner shows also that, because they both fail to grasp this Dionysian logic of transcendence, Jean Gerson (who condemned this aspect of Ruusbroec’s teaching as heretical) and Denys the Carthusian (who defended Ruusbroec against Gerson) both misunderstand Ruusbroec on this point. “Loyal though Denys’ defence of Ruusbroec may be, it is, in my view, uncomprehending of the inner logic of Ruusbroec's thought. Ruusbroec's “hyperbole” is not the product merely of pious fervour, and in any case, were it but that, he would still be left open to Gerson's second level of critique that Ruusbroec's intended meaning can be derived only from what he has actually written; so that even if he is let off the hook of explicitly heretical aforethought, his
dimensions of Ruusbroec’s vision of mystical theology, which will, of necessity, be done in broad strokes.

II. The Flowing, Ebbing Sea: The Trinitarian Shape of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology

In what many consider his magnum opus, Die Geestelike Brulocht (The Spiritual Espousals), Ruusbroec proclaims, “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 in heaven and earth, together with all that they have and can do.”26 The analogy drawn between the boundless, infinite life of the Trinity and the sea or ocean has been a prevalent one throughout the centuries of Christian mystical/contemplative theology. However, it is a decidedly powerful one for Ruusbroec, for it brilliantly illustrates his vision of the Trinity. This is especially important for understanding the late medieval Flemish mystical theologian’s thought, for his vision of the mystical/contemplative life of the Christian is trinitarian through and through. Ruusbroec was of course not the first to develop a Christian

failure still lies in the manner of his expression, which piety cannot be allowed to excuse. There is, in any case, more to it than that; the diagnoses of Gerson and Denys, opposed as they are, are equally superficial. What leads Ruusbroec to his hyperbolical formulae of the soul's oneness with God are pure necessities of thought and language, necessities which derive from the Dionysian soil in which Ruusbroec's theology is rooted.” Turner, “Dionysius and Some Late Medieval Mystical Theologians,” 659–660. While my sympathies lie with the theological way of reading Ruusbroec which offers correctives to the way of reading Ruusbroec that has not taken into account his rootedness in the Christian Neoplatonist mystical theology, the two approaches should be considered complementary, rather than simply opposed.

26 Die geestelike brulocht—The Spiritual Espousals (Brulocht). in Jan van Ruusbroec: Opera Omnia, G. de Baere, editor in chief; 10 vols. Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout: Brepolis, 1981-2006), b 1148-51. That Ruusbroec’s use of the analogy of the “flowing, ebbing sea” for the dimension of the intra-trinitarian life of God in which the Persons flow back into their unity is also made use of and found to be central for Ruusbroec’s mystical theology is often pointed out. See especially Rik Van Nieuwenhove, Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian of the Trinity (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2003), 77-99.
mystical theology that was deeply trinitarian in nature. Regardless, his trinitarian vision is one of the distinctive highlights in the history of Western mystical theology, though his thought has only recently, within the past three decades or so, begun to become more known in the English-speaking world. In describing Ruusbroec’s mystical theology, the living authority of the history of Western Christian mystical theology Bernard McGinn helpfully states:

Given the centrality of the Trinity in Christian belief, all mystics are trinitarian in some way or other; but there is a considerable difference between figures like Bernard of Clairvaux, who refer to the Trinity in the soul from time to time, and those, like his friend William of St. Thierry, who give the inner life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit a central role in their mystical thought.27

To contextualize Ruusbroec’s contribution to trinitarian mystical theology it is helpful to see that Bonaventure and Meister Eckhart both made configurations of dynamic trinitarianism essential to their mystical theology in the century preceding Ruusbroec’s writings. Furthermore, some women mystics such as the beguine Hadewijch, by whose writings Ruusbroec was influenced, made fresh and original contributions to trinitarian mystical theology through their writings. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively, Nicholas of Cusa and John of the Cross wrote mystical theological works for which the inner life of the triune persons was the crux.

Notwithstanding, “Russbroec is a special case, both because of the originality of his theology of the Trinity and also because of the constitutive role he gives the divine Tri-unity in his mysticism.”28

27 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 8.

28 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 9. Lieve Uyttenhove agrees and speaks of this “constitutive role” the Brabantine Augustinian gives to the Trinity and yet offers words that should cause us to proceed with caution when we speak of “originality” of Ruusbroec’s theology of the Trinity when she states: “…The theological component of Ruusbroec’s mysticism…is aligned to the Christian tradition’s doctrine of the Trinity…therefore, we allude with frequency to Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mysticism rather than his trinitarian ideas. Ruusbroec never had the intention to develop a (new) systematic doctrine of the Trinity. All of his writings endeavour to explain the mystical life on the basis of the Trinity or on the basis of God’s trinitarian life. In
The sea is one of a handful of metaphors that Ruusbroec uses for the reality of the life of God as Trinity but there is perhaps none more important, as the Flemish mystic uses language throughout his corpus which is easily connected to the conceptual landscape of the Triune God as “flowing, ebbing sea.” This is not only the case with reference to the inner life of the Trinity, ad intra, but the life of the Trinity ad extra, for it encompasses also the life of Creation in general and the life of human creatures in particular as the image of God: created, fallen, and yet called, along with all creation, to live in the resplendent Light and Love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Ruusbroec’s writings are visions of God and creation that are simultaneously full of grandeur and beauty and, at times at least, sprawlingness and perhaps even confusion. We may gain an entry into his dynamic trinitarian mystical theology through a passage in The Spiritual Espousals where Ruusbroec, in his characteristically lyrical manner, writes:

Nevertheless, every lover is one with God and at rest, and God-like in the activity of love; for God, in his sublime nature of which we bear a likeness, dwells with enjoyment in eternal rest, with respect to the essential oneness, and with working, in eternal activity, with respect to threeness; and each is the perfection of the other, for rest resides in

other words, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity only functions as a hermeneutical key to Ruusbroec’s works. His trinitarian ideas clarify the inner structure of the relationship between God and humanity” Lieve Uyttenhove, Embraced by the Father and the Son in the Unity of the Holy Spirit: A Study of the Trinity and the Mystical life in the Works of Jan van Ruusbroec (Leuven, BEL: Peeters, 2012), 4. While I don’t quite agree with this statement in its entirety, for “hermeneutical key” is not quite strong enough language for how Ruusbroec’s teaching on the Trinity drives his mystical theology, her perspective does invite prudence in determining how much originality there is in Ruusbroec’s thought. I do agree with McGinn that Ruusbroec is a special case who stands out among Western trinitarian mystical theologians but at times the effort to show Ruusbroec as “highly original” can be overdrawn and forced. This happens not so much in McGinn’s reading of Ruusbroec but it does become overly emphasized in Van Nieuwenhove’s work on Ruusbroec to a degree that is unwarranted. There is much I am in agreement with in Van Nieuwenhove’s interpretation of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology but this is a weakness in his approach. See Van Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 22 where Van Nieuwenhove describes Ruusbroec’s trinitarian theology as “highly original.” This is but one of many instances of what becomes a movement beyond the grounds of warrant. While I think that perhaps Van Nieuwenhove is right, he is only right to a point. One wonders why the focus of trying to show Ruusbroec’s “originality” plays such a prominent role in Van Nieuwenhove’s predominantly fine and helpful work.
oneness and activity in threeness. And thus both remain for eternity. And therefore, if a person is to relish God, he must love; and if he is willing to love, then he can taste. But if he allows himself to be satisfied by other things, then he cannot taste what God is. 

This passage contains a number of the concepts and terms that are crucial for the Flemish contemplative such as love, activity, rest, enjoyment, working, essential oneness, threeness, taste, etc. This passage is a helpful entryway into Ruusbroec for it shows a number of these concepts. The passage also shows that the goal of the life of contemplative prayer, indeed the life of the Christian, is trinitarian in nature. As McGinn notes, “‘The rest resides in the oneness and the activity in the threeness,’ precisely because ‘each is the perfection of the other.’ These two “moments” in God are eternally and mysteriously simultaneous in God. Ruusbroec concludes by insisting that it is the power of love that enables us to enter into the inner life of the eternal interaction of the three who are one.”

While this notion of rest and activity being, paradoxically, the perfection of the other may seem counterintuitive to our common perception and experience as human beings, this is not the case with the Triune Life of God and, indeed, for Ruusbroec this paradoxical notion holds the key for understanding the life of God and thus the life and salvation of human beings and all creation.

As was noted above, Ruusbroec was not the first to develop a trinitarian mystical theology. In fact, though some have tended to, incorrectly, study his thought in isolation from the wider Christian tradition, Ruusbroec, through the developing library of the Groenendaal

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29 “Nochtan es ieghewelc minnere een met gode ende in rasten, ende gode gheliȝc inder minnen werken; want god in sire hogher natueren daer wij een gheliȝc af draghen, die houdet hem ghebrukelijc in eewigher rasten na der weselijcker eenheit, ende werkelijc in eewighen werkene nader driheit, ende iegheliȝc es des anders volcomenheit, want raste leghet in eenheit, ende werken in driheit. Ende aldus blivet byde inder eewichet. Ende hier ommes, sal de mensche gods ghemsaken, soe moet hi minnen; ende wilt hi minnen, soe mach hi smaken. Maer laet hi hem met anderen dighen ghenoegeen, soe en mach hi niet <ghe>smaken wat god es.”


30 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 8.
monastery as well as other Franciscan and Cistercian communities recently founded in the Brussels area, was the beneficiary of a deep and rich tradition of mystical theology, in which he immersed himself. Though it is an extreme rarity for him to cite them, as noted above, one can see either the direct or indirect influence upon Ruusbroec’s thought of figures such as Gregory of Nyssa, Denys the Aereopagite, Augustine, Bonaventure, Hadewijch, and William of St. Thierry to name but a few. He was, like these figures, a Christian Neoplatonist within the Christian Neoplatonist tradition.

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31 For a helpful articulation of some of the primary and various sources of and influences upon Ruusbroec’s mystical theology see Pyong-Gwan Pak, “The Vernacular, Mystical Theology of Jan van Ruusbroec: Exploring Sources, Contexts, and Theological Practices” (PhD Diss., Boston College, 2008), Part I.2.1-2.3 (pp. 130-321). Also see Nieuwenhove, 16-76 (though it must be said that Nieuwenhove’s investigations into the sources of Ruusbroec’s thought are woven throughout the body of his text), Geert Warnar, Ruusbroec: Literature and Mysticism in the Fourteenth Century (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), 11-66. I list Gregory of Nyssa not because Ruusbroec had read him directly. There is no evidence to substantiate this. However, Gregory’s famous notion of *epektasis*, the soul’s eternal traversing of God’s infinity through the paradoxical notion of ceaseless desire and simultaneous enjoyment of ever-new horizons in God, which had such a deep influence on Denys and the tradition after him, can be seen in Ruusbroec’s thought. It seems perhaps that Ruusbroec most likely inherited the notion from Hadewijch, William of St. Thierry, or Bernard of Clairvaux, or perhaps all three to some extent. Their use of *epektasis* or perpetual progress shares similarities and yet differences. William has more of a balance of love and knowledge in his teaching than Bernard and “in Hadewijch’s poems, the soul’s insatiable desire for an inexhaustible Godhead takes on an intensity and fervour unmatched in Cistercian and Victorine texts,” Amy Hollywood, “Rik van Nieuwenhove, Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian of the Trinity,” Scottish Journal of Theology 59, no. 4 (2006): 492. For Bernard’s use of the notion see Sermo super Canticorum, 84.1 (2:303.10–16), quoted and discussed in Bernard McGinn, The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great Through the 12th Century, vol. 2 of The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 216–17. For William’s use of the concept see William of Saint Thierry, The Way to Divine Union, trans. M. Basil Pennington (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998) 95. For Hadewijch’s use of perpetual progress, a prominent theme throughout her works, see Hadewijch: The Complete Works, trans. Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980). For *epektasis* as developed by Nyssen see Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. and introduced by A.J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).
The procession of all things from God and their return to God, the master paradigm of *exitus* and *reditus*, was inherited from Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophers.\(^{32}\) This master paradigm had been taken up and transformed by Christian thinkers through its encounter with the Hebrew-Biblical God whom the church had confessed as Trinity since the time of Origen.\(^{33}\) Indeed, what was characteristic of Christian Neoplatonism was its gathering of the dynamic process of flow and return of all created things into God as an instrument for expressing the church’s faith in God as a Trinity of persons. Biblical, Triune faith, along with the doctrine of

\(^{32}\) Much of my account of the adaptation of the Neoplatonic scheme of *exitus-reditus* by patristic theologians and Ruusbroec relies upon the account given in McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 9–11.

\(^{33}\) Though one still unfortunately finds the paradigm of the “Hellenization Thesis,” the historical interpretation of the early church which holds that with figures such as the Cappadocian Fathers one sees the contamination of a purely Hebraic Christianity by Graeco-Roman thought, put forth by the historian of dogma Adolf von Harnack, the critique of this influential perspective is now becoming known more widely. The problem with Harnack’s thesis, which church historians and historians of Christian theology have been pointing out for a few decades, has begun to make its way into contemporary systematic and philosophical theology. For Harnack’s perspective see his study in Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (New York: Dover Publications, 1961). There are a number of works that one can point to which critique and work in conscious counterposition to the “Hellenization Thesis.” For examples, see Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005) and Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), though see the important review and critique of the “thematic” historical methodology used by Pelikan in the book in Michel Rene Barnes, "Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism," *Theological Studies* 55, no. 4 (December 1994): 756-758. For a particularly insightful critique of the Hellenization Thesis, which must be taken into account, see Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). After reading Gavrilyuk’s analysis of Hellenism and the actual way the early Church Fathers transformed Hellenistic thought patterns as they appropriated them in service to the articulation of the revelation of the Trinitarian nature of God in the life, death and resurrection of Christ and sending of the Spirit, I think it is now scholarly irresponsible to continue to do theology in a way that assumes Harnack’s “Hellenistic (Invasion) Thesis.”
creatio ex nihilo, transformed the pagan Neoplatonic elements into Christian Neoplatonism(s).\textsuperscript{34}

Much from this way of understanding was owed to the fashion in which some pagan Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and certainly his successor Proclus, who had a significant influence upon Denys the Aereopagite, analyzed the law of procession and return.\textsuperscript{35} Proclus examined the law of procession and return in accordance with a pattern of three concomitant


\textsuperscript{35} For introductions to the Neoplatonist theurgists such as Iamblichus and Proclus, who had a significant influence on Denys the Aereopagite, see Algis Uždavinys, Philosophy and Theurgy in Late Antiquity (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2014); and Gregory Shaw, Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus, 2nd ed. (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis, 2014). In Shaw’s work see the intriguing forward by John Milbank and Aaron Riches, “Neoplatonic Theurgy and Christian Incarnation,” v—xvii. Milbank and Riches argue that Augustine and Denys may not be very far apart in terms of the influence of theurgy upon their thought.
essential stages or moments—*monē*, which is the First Principle understood to be the transcendental, unknowable, and unmoving source; *proodos*, the First Principle as the active origin of all lower reality; and *epistrophē*, which was The Principle as the ultimate goal (*telos*), drawing and attracting all things back to itself. McGinn illuminates this tradition and its relation to Ruusbroec by noting the Christian adaptation of this Neoplatonic schema by Denys the Areopagite and others:

…The fifth century author of the *Mystical Theology*, adapted this pattern to expound the immanent, yet transcendent, relation between the biblical God and creation. He and other Christians took over the triadic Neoplatonic hierarchies of reality in the service of trinitarian theology. For the pagan Neoplatonists, the first and highest stage of emanation from the hidden One formed a triad of Being-Life-Intellect. Beginning with Marius Victorinus in the fourth century and carried on by Dionysius in the fifth, this triad was used to express what could be known positively (cataphatically) about the processions and relations within the Trinity, rather than just in the realm of created dependency. The intra-divine flow of life found in Father, Son and Holy Spirit came to be seen not only as the source but also as the exemplar of extra-divine dynamism of creation and return. Jan van Ruusbroec’s mysticism is an example of this form of theology.36

This Neoplatonic paradigm of inward rest/outward flow/ returning is found in various configurations throughout Ruusbroec’s corpus. In Ruusbroec’s last treatise, *The Twelve Beguines—Van den XII behinen*, he gives a summation of the role of the primal *monē*: “Unity in love is always constantly inward (*inblivende*), unmoved (*onbewecht*), a fathomless abyss in enjoyment and blessedness.”37 The deity’s unmoved Oneness is the root and source of what Ruusbroec calls the “flux and reflux” (*vloeyen ende wedervloei*), which he locates primarily in the Trinity and secondarily in creation. A summation of his understanding of *proodos* and *epistrophē* is found in an earlier passage of *The Twelve Beguines* where Ruusbroec says:

And thus there is oneness in nature and otherness in Persons, for in the relations of the persons there is mutual knowledge and love, flux and reflux between the Father and the


37 XII Beghinen 2b, 2021-22.
Son by means of the Holy Spirit, who is the love of them both. But the oneness of the Holy Spirit, in whom the persons live and reign, is active in the outflowing (uutvloeine), and fruitfully operating all things according to the free nobility, wisdom and power of the Persons. But in the inflowing (invloeyene) of the persons the oneness of the Holy Spirit is enjoyably drawing inwards and containing the persons above distinction, in an enjoyment of fathomless love that God himself is in being and nature. See, thus does God live in himself, and with himself, in knowledge and love, in possession, in enjoyment of himself above all creatures.  

This and similar passages are based on a received Neoplatonic paradigm, but the Flemish contemplative’s understanding of this view of reality is rooted in the tradition of Christian Neoplatonism, through which he receives the paradigm. And yet it is very much his own, both in its transcendent origin and its created manifestation.  

Undoubtedly, the most fundamental insight of Ruusbroec’s teaching on the Trinity, which then shapes his christology, anthropology, soteriology, and really every aspect of his theology, is his crucial understanding of the eternal concomitance of perfect inner fruition, “the enjoyment of fathomless love” (een ghebruken grondeloser minnen) and the simultaneous “outflowing and inflowing” that is the constitution of the three persons, their circumincession or necessary concomitance, and their return to their perichoretic unity, the “fathomless abyss that is God’s essence” (grondeloes abys dat gods wesen ist). For all the winding roads of his writings, Ruusbroec’s teaching on the Trinity always remains the orienting center in which all else is

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38 “Ende aldus es daer eenheit in natueren ende anderheit in personen, want in die wederdragheinghe der persone, soe es onderlinghe kinnen ende minnen, vloeyen ende wedervloeyen tuschen den vader ende den sone, overmids den heilighen gheest, die hare beider minne is. Maer die eenheit des heilichs gheest, daer die persone in leven ende regneren, die is inden uutvloeien werkelijke ende vruchtheit werkende alle dinc, na vrye edelheit, wijsheit ende moghenheit der persone. Maer inden weder invloeyene der persone, soe es die eenheit des heilichs gheest ghebruikelijke intrekkende ende inhoudende die persone boven onderscheet in een ghebruken grondeloser minnen, die god selve is in wesene ende in natueren”. XII Beghinen 2b, 46–57.

39 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 10.

40 XII Beghinen 1, 659-60.
rooted in this paradoxical, eternal simultaneity and concomitance of active love of the Persons and blissful, peaceful rest in their unity (wesen). Sharing in this “flowing, ebbing sea” that is the life of the Trinity is the goal of the contemplative/mystical life in which we are drawn ever-deeper into the paradoxical fusion of what we in our common human experience tend to view as successive and distinct. For instance, we generally perceive motions and states of affairs such as going out vs. going in, essence vs. activity, unity vs. multiplicity, etc. as distinct, successive, and perhaps even mutually exclusive, at least in terms of their temporal occurrence. However, according to Ruusbroec, for the Triune God and those who come to share in the loving “motion” of the activity and peaceful, blissful unity which constitutes the Triune Life there is a paradoxical simultaneity in the occurrence of these realities (Infinite in God and a continual growth into participation in this paradoxical life for humans). They are complementary aspects of Trinitarian love. The paradox of the simultaneity of outgoing and ingoing fruitfulness of the persons and blissful fruition in the unity of their perichoretic Being/Essence is thus the mystery of perichoretic love (minne), while the paradoxical simultaneity of these two dimensions in Christians occurs as they partake evermore deeply (or, to use the metaphorical language of Ruusbroec’s vocabulary, as the soul ascends ever higher into) of this mystery that is God’s life and love through Christ and the Spirit.

41 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 10.

42 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 10. Bernard McGinn tends to talk about these dimensions of fruitfulness of Persons and blissful rest in essence as an example of the “dynamic polarities governing his [Ruusbroec’s] vision of reality.” McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 10. He then describes the moments of rest and activity as “dialectical simultaneity of complementary aspects of divine love.” He goes on to say that “this dialectical fusion comes to be realized in those who love God…” McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 10–11. Rik Van Nieuwenhove tends to describe this simultaneity in terms of dialectical “tension.” Van Nieuwenhove also has a propensity to describe this simultaneity in God in terms of dialectical polarity. See Van Nieuwenhove, 77–99. However, and while I am not sure McGinn and Van Nieuwenhove intend to deploy the language in this way, the language of
The Christian’s growth in participation in the paradoxical life of the harmony of activity or work (werc) and restful enjoyment (ghebruken) blooms from the fact that this life is first, and dialectics (in terms of trinitarian ontology) seems to me to be too fraught with being connected with the Hegelian ontological process of becoming (of God and creatures) through thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Ruusbroec’s dynamic trinitarianism is not dynamic in this way, a fact that both McGinn and Nieuwenhove seem to realize. However, Hegel has cast a large shadow upon the history of dialectics and one must be careful to distinguish Christian Neoplatonic “dialectics” from that of Hegel and those who follow in his train such as Karl Marx, Alfred North Whitehead, and others. For Hegel’s dialectical ontology of consciousness see elements of his major works in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Hegel Reader, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998). The language of tension which Van Nieuwenhove uses to describe the relation of the two sides of the polarity also seems to be misplaced. Rather than use the language of dialectical tension it seems to me to be more helpful and accurate to describe these two dimensions of the life of God in terms of theological paradox. If one is to speak of tension at all it should be in regard to our human thinking about the simultaneity of active, fruitful love of the persons and blissful enjoyment in unity. By paradox I mean what Rustin Brian describes in his work on the twentieth century Protestant theologian Karl Barth and his movement away from thinking in terms of dialectical tension in his early work toward paradoxical theology. Brian argues that Barth’s work becomes more a type of paradoxical theology than dialectical theology the further one goes along in the chronology of Barth’s work (Barth’s early use of dialectic in terms of enduring “tension,” rather than the synthesizing of the tension of thesis and antithesis, seems to be the way that Nieuwenhove uses dialectic). I read Ruusbroec as more of a theologian of paradox than dialectics. Brian defines paradox when he states: “…Barth employs the logic of what I call paradox, which I take to mean the coincidence of two seeming opposites in a noncontradictory manner, in which an overall meaning is achieved through a fundamental unity that is beyond, and yet contains within itself, all distinction” Rustin E. Brian, Covering up Luther: How Barth’s Christology Challenged the Deus Absconditus that Haunts Modernity (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 6. When discussing these complementary dimensions of the Triune life one does well to remember Nieuwenhove’s words when he says, “Ruusbroec opposes God to Godhead, Persons to being/essence, activity to rest. This dichotomy between Persons and being is only conceptual, for it is the Persons who possess the divine being, who are the divine being. Likewise, the opposition of being/essence and nature is only conceptual” (emphasis added), Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 87. Of course paradox is my interpretation, just as “dialectic” is an (well accepted) interpretation. One cannot, to my knowledge, find either term explicitly in Ruusbroec’s corpus, though analogous concepts certainly can be argued for. It should be said as well that McGinn and Kikuchi seem to use the language of “bipolarity” in a way that is analogous to what I mean by paradox. See McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 11; and Kikuchi, From Eckhart to Ruusbroec, 217–231. It seems to me however that paradox does not carry the aforementioned conceptual baggage that the language of dialectics carries, whether that be the early Barthian understanding or, and especially, the Hegelian understanding. For more on paradox vs. dialectics see John Milbank, “The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On not quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek,” in The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 110–233.
thus always already ontologically prior, found in the Creator, the Triune God and his life of
minne. In the Brulocht this is seen in the first quotation from Ruusbroec I noted in this section
and in a quotation, which precedes the one above, where the canon states:

For charity in the likeness must be eternally active, but oneness with God in enjoyable
love will be forever at rest. And this is what it is to love. For in one now, one instant, love
acts and rests in its beloved. And the one is reinforced by the other. For the higher the
love, the more the rest; and the more the rest, the more inner the love. For the one lives in
the other. And [she] who loves not, rests not; and [she] who rests not, loves not.
Nevertheless, it sometimes seems to a good person that [she] neither loves nor rests in
God, but that very notion comes from love. Because [she] desires to love more than [she]
can, it seems to [her] that [she] falls short. And in this activity, love and rest have relish
for [her], for no one but this (self-) forsaken, empty, enlightened person can understand
how one (can) actively love and enjoyably rest. Nevertheless, every lover is one with God
and at rest, and God-like in the activity of love.43

Louis Dupré notes, “That love (which is God himself) has two moments, a contracting (the one
nature) and an expanding (the distinctness of persons). The superessential contemplation
partakes in both moments: from the wayless darkness to the generation in love, and back into the
unity in love.”44 McGinn points out that this paradox (what he calls, along with most other
Ruusbroec scholars, “dialectic.” See the note above on my use of “paradox” rather than language
of dialectics) of complementary moments “synthesizes themes rooted in the Christian
appropriation of ancient philosophy, such as the opposition between unity and multiplicity,
flowing out and flowing in, ineffability and nameability.”45 At times Ruusbroec will describe this
paradoxical essence of trinitarian love in terms of God’s “modelessness” (onwise) in the unity of

43 Brulocht b 1984–90.

44 Louis Dupré, The Common Life: The Origins of Trinitarian Mysticism and Its

45 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 11. McGinn is drawing here from the
work of Paul Henry, “La mystique trinitaire du Bienheureux Jean Ruusbroec; la doctrine de
Dieu,” Recherches de science religieuse 338–41. For more on flowing in and out in the triune
persons see Myriam Groot, “De Termen inkeer-uiitkeer in Ruusbroeck’s Geschriften,” Ons
his essence and “modes” (wise) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and all creatures. However, the primary way in which the Brabantine Augustinian describes this ultimately indescribable love of the Trinity is through the language of wesen (essence/being) and werc (operation/activity). Albert Ampe classically described this paradox when he stated “Essence and activity are the two dialectical moments that command the trinitarian theology of Ruusbroec.”

The work of Albert Deblaere and Joseph Alaerts has shown that the terms “essence/essential” (wesen/weselijc) and their corresponding transcendental terms “superessence/superessential” (overwesen/overweselijc) are used in a number of varying ways throughout Ruusbroeck’s corpus. Wesen/weselijc (essence/essential) describes what is essential to God or creatures, while overwesen/overweselijc (superessence/superessential) describe what is essential to God and, thus, superessential to creatures. Ruusbroec’s vernacular Middle Dutch only used the root wesen to describe being/essence, and thus did not have a range of terms to describe being such as Latin (esse, essentia, ens). However, as with Eckhart’s creative use of grunt (“ground”) in his vernacular German, this gave the Brabantine the opportunity to develop various and subtle uses of wesen that were not found in the more rigid linguistic system of Latin. Wesen/Being is Ruusbroec’s way of representing the “moment” of rest, idleness, and enjoyment (ghebrucken) in the perichoretic unity of the persons in their common being/essence, while minne (love), which has a kind of yearning element to it, represents the “moment” in


48 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 11.
God’s life in which the persons go out to one another in active love (the generation/begetting of
the Son and the spiration of the Spirit) and thus out to creation in love (in creating through the
processions and re-creating through the missions of the Son and Spirit). As the quotation above
from the Brulocht (noted in footnote 27) states with acuity: “God, in his sublime nature, of which
we bear a likeness, dwells with enjoyment in eternal rest, with respect to the essential oneness,
and with working, in eternal activity, with respect to threeness…” And rather than this being a
“tension” in the life of the Triune God Ruusbroec continues in the way of theological paradox
when he states, “…and each is the perfection of the other, for rest resides in oneness and activity
in threeness. And thus both remain for eternity.” So both remain: the one essence and the three
persons. They are indivisible. One may talk about these elements in the intra-trinitarian life as
“bipolar” but this is not a tension within God for Ruusbroec. Even though Nieuwenhove,
unfortunately, uses language such as “dialectic” to describe these harmonious aspects, it is
important to understand Ruusbroec’s teaching here from the perspective articulated by
Nieuwenhove when he states (as earlier noted above), “Ruusbroec opposes God to Godhead,
Persons to being/essence, activity to rest. This dichotomy between Persons and being is only
conceptual, for it is the Persons who possess the divine being, who are the divine being.
Likewise, the opposition of being/essence and nature is only conceptual.”

Bernard McGinn rightly claims that “The inseparability of essence and persons, activity
and tranquility, is rooted in God’s nature as love. Ruusbroec analyzes this concomitance in terms
of the relation between ‘love’ (minne) and ‘enjoyment’ (ghebrucken).” In an important passage

49 See full quotation in fn 27.

50 Van Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 87. (emphasis added)

51 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 12. McGinn also correctly notes that,
given the centrality of minne for Ruusbroec and late medieval mystical theologians in Germanic
that illustrates this inseparability, from *Van seven trappen—The Seven Rungs*, Ruusbroec, describing the highest rung or step of the contemplative ascent, states:

> The divine Persons in the fruitfulness of their nature are one God, eternally active. And in the simplicity of their essence they are Godhead, eternal inactivity. Between working and being inactive: this is how love (*minne*) and enjoyment (*ghebrucken*) live. Love always wants to be active, for it is an eternal work of God. Enjoyment always has to be tranquil, for it is, above willing and desiring, beloved in beloved, in bare love without images, where the Father with the Son has embraced his beloved ones in the enjoyable unity of the Holy Spirit, above fruitfulness of nature, where the Father says to each spirit in an eternal pleasing: ‘I am thee and thou art Me, I am thine and thou are Mine: I have chosen thee eternally.’

In this passage, and throughout Ruusbroec’s writings, *minne*, when not connected to any qualifying descriptor, tends to be the Brabantine contemplative’s way of expressing the active dimension of God’s love. On the other hand, *ghebrucken* conveys the idle and peaceful enjoyment of the modeless perichoretic union where the blessed, Ruusbroec goes on to say, “lose their spirit, melt away, flow away, and become one spirit with God in enjoyment, eternally inclined into the fathomless blessedness of his being.”

Barbara Gist Cook as well as McGinn note that, though there are definitely similarities between Ruusbroec and Eckhart, particularly due to a significant amount of usage of apophatic language in Ruusbroec, there is also a


52 *Van seven trappen* VII, 1068–79.

53 *Van seven trappen* VII, 1080–83.

54 Cook and Kikuchi discuss the possible influence of Eckhart upon Ruusbroec as well as their similarities and differences. See Cook, 197–266; and the entire work of Kikuchi, *From Eckhart to Ruusbroec*. The work of Cook, Kikuchi, McGinn, and Turner, despite their differences, when taken together, show both similarities between the Dominican and the Brabantine Augustinian and likely influence on Ruusbroec by Eckhart’s thought. Kikuchi and Cook specifically go beyond showing similarities and argue, more or less convincingly in my opinion, that the Dominican’s mystical theology was influential upon the Augustinian’s mystical...
noteworthy difference between him and Eckhart when it comes to how each discusses the divine essence. McGinn, in summarizing what is essentially the perspective of his former student Gist Cook, says, “For Ruusbroec, God’s resting in his essence is not primarily remaining in the Eckhartian divine ‘no-thing,’ but is a modality of the ultimate form of love he called ‘essential love’ (weselijke minne).” McGinn goes on to argue that, “essential love is the higher fusion of the passive ghebrucken and the active, yearning minne.” But again we must remember that the “higher fusion” does not have to do with a “becoming” in the Triune God in which the two aspects are “synthesized,” in the Hegelian sense. We are speaking here from the perspective of the human’s journey of coming to know, love, and reflect reasonably upon the divine. In a sense we could say that the unity of weselijke minne expresses the unity of the paradox of the simultaneity of minne and ghebrucken. And by this we do not mean “unity” in the sense that the wesen supersedes minne. Rather, it seems Ruusbroec understands weselijke minne in the

theology. McGinn notes affinities between Eckhart and Ruusbroec throughout; see McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 5–61. One of the numerous examples can be found on pg. 17. Turner argues not so much for influence as for common Dionysian Neoplatonic ontological assumptions shared between the two thinkers in Turner, “Dionysius and some Late Medieval Mystical Theologians of Northern Europe,” 121–136. This contradicts Van Nieuwenhove’s thesis that we have very different theologies going on in Eckhart and Ruusbroec, Ruusbroec’s influences being primarily Franciscan. See Rik Van Nieuwenhove, “Meister Eckhart and Jan Van Ruusbroec: A Comparison,” Medieval Philosophy and Theology 7 (1998): 157–93. One must admit that Nieuwenhove goes through a painstaking process of comparison. However, though one must admit that these are complex and detailed arguments, I see no reason why the Franciscan and Eckhartian influences have to be completely mutually exclusive. It is beyond the scope of the present work to argue for this in any detail, but perhaps the issue is more about proportionality of influence. If Nieuwenhove and Pak are right, and they both argue this point in the overall sweep of their respective projects, about Ruusbroec’s synthesizing of Augustinian and Dionysian Neoplatonism (which I think they are) then there is room, at least in principle, for the influence of both Bonaventure and Eckhart. See Pak, “The Vernacular, Mystical Theology of Jan van Ruusbroec,” 1–29. Pak then shows this creative integration of Augustinian and Dionysian Neoplatonism throughout the rest of his work.

55 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 12.

56 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 12.
paradoxical sense that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed says that the *ousia* of God is the hypostatic relations, without remainder. Another way of saying this would be to say that the *ousia* is what God is and the *hypostases* (in their eternal, perichoretic relations) are who God is. And we say this remembering that the *ousia* and perichoretic relations are not two different things. Rather, they are the one reality of the Triune God considered from two different angles. *Weselijke minne* is Ruusbroec’s deepest way of conveying this paradoxical reality of God.57

One must acknowledge that Ruusbroec’s thought is not a tight scholastic system. He sometimes uses key terms in analogous ways and is not always consistent with those terms. However, it does seem that there is an overall pattern in which we can say that for the most part *minne* is used to express the active dimension of triune love, *ghebrucken* the modeless, restful dimension of perichoretic union in the divine *wesen*, and *weselijke minne* refers to the paradoxical concomitance of the activity and blissful enjoyment. The fact that the Persons and *wesen* are but two dimensions of the One God, the Trinity in His simplicity, is helpfully shown in a passage from *Van den XII beghinen*:

He [God] is every being’s super-essence (*overwesen*). His Godhead is a fathomless whirlpool; whoever enters it loses himself in it. God is one in nature, threeness in Persons. Threeness is eternally remaining in oneness of nature, and oneness of nature in threeness of personhood. Thus nature is living and fruitful in eternity. The being/essence of God is idle, eternal beginning and end, a living subsistence of everything created. And that same being is nature and fruitful and potentiality of the Persons. And that potentiality is personhood and personal in three properties, namely, paternity, filiation, and, entailed in them, the third property, namely, voluntary spiration. The nature cannot exist without the Persons, nor the Persons without their substance, for it is a living support of the Persons. Therefore the nature is one in itself, fruitful in threeness, and threeness in oneness, and oneness lives in threeness, and threeness is fruitful in itself; and it is not distinguishable according to things, but according to reason. For threeness is oneness in nature. It generates the Persons, distinct according to reason and in reality, namely the

57 Though I certainly do not want to argue for Thomas as a direct source for Ruusbroec’s mystical theology, there does seem to be at least an affinity between what Ruusbroec’s notion of *weselijke minne* is describing the Triune God and how Thomas describes God as *actus purus* in the Prima Pars (part I) of the *Summa Theologia*. 
Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; They are three distinct Persons and one Godhead whom one should not divide or separate. Thus we confess God in three Persons.  

This passage deals with a number of themes, some of which we will deal with below (natuere and wesen, Ruusbroec’s use of metaphor, the processions, etc.), but for now it suffices to say that in this quotation Ruusbroec is at pains to say that which language strains to the breaking point to describe, the oneness and threeness or the paradoxical simultaneity of the active and modeless love in the God who is weselijke minne.

Ruusbroec’s teaching on the triune God’s perichoretic being as it is most fully understood and participated in by the Christian as essential love can be seen in an important passage in the Boecsken where, in describing mystical union and the interior human, Ruusbroec states:

...above reason and above the active life [she] is lifted up in naked vision and without work in essential love (weseleke minne). And there [she] is one spirit and one love with God, as I have explained before. In this essential love (weseleke minne) [she] infinitely transcends [her] understanding by means of the unity which [she] has essentially with God—and this is the life of contemplative humanity, for in this elevation humanity is capable of knowing all creatures in heaven and on earth, with distinction of life and reward, if only God wants to show it to [her] in a vision. But [she] must yield to the infinity of God and essentially and infinitely follow it, for no creature can comprehend or attain it, not even the soul of our Lord Jesus Christ who has received the highest union, above all creatures.

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58 Van den XII beghinen, 2a 568–587. I have used, with only slight modification, the translation of this passage by Rik Van Nieuwenhove in Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 82–83. Nieuwenhove’s translation makes clearer what, according to the present author’s work with the Middle Dutch text, is the intent of Ruusbroec’s description of the being/essence and the fruitfulness in the Persons. The CCCM critical edition translates this description in the same spirit but is faintly muddled in its rendering. The critical edition also incorrectly translates “...hi blivet verdoelt die daer inne comt” as “...whoever enters it [the Godhead] remains in motion,” whereas Nieuwenhove correctly translates it as “...whoever enters it loses himself in it.” The mistake rests on a mistranslation of “verdoelt.”

59 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 12.

60 Boecsken, 284–296 (modified).
This passage shows that the highest form of union is not only described as an ascent into unknowing (“…[she] infinitely transcends [her] understanding by means of the unity she has essentially with God…”) but this union which transcends human understanding is kataphatically/positively named as “essential love.”\textsuperscript{61} This passage also shows that this union in \textit{weselijke minne} continues unendingly even into heavenly resurrection life.\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Van den XII behinen} likewise says of the soul consumed in the fire of the Holy Spirit:

> 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 (\textit{die overforminghe}) by God. But where it is totally burned up and one spirit with God, it is inactive, essential love. And that is the highest scale of love that I understand.\textsuperscript{63}

Later in the same work we read a similar note that speaks of becoming “the same form as God and transformed in essential love” (\textit{eenformich met gode overformt in weselicke minne}) and then ends by stating, “This is the noblest and the highest that we possess, savor or feel in this life.”\textsuperscript{64}

These and other passages throughout Ruusbroec’s oeuvre, when wed together with other passages which describe God’s being in apophatic terms, show that McGinn is correct in noting that the apophatic and kataphatic are woven together in the canon’s thought when he suggests, “Therefore, although God’s \textit{wesen} involves ‘superessential darkness’ (\textit{The Christian Faith}, 271),

\textsuperscript{61} For a very helpful exploration of the relationship between kataphatic and apophatic theology which explores various voices from the history of the Christian tradition as well as addressing contemporary concerns see D. Stephen Long, \textit{Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth} (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009).

\textsuperscript{62} This is a place in which, as noted earlier, we see the influence of the idea of \textit{epektasis}, the eternal traversing of God’s infinity, from Gregory of Nyssa. See note 29 above.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Van den XII behinen}, 2b 845–63.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Van den XII behinen}, 2b 2089–92. Cited in McGinn, 13.
‘eternal stillness’ (*The Realm of Lovers* 2420), and other apophatic denominations that express the divine modelessness, it is always also essential love—a positive name.”

In *Van seven trappen—The Seven Rungs*, in the midst of describing the seventh rung or step, Ruusbroec discusses how this paradoxical simultaneity of active *minne* and *ghebrucken* of the divine life is participated in by the contemplative as she grows evermore into the deiform that reflects the incarnate Son, and thus reflects the life of the Trinity. And these two aspects of the Trinitarian paradoxical action of divine love are actually the Holy Spirit himself, breathing humanity out and in:

> Our work is to love God; our enjoyment is to undergo being embraced in God’s love. Between loving and enjoying [there] is the [same] distinction as between God and his grace. Where we cleave to God with love, we are spirits, but where he makes us lose our spirit and transforms us by his Spirit, we are enjoying. The Spirit of God breathes us forth for loving and for working virtues, and he breathes us back into him for resting and enjoying.  

Though this passage is deeply contemplative mystical theology, notice that it gives a hint of spiritual direction. The direction is not in the sense of a specific action to take. Rather, it is a somewhat ecstatic, yet calm, passage of reflection from a wise contemplative gazing into the vastness of the Trinitarian light in which he is enfolded and which unfolds within his own depths. Ruusbroec seems to be inviting those wishing to contemplate God to an angle of vision which sees the goal of the spiritual life to be one that, even when we have reached it, is a boundless, endless participation in the concomitance of loving and enjoying. The *Trappen* goes on to say, “we must always go up and down the rungs of our heavenly ladder.”

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66 *Trappen* VII, 1116–22.

67 *Trappen* VII, 1135–36.
never-ending “participation in the simultaneous and eternal dynamism of the divine essence and the divine activity…”

The life of the Triune God in which the contemplative Christian participates is infinite vastness. In describing the boundlessness of God Ruusbroec will often utilize rich imagery, analogy and metaphor (he utilizes these in describing the transformation of the Christian in the life of contemplation as well). In the Trappen the Brabantine contemplative describes, like Hadewijch before him, the boundlessness of the wesen of God through the analogical language of “abyss” when he says, in describing the characteristics of the seventh rung/step,

All together we are one burning blaze that can never perish with the Father and with the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit, where the divine persons lose their spirit in the unity of their essence, in the fathomless abyss of simple blessedness. There, there is neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit, nor any creature. There, there is nothing but one being, that is the substance of the persons. There, we are all one and uncreated in our superessence.

68 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 13.

69 I place “Christian” after “contemplative” in this context to note that, as far as I am aware, Ruusbroec never makes mention of any distinction between laity and those in religious orders in terms of access to the depths of the contemplative/mystical life. Growing into the depths of the love of the Trinity is in principle available to all whether it be laity, religious, or clerical groups of people.

70 Trappen VII, 1150–57. This language of “fathomless abyss” (abyss/afgront) is found in other mystical theologians of the Middle Ages such as Hadewijch and this may be an example of her influence upon Ruusbroec. For more on the language of the abyss see Bernard McGinn, “The Abyss of Love: The Language of Mystical Union among Medieval Women,” in The Joy of Learning and the Love of God: Studies in Honor of Jean Leclercq, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, Cistercian Studies Series 160 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 95–120. On Hadewijch in particular see pgs. 106–8. Ruusbroec also uses the language of “abyss calls out to abyss” from Psalm 41:8 “to express the union between the divine abyss and its created image, the abyss of the soul as the true imago dei.” McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 14. Ruusbroec does this in a passage in Van den Geestelijken Tabernakel 4:1878–80: “Ende die afgront godleker naturen roept in den afgront; dat sijn alle die in minnen met gode verenecht sijn. Die werden alle ingeroopen in die stimme sijnre verborgene wege.” One can find this same appeal to Psalm 41:8 in the Brulocht b, 2169–70. This is similar to a teaching by Johannes Tauler in which he uses the same passage of scripture. See McGinn, 14. For Tauler’s teaching on the abyss, see Bernard McGinn, The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany, vol. 4 of The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism (New York: The Crossroad
In the beginning of this section I quoted from the *Brulocht* where Ruusbroec says, “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 flowing back in again, drawing all those whom he has endowed in heaven and earth, together with all that they have and can do.” This symbolic/analogical use of the sea and ocean is widely used amongst Christian mystical/contemplative theologians throughout Christian history, beginning with Evagrius Ponticus in the fourth century. In the above passage the Flemish mystical theologian uses the sea as a way to describe the flowing out and flowing back into the divine *wesen*, while in other places he uses the sea to signify the trinitarian *wesen* itself. While the use of the sea or ocean as metaphor or analogy for God and the soul (in its union with God) is one that Ruusbroec shares with and draws from the Christian theological tradition, there is another analogy/metaphor for the Trinity which is more distinctively his own. That symbol is another aquatic image, God as a whirlpool. In the *Rijcke* Ruusbroec uses this image of the whirlpool to speak of the unceasing activity of Triune love when he states, “With respect to its in-flowing, it is essential, overflowing all who are united in

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71 *Brulocht* b, 1148–51. One can find similar language in *Dat rijcke der ghelieven* IV, 1261–67 where Ruusbroec speaks of “…how God is gushing and flowing forth like the wild sea (*welder zee*) with incomprehensible bliss into all who are ready to receive Him, and again, ebbing and drawing inward into the wild sea of His unity.”

72 Here I am following the insights of McGinn in McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 14–15. For an example of the sea as signifying the divine *wesen* itself see *Brulocht* b, 1039 where Ruusbroec remarks, “one may observe many a marvel in the fathomless sea of the Godhead.” Ruusbroec also uses the symbol of the desert for both the inner solitude of the Godhead and the soul. For the former see for instance *Sloten*, 160–63 and *Brulocht* b, 1036–37. For the latter see *Spieghel*, 2155–57 and *Steen*, 754–58. For more on these symbols in Christian contemplative literature see Bernard McGinn, “Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption,” *Journal of Religion* 74 (1994): 155–81, treating Ruusbroec on 178–79.
an incomprehensible savoring. This is the bottomless whirlpool where all noble minds are hanging in (God) in enjoyment and sunken away in lostness.”73 As with the language of “abyss” the metaphor/analogy of “whirlpool” is found also in Hadewijch.74 This metaphor of the whirlpool sheds poetic light upon Ruusbroec’s understanding of the Triune “Godhead as motionless motion—the still point at the center of the whirlpool created by constant circling of the waters representing the persons of the Trinity.”75 Though there is no evidence that Ruusbroec had direct access to Gregory of Nyssa’s writings, in a passage reminiscent of passages on ἐπεξτάσις (the eternal traversing of God’s infinity), which combine kataphatic and apophatic modes of theology in Gregory’s The Life of Moses, Ruusbroec reflects on this “motionless motion” of God’s paradoxical life of active yet restful love through another use of the whirlpool imagery. This passage is found in Boecsken der verclaringe where Ruusbroec describes the paradoxical life of the Trinity as “a dark silence that is always inactive; it is essential to God and superessential to all creatures, and there you must accept that the persons yield and lose themselves whirling about in essential love, that is, in enjoyable unity; nevertheless, they always remain according to their personal properties in the working of the Trinity.”76 Along with these


74 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 15. Hadewijch’s use of the whirlpool metaphor/analogy to symbolize the essence of God may be found in Hadewijch’s Visions 1, 11, and 12 in Hadewijch, Visionen, ed. Imme Dros (Amsterdam: Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 1996), 45 (lines 231–35), 103 (lines 1–4) and 115 (lines 4–13). Cited in McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 500, fn. 49.

75 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 15.

76 Boecsken 329–34: “Dat ghevoelen date es onse overweseleke salecheit, die een ghebruken gods es ende alle sinre gheminde. Desse salecheit date es die duustere stille die altoes leede staat. Si es gode weselee, ende allen creaturen overweseleece. Ende daer eest te nemene date die perse wiken ende verwielen in die weselee minne, dat es, in ghebrukelekele enecheit, ende nochtan altoes staende bliven na persoenleker aert in werken der drieheit.”
analogical and metaphorical descriptions of the divine *wesen*, Ruusbroec uses throughout his corpus, for example in the final stage of ascent in the *Trappen*, language which makes use of speculative terms that were features of the mystical/contemplative theology of the Germanic lands in the late Middle Ages. Such terms include “eternal inactivity” and “superessence of all creatures.”

In the last thirty-five lines of the *Trappen*, which describe the final stage of mystical ascent into God, we find a very similar rendering to the one quoted above in footnote fifty-six from the *XII beghinen* and a similarly helpful summary of the Brabantine canon’s understanding of the other dimension of the paradoxical life of God, the activity of the persons of the Trinity. Ruusbroec shows the influence of Bonaventure upon his thinking in this passage as he focuses attention upon the primordial fecundity and plenitude of the Father as eternal source of the emanations of the eternal persons of the Son and Holy Spirit:

> But in the fruitful nature (*natuere*) the Father is an almighty God, Creator and Maker of heaven and earth and all creatures. And from his nature he bears his Son, his eternal Wisdom as one with him in nature, and other in person, God from God, by whom all things were made. And the Holy Spirit, the third person, who flows from the Father and from the Son who is one with them in nature: that is their fathomless Love in which they are eternally embraced in love and enjoyment, and we all with them—one life, one love, one enjoyment. God is one in his nature, threeness in fruitfulness, three persons separate as to distinctions. And the three persons are one in nature, threeness in their proper ground.

There are, like many rich passages in Ruusbroec, a number of important themes going on in this passage. Of particular interest at this point in introducing Ruusbroec’s theology is how the Brabantine ascribes the primordiality of the Father, the primal source of all emanation, to the divine *natuere* rather than the *wesen*. One may legitimately ask if the “nature” of the Trinity is

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78 *Trappen* VII, 1161–72.
something other than the “essence” of God as it is described here by Ruusbroec. However, though Satoshi Kikuchi has recently shown persuasively that there is some equivocal use of *natuere* in Ruusbroec’s thought, he and most Ruusbroec scholars agree that predominantly the Brabantine canon is consistent in the use of *natuere* to define the divine essence at some points and the use of *wesen* to describe the essence at other times in a way that signifies for Ruusbroec that the divine essence shared by the persons of the Trinity can be understood from two vantage points. These two angles of vision are a significant way in which Ruusbroec once again shows that the essence, the *wesen* or *nateure*, of God is not merely idle rest and enjoyment but is also, paradoxically, the loving activity of the persons. As Nieuwenhove rightly notes:

“This is possible if we realize that God’s *wesen* is not merely idle essence but being, both idle and fruitful—in which case it is called ‘fruitful nature,’ one and threefold. It is not surprising that Ruusbroec occasionally states that the divine being or essence and the fruitful nature are the same thing. Thus, Ruusbroec views the divine nature, shared by the three Persons, from two perspectives: on the one hand, the divine nature is essence; on the other it is ‘fruitful’ and the source of the divine Persons. From the first perspective, nature is called onefold (*eenvuldigh*), from the second it is always called ‘fruitful’ (*vruchtbare*).”

Relative to the fruitfulness of his nature, God is pure activity (*een puere werken*), while in the “essential” unity (what Nieuwenhove helpfully suggests should perhaps be translated “unity of being”) God is eternal idleness or rest. The divine essence understood as both *wesen* and

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79 For the equivocal use of *natuere* in Ruusbroec see Kikuchi, *From Eckhart to Ruusbroec*, 217–224.

80 Nieuwenhove, *Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian*, 89–90. In the *Beghinen* Ruusbroec states, “Ende dat selve wesen es natuere ende vruchtbaer ende eyghendom der persone” (“And that same essence is nature and fruitfulness and potentiality of the persons”) (my trans.). For an example of Ruusbroec discussing nature as onefold essence (*eenvuldigh*) see *Rijcke* I, 84.

81 Nieuwenhove, *Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian*, 90. Ruusbroec’s notion of God as pure activity (*een puere werken*) has affinities with Aquinas’ notion of God as “pure act” or “pure actuality” (*actus purus*). A comparative study of the two thinkers on this front would be a welcome contribution to the study of medieval theology. For a classic and helpful study of Aquinas, particularly his various analogical notions of *actus*, including God as *actus purus*, in
natuere is a fundamental way Ruusbroec communicates his teaching on the paradox of the
Trinity, “because God is always active (werkende) and constantly enjoying (ghebrukende).”

The notion of the divine essence as nature points to the centrality for Ruusbroec of the
primal nature of the Father’s fruitfulness. In the Brulocht Ruusbroec describes this primal nature
of the Father’s fruitfulness as “a beginning without beginning.” Earlier in the Brulocht
Ruusbroec even says that the “Father is the principle of all Godhead with respect to being and
persons.” McGinn describes this as the reason Ruusbroec “like Eckhart, sometimes speaks of
the divine nature, God as One, as the Father. The way in which the paternal primordiality comes
to active expression in the emanation of the Son is often expressed in terms of fatherly self-
knowledge.” A passage that is particularly poignant in this regard, though numerous others
could be cited just as well, is a passage from the Beghinen where Ruusbroec describes the
emanation of Son from Father and the mutual knowing of each in the love of the Spirit:

And He [the Father] gives birth to His eternal wisdom, that is, His Son, who is like to
Him, and one substance with Him. He recognizes His only-begotten Son, eternally
unborn in Him and giving birth without cease from Him ever anew and always revealed
as another Person, and always one God with Him in nature. And the Son is the wisdom of
the Father: He is looking back into His source, that is His Father, and knows His Father;
and He sees Himself in the Father as unborn in nature. And He [the Son] sees Himself
flowing out in personal otherness (in persoenlijcker anderheit) from the substance of the
Father; and as another Person, distinct (onderscheiden) from the Father, and in nature
always remaining with the Father. And in this mutual seeing between Father and Son,
there flows an eternal complacency, that is, the Holy Spirit, the third Person, who flows
from them both. For He is one will and one love in both of them, and out of them both

Aquinas’ Summa Theologiae see David B. Burrell, Aquinas: God and Action (Scranton, PA:
University of Scranton Press, 2008), 133–200.

82 Rijcke I, 72. Cited in Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 90.

83 Brulocht c, 127.

84 Brulocht b, 2067–68.

85 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 17.
eternally flowing-out and flowing back into the nature of the divinity. Thus the supreme nature of God consists in trinity of Persons with distinction (met onderscheide), and in unity of nature in a simple manner without distinction (sonder onderschet). This is an illuminating passage for understanding the language of the primordiality of the Father in terms of fecund origin of the eternal emanations of Son and Spirit as well as the action and relations of the Son and the Spirit to the Father and one another and the eternally dynamic modalities of these relations as the Son as the Wisdom of the Father gazes back into the Father, in a breathtaking “seeing himself as unborn.” There will be more to say in the next section on the Son as the Image of the Wisdom of the Father. The passage also speaks of the Spirit as the love of the Father and Son, eternally flowing out from both and “flowing back into the nature of the divinity.” This points to what seems to be a unique aspect of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology, the Holy Spirit as the means of the eternal flowing back into the essential unity of the Persons as one God.

The aspect of Ruusbroec’s pneumatology in which he describes the Holy Spirit as the bond of Love between Father and Son, who flows from Father and Son in the love poured out in and on creation, is not unique to the Flemish contemplative theologian. Many Western theologians from the time of Hiliary of Poitiers to Augustine in the fourth century to the time of Ruusbroec would have claimed as much. Nevertheless there is a prominence given to the Holy Spirit’s role in the

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in what in Latin is called *regyratio*, which Ruusbroec translates into Middle Dutch as *wederboechde*, in the Brabantine contemplative theologian that seems to be unexplored in depth in the West. *Regyratio/wederboechde* is the flowing back into God, *reditus*, of all things and, in the end, the flowing back of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into the bottomless abyss of their *wesen*, their essence of perichoretic unity. And it is the Spirit’s role as the principle of return of the *Persons* into the unity of the Godhead that Ruusbroec seems to have explored in depth for the first time in Western mystical theology.  

Rik Van Nieuwenhove has been a key interpreter of Ruusbroec in terms of highlighting this prominence of the Spirit in *regyratio*, particularly the emphasis upon the Spirit as the principle of the eternal return of the Persons to their perichoretic unity. Nieuwenhove shows that the basis for Ruusbroec’s reflective breakthrough in this regard is his recognition that the Spirit is not simply the passive love shared between the Father and Son and received from them. Rather, in addition to this, the Spirit is also the active principle of love by which the persons are eternally led back into the perichoretic unity, the embrace in the fathomless abyss of the triune *wesen*.  

Nieuwenhove rightly claims that Ruusbroec consistently

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87 McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 18. McGinn notes that “previous mystics, such as William of St. Thierry and Eckhart, were “Spirit-centered” in seeing the third person as having an essential role in our return to God, but not in terms of the return of the three persons to their hidden depth in essential love,” McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 501 fn. 61.

88 See McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 18; and Nieuwenhove, *Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian*, 48–57, 82–99. Lieve Uyttenhove finds Nieuwenhove’s interpretation, which is followed by McGinn, of the *person* of the Holy Spirit as the active principle of the eternal flowing back into the unity of the Persons to be problematic. If I understand her argument correctly, she reads Ruusbroec as not actually focusing upon the Person of the Holy Spirit as the principle of return. Rather, Uyttenhove argues that when Ruusbroec discusses the Holy Spirit in this context he is claiming that the Holy Spirit as the principle of unity, through the *mutual embrace* of the Father and Son in the Love of the Spirit, is the principle of the inflowing of the Persons into the blissful unity. In other words, it is not simply the Person of the Holy Spirit but the *unity* of the Godhead, seen in the whole movement of mutual embrace of the Persons in the Spirit that is the active principle. See various places in her monograph for this argument. See for instance Uyttenhove, *Embraced by the Father and the Son*, 183–198. See also, for a more succinct form of her argument, Lieve Uyttenhove, “Ruusbroec as a Theologian: The Holy
relates *wederbochde/regyratio* to the intra-trinitarian life in a way that highlights the Holy Spirit as the active principle of the eternal return of the Persons to loving unity. This can be seen in the last work of Ruusbroec’s oeuvre, the *Beghinen*, when the canon, after speaking of the familiar notion of the Father begetting the Son, says of the Holy Spirit: “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 in into the nature of the Godhead.”

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This teaching by Ruusbroec is central for his mystical theology for it orients his teachings on the relation between God and creation, the Incarnation, Christ’s passion, the gifts of the Spirit, ecclesiology, etc. As the latter part of the quote from the Beghinen in footnote thirty-seven above states:

There is…mutual knowledge and love, flux and reflux between the Father and the Son by means of the Holy Spirit, who is the love of them both…but in the inflowing (invloeyene) of the persons the oneness of the Holy Spirit is enjoyably drawing inwards and containing the persons above distinction, in an enjoyment of fathomless love that God himself is in being and nature. See, thus does God live in himself, and with himself, in knowledge and love, in possession, in enjoyment of himself above all creatures.

This is indeed the center, the heart of the Flemish mystical theologian’s contemplative theology. Just as the fecundity of the fruitfulness of the divine nature (eternally, again this is not a time bound succession because of God’s transcendence) lies in the Father, so the flowing back into the divine perichoretic essence takes place by the active principle of love, the Holy Spirit. In the Boecsken he will even say that, in almost audacious fashion, in the “union without difference/distinction” the spirits who have been drawn into the infinite depths of this love are being melted away and annihilated. However, Ruusbroec goes on to say, additionally, that “there all clarity is turned back to darkness, there where the three persons give way to the essential unity and without distinction enjoy essential beatitude.” In The Spiritual Espousals (Brulocht) Ruusbroec says that the divine essence is a simplicity before which “the persons and everything that is living in God must give way…” This “yielding/giving way” (wiken) of the Persons

90 Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 84.

91 See footnote thirty-seven above for citation and the Middle Dutch text.

92 Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 84.

93 Boecsken, 451–53.

94 Brulocht c, 249–50.
before shared essence in which they are “contained above distinction” is indeed daring and somewhat puzzling. Here McGinn raises a valid question when he says, “What can such texts mean?…does he too advocate a kind of ‘God beyond’?”95 It is here that we must remember the paradoxical nature of the Triune Life of God. Ruusbroec is not offering a teaching of a hidden God (deus absconditus) or God beyond God. Rather, remember that, paradoxically, Ruusbroec “distinguishes three moments in the intra-trinitarian life: (a) there is the activity of the divine processions of Son and of Spirit, from the fruitfulness of the fatherly nature; (b) there is the return, or regiratio, of the divine Persons into their shared unity or essence; and finally (c) there is the moment of ‘excessus,’ passing over or “yielding” of the divine Persons in their enjoyable or idle essence.”96 In these three paradoxical, eternal (and therefore ever simultaneous in infinite fullness) moments lie the full picture of the intra-trinitarian life. As McGinn insightfully describes it: “…the divine mystery is always both essence and activity, one and three, simple and manifold; it is active insofar as it remains essential and essential insofar as it is always supreme whirling motion. At the deepest level, the polarities [here I would say paradox] of essence and activity are fused and identical, though our discursive language cannot bring this to adequate comprehension.”97 The paradoxical simultaneity of activity and enjoyable rest, which may be conceptually described in three eternal “moments” of processional outflowing, Spirit-enabled inflowing, and idle enjoyment, is the heart of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology. Within the orbit of this theology moves his teaching on human transformation in deifying union, in which humans become Godlike (god gelike/godformich). The goal of the mystical path is union

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96 Nieuwenhove, *Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian*, 84.

with the Trinity, living of what Ruusbroec calls “the common life” (ghemyne leven). Like all Ruusbroec’s teaching, ghemyne leven arises out of the Western mystical theological tradition, and yet, as with his understanding of the Spirit as the principle of loving return of the Persons, Ruusbroec adds his own bit of improvisation, which enriches the tradition as it goes forward. Thus, “while Ruusbroec shares the ideal of a harmonious synthesis of activity and contemplation with Hadewijch, he also develops it in a Trinitarian way, by interpreting the common life as a participation in the exitus, reditus, and fruition of the divine Persons.”98 However, before moving to Ruusbroec’s teaching on the mystical/contemplative path (itinerary) it is necessary to briefly look at how he understands human being, which is firmly rooted in his trinitarian thought.

III. Exemplarist Anthropology

Ruusbroec’s teaching on the human being does not stand on its own; it is firmly rooted in his trinitarian thought discussed in the previous section. For the Brabantine canon the human must be understood as a dynamic reality/creature for the human is created “to the image” of the Trinity. Thus Ruusbroec’s is a trinitarian-exemplarist, and thus relational, anthropology. More specifically, the human is made to the true Image/Exemplar, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son, who is the Image of the Father and thus the Exemplar of all things. The human is therefore the imago dei or imago trinitatis in a secondary or derivative sense. As created to the Image the human vocation as image is achieved in the infinite journey of becoming or actualizing itself as likeness of the Image by grace. In addition to being created to the Image, the

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human is created in the Image. As created in the image of the true Exemplar, the Son, the human finds the heart of its truest being in its eidetic preexistence in the Word/Son. This is a relational (being by relation to the Word and thus to God the Trinity) and exemplarist (our virtual existence in the Son as idea provides our eidos/form which teleologically guides our growth in being). Consequently, “in the divine image [the Son] all creatures have an eternal life without themselves, as in their exemplar. And the Holy Trinity has made us to this eternal image and to this likeness.”

For Ruusbroec, it is through the Love of the Holy Spirit, shared by the Father and the Son, that we are created in and to the Image, the Son. A particularly important symbol for Ruusbroec in this anthropology is that of the mirror. This is seen in one of his later treatises from the Groenendael period entitled Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit—A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness (to be explored more in chapter four of the present work). In an important and somewhat compendious passage in the Speighel Ruusbroec expresses the salient points of this anthropology in commenting on John 1:3–4, which I will divide into the two following block quotations:


100 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 20.

101 Brulocht c, 152–155: “In desen godlijcken beelde hebben alle creatueren een ewich leven sonder hem selven, alse in haren eewighen exemplare. Ende toe desen eewighen beelde ende toe dese ghelijckenisse hevet ons ghemaect die heilighe drivoldicheit.”
And that life is nothing but the image of God, in which God has eternally known all things, and that is also the cause of all creatures. And thus this image, which is the Son of God, is eternal, before all createdness. And to this eternal image we are all made; for according to the noblest part of our soul, that is the ground of our higher faculties, there we are made as a living eternal mirror of God (levende eewegh spieghel gods), whereupon God has impressed his eternal image, and wherein no other image can ever come. The mirror always remains before the countenance of God. And therefore it is eternalized by the image it has received. In this image God knew us before we were created, in himself, and now, created in time, unto himself. This image is essentially and personally in all people, and every person has it whole and entire, undivided; and all people have it among them all no more than one person has.\textsuperscript{102}

Here the Flemish mystic establishes that we are created in the Image (the Son) and that we exist eternally as idea within the Word. This is the cause of our created existence; indeed, ideas of all creatures, eternally existing in the Word/Son/Image, are the cause of all creatures. Ruusbroec then goes on to say that in the Image/Son, our origin,

…our created being and our life hang without intermediary as in its eternal cause. Yet our createdness does not become God, nor (does) the image of God become creature; for we are created unto the image, that is: to receive the image of God. And that image is uncreated, eternal: the Son of God. This image is, in the essence of God, essence and essential; and, in (God’s) nature, that nature itself. […] The highest (part) of our soul is always prepared, for it is bare and unassailed by images, always seeing its beginning and inclining toward it (altoes siende ende neighende in sijn begin). And therefore it is an eternal living mirror of God, always without cessation receiving the eternal birth of the Son, the image of the Holy Trinity, in which God knows himself: all that he is according to his essence and according to the Persons […]. And this image we all have as an eternal life, without ourselves, before our createdness. And in our createdness that image is the superessential being of our essence (overwesen ons wesens) and is eternal life.\textsuperscript{103}

In commenting on these excerpts from the passage in the Speighel, Rik van Nieuwenhove rightly notes that “Ruusbroec is at pains to argue two points: on the one hand, our created being is distinct from God: ‘our createdness does not become God.’ On the other hand, he attempts to make clear that the apex of our soul is one with God and can only be properly understood in

\textsuperscript{102} Speighel, 847–59.

\textsuperscript{103} Speighel, 861–82.
relation with God. Our eternal life in the Image of God is the ground of our created being.”¹⁰⁴ As human beings, image of the Image and thus *imago dei*, we are nothing less than a created participation in the being of the Trinity.

Our “essential unity” (*weselijke eenheid*) is a mystery that is a union between our created being and our image or idea, which eternally exists in the second Person, the Word of the Father. In this union the soul is a living mirror of the Image/Son. Ruusbroec also understands that all humans are one in this image for we all share it in the same way without exception.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, he emphasizes that ‘the highest (part) of our soul is always prepared, for it is bare and unassailed by images, always seeing its beginning and inclining toward it.’ In the *Brulocht* the Flemish canon further describes the union between our virtual existence as idea in the Son and our created being:

This eternal life, which we eternally have and are in God apart from ourselves, is a cause of our created being in time. Our created being depends upon [is suspended in] this eternal being and is one with it in its essential subsistence. This eternal being and life which we have and are in God’s eternal Wisdom [the Son] is like unto God, for it both abides eternally and without distinction in the divine essence and, through the birth of the Son, flows forth eternally into an eternal otherness, with distinction, according to eternal wisdom.¹⁰⁶

Ruusbroec unfolds his teaching on how our virtual existence as eternal idea in the Son shapes our created existence as a subjective creature by describing three ‘unities’ that compose the three dimensions of the human soul. This schema of human nature as composed of the three unities is found throughout his corpus but he goes into great detail in the second book of the *Brulocht* in

¹⁰⁴ Nieuwenhove, “Ruusbroec, Jordaens and Herp,” 213.


¹⁰⁶ *Brulocht* c, 135–141. In this passage I primarily follow the translation in Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 149. However, at points I follow the critical edition and, in the last sentence, slightly depart from both and use my own translation.
describing these three unities which are the unity of the heart, an active unity, and an essential
unity (the last of which has already been mentioned above). He notes this by stating “We find
a triple unity in all people naturally, and in good people also supernaturally.” In Ruusbroec’s
schema the unity of heart is the life-giving, animating element of the soul, which serves as the
seat for the five senses and all bodily activity. As the animating form of the body Ruusbroec says
that this unity is properly called “soul” (ziele). The ‘active unity’ is the ground of the three
Augustinian faculties of memory, intellect and will. In fact, he calls this unity the “domain of the
higher faculties.”

In this second unity of the soul Ruusbroec calls the soul “spirit” (gheest) for it is the origin
of the three higher faculties “and every faculty of spiritual activity.” This unity also points us to
the created participation in God’s Being that is the human soul for this unity is intimately bound
to our eternal life as divine idea of the Father in the Son. The unity of the created mind, with its
three higher faculties, with the soul’s eternal life as idea in God is called, as mentioned above,
the ‘essential unity,’ for it is mysteriously a union between our created being and our eternal life
as idea in the Son/Wisdom of the Father. Ruusbroec says, “The…highest unity [the essential
unity] is in God, for all creatures hang in this unity with (their) being, life, and subsistence…”
Thus, “in accordance with his exemplarist anthropology, Ruusbroec can claim that at the core of
our being we are a relation, intimately linked to our eternal idea or image in God.” This unity
or relation is expressed in terms of the symbol of the soul as living mirror onto which is pressed

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107 In terms of other places in Ruusbroec’s writings where these unities are discussed one
could turn to the Tabernakel

108 Brulocht b, 1675.


110 Nieuwenhove, “Ruusbroec, Jordaens, and Herp,” 214.
the eternal image/idea of our creaturely identity as it eternally exists in the Image/Son. The soul is mirror for it is here, ‘in the most intimate and highest part of our being,’ that the impress of our eternal Image is received on our part. These three unities, taken together, configure the “one kingdom of the soul.”

In expanding on the outworking logic of this exemplarist/relational anthropology and its attendant “unities,” in the second book of the Brulocht, Ruusbroec shows in some detail how these unities make us participatory in both the image and likeness of God. His reflections on this score root his anthropology in his trinitarianism, which is also to say that they weave this anthropology into the wesen-werk paradox of the triune life. The deepest dimension of the soul receives “the impress of its eternal image and of the divine brightness in bare nature.” This essential unity is not identical with God, but as created image of God into which the eternal image shines, it shares in the threefold activity of the Trinity, once again emphasizing his trinitarianism. Ruusbroec goes on to show that out of this essential unity (weselijke eenicheit) flows forth the action of our created being, grounded in God and, paradoxically, rooted in the “active unity.” The Brabantine Augustinian describes this participation in the wesen-werk

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111 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 22. See previous block quote above from the Speighel cited in fn. 102.

112 Brulocht b, 1630. For the paradoxical yet simultaneous affirmation of God as the being of the soul alongside the Creator/creature distinction in Ruusbroec see fn. twenty-four above.

113 This and the other unmarked quotations in this and the previous paragraph are from Brulocht b, 41–66.

114 Brulocht b, 1632–33. Quoted in McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 23.

115 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 23–24.

116 Here we must remember the paradoxical nature of our language about God in the Dionysian Mystical Tradition, of which Ruusbroec is a part (discussed in fn. twenty-five above).
paradox of the triune life from the angle of the essential unity (the *wesen* aspect of the paradox), which leads him then to the participation in the eternal “motions” of the relations of the Persons, when he states:

And therefore the spirit possesses God 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). And by means of the brightness of its eternal image which shines in it essentially and personally, the spirit sinks away from itself with respect to the highest part of its natural vigor into the divine essence, and there abidingly possesses its eternal blessedness; and it flows out again with all creatures through the eternal birth of the Son, and is set in its created being by the free will of the Holy Trinity. And here it is like unto the image of the supreme Threeness and Oneness to which it has been created.\(^{117}\)

Bernard McGinn comments that “this is the soul as ‘untarnished mirror’ (*ombesmette spieghel*), a true *imago trinitatis*. The soul’s essential relationality is evident in the way in which it participates in the three basic aspects of the divine reality—abiding or hanging in God (Greek: *monē*), flowing forth from God (*proodos*), and ‘returning back into God as its natural cause’

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As Denys Turner notes in his essay on Denys the Aereopagite’s influence upon Marguerite Porete, Ruusbroec, Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa: “Dionysius himself had said in *Mystical Theology* that “[the cause of all] is beyond assertion and denial”; and again, “We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion . . . [and] also beyond every denial”; and yet again, “[The One] beyond . . . the assertion of all things and the denial of all things, [is] that which is beyond every assertion and denial.” For this reason, Dionysius adds, the Cause of all is “beyond similarity and difference.” Now when Eckhart says of creatures that all of them are in one way or another “distinct”, but that of God you can say only that s/he is, if indeed “One”, so only by virtue of being “indistinct”; and when Nicholas of Cusa entitles one of his last works *De li non-Aliud*, ‘on the (one and only) *not*-other,’ he is but glossing those concluding words of Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*. What all three [Dionysius, Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa] acknowledge is the highly paradoxical character of our language of the divine transcendence, a paradoxicality at the level of ontology which has to flow into a consequent paradoxicality in our language of the union of the soul with God,” Turner, “Dionysius and some Late Medieval Mystical Theologians of Northern Europe,” 662. Turner’s quotations from Denys’ *Mystical Theology* are drawn from *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987).

\(^{117}\) *Brulocht* b, 1640–50.
(epsistrophē) (Brulocht b, 1655–58).”\textsuperscript{118} Notice that Ruusbroec is clear that this essential unity is in all human souls naturally, whether good or evil, so it does not make one holy for one receives “the impress of its eternal image passively, insofar as it is God-like but a creature in itself.”\textsuperscript{119} It becomes the source for the life of blessedness and holiness as it is vitalized by grace-filled actions, for in this way we live fully into the wesen-werk life of the Trinity and are made not only the image of God but also the likeness of God or to God (ghelijcke gods).

This likeness to God is the second or active unity of the three unities or the active aspect of the unity of spirit (the “domain of the higher faculties” noted above in fn. 106). According to Ruusbroec unity as such does not act but it is the source of the three higher faculties of memory, intellect/understanding, and will and their action. Ruusbroec then teaches that “in this unity, the spirit must always be God-like by grace and virtues, or else unlike (Him) by mortal sin. For since we are made to the likeness of God, that is, to the grace of God…although we cannot lose the image or the natural unity with God, if we lose the likeness, that is the grace of God, then we are damned.”\textsuperscript{120} For Ruusbroec, this action by grace is christological, for if we are to act into the likeness of God it will be by the grace given to us in and through the incarnation of the Son/Image in Christ who “comes to us and into us with intermediary and without intermediary, that is, with gifts and above all gifts. And we also come to Him and into Him with intermediary and without intermediary, that is, with virtues and above all virtues (\textit{En<del>de wij comen oec tot hem ende in hem, met middele ende zonder midde <\l>, dat es met doechden ende boven alle}}

\textsuperscript{118} McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 24. The in text citation from the \textit{Brulocht} is by McGinn.

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Brulocht} b, 1662–63. Quoted in McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 24.

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Brulocht} b, 1681–89.
Ruusbroec uses the language of gifts for describing Christ coming to us, by the Spirit’s outflowing and inflowing, through the sacraments and other mediated forms of grace such as the rest of creation and the embodiment of the virtues of Christ. The “above gifts” and “without intermediary” refer to the depths of contemplative union with God, which will be discussed more in the next section.

Because Christ’s humanity is deified through union with the Word/Son he receives an infinite abundance of grace, and thus, by the Spirit, he fills our faculties with that same grace. Therefore in the Beghinen Ruusbroec states: “Thus the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ was and is exalted and is one with the divine Wisdom, and his soul and all his faculties were and still are filled with the fullness of his gifts; he is the living fountain from which we receive everything we need.” Christ generously shares his grace with our faculties from the abundant fullness of grace in his soul. Ruusbroec expresses this when he states:

I have seen you eternally before all createdness in myself, one with me and as myself; there I have known, loved, called and chosen you. I have created you according to my Image and likeness. I have assumed your nature and have impressed my Image in it in order for you to become one with me without intermediary in the glory of my Father. I have created my soul with its faculties and filled them with every gift so that I could serve and obey my and your Father, your God and my God in our shared humanity, with all my might, unto death. From my fullness of grace and mercy I have filled your soul and your faculties, so that you are like me and are able, with my power and gifts, to serve, pay thanks and praise our God, in all eternity without end.

After being “chosen” from all eternity as idea in the Wisdom/Son of the Father, in the unity or love of the Holy Spirit, and set on the journey of becoming the likeness of God humanity has, through the Fall, distorted the Image in the living mirror of the soul. However, the Son has taken

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121 Brulocht b, 1693–96.

122 Beghinen I, 367–70.

123 Beghinen I, 350–61. Here I have gone with the helpful translation of Nieuwenhove in Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 132.
on the wayward creature’s humanity and restored the possibility to once again tread the path of
the eternal journey of actualizing the likeness to the Son and thus to the Trinity. The grace of
Christ given by being immersed in his humanity and flooded by his gifts of grace in the
sacraments and virtuous life of charity make it possible to continue on this journey of actualizing
the image and likeness. We are enabled by grace to have an active role in our own redemption.
“Of course, our charitable works themselves are dependent on Christ’s grace, which is available
to the individual believer in Christ’s Body, the Church, and in the sacraments in particular…”

The actualizing of the “likeness” to God, the werk aspect of our participation in the enjoying and
active love of the Trinity, then “may be defined as our ever-growing similarity to God achieved
through the deifying activity given to the higher faculties through grace. It is fundamentally
christological. We can attain ‘the simple essence in which God gives himself with all his
richness’ ([Brulocht] b, 1734–35), that is, the eternal image of humanity in the second person of
the Trinity, only if we live in and by the love of the Word made flesh.”

The dimensions of how the Christian contemplative/mystic grows ever-deeper into the
paradoxical (wesen-werk) life of Triune love through the grace-empowered action of the faculties
of memory, intellect, and will are spelled out in greater detail in the Brulocht. Ruusbroec also
discusses the vital importance in this journey of a “single, or pure, intention” (eenvoldighe
meyninghe), what the Brabantine canon calls “an inward, enlightened, loving inclination of
spirit.” Furthermore, this ground of a single intention is where we may meet God without

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124 Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 133.
126 See Brulocht b, 972–1131.
127 Brulocht b, 1797.
intermediary. Ruusbroec also explores how the soul’s “ground” and God’s ground are related in this journey.128 These are all important elements in Ruusbroec’s complex anthropology, though space does not allow for further exploration of these threads in the present work. Nonetheless, these exemplarist anthropological elements of creation in and to the Image of the Son, the “three unities,” and how the redemption wrought in Christ and participated in by the human, which makes us sharers in the essential and active paradoxical love and life of the Trinity, give us the framework, along with Ruusbroec’s teaching on God as Trinity, to lead us into the final section of the chapter. This final section will be an exploration of the mystical/contemplative path according to the Brabantine mystical theologian. It should be remembered that though Ruusbroec’s trinitarian, anthropological, and mystical teaching can be sprawling and complex, it “had a fundamentally practical purpose—it was aimed at showing fallen humans how to regain their relatedness to God. Being reformed to the fullness of the image and likeness of God, that is, the Father’s one and only image, becomes possible only through that image made [human] in Christ Jesus, who provides us with both the means and the example to realize who we really are.”129 This should therefore show us that identifying spiritual direction/guidance as one of the vital aspects of Ruusbroec’s work is not an imposition of a foreign category upon his teaching. It is part and parcel of it for he desired to help fellow Christians grow into the depths of their identity as image of the Son, which is what the mystical path of contemplation is all about.

128 See for example Brulocht c, 159–69; and Rijcke IV, 1896–97 and 2079-81.

IV. The Mystical/Contemplative Way

With the primary characteristics of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian theology of the paradoxical life of God (wesen/ghebrucken and minne/werk) and his concomitant pneumatology, exemplarist anthropology, and christology in mind, it is now possible to explore Ruusbroec’s teaching on the mystical/contemplative life of seeking an ever-more vibrant and deep growth into consciousness of the transforming presence of the triune God. Ruusbroec’s teaching on the contemplative life of union with God works in harmony with his exemplarist anthropology, which, as we have seen, works in harmony with the cantus firmus (“firm melody”) of the paradoxical triune life of God, characterized by the eternal simultaneity of restful enjoyment and active love. Ruusbroec’s mystical theology of human transformation rests in the human participation in the trinitarian life of God such that one, through Christ, by the animating power of the Spirit, “becomes what one is.” In other words the mystical life is one of deification, where we live from, by, and into our life as idea in the Son, the Image, and actualize the likeness to God in our life as creature (thus also reflecting the life of essential enjoyment and active love in God). This life is the true mystical or contemplative life, what Ruusbroec calls “superessential” mysticism. This true contemplative life provides Ruusbroec’s counterposition to the false mystical life he discerns in the teachings of Free Spirit heresy. Finally, the goal of the contemplative life, the deified life, is what Ruusbroec calls the “common life” (ghemyne leven) in which the life of our rest in God is harmoniously integrated with our participation in the active love (minne) of the Trinity. While he

130 While Ruusbroec never uses the word mystiek (“hidden”) as a qualifier, as noted by Albert Ampe, he speaks at a deep level about the life of contemplation. As McGinn notes: “While mysticism is a modern term, we can legitimately speak of Ruusbroec as a mystic in the sense that the message of the Groenendaal canon centered on how to attain a deeper and transforming sense of the consciousness of the presence of God,” McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 29. In order to avoid the potential confusion and problems of the modern notion of “mysticism” I try to predominantly refer to Ruusbroec as “mystical theologian,” “contemplative theologian,” or “contemplative,” along with the designation of “mystic.”
does comment upon some of the atypical forms of mystical consciousness such as ecstasy, strange locutions, visions, and spiritual drunkenness, Ruusbroec clearly argues that the primary weight of attention must be paid to the core of contemplative/mystical transformation of the person, which is a life of deeper and deeper sharing in triune love.\textsuperscript{131} Louis Dupré states Ruusbroec’s stance with utmost clarity when he says, “The mystical life does not consist in abrupt alteration of consciousness, but rather in an evermore intensively conscious recurrence of the same divine rhythm. It is a rhythm of which every devout person has had at least some experience. What happens on the highest peaks of mystical life displays a genuine family resemblance with life in the spiritual valleys where most of us dwell.”\textsuperscript{132} This is how Ruusbroec must be understood. He invites everyone into the contemplative life, a mystical life that is in principle available to everyone and which immerses the person in the ocean of triune \textit{minne}.

\textsuperscript{131} McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 29.

\textsuperscript{132} Louis Dupré, \textit{The Common Life: The Origins of Trinitarian Mysticism and its Development by Jan Ruusbroec} (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), 53. Paul Mommaers also discusses how this means that mystics are not primarily concerned with their own feelings or psychological states. Rather, they are more concerned with the Divine Other of whom they are becoming more and more conscious. Mommaers states, in describing Ruusbroec’s vision of the mystical life: “The mystics themselves appear to be fascinated not by their own feeling but by something felt, by someone…It is altogether wrongheaded, then, to portray mysticism as a subjectivistic spiritual endeavor and the mystics as bursting at the seams with ‘feeling.’ Certain highly poetic, emotional and sensuous utterances and images found in the writings of so-called “love mysticism” have tended to invite such misrepresentations…[however] a mere skim through the pages of the \textit{Letters} or portions of the \textit{Visions} of Hadewijch [for instance], the Flemish \textit{minne-mystiek}, is enough to topple the subjectivist interpretation. The experience of \textit{minne} — a very personal one and explicitly feminine at that — is not subjective in the sense of valuing and enjoying the emotion of love as such. For Hadewijch, \textit{minne} as a movement of the soul is never detached from \textit{minne} as the Other [the Trinity] who causes it. To feel love is to meet the Beloved. And where the object of love is blurred by the emotion it arouses, the mystical beguine Hadewijch turns into the most penetrating soul-searcher, ruthlessly scrutinizing the joys and pains of love so as to relativize them by relating them to their object [the Trinity].” Paul Mommaers, \textit{Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Union with God} (Leuven, BEL: Peeters, 2009), 16–17.
A. The True Contemplative/Mystical Path

For Ruusbroec, mystical life is rooted in the fact that our created being is shaped by its cause, our existence as eternal idea in God. Furthermore, our created being is one with and indistinct from our uncreated life as idea in God’s Image, for “God’s nature radically transcends (and is therefore indistinct from) his creation. Therefore, our life as idea in God is both the condition of possibility (die ieerste sake) and the fulfillment of the contemplative life. 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.”133 As discussed in the exemplarist anthropology section above, not only is the Son the cause of our created life, it is through our participation in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Son in Jesus Christ through the sacraments and the life of prayer that we are drawn back into the dynamics of the triune life of God. Yet, just as the Holy Spirit is the Love shared between the Father and Son and the Love through which God creates the cosmos through the Son, the Spirit is also the means of rygiratio. Thus, not only is the Spirit the means of regyratio of the Persons as they eternally flow back into their unity in the processions but he is also the means of the creation’s flowing back into the perichoretic union of the Persons through the salvific missions of the Son and Spirit.

133 Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 61. Nieuwenhove understands Ruusbroec as holding that, since our fundamental being is the union of our created being with our uncreated life as idea, our origin and telos as humans is in God and therefore “grace perfects nature.” Due to the Creator/creature distinction, God’s being so radically transcends ours as to be “indistinct” from our own. God is our being but we are not God’s being. In light of this radical transcendence Nieuwenhove observes: “It is therefore not without significance that Ruusbroec, when dealing with God’s gracing in the ‘three unities,’ does not mention a supernatural adornment in the third life” Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 205, fn. 90. See Brulocht b, 69–72.
This participation in the work of the Son and Spirit is highlighted by Ruusbroec in the significant attention which he gives to participation in the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as they are poured out on the humanity of Christ. This was foretold by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 11:1–3) and is symbolized by the seven types of ornamental furnishing which grace the golden candlestick. Reflecting upon this in *Van den Geesteliken Tabernakel—The Spiritual Tabernacle*, Ruusbroec states: “And he [Christ] also has these seven gifts, as seven eyes, with which he recognized and felt, according to his humanity, all virtues with distinction. For each gift makes one especially recognize and feel the ground of one of those virtues, which may grow out of this capital virtue. And therefore, all the seven gifts make one recognize and feel how the Spirit of God moves the human spirit, in seven manners, to all virtues that a person can practice.”¹³⁴

Wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, piety, fortitude, and fear of the Lord are the seven gifts of the Spirit and these had long been of significant consequence for Christian mystical theology. However, few in this tradition gave the seven gifts as pivotal a role as did the Brabantine canon. As McGinn suggests, “This stress on the seven gifts allowed him to show how the path to union was both christological, rooted in our growing imitation of Christ, and pneumatological, achieved by our participation in the love that is the Holy Spirit.”¹³⁵ So superessential mysticism and union are accomplished through participation in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Ruusbroec deals with the transformation or perfection of the human soul through grace throughout his corpus but looking to what today is considered his masterpiece, *Die Geestelike Brulocht—The Spiritual Espousals*, gives us a sure guide to the Brabantine’s vision of the

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mystical life. In the *Brulocht* Ruusbroec identifies three “lives” which seem to more or less correspond to the traditional three-fold way or itinerary of spiritual progress, initiated by Origen and spread through the Dionysian oeuvre, in Christian contemplative tradition: Purgation, Illumination/Enlightenment, and Union/Perfection (though Ruusbroec uses a number of different itineraries, some of his own devising, to describe the life of the Christian contemplative). This dominant itinerary is a three-fold pattern of progression, which the Flemish mystical theologian discerns and describes as: (1) The *active* life, (2) the *interior* or God-yearning life, and (3) the *contemplative* life. This pattern structures the entirety of the large works of the *Brulocht* and the *Tabernakel*. However, as with a number of mystical theologians in the Christian tradition who use the traditional three-fold way of purgation, illumination, and union/perfection, this three-fold progression is not simply an advancing in which the previous stage is left behind, like a ladder one kicks out from under oneself once the stage is passed. Rather, analogous to the simultaneity of eternal activity and rest in the Trinity, there is a paradoxical simultaneity of progress and yet concomitance of the three stages in the life of the contemplative Christian. Thus the “…three forms of life remain present and interactive.” The life that then seems to integrate the goodness, truth, and beauty of all three forms of life is *dat ghemeyne leven* (“the common life”),

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136 One of these itineraries is found in the *Steen*, which is a fourfold analysis of relationship with God in which the contemplative progresses from hirelings, to faithful servants, through secret friends, to hidden sons. It seems that there is then an additional level in which the best of the last of the three categories are harmonized, which is the “common man/person.” This analysis in the *Steen* will be discussed more below in this section. Other itineraries are to be found in *Dat rijke der gelieven*—*The Realm of Lovers* where the seven gifts of the Spirit are correlated with the nine choirs of angels, and in *Vanden seven sloten*—*The Seven Enclosures* and *Van seven trappen*—*The Seven Rungs* where Ruusbroec mixes patterns of seven with the primary itinerary used in his writings, that will be discussed presently. In what follows in the current section, the progression in the spiritual life is described as a three-fold pattern: (1) The active life, (2) the interior life, and (3) the contemplative life. This pattern structures the entirety of the *Brulocht* and the *Tabernakel*.

which harmonizes a paradoxical life of activity and contemplation. The common life seems to be the crowning harmony of the three preceding lives.

As Ruusbroec begins the *Brulocht* he roots his teaching in scripture by giving a quotation from Mt. 25:6 in which Jesus, in his parable of the virgins and the bridegroom, says, “See-the Bridegroom is coming-Go out-to meet Him!” Ruusbroec divides the work into three books, corresponding to the three lives (active, interior, and contemplative). Each book is then divided into four sections, which coincide with the four-part division of the scripture from Matthew. In the first section of the first book, the book on the active life, Ruusbroec addresses both the Christian’s inner endeavor to overcome sin and outward service to others. He first describes the necessary conditions for conversion. He then lays out the three ways in which Christ comes in past, present, and future, which are through the incarnation, daily gifts and graces coming into the soul, and at the hour of death or the time of judgement. This gives us an example of how Ruusbroec understands transformation (deification, becoming “God-like,” *god gelike/godformich*) as made possible by the work of Christ; it is christological. We are prepared for Christ’s final judgement by his daily coming to us through the gifts of the sacraments.

Christ’s coming calls for a reciprocal “coming” on our part, and we do this through the practice of the virtues exteriorly and interiorly through charity and true humility. This “going out” by imitating Christ in the virtues “…must take place in three ways: we must go out to God and to ourselves and to our neighbors, and this must be done with charity and justice.” The third part of Book I on the active life gives a long reflection on the essential virtues, the practice of which, again, constitute our response to Christ’s coming, and an investigation into how the seven

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138 The conditions needed for salvation are God’s grace, a will which is freely turned to God, and a conscience unstained by mortal sin, *Brulocht* a, 71–78.

139 *Brulocht* a, 476–78.
beatitudes help the believer overcome the seven deadly sins. “The meeting with Christ then consists of being intent on God in every good work. One ought ‘to rest’ in God above all virtues and divine gifts when performing virtuous deeds; that is, activity and rest ought to be perfectly integrated.”140 The Brabantine canon then ends Book I by looking at the three ways we meet Christ in the active life. We meet him by directing or ordering the mind toward God, loving God and thinking about God more than anything, and by resting in God above all creatures with great ardor. Ruusbroec helpfully expresses this when he says that “the person who thus lives in this perfection…and who offers all his life and works to God’s honor and to God’s praise and is intent on God and loves him above all things, will frequently be touched in his desire to see, to know, to understand who this Bridegroom, Christ is.”141 This final stage identifies the transition to the interior or God-yearning life.

The majority of the Brulocht is occupied with Ruusbroec’s expounding upon the second life, the interior life. This may be evidence that, as a pastorally sensitive writer of mystical theology, which serves as sound spiritual direction, Ruusbroec thought that this is where the majority of his time should be spent. McGinn suggests this when he states: “The Spiritual Espousals concentrates on this second part of the itinerary, a sign that Ruusbroec felt that the majority of his readers would profit most from a detailed account of this stage.”142 This stage is one of transformation and deepening of mystical consciousness (though this is more than

140 Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 184. See Brulocht b 848–53 and 889–956.

141 Brulocht a, 971–75.

142 McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 38. McGinn supports this point by stating that “The active life (Brulocht a) takes up 1,022 lines in the critical edition, while the interior life (Brulocht b) has 2,584 and the contemplative life (Brulocht c) only 259,” McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 506, fn. 126.
moments of consciousness, which it will contain, but is an ever deepening transformation). The interior life is for Ruusbroec the stage that can still be described, to some degree at least, by discursive reason while the following stage, the “contemplative life,” will be described more doctrinally and apophatically because it is, given God’s radical transcendence, beyond the pale of adequate description through discursive reason. It is not “unreasonable” but certainly is “supra-reasonable.”143 In this second book on the interior life Ruusbroec will move to describing how we receive the inflowing of the grace of God in the active unity. This empowers us to rest in the place in which the triune God gives himself, in all his abundant richness, “without intermediary.”144 This place or dimension is the simple being of our spirit.145


144 Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theology, 185.

145 This is distinguished from “with intermediary,” as through sacraments. This idea is rooted in Ruusbroec’s anthropology, which is rooted in his trinitarian theology. Particularly it is rooted in his understanding of the essential unity where, because of the Dionysian and Augustinian understandings of the radical transcendence of God, our created being hangs in indistinct union with the eternal idea of us in the Son/Image. Thus God, since God’s ideas are God (the Son), is, in an Augustinian idiom, “more inward than my innermost and higher than my uppermost” (interior intimo meo et superior summo meo), Augustine, Confessions 3.6.11. The Latin text may be found in Augustine, Confessions, Volume I, Introduction and Text, by James J. O’Donnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Here I have gone with the translation of Robert E. Wood in Robert E. Wood, The Beautiful, the True and the Good: Studies in the History of Thought (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 156. Because of the idea of us (in God the Son) is God and God is “more interior to me than I am to myself” due to God’s radical transcendence of the creature, God’s being and the soul’s being are indistinct, which is paradoxically rooted in the radical transcendence of God or the Creator/creature distinction. The contemplative life and, ultimately, the common life (to be discussed below) are lives in which we become, in some apophatic sense, conscious of this indistinction, though this is done apophatically through a “knowledge beyond knowledge” which is an unknowing, in the Dionysian sense. This is the case because we cannot comprehend God’s Being through which we exist by participation and are transformed (deified) by God’s grace. We cannot circumscribe it with our mind. Thus we will see below, when discussing the “contemplative life,” that Ruusbroec will have to discuss this in doctrinal and apophatic ways because of the fact that this life or union is beyond our ability to adequately describe with words. This life is also more than simply isolated mystical experiences. It will have many moments of deeper awareness or consciousness on our part, which Ruusbroec discusses, but it is a life of
enabling power of God’s grace the higher faculties (memory, intellect, and will) actively flow outward in all virtues and they return, flowing inward into the unity of the spirit in the union or bond of love. Thus, the soul/person, through this motif of love reflects the eternal ebbing and flowing of the triune life of God. Prior to this discussion, however, Ruusbroec first describes the consequences of God’s gracious action in the unity of the heart, for he presents Christ’s coming (as the Bridegroom) into the “three unities” of the human person. The significantly lengthy second and third parts of Book II (the interior life) are an unpacking of the portions of the Matthew passage which state “the Bridegroom is coming” and “go out,” which are treated together. The Brabantine mystic’s consistent theme of motion structures his reflections here. The movement of Christ, the Bridegroom, coming into us must coincide with our own going out to meet him and others.\textsuperscript{146}

Christ’s coming into the unity of the heart, the unity of all the corporeal powers, takes place in four modes: sensible fervor and devotion, a superabundance of consolation and spiritual joy, a robust desire for God, and a state of abandonment. The corporeal powers, particularly appetite and desire, are drawn upward to achieve unity with God. Christ’s coming into the heart in these four modes may overflow into the outward senses such as in jubilation, rapture, spiritual abandonment, and desolation. Ruusbroec describes the first mode in terms of analogies such as boiling water or the sun’s effects upon the earth during the spring, for an inward impulse illumines and sets aflame the heart and the faculties.\textsuperscript{147} He then describes the second mode, the superabundance of consolation and spiritual joy, when he states: “Out of this sweetness comes a

\textsuperscript{146} Brulocht b, 160–1602.

\textsuperscript{147} Brulocht b, 212–358.
blissfulness of heart and of all the bodily faculties in such a way that a person believes [herself] to be interiorly enfolded by a divine embrace of affective love. This blissfulness and this consolation is more abundant and more delightful to the soul and body than all the blissfulness that earth can provide, even were a person to receive it all.\textsuperscript{148} This intense bliss creates what Ruusbroec calls “spiritual inebriation” (\textit{gheestelijcke dronkenheit}).\textsuperscript{149} This can lead to various unusual somatic effects of ecstatic gifts in the contemplative such as jumping, running, clapping hands, and dancing because of exuberant joy. It is important to say, however, that Ruusbroec “insists that such experiences come at the beginning of a person’s conversion from the world and can often prove misleading.”\textsuperscript{150} The third mode of Christ’s coming into the heart is a mixture of pain and pleasure as the contemplative is “wounded within, in [her] heart, and feels the lacerations of love.”\textsuperscript{151} The fourth mode is such that the mystic experiences desolation and the loss of all joy and consolation. However, this suffering is to be embraced in obedience and will lead to a state in which the contemplative will experience a depth of joy she has never known before. Ruusbroec ends this part by reflecting on how Christ Jesus is our prime example of living faithfully in all four of these modes.\textsuperscript{152}

The next section on interior practice deals with Christ’s coming into the higher faculties of the memory, intellect, and will. Ruusbroec says that grace dwells essentially (\textit{weselijcke}) in the unity of the spirit (the “second unity” described above in the section on Ruusbroec’s exemplarist

\textsuperscript{148} \textit{Brulocht} b, 384–89.

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Brulocht} b, 395.

\textsuperscript{150} McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 40. See \textit{Brulocht} b, 423–38.

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Brulocht} b, 491–93.

\textsuperscript{152} \textit{Brulocht} b, 891–971.
anthropology), while it flows actively (werkelijcke) into the three faculties.\textsuperscript{153} The flowing in of the first stream of grace unifies our memory by lifting it above busy distractedness and multiplicity into a mode of simplicity.\textsuperscript{154} The intellect is illumined or enlightened by the second stream of grace and from this follows numerous manners of virtues and practices as well as contemplation of the essential character of the Godhead and the characteristics of the Persons of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{155} As Rik van Nieuwenhove describes it, “The enlightened person will examine the attributes of the Father (almighty Power, Creator, Sustainer, etc.), the Word (unfathomable Wisdom and Truth, Exemplar of all creatures and their very Life), and the Spirit (Charity and Generosity, Benevolence, unfathomable Goodness, etc.).\textsuperscript{156} The third stream of grace flows out of the unity of spirit and enkindles the will in silent, peaceful love. Ruusbroec states: “Through this joy and fullness of grace and divine fidelity, springs forth and flows the third stream in this same unity of spirit. This stream enkindles the will like a fire and devours and consumes everything into unity and flows over and through all the faculties of the soul with rich gifts and particular nobility, and it produces in the will a subtle spiritual love without labor.”\textsuperscript{157} Through this stream of mediated grace the enlightened contemplative begins to participate in the intratrinitarian paradox of inflowing and outflowing love.\textsuperscript{158} “The grace of God is present as a fountain in the unity of the spirit. And the streams cause an out-flowing in the faculties, with all

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\item[153] Brulocht b, 977–80.
\item[154] Brulocht b, 983–1007.
\item[155] Brulocht b, 1121–24.
\item[156] Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 186. See Brulocht b, 1045–63.
\item[157] Brulocht b, 1111–18.
\item[158] Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 186.
virtues. And the fountain of grace always demands a flowing back into the same ground from which that flow issues.”

The last section of Christ coming into the faculties or higher powers once again shows Ruusbroeck discussing how Christ is the model for us in sharing ourselves, “commonness” with all people. He particularly points to how Christ gives himself as common to all people in the Eucharist.

Finally, the last of the three “comings” of Christ the Bridegroom is his coming into the ground of the soul, the “active unity” of the spirit itself, which again calls for a responsive “coming out” on the part of the contemplative soul. The Fleming describes this coming in the unity of the spirit as a kind of vein in the fountain of God’s grace. Here the inward stirring or “touch” (gerinen) of Christ occurs. This divine touch is described by Ruusbroeck when he states: “And in this touch of God, each one savors his practice and his life according to the force of the touch and in the measure of his love. And this divine stirring is the innermost intermediary between God and ourselves, between rest and activity, between mode and modelessness, between time and eternity.” Prior to all gifts the touch of Christ takes place in us. Nevertheless, this touch is the last act to be rightly discerned and savored by the mystic, “for God’s grace works in us from within outwards, and is nearer and more inner to us than our own work.” In the ground of the soul, the unity of the spirit, the mystic finds herself in a state that is deeper than or “above” reason, though not without reason. She does feel this touch and yet cannot comprehend its mode. Yet deeper or above this touch of Christ is the “essential unity,” for

159 Brulocht b, 1128–31.

160 Brulocht b, 1405–1602.

161 Brulocht b, 2110–13.

162 Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 186.
in the stillness of the essence of the soul is the more inner, higher, and deeper brightness that is incomprehensible, the Trinitarian God who gives the touch.\textsuperscript{163} As the account of the interior life moves along Ruusbroec describes how the amorous and knowing capacities are enkindled to enjoy and understand God in his incomprehensible brightness and, while neither capacity can love or know God adequately, where understanding is blinded by the brightness, love goes further, for in the soul’s ground

…the brightness of God shines so greatly that reason and all understanding fail to go further and must suffer and yield to the incomprehensible brightness of God. But when the spirit feels this in its ground, even though reason and understanding fail in the face of the divine brightness and remain outside, before the door, nevertheless, the faculty of loving wishes to go further; for, like understanding, it has been compelled and invited; but it is blind and it wants enjoyment, and enjoyment lies more in tasting and feeling than in understanding. For this reason love goes in while understanding remains outside.\textsuperscript{164}

At this point we find Ruusbroec drawing on the idea of \textit{epektasis} for “the movement of the amorous faculty to find enjoyment in God, he says, cannot be anything other than an ‘eternal hunger’ (\textit{eewich hongher}), because the finite spirit can never reach repletion in its pursuit of the infinite God. This eternal hunger is a form of \textit{epekstasis}, that is, the endless pursuit of God that is a paradoxical fusion of satisfaction and desire.”\textsuperscript{165}

\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Brulocht} b, 1469–90.

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{Brulocht} b, 1519–27.

\textsuperscript{165} McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 42. See \textit{Brulocht} b, 1536–41. Through various voices of the Eastern and Western Christian tradition the idea of \textit{epektasis} (“perpetual progress”) is often associated with the Pauline passage of Phil. 3:13. As discussed above Gregory of Nyssa was the first to explicitly develop this theme. Ruusbroec did not have access to Nyssen’s works but it is found in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux and is particularly prominent in Eckhart and Hadewijch, who also used the language of eternal hunger. For more on this see Donald F. Duclow, “The Hungers of Hadewijch and Eckhart,” \textit{Journal of Religion} 80 (2000): 421–41. McGinn notes that “Ruusbroec almost certainly knew the Hadewijch texts. One way in which Ruusbroec expresses \textit{epektasis} is by combining the verbs crighen/vercrighen (‘craving’) and ontbliven (‘lacking’)…,” McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 507, fn. 137. For more on this theme in Ruusbroec see Nieuwenhove, \textit{Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian}, 174–77. For a particularly helpful exploration of \textit{epektasis} in Nyssen, his influence upon
Discussion of this eternal hunger issues forth in rhapsodic language for describing the “inward avidity and craving on the part of the faculty of loving and of the created spirit for the uncreated good.” This rhapsody serves as evidence for why Ruusbroec is considered one of the great erotic or love (minne) mystical theologians. Ruusbroec writes in ecstatic voice when he states:

See, here begins an eternal voracity and insatiable craving in an eternal failing. These are the poorest people alive, for they are voracious. Whatever they eat and drink, they are never satisfied in this mode, for this hunger is eternal. For a created vessel cannot contain an uncreated good; this is why there is an eternal, hungry avidity here, and God overflows everything, but (is) always uncontained. Here are great dishes of food and drink, which no one knows but the one who feels this. But full satiety in enjoyment is the dish that is missing. This is why the hunger is always renewed. Nevertheless, in this touch flow honey-streams full of all bliss.

The soul remains paradoxically satisfied (“full of bliss”) and yet voracious for only God can satisfy the desire of the soul. And yet God is a bottomless abyss, infinite. Thus, the more the contemplative receives the divine touch, the more it desires and craves. This results in the soul being so enchanted by love that it must exhaust its activity and become love itself. Ruusbroec here is similar to Hadewijch in using tumultuous metaphors such as fire and storm to describe

Maximus Confessor, Maximus’ development of the theme, and twentieth century scholarship on all of these components of the concept see Paul M. Blowers, “Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and the Concept of ‘Perpetual Progress,’” Vigiliae Christianae 46 (1992): 151–171.

166 Brulocht b, 1528–30.


168 Brulocht b, 1532–77.
this aspect of self-transcendence in response to God’s love. “In this storm of love (storme van minnen) two spirits contend: the Spirit of God and our spirit.” We are granted the touch and thus enflamed with love to respond by touching God in the ecstasis of the mutual embrace of the storm of love.

God, by means of the Holy Spirit, inclines himself towards us, and we are thereby touched in love; our spirit, by means of God’s activity and the amorous power, impels and inclines itself toward God, and thereby God is touched. From these two movements there arises the struggle of love, for in this most profound meeting, in this most intimate and ardent encounter, each spirit is wounded by love. These two spirits, that is, our spirit and God’s spirit, cast a radiant light upon one another and each reveals to the other its countenance. This makes the two spirits incessantly strive after one another in love. Each demands of the other what it is, and each offers to the other and invites it to accept what it is. This makes the lovers lose themselves in one another.

However, because this storm of love is a sign of deeper participation in the enjoyment and active love of the Trinity, this union in enjoying love drives the soul into all virtuous activity of love. The deeper this enjoyment of love the deeper the drive to more active love, just as the blissful perichoretic unity of the Trinity is the source of the active love of the Persons. At the close of this portion Ruusbroec prompts the reader to remember that as deep (or “high” in his chosen metaphorical scheme of “ascending”) as the stage of the journey into participation in the life of God is, the divine “touch” is still a created intermediary and not as deep into the divine life as the “contemplative life” (the third life, Ruusbroec’s way of describing the stage of union/perfection).

In the fourth and final part of the interior life Ruusbroec discusses how we are to “meet him” by exploring the variety of means of union with the Trinity. There are three of these

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169 Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 187.
170 Brulocht b, 1558–59.
172 Brulocht b, 1603–2584.
means or modes, one of which is natural while the other two are supernatural. The natural meeting or union with God is a way of talking about the “essential union” discussed above in the anthropology section. It is “without intermediary” because God is always “directly, if obscurely, present in the depths of the soul.”\textsuperscript{173} The first of the two manners of supernatural union with God (“meeting Christ”) in the interior life is described as taking place with intermediary. Ruusbroec explains this meeting as the restoration of our likeness to God and describes it as a birth. The Flemish contemplative shares with the reader: “and He wills that we should visit the unity and the likeness without cease with each work that we do. For in each new now God is born in us and out of this sublime birth the Holy Spirit flows with all his gifts. Now, we should meet the gifts of God with likeness, and the sublime birth with unity.”\textsuperscript{174} This meeting takes place through a single or pure intention upon God in which all works are intended for the love of God and as the faculties are all gathered together in the unity of spirit, which places the spirit in God.\textsuperscript{175} This single intention or theocentric focus (\textit{eenvuldighe meyninghe}) “is end and beginning and enrichment of all virtues. The single intention offers to God praise and honor and all virtues, and it goes beyond and passes through itself, all the heavens and all things, and it finds God in the one-fold ground of its very self. That intention is single that intends nothing but God and everything as ordered towards God.”\textsuperscript{176} Since The Trinity is not another object or being alongside other beings or objects, but rather is indistinct and the most interior being of all creatures because of God’s radical transcendence, to love all things as ordered or harmonized in

\textsuperscript{173} McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 43.

\textsuperscript{174} \textit{Brulocht} b, 1772–77.

\textsuperscript{175} \textit{Brulocht} b, 1778–84.

\textsuperscript{176} \textit{Brulocht} b, 1784–89.
and to God is the only true way to love creatures most fully. This is possible because the radical transcendence of God, who can thus be more interior to creatures than we can be to ourselves, is non-competitive with creaturely being. This too is paradox. To love God more and all things in God does not mean to love creatures less but to love them more.\textsuperscript{177} This theocentric focus is vital for understanding Ruusbroec’s overall mystical theology and it makes possible the goal of the mystical/contemplative journey, the common life (discussed more below).\textsuperscript{178} Union with intermediary is continually necessary both in this present life and in the resurrection life of heaven. However, even now the Christian who seeks the deified life in God is invited to the deeper, higher sphere of “union without intermediary.”\textsuperscript{179}

Ruusbroec describes the meeting of Christ \textit{without intermediary} as unfathomable and incomprehensible rest and enjoyment. He begins this part with a particularly expressive and

\textsuperscript{177} For the notion of God’s transcendence as non-competitive with creaturely being see Kathryn Tanner, \textit{Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 2–5, 9, 91–2. For a monumental work which charts the patristic (mostly Greek yet also a bit in the Latin and Syriac patristics) roots of the Christian Neoplatonic, participational metaphysics which Ruusbroec presumes and which rely on the radical transcendence of the Trinity see Norman Russell, \textit{The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{178} Nieuwenhove discusses the importance of the single intention while reflecting on the “contemplative life” (the third and final book of the \textit{Brulocht}) when he states: “Through faith and love we participate in our eternal life [as divine idea in the Son] in the Trinity to which our created being is already attuned. Crucial in this participation is a selfless intention and focus on God solely. Therefore, when Ruusbroec describes the transformation of our faculties in the inner life, he does not aim at describing a particular experience in which the memory becomes empty, the understanding enlightened, and so forth, but he describes how grace effects a different intention or disposition towards God, world, and our fellow [humans]. This is why he puts such an emphasis on \textit{die eenvuldighe meyninghe (simplex intentio)}, or the single intention,” Nieuwenhove, \textit{Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian}, 63.

\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Brulocht} b, 2158–2584. See the discussion of “with intermediary” and “without intermediary” in McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 44.
condensed reflection (and here we see a definite instance of Ruusbroec as spiritual director of his intended audience).

Now understand: the incommensurable inshining of God, with incomprehensible brightness, which is the cause of all gifts and all virtues, — that same incomprehensible light transforms and permeates the enjoyable inclination of our spirit with modelessness, that is, with incomprehensible light; and in this light the spirit sinks away from itself into enjoyable rest (ghebrukelijcker rasten), for the rest is without mode and fathomless. And we cannot know it but by itself, that is, by rest, for were we to know and understand it, then it would fall into mode and into measure, and then it could not suffice for us, but rest would become eternal unrest. And therefore the one-fold, immersed, loving inclination of our spirit produces in us an enjoyable love, and enjoyable love is fathomless (Ende hier omme maect de eenuuldighe ontsonckene minlijcke neyginghe ons gheests in ons eene ghebrukelijcke minne, ende ghebrukelijcke minne es grondeloes). And the abyss (afgront) of God calls the abyss [of the soul] inward: that is all who are united with the Spirit of God in enjoyable love. This inward call is an overflowing of essential brightness. And this essential brightness, in an embrace of a fathomless love, causes us to lose ourselves and to stream away (from ourselves) into the wild darkness of the Godhead (Ende dese weselijcke clærheit, in eene ommevanghe eere grondeloser minnen, doet ons seleven verliesen ende ontvlieten in die wilde duysternisse der godheit). And thus united, without intermediary one with the Spirit of God, we can then meet God with God, and with Him and in Him abidingly possess our eternal blessedness.\textsuperscript{180}

Here we see the theocentric focus, which begins and ends in grace though we cooperate with the divine activity of grace, combined with being lifted by the Spirit into (or plunged into the depths of) the enjoyable bliss of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we begin to lose the sense of ourselves as we flow into God’s enjoyable love. According to Ruusbroec this union without intermediary in the interior life can be practiced in three ways: by emptiness, active desire, and the concomitance of rest and work. In the first way the person is emptied of all things and is caused to become immobile.\textsuperscript{181} This manner entails a union with God and a relishing or savoring which overflows into the unity of the three higher faculties. This comes as an immersion into the

\textsuperscript{180} Brulocht b, 2158–76.

\textsuperscript{181} Brulocht b, 2177–2209.
richness of God: “an embrace and fullness of felt love. And out of this fullness of felt love flows forth, into the heart and into the bodily faculties, a delightful, pervasive savor.”¹⁸²

The second manner of practicing the union without intermediary, active desire, starts with the mystic’s turning inward toward God “with desire and virtuous activity (i.e., a form of active mediation).”¹⁸³ Nevertheless, there is an advancement to a phase in which the mystic “offers all virtues to God in desire, and where love lives. Thereby the hunger and thirst of love become so great that [she] surrenders [herself] every moment and fails in [her] activity and exhausts [herself] and becomes annihilated in love.”¹⁸⁴ By utilizing once again the language of love here we see that Ruusbroec is conveying the same paradoxical, eternal hunger of which we spoke above. The Brabantine mystical theologian says that this second mode is paradoxically related to the first, thus reflecting the activity-enjoyment paradox of the Trinity, for the grace of God and our active minne must be practiced before and after this surrender of becoming “annihilated” in love. We can see here that Ruusbroec’s use of the language of annihilation differs from what he understands to be the actual ontological annihilation of the created soul in the teaching of the Free Spirit heretics.

The third manner of practicing the union without intermediary expresses the paradoxical fusion of enjoyment and activity, thus reflecting to an even deeper degree the paradoxical life of the Trinity. Ruusbroec states that

God comes without cease within us, with intermediary and without intermediary, and demands of us enjoyment and activity, and that one should not be hindered by the other, but rather always be fortified. Therefore, the inner person possesses his life in these two modes, that is, in resting and in activity. And in each he is whole and undivided, for he is

¹⁸² Brulocht b, 2193–96.
¹⁸³ McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 44.
¹⁸⁴ Brulocht b, 2221–24.
wholly in God where he rests in enjoyment, and he is wholly in himself where he loves with works. And he is admonished by God at every moment to renew both rest and enjoyment.\textsuperscript{185}

Ruusbroec is clear that the “just man” lives not simply in the oscillation between active works of love and enjoyment and rest but lives a life of paradox in which, through participation in the Triune Life through Christ and the Spirit, his life becomes evermore-deeply deified. This life continually grows into the paradoxical, deified whole where active love and enjoyment are not understood as opposites but rather perfect one another. This is seen in the fact that this person “goes into God with enjoyable inclination, by eternal rest; and he abides in God and yet, he goes out to all creatures in common love (gemeynre minnen), in virtues and in justice.”\textsuperscript{186} Finally, at the close of this very long treatment of the interior life, Ruusbroec once again points to Christ as our model for this stage of the mystical theological journey and all the other stages as well.\textsuperscript{187}

The final section of the \textit{Brulocht} is given to Ruusbroec’s teaching on the third “life,” corresponding to the traditional stage of perfection/union, the \textit{contemplative life}, though one must qualify this as being only partial, for, as we shall see below, \textit{ultimate} union or perfection lies in the \textit{common life} in which all the goodness of the active, interior, and contemplative lives are integrated into the paradoxical harmony of participation in and reflection of the inner dynamics of enjoyment and action that is the Triune God. Again, he breaks the section down according to the four parts of the Matthew passage. Ruusbroec is at pains to bend human language to the breaking point to allow it, however opaquely, to be a means of communication of the union “without distinction” in which all mystics/contemplatives are plunged by God’s grace.

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Brulocht} b, 2244–51.

\textsuperscript{186} \textit{Brulocht} b, 2275–78.

\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Brulocht} b, 2555–84.
Because this union, apart from growth into it and consciousness of it, is impossible to adequately communicate, Ruusbroec engages in sharing it with his readers through an oscillation between cataphatic/doctrinal and apophatic modes of theology. The cataphatic is the trinitarian theology, with its concomitant christology, pneumatology, anthropology, and cosmology discussed in the previous sections of the current chapter of the present work. Or perhaps a better way to say this is that his commentary in some sense is an interweaving of the cataphatic and apophatic such that the reflection on the contemplative life itself is an embodiment, in human language, of the paradoxical simultaneity of the fathomless unity and enjoyment of the Godhead and the outgoing love of the Persons of the Godhead. Anyone who pretends to have a firm grasp of what Ruusbroec is trying to communicate in his reflections on the contemplative life, particularly apart from sharing with Ruusbroec in this stage of mystical consciousness is, according to Ruusbroec, deluding himself. So humility is in order for interpretation of such texts in Ruusbroec’s corpus.

Furthermore, given the interweaving of cataphatic and apophatic modes of expression and the fact that this is a “life,” we should avoid, on the one hand, simply reading Ruusbroec as describing his own array of punctiliar mystical experiences, though Ruusbroec says that being elevated to such “superessential contemplation” (overweselijken scouwene) is sharing in the “eternal now” of the divine life (to equate the eternal now with points in the flow of time however would simply be a category mistake). Ruusbroec is describing further the process of transformation in deification by grace. And yet, it seems clear that mystical consciousness and moments of clearer awareness of this union are part of the overall life as well. So the Brabantine canon should be read as describing a life of growth in mystical consciousness of our union with
the Trinity that may involve times of deep awareness and a larger life of growth into the transformation of deification.\textsuperscript{188}

This relatively brief final portion of the Brulocht begins with the claim that this stage of the mystical itinerary is possible not by the initiative of the mystic but by the free initiative of God. This life is available to “…whom God in His freedom wishes to choose and to elevate to a superessential contemplation (\textit{overweselijken scouwene}) in divine light and according to the mode of God.”\textsuperscript{189} The person who is chosen however must be an inner lover who “possesses God in enjoyable rest, and himself in devoted, working love and his entire life in virtues with justice…”\textsuperscript{190} to make himself open to God’s choice of him. For those who attain this depth or level of contemplation Ruusbroec strikingly claims: “But he who is united with God and enlightened in this truth can understand truth by (the truth) itself. For to comprehend and to understand God, above all similitudes, as He is in Himself means to be God with God, without intermediary or any otherness which can create a hindrance or a mediation.”\textsuperscript{191} Such passages help us to comprehend how someone like Jean Gerson could later accuse Ruusbroec of heresy, even though Ruusbroec understood his teaching to be a counterposition to the teaching of the

\textsuperscript{188} This is one of the weaknesses of Nieuwenhove’s approach in \textit{Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian}. He is an astute reader of Ruusbroec and the larger Christian Neoplatonic tradition of mystical theology of which he is a part. Nevertheless, he is so keen to argue, rightly, against interpretations, such as the work of Paul Mommaers, which tend to interpret Ruusbroec as primarily describing his own particular mystical experiences in his writings, that he has difficulty taking account of Ruusbroec’s descriptions of the growth in mystical/contemplative consciousness.

\textsuperscript{189} \textit{Brulocht} c, 6–8.

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Brulocht} c, 1–3: “Die innighe minnere gods die gode besit in ghebrukelijcker rasten, leven in doechden met gherech<\textit{tich}> eiden, overmids dese drie poenta ende die [o]verborghene oppenbaringhe gods.”

\textsuperscript{191} \textit{Brulocht} c, 30–37.
Free Spirit heretics. Here we must remember the passages discussed earlier that make it clear that Ruusbroec taught that the soul never loses its created status. What is going on here, again, is the working out of the blend, in Ruusbroec’s teaching, of the Augustinian and Dionysian streams of Christian Neoplatonic mystical theology. Since we are created through the Exemplar of the Son, there is an indistinct unity between our eternal idea/exemplar in the Son and our created being (because of the classical notion of God’s transcendence). More than this, however, is being claimed in the discussion of the contemplative life. The perfection through union of the contemplative life is our created being united with our exemplar in such a way that we not only have the natural essential unity but our created being is lived out toward and in harmony with our exemplar so that we are actualizing likeness with Christ through being transformed into the idea that God has for us to actually become from all eternity. The key difference between what Ruusbroec understands to be the Free Spirit heresy and his own teaching is that the Free Spirits see the union as a type of monism in which annihilation means not only a sense of losing awareness of ourselves as distinct from God but actually being ontologically absorbed into God and losing our created being as creature. Ruusbroec makes this clear when he states that the Father “…speaks eternally in the hiddenness of our spirit a single fathomless word and nothing more. And in this word, He utters Himself and all things. And this word is nothing other than ‘See’; and this is the going-out and the birth of the Son of eternal Light, in whom one knows and sees all blessedness (Ende dit woort en ludet anders niet dan: ‘Siet’: ende dit es die uutganc ende die gheboert des soens des eewichs lichts, daermen alle sallicheit in bekint ende siet).”

In order to be drawn into this union of contemplation without intermediary and “to see,” three things are necessary: the outward ordering in the virtues yet inwardly being free from

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192 *Brulocht* c, 48–52.
works as if doing nothing, cleaving to God through devoted intention and love, and being lost in the modeless enjoyment of the dark abyss of God. With these conditions being fulfilled, the mystical spirit receives the incomprehensible brightness of the Son of God “and without cease, it becomes the very brightness which it receives.”\(^{193}\) Here the soul loses all awareness of distinction between itself and God. “And according to the simple bareness which encompasses all things, he finds and feels himself to be that very light by which he sees, and nothing else.”\(^{194}\) Here, out of the fruitful and living ground there is a constant, eternal birth and illumination of the Bridegroom [The Son/Christ]. This is “renewed without cease in the hiddenness of the spirit.”\(^{195}\) Astonishingly, “the comprehension of the spirit is so widely dilated for the coming of the Bridegroom that the spirit itself has become the wideness which it apprehends. And thus God is apprehended and seen with God; in this all our blessedness resides.”\(^{196}\)

“The third point, ‘go out,’ spoken by the Holy Spirit in the soul, indicates a going out into eternal being in the Trinity through superessential contemplation. The love that is the Holy Spirit catches the contemplative up into the embrace of the Trinity, where it resides at rest in the superessential divine unity.”\(^{197}\) Here there is a “beginning without beginning” and an eternal going out in which the Son goes out from the Father, and in the Son the Father perfectly comprehends himself “in the ground of His fruitfulness, the Son, the eternal Word of the

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\(^{193}\) Brulocht c, 76–77.

\(^{194}\) Brulocht c, 80–83.

\(^{195}\) Brulocht c, 91–92.

\(^{196}\) Brulocht c, 106–110: “…dat begrijp des gheests es soe wide ontploken jeghen die toecomst des brudegoms, dat die gheest selve die wijtheit worden es die hi begrijpt. Ende aldus wert god | met gode begrepen ende ghesien, daer alle onse zalicheit in gheleghet.”

\(^{197}\) McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 46.
Father…and through the eternal birth all creatures have gone out eternally” in their life-
bestowing ideas.\textsuperscript{198} The living into the eternal idea of one’s being with one’s created being in a
supernatural (salvific/deifying) way, thus attaining likeness to God, is the \textit{telos} of the mystical
life. The birth of the Son is an “eternal resplendence” with which we become one in the
contemplative life, where there is a “one-fold seeing” of God and all creatures by God. It is here
that we have the true union without distinction. Mystics who are brought to this stage “see and
become aware and find, by means of this divine light, that according to the mode of their
uncreatedness they are themselves the same one-fold ground out of which this brightness shines
forth without measure, in a divine mode, and in which ground, according to the simplicity of
their being, this brightness remains simply within, eternally without modes.”\textsuperscript{199}

The closing section of the contemplative life points us to how it is a participation in the
Son/Christ and the Holy Spirit and thus in the inner dynamic of the life of the Trinity. Ruusbroec
does this by discussing the contemplative life through the last part of the Matthew scripture when
Jesus says “to meet him.” We meet him through participation in the loving relations of the
Persons, the Son with the Father, and the Love they share who is the Holy Spirit. This is a
“loving meeting.” “And (this love) actively and enjoyably encompasses and pervades the Father,
the Son, and everything that is living in both of them with such great richness and joy that all
creatures must eternally keep silent about it.”\textsuperscript{200} The soul that savors this sharing in the
Trinitarian marvel of love is one with the Spirit of God. Ruusbroec ends the \textit{Brulocht} by
reflecting apophatically on the fact that this stage is beyond knowing and is inexpressible when

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{198} \textit{Brulocht} c, 128–31.
  \item \textsuperscript{199} \textit{Brulocht} c, 173–177.
  \item \textsuperscript{200} \textit{Brulocht} c, 218–21.
\end{itemize}
he states that this is a “fathomless whirlpool…a dark stillness in which all the loving are lost.”

He beautifully ends his reflection with a prayer that asks “that we might blissfully possess the essential Unity and clearly contemplate the Unity in the Trinity—may the divine love grant us this, for it turns no beggar away. Amen. Amen.”

B. Counter-position to False Mysticism

Before moving on to discuss the summit of the contemplative/mystical journey for Ruusbroec, “the common life,” it is important for us to note that while the Flemish contemplative theologian’s mystical teaching was by no means exhausted by addressing the Free Spirit heretics, given that errors of mystical heresy are dealt with in almost all of his works, he undoubtedly intended his teaching to spiritually guide the faithful and stand as a counter-position to Free Spirit heretical teaching as he understood it. In the previous chapter we looked at how the root error of the perceived teaching of the heresy of the Free Spirit was the notion of the personal annihilation of the created soul (particularly the created will), which resulted in esotericism, antinomianism and antisacramentalism. I say the “perceived teaching” because of the fact that it seems the teaching of mystical theologians such as Eckhart and Marguerite Porete were condemned because their inquisitors failed to accurately understand their teachings. This points to the fact that, as we also saw in the previous chapter, one must be very wary of assuming that an accurate portrayal of what the accused heretics believed is to be found in the inquisitorial records, given the dubious nature of the process of inquiry during the trials.

That being said, it does seem likely that, though it is doubtful there was a unified movement of Free Spirit heretics,

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201 Brulocht c, 253.


203 See chapter one.
there was at least some version of annihilation of the created soul at work in various groups and movements that gave rise to the associated errors above. Ruusbroec likely became aware of these tendencies through multiple means due to his obvious awareness of the literature of the condemnations of heresy by the Church (such as the council of Vienne) as well as the fact that he seems at times to have actual adversaries in mind. He evidently saw these errors as detrimental enough to the life of faith to critique them even though, as we have seen, he uses some of the same language (such as annihilation and indistinction) for different ends. Satoshi Kikuchi persuasively shows that Ruusbroec addresses a variety of people he thought to be in error throughout his writings and that Ruusbroec never names any people or groups directly. So it is difficult to know the particular people and groups he addresses, though the sensibilities of the Free Spirit tendency of thought certainly seem to be ones whom he considers particularly erroneous.

Ruusbroec is very critical of those who claim no need for the practice of virtue and participation in the life of the Church (such as the sacraments). These people are culpable for “neglecting all the sacraments and all virtues and all practices of the Holy Church, for they think they have no need of them. According to their idea, they have passed beyond all. But the

\[ \text{Ruusbroec’s familiarity with the literature on the heretical teaching is obvious throughout his corpus and continues to develop as his life progresses. See for instance Sloten, 592–610, Speighel, 1520–90, and Boecksen, 70–165. McGinn notes that the fact that Ruusbroec distinguishes, in Brulocht b, 2346–2500, “between two different groups of false mystics indicates that he had real and not merely literary opponents in mind,” McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 32.} \]

\[ \text{See Kikuchi, From Eckhart to Ruusbroec, 71–75. Kikuchi also helpfully organizes the heretical tendencies Ruusbroec addresses under the headings of three dominant themes: “(1) the heretical doctrines about the praxis of ecclesial life, (2) heretical doctrines about God and creation, and (3) heretical doctrines about christology and the mystical union with God,” Kikuchi, From Eckhart to Ruusbroec, 76. See also J. Feys, “Ruusbroec and his False Mystics,” Ons Geestelijk Erf 65 (1991): 108–24.} \]
imperfect have need of them, so they say.” Kikuchi states that “an especially important notion related to this issue is the Middle Dutch term valsche ledicheit—normally meaning ‘false emptiness’ or ‘false inactivity’—which Ruusbroec frequently mentions and defines as ‘a beginning of all spiritual error’ (een begin van alre gheestelijcker dolinghen).” A passage Kikuchi uses from Ruusbroec’s corpus to illustrate, in a succinct manner, Ruusbroec’s critique of this position of false emptiness is from Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit—A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness where the Brabantine canon emphatically states:

Yet they are worse than any devil, those feigned unbelieving people, who scorn God and His grace, holy Church and all its sacraments, holy Scripture and all practice of virtues, and say that they live above all modes modeless; and that they are as empty [leedegh] as when they were not; and that they have neither knowledge nor love, will nor desire, nor any practice of virtues, but they are empty [leedegh] of all.

This false emptiness leads the false mystics to turn contemplation into a technique as well by laying claim to “natural rest.” While not evil in itself, for, as we discussed earlier in this chapter at length, all humans/souls have a natural/created unity with their eternal idea in the Exemplar/Son which makes this natural rest possible, Ruusbroec critiques the notion of how the false mystics approach such rest (as an end in itself, apart from true charity) when he states:

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, in emptiness, so that rest may be found and abide unhindered. But rest practiced in this way is not lawful, for it produces blindness in a person, in ignorance, and a sinking down into himself without activity. And this rest is nothing but an emptiness into which a person falls and forgets himself and God and everything with respect to any activity. This rest is contrary to the supernatural rest which one possesses in God…

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206 Boecsken, 103–6.
207 Kikuchi, From Eckhart to Ruusbroec, 76. The Ruusbroec quotation is in the Kikuchi text and is from Brulocht b, 2346.
208 Speighel, 1572–79. This quote also has a textual connection to some of Eckhart’s condemned teachings. See Kikuchi, From Eckhart to Ruusbroec, 77–78.
209 Brulocht b, 2311–20.
The problem with this approach is that the false mystics seek only this imageless rest and do not connect it with the grace of God, for the true rest in the bosom of the Trinity leads one to acts of love, for one is thus formed to participate in and reflect the *ghebrucken-minne* paradox of trinitarian life.\textsuperscript{210} This is a type of quietism.

In the later writing from Groenendaal, the *Boecsken*, Ruusbroec connects this error with the error of the annihilation of the created soul (which has been called autotheism) when he observes: “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 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.”\textsuperscript{211} As Nieuwenhove notes:

> The heretics thus draw ontological conclusions from their experience: quietism leads to autotheism [annihilation of the created soul by absorption into God]. It is the ‘blind essential repose which they experience’ that leads them to believe, not only that they are God, but also that the Persons [of the Trinity] will disappear into the Divinity and ‘nothing else will remain in eternity but the essential substance of Divinity.’ So they even draw conclusions about the nature of the Trinity from their experience.\textsuperscript{212}

Ruusbroec’s mystical theology is rooted within a theological framework, which understands God’s trinitarian nature to be such that in the perichoretic unity of the persons God is eternal, blissful unity and enjoyable fruition (*ghebrucken*). Paradoxically, God is, as Father, Son, and Spirit, eternal outgoing love (*minne*) of the Persons. We have seen that Ruusbroec describes this

\textsuperscript{210} *Brulocht* b, 2305–10.

\textsuperscript{211} *Boecsken*, 95–100. Quotation cited in Nieuwenhove, *Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian*, 70.

\textsuperscript{212} Nieuwenhove, *Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian*, 70–71. The quotation within the Nieuwenhove quotation is from *Boecsken*, 84–86.
paradoxical simultaneity of *wesen-werk* (essence-activity) as *weselijcke minne* (essential love). Our participation in this paradox requires that we share in this paradoxical life of essential love. This simultaneous life of rest and activity happens through the single intention (*die eenvuldighe meyninghe*) for God through the life of prayer, the sacraments of the Church,213 and the life of virtue (loving others in charity). This theology assumes exemplarist, relational anthropology with the essential unity, active unity, and the unity of the heart. This theology also assumes the fusion of Augustinian and Dionysian mystical theology and its assumptions about the transcendence of God and his relation to creatures.

However, it seems that the false mystics based their mysticism upon their experiences, severed from a theological framework like that of Ruusbroec. This severing of contemplation from a trinitarian theological framework means that the Brabantine contemplative theologian and the false mystics can use some of the same language but to different ends, based on differing theological and metaphysical assumptions. For instance, Ruusbroec cannot disconnect enjoyable rest in God from active love because, in imaging the Trinity who is essential love, true, mature rest only happens with active love. Furthermore, though Ruusbroec also uses the language of indistinction and annihilation in love,214 his understanding of indistinction fuses the Augustinian notion of union with God in love with the *creatio ex nihilo* understanding of the asymmetrical relation of God and creatures based upon the transcendence of the Creator from creature (creatures may be ontologically more or less like God but the transcendent Creator is not more or less like any creature). So God can be ontologically indistinct from the soul precisely because


214 See Boecskcn, 448–51 for instance.
God infinitely transcends all creatures. Lacking this mystical theological framework the false mystics can only imagine an indistinction and annihilation in which the soul loses its created otherness to God. As Nieuwenhove rightly notes: “Ruusbroec’s spiritual ideal is one in which activity and rest are perfectly integrated. Those who lose themselves exclusively in outward works or indulge without action in an inner emptiness cannot understand it.” Ruusbroec is a spiritual director whose writing serves to show the aspiring contemplative Christian the true mystical/contemplative path. Part of this task is taken up with leading her or him away from false mystical paths. We will return to Ruusbroec’s critique of false mysticism at various places in the next two chapters, as we explore the trinitarian shape of Ruusbroec’s spiritual guidance in some of his Groenendaal writings. We will now end this chapter by discussing the goal of the mystical life for Ruusbroec, the common life.

C. The Common Life

The goal of the mystical life for Ruusbroec is the notion that we have discussed at a number of points, “the common life” (dat ghemeyne leven). This notion only makes sense within his trinitarian mystical theology discussed throughout this chapter and summarized just above. The notion of “commonality” is important here, for God is “common” in his love in the inner life of the Trinity and in and toward all creation. It is in the triune love that “the common life” is rooted, for it is a perfect participation in the essential love of the Trinity, the paradoxical life of harmonious fruition and active love. This notion has been notoriously difficult to translate into English. A couple of helpful translations have been put forth such as Louis Dupré’s when he describes it as a concept that “denotes at once the highest communion of the Persons in the one

215 Nieuwenhove, Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian, 72.
divine nature and the contemplative’s total devotion both to God and to his creation.”

Perhaps the most helpful translations have come from Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Bernard McGinn. In his first major work Nieuwenhove defines it as “a life of harmonious integration of charitable activity and ‘enjoyment’ of God.” More recently he has defined it as the “‘universal’ or ‘catholic’ life… which combines a life of charitable activity with that of contemplation.”

McGinn develops a definition that points to the fact that the concept applies to the Trinity, Christ, and to us. He calls the common life “the generously loving life.” The elements of harmonious integration of contemplation and charity and the catholic element from Nieuwenhove as well as the generously loving idea which is rooted in the Trinity and Christ and involves us in practicing common love through the power of Christ and the Spirit are all vital elements to a proper understanding of what the Flemish Augustinian is describing by the descriptor.

One important issue that this notion provided a helpful solution to was the traditional problem of how to relate action and contemplation. In Greek thought there had been a distinction made by philosophers between the \textit{bios theōretikos} of the philosopher occupied with thought and the \textit{bios praktikos/politikos} of citizens involved in the political-economic life of the city. Early Christian theologians such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria utilized these concepts in describing the two elements of the Christian life: the life dedicated to prayer and contemplation, the \textit{vita contemplativa}, and the \textit{vita activa} in which one gave loving service to the neighbor. Both

\begin{itemize}
\item[216] Dupré, \textit{The Common Life}, 63.
\item[217] Nieuwenhove, \textit{Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian}, 158.
\end{itemize}
of these aspects of Christian life were seen as necessary for salvation, but the consensus among patristic and medieval thinkers was that contemplation was the superior element. Vital, active love was understood to be incompatible with contemplation. The best one could hope for in this life was an oscillation between the two, with primary focus given to contemplation. One can see this understanding in monastic writers such as Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux. However, this notion was challenged in late medieval mystical theology by figures such as Eckhart and John Tauler.\textsuperscript{220} Eckhart had famously pointed to Martha rather than Mary as the model for a life of double perfection in action and contemplation rooted in the life of God, and Tauler had likewise rooted the life of faithful discipleship in the triune life of work and enjoyment.\textsuperscript{221} Ruusbroec’s idea of the common life is a version of such a perspective and it can be seen consistently throughout his corpus.\textsuperscript{222} This notion of the common life gives Ruusbroec’s contemplative thought a full and harmonious sense of equilibrium. In the \textit{Rijcke} he summarizes the argument he has made throughout the treatise when he notes: “The noble person who is common to all is the most like God, for he is flowing out with all virtues, and he is like God who is flowing out with all gifts; but he remains in an eternal enjoyment and is one with God above all gifts. This is a person enlightened and common in all nobility.”\textsuperscript{223}

In perhaps the most succinct and elegant account of the primary elements of the Brabantine canon’s mystical theology, \textit{Vanden Blinkenden Steen—The Sparkling Stone}, he observes that

\textsuperscript{220} McGinn, \textit{Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism}, 59.


\textsuperscript{222} See for instance in his earliest work \textit{Rijcke} IV, 1931–2387; and \textit{Trappen} VII, 1126–32.

\textsuperscript{223} \textit{Rijcke} V, 2752–56.
there are two extremes which we must avoid (which will sound very familiar at this point): the false idea, seen in the Free Spirit tendencies, that we somehow lose our status as creature and become God, or the unreasonable longing to remain locked in ourselves. Though it may seem impossible from a purely human point of view, we should forsake both these extremes and seek the whole life that is at once completely in God and completely in ourselves. In counter-position to the two extremes Ruusbroec states:

And even if we live completely in God and completely in ourselves, yet it is only one life. But it is contrary and two-fold according to experience, for poor and rich, hungry and replete, working and at rest, those are contraries indeed. Yet in them resides our highest nobility. For we cannot become God at all and lose our createdness: that is impossible. And if we remained in ourselves completely, separated from God, we would be wretched and beyond bliss. And therefore we should be consciously aware of ourselves as completely in God and completely in ourselves. And between these two standpoints of awareness we find nothing but the grace of God and the practice of our loving. For out of our highest awareness the brightness of God shines in us and teaches us the truth and moves us to all virtue and in eternal love of God. We follow that brightness without resting into the depths from which it springs. And there we are aware of nothing but the losing of our spirits and sinking away from ourselves without return in simple love unfathomable.  

In the Steen Ruusbroec presents his readers with a vision not only of the common life but of the process of transformation and growing self-transcendence that come from participation in the Triune Life of God. The canon does this by assuming the traditional schema and distinction between hired servants, faithful servants, secret friends, and hidden sons.

The hired servants only serve God for their own gain. They are extremely preoccupied with themselves and even when they serve God out of the fear of damnation Ruusbroec sees this as an

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224 *Steen*, 581–91. I have made changes in the critical edition translation here, particularly with regard to the translation of *ghevoelen* (line 589) and *ghevoelne* (lines 590 and 591). The contemporary North American English word “feeling” is an inadequate rendering here, for, what is being communicated is not simply reducible to “emotions.” Rather, Ruusbroec is here conveying a sense of awareness or consciousness more holistic in nature.

225 Nieuwenhove, “Ruusbroec, Jordaens and Herp,” 208.
example of self-centeredness. “It is in this that you can see how their fear of hell arises from self-
love (Ende hier ane moechdi merken dat die helsche vreese comt van eyghenre minnen die si tot
hem selven hebben).” Though they are basically intent on themselves in all their actions they
can, by God’s grace, mature beyond this self-centered love such that God becomes their focus in
all they do and they grow into faithful servants. Through the active life of virtue the faithful
servants desire to help the world. The language of exterior practice is key, for it points to their
participation in the outgoing love of the Trinity through the begetting of the Son and procession
of the Spirit. “And this is called an outward life, or an active life” (Ende dit heet een
uutwendich leven ochte een werkende leven). However, the faithful servants are still
unenlightened interiorly and have little knowledge of ardent and loving bonding with God. It is
the secret friends who have this loving adherence and are drawn inwards (inweert), drawn to the
interior, spiritual life. The active faithful servant life is exterior and contrasted with the interior
life of the secret friends. The temptation for the faithful servant is to become too distracted by
their works, which becomes a source of self-satisfaction. Nevertheless, “the interior life,
symbolized by the secret friends, has its own temptations. The friends remain too preoccupied
(veerbelt) with themselves and their interior practices. Religion and the spiritual consolations it
offers may become a source of attachment in their own right.” So there is a temptation toward
self-love or self-centeredness here as well.

226 Steen, 290–92. Trans. in Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 164.
228 Steen, 320–321. I have slightly altered the translation in the critical edition.
229 Steen, 321–27.
The *hidden sons* are the ones who are able to detach themselves from inordinate affections for created things and “forms” which mediate the interior union of secret friends with God. Ruusbroec describes this as “dying in love, we will transcend all our creatureliness and attain to God’s superessential richness. There we will possess God in an eternal dying to ourselves.”

He goes on to render the sons, which he considers the contemplative life, in poetic fashion when the canon writes: “In the empty being of our spirit we receive an incomprehensible resplendence which envelops and permeates us in the same way that the air is permeated by the light of the sun.”

It is vital to notice that the grace-empowered elements of the faithful servants, secret friends and hidden sons do not cancel one another out. The sons must still live a life of active service through the active life. Likewise they must continue to be friends who live an interior life as well. Notice that these correspond with the lives of the *Brulocht* as well. The faithful servants live the *active life*, the secret friends live the *interior life*, and the hidden sons live the *contemplative life*. Furthermore, the *Steen*, in its elegance and clarity, helps us see something that is more difficult to discern in the *Brulocht* given its length, intricate detail, and, at times, sprawling nature. The fact that these lives do not cancel one another out and must be combined brings with it the implication that the contemplative life is not in fact the highest or deepest life for Ruusbroec. Rather, the most mature stage of mystical life is the *common life*, for in the

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232 *Steen*, 535–37: “Ende iden ledeghen sine ons gheests ontfaen wij die ombegripelkijcke clærheit, die ons beveet ende doergheet, ghelijckerwijs dat de locht doergaen wert met clærheiden der zonnen.” I have slightly altered the translation in Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 171. His rendering of *doergheet* and *doergaen* as “pervades” and “pervaded” seems to communicate more clearly what Ruusbroec is describing here. I have rendered the words “permeates” and “permeated” for what I sense is the intricate intimacy being communicated, though both terms may be equally adequate.

common life all of the graced aspects of the active, interior, and contemplative lives are woven together in a beautiful harmony. Ruusbroec describes the common life in this way:

A person who has been sent down by God from these heights into the world is full of truth and rich in all virtues. He seeks nothing of his own but only the glory of the one who sent him. He is accordingly righteous and truthful in all things and has a rich and generous foundation which rests on God’s own richness. He will therefore always flow forth to all who need him, for the living spring of the Holy Spirit is so rich that it can never be drained dry. Such a person is a living and willing instrument of God with which God accomplishes what he wishes in the way he wishes. Such a person does not attribute these accomplishments to himself but gives God the glory. He stands ready and willing to do all that God commands and is strong and courageous in suffering and enduring all that God sends him. He therefore leads a common life (een ghemeyn leven), for he is equally ready for contemplation or for action and is perfect in both.

This harmonic life of integration is the perfect life of blissful loving, which participates in the inner dynamics of the paradoxical life of essential love that is the Trinity. Nieuwenhove lucidly describes the harmony of the common life when he says:

…the active life of the faithful servants, as a life of virtue and external activity, mirrors the ‘out-going’ aspect of the Trinity (the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit). The inner or God-yearning life of the friends from The Sparkling Stone mirrors the ‘in-going’ aspect of the divine Persons (regiratio) at the heart of the Trinity. The contemplative life of the hidden sons, in which we possess God in utter emptiness of self, detached and totally focused on God, mirrors the ‘fruition’ or enjoyable ‘rest’ of the divine Persons in their perichoretic unity. The common life, then, is a combination of these aspects.

The common life is for Ruusbroec the life of perfect harmony of the active and enjoying love. It is the foretaste of the glory fully enjoyed by the communion of saints and the most mature reflection of and participation in the life of the Trinity for the human.

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234 This is pointed out by both Wiseman and Nieuwenhove. See Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, Introduction, 23–24; and Nieuwenhove, “Ruusbroec, Jordaens and Herp,” 209–10.

235 Steen, 936–49. I have slightly changed the trans. in Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 184.

Conclusion

One simply cannot do justice to the height, depth, and breadth of the richness of Ruusbroec’s mystical theology in one chapter. Nevertheless, our exploration of some of the key issues at work in the Brabantine contemplative’s theology of the mystical life will guide us as we turn to his Groenendaal writings and seek to interpret how the vision of the Augustinian canon’s trinitarian mystical theology shapes and informs the spiritual direction or guidance he gives to his readers. Ruusbroec’s is a rich theology of the mystical journey of the Christian life and this life is rooted in the paradoxical, harmonic life of the ecstatic outflowing love of the Trinity in the Persons which creates and graces creation, and in particular humanity, to receive and respond to this outgoing love in the Son and Spirit by being drawn into their inflowing into the enjoyable fruition of the unity of the Persons in the love of the Spirit.

Ruusbroec’s theology includes a vibrant exemplarist anthropology and provides an account of how this “image of the Image” is, through the work of Christ and the Spirit, drawn deeper and deeper into the paradoxical Triune life and transformed in its light to be the “common person.” The common person both participates in and reflects this paradoxical simultaneity of Triune essential love, the harmonic simultaneity of out-going love and enjoyable union, which God desires for all. Ruusbroec’s vision provides a kind of illuminative roadmap for the “way-less way” of the mystical life for aspiring contemplatives. His trinitarian mystical theological vision provides the context for the spiritual direction that he gives throughout his writings. It shapes the particular directives he gives to his readers but his trinitarian theology itself is a dimension of spiritual direction, for it gives his readers a trinitarian angle of vision in which to understand and practice the guidance he gives them. It is to this trinitarian-shaped guidance in his Groenendaal writings that we turn in the next two chapters.
Chapter 3: Cantus Firmus and Symphonic Harmony I: The Trinitarian Shape of Ruusbroec’s Spiritual Direction in Van den Geestelijken Tabernakel

Introduction

In chapter one I gave a minimal definition for understanding spiritual direction in the Christian tradition. There we saw that the orienting purpose of spiritual direction is its deep concern with the activity and growth of spiritual maturation. The spiritual director is a guide concerned with the process through which the community and individual are being made one in love with the Trinity.¹ It is within the common life of the flock that we see the shepherds like Paul and others in the New Testament arise to care for the progress of the spiritual maturity of believers. The Pauline letters are of particular importance because they are essentially pastoral spiritual direction for early Christian congregations and individuals within those congregations. So from the earliest days of Christian faith spiritual direction is done not only in person but also through writing.² Paul Jones affirms this description of Paul’s writings and written spiritual direction in the early history of the Church when he notes:

¹ Leech, Soul Friend, 37.

² Many examples of spiritual direction in writing can be pointed to in the Pauline epistles of the New Testament. One such instance can be seen in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians when he states: “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be
[Paul’s] practical contribution was in perfecting direction through mail to such an extent that his letters became sacred scripture as direction for us all. In some letters, his direction was wrapped with strong praise: “I thank my God every time I remember you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil. 1:3–5). In others, he expressed forthrightly the strong need for accountability, expressing graphically his disappointment in the people’s behavior: “I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2 Cor. 2:4). He trained Timothy and Titus to help him in this ministry of spiritual direction, both through visits and with letters. Likewise, bishops in the early church were chosen from among the people precisely for their abilities in this ministry of support and accountability, especially needed in time of persecution. ³

This is poignant, for a significant amount of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction is done through writing to particular recipients (individuals and communities).

In order to understand the texture of how giving spiritual guidance functions in the writings of Ruusbroec we must discern that the texture is multidimensional. There are works in which one can clearly discern relatively explicit spiritual direction flowing from the hand of the Brabantine, such as *The Seven Enclosures* and its guidance for the Clare Margriet van Meerbeke and her community of Clare sisters (to be discussed in the next chapter). However, there are other instances in which Ruusbroec does not seem to be giving particular guidance to a specific person or community, though he seems to have a larger public in mind such as in the *Spiritual Espousals*. The *Brulocht* is also a good example of another dimension of Ruusbroecian guidance.

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Namely, it is an example of a work in which the Augustinian canon may not be giving specific
guidance on a particular practice, such as participation in matins or, but nonetheless charts an
itinerary which gives “milestones,” “landmarks,” or “signposts” along the pathless path of the
mystical/contemplative journey. One must be cognizant, however, that a number of these
milestones cannot be easily mapped as a particular experience in contemplation, due to their
apophatic mode of description. His mystical theology seems best described as both providing
moments or periods of heightened awareness of being united with God and an overall pattern of
transformation taking place in the life of the contemplative Christian.

Finally, in order to accurately and fruitfully interpret Ruusbroec’s written spiritual
direction, one must be ever mindful of the fact that there is never a hard and fast distinction for
the canon between “spiritual direction” on the one hand and “theology proper” on the other. As
with other great voices in the Christian tradition, as discussed in chapter one, Ruusbroec’s
theology and spirituality, intellectual reflection on God and prayer and lived experience of God,
are always intertwined. The intertwining of theology and spiritual direction in the Brabantine
contemplative theologian’s writings is but an aspect of this larger feature of his
mystical/contemplative theology.

In this chapter and the next we will scrutinize three of Ruusbroec’s later writings, from
his years in Groenendaal, in order to detect occurrences of spiritual direction in which the canon
seeks to guide his readers/directees in the way of union with God, leading to these people
becoming “common people” who live “the common life” (dat ghemeyne leven). In doing so we
will simultaneously trace the patterns of how this guidance is a harmony which takes its cues
from the cantus firmus (“firm melody”) of the Brabantine’s trinitarian mystical theology and its

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4 Ruusbroec never specifically uses the term “spiritual direction” but much of his work is
filled with the practice.
orienting center of the triune life of \textit{weselijke minne} ("essential love"). In the present chapter we will examine the treatise \textit{Van den Geestelijken Tabernakel—The Spiritual Tabernacle}.

\textbf{I. Van den Geestelijken Tabernakel}

While the \textit{Brulocht} is considered Ruusbroec’s masterpiece in today’s milieu, this was most likely not the case during his lifetime. Rather, it seems that this distinction belonged to \textit{Van den Geestelijken Tabernakel—The Spiritual Tabernacle}. The fact that Willem Jordaens translated the treatise into Latin demonstrates that the Groenendaal community of Augustinians held the work in high regard and believed its message to be significant.\footnote{John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” in \textit{A Companion to John of Ruusbroec}, John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, eds., (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 66.} Though there is a great deal of profundity throughout the Brabantine mystical theologian’s writings, the \textit{Tabernakel} is his most learned work.\footnote{Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 66.} The number of preserved manuscripts further supports granting this distinction of magnum opus to the \textit{Tabernakel} during Ruusbroec’s day. In the critical edition of the \textit{Opera Omnia} editor Thom Mertens states that, “insofar as the preserved manuscripts of Ruusbroec’s works give a reliable image, the \textit{Tabernakel} was Ruusbroec’s most widely disseminated work. With its forty-two manuscripts the \textit{Tabernakel} exceeds the \textit{Brulocht} (37) and the \textit{Spieghel} (28).”\footnote{Thom Mertens, “Introduction,” in \textit{Opera Omnia V, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis (CCCM) 105}, ed. G. De Baere, translated into English by H. Rolfson (Tielt: Lanoo-Brepols, 1988-2006), 67–68.} Furthermore, being more than twice the size of the \textit{Brulocht}, the work is the longest of the Flemish mystic’s oeuvre. The sprawling immensity of the text, an array of perplexities in the content and structure, as well as the complex compositional history of the work make it understandable why so few scholars have worked with the treatise in depth. Given the massive
size of the Tabernakel, along with issues of audience and manuscript history, it is necessary that we take a significant amount of space in the present chapter to explore spiritual direction in this work and its formation according to Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical/contemplative theology.

A. Date, Textual-Historical Considerations, and Occasion

The questions of when and why Ruusbroec wrote the Tabernakel are ones to which simple answers are not readily at hand, as shown in the learned introduction to the critical edition of the text by Thom Mertens. Mertens persuasively argues that the text was not in fact written as one complete work from beginning to end, as had been previously thought, even if one grants that the period of writing was a number of years, stretching from his time as chaplain at St. Gudula’s in Brussels to his becoming an Augustinian canon in Groenendaal. Rather, there is sufficient evidence to show that the Tabernakel was most likely composed of one or multiple texts that the Brabantine had written during previous times, while a secular priest, combined with further writing he had composed after becoming a religious at Groenendaal in 1350. The text(s)

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9 Ruusbroec’s works were collected during his lifetime and compiled in the famous Groenendaal manuscript. The table of contents in of the manuscript refers to the Tabernakel as the first writing of the codex and adds a date. See Mertens, “Introduction,” 13. The contents state: “1. Primo Liber de spirituali tabernaculo, qui incipit Loept alsoe dat ghij begripen moeght. Hunc Librum edidit dominus Johannes Ruysbroeck pro magna parte adhuc presbiter secularis existens. Residuum autem post ingressum religionis complevit. Et est translatus in latinum per fratrem Wilhelmmum Jordani, presbiterum professum in monasterio Viridisvallis (1. In the first place Liber de spirituali tabernaculo, beginning with the words: Run so that ye may obtain. The Reverend John Ruusbroec wrote this book for the most part as a secular priest. The remaining part he finished after entering religious life. And it was translated into Latin by William Jordaens, professed priest in the monastery of Groenendaal),” Mertens, “Introduction,” 14. Mertens draws this quotation and translates it from MS A, F. 1v. Mertens then immediately quotes and translates a similar observation found at the end of the text, which comes from the hand of someone other than the copyist. It states: “Hunc librum edidit dominus Johannes de Ruysbroeck, primus prior huius monasterii, pro maiore parte presbiter secularis existens; residuum fecit monachus iam effectus (The Reverend John Ruusbroec, first prior of this monastery, wrote this book for the most part as a secular priest; the remaining part he made when he was already
written prior to becoming a religious were also likely not foreseen by Ruusbroec to be for the same treatise as the material with which it/they was/were ultimately woven together, as it/they seem(s) to have been written for other, previous occasions.\textsuperscript{10} We cannot even be sure as to the

\textit{a religious),” MS A, F. 125va. The question then becomes, “what exactly do these designations of time mean for our understanding of Ruusbroec’s writing of the materials that he used in constructing the \textit{Tabernakel}?” There are other notices which are similar to these two in other works of Ruusbroec’s found in the Groenendaal Codex. In terms of estimations of when the \textit{Tabernakel} was composed, or the period(s) of time through which it and its constituent parts were composed, of great importance is how one translates the verb \textit{edere (edidit)} in such notices. If one translates it as ‘wrote,’ as does Mertens, then, though we cannot determine precisely when it was written, one can at least say that part(s) of the work was/were composed while still a secular priest (i.e. before 1350), the rest being written after he became a religious (after 1350) in Groenendaal. However, if one translates the verb as ‘published’ then it raises the question as to whether Ruusbroec actually published part or parts of the work while still a secular priest and published the rest later as a religious in the monastic life. As discussed in chapter one, there are four distinguishable periods in Ruusbroec’s life: (1) his childhood and life up until his ordination to the priesthood in 1317/18, (2) his period as chaplain at St. Gudula’s Church in Brussels from 1317/18 until 1343, (3) his move with his friends to the hermitage in Groenendaal from 1343–1350, and, (4) from this time until his death in 1381, the period in which he was a religious and served as prior of the monastery at Groenendaal. In an essay by Hans Kienhorst and Mikel Kors, the claim is made that there is a correspondence between each of the three different types of wordings of such notices, that the authors locate in the Groenendaal Codex, and three time periods (1317/18–1343, 1343–50, and 1350–81). This claim is also based on the chronological rearrangement of Ruusbroec’s works for which the authors argue. For Kienhorst and Kors this carries with it the claim that, most likely, the \textit{Tabernakel} was published in two finished parts, the first during the Brussels period and the second during the religious period after 1350. See Hans Kienhorst & Mikel Kors, “Codicological Evidence for a Chronological Rearrangement of the works of Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381),” \textit{Quaerendo}, 33 (1–2), 135–174. However, as Mertens argues, this schema “has the improbable implication that Ruusbroec worked on the \textit{Tabernakel} during his Brussels period, interrupted that work as a hermit in Groenendaal, but took it up again after having become an Augustinian canon. In light of this consideration it is also much more likely that the annotation to the text of the \textit{Tabernakel} means that he worked on it before as well as after his entry into religious life, maybe already during his Brussels period,” Mertens, “Introduction,” 14. While I am not certain that taking a side in this debate has a significant bearing on the present project, I am persuaded by the claims of Mertens over those made by Kienhorst and Kors. For important earlier studies in the chronology of Ruusbroec’s works see L. Reypens, “Ruusbroecbijdragen. Belangrijke ontdekking in Handschrift A,” in \textit{Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal en Letterkunde}, 42 (1923), 41–71; and W. de Vreese, \textit{De handschriften van Jan van Ruusbroec’s werken} (Ghent, BEL: 1900–02).

\textsuperscript{10} Mertens notes: “Up till now [2006] scholars have tacitly taken for granted that Ruusbroec conceived the complete text as we now know it in advance, and that he wrote it in linear fashion from beginning to end. He would then have started the long treatise as a secular
number of texts Ruusbroec attempted to weave together or whether he used all or part of the
texts or the entirety of some and segments of others. Therefore, it has a complex compositional
history. Mertens comes to this conclusion by laying out the evidence of various compositional
inconsistencies, misplaced parts, duplications, unresolved introductions of new material, etc.
Through bringing these inconsistencies to light, Mertens shows that Ruusbroec spent time as an
editor of his own work in piecing together various writings (at least two or more) he had most
likely written on different occasions and for varying purposes. However, though Mertens has
made us aware of this complex history of composition, he concludes that the treatise does not
allow us to proceed with certainty as to the number of texts that make up the entire work or even
how to precisely view the full text, in its minutia, as a coherent whole.

The complex compositional history of the Tabernakel is admirably explored and
detailed in Mertens, “Introduction,” 37–56. We are greatly in his debt for his deep textual work
in this area.

Regarding this ambiguous compositional history, Mertens states: “…Ruusbroec, while
writing the Tabernakel, made use of one or more existing texts which he had written earlier. This
then would imply that Ruusbroec wrote more texts than finally remained. This should not
surprise us in itself, as the same was established with regard to his letters. Attempts to
reconstruct this text or these texts fail in spite of the many possibilities offered by the textual
material: the passages of transition in which other parts of text are announced or recapitulated,
differences in the way of allegorical interpretation, the chronological line of the Passion up to the
events of Pentecost, differences in the use of sources and their order, differences in the intended
In addition to Ruusbroec’s editorial work the text was redacted a second time. In this second version of the treatise the redactor, whose likely identity was Brother Gerard of Herne, inserted glosses of historical detail that are not from the hand of Ruusbroec. In this second edition not only is historical information added in the attempt to provide contextual details to help the reader’s understanding of the text but particular words are systematically replaced by synonyms. In addition to these supplemental features and changes, and what Mertens rightfully public, terminological differences, duplications. There is an abundance rather than a lack of such indications and patterns. The problem is that they seem in part to be contradictory and, as yet, resist any combination into an inclusive whole. The reason might be that more than one text underlies the Tabernakel, each with its own theme and structure. The fact that we cannot proceed further than this suggestion implies that this hypothesis too is unable to lead to a fitting explanation,” Mertens, “Introduction,” 56. It must be said, however, that, though Mertens’ work does not give us certainty in terms of the number of his previous works Ruusbroec used to compose the Tabernakel or exactly how some of the pieces are to be understood together as a completely coherent whole, one can say with confidence that Mertens’ work has contributed more to our understanding of the Tabernakel than that of any other scholar. Unfortunately, the treatise has been one of the least explored in Ruusbroec scholarship. This is undoubtedly, in large part, due to the vast and often puzzling nature of the text, given the multi-textual nature of the composition.

13 Mertens, “Introduction,” 65. This is also pointed out in Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 66. On this same page Arblaster and Faesen direct our attention toward the fact that this second version, most likely edited by Brother Gerard, was used later by Surius as the foundation for his Latin translation of the Tabernakel. Mertens bases his claim that Brother Gerhard is the revisor on the fact that in the prologue of his collection of five of Ruusbroec’s works he offers lofty praise for the Tabernakel. Then, “straight away he admits to having revised the text, not as a form of criticism of the author but to support the acute and enlightened reader in his meditation on the text—and we suppose that brother Gheraert considered himself to be such…,” Mertens, “Introduction,” 65.

14 Mertens describes details of these additions when he states: “Historical information is often added in glosses. Ruusbroec himself did not provide his text with glosses. They all originate from the revision. In total it involves thirty-two glosses, which are only transmitted completely in manuscript Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 15136 (siglum: C),” Mertens, “Introduction,” 57. On the same page, in fn. 121, Mertens goes into greater detail in describing which of the remaining manuscripts do and do not have complete versions of the second revision, pointing the reader to the variant apparatus of the critical edition. Mertens gives a chronological list of the surviving complete manuscripts of the Tabernakel, along with whether each manuscript is from version I or version II, in Mertens, “Introduction,” 68.
deems most remarkable, there are authorial additions in which “the revisor passes judgments about the writing of the text with an authorial addition in the first person (‘I’ or ‘we’). In most cases this is limited to the insertion of simple references…”\textsuperscript{15} In 1552 the Carthusian Laurentius Surius (1523–1578) published a Latin translation of the \textit{Tabernakel} and his translation is based on the second version of the work.\textsuperscript{16}

Given this complex compositional history, what might be the reason for Ruusbroec’s bringing together these texts (whatever number of works he knitted together to make up the final product)? While we cannot be absolutely sure, the text itself provides a clue that warrants an interpretation that would see a linkage between the \textit{Tabernakel} and Ruusbroec’s desire for a good and true formation of the community of the Groenendaal monastery, given, as discussed in chapter one, Ruusbroec and his confreres’ evident distaste for what they saw as a lack of spiritual savor and fervor among the majority of priests serving in the church of St. Gudula in Brussels.\textsuperscript{17}

Because of a lengthy discussion of the ordination of Aaron and his Sons, as well as details of the ritual sacrifices they offered in the tabernacle, which Ruusbroec interprets allegorically/typologically as a figure of the call, importance, and proper focus of priests in the

\textsuperscript{15} Mertens, “Introduction,” 61. Mertens gives a couple of examples from the revised version, one of which is, “Die uutwendeghe salve daer si mede ghesalft worden, die moestemen, alsoe ic voer gheseit hebbe, uut persen met groeter cracht (And therefore, the outward ointment with which they were sanctified had to be pressed out with great force as I said before),” MS C, F. 151r at II. 5:2404–6, quoted in Mertens, “Introduction,” 62. Mertens discusses these changes and additions by the revisor in Mertens, “Introduction,” 56–67. See also Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 66.

\textsuperscript{16} Surius’ translation and the possible manuscript he used are discussed in Mertens, “Introduction,” 67.

\textsuperscript{17} This linkage between the formation of the Groenendaal community and the \textit{Tabernakel} is explored in Geert Warnar, \textit{Ruusbroec: Literature and Mysticism in the Fourteenth Century}, trans. Diane Webb (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007), 180–89. The linkage, along with consideration and critique of Warnar’s view, is examined also in Mertens, “Introduction,” 16–18.
Church, we can legitimately assume a connection of the final composition of the *Tabernakel* and the formation of the Groenendaal monastery. Ruusbroec’s desire to see holy priests and a holy community that bore witness to the way in which priests should truly serve as mediators between God and the community provided an opportunity for him to spiritually guide his fellow priests and monks of Groenendaal in this regard. Though this undoubtedly was not the only reason for Ruusbroec’s composition of the *Tabernakel*, it certainly seems to be a significant factor.  

As stated above, because of the interweaving of multiple texts in Ruusbroec’s complete version of the work (and of course this remains true in the second version redacted by Brother Gerard), it is most difficult to discern the audience or multiple audiences to which the *Tabernakel* is directed. Throughout the text Ruusbroec mostly addresses himself to a public whose identity is not specified to any significant degree. However, because of a lengthy excursus on the priesthood (to be discussed further in the following two sections of the present chapter) there are times where Ruusbroec does seem to address a more specific public (or publics).

Mertens states:

…Ruusbroec mostly addresses himself to a little specified public and, for the moral [tropological] interpretation, uses general indications [such] as *die mensche* or *wi*, to be interpreted broadly as ‘we humans.’ In a number of cases, however, it is acceptable that the *Tabernakel* primarily addresses a specific public. Sometimes these are laypeople, sometimes priests. It may be that it is not a question here of compositional inconsistencies…but as yet we have not been able to identify a system in it. This difficulty is connected with the uncertainties about the shape of the preliminary stages of the present text of the *Tabernakel*.  

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18 Ruusbroec’s excursus on the priesthood is the fifth of the seven points that make up the *Tabernakel* and will be discussed more in the next section on structure and content. However, it will be discussed much more in the section below, which explores spiritual direction in the *Tabernakel*, for this section, as much as any other section of the work, can be seen as spiritual direction.

Mertens notes that the section dealing with the sacrifices of the newly-ordained priests (5, 3562–4177) begins by using the phrase ‘our priests’ when Ruusbroec states:

And immediately after this the figure teaches us what the sacrifice was which the priests of the Jews performed for the Jewish people. And by the same we are taught what the sacrifice shall be which our priests are to perform for the Christian people and for all the world.\(^{20}\)

Mertens, with whom I tend to agree here, interprets the use of ‘our priests’ as showing that this part of the work was written for a non-clerical public.\(^{21}\) This interpretation is confirmed by other statements following this quotation. One such example is when Ruusbroec states:

But if the priest’s garment is soiled by our blood in the offering, so that on account of his ignorance he gives us too little penitence, or too much, or is something other in confession than he ought to be, the water of God’s grace washes it off through his good will.\(^{22}\)

This and other such quotations point to an audience of lay people.

Mertens goes on to show that there are other times, however, when Ruusbroec’s language seems directed to a public made up of a mixture of lay people and religious who are not priests, for Ruusbroec teaches that, “each one should take note of himself and keep his rule, his order and his vows…for all our life and all our works must be ordered toward God, in whatever state

\(^{20}\) Tabernakel, 5, 3562–65: “Ende al te hans hier na leert ons die figure wele die sacrificie was die die priestere der joden daden vore dat joetsce volc. Ende met den selven werden wi gheleert wele die sacrificie sijn sal die onse priestere doen selen vore dat kerstene volc ende vore alle die werelt.” English translation quoted in Mertens, “Introduction,” 52. When Mertens gives quotations from the Tabernakel in his introduction from the critical edition’s English translation (by Helen Rolfson) he cites the line numbers from the English translation rather than the Middle Dutch text. Throughout the present work I only cite the lines from the Middle Dutch text.

\(^{21}\) Mertens, “Introduction,” 52.

we are.”  

Finally, Mertens continues, “other parts, on the contrary, seem mainly—but not exclusively—to be addressed to priests.” Ruusbroec was a priest himself and gives particular emphasis to the importance of the role of the priest as mediator of God’s grace given in Christ’s incarnation, by the Holy Spirit and which continues in eucharistic celebration through which the Spirit incorporates us into Christ’s body. Therefore, some of his most poignant examples of spiritual direction in the Tabernakel come in the form of guidance for priests. An example, in which the more restricted public of priests is addressed, though perhaps not exclusively as the passage could be helpful to a wider audience, is seen when Ruusbroec states:

And in order that we might be taught what is rightly fitting for every priest who wants to be pure and live honorably for God and usefully for all people we must note in detail the way in which Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons according to God’s command. And we must also go on to note the manner of the sacrifices by which they were cleansed and sanctified, (and) how they performed them, for these things were a figure as to how we should be clean and holy according to the dearest will of God.

An instance, in which the more narrow public of priests seems to be addressed, perhaps exclusively, is found in Ruusbroec’s discussion of the priestly use of the tabernacle laver. He connects the washing with the plural pronoun ‘we’ (wi) and the plural, possessive (genitive) pronouns ‘our’ (onse) and ‘their’ (haren) when he states:

This is our laver with its base. Into it God shall pour the water of His grace, in which we are always to wash ourselves, if we have need of it, and especially before we put on the sacred ornament, and before we go up to the altar of God. For our Lord told Moses that this washing would be legal work for Aaron and his seed after him. Now, all good people are spiritually his seed, and especially, good priests, by means of spiritual imitation with their holy life.

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23 Tabernakel, 5, 4096–4104. See also Mertens, “Introduction,” 53.


26 Tabernakel, 5, 909–16: “Dit es onse lavoer met sire bascen. Hier inne | sal god storten dat water sijnre genaden daer wi ons inne dwaen selen altoes als wijs hebben te donee ende sunderlinge eer wi dat heilege ornament anedoen ende eer wi opgaen ten outaer goods. Want
This passage also “contains a manifest allusion to the beginning of the mass, where the first words after the sign of the cross run: Introibo ad altare Dei: ‘I will go up to the altar of God.’”27 Such passages are important for discerning Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction/guidance given in the Tabernakel for they seem to have a circumscribed public of priests in mind and perhaps other religious. It is not difficult in the least to imagine such passages being directed to the priests and religious of the Groenendaal monastery, to ensure that the form of life embodied by the community be oriented around a faithful savor for the God whose paradoxical life is that of essential love. This life would be a counterposition to the unfaithful and lax way of life Ruusbroec perceived amongst many of the priests and laypeople of the St. Gudula congregation.

**B. Structure and Content**

Ruusbroec begins his most lengthy treatise with a quotation from I Corinthians 9:24 which states, ‘Run that ye may obtain’ (loept also dat ghi begripen moegt), from the Latin Vulgate).28 He states that, “all creatures must run the race of love, to God or to creatures…”29 If one runs toward God, “he shall surely obtain.”30 However, rather than describing this activity by unfolding this passage as the framework for the treatise, as he does with Matthew 25:6 in the Brulocht, the canon illumines his teaching on how to “run” and “obtain” union with God, and

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28 Tabernakel, 0,1.

29 Tabernakel, 0, 9–10: “Alle menschen moten loepen den loep der minnen, te gode ocht ten creaturen…”

30 Tabernakel 0, 12.
thus perfection, by an allegorical reading of the tabernacle in Exodus. The work is an example of numerous figural or allegorical readings of Israel’s tabernacle from the Old Testament book of Exodus (chs. 24–31), which have appeared throughout the history of the Church. Through this figural reading of the tabernacle Ruusbroec calls the reader to take his or her place within the eternal tabernacle, for “Christ, God’s Son, has made an eternal ark and an eternal tabernacle for God, for Himself and for us, that is Himself, or the holy Church, and whatever good person, of whom He is the prince and the head.”

Taking our place in the spiritual tabernacle means that we must relinquish all that would encumber us so that we may “make for God a spiritual ark as a sanctuary within ourselves.”

We share in God’s triune love such that we become a spiritual tabernacle for God. Though one must immediately say here that becoming a spiritual tabernacle arises out of the fact that, as we saw in chapter two with Ruusbroec’s anthropology, “fundamentally, the human person is a sanctuary of God’s presence and the locus of the encounter with God.” The becoming arises out of the fact that the core of the human is the essential unity in which the

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31 Ruusbroec’s scriptural interpretation works out of the assumed patristic and medieval exegetical framework of the four senses of scripture: the literal (historical), allegorical (which includes the figural/typological sense), tropological (the moral sense), and analogical (sense of the eternal/teleological/eschatological horizon) senses. A magisterial treatment of the four senses of scripture is to be found in Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 3 vols., trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998–2004). For more detail on Ruusbroec’s use of these four senses throughout the text of the *Tabernakel* see Mertens, “Introduction,” 29–37.

32 “Ruusbroec was inspired by similar works such as Venerable Bede’s commentary and the *Historia Scholastica* by Peter Comestor († 1178),” Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 67.

33 *Tabernakel*, 1, 13–16.

34 *Tabernakel*, 1, 2–4.

human soul is suspended in being through union with its eternal idea in the Son. The becoming is becoming more fully what one essentially is, the image of the Image of God, such that the human becomes like God. In his figural reading, Ruusbroec goes into great detail concerning the plethora of elements of the tabernacle. It is here that he shows great erudition and learning. Within the overall goal of an allegorical reading of the tabernacle, which guides the reader into a transforming awareness of the Trinity, “he often appeals to the natural sciences of his age, for example, with respect to the specific qualities of certain building materials, the etymology of names of precious stones, etc. These details attest to Ruusbroec’s considerable and impressive erudition. And yet, this is not the author’s primary intent. His central concern is to provide a (biblically inspired) description of the loving encounter between God and the human person.”

Ruusbroec divides his figural reading of the tabernacle, his description of our ‘running the race of love’ through making of ourselves, by grace, into a spiritual tabernacle for God, into seven main points. He notes that, “in each of the seven points, God is found and possessed, and always in greater love, and always in more feeling/holistic loving consciousness and in more wisdom…” The first point, alluded to above, is becoming ‘disencumbered’ by turning away


37 Ruusbroec summarizes these seven points in the prologue. See Tabernakel, 0, 26–40.

38 Tabernakel, 0, 27–29: “in elken poente van den sevenen wert god vonden ende beseten, ende altoes in meerre minnen, ende altoes in meerren ghevoelne ende in meerre wijsheit…” I have departed slightly from the critical edition translation in an attempt to render “ghevoelne” more accurately. This is a difficult concept to communicate in translation for it is not that “feeling” is incorrect but, given the tendency in North American English to limit “feeling” to emotions, I fear that using it as a stand alone translation risks interpreting Ruusbroec’s insight in too narrow a fashion. While my translation is a bit cumbersome in translating ghevoelne, it seems to me to be, unfortunately, necessary. This is the case because of Ruusbroec’s use of “feeling” must be understood in connection with his use of the tradition of the spiritual senses in his teaching on mystical union with God. So terms such as ghevoelne can only be interpreted correctly in connection with the language of ‘touch’ and ‘taste’ which are so prominent in his writing. And one must make haste to point out that Ruusbroec’s use of the
language of the spiritual senses seems to be caught up in an important point of evolution in that tradition, which one sees in figures such as Hadewijch. Namely, more than the inner, spiritual senses being analogically related to the exterior, bodily senses, there is in the beguine’s and Ruusbroec’s language a move toward a holistic sensing of the “touch” of God. Bernard McGinn helpfully describes this moment of evolution in the spiritual senses tradition when he states: “the spiritual senses conceived of as powers of the inner person analogous to the exterior senses of the body had been an important theme in Christian mysticism since the time of Origen. The patristic and early medieval tradition tended to stress a disjunction between inner and outer sensation…from the time of Bernard of Clairvaux, however, some mystics began to use language that undercut a sharp difference between external and internal sensation, at least in relation to divine action…in female mystics like Hadewijch all distinction between inner and outer senses vanishes and the encounter with God is described in a directly somatic way, although, to be sure the sensations described go beyond those found in ordinary experience. The notion of the spiritual senses was giving way to an idea of sensing ascribed to the whole person, a single sensorium that could be activated both from within and without…Ruusbroec seems close to Hadewijch in employing sensory language about God’s action in a holistic way involving the whole person…Ruusbroec’s teaching on how we become aware of God’s action is best seen in his frequent appeals to the language of ‘touch’ (gherinen) or ‘stirring’ (ruer). This terminology seems to have been one of his innovations, not to be found, or at least favored, among his predecessors, though it was to become popular with the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century,” Bernard McGinn, Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism (1350–1550), vol. 5 of The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012), 51–52. McGinn discusses this evolution in the spiritual senses tradition in more depth in Bernard McGinn, “Late Medieval Mystics,” in The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity, eds. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 190–209. More from McGinn on the development of the theology of spiritual sensation can be found in Bernard McGinn, “The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism,” Spiritus 1 (2001): 156–71. The volume edited by Gavrilyuk and Coakley is very important for gaining an understanding of the various paths along the way in the development of the tradition of the spiritual senses. Another important volume in this area is the study by Rudy in Gordon Rudy, Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages (New York and London: Routledge, 2002). Rudy particularly focuses on development of the language of the sensations of touch and taste in Bernard of Clairvaux, Hadewijch, Bonaventure, Rudolf of Biberach, and Ruusbroec. He contrasts the holistic perspective of the spiritual senses articulated by Bernard and Hadewijch with the “dualist” tradition of the spiritual senses beginning with Origen. Rudy sees in Bonaventure, Rudolf and Ruusbroec elements of both the dualist tendency and the more holistic tendency. This seems broadly correct to me in terms of Ruusbroec’s thought. However, given the vast amount of scholarship left to do in the area of the spiritual senses in general, and the late Middle Ages in particular, we must be careful not to assume too strong a distinction between the two streams of the tradition, given the fact that in figures like Bernard and Ruusbroec one sees evidence of both streams of the tradition of reflection upon the spiritual senses. There are also variances amongst figures in both streams as to how they deploy and develop the language of sensation in the contemplative life. More particularly, in regard to Rudy’s monograph, one also wonders if he describes Origen’s theology, particularly his anthropology, a bit too simplistically. These questions notwithstanding, Rudy’s
from sin and toward God in love. This point is special and given priority, for Ruusbroec teaches that within this point all the other points are included. If a person lacks the time to focus on the other points, which are really but the development of the first, essential point, giving one’s attention to the first point is suffice, for it contains within itself all the other points. There is a definite sense in which the first point is eschatological in that all the points are contained in it as well as the fact that Ruusbroec states that one cannot be disencumbered from the sin that weighs one down, “if we do not make for God a spiritual ark and a sanctuary within ourselves.” So the teleological end of one’s life as a spiritual tabernacle within the larger tabernacle of Christ, holy Church, is assumed before one can be disencumbered by sin, thus highlighting the comprehensive nature of the first point and its eschatological characteristic.

The second point begins Ruusbroec’s detailed allegorical reading of the building of the tabernacle as a figure of the spiritual growth of the human being. While the Exodus account work is a very important contribution to scholarship in this area. For a reading of Origen that acknowledges the dualist tendency in his anthropology but nonetheless offers a textured reading that brings to light the complexities of Origen’s anthropology as grounded in God, the only purely immaterial reality, and his more positive assessment of the material/historical in terms of the biblical text and the human body see Rowan Williams, “Origen,” in The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church, ed. G.R. Evans (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 132–42. See also the critique of Rudy’s methodology (in which Rudy follows the work of J.M. Dillon, in which Dillon sees only a metaphorical use for the language of sensation in Origen’s early work rather than an analogical use) in Mark J., McInroy, “Origen of Alexandria,” in The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity, eds. Paul L. Gavrylyuk and Sarah Coakley, 20–35. For Dillon’s perspective see J.M. Dillon, “Aisthēsis Noêtê: A Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses in Origen and in Plotinus,” in Hellenica et Judaica: Hommage à Valentin Nikiforovetsky (Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 1986), 443–55.

39 The first point is unfolded by Ruusbroec in Tabernakel, 1, 1–161.

40 Tabernakel, 1, 3–4.

41 The second point gives Ruusbroec’s allegorical reading of the court of the tabernacle, which signifies the outward moral life. The point is contained in Tabernakel, 2, 1–306.
works from the inside outward, beginning with the ark and finally ending with the demarcated area around the tabernacle, the Brabantine contemplative theologian moves from the outside inward and from beneath to above, beginning first with the demarcated or fenced off area around the tabernacle. This area is a figure of the external moral life. The inner life of the human is signified by the altar of burnt offering in the third point. Ruusbroec interprets it as an image for the heart of the human inspired by the love of God. The heart is the seat of the sensory and affective life and the place where the person offers his corporeal service and works to God. In the fourth point Ruusbroec continues his thorough typological reading by considering the building of the tent of the tabernacle itself. He interprets the tabernacle as the assembly of all good people united with God, which is built and enlivened by Christ. The various components are considered as prefigurations of elements of the human being united to God, in Christ, by the Spirit, and, as a result, further becoming a spiritual tabernacle for God.

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42 For the third point in its totality see Tabernakel, 3, 1–162.

43 Mertens, “Introduction,” 24. Mertens points out that the movement inward of the third point is contrasted with the second point of turning outward. Mertens, however, rightly reminds us that these movements (outward and inward) are harmonized in the love of God according to Ruusbroec when the canon states: “By means of the second and third points, sensuality is adorned without and within, in conduct and inner, loving consciousness, according to the will of God and according to God’s commandments,” Tabernakel, 0, 33–35. I have slightly departed from the translation of the critical edition in its translation of ghevoelne as “feelings.” For my reasoning in translating this concept in a way in which I believe comes closer to the depth and breadth Ruusbroec intends with this word and concept see my footnote in the previous paragraph and my translation of Tabernakel, 0, 27–29.

44 Tabernakel, 4, 1–2229.

45 Mertens helpfully summarizes the elements and those truths of which they are types by stating: “The parts of the tabernacle that are successively described are: the roof, the walls, the separation between the holy and the holy of holies, and the entrance. The virtues form the roof. This roof rests upon the walls, the foundation of the virtues, which consists of our free mind and the free resolutions we take. The boards that make up the walls, stand for unity with God and the free accord with the inward-working of God, which comes into being thanks to this unity. Between the holy and the holy of holies there is a separation which, with its four columns, forms
As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, the fifth point contains a lengthy excursus, which explores the vital mediatorial role of priests who make Christ’s sacrifice present in the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{46} The Christian priesthood is prefigured in the Levitical priesthood of Aaron and his sons. This excursus takes place within the larger point, that of Ruusbroec’s deepening of his meditation upon the objects of the temple, particularly the inner objects such as the golden candelabrum, the altar of incense, and the table with showbread. The sixth point finds Ruusbroec discussing the ark of the covenant, which, like the tabernacle as a whole, “describes the loving union between God and the soul.”\textsuperscript{47} In this point all virtues are perfected for, in the familiar tones of Ruusbroec’s understanding of essential love (\textit{weselijke minne}), though active love leads the soul into the unicity of the enjoying of triune love, love cannot rest in enjoyment and so is once again sent forth in active, virtuous love. Finally, the seventh point deepens this focus by emphasizing the call for the soul to be rooted in the paradoxical reality of essential love and its simultaneous fruitful enjoyment and active love through virtue. Mertens helpfully summarizes this final point when he states:

> Love elevates the human being above himself and unites him with God, and founds the spirit in God. Love, however, cannot be inactive and drives the person outward to exercise virtues. But above them we rest in superessential love, a love that transcends our human essence and abides in God’s Essence. These three aspects (turning in, turning out and rest) construct our spiritual tabernacle, and this ensures that we obtain the prize while running. With this final image, Ruusbroec, at the end of his longest treatise, returns to its a prefiguration of the indwelling of God in our spirit, thanks to the fourfold ascent of our understanding, our love, our spirit and our essential being. The five columns of the entrance of the holy stand for our five internal senses, which follow the ascent of our spirit,” Mertens, “Introduction,” 25.

\textsuperscript{46} With the extraordinary length of excursus on the priesthood the fifth point is quite protracted. For the entire point see \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 1–6718. The excursus is found in \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 845–4910.

\textsuperscript{47} Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 67.
first lines [running while obtaining and obtaining by running]. In doing so he makes his text, in wording and imagery as well, into a beautifully finished whole.\(^{48}\)

With the complex textual history and the basic structure and content in mind we are now in a place to hone in more specifically upon Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction in the *Tabernakel* and its refraction through his Trinitarian theology discussed in chapter two.

**C. Spiritual Direction in the Tabernakel**

When discussing written spiritual direction in the *Tabernakel*, we must first acknowledge that the work as a whole is, in a remarkable sense, a work of spiritual direction/guidance, for it instructs the reader(s) in the way of making ourselves into a spiritual tabernacle, within the larger tabernacle of Christ’s Body, what Ruusbroec calls “holy Church.” In other words, the overarching call to become a tabernacle within the larger tabernacle of holy Church/the Body of Christ suffuses the entire treatise. This is seen from the outset when, in the second paragraph, Ruusbroec states:

> All people must run the race of love, to God or to creatures, and nothing is as fast nor as subtle as the race of love. Therefore, a person is to take note and examine himself as to whether the race of his love is turned toward God; if so he shall surely obtain. But if he is (turned) toward creatures, then he must always miss, for he shall lose all that he loves. Thus you may know by experience that we all must run. It is good then that we so order our running that, according to St. Paul’s teaching, we may find and obtain all that we seek.\(^{49}\)

This paragraph follows upon St. Paul’s call to “run so that ye may obtain.”\(^{50}\) It calls the reader(s) to hear and answer St. Paul’s call and directs them to the way of ‘running’ so that we may ‘obtain.’ The *Tabernakel* is Ruusbroec’s guidance on how to run and obtain. *Not running* is

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\(^{49}\) *Tabernakel*, 0, 9–16.

\(^{50}\) *Tabernakel*, 0, 1. As noted in the previous section, this is from I Corinthians 9:24 from the Latin *Vulgate*. 
simply not possible for the human, for “we all must run (wi alle moten loopen)”\textsuperscript{51} The question is whether, in our running, we will or will not obtain. More particularly, and Ruusbroec’s use of the ‘we’ (wi) pronoun points us in this direction, we must keep in mind the fact, as discussed in the previous sections of the present chapter, that the work is made up of multiple texts which Ruusbroec probably wrote for various audiences. So particular bits of spiritual direction given by the Brabantine mystical theologian are for the different groups, the multiple publics addressed in the work. This shapes the particularities of the various examples of spiritual direction given throughout the Tabernakel. The diverse instances are also configured by the common backdrop or horizon within which all are located, Ruusbroec’s trinitarian theology. In this section we will examine some examples of the Tabernakel’s spiritual guidance addressed to these multiple publics whom the Augustinian canon seems to be addressing in the respective passages. Namely, the publics of “we humans,” the clerical/priestly public, the public of lay people, and the public of the non-clerical religious and lay people (though admittedly there are times in which these groups of addressees are difficult to parse out with certainty). We have already highlighted examples of these publics addressed by a handful of quotations in the first section of this chapter, which are clearly examples of spiritual direction. Again, we cannot be sure of the exact date of the work’s final compilation by Ruusbroec, but, given the fact that it seems to be assembled and edited in the canon’s final form, before the second revision by Brother Gerard, some time around the time of the formation of the Groenendaal monastery, it is reasonable to assume that some of the priestly and religious being addressed are the members of Ruusbroec’s Augustinian community.

\textsuperscript{51} Tabernakel, 0, 14.
Ruusbroec offers spiritual guidance to the broadest public, “we humans,” at a number of points along the journey through the Tabernakel. For instance, in point four where Ruusbroec interprets the building of the tent of the tabernacle itself and its components as prefigurations of elements of the human being united to God, he discusses Uri and Oliab, who signify our free will and understanding, as the builders of the tabernacle.\textsuperscript{52} The canon points out that Oliab was gifted with discerning beautiful colors and uses this gift to choose the colors for the curtains and the right patterns to sew into them. He is able to discern these in such a way as to order the art to the most beautiful and richest sort of arrangement. For Ruusbroec this prefigures our right understanding for discernment of correct inner resolve and action. Ruusbroec states:

In like manner our understanding must be master and note all that is within us, and with discernment consider everything that we inwardly resolve in action or in omission. And this (resolution) we shall cut, increase or decrease, lengthen or broaden, so that it may be well-ordered unto the glory of God. Then we shall clothe and cover this resolution with inward spiritual works, and these we shall join together with right intention.\textsuperscript{53}

When we embody the truth of the “Oliab” figure we have a “clear understanding” (\textit{claer verstaen}, “understanding” being another way of referring to the soul’s higher faculty of “intellect”) of our inner life and our essential unity with God the Word. This enables us to discern the resolutions we should make and the resolutions from which to refrain in our pursuit of becoming a spiritual tabernacle for God. This discernment allows our resolutions, and thus inward works, to be ordered to God’s glory. These aspects of building our tabernacle: clear

\textsuperscript{52} Tabernakel, 4, 107–423. As discussed in chapter two, the “spiritual unity” is the unity (in Augustinian anthropology and its idiom) of the higher faculties of memory, intellect (understanding), and will.

\textsuperscript{53} Tabernakel, 4, 341–46: “Alsoe gelikerwijs moet onse verstaen | meester sijn ende merken al onse inwendecheit ende met bescedenheiden anesien al dat wi van binnen begripen in doene ende in latene. Ende dat selen wi besniden, meerren ende minderen, lingen ende breiden, also dat wel geordent si in die eere goeds. Dan selen wi dit begrijp cleden ende decken met inwenden geesteleken werken ende die selen wi te gadere voeghen met rechter intencien.”
understanding, discernment,\textsuperscript{54} and well-ordered actions, are familiar themes in Ruusbroec’s thought, as is the “right intension” with which these are all to be wed. The right intention is the Augustinian, theocentric focus (\textit{eenvuldighe meyninghe}) or the willing and loving of God in all things, as we discussed in chapter two. This, for Ruusbroec, facilitates loving all creatures in a harmonious, ordinate manner. This is rooted in the fact that, as we additionally saw in chapter two, all creatures exist eternally in the Word/Son of God (as divine idea and as creature in union with this idea as the creature’s origin, telos, and sustainer in being) and are, in the Spirit, eternally cherished and loved by the Father. Therefore, the origin, sustainer in being, and telos of all creatures is their eternal idea (the Father’s eternal idea of us), in the Son, and loved by the Father in the love of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{55} A creature therefore becomes all that it is created to be as it is 

\textsuperscript{54} As discussed in chapter one in the section on spiritual direction in the Christian tradition, discernment (\textit{diakrisis}) is the central characteristic of a wise and mature spiritual director. It is also vital for the growth of every Christian throughout the history of Christian spirituality and theology. For a rich and illuminating exploration of discernment as it arises in the Christian tradition and the important role it plays in theology see Mark McIntosh, \textit{Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge} (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004). For a more practical, yet helpful, work on discernment, see Elizabeth Liebert, S.N.J.M., \textit{The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{55} This corresponds, as discussed in chapter two, with the Trinity as, in Neoplatonic language, the monē, proodos, and epistrophē (\textit{telos}). We must keep in mind here that, for Ruusbroec, our creation from and living into our eternal idea in the Son is a Triune affair, for the One God is the trinitarian relations in which the Father is our source, who speaks the truth or idea of us in the Son, in the Love of the Spirit. And in the redemptive missions of the Son and Spirit the Spirit is the principle of our “return” to the Father, through the Son, into the perichoretic unity of the Trinity. The Son is, in a sense, the perfection of creation and the Spirit is the principle of incorporation of humans and all creation into the Son’s perfection. Of course we must always remember that when Ruusbroec, as with the best of classical Christian Trinitarian theology, speaks of the Persons he assumes the relations of the Persons, in their loving, perichoretic unicity, as the One God who is at work in all three dimensions of triadic exitus-reditus. The Father as source, the Spirit as mode, and the Son as perfection perhaps shows the influence of Bonaventure upon Ruusbroec, who also insisted upon the Persons always being spoken of in relation to one another as the One God. Bonaventure’s language is \textit{ortus} (order), \textit{modus} (means), and \textit{fructus} (fruit/end). The Father, Spirit, and Son as source, mode, and perfection can be seen in Bonaventure’s thought when he says: “Scripture . . . flows from divine
loved by and in the Trinity. So to love the Son in the Spirit/Love of the Father is to truly love creatures orderly or harmoniously. This is not a competition between God and creatures for our love because God is utterly transcendent and thus his transcendence is nonconstrastive or noncompetitive with our existence and our love, as discussed in chapter two. In this passage we see that Ruusbroec’s guidance for making oneself God’s tabernacle in the midst of the larger revelation, coming down from the Father of lights, from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth receives its name. It is from him, through his Son, Jesus Christ, that the Holy Spirit flows also into us. It is through that same Spirit, who apportions gifts and allots to each one according to his will, that faith is given, and it is through faith that Christ dwells in our hearts,” Breviloquium, Prologue, 2, vol. IX of Works of St. Bonaventure, ed. Dominic V. Monti, O.F.M. (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005), 2. Many thanks to Daniel Wade McClain for reminding me of this quotation and for our discussions of Bonaventure’s thought over the past five to seven years. For more on Bonaventure’s influence upon Ruusbroec see Pyong-Gwan Pak, “The Vernacular, Mystical Theology of Jan van Ruusbroec: Exploring Sources, Contexts, and Theological Practices” (PhD Diss., Boston College, 2008), 32–67; and Rik van Nieuwenhove “The Franciscan Inspiration of Ruusbroec’s Mystical Theology: Ruusbroec in Dialogue with Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas,” Ons Geestelijk Erf 75 (2001): 102–115; idem, “In the Image of God: The Trinitarian Anthropology of St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas Aquinas and the Blessed Jan van Ruusbroec, Parts I and II. Irish Theological Quarterly 66 (2001): 109–123, 227–237. See also Rik van Nieuwenhove “Meister Eckhart and Jan Van Ruusbroec: A Comparison,” Medieval Philosophy and Theology 7 (1998): 157–93. As stated in chapter two, while Nieuwenhove’s exploration of Bonaventure and the Franciscan tradition’s influence upon Ruusbroec is most helpful, I am not convinced by his denial of the possible influence of someone like Eckhart upon Ruusbroec. So one must also consider the argument for more than Franciscan influence upon Ruusbroec put forward by Kikuchi in Satoshi Kikuchi, From Eckhart to Ruusbroec: A Critical Inheritance of Mystical Themes in the Fourteenth Century (Leuven, BEL: Leuven University Press, 2015). A particularly rich and lucid account of this way of viewing the trinitarian rendition of the Neoplatonic paradigm, which is at once learnedly rooted in the fruits of the Christian tradition and creatively attuned to the contemporary context, is Sarah Coakley’s work in the first volume of her projected four volume systematic theology. Coakley, like Bonaventure and Ruusbroec, sees the chief means and ends of theological reflection as being prayer and contemplation (though Ruusbroec, again, particularly weds contemplation with action in his understanding of the common life). Coakley expresses her “incorporative” model when she says: “The prayer-er’s total perception of God is here found to be ineluctably trifaceted. The ‘Father’ is both ‘source’ and ultimate object of divine desire; the ‘Spirit’ is that (irreducibly distinct) enabler and incorporator of that desire in creation—that which makes the creation divine; and the ‘Son’ is that divine and perfected creation,” Sarah Coakley, God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’ (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 114. Another helpful recent work, which thinks God’s triune relations in terms of God’s unicity is Katherine Sonderegger, Systematic Theology: Volume I, The Doctrine of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).
tabernacle of the Body of Christ, holy Church, is partially fulfilled through clear understanding and discernment, which is rooted in and oriented by his trinitarian thought.

One significant section of the *Tabernakel*, which contains a number of passages where Ruusbroec gives spiritual direction to the largest public of the general “we humans” (or at least “we Christians”), can be found in the first portion of point five. As noted already, in point five we read the Brabantine’s discussion of the figural significance of the objects in the inner or “holy” area of the tabernacle. In this first part of the fifth point Ruusbroec gives a quite beautiful reflection in which he reads the golden candelabrum as a figure of the humanity of Jesus, united with his divinity.\(^{56}\) Christ is the one through whom we may live into the fire (the Spirit) of God’s love inwardly, which empowers us to fulfill all virtuous love outwardly toward our fellow humans and all creation. The weaving of this portion of the tapestry of making ourselves, by grace, a living spiritual tabernacle is correctly read as written spiritual direction, for, at various points along the way, Ruusbroec exhorts the general public or audience to live into this union with Christ, in the Spirit, with the Father. Ruusbroec describes this when he, somewhat lyrically, gives an account of this theologically. He does this in a way that serves as spiritual direction (here we must remember that, with Ruusbroec, “spiritual direction” cannot be severed from “theology”). The Augustinian canon states:

Now, note: Jesus Christ, our golden candelabrum, was always raised up with His spirit, and with all His faculties, unto the honor of His Father. And thus He brought to perfection all virtue, and was the golden lily-flower upon which the Spirit of God wanted to rest with all Its gifts. For in the height [or “most inner,” as these are analogous terms for Ruusbroec], where virtues begin, there they are accomplished, namely, in the Holy Spirit, which is a fount of all good. And therefore, if we want to be like this candelabrum, and carry the lamps of the gifts of God in us, then our spirit within must be raised up in the honor of God, so that we, in our uppermost part [or “most inner” part], are holistically, lovingly conscious (*gevuelen*) of a stilled emptiness, above all the busyness of the world, and above all the temptation of the devil, and above all movements of

\(^{56}\) *Tabernakel*, 5, 7–696.
nature. And as often as we observe ourselves, and raise up all our faculties [of both the unity of spirit, the “higher faculties,” and the unity of heart, the “lower” or bodily faculties] to the honor of God, we are ready to receive the lamps of God’s gifts.57

This quotation directs the public (spiritual directees of the Brabantine mystical theologian), in brief, toward the primary contours of Ruusbroec’s guidance in this section of point five, namely, Christ’s humanity united to his divinity is the golden candelabrum who, enflamed by the Spirit, is always simultaneously burning in love for and resting in the love of the Father, and the Spirit, who is the means for our being simultaneously burning in blissful love inwardly, resting in union with God, and going out to others in love as the virtues are perfected in us by being united to the virtues of Christ through the gifts of the same Spirit. In this love Christ is always lifted up in his higher/most inner faculties and always intent on the honor of the Father. Thus his faculties, both higher and bodily, are always ready to go out in virtuous love to all by means of Christ’s virtue being united to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Christ’s humanity, united to his divinity, becomes the way and means for us to be intent and inwardly united to God in love and transformed into the Trinity’s love. Through his figural reading of the candelabrum, Ruusbroec paints this trinitarian vision of mystical theology. Christ is the means or way by which we live into the triune paradox of essential love and the Spirit is the love or power by which this happens, as told through the elements of the candelabrum. Throughout this section of point five Ruusbroec moves rhythmically (though at times one must admit that this rhythm is lost and the logic becomes confusing) from the figure of the elements of the tabernacle candelabrum to Christ’s fulfillment of the figure and then on to our call as humans to follow and unite ourselves, by the Spirit, to Christ’s fulfillment of the figure.

57 Tabernakel, 5, 220–32. I have slightly changed the translation of the critical edition by departing from its rendering of the verb gevuelen. See my explanation of my translation of this verb in the translation of Tabernakel, 0, 27–29 in the previous section of this chapter for my explanation and critique of Mertens’ rendering of the verb as “feel” or “feeling.”
The crescendo of the section is Ruusbroec’s figural reading of the lamps of the candelabrum and their components, for here all the dimensions of Ruusbroec’s call to his audience/directees come to their fullness. The figural reading unfolds as the Flemish mystic looks at the principal elements of the shaft (Christ’s human nature) and the six branches (Christ’s bodily faculties and spiritual faculties). He then moves to a closer look at the components, which make up the branches and shaft. The hypostatic union of Christ’s human and divine natures occurs in the personhood of the Son and is empowered by the Love of the Holy Spirit, who is, as was discussed in chapter two, the Love between and of the Father and Son, the principle of the Eternal flowing into perichoretic unity of the Persons and the one who draws all creation into the loving, triune embrace, through the Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. So we see a number of the core elements of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology in this section. In describing Christ, as the fulfillment or truth of the figure, and our union to God through Him, by the Spirit, Ruusbroec states:

…He is a light-bearer to all the world, and especially to holy Church, and to every good person. And He is golden. For He is given to us out of love, and according to humanity He is the Son of love. If we are united with Him, then we are sons, and call in His Spirit: ‘Abba, Father.’ He is the candelabrum of gold which was forged by means of the Holy Spirit, between the heavenly Father and the Virgin Mary, with the reverent service of the angel.

58 Tabernakel, 5, 33–57. The ascending nature of the shaft and the curved branches provide Ruusbroec the opportunity to describe Christ’s humanity as raised up in a threefold manner in honoring God. Namely, in might, wisdom, and willingness.

59 Tabernakel, 5, 58–232. The lower sections of the branches and shaft signify for Ruusbroec the bodily nature of Christ in his ascent in God while the upper sections signify his spiritual/higher faculties. The additional section of the middle shaft signifies the way in which Christ’s nature is elevated above all that it could obtain or earn.

60 Tabernakel, 5, 26–32: “…want na der menscheit es hi .i. lichdragerre alle der werelt ende sunderlinge der heileger kerken ende iegewelcs goeds menschen. Ende hi es gulden, want hi es ons van minnen gegeven ende na der menscheit es hi en sone der minnen. Eest dat wi in heme geenecht werden, soe sijn we sonen ende roepen in sinen geeste: ‘Abd, vader!’ He es die
As the passage progresses Ruusbroec highlights how Christ’s whole human nature, from his higher faculties of spirit to his bodily nature, was encompassed and pervaded by the power/love of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{61} His humanity was therefore united with God in love (the Spirit) and thus he lived all manner of virtuous behavior perfectly, for his spirit (the union of the higher faculties of memory, intellect, and will) desired God completely and thus lived into the essential unity of his human soul with God in the Son. And his personhood, mysteriously, is the Son.\textsuperscript{62} This means that his union of spirit was united to the Son in his personhood such that:

\begin{quote}
\ldots the Spirit of God, united to the spirit of Christ, encompassed with love the bodily nature in Christ with all the bodily faculties, and made them submissive and subject to the spirit [union of the higher faculties of Christ’s soul], in all difficulty and in all ordered service, even unto death. See, these are the lowest roundels of gold [according to the figure of the tabernacle candelabrum] in Christ’s rising-up. And there are seven of them, for the bodily nature of our Lord Jesus Christ had to be subject and ready to perform all virtues.\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{61} The Brabantine describes the truth of the bodily and spiritual faculties of Christ according to the figure when he notes that: “Three golden branches rise up from this shaft [Christ’s humanity] on each side, namely the bodily faculties and the spiritual faculties in Christ, which from the beginning, when they were created, have always been raised up and have existed in the honor of His Father,” \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 36–39.

\textsuperscript{62} Ruusbroec states: “This candelabrum has a shaft rising up in the middle, namely the human nature of Christ, which is elevated above all, and one with the eternal Word. For that is the substance of its personhood, \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 33–35: “Dese candelare heeft enen scracht in midden op gaende, dat es die minscelike nature in Cristo, die boven al verhaven es ende \textsc{i}. metten ewgen worde. Want dat es hare onderstant ende hare persoenlecheit.”

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 74–79: “Nu merct. Die geest goods, geenecht den geeste Cristi, bevinc met minnen die lijfleke nature in Cristo met allen den lijfleken crachten ende makese dienstachtech ende onderworpen den geeste in alle swaerheit ende in allen geordenden dienste al tote der doet. Siet, dit sijn die nederste rondeele van goude in Cristus opgange. Ende derre is \textsc{i}.vii., want die lijfleke nature ons heren Jhesu Cristi moeste onderworpen sijn ende gereet alle dogede mede te werkene.”
And we, through the Spirit, being united to him in his body, are to follow him in virtue. In union with the Spirit-enflamed humanity of Christ, we are enabled to intend the glory of God, live in theocentric focus, and live out the virtues through union with Christ, by the Spirit.

We are enabled to grow into living the virtues of Christ by the Spirit for we are in union with Christ, who inwardly (in the highest, deepest, or most central dimension of his being) lives in loving union with the Father in the love of the Spirit and simultaneously goes out in virtuous love, in that same love of the Spirit, to all the world and to the neighbor. Thus, in Christ, we see humanity lifted into the paradoxical simultaneity of triune, blissful union and outgoing love (weselijke minne). Ruusbroec describes this transformation and calls his audience to this reality when he states:

Hereby we understand that God’s Spirit lovingly encompassed the humanity of our Lord, and raised it up in a threefold manner in the honor of God. He made it mighty, overcoming all things; wise, knowing all things; and willing, bringing to perfection all justice. And we shall be holistically, lovingly conscious of the like in ourselves, if we are but united with Him…and therefore, if we have died to ourselves and live in Him, we shall raise ourselves up with all our faculties, always intending God’s honor. And thus we always remain mighty to overcome ourselves, and wise to know our faults, and willing to bring virtue to perfection.64

Bringing “virtue to perfection” is the outgoing love of neighbor and all creation. Ruusbroec then shares his wisdom and encouragement with his readers when he states: “He prayed for the Holy Spirit, so that he would not fall, but would persevere in all virtues. And that this may happen to

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64 Tabernakel, 5, 42–51: “Hier mede versta wi dat die geest goods minleke bevine die menscheit ons heren ende rechtse of drivoldeger wijs in die ere goods. Hi makese mechtich, alle dinc verwinnende; wijs, alle dinc bekinnende; ende willech, alle gerechtecheit volbringende. Ende dese gelike selen wi in ons gevuelen, eest dat wi hem geenechte sijn…Ende hier omme, eest dat wi ons selfs gestorven sijn ende in heme leven, soe selen wi ons op rechten met allen onsen crachten, altoes meinende die ere goods. Ende alsoe bliven wi machtech altoes ons selven te verwinnie ende wetende onse gebreke te bekinnene ende willech di doecht te volbringene.” I have once again departed from Mertens’ translation of gevuelen. By translating the term “lovingly conscious of” I have departed briefly from a word-literal (formal equivalence) translation to a dynamic-equivalent translation by adding the preposition “of” to my translation.
us also: this shall we pray and desire (dat selen we bidden ende begeren)." Based upon Christ’s Spirit-empowered work and prayer for us we are to pursue Christlikeness through being united to him and thus lovingly encompassed by the Spirit. Part of this pursuit is to listen to wise teaching, which, for Ruusbroec, involves pondering the figure of the tabernacle fulfilled in Christ. Therefore, Ruusbroec urges the reader:

Now, note what these things teach us. We are to consider this golden candelabrum, that is, the humanity of our Lord, elevated by the Spirit of God, and adorned in three manners. And this adornment we are to strive to follow, for Christ is our head and we are His members, and therefore, we should be like Him as far as we can.

From this admonition Ruusbroec guides his readers/directees into the more minute details of the candelabrum figure and its truth in Christ, along with our call to be united to Christ in the Spirit. According to the figure the highest lamp atop the central shaft (Christ’s humanity) symbolizes the Holy Spirit, the fount of all good. Christ fulfills all virtue (and we with him) by “dying to nature.” Ruusbroec describes and calls us to this when he says:

The most noble gift of these six [gifts of the Spirit. The center, highest lamp signifying the Holy Spirit and the gift of wisdom] is the gift of understanding, because it teaches us to consider and to note God in His manifold richness and goodness. This gift is a supernatural light which is meant to clarify our understanding [intellect] in its height, if we are but willing to elevate ourselves up within, and to be obedient to this light. For this light requires of our inward ‘man’ a passing over of the senses and of all sensible images and that we die to nature and live in the spirit [die to our intension of the gratifying of the bodily senses and live toward the union of spirit, oriented to our essential union]. And thus the inward ‘man’ is separated from the outward. For if we are willing to pass over sensible images and die to nature [which causes our intention to be that which is less than God], then we find this light. And then we receive this gift of clarity in the height of our understanding [intellect]. For in dying, we receive the gift of understanding, and in receiving, we die to nature.”

65 Tabernakel, 5, 55–57.
66 Tabernakel, 70–74.
67 Tabernakel, 5, 224–225
68 Tabernakel, 5 326–37: “Die edelste gave van desen .vi. dat es die gave der verstendecheit, omme datsi ons leert te anesiene ende te merkene gode in sine menechfoldege
This involves us, with Christ, in ascending and melting away in the love of the Spirit, what Ruusbroec describes as an inward virtue of “lustiness” (ultimate or central burning desire) for God when he notes:

> And out of this [receiving the Spirit’s gift of clarity in our intellect] grows in us a particular virtue which is born from God and from us, namely, a spiritual lustiness rising up toward God, which always makes our inward ‘man’ keep vigil and live. For this living lustiness always makes us consider and take note of God with our new contentment in Himself and His manifold gifts. And in this considering, the dying to our nature is always renewed. And thus the life of our spirit grows in grace. And hereby we remain near the light.⁶⁹

Out of this inner union in love in/with the Triune God (“melting”) arises, from the fount of the Spirit, Christ’s, and thus our, living of all virtue.

> Of particular importance in Ruusbroec’s teaching on being united with Christ in his perfection of virtue is his call to the reader to understand the truth of the figure of the lamps and

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their components. The lamps as a whole signify the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. In describing the lamps, their components, and what is signified thereby, the canon states:

To each lamp three things necessarily pertain, namely: The vessel, the oil, and a burning wick. By the oil in the vessel, we understand the fullness of virtuous works; by the wick, right intention (*rechte meininge*). By the fire with which the wick was ignited, we understand the gift of God, which makes it burn completely unto the honor of God. For neither on the altar of sacrifice, nor within, in the tabernacle, might there be any other fire but that which God had sent from heaven.

Further in this passage Ruusbroec contrasts the fire from heaven with “alien fire.” The gift of God is the Holy Spirit who is the love of God and burns the wick and thus the whole lamp. Any other love as central to one’s intention is less than God and leads one into sin (disorder, lack of desire harmonized by the desire/love of God). Ruusbroec highlights here how the priests were consistently to feed the fire with wood and oil. In fulfillment of the truth of the figure in Christ and, thus, in us, the Brabantine urges his readers to “feed the fire” of God’s love when he tells them:

See, in this same manner God wills that His fire, that is, His love, which He has sent to earth, should always burn in the unity of our heart and in the intention of our soul. And this fire He wants us to feed, in that we subjugate our body and chastise it with a harsh life of penitence, and in that, by means of right intention, we make our desire fat and luxuriant in our inward practice. Thus…in heartfelt, loving affection we shall burn our subdued bodily nature, and thus cleansed, we are to offer it to God. Our spiritual nature, raised up to God with right love and with right intention, is always and eternally to burn in divine love and unto the divine honor. And thus shall it become brighter than the sun and shall be an eternal offering to God.

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70 The figures of the lamps and their component parts are covered in *Tabernakel*, 5, 233–599.


72 *Tabernakel*, 5, 244–48.

73 *Tabernakel*, 5, 249–60: “Siet, in deser selver maniren soe wilt god dat sijn vier, dats sine minne die hi in ererike gesint heft, altoes berre in die enecheit ons herten ende in die meininge onser zielen. Ende dit vier wilt hi dat wi vuden in dien dat wi onsen lichame drucken ende castien met scarpen levene van penitencien ende in dien dat wi overmids rechte meininge vet ende weldech maken onse begerte in onser | inneger uefelleren. Aldus…in gevueleker
We see here again Ruusbroec’s consistent theme of theocentric focus, which helps the “spiritual nature” (higher union of memory, intellect, and will) to burn in love for and in God. This is connected with penitentially ordering bodily affections toward the love of God, for this helps enable the spiritual nature to burn in divine love. He tells his readers that they “must always beware of alien fire…all disordered affection toward any creature…and that we take care neither to teach anything nor to believe anyone contrary to the saints or the Scriptures.” Ruusbroec then connects this right love and intention, which, by grace, enables our burning in love, to outward virtuous love and good works that are ordered to God’s glory when he avers:

And above all, in all good works, we must take care that in them we principally neither seek nor intend what is perishable, but always honor God. This we are to intend and seek unendingly, that is, without cease, and therein shall all our works be ordered. And all our confidence shall be in the fidelity of God. Therein shall we deny ourselves and serve God in justice.

In this passage on the lamps and their components one can easily see the contemplative theologian working within the logic of our sharing in the simultaneous resting in the love of God.
inwardly and moving outward, with the Persons, in virtuous love and good works.\textsuperscript{76} In other words this language points ultimately to the sharing in God’s essential love (\textit{weselijke minne}), the eternal simultaneity of inner fruition and active, desiring love. This sharing enables us to live the common life (\textit{ghemeyne leven}).

There is a kind of many-leveled richness here in which Ruusbroec weaves his exemplarist anthropology in with his larger trinitarian mystical theology, with its attendant christology and pneumatology. Ruusbroec here invites his readers/directees into the depths of making themselves a tabernacle within the larger tabernacle of the Body of Christ by having a theocentric focus upon God such that the unity of heart is guided by the spiritual unity as that unity (and thus the unity of heart) are united in the burning love of God. This occurs by the gifts and grace of the Holy Spirit who draws the readers, through the Divine-Humanity of Christ, into the triune life. So here we find an exemplary passage which brings into bold relief Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction and its inflection in terms of his trinitarian mystical theology. In other words, the Brabantine’s written spiritual direction is in harmony with the firm melody (the \textit{cantus firmus}) of his trinitarian mystical theology. Though there are many other examples of spiritual direction addressing this broadest public to which one can point, the passages on the figures of Oliab and the golden candelabrum are instructive instances which enable us to observe the mystical/contemplative theology of Ruusbroec as always intertwining theology and spirituality and, particularly, in our exploration, his theology and spiritual direction.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{76} In this instance he happens to be using the “inner-outer” imagery rather than the “higher-lower” that he uses at other times. However, both modes refer to the same pursuit of the contemplative life and, ultimately, the common life.

\textsuperscript{77} For other, though not exhaustive, examples of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction which addresses this broadest public of “we humans” see \textit{Tabernakel}, 4, 883–87, 930–34, 1086–1120, 1230–60, 1573–1619, 2021–39, 2186–2215. Just beyond the material I have covered in this passage Ruusbroec gives his figural reading of the seven golden candle-trimmers (5, 600–620)
The variety of publics, in addition to the broadest public we have just been exploring, are addressed in the lengthy excursus on the priesthood.\(^7\) That is, as discussed previously in this chapter, in this excursus we find examples of passages addressed to the clerical/priestly public, the lay public, and the non-clerical public made up of lay people and religious. In some of these passages we find Ruusbroec giving spiritual direction/guidance to these various groups and this guidance is sometimes more straightforward and practical in terms of steps to be taken in day to day life than the passages we have investigated thus far. Here as well we find Ruusbroec’s written spiritual guidance to be shaped by and in harmony with his broader trinitarian mystical theology. It is always the theological horizon against which these harmonic articulations of spiritual direction are “played” or, better yet, “sang” by the Brabantine contemplative/mystical theologian. To round out our analysis of spiritual direction in the Tabernakel I will call attention to and highlight a couple of important examples in which Ruusbroec shares spiritual guidance and wisdom to these distinguishable groups of people.

Earlier in this chapter I quoted Ruusbroec as saying: “And in order that we might be taught what is rightly fitting for every priest who wants to be pure and live honorably for God and

and the seven golden vessels with water to extinguish the wick (5, 621–35). The candle-trimmers signify for Ruusbroec the sevenfold restlessness of love in which the gifts call us to the perfection of the seven capital virtues, which we offer to God. And yet, with each offering, we are ever renewed in virtue with the restlessness of love, the desire to go deeper and deeper into the perfection of virtue. Perfection here is, again, in the mode of Gregory of Nyssa’s epektasis. It is not a frozen “flawlessness” but unending growth. This reflects or is porous to Ruusbroec’s notion of the Persons of the Trinity and the eternal going out in boundless love. The golden vessels with water to extinguish the wick signify our passing over in love, with and through Christ, to the unity of God. This reflects the other dimension of the paradox of triune, essential love, the eternal fruition of blissful enjoyment in the perichoretic unity of the Persons. “And we note this also in Christ Jesus, who is the mirror of us all. For in every virtue that He wrought, He was passing over so lovingly that He sought the unity of His Father with love. And all our passings-over we are to unite to the loving passings-over which He made to His Father in every capital virtue,” Tabernakel, 5, 623–29.

\(^{78}\) Tabernakel, 5, 845–4910.
usefully for all people we must note in detail the way in which Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons according to God’s command.” The fact that Ruusbroec expends so much energy in the excursus on the life and ministry of priests shows that their being pure and living “honorably for God and usefully for all people” was deemed to be vital by the canon. Here we must remember our discussion in chapter one where we found that Ruusbroec’s criticism of the clergy (priests and prelates) and religious was intricately tied to their place within the Church and their effects upon the lives of the laity. It is the charism and role of the clergy and bishops to lead the laity into a deep “savor,” “taste,” or desire for God in order that they may seek the contemplative and common lives in which they would grow in union with God and live out the love of God toward others. This kind of savor for God, which should be found amongst clergy, religious, and laity, was the key to a Church truly living as the body of Christ, the Spiritual Tabernacle of God. We also found that Ruusbroec believed that the lack of savor for God in the clergy was exactly the reason why the laity were being enticed into false mystical contemplation such as the sensibility of the “Free Spirit.” The laity hungered for authentic growth in contemplative consciousness of God.

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79 Tabernakel, 5, 2933–37. For the full quote see the section above in the present chapter entitled: “Date, Textual-Historical Considerations, and Occasion.”

80 See the sections in chapter one of the present work entitled “The Brussels Years as Chaplain Priest” and “The Heresy of the Free Spirit.” Ruusbroec seems to be addressing the Free Spirit tendency when he speaks of the goodness of natural contemplation and yet elucidates the dangers of such practice in Tabernakel, 5, 6276–6329. In addition to priestly teaching and providing a model, for the laity, of people who are focused on their inward union in burning love with God and outwardly loving others with the love of Christ in the power of the Spirit, Ruusbroec teaches that the hearing of confession of the laity and binding and unbinding them is a key function of the priestly office. He addresses this and instructs priests and laity on the necessity to trust God’s grace as the laity confess to the priest and the priest offers guidance to the repentant sinners when he states: “But if the priest’s garment is soiled by our blood in the offering, so that on account of his ignorance he gives us too little penitence, or too much, or is something other in confession than he ought to be, the water of God’s grace washes it off through his good will. And also the love which he has toward God and for our salvation burns...
The importance of priests had not only to do with their needed teaching and example. It also was related to with their irreplaceable role in the liturgy of the Eucharist and its nourishment of the faithful with the life-giving body and blood of Christ, enabled by the Spirit. Because of their example, teaching office, and sacramental ministry Ruusbroec directs his critique and exhortations to prelates and priests often in the *Tabernakel*. For instance, he does so when he states:

But above all other people, prelates, priests and teachers especially should so rule themselves that they might receive the wisdom of God. For they are required to bear the burden of holy Church with their life and with their teaching, since they possess Christ’s heritage, both the spiritual and the physical. From this they should dispense to everyone what he needs, for they are supposed to be mediators between God and His people, that is, by the sacraments, by the sacrifice, by their prayers and by the death of our Lord Jesus Christ and by all the goods that they have received from God and which are still His. They should rightly thereby serve Him and His retinue. To this there pertains great virtue, enlightened reason, and clear discernment.

the stains out of the garments of his good works. And all the flesh [of the he-goat sacrificed in the tabernacle figure] of the offering is his. ‘For whoever helps convert a sinner has won him,’ says the Lord. And of this flesh no one else may eat than priests, for no one may bind or unbind the sinner on the part of God than the priest, to whom it is commended by God and by holy Church. And all the flesh that is left over to the next day is to be burned up. That is, when the priest helps and corrects any sinner according to his understanding and his capacity, all that is then lacking to him he is to commend to the fire, that is to the love of God. And thus he remains free and unoppressed at heart. And thus, every day on which God sends him a sinner, he may make a new offering, and help and correct anyone confided to him, according to his capacity,” *Tabernakel*, 5, 3657–74.

In the midst of his lengthy, blistering critique of the prelates, priests, and religious for going down the destructive paths of viciousness such as greed, pride, and all manner of vice, which destroys their ability to lead the Church into the depths of the burning love of God, Ruusbroec emphatically states: “And although the bishops are sometimes holy and of good will, those who are near them and carry out their office are cunning and merciless, and so greedy that no one can approach them, or obtain any favor, unless he buys it with money…and this disgusting calamity is contagious, and it has progressed, and has tainted all religious orders and all the priests in the world. And thus has the cold winter driven away the warm summer. And therefore, little spiritual fruit is remaining in holy Church,” *Tabernakel*, 5, 5987–95.

Ruusbroec spends a good deal of space noting the behavior of “unclean priests” and then shifts to discussing the healthy example of “the best priests alive,” *Tabernakel*, 5, 4910.

Tabernakel, 5, 4857–67. I have slightly altered the critical edition translation.
One can easily imagine Ruusbroec having in mind here and giving guidance to those who were part of the newly formed Groenendaal community as well as the priests at St. Gudula and other bishops and prelates in the Church hierarchy in Brussels and the surrounding area (and beyond).

The importance of priests for the life of the Church can be seen in the early section of the excursus where Ruusbroec reads the figure of the tabernacle and its priests as fulfilled by the Church’s priests and their eucharistic sacrifice. Ruusbroec first calls the public of priests’ attention to the fact that the eucharistic sacrifice, which Peter and all the bishops and priests following him perform, and the sacrifice which they themselves perform, is established and vivified by Christ’s sacrifice of death upon the cross.\(^{84}\) He then, as noted earlier in this chapter, teaches them that the laver signifies an affective, heartfelt earnestness in service to God and that they must wash themselves in it as needed, particularly before putting on priestly vestments and serving the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ.\(^{85}\) Ruusbroec then takes his priestly and prelate readers through a figural reading of the clothing of the tabernacle high priest. The elements of clothing are a sign of the truth of the virtues that all prelates must have and the first four should be in all priests.\(^{86}\)

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\(^{84}\) *Tabernakel*, 5, 819–844.

\(^{85}\) *Tabernakel*, 5, 845–921.

\(^{86}\) *Tabernakel*, 5, 922–1795. One must keep in mind here however that the prelates and priests are to be examples of what Ruusbroec ultimately calls “the common life.” Thus, while these virtues are to distinguish bishops and priests, all eight, in the end, should be a reality in not only the bishops, but in the priests, religious and laity as well, for all are called to the common life. I think Ruusbroec’s point is that if anyone should embody these eight virtues it should be bishops, for it seems, from the larger context of Ruusbroec’s mystical/contemplative teaching, that they are ultimately to lead all into this way of life. In other words, they have an intricate role in the salvation of all in holy Church.
The double white undergarment ornament is the first ornament, by which “we understand double purity, that is, purity of body and strong resistance always to every arousal of animal lust.”\(^{87}\) One can here hear a concern for the priests in the Groenendaal community and the priests and prelates in the wider diocese and church to avoid the shameful behavior Ruusbroec perceived in a number who occupied such positions, to which we have alluded in chapter one and the present chapter. Purity of body is also a sign for Ruusbroec that the unity of heart, the lower unity of the bodily facilities, is in proper submission to the higher spiritual unity of the human. This of course assumes that the higher unity is ever-growing in burning love in harmony with its union, in its ground, with the Word in the essential unity. This is related to the second garment as well, “that is the purity of heart, and honesty in moral conduct and in behavior, with works without, in the presence of all people.”\(^{88}\) This assumes the harmony of the unities of the “kingdom of the soul” assumed in the first ornament but adds the element of good works, which are seen by all people. This ensures that the prelates and priests are providing persuasive examples of lives that are oriented by the “savor” and “taste” for God’s love. For Ruusbroec, the inner unity with God in love and the going out and coming back in by the love of the Spirit, through the Son, in outer virtuous works of love is the only way in which these servants in the Church can truly be compelling examples of lives who “savor” and have a hungering “taste” for God. One can also discern here an unspoken concern to counter the temptation to fall prey to the antinomian behavior of people who had followed the sensibility of the Free Spirit, to which the spiritually hungry laity had become susceptible, given the lax spiritual lives of many in the leadership element of the church hierarchy.

\(^{87}\) *Tabernakel*, 5, 931–32.

\(^{88}\) *Tabernakel*, 5, 935–36: “Dat es survheit van herten ende eersamheit in den seden ende in der wandelingen met den werken van buten vore alle menschen.”
The third ornament is the belt and with this ornament Ruusbroec gives attention once again to his critical motif of the necessity of theocentric focus with all of one’s life, which is rooted in a pure conscience with innocence. He particularly focuses on the warp of the belt. Describing this figure and its truth the Fleming states:

By the warp we understand a pure conscience with innocence of life. This is the warp. In it one is to wear sky-blue, that is, heavenly intension; purple, that is, abstinence in all things that are not allowed; red, a strong earnestness to satisfy God and all people; lovely flowers, that is, to draw and teach other people by words and by good works.89

Here we see the theocentric focus (hemelsche meininge) connected with the earnestness (intense conviction) to satisfy God and others. Given Ruusbroec’s overarching trinitarian mystical theology, perhaps we should interpret this “strong earnestness” (starken erenst) as arising out of the intense loving desire, or what Ruusbroec describes as “burning or melting in love,” for and in union with God that characterizes, or at least goes hand in with, theocentric focus. And this burning love is restless and ever renewed. The restlessness of epektatic, inner love is wed to theocentric focus and this is integrally related to words and good works which lure the faithful deeper into sharing in the triune life. This results in, and here Ruusbroec’s hierarchical ecclesiology is foregrounded a bit, priests and prelates who are, in the words of Pope Gregory the Great, “servants of the servants of God” (servus servorum Dei).90 These kinds of princes of the

89 Tabernakel, 5, 940–45: “Met der warpten versteet men ene pure conscience met onnoeselheiden van levene. Dit es die warpte. Hier inne salmen dragen jacint, dat es hemelsche meininge; purpur, dat es abstinencie alle der dinge die ongeorloeft sijn; woermen, enen starken erenst gode gnoech te sine ende allen menschen; § graciose bloemen, dat es andere menschen trecken ende leren met waerden ende met goeden werken.” Emphasis added.

90 Here I mean “hierarchical” not in the contemporary understanding of a “top-down power scheme of oppression,” but rather in the sense of Denys the Areopagite, where the primary attention is given to hierarchs as those who serve those over whom they have been given care so that they may assist them in becoming all they are created to be as images of the Image. See The Celestial Hierarchy and The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy by Denys in Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987),
Church are shepherds who love the sheep by drawing them, through the beauty of holiness, deeper into sharing in the triune life, the paradoxical life of essential love.

Ruusbroec then turns to the fourth ornament, which “was an ornament for the head, namely a miter of fine linen, with bands of sky-blue bound and firmly affixed to the priest’s head, during every offering that he would make unto God.”

He goes on to describe the ornament allegorically when he notes:

By this we understand a liberty free of care. For the free will, which we compare to the head, ought to be imageless and without care in every priest, so that in all his service he would be unhindered, and might make worthy offering to God. Thus his head is adorned with the miter of purity and with the strong headpiece of bareness which no one can harm as long as he is without images. This adornment is to be bound and firmly affixed with bands of sky-blue, that is, with an entire turning away from the world into inner prayer and into heavenly exercises.

Ruusbroec’s commentary on the will that is free of care, as with the previous two virtues which should be present in all priests and prelates, and other passages we have examined in this chapter, is connected to the theocentric focus (eenvuldighe meynighe). However, here the Brabantine contemplative theologian also discusses one of the results of theocentric focus, a will that is free and free of care, what he calls “imageless.” Furthermore, this virtue of imagelessness must be nourished by “inner prayer and heavenly exercises,” by which Ruusbroec surely means the practice of contemplation, the cultivation of inner love. This practice cultivates the union of our spiritual unity with our essential unity, in which our soul hangs in indistinct union with our eternal idea in the Son. As we discussed at length in chapter two, our soul hangs in the Trinity in indistinct union because of the radical transcendence of God, articulated and held as standard 143–260. See also The Church’s Mystagogy by Maximus Confessor in Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings, trans. George Charles Berthold (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 181–214.

91 Tabernakel, 5, 946–48.

92 Tabernakel, 5, 902–909.
teaching in the Church from the Church Fathers through the time of Ruusbroec. This then helps us to understand what Ruusbroec means by the “imagelessness” which should characterize the will of every priest. Because God is utterly transcendent, not an object alongside other created objects in the cosmos or a force competing with other forces in the cosmos, the will that is focused upon God literally cannot be focusing upon a being which presents an image, for image characterizes the creature, the created. God is the uncreated and therefore cannot be captured as an object in our field of vision (whether that be bodily or spiritual vision). As the ancient wisdom states, “God is that reality whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”

Therefore, the transcendent Trinity is uncircumscribable, imageless to the human intellect. For Ruusbroec, as for Augustine, it is only in this focus upon the God who is imageless, that we can truly love the “image of God” that is our fellow human beings, as well as the rest of creation.

According to Ruusbroec these four virtues should be in every prelate and priest, as well as all religious. He goes on to describe four more virtues that should be present in all prelates by reading allegorically four other elements of clothing worn only by the high priest. The tunicle

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93 This ancient description of God goes as far back as Hermes Trismegistis and the *Hermetica* from the late second and third centuries. It is famously cited by Blaise Pascal in *Blaise Pascal, Pensées*, rev. ed., trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1995), 60. I have drawn the citation from Martin Laird, O.S.A., *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12. While Ruusbroec does not discuss it here, one may theologically state that part of the uniqueness of Christ as the true Adam or true image of God, is that, as the God-Human, his humanity fully reveals God and yet this revealing is not simply a matter of intellectual interest. His humanity, united with his deity, is the creature’s gateway into the triune life of God, which is boundless and uncircumscribable. Therefore, in a key sense, Christ’s revelation of God is a veiled revelation. But, again, this is not simply in order to satisfy an “epistemological itch” in the human. Rather, this revelation is most truly known by the creature in sharing, by the Spirit, through the Incarnate Son, in doxology. So, contra much contemporary modern and postmodern theology, perhaps our theological energies are misplaced by the obsession with developing a “doctrine of revelation.” This tends to be a particular epistemological preoccupation of modern theology reacting to post-Kantian enlightenment understandings of human epistemology.

94 *Tabernakel*, 5, 961–68.
signifies evangelical truth, while the four-colored scapular delves into the familiar theme from his anthropology of the unity of our spirit.\textsuperscript{95} The figure of the breastplate is understood by the canon as the sign of enlightened human rationality adorned with the twelve articles of faith which all prelates were to have.\textsuperscript{96} This is a lengthy section in which Ruusbroec’s guidance for prelates is intricately interwoven with various elements of his trinitarian theology, christology, pneumatology, and exemplarist anthropology. The last ornament, a second miter, worn by the high priest signifies how each prelate should have a free going-up in supernatural light.\textsuperscript{97} This miter “goes upward roundly, for it has no care, nor busyness with anyone, nor anyone with it. Nevertheless, it is a hidden adornment, and the principal beginning of all virtues.”\textsuperscript{98} This “going up” describes melting/burning in love in the essential union with God and clues us in to the fact that this last adornment is Ruusbroec’s call for all prelates to live the common life (\textit{dat ghemeyne leven}) for it is “principal beginning of all virtues.” The common life is constituted by this harmonization of inner union and outgoing love. Given the role of bishops and their call to lead the rest of the body, through teaching, example, and sacrament, to the common life, it seems only natural that Ruusbroec would teach of the necessity for this to be a reality in the lives of prelates and guide them toward such quality of life. This is confirmed in the next paragraph, for living the common life requires sharing the divine, triune life of essential love. In this next paragraph Ruusbroec, in describing the triple ring of gold surrounding the miter, states:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{95} The tunicle is discussed in \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 973–1015 while the four-colored scapular is interpreted in \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 1016–65.
\item \textsuperscript{96} \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 1066–1640.
\item \textsuperscript{97} \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 1641–1795.
\item \textsuperscript{98} \textit{Tabernakel}, 5, 1654–67.
\end{itemize}
By this triple ring of gold we understand the triple love which shall always reign in the free ascent of every prelate and of every enlightened person. In itself this love is essential love (weseleke minne) and it has embraced the free heavenly ascent with three tiers, or with three manners of loving. The first tier is that we are to freely love and desire God’s honor above all things. The second tier is that we are to renounce and disdain earthly things as far as comfort is concerned, out of love, for the honor of God. The third tier is that, without care or dejection of heart, we are to desire the salvation of each person as for ourselves. These three tiers, or the three golden rings, which bring to perfection one ring, that is a perfect divine love, which is a source of all virtue.

Here, at the summit of the mystical life of the prelate we find the sharing in the essential love of the trinity. The love of God is interwoven with virtuous love of fellow humans. This should lead us not to restrict our interpretation of the desiring of “the salvation of each person as for ourselves” to only the spiritual unity of human others (the immaterial dimension of the higher faculties). Rather, given the connection of perfect divine love and virtue, we should see this as a call to love the whole person and all her unities (essential, spiritual, and unity of heart) of the “kingdom of the soul.” This includes then the soul’s material manifestation, the body. And it is telling that in this quotation church bishops share in God’s essential love as does “every enlightened person.” For all prelates and priests are to lead all the faithful toward the common life, which is, in principle available, to all people. Ruusbroec calls for priests, prelates, and religious to distinguish themselves from others in holiness, but this is not because Ruusbroec is teaching a type of “two-tiered” Christianity in which priests, prelates, and religious have access to a level or depth of spiritual life not available to the laity. Rather, this call arises from the

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charisms, the gifts of the Spirit, through which God has called and empowered them, in order to enable all of the members of the Body of holy Church, the Tabernacle, to share in the depths and heights of the mystical life which partakes of the essential love of the Trinity.

This reading is confirmed as, in the final stages of the Tabernakel, Ruusbroec gives some of his most beautiful mystical, contemplative…theological reflections in all his works as he describes the goal of the mystical life, the common life (dat ghemeye leve). He does this by speaking to the public of “we humans.” However, this public is now perhaps more deeply aware that it is made up of the multiple publics of laity, prelates, priests, and religious (the one holy Church), due to the Brabantine’s moments of speaking directly to these specific groups throughout the treatise. He now addresses these multiple publics as the one public by reflecting on how we are led to sharing in God’s essential love (which is superessential for us) by dwelling in the contemplative life, which leads us to good works, inner rumination upon those good works, and then out again to more works. The image of one simply breathing deeply and rhythmically comes to mind as Ruusbroec states:

In this we are taught that if the grace of God moves us within to outward good works, and we then draw into us all the deeds of good works, and ruminate and chew them with desire and with devotion unto God’s honor, we are spiritually fed. And the more we multiply the intentions of our good works, the more we rechew our food [according to the analogy of animals that chew their food twice] and the better we are fed. Therefore, we are gladly to undertake outward works; for God Himself has wrought them, and His saints. And He has also taught and commanded them, from the beginning of the world in the law of nature, and in the law of the commandments, and in the law of the Gospel. They open to us the realm of heaven and unite us with God. They give us the angels as our companions; and they make us participants in all good and all holiness in heaven and on earth.100

These works are only true and good (“clean”) when they “have cloven feet. That is, by every good work we are joined to God, and by God to our fellow-Christians, so that we go in with all

100 Tabernakel, 5, 5769–81.
people to God, and go back out to all people with God.”

Ruusbroec seems to be articulating a reality of grace in which, as we are immersed ever-deeper into the love that inwardly intends God and grows in union with God, while simultaneously going out in good works to others, where we also intend God’s honor, we are united in harmonic fellowship with creation’s manifold creatures ("nature"). This unity in harmony happens in God as heaven and earth are united in harmony in the Trinity. Here we must remember Ruusbroec’s theology of the divine ideas, where in the Son lie all the eternal ideas of creation, in union with which creation is sustained in being by the power/love of the Spirit and through whom, by that same Spirit, all creation is drawn back into redemptive fellowship with the Father. We are made participants in “all good and all holiness in heaven and on earth.” Thus we are brought into harmonic union with the saints, our fellow-Christians, the angelic hierarchy, and the rest of creation.

Indeed, “everything which God made, except the sinner, keeps its order [harmony]. God has created sun and moon, heaven and earth, and angelic nature unto our service, so that we should serve Him.”

We are to join this harmonic chorus of creation by seeking God in performing works harmonized to the firm melody of triune love (made incarnate in Christ, by the Spirit) by intending God’s glory. “For He has made all things from His free outflowing goodness. And thus, we should bring ourselves and all things back into Him with free outflowing love. Then we would find blessedness in Him, and the right intention for our life and for all creatures.”

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101 Tabernakel, 5, 5790–93.

102 Tabernakel, 5, 5803–06.

outflowing and inflowing of triune love. We play our part as humanity by offering back to God, in our sharing in his inflowing love, all creation. And the Spirit is the Person who is the principle of the inflowing love, through the Son, in fellowship with the Father. Though Ruusbroec does not say all of this explicitly here, this is the “flowing, ebbing” sea of triune life that animates and enables this entire cosmic, and yet personal, symphonic dance, as we have seen in chapter two and thus far in the present chapter.

Notice how this brings the Christian seeking union with God into a life characterized by a perichoretic love in which we are united to God and thus, in God, with our fellow-Christians. We are then breathed “back out to all people with God.” This perichoretic, ecclesio-cosmic harmony is articulated by Ruusbroec in the following paragraph, where he teaches this general public that, “the right intention for our life should be mutual love and fidelity each to the others [ecclesiological others and, presumably, to the rest of the “cosmic others” such as “nature” and angels], and that we should intend and desire God’s honor in all our works.”

Ruusbroec then highlights the fact that Christ has taught us this through his word and works and has prayed that such a life would be possible for all through the Lord’s prayer. Ruusbroec subsequently shares with his audience/directees a lovely passage, which gives a picture of the common life on a communal and perhaps even cosmic scale, which includes the gifts offered by various members of holy Church, from the priest’s work in the Mass to our everyday activities. Here the canon notes:

This prayer [the Lord’s Prayer] Christ Himself has ordered unto the glory of God, and to the benefit of all people. That is why it is common (ghemeine) to all good Christian people, just as the Mass is, and all the service of holy Church, and also all the good works done in the whole world. For the priest says his Mass and the farmer sows his grain and

104 Tabernakel, 5, 5812–14.

the sailor sails the sea; and so each one serves the others. Although the works are varied and dissimilar, the fruit of the works is common (ghemeine). And whoever desires most of all the glory of God, and the common (ghemeinen) profit of humanity shall be rewarded the most by God.\footnote{Tabernakel, 5, 5820–28.}

This passage highlights the manifold gifts of the Body of Christ, the Spiritual Tabernacle, and assures us that the common life, the goal of the mystical life for Ruusbroec, is not an isolated, individualistic affair. The Brabantine affirms this when he continues by stating: “You see well, the human body has many members, and each member which is healthy serves all the other members in bodily needs and keeps the place and order in which God has placed it. And the stature of the human body is raised up heavenward, as a sign that one ought to live unto the glory of God.”\footnote{Tabernakel, 5, 5829–33.}

When Ruusbroec shifts to the sixth point he interprets for this broadest public the figure of the ark. It is here that he illumines for his readers both the commonness of the Body of Christ, the Spiritual Tabernacle, and the perichoretic love of that Tabernacle as it partakes in the essential love of the Trinity. In this point we see the goal of the mystical life as a common love and life which partakes in the triune mystery in such a way that the life of the Tabernacle/Body is a perichoretic dance in which all is in God and God is in all and the members, by being in God and God in them, become porous to one another, dwelling in one another with God in a way that is a rendition of the medieval notion of “complex space.”\footnote{Complex space was, in medieval idiom, a spatial (such as Gothic architecture) and social (we could say “spatio-social” or perhaps even “spatio-socio-temporal,” given the way Augustine’s “Two Cities” theology was part of this schema) way of thinking of the dispersal of power within the “whole” and the “many” of the body politic, which was ultimately rooted in the Pauline idea of the Body of Christ, where God is present in all and the whole is in each member and the members in the whole and in one another. In I Corinthians 12 Paul describes this as the Church who is “one Body of Christ/many members” and “one Temple of the Spirit/many gifts.”}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[106] Tabernakel, 5, 5820–28.
\item[107] Tabernakel, 5, 5829–33.
\item[108] Complex space was, in medieval idiom, a spatial (such as Gothic architecture) and social (we could say “spatio-social” or perhaps even “spatio-socio-temporal,” given the way Augustine’s “Two Cities” theology was part of this schema) way of thinking of the dispersal of power within the “whole” and the “many” of the body politic, which was ultimately rooted in the Pauline idea of the Body of Christ, where God is present in all and the whole is in each member and the members in the whole and in one another. In I Corinthians 12 Paul describes this as the Church who is “one Body of Christ/many members” and “one Temple of the Spirit/many gifts.”
\end{footnotes}
ark, as Ruusbroec notices that there is not many but one ark for all of the people of Israel. It is here that the Brabantine contemplative theologian articulates one of the more beautiful, mystical passages in all of his works. Namely, he shares with his readers the mystery and beauty of the love of the Body of Christ, holy Church. And while he is not giving specific, practical direction here, he is articulating the ecclesiological, eschatological, trinitarian horizon (present and yet to come), within which all of the Augustinian master’s guidance coheres and toward which he calls his readers/directees. With words at the edge of mystery Ruusbroec states:

This ark signifies for us nothing else than the union which each good person, or all good people, make with God. For union with God is particular to each one who receives God in love, and it is common to all those who love, for there we all come together in one. And in the union each one receives God and all who love. And he is received with God by everyone who loves. And thus we all dwell in God and God in us all and each one with God in the others. And this is the ark which I mean, that is made between God and every good person. There comes God from above with all His gifts. And we come from below with our love and with all our works. And thus we make in us the ark of eternal holiness.109


This passage is an appropriate one with which to end our exploration of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction in the *Tabernakel*, for it brings together and assumes the triune, paradoxical life of essential love that is God and its eternal “ebbing and flowing” in the Spirit, the exemplarist existence in the Son of humanity, and the true mystical path of the active, inner, contemplative, and common lives (of which this passage is a microcosmic summary). It also provides a communal, cosmic vision which, if pursued, leads the faithful away from the errors of the Free Spirit sensibility and its failure to imagine the mystical life in a way that upholds our union with God, and thus one another, while also honoring our created otherness, based in the classical trinitarian metaphysics of transcendence, which is operative in Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical/contemplative theology. Rather than the Free Spirit sensibility and its vision in which all distinction is ultimately lost in formless being, Ruusbroec offers and calls his readers/directees to a vision of continued otherness amongst the members of holy Church, the Body of Christ, and yet this otherness is united in the love. This unity is, as we have seen in previous passages such as the figure of the candelabrum, is the uniting of the members in the triune life of essential love through Jesus Christ as the Spirit draws all into the perichoretic, triune embrace. This mysterious unity is such that we are indwelled by God as we indwell God. And by this mutual indwelling we mutually, with and in God, indwell one another. This vision, rather than the monistic vision of the Free Spirits, is, according to Ruusbroec, the goal to run toward. And in running we will ultimately obtain; and in obtaining we will continue to run. For this is goal is nothing other than an ever-deeper sharing in the Triune life of the paradox of essential love.
Conclusion

There are many other passages of spiritual direction Ruusbroec offers in the *Tabernakel*. This comes from the fact that the work as a whole can in some sense be described as a work of written spiritual direction. As a result, there are a multitude of other passages in the work which serve as helpful examples of the Brabantine mystical theologian’s spiritual direction and how it is shaped by his larger trinitarian mystical theology. Nevertheless, the passages we have explored, addressed to the various publics to which he writes, make abundantly clear that the instances of Ruusbroec’s spiritual guidance given in this his largest work are harmonies which play in intricate relation to the firm melody that is his trinitarian mystical theology. These exemplary passages of guidance are luminously porous to the canon’s teachings regarding the paradoxical simultaneity of the eternal, outgoing love of the Persons of the Trinity and their eternal, fruitive enjoyment in their perichoretic unity (essential love), as well as his christology, pneumatology, exemplarist anthropology, and ecclesiology. Furthermore, the guidance offered in these passages are linked to his teaching regarding true and false mystical/contemplative life, and the common life, which counters the errors of the Free Spirit sensibility. Moreover, any number of these interwoven themes shine through in the examples of Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction we have examined. Even when one or two of these elements shine through more than the others in a particular passage they all seem to be assumed by the Brabantine mystical theologian. We now turn to two more treatises of Ruusbroec’s later writings to investigate the Augustinian canon’s spiritual direction offered therein and to discern how this guidance is likewise shaped by his trinitarian mystical theology. In other words, we will delve into the Ruusbroecian gestures of written spiritual direction in these further works to assess their harmonic shape in relation to the *cantus firmus*, the firm melody of the Brabantine’s trinitarian
mystical theology and its various elements. This will be our task in the next chapter. To this task we now turn.
Chapter 4: Cantus Firmus and Symphonic Harmony II: The Trinitarian Shape of Ruusbroec’s Spiritual Direction in Vanden seven sloten—The Seven Enclosures, and Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit—A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness

Introduction

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Tabernakel covers a great deal of spiritual-theological terrain by way of Ruusbroec’s figural reading of the Old Testament tabernacle. This, along with his long excursus on the priesthood, makes for Ruusbroec’s longest work by far. The Brabantine’s two treatises we will investigate in this chapter are much shorter works. These writings are Vanden seven sloten—The Seven Enclosures and Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit—A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness. In the Sloten and the Spiegel Ruusbroec wrote works that, as a whole, can definitely be described as spiritual direction, for they are each addressed to audiences who were likely members of religious communities. As we shall discuss below, the identity of the community to whom the Sloten is addressed is much more certain than that of the one to whom the Spiegel is written. These two works are from the mature Ruusbroec and are examples of his wisdom as both a mystical theologian and spiritual director after years as chaplain priest in Brussels and as the spiritual sage and guide of the Groenendaal community.

As our exploration of these two works unfolds the reader will see that, for all the differences between these two writings and the Tabernakel, what they share in common with the latter is the way in which Ruusbroec’s understanding of the paradox of essential love (weselijcke minne) of the Triune God is their omnipresent, organizing center. This is the perfect, eternal simultaneity of the fruitive rest and enjoyment (ghebruken) of the perichoretic embrace of the Persons in their unicity and the active, outgoing love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which constitutes the mysterious life of the Trinity. This understanding of the paradoxical life of
the Triune God, along with its attendant elements of pneumatology, christology, doctrine of creation, exemplaristic anthropology, ecclesiology, teaching on the common life and the spiritual senses, sacramental theology, etc., is the firm melody (*cantus firmus*) which orders or harmonizes Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction given in the two works, as it does in the *Tabernacle*. The *Sloten* and the *Spieghel* also share the characteristic of having significant reflections on the vital importance of the Eucharist in the mystical pilgrimage. The *Spieghel* in particular has a lengthy excursus on the Eucharist in the spiritual life. Both of the works contain important instances of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction in their reflections on the Eucharistic meal. These two treatises from the Brabantine mystical theologian’s later life are two of the clearest and finest examples of spiritual direction to be found in his corpus.

I. Vanden seven sloten

While one should not surmise that concrete practice in everyday life is not in the ever-assumed background for Ruusbroec in early works such as the elaborate vision of the *Brulocht*, the lovely and intelligent synthesis of the *Steen*, and his earliest treatise *Dat rijecke der ghelieven*—*The Realm of Lovers*, there is little to be found in them in the way of guidance concerning the details of day-to-day living. As we have seen, this changes to some degree in the *Tabernakel*, particularly with its guidance for priests, though guidance for the concrete details of daily life is still limited in this vast allegorical treatise. There is a decisive change in *Vanden seven sloten*—*The Seven Enclosures*.¹ In this work the Flemish mystical theologian addresses a convent of Clares (to be discussed more in the next section) and offers them spiritual guidance in

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the form of a program of daily life, which would foster the growth of the community into the contemplative life and, ultimately, the *common life*.\(^2\) Indeed, as Guido de Baere states:

*Vanden seven sloten* is a work of the mature Ruusbroec…[and it] shows another aspect of his many-sided genius: his sense for the concrete every-day life, which to him never becomes banal, penetrated as it is by the ever surprising divine reality. No work of Ruusbroec is so filled up with matter-of-fact advice, but these suggestions open themselves again and again to mystic depths scarcely to be expressed.\(^3\)

In the *Sloten* we find guidance in which the Clares are invited into the awareness of the porousness of their daily life to the infinite depths of Triune love. De Baere goes on to say that “In the *VII Sloten* and also in the work *Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit [A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness]* written later on, concrete tips are legion—though always as ways to, and expressions of, divine union.”\(^4\)

The program of contemplative life recommended by Ruusbroec addresses various concrete elements of the daily life of an enclosed nun, such as: Matins, Eucharist, service amongst the members of the community, caring for the ill (and being cared for when one is ill), behavior towards fellow sisters, the communities’ dress, diet and meals, and Vespers.\(^5\) A thread running through these concrete details and issues of the daily horarium is Ruusbroec’s call to the Clares to serve God by serving one another and any who come to the community. And in the midst of practical reflections on daily life are beautiful and ecstatic passages on the mystical/contemplative life of union with God which deal with the familiar themes of

\(^2\) I use “contemplative” here in both the more general sense of a life formed around the practice of contemplation but also in the more narrow sense in which Ruusbroec uses it in the *Brulocht*. This second sense is, for Ruusbroec, the aspect of the mystical life, which denotes the contemplative’s resting and melting in the love of the perichoretic unity of the Persons.

\(^3\) De Baere, “Introduction: *Sloten,*” 18.


superessential life, the divine touch, the storm of love, etc., as the concrete always opens out to the transcendent depth, the triune life, which is the inmost element of human life.⁶ These concomitant elements of the treatise, reflections on the mystical depths of union with God and the call to service in the details of the community’s daily life, are expressions of the heart of all of Ruusbroec’s mystical theology, namely, his claim that sharing in the Triune life at the most profound level is the *common life*, the life of being inwardly united with God in the embrace of the perichoretic unity of the Holy Spirit while simultaneously going out to the neighbor in love with the Son and Spirit. In other words: “The deeper [a person] sinks away in God’s abyss, the more abundantly [she] bears fruit in every-day life.”⁷ Important for the present work is the fact that, as De Baere asserts: “Undoubtedly Ruusbroec’s growing attention for the concrete is closely bound up with his increasing experience as a spiritual guide.”⁸ The *Sloten* is an example of Ruusbroec’s mature and blossoming gifts as a spiritual director of individuals and communities, whether his own Groenendaal monastery or the community of Clares in Brussels.

**A. Date, Occasion, and Structural Considerations**

The *Sloten* was written to a Clare in Brussels named Margriet van Meerbeke, with whom Ruusbroec had a sustained writing relationship.⁹ We know this to be the case because an extant


⁹ See Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusborec’s Life and Works,” 74 and De Baere, “Introduction: *Sloten,*” 17–19. Albert Ampe made a significant contribution to Ruusbroec scholarship in an essay in which he discussed Margriet van Meerbeke as the recipient of multiple writings or letters from Ruusbroec. See Albert Ampe, “De bestemmelinge van Ruusbroec’s Spieghel en Trappen,” *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 45 (1971), 241–289. Loet Swart describes Ampe’s contribution when he notes: “The only contribution to be dedicated entirely to the issue of the occasion of Ruusbroec’s works is that of Ampe (1971). His article is premised on the idea that
letter from the Brabantine from 1346, the year in which Meerbeke’s convent was founded, is addressed to her.\(^\text{10}\) Other manuscript evidence tells us that Ruusbroec wrote the work after having become a religious, which would be 1350.\(^\text{11}\) Though it seems likely to the present author that the date of 1350, the year in which the Groenendaal community adopted the Rule of St. Augustine, is correct here, one may interpret Ruusbroec’s becoming a religious more broadly, thus pointing to his move to the hermitage at Groenendaal in 1343 as the beginning of his “becoming a religious.”\(^\text{12}\)

The *Sloten* was written prior to *Van seven trappen—The Seven Rungs* and *Een spieghel der eeuwiger salicheit—A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*. The *Spieghel* was produced in 1359. This would put the date of the *Sloten*’s composition between 1350 and 1358 if one interprets Ruusbroec’s entry into the religious life strictly as the time of the Groenendaal community’s adoption of the Rule of St. Augustine. Should one interpret his becoming a hermit at Groenendaal as the beginning of his religious life, the possible timeline for composition would broaden to 1346 (the year of the establishment of the Clare convent) to 1358. Regardless of which dates are preferred, Ruusbroec and Meerbeke seem to have shared a writing relationship of some duration.

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\(^\text{11}\) Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 74.

\(^\text{12}\) This is the way in which Guido De Baere tends to interpret Ruusbroec’s “becoming religious.” See De Baere, “Introduction: *Sloten*,” 17.
Relying on the investigation of Albert Ampe, De Baere interprets the manuscript evidence as pointing to Margriet as the recipient of the Spieghel and thinks that it is likely that the Trappen was intended for this particular Clare as well.\(^\text{13}\) While Ampe’s thesis is perhaps convincing concerning the Spieghel, regarding the Trappen it is much more difficult to be certain of the recipient(s).\(^\text{14}\) This means that, while Ampe and De Baere are perhaps correct as to the Spieghel, there is no scholarly consensus on these matters. Arblaster and Faesen make a relatively coherent case that, of these three documents, only the Sloten was addressed to Meerbeke. Therefore, to the author of the present work, the destinations of the Spieghel and the Trappen are still open questions.\(^\text{15}\) One dimension of the discussion in which the present author does agree with Arblaster and Faesen, somewhat in opposition to De Baere’s interpretation, is the identity of the recipient(s) of the Sloten. While De Baere is correct that the treatise is addressed to Meerbeke, he


\(^{14}\) Swart, “Overview of Ruusbroec Research,” 312.

\(^{15}\) In regard to whether or not the Spieghel was addressed to Meerbeke, Arblaster and Faesen state: “This claim [that Meerbeke was the recipient], which is based on the following notation in one of the manuscripts—‘This book was written by the Reverend John of Ruusbroec in the year of Our Lord 1359, and he sent it to a nun of the Order of Clare (Dit boec heeft ghemaect heer Jan Ruusbroec int Jair ons (Heeren) m.ccc. ende lix ende heefet ghesonnen enre nonnen van clara)—may not be correct. Strictly speaking, we may only conclude that Ruusbroec sent the work to a Poor Clare, not that he wrote it specifically for Margriet van Meerbeke. Indeed, a number of passages in the work appear rather strange when we assume that it was written for a female religious. More probably, it was written for a different group of readers and later sent to a Poor Clare (possibly the same Margriet van Meerbeke),” Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 75. Arblaster and Faesen also disagree with De Baere and Ampe regarding the Trappen when they state: “Indeed, again we find a number of passages that lead us to suspect that it was written for a group of (probably male) readers rather than one recipient. In any case, the work clearly appears to have been written for members of a religious community,” Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 77. Also helpful in this discussion is Geert Warnar, Ruusbroec: Literature and Mysticism in the Fourteenth Century (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 242–269.

does not address the work only to her. Through Margriet Ruusbroec addresses the entire community of Clares, which constitutes the convent. As Arblaster and Faesen note:

Ruusbroec also clearly felt personally involved in the new community, which was explicitly intended to be a contemplative convent. The fact that Ruusbroec wrote [the] Enclosures for Margriet need certainly not be interpreted in an exclusive sense. Although he addresses her personally, he indirectly also addresses every member of the young community. In the Middle Ages, letter-writing was rarely a strictly personal affair. The work is presented as a program for the contemplative life, based on a number of concrete elements from the life of an enclosed nun.16

As mentioned above, Ruusbroec believes these elements of concrete daily living are doorways to the transcendent depths of the mystical life, which means these elements lead to and are directly related to contemplation.17 That being said, it certainly seems that De Baere is correct to note that the Brabantine mystical theologian had high hopes for Meerbeke and held her in high regard when he states:

Between the Master of Groenendaal and the Brussels Clare a dialogue was going on of which the Sloten is a privileged moment. The personal destination of the treatise left an unmistakable imprint upon the contents. And in no other work does Ruusbroec address someone as often as four times with: “lieve suster” (dear sister)…Also exceptional is the sustained use of the ghi-form, which is more frequent than the wi-form.18

Therefore, while De Baere’s interpretation of Meerbeke as the single recipient is incomplete, it helps us to nuance our interpretation a bit further and conclude that, while the community of Clares as a whole are the intended audience, Ruusbroec’s relationship with Meerbeke is the doorway into his being afforded the opportunity to speak to the whole community because he seems to share a closer relationship with her than any others in the convent. In terms of the

structure and contents of the *Sloten* it is first important to be aware of the fact that the treatise, like all of Ruusbroec’s works, is, in the words of Guido de Baere:

…a variation on his fundamental intuition. In his deepest essence man is created unto God’s image. He has to rediscover this image, not by rejecting all things created but by letting himself be freed of all egoism in his relation to creation, so that it becomes transparent and reveals the Image of the Creator. But as in no other treatise this work has countless ramifications for even the smallest details of daily life.  

Thus, while the work is unique in terms of the *intensity* of focus upon the mundane daily routine of an enclosed nun, it is nonetheless a variation of the fundamental themes found throughout the mystical theological corpus of Ruusbroec. As discussed in chapter two of the present work and in the previous chapter on the *Tabernakel*, Ruusbroec believed that the reason the laity of the church were falling prey to mystical heresy such as that of the Free Spirit tendency was that the prelates, priests, and religious lacked a savor for the contemplative life of intimacy with and in the Triune God. Therefore, not only were they damaging their own spiritual life, they were also destroying their ability to lead the rest of the Body of Christ into cultivation of the savor for contemplative intimacy and mystical union with and in the Trinity. In *The Seven Enclosures* Ruusbroec particularly focuses on the religious orders of the church. As De Baere notes, in reiterating what the Brabantine describes in the early portion of the treatise, the monastics and mendicants were, in the way of Pope Gregory the Great and the founders of the various orders such as Francis, to be servants:

But the religious have been unfaithful to the legacy of their Founders; the rule has been relaxed, poverty has degenerated into luxury, austerity has become love of ease. Learning has evaporated into the pursuit of subtle innovations and correction has but an eye to its own reputation. In a word—the cloistered life is in decay.  

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As a result, the Brabantine contemplative theologian writes this treatise to help the Clares of Brussels cultivate the mystical life of savor for God, which leads to the common life and leads the laity into pursuit of the same savor and life.

Therefore, as has already been noted, the structure of the *Sloten* is oriented around the daily horarium of the community of the Brussels Clares. After calling the convent of sisters to the orientation of seeing the cloistered life as one of servanthood after the pattern of Christ, Ruusbroec directs the nuns into practicing purity of conscience through self-examination, trust in God’s forgiveness, continually remembering their need of God for forgiveness, and growth in the desire to include all the saints and people in their (eternal) love. The Brabantine then guides the community in how to practice the daily elements of the horarium in the way of holiness. These elements include morning prayer, Mass, communion, acts of service toward other sisters in the community, facing one’s own times of illness, relating with fellow sisters, meal times, and social interactions with visitors. Along the way through these various elements of communal life Ruusbroec shows how these portions of daily living are porous and open one to the depths of life in God. This is seen in reflection on communion during Mass and mealtimes.

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21 My description of the structure of the work has been greatly influenced by De Baeres work and the work of Arblaster and Faesen. See De Baere, “Introduction: Sloten,” 20–33; and Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusborec’s Life and Works,” 74–75.

22 *Sloten*, 1–70.

23 *Sloten*, 71–87.

24 *Sloten*, 88–493.

25 The small digression on the inner life and union in communion is found in *Sloten*, 125–257. For the reflection on physical and spiritual hunger see *Sloten*, 372–393.
Ruusbroec then goes into a digression in order to offer deeper reflection on “the seven enclosures” and “the three lives.” This lengthy digression forms the structural core of the work.\(^{26}\) The first enclosure is the physical cloister (501–507),\(^{27}\) while the second enclosure is enlightened reason or “the orientation of inner attention,”\(^{28}\) which rightly orders the life of the senses (508–531). The third enclosure is the loving affection of Christ (532–547), the fourth enclosure is entry into the free will of God as our orienting, sole focus, through the denial of our own will (548–577),\(^{29}\) and the fifth enclosure is contemplation or “gazing and contemplating, with simple vision, in the divine light” (starende ende scouwende met eenvuldegens gesichte in godleken lichte) (578–610).\(^{30}\) The sixth enclosure is, through love, becoming one spirit with the Triune God, Ruusbroec’s version of “annihilation,” in opposition to the “annihilation” into formless being of the Free Spirit heresy (611–650).\(^{31}\) With the seventh enclosure we have final, silent rest (651–660).

If Ruusbroec ended here it would seem that this treatise, at least in terms of the discussion of the seven enclosures and the weight of emphasis placed upon them in terms of their length, contradicts his other works, which stress the goal of the mystical life as the common life, the

\(^{26}\) Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusborec’s Life and Works,” 74. For Ruusbroec’s musings on the seven enclosures and the three lives see Sloten, 494–745.

\(^{27}\) This and the following parenthetical notations from the section on the seven enclosures are all from the Sloten of of the CCCM critical edition. I simply shift briefly to parenthetical citation of the specific enclosures for simplicity and brevity’s sake.


\(^{29}\) See De Baere, “Introduction: Sloten,” 27.

\(^{30}\) Quoted in Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusborec’s Life and Works,” 74–75.

sharing in the paradoxical simultaneity of the active love of the Trinitarian Persons and their enjoyable rest in their perichoretic unity. However, Ruusbroec does not end here. Rather, he revisits the three last enclosures by looking at the “three lives” (the “active,” “interior,” and “contemplative” lives, which we have seen in *The Spiritual Espousals*,)\(^{32}\) and the allegory of the four animals.\(^{33}\) In these passages Ruusbroec explores the theocentric life through the “three lives” (and their assumed unities of heart, spirit, and essence) and the touch (*gerinen*), leading to the soul-storm of violent impetuosity (*oerwoet*) in love. This violent impetuosity, as De Baere states: “passes over into rest (809–833) and…finally, the soul abandons itself entirely in order to enter into the experience of unity of the divine Persons (834–867; cf. 651–654). The highest experience of union includes all the previous levels (868–884).”\(^{34}\) This inclusion of the three previous levels in the union with the triune Persons shows that the end of the mystical life is ever-deepening participation in the triune life of essential love in which activity and blissful rest are in paradoxical, mutually enriching harmony. Ruusbroec finishes the treatise with his guidance for the sisters to read the “three little books” during evening prayer. These are the book of sin (written in black ink), the book of Christ (in red ink), and the book of eternal life (in golden ink). With these structural elements and themes in mind we are now in a place to dive deeper into particular passages of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction in the *Sloten* and articulate their trinitarian shape.

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\(^{32}\) *Sloten*, 661–745.

\(^{33}\) *Sloten*, 746–890.

\(^{34}\) De Baere, “Introduction: *Sloten,*” 21. In text, parenthetical citations of from the *Sloten* provided by De Baere.
**B. Spiritual Direction in Vanden seven sloten**

As we delve now into some of the particular instances (which are numerous) of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction or guidance given to the community of Clares, there are a couple of crucial factors to keep in mind. Firstly, we must remember De Baere’s description quoted above in the first section on the Sloten in this chapter when he notes that the treatise shows Ruusbroec’s “sense for the concrete every-day life, which to him never becomes banal, penetrated as it is by the ever surprising divine reality. No work of Ruusbroec is so filled up with matter-of-fact advice, but these suggestions open themselves again and again to mystic depths scarcely to be expressed.”\(^\text{35}\) This is not surprising given Ruusbroec’s assumption of classical transcendence, which he inherited from the Augustinian and Dionysian streams of Christian Neoplatonic mystical theology. The non-contrastive, non-competitive transcendence of the Trinity allows Ruusbroec to describe, once we have begun to be freed of egocentric, idolatrous ways of interacting with the rest of creation, how we may mystically discern God as “more inner” to creation, from every moment and to the smallest particle, than it is to itself (in the way of Augustine). So the mundane is always filled with the potency to draw us into the mystical depths of divine transcendence. Secondly, as we shall see, the way in which Ruusbroec oscillates between how to approach the elements of the daily horarium through service and reflection on the inner life of union with God in love, is a pattern that emerges. This in fact makes perfect sense, given his understanding that the height of the common life is the harmonious sharing of the nun/contemplative in the paradoxical, essential love of simultaneous action and joyful union that is the life of the triune God.

Given these two crucial factors just noted it will be helpful to explore a few of the many instances of Ruusbroec’s direction in which the active elements of daily life open to the mystical depths of the inner life of union.\textsuperscript{36} We will also see here important instances of how the triune paradox of essential love (\textit{weselijke minne}) and its attendant dimensions of exemplarist anthropology, pneumatology, christology, ecclesiology, etc. inform the Brabantine’s spiritual direction given to the community of Clares just as a firm melody informs its various harmonies.

Early in the \textit{Sloten}, we find just such a passage. After calling the Clares to the familiar notion of the theocentric angle of vision and intention,\textsuperscript{37} Ruusbroec offers guidance upon how one approaches and participates in daily Mass. He does so not only after the call to theocentric intention but also after exhorting Margriet van Meerbeke and her fellow nuns to serve in the way of Christ and Francis (as opposed to many religious who have forsaken the way of their founders) and offering guidance for their approach to morning prayer.\textsuperscript{38}

Ruusbroec first instructs the nuns to begin the Mass with confession to God of sin and listening to the sermon, “paying close attention — more for your life than for knowledge; for he who knows much and lives nothing loses his time.”\textsuperscript{39} One hears here not only an implicit critique of the decaying religious orders (and those within them who desire knowledge without love) but perhaps also an indictment of the quietism and antinomianism of the tendency of the Free Spirit.

\textsuperscript{36} Throughout this section I have been helped by the invaluable commentary of Guido De Baere in his introduction to the critical edition of the \textit{Sloten}. See De Baere, “Introduction: \textit{Sloten},” 23–33.

\textsuperscript{37} “Dear sister, above all things, may God be your intention and your love,” \textit{Sloten}, 1–2: “Lieve suster, boven alle dinc, sy god ghemeint ende ghemint.” I have changed the critical edition translation only slightly.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Sloten}, 15–91.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Sloten}, 98–100.
Ruusbroec’s theology of the contemplative’s participation in the triune essential love propels him to offer guidance that encourages his directees, in this case the convent of Clares, to be aware of the fact that one who descends into the true mystical depths of the Trinity is one who embodies the inner and outer virtues of Christ, as empowered by the Spirit who draws the community into the Triune embrace. There is a life to be lived that is both joyful rest and active love for others.

Further on in the service the sisters are to:

…call to mind the suffering and passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ; [and] reflect on it with loving compassion and thank Him with humble fervor because He willed to become human, to live and to die the shameful bitter death for your sake and for your sins. Offer this to His heavenly Father. And with it, offer yourself and all your needs and all that could be to holy Christendom’s profit, just as He Himself did when He died and as He still does in eternal life before the face of His Father.40

This, continues Ruusbroec, is the sacrifice of Christ in which, by God’s power, the sacrifice of the consecrated elements of the body and blood offered by priests in the Mass participates. Herein, in Christ’s sacrifice offered by the Church in the Mass, is the sister to offer not only herself but all the dignity and glory of Mary, the communion of the saints, martyrs, confessors, holy virgins, angels, and service of the church.41 With this whole offering of the Church and the angelic hierarchies in Christ the Clares are “with all your faculties and with all that you are capable of, [to] surrender yourself before the eyes of God.”42 They are then to “walk and dwell there in gratitude, praise, and heartfelt affection. In this way you shall participate in the passion

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40 Sloten, 100–108: “…soe suldi vore nemen dat liden ende die passie ons heren Jhesu Cristi. Die suldi overdinken met minleker conpassien, ende sult heme dies danken met oetmoedeger devoutien, dat hi omme uwen wille ende omme uwer sonden wille mensche werden woude, leven, sterven woude die scandeleke bettere doet. Ende die suldi offereren sinen hemelschen vader. Ende daer mede suldi offeren u selven ende al uwe noet ende alle den orbore der heilegher kerstenheit, geliker wijs dat hi selve dede doen hi staerf, ende noch doet in dat ewege leven vore dat anschijn sijns vader.”

41 Sloten, 113–117.

42 Sloten, 117–119.
and death of Our Lord, and in all the good that has ever been done, or ever shall be in heaven and on earth. For thus one receives all the fruits of the sacrament, spiritually, in one’s soul.”

In this passage of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction for the community we encounter the concrete practice of participation in Mass as a central entryway into the passion of Christ. As the passage shows (in the first two lines of the treatise noted earlier in this section), for Ruusbroec one cannot even begin to make this movement without the grace-enabled theocentric posture of God being one’s single intention (eenvuldighe meyninghe). And, as discussed in the previous paragraph, through this intention one is drawn into a life to be lived rather than simply knowledge to be acquired. Ruusbroec’s guidance for the Clares as to how to receive “all the fruits of the sacrament, spiritually, in one’s soul” by sharing in Christ’s, and thus the entire Church, communion of saints, and angelic hierarchies’, sacrifice is oriented by his christology (as discussed in chapter two and in chapter three, on the Tabernakel, of the present work).

According to Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology, as we saw earlier in the figure of the candelabrum in the Tabernakel, the sharing of the sisters in the benefits of communion turns on the incarnation of the Son, the Word of the Father. The life, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ is efficacious for the redemption of creatures, particularly human creatures, for the deep truth of their existence lies in their life in this very Word who becomes incarnate by the Spirit in order to reorient them toward their union with their deep truth as divine idea in the Word. This is their origin, sustaining life, and telos. Against the Free Spirit Ruusbroec sees the sacraments of the Church as essential to human redemption and growth in the mystical life. Through Eucharistic communion the Spirit draws the sisters into sharing in the sacrifice and “the contemplation of Christ, the Word incarnate who finds humanity in its degradation, leads

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43 Sloten, 119–124.
believers to the encounter, in and through Christ, with the creative and re-creative truth of themselves which is God.\textsuperscript{44} And this is to be done with all their faculties in the “kingdom” of their soul to the best of their ability.\textsuperscript{45}

Ruusbroec works to persuade the sisters to practice spiritual hunger in relation to the sacrament. Here we see a manifestation, in the Dionysian mode of mystical theology and like Hadewijch before him, of Ruusbroec as erotic mystical theologian.\textsuperscript{46} Along with the Dionysian influence we also see the influence of Augustine’s Eucharistic theology.\textsuperscript{47} Ruusbroec states:

In company with your sisters, approach the holy sacrament with interior fervor and great desire... when you approach the Sacrament, and before and after, and as frequently as possible, practice spiritual hunger and thirst for the eternal food so that all your innermost powers and all your veins yearn and yawn to be fed and satisfied. For God gives hunger within the faculties by means of (His) grace and (our) activity, and He gives satisfaction in the soul’s essence through His own proper indwelling. Therefore, let yourself hunger and thirst much after God, and then you shall feel and find satisfaction within your essence. For if you, with avid desire, can eat and digest Christ within yourself, in turn you

\textsuperscript{44} Mark McIntosh, “The Maker’s Meaning: Divine Ideas and Salvation,” Modern Theology 28:3 July 2012, 372. McIntosh here is describing how, for Augustine, creatures are created through and redeemed by the Word as the one in whom their potency of life lies as ideas of the Father. This of course is part of the Christian Platonist tradition we see in Ruusbroec as well and therefore is just as easily said of the Brabantine’s soteriology as that of the bishop of Hippo.

\textsuperscript{45} Sloten, 117–119.


\textsuperscript{47} Augustine, in his theology of the eucharist, famously notes: “nor shall you change Me, like the food of your flesh, into yourself, but you shall be changed into Me,” Augustine, Confessions, Book VII, Nos. 10, 16. This Eucharistic theology of Augustine, as the next quotation from the Sloten will show, deeply influenced Ruusbroec.
are eaten and digested into Him. For He Himself says: “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood dwells in Me and I in him.” And this is eternal life…that is why you should love so deeply that God’s eternal love enfolds you; thus you shall become one spirit and one love with God.\footnote{Sloten, 125–142: “Ende ghi sult oec ten heylegen sacramente gaen met innegher devotien, met groter begerten, ende met uwen susteren…ende alse gi ten sacramente gaet, ende vore ende na, ende alsoe dicke alse gi moget, soe suldi u oefenen met gheesteliken honghere ende dorste toe der ewegher spisen, alsoe dat alle uwe binnenste crachte ende alle uwe aderen ghieren ende gapen gespijst ende gesaet te werdene. Want god ghevet hongher inden crachten overmids gratie ende oefeninghe; ende hi gheeft sadheit inden wesene der zielen overmids die in woninghe sijns selfs. Laet u dan sere hongheren ende dorsten | na gode, soe suldi sadheit ghevoelen ende vinden in uwe wesen. Want condi met ghiegergelost Cristume eten ende teren in u, soe werdi van heme geten ende verteert weder in heme. Want hi sprect selve: “Die edt mijn vleesch ende drinct mijn bloet, hi woent in mi ende ic in heme.” Ende dit es ewege leven. Ende voert meer: “Ensi dat gi dese geestelike spise edt ende drinct, gi en hebt geen leven in u dat gode behaecht.” Ende hier ommte soe suldi alsoe sere minnen, dat u die ewege minne gods beva; soe werdi een geest ende ene minne met gode.”} 

This passage alludes to the theme of desire and \textit{epektasis} we have noted before in Ruusbroec.

The theme is more fully fleshed out by Ruusbroec when he reflects later on the “soul storm” or “storm of love” and the divine touch.\footnote{Sloten, 721–745, 784–808.} Ruusbroec tells the sisters to only partake of the Eucharist as their rule of life prescribes, in order to make space for the stoking of the fires of desire for union with God.\footnote{Sloten, 126–127.} One suspects that Ruusbroec is referring here to the practice of fasting in the community as well. The Brabantine’s spiritual guidance here is also ordered by his relational, exemplarist anthropology, for God gives spiritual hunger within the higher faculties and the bodily appetites (“innermost powers and all your veins yearn…”) and they are satisfied by God in the essence, or essential unity of the soul with its divine idea in the Son. The inner and outer life is united through the Eucharist as the sisters are consumed and transformed in the Person of Christ as they consume the body and blood, thus becoming “one spirit and one love with God.” De Baere then notes that, as the reflection proceeds, Ruusbroec teaches the sisters
that “as the communication of Christ in the communion is threefold—bodily, spiritual and divine—so the response of the communicant shall be affectively felt, rationally willed and suprarationally prepared for passive surrender.”

Here again the guidance given is shaped by Ruusbroec’s trinitarian theology, and particularly its exemplarist anthropology of the threefold “kingdom of the soul” which are the dimensions of the human created to the Image/Son.

It is at this point of guidance regarding Eucharist and the depths into which the sisters will be led through it that Ruusbroec invites the Clares into a transforming awareness of union with and in the Trinity that is above reason. He states:

But if you want to practice and possess love and holiness to the highest degree, you must strip your faculty of understanding of all images, and through faith raise it above reason. There shine the rays of the eternal sun. It shall enlighten you and teach you all truth; the truth shall free you and establish your naked vision in imagelessness. Blessed are the eyes that see this, for the faculty of love always follows this sight with denuded love. This following of the eternal light by the “sight” of the faculty of understanding (intellect) through or with the faculty of love, stripped of images, leads the soul along the continually flowing river of grace, through which it is led to the loving consciousness or awareness of “the living fountain of the Holy Spirit, where the veins of eternal sweetness spring forth, inebriating the soul and lifting (it) above reason to a wandering about in the desert of eternal blessedness.”

This union in love described here as eternal light which draws the soul into the Spirit, wandering about in the infinite boundlessness of triune love (the “desert”) is, according to Ruusbroec, “the


52 Sloten, 153–159: “Maer wildi minne ende heilecheit oefenen ende besitten inden hoechsten grade, soe moet di uwe verstendege cracht ontbloeten van allen beelden ende overmids gheloeve verheffen boven redene. Aldaer seijnt die raye der eweger sonnen. Ende die sal u verclaren ende leren alle waerheit. Ende die waerheit sal u vrien ende u bloete gesichte stadeghen in ongebeeltheit. Salech sijn die oegen die dit sien, want desen siene volcht altoes die minnende cracht met bloeter minnen.”

53 Sloten, 160–163.
substance and the root of true holiness.” The orientation of this articulation of union by the canon by his relational, exemplarist anthropology is palpable, as is his pneumatology (his understanding of the Person of the Holy Spirit as the principle of \textit{rygiratio} who draws the soul into the fathomless depths, “the desert,” of the Trinity). The analogy of “the desert” (or “abyss of fathomless love” in other places) is another way in which Ruusbroec names God’s infinity, another familiar theme of his trinitarian thought. It is by the summons of the higher faculty of understanding (intellect, which, along with the higher faculties of memory and will form Ruusbroec’s “spiritual unity”) by the Spirit through the faculty of love that the sisters are able to orient themselves toward/into their essential unity (the soul’s indistinct union with the Father’s eternal idea of the soul in the Son), wherein God dwells, and become inebriated and wander in the boundless desert of Triune love and blessedness.

While this union is the “substance and root of true holiness,” true to his understanding of the trinitarian life of God as essential love (\textit{weselijke minne}), the paradoxical simultaneity of blissful union and active, desiring love, Ruusbroec immediately states: “From this root always comes an interior exercise of virtue; for love cannot rest idle. Interior practice (of virtue) has four modes, which I shall describe for you.” Ruusbroec tells the Clares that the first dimension or mode of this interior virtue “raises us up to God with interior affection, with eternal love…and all our own activity…” This is an ascending into God in which all our powers fail before God’s eternal love and goodness, and yet this is the “elevation of our life into God.” The second mode

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Sloten}, 163–164.
\item \textit{Sloten}, 168–171.
\item \textit{Sloten}, 172–173.
\end{itemize}
gives us the virtuous perspective of humility, “so that neither praise nor scorn can perturb us.
A aware of our sinfulness, we shall humble ourselves before God and all [people], and even before
the devils, insofar as God allows.”

In the third mode we and the Clares are bound in love to the saints by praising their merits
and desiring their assistance and prayer and we love both sinners and good people. In all this “we
go out to our neighbor in the breadth of love which has filled heaven and earth with the richness
of grace and virtues.” The fourth and final “mode of interior life puts our reason between time
and eternity.” With seeing the horizon of the kingdom of heaven and yet being in the “exile” of
life in this world of brokenness we are grieved and the world becomes a cross for us to bear.
Ruusbroec then movingly states: “Here springs up out of God’s gift in the loving heart the
highest virtue that I know, patient longsuffering, which speaks thus: ‘Lord, may Thy will, not
mine, be done; Thine honor and Thy praise, not my comfort and desire. Lord, I give myself to
Thee in time and in eternity.’” In harmony with the melody of triune essential love, the canon
then declares to the sisters: “If you possess these four modes together with the ground of the
substance wherein they are rooted [the previously stated unity with God], then you may
contemplate above reason in bare emptiness and distinguish in reason all virtues by
discernment.” Through the depths of Eucharist in which they share, by the Spirit, in the divine-

59 Sloten, 199–201.
60 Sloten, 202–203.
61 Sloten, 214–218.
62 Sloten, 220–222: “Hebdi dese .iiiij. wisen met den gronde der substantien daer si inne
gewortelt sijn, soe moechdi scouwen boven redene in bloete ledecheit, ende merken in | redenen
alle dogede na bescedenheit.”
humanity of Christ, and thus in the life of the Trinity who is essential love, the Clares grow into the simultaneity of union with God in the blissful enjoyment (ghebruken) of the perichoretic embrace, the unity of the Persons, and the breadth of virtuous love through the Son and Spirit. This is one whole life of active love and rest in God.

Ruusbroec then summarizes and concludes this section of his spiritual guidance for the Clares on participating mystically in the Mass by reflecting on his well known analogy of the golden penny. This analogy brings together and is funded by his understanding of the trinitarian life of God as essential love, his Augustinian teaching on the divine or theocentric intention, and his exemplarist “anthropology of the image and its restoration in Christ.” The penny signifies human nature. The Clares are to examine their penny in three ways: its purity or authenticity, its weight, and its minted image. Ruusbroec explains to them the analogy when he states:

If we love God for Himself and for no other motive, then our penny is of fine gold. If we love, use, and employ all other things in subordination to God, so that the love of God outweighs everything, then our penny is of good and sufficient weight. And if we follow Christ, bear our cross, and subdue and kill our nature by resistance and by penance, and are obedient to our superiors, the law, the commandments, our reason, and the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, then Christ lives in us and we in him. And that is how our penny is enriched, formed and well-minted in the reverse side (die cruusside).


64 Sloten, 226–236: “Nu verstaet: alse wi gode minnen om hem selven ende omme en gene andere waeromme, soe es onsenn inc van finen goude. Ende alse wi alle andere dinc minnen, oefenen ende orboren in ordenen te gode, alsoe dat gods minne verwege alle dinc, soe es onsenn inc goet swaer gnoech van gewichte. Ende alse wi Cristume na volgen ende onsenn cruce dragen, ende onsenn nature drucken ende doeden in wederstane ende in penitentien, ende gehoersam zijn onsenn oversten ende der wet ende den gheboden ende onser redenen ende den levene ons heren Jhesu Cristi, soe leeft Cristus in ons ende wi in heme. Ende hier mede es onsenn inc geciert, geformt | ende wel gemunt in die cruusside.” I have slightly departed from the critical edition translation.
Ruusbroec goes on to tell the Clares that they may continue to enrich this minted side with
growth in the virtues as they pursue and mature in the life of Christ.\textsuperscript{65} The other side, the blank
side, of our penny “is the essence of our soul whereupon God has imprinted His image.”\textsuperscript{66} The
essence of the soul, the human, in Ruusbroec’s anthropology is, as we saw in chapter two of the
of the present work, the indistinct union of the soul with God’s eternal idea of the soul or person
within the Son, the eternal life we have “without ourselves.”\textsuperscript{67}

The Augustinian canon then shares with the sisters that we receive God’s image
supernaturally, that is, beyond the gift of existence we receive passively by simply being a
creature, on the blank side (our essence), “when through faith, hope, and love we turn inwards
and so, love and possess God…”\textsuperscript{68} This is the case for on the blank side, our inward-directed life
in God, God imprints his image of himself, the Holy Trinity, by which it is formed and enriched;
“for there God lives in us and we in him.”\textsuperscript{69} Ruusbroec goes on to say: “so, the blank side of our
penny is enriched with the indwelling of God, and the reverse side with our virtues and with the
life and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the golden penny which is worth eternal life, for
it is itself eternal life.”\textsuperscript{70} This means, as Bernard McGinn helpfully notes: “in other words,

\textsuperscript{65} Sloten, 236–237.

\textsuperscript{66} Sloten, 237–239: “…dat es dat wesen onser zielen, daer god sijn *beelde in gedruct
heeft.” I depart from the critical edition translation by De Baere here slightly, but only because
there seems to be a misprint in his translation where his translation of “dat es dat wesen onser
zielen” reads, “is the essence or our soul” rather than the correct rendering which reads “of our
soul.” This is most likely a misprint or typing error on De Baere’s part rather than his intended
translation.

\textsuperscript{67} See Brulocht c, 152–155.

\textsuperscript{68} Sloten, 239–240.

\textsuperscript{69} Sloten, 243–244.

\textsuperscript{70} Sloten, 244-246.
eternal life is gained by restoring to God the penny of human nature that has been conformed to Christ on the outside and restored to its Trinitarian likeness on the reverse inside.” Not only does this analogy for instructing the Clares in the mystical way depend upon Ruusbroec’s relational, exemplarist anthropology; the conforming to the life of Christ in virtue and the imprinting of the image of the Trinity in our essence, through union with our eternal idea in the Son, once again seems to image and arise from Ruusbroec’s trinitarian theology, according to which the triune God is mysteriously and synchronously outgoing love of the persons and fruition of joy and blessedness in the perichoretic embrace of the Persons through the inflowing of the unity of the Holy Spirit. Or, to put things differently, God is essential love.

As Ruusbroec moves on from this first substantial reflection on how an important aspect of the daily horarium (communion) opens out to and draws one into the depths of the mystical life he makes an understandably logical move from discussion of a life enriched with the active, loving virtues of Christ. That is, he transitions into a call to the life of service within the community, as we noted in the previous section of this chapter, and begins this with another call to service (along with the poem that begins the work). The Brabantine contemplative then instructs the Clares in how, in living out the virtuousness of service, they should care for the sick as well as how they should receive care should they find themselves in the midst of bodily illness. After moving into the sections on guidance for daily community life he eventually guides the Clares into how to practice eating during meal times. Here we have another, more

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72 Sloten, 258–273.

73 Sloten, 274–328.

74 Sloten, 360–451.
concise, excursion into the depths of the spiritual life through the porosity of the concrete daily routine, where the canon discusses two kinds of hunger. After directing the sisters to eat in moderation and avoid gluttony, Ruusbroec reminds them that they are of two natures, spiritual and material or soul and body. Thus there are two kinds of hunger, spiritual and material. While material food will never finally satisfy because of its transitory nature, the charity or love of God is ever available to satisfy spiritual hunger, for it unites us with God. Ruusbroec expresses it thus:

Material food is prepared by ourselves or others. But as for spiritual food: God Himself has prepared it for us in eternity. Where spiritual hunger exists, eternal food is always ready. But where there is material hunger, there is often poverty and great want; therefore, he who is spiritually hungry and thirsty will always be fed by God and he lives for God in grace...Therefore, while you satisfy your material need, lift up your heart before the face of our Lord, and sit at table among your sisters in company with Christ, the angels and the saints. Receive the gifts and dishes which flow from God; thus you will be fed and nourished, as to the inward man, with eternal food. And so you live for God.

In this example of Ruusbroec’s guidance for the Clares we see the theme of spiritual hunger come to the fore (the epektatic language we have discussed in chapter two and noted in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa). Here, however, rather than encouraging the nuns to practice spiritual hunger, Ruusbroec simply states, in Augustinian fashion, the human fact of spiritual

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75 Sloten, 360–371.

76 Sloten, 372–373. There are passages such as this in which Ruusbroec can sound a bit dualist in his use of language, developing in the high to late middle ages, of the spiritual as opposed to the bodily. See the methodology section of the first chapter of the present work for more on this as it impresses itself in the historical development of the idea of what is “spiritual.” However, we much remember that this tendency must be read against the more dominant horizon of Ruusbroec’s anthropology of the three unities, which comprise the “kingdom of the soul.” This kingdom includes the “unity of the heart” or the bodily dimension of the human.

77 Sloten, 372–378.

78 Sloten, 378–391.
hunger (desire), which can only be satisfied in God. Notice as well that, while Ruusbroec certainly believes that focusing only on physical hunger will leave us bereft of the awareness of God, he does not leave behind the material daily practice (here the eating of a common meal) which is the bodily activity through which we are rooted in the depths of the love of God (as if it were a ladder to be kicked away once one has reached consciousness of God). The sisters are to fulfill their legitimate bodily need for food while simultaneously lifting up their hearts to the face of God. One can hear here the echoes of essential love once again. While engaging in a common meal they have fellowship one with another in the bond of love which occurs within the union they have with God through Christ, and thus with one another. In a way analogous to his treatment of the perichoretic union we share with other members of the Church while indwelling and being indwelled by the Trinity in the Tabernakel, Ruusbroec here shares with the Clares that if they lift their hearts to the face of God while they fulfill their bodily need of food they mysteriously, simultaneously, “sit at table among your sisters in company with Christ, the angels and the saints.” To dwell, by the Spirit, through Christ, in union with God in love is to share in communion with the celestial hierarchy of angels and the saints, for we are all in Christ, and thus in the Triune embrace. We might point out here as well that “lifting our heart to the face of God” is perhaps another way for Ruusbroec to express the divine or theocentric intension. One is thus nourished with spiritual food and lives for God.

79 Augustine’s testimony, described in his Confessions, is the narration of his journey of desire, as stated by his famous sentence: “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee,” Augustine, Confessions, I.1.

80 “But the one who feels only material hunger is dead before God, for his life is nothing other than bestial.” Sloten, 384–385: “Maer die lijfleken honger allene heeft, hi es doet vore gode want sijn leven en es anders niet dan beesteleec.”

81 See the previous chapter of the present work entitled “Spiritual Direction in the Tabernakel.”
Once the canon finishes the section on mealtimes he offers spiritual guidance to the sisters in regard to how they should practice fellowship with visitors who visit the convent. If she is called upon to go to the grill to meet and share conversation with a visitor and goes “gladly, with an inordinately eager heart, then [she] should certainly be saddened.” While Ruusbroec is not immediately clear by what he means here, read in the overall context of his theology and when compared with the previous passage we just investigated above, his meaning becomes clearer. When the sisters engage in any activity, whether eating or meeting with visitors, they are to be focused on union with God. Therefore, their interactions with others, as with all activity, should intend the love of God. So the eagerness of heart (loste van herten) to leave contemplative prayer or contemplative service seems to be a sign that the sister “has not at all understood the spirit of enclosure.” De Baere insightfully describes Ruusbroec’s guidance for the Clares at this point when he writes:

At the grill she is to conduct herself in a modest and unassuming manner, her mind on the soul’s health both of herself and her visitor. As soon as she can, she is to disengage herself from all worries in order to turn inward again, to unity with God. For if she lets herself be absorbed by the distractions that the grill offers, she will become inwardly darkened and empty.

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82 Sloten, 452–493.

83 Sloten, 453–455. I have departed a bit from the critical edition translation by rendering “met loste van herten,” as “an inordinately eager heart.” The literal translation would be something like “with lust of heart” or “with a lustful heart.” However, the tendency of contemporary Western culture to reduce “lust” to its genital-sexual dimension is often accompanied by the assumption that “lust” refers to something evil, which is not necessarily the case in Ruusbroec’s variety of uses of the term loste. It is another term for intense yearning or desire. I have rendered “loste” here as “inordinately eager” to add to the intensity of the eagerness while not narrowing the sense in which Ruusbroec is using the term here, which is for an inordinate desire to leave prayer or enclosure for conversation with an outsider. “Lust” is an analogous term and does not necessarily denote sin. It only does so when inordinate or wrongly directed.


This concrete activity provides another practice from the Clares’ daily horarium that allows the Brabantine canon to show the porosity of the seemingly mundane to the contemplative depths of the triune life, in which the sisters are invited to share ever-more deeply. This leads then to a lengthy and perceptive rumination of the concept of enclosure that provides the structural and conceptual core of the *Sloten*.

Ruusbroec pivots into the rumination on the enclosures through an exhortation to follow the way of Clare of Assisi, the founder of the sisters’ order, when he voices:

> This is why I have noted in St. Clare, a foundress of your order, that she was enclosed in seven enclosures. And so she became clear and enlightened and enriched in all virtues, holy and blessed unto the glory of God. Now, note these enclosures carefully: I shall name and teach them to you if you are willing to accept them. No one can give these seven enclosures but the Holy Spirit, nor may anyone receive them other than those who love God.\(^8^6\)

As discussed in the previous section of the present chapter,\(^8^7\) the first enclosure is the physical cloister, while the second enclosure is enlightened reason or “the orientation of inner attention,”\(^8^8\) which brings harmony to the life of the senses. The third enclosure is the loving affection of Jesus Christ, while the fourth enclosure is entry into the free will of God as our central, harmonizing focus, through the denial of our own will. In the fifth enclosure “we are raised up in mystic contemplation as a simple steadfast look into the light that flows from God.

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\(^{8^6}\) *Sloten*, 494–500: “Ende hier ommhe hebbic gemerct in sinte Claren, die een begin was van uwer ordenen, dat si besloten was in .vij. sloten. Ende alsoe wart si clare ende verclaert, ende geciert in allen dogeden, ende heilech ende salech tote in die glorie gods. Nu merct met ernste die slote: ic salse u noemen ende leren, eest dat gise ontfaen wilt. Dese .vij. slote en mach nieman geven dan die heilege geest, noch niemen ontfaen dan die gene die gode mint.”

\(^{8^7}\) See the previous section of the present chapter and the discussion on Ruusbroec’s digression on the seven enclosures for the location in original text of each of the enclosures.

\(^{8^8}\) Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusborec’s Life and Works,” 74.
into the soul.”  The sixth enclosure is, through love, becoming one spirit with the Triune God. Lastly, with the seventh enclosure we have final, silent rest.

However, as noted in the previous section of the present chapter as well, Ruusbroec does not end here. Rather, he revisits the three last enclosures by looking at the “three lives” (the “active,” “interior,” and “contemplative” lives) and the allegory of the four animals. In these passages Ruusbroec explores the theocentric life through the “three lives” (and their assumed unities of heart, spirit, and essence) and the divine touch (gerinen), leading to the soul-storm of violent impetuosity (oerwoet) in love. This violent impetuosity of love passes over into rest and the soul abandons itself completely in order to share in and be conscious of the perichoretic unity of the divine Persons. This highest stage of ascent into union includes all the previous levels. Again, this inclusion of the three previous levels in the union with the triune Persons is a manifestation of the fact that for Ruusbroec the teleological goal of the mystical life is ever-deepening participation in the triune life of essential love in which activity and blissful rest are in paradoxical harmony.

As one swims through the richness of Ruusbroec’s expatiation of the seven enclosures and his recapitulation and deepening of the final three enclosures, which serve to help deepen and enrich his spiritual guidance of the community of Clares, one sees perhaps every significant dimension of the Brabantine’s trinitarian mystical theology. And once again the cantus firmus of his trinitarian thought orders and harmonizes his illuminating guidance for the Clares and serves as a beautiful vision, ever-inviting the sisters into the depths of the triune life of God. While we will not explore all of Ruusbroec’s ruminations in this portion of the Sloten, it is helpful, for our

purposes, to dive a bit into the depths of his reflection here to make us more aware of the construal of his spiritual guidance through his trinitarian mystical theology.

When Ruusbroec unfolds for the Clares his recapitulation of the last three enclosures, through exploring the three lives, the allegory of the four animals, and the progressively intense effects of the divine touch (gerinen), there is clearly a description of, and thus call to, an ever-deepening participation in the active love and loving perichoretic unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This anthropological rooting of our life and existence in the intratrinitarian life of the Persons, as we live and move and have our being in our archetypal existence in the Son, is elucidated by Ruusbroec in his observations on the sixth enclosure. By way of the theology of the gospel of St. John, and one hears Bonaventurean echoes here as well, Ruusbroec states:

For we live unmanifested and unborn in our origin, that is in the fruitful nature of our heavenly Father; and in the Son we are being born, and known and chosen from all eternity; and in the gushing forth of the Holy Spirit, we are eternally loved; we should be glad to hear that. We are continually born in the Son, and ceaselessly being born with the Son, and eternally remaining unborn in the Father. The bond and the unity of love between the Father and the Son remains always. Nevertheless, the giving birth and the gushing forth of the Holy Spirit are ceaselessly renewed in God’s exalted nature, for this nature is fecund and a pure activity (puur were) in trinity of persons. Thus He reigns and lives in us and we are in Him, above our creatureliness, in unity of spirit. Nonetheless we must ceaselessly renew ourselves in virtues and in greater likeness to God, for we are not only made to the image but also to the likeness of God.⁹⁰

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⁹⁰ Sloten, 620–635: “Want in onsen orspronc, dat es in *die vrochtbare nature ons hemelsche vaders, | daer leven wi onvertoent ende ongeboren. Ende in den sone werden wi geboren ende van e weaveheit bekint ende vercoren. Ende inden uut vole des heilege geests sijn we eweleec gemint; dat mogen we gerne horen. Altoes sijn we geboren inden sone; ende sonder onderlaet werden wi geboren met den sone; ende eweleec bliven we ongeboren inden vader. Altoes blijft bant ende eenecheit der minnen tusschen den vader ende den sone. Nochtan vernuuet gebaren ende uut vole des heilege geests sonder onderlaet in die hoege nature gods. Want die nature es vrochtbaer ende een puur were in driheit der persone. Ende alsoe regneert hi ende levet in ons ende we in heme, boven onse gescapenheit in eenecheit van geeste. Daer bliven wi altoes gode geenecht in bande van minnen. Nochtan moten wi ons vernuwen sonder onderlaet in doechden ende in meere gelijcheit met gode. Want wi en sijn niet allene gemaect toe den beelde, maer oec toe der gelijcheit gods.”
This passage seeks to show the sisters that, at the deepest core of our being, our vivacity as humans is given, at every moment of our continual creation (and therefore recreation through the missions of the Son and Spirit), by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one God in whom we live, move, and have our being. We always remain, simultaneously, unborn in the Father, born and being born in the Son, and continually loved in the eternal gushing forth of the Holy Spirit. Here we see Ruusbroec’s expression of the Christian adaptation of the Neoplatonist “moments” of the First Principle: monē (Father), proodos (Son), and epistrophē (Holy Spirit). The bond of loving unity shared between the Father and Son in the love of the Spirit is eternal and, true to his understanding of the trinitarian life of God as essential love, Ruusbroec points out that the trinity of relations is also eternal, as it is ever pure activity, pure actuality. Therefore, Ruusbroec teaches the Clares that they ceaselessly live in God and God in them through our unity with our archetypal existence in the Son, in the unity of the Godhead, and must continuously renew themselves in virtue, in reflection of and participation in the Triune life. They must not veer toward the mistake of the sensibility of the heresy of the Free Spirit in thinking that the contemplative life of enclosure is only about rest in the unity of God. They must continue to grow in the actualization of their blooming into the likeness of God through sharing in the outgoing love of the Spirit and Son. Thus they will continue to be enriched in virtue. This seems to be why Ruusbroec has emphasized the indispensable nature of service for the life of the sisters throughout the treatise. In serving the sick, the community (in daily chores), caring for the health of one another’s souls and the souls of visitors, etc. the sisters share in the loving relations of the Persons of the Godhead and continually renew and enrich themselves in virtue.

This passage articulates the trinitarian framework and logic of the exemplarist, trinitarian anthropology that is the basis for Ruusbroec’s discussion of the progressively more potent
reaction of the soul to the divine touch in the recapitulation of the final three enclosures through the three lives and the allegory of the four animals. The contemplative master tells the Clares that

Where we are united with God, then, there is a hidden touch or motion which is the source of God’s grace, enlightening our understanding to recognize the truth [the Son] in clear distinction, and enkindling our will in love [the Holy Spirit], to desire all justice. As long as love and desire (minne ende begeren) remain subject to enlightened reason, we can perform great works and enrich all our enclosures with virtues and holy exercise.

However, the love of the Holy Spirit, the divine touch, stirs and carries our love and desire beyond the capacity of even enlightened reason. As a result:

Whenever love and desire become impetuous and restless through God’s touch in the unity of love, reason must give way and let love have its way just as long as this impetuosity of love lasts. In this way we must resemble God through grace and virtue within ourselves, and we shall be united with Him through contemplation and gazing, our spirit uplifted in Him.

Ruusbroec here teaches the sisters that the touch of the Holy Spirit happens in our union with God, through living into our essential union with our archetypal existence in God “above” ourselves by inner practice, which sets us in the motion of the exercise of virtue. The motion, however, at times, takes us, in love, beyond reason into the impetuosity of love where the reason gives way. Later, when teaching the nuns of the three lives, Ruusbroec will communicate how, in the third life, the faculties of intellect (understanding) and will, along with our affective faculty, draw our whole person into the loving unity of God. Here “the faculties are continuously invited to enter into unity, but in that unity they must remain passive. So they mount and descend like

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91 Sloten, 661–890.

92 Sloten, 636–642.

93 Sloten, 642–648.
lightening flashes between intense activity and yielding surrender.” Ruusbroec will then explore this flashing of the faculties in more depth through the allegory of the four animals. This exemplarist, trinitarian anthropology, developed by Ruusbroec, with the help of the theology of the gospel of St. John, undergirds and enlivens the Augustinian canon’s remaining elucidation of the final three enclosures and his understanding of the touch of the Spirit. Through this he teaches and guides the Clares into an ever-deepening, ever-ascending sharing in the trinitarian life of God.

Ruusbroec’s guidance for the Clares in this mystical pilgrimage comes to full bloom as he transitions from the modes of the animals to the continually ascending and deepening mystical life. Here the Brabantine mystical theologian recapitulates and describes the sixth and seventh enclosures. The sixth mode is described for the sisters in terms of three “divine modes,” each a mode of a particular Person of the Trinity, with which God must gift us in order to draw us into complete union with him. These divine modes can accomplish what the human mode cannot. Ruusbroec describes this in the first divine mode (The Holy Spirit) when he states:

Where the human mode is deficient…and may go no higher, it is there that God’s mode commences. That is, when the person cleaves to God with intention and with love and with unsatisfied desire and still cannot achieve union with Him, the Spirit of our Lord comes like a mighty fire that burns, consumes, and devours all within Himself, so that man forgets himself and all exercise and he experiences himself only as though he were

95 Sloten, 746–783.
96 For the four modes of the allegory of the animals see Sloten, 746–783. The first mode is the lion, which signifies spiritual strength, the second mode is an ox or calf, which refers to a generous heart that opens and offers all to God. The third mode is the face of a human, symbolizing wise discernment. The fourth mode is the eagle which is a figure standing for Ruusbroec’s vital notion of “right intention and love for God (rechte meininge ende minne te gode),” Sloten, 763–64.
97 Sloten, 809–833.
one spirit and one love with God. Here the senses and all faculties keep silence and are appeased. For the fountain of God’s goodness and richness has overflowed everything: each has received more than he can desire.\textsuperscript{98}

Here Ruusbroec’s pneumatology stands in bold relief. The Spirit, who is the principle of inflowing (\textit{invloeyene} Middle Dutch and, in Latin, \textit{rygiratio}) of the Persons in their perichoretic union and of the inflowing of creation into this divine embrace, lifts us into the rich overflowing of the triune life. He then relates the second mode (The Son) to the Clares by saying to them:

The second mode, attributed to the Son of God, (is) where He raises the understanding above reason, above consideration and differentiation. The naked understanding becomes enlightened and penetrated by divine light so that in divine light it may gaze and contemplate, with simple vision, the divine radiance, eternal truth with its personal being.\textsuperscript{99}

In the Son we are so penetrated by the divine light that Ruusbroec certainly agrees with the psalmist in Psalm 36: by the Son, “in your light we see light.”

Ruusbroec then elucidates for the sisters the work of the Father by stating: “Hereupon follows the third mode, which we ascribe to our heavenly Father; that is when He empties the memory of forms and images and raises up the denuded mind to its origin, which is He

\textsuperscript{98} Sloten, 809–819.

\textsuperscript{99} Sloten, 819–824: “Die ander wise, diemen den sone godes toe eigent, daer hi die verstendichetie verheft boven redene, boven gemerc ende onderscreet. Ende dat bloete verstaen wert verclaert ende dordragen met godleken lichte, alseo dat staren ende scouwen moge, met eenvuldegen gesichte in godleken lichte, godleke clærheit: die ewege waerheit *met haers zelfsheit.” I have departed from De Baere’s translation in the critical edition by rendering “selfsheit” as “personhood” rather than selfhood. I fear this translation may give a hint of Ruusbroec offering an understanding of “the self” which some see as historically informing Descartes’ understanding of the self. It is often alleged that the roots of the Cartesian self can be traced to Augustine (and thus one could attribute the “Augustinian” conception to Ruusbroec as Augustine is a significant influence upon the Brabantine). However, I believe the roots of the Cartesian self are to be found elsewhere than in Augustine’s thought. For a strong riposte to this idea of Augustine’s thought as the precursor to the Cartesian self see Michael Hanby, \textit{Augustine and Modernity}, Radical Orthodoxy 10 (London; New York: Routledge, 2003). See also Rowan Williams, “Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on \textit{De Trinitate},” in \textit{Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T. J. van Bavel}, eds. Bernard Bruning, Mathijs Lamberigs, and J. van Houtem (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 317–332.
Himself.” The consequence of this threefold work of the Trinity is emphasized by Ruusbroec in immediately voicing:

There, the human is established in and united to her beginning, which is God. Power and freedom are given [her] to work both outwardly and inwardly in all virtues. [She] receives knowledge and discernment in all exercise in accord with reason; [she] also learns how to undergo and allow the in-working of God and the transformation wrought by the divine modes, above reason, as you have just heard. 

Ruusbroec then recapitulates and deepens his reflection on the seventh enclosure by describing for the nuns the drawing of us beyond modes, into the blissful, perichoretic union of the Persons. Though he is clear that no signs or likeness do this union justice, for it is beyond description, he does describe this beautifully with a few analogies, such as when he notes:

Imagine it this way: as if you saw a glow of fire, immensely great, wherein all things were burnt away in a becalmed, glowing, motionless fire. This is how it is to view becalmed, essential love (weseleke minne), which is an enjoyment of God and of all the saints, above all modes and above all activities and practice of virtue. It is a becalmed, bottomless flood of richness and joy into which all the saints together with God are swept in a modeless enjoyment (gebruken).

Ruusbroec ends the reflection on this seventh enclosure by then stating that it is where “all holiness and beatitude are consummated. Here we shall always remain dwelling, simple and immobile, above our creatureliness.”

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100 Sloten, 825–828.
101 Sloten, 828–833: Daer wert die menshe gestadecht ende geenecht in sijn begin, dat god es. Ende hem wert gegeven cracht ende vrijheit uutweert ende inweert te werkene met allen doechden. | Ende hi onfeet kinnesse ende ondersceet in alre oefeningen na redenen, ende hoe hi liden ende gedoegen sal dat in werken gods ende die overforminge van godleken wisen boven redene, geliker wijs dat gi te hans horet.” I have departed here at points from the critical edition translation and have included gender-inclusive language and pronouns.
102 Sloten, 834–867.
103 Sloten, 840–847.
104 Sloten, 864–867.
What are we to make of the fact that this enclosure is the consummation of all holiness and beatitude? Furthermore, how are we to interpret the fact that he describes this enclosure as “becalmed, essential love?” Is Ruusbroec teaching the Clares that, in the end, essential love really is finally about the unity of God more than the eternal activity of the Persons? Does this then mean that the ultimate goal of the mystical life is in fact rest in the unity of God? If so this would be in contrast to our interpretation of the essential love of God’s life as the eternal, paradoxical simultaneity of the pure activity of the love of the Persons and their eternal enjoyment in the perichoretic embrace. Even though we may interpret him as saying that the Persons remain there could be the giving of precedence to the unity. This would also be in contradiction to our interpretation of the goal of the mystical/contemplative life as the limitless sharing of humans (and the Body of Christ) in this eternal paradox in God, “the common life” (*dat ghemeyn leven*).\(^{105}\)

Here we must admit that it is possible to interpret Ruusbroec as giving priority to the essential unity of God and thus to the ultimate goal of the mystical life as rest in God. Ruusbroec is not always as consistent as carefully reasoning scholastics such as the great Franciscan master Bonaventure or the equally great Dominican master Thomas Aquinas. We must also certainly be open to development of Ruusbroec’s thought throughout his lifetime. On the other hand we also may say that, while Ruusbroec perhaps does not communicate this in a satisfactory manner in this instance, we could interpret him as wanting the Clares to hold the sixth and seventh enclosures together. This is how the present author tends to interpret this passage by the Brabantine contemplative theologian. This is possible for, immediately after closing his reflection upon the seventh enclosure, Ruusbroec states:

\(^{105}\) For a more in depth discussion of the paradox of essential love in the divine life and the common life, see the sections on these respective topics in chapter two of the present work.
Nonetheless, we must inhabit all our enclosures and enrich them with virtues in an orderly fashion, turning outward and turning inwards by holy exercise in the four modes pointed out before. And herein, there exists many a differentiation. Each one is busy with his God, himself, and his virtues according to God’s gift and enlightenment, and the measure of his love and his wisdom. In this way, each one within himself hungeres and thirsts and has savor and longing after God and after all virtue to a greater or lesser degree according to his holiness and blessedness, his merits and dignity. But the superessential blessedness that is God Himself, with whom, above ourselves, in transport, we are one, is common (gemeyne) to us all, limitlessly overflowing and incomprehensible to our faculties. And this everyone knows, loves and savors within himself to a greater or lesser degree, with differentiation, depending on how holy and blessed he is. This is the order which exists in the angels and saints, in heaven and on earth, which God has foreseen and ordained in eternity and which shall remain and perdure forever.\footnote{Sloten, 868–884. Emphasis added.}

Here we find Ruusbroec perhaps holding the unity and activity of Persons together and claiming that this is also the order of heaven and earth just as is the modeless enjoyment of the saints. Therefore, Ruusbroec, in the end, seeks to guide the Clares into the understanding that the common life, the sharing in the paradoxical simultaneity of the Triune life, by the Spirit, through Christ, is in fact the goal of the mystical life. It is also perhaps not without accident that immediately after he finishes this core section of the treatise, Ruusbroec at once ventures on into guidance for the sisters in regard to the proper approach to how to dress. As our reading of this core section of the treatise has shown, the canon’s spiritual guidance for the community of Clares here is shaped by his theological understanding of the life of the Trinity as the eternal, paradoxical simultaneity of essential love. It is also shaped by his exemplarist anthropology (with its three unities), which is rooted in the paradoxical life of the Trinity as well as his emphasis upon the vital necessity of theocentric intention. Along with these elements of his trinitarian mystical theology, his guidance here is shaped by his pneumatology, wherein the Spirit is the means by which we are drawn into the essential love of the Trinity.
In conclusion, the *Sloten* is, without a doubt, a treatise in which Ruusbroec intends to give spiritual direction to Margriet van Meerbeke and her fellow sisters in the Clare convent of Brussels. The Brabantine contemplative theologian does so by means of guidance regarding how the Clares should approach the concrete activities of their daily horarium. And he seeks to show them that, far from being mundane, these concrete activities of their day (morning prayer, the mass, care for the sick, doing chores in the community, relating with one another and visitors, etc.) are porous to and open out, again and again, to the mystic depths of sharing in the life of the Trinity, through the Son, by the love of the Spirit. As we have seen, Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction for the nuns is shot through with, indeed is constituted by, the primary elements of his trinitarian mystical/contemplative theology such as his theology of the paradoxical life of the Trinity (essential love), his exemplarist anthropology, his Christology, his Pneumatology, his ecclesiology, and his understanding of the common life as the goal of the mystical life. There is no greater example from the oeuvre of Ruusbroec as a spiritual director whose guidance is thoroughly shaped by his mystical trinitarian theology. We now turn to the last treatise to be investigated in this chapter (and in the present work as a whole), which is also a shining example of a work with deep and penetrating examples of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction and its formation by his trinitarian mystical thought.

III. *Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit*

While *Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit—A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* may not be such that one could label it with the moniker “architectural masterpiece” in terms of the coherence of its organizational structure, it has nonetheless “long been recognized as containing
some of Ruusbroec’s most mature reflections on mystical union with God.”\textsuperscript{107} In this work the Brabantine contemplative theologian deals extensively with the Eucharist and human union with God. In doing so Ruusbroec illumines for the reader his theological anthropology, which is, as we have seen at various junctures in the present work,\textsuperscript{108} intimately intertwined with his christology. The human is image of God in a secondary or derivative way, for the “mirror” of the soul reflects the true and primary image of God who is the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son. During the unfolding of the work, at a number of notable points, Ruusbroec offers spiritual direction to his readers. These instances of spiritual direction in the \textit{Spieghel}, as we shall see, are, like those found in the \textit{Tabernakel} and the \textit{Sloten}, oriented and shaped by the various elements of the canon’s trinitarian mystical theology. While all the elements we have discussed to this point are assumed and at work in the \textit{Spieghel}, Ruusbroec’s exemplarist anthropology, christology, and sacramental theology play particularly prominent roles. As with the previous treatises we have investigated, our reflections on the \textit{Spieghel} will unfold first by looking at issues of date of writing, occasion of writing, and the structure and content of the document. This will then be followed by consideration of noteworthy passages in which Ruusbroec engages in offering spiritual direction to his readers and how this guidance is construed through and oriented by his trinitarian theology.

\textit{A. Date, Occasion, Structural Considerations, and Content}

As we have seen, the \textit{Sloten} was written for Margriet van Meerbcke and her community of Clares in Brussels. Ruusbroec scholars have typically suggested that \textit{Een spieghel der eeuwigher}


\textsuperscript{108} See chapter two of the present work, particularly the section on Ruusbroec’s exemplarist anthropology.
_A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness_ was addressed to Meerbeke as well. The assertion that Meerbeke (and thus her community of Clares) is the recipient of the _Spieghel_ is founded on a notation from one of the manuscripts of the work which states: “This book was written by the Reverend John of Ruusbroec in the year of Our Lord 1359, and he sent it to a nun of the Order of Clare (Dit boec heeft ghemaect heer Jan Ruusbroec int Jair ons (Heeren) m.ccc. ende lix ende heeftet ghesonnen eenre nonnen van clara).”\(^{109}\) Mommaers, in the introduction to the critical edition translation of the _Spieghel_, agrees with the dominant claim that the treatise was originally intended for a Clare nun who was part of Meerbeke’s convent in Brussels, though he never names Meerbeke as the recipient.\(^{110}\) Wiseman states that “_A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness_ was likewise written for a…Clare, quite possibly the same one for whom Ruusbroec wrote the _Enclosures._”\(^{111}\)

Arblaster and Faesen, for their part, contend that the notation on the manuscript referring to a Clare as the original recipient may not be correct. They conclude that it is possible that the treatise was originally addressed to another group of readers and later sent to a Clare. A key element in Arblaster and Faesen’s reasoning on this point is that they find some passages, though they do not specify which ones, in the text to be unusual if addressed to a female religious. They state: “Strictly speaking, we may only conclude that Ruusbroec sent the work to a…Clare, not that he wrote it specifically for Margriet van Meerbeke. Indeed, a number of passages in the work appear rather strange when we assume that it was written for a female religious. More

\(^{109}\) Quoted in Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusborec’s Life and Works,” 75.


probably, it was written for a different group of readers and later sent to a…Clare (possibly the same Margriet van Meerbeke).” While the identity of the original recipients is still an open question, we can at least be confident that at some point after its production Ruusbroec sent it to a Clare. Given his relationship with the Clares at the Brussels abbey, it is reasonable to suspect that they were the recipients and that Margriet was the Clare in question, though even here we cannot be sure. In the end, while the exact recipients (initially and at a later time) are in question with the Spieghel, it is at least possible that it and the Sloten share in common the Brussels Clares as their original addressees. Furthermore, whether the original recipients were the Clares or a community of male religious, it seems highly likely, given much of the content and spiritual direction given in the work, that the original audience was some type of religious community.

Before we lay out the structure and contents of this work of Ruusbroec’s some thoughts on the title of the document are in order. The use of the mirror (Spieghel in the Brabantine’s Middle Dutch) as a symbol in Christian theology is prominent. Therefore, by using this symbol Ruusbroec is making use of a symbol with deep roots in the Christian tradition. Furthermore

\[112\] Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusborec’s Life and Works,” 75.

\[113\] The use of mirror symbolism can be seen as early in the Christian tradition as Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians when he states “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (I Corinthians 13:12). The use that Christian theologians, from the early Patristics to Ruusbroec’s time, make of the symbol of the mirror goes beyond Paul’s use of the image. The human soul is understood as the image or mirror of the Trinity. This symbolism finds its roots in the creative synthesis in the early church patristic age and Christian theology’s creative synthesis of the biblical/Hebraic understanding of God and Hellenic philosophy. Sarah Coakley describes these roots as “the creative elision of biblical and Platonic ideas about desire that occurred in the early Christian centuries: Yahweh’s primal desire for Israel/Church and the soul’s responsive desire for God (as celebrated in the prophetic books, the psalms and the Song of Songs) was there fused with Plato’s idea of human desire (as always intrinsically tugged back to the realm of the ‘forms’),” Sarah Coakley, The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 5, n. 4. As I made clear in chapter two of the present work, I reject the Harnackian understanding of “The Hellenistic Thesis” or hellenistic takeover of Christian thought. So I concur with Coakley’s view of the positive benefits of the creative
the use of the symbolism of the mirror is very prevalent in medieval Christian thought. Given Ruusbroec’s likely reading of compendiums of Christian theology during his days in Brussels, as we discussed in chapter one, he would have been familiar with examples of mirror symbolism in various theologians of the Church’s history.

_synthesis_. This is the ground of Christian Neoplatonism, which comprises an enormous amount of dynamic and visionary Christian thought throughout the church’s history, particularly from the early patristic period to, roughly, the sixteenth century. One notable example of pervasive use of the mirror in Christian theology from the Patristic era is the thought of Gregory of Nyssa. His use of the language of light and mirror make his trinitarian and cosmological (as his cosmology happens within the midst of triune light) thought what David Bentley Hart calls a spectral reality or economy. As Hart notes: “Certainly if one were to attempt to isolate the one motif that pervades Gregory’s thought most thoroughly, and that might best capture in a single figure the rationality that unifies it throughout, it would be that of the mirror: the surface in which light is gathered, created depths where none previously existed, and by which it is reflected back to the source of its radiance. One might say, to begin with, that for Gregory all knowledge consists in _theoria_ of the reflected, and this is in some sense so even within the life of God: the Son is the eternal image in which the Father contemplates and loves his essence, and thus the Father can never be conceived of without his Son, for were he alone he would have no light, truth, wisdom, life, holiness, or power; ‘if ever the brightness of the Father’s glory did not shine forth, that glory would be dark and blind’ [from Nyssa’s _Refutatio Confessionis Eunomii_].

This ‘mirroring’ [of the Triune Persons in the glory of the Spirit] is that one original act of knowledge in which each of the Persons shares; the Only Begotten, says Gregory, who dwells in the Father, sees the Father in himself, while the Spirit searches out the deeps of God. God himself is, one is tempted to say, an eternal play of the invisible and the visible, the hidden Father made luminously manifest in the infinite icon of his beauty, God ‘speculating’ upon himself by way of his absolute self-giving in the other. And it is from this original ‘circle of glory’ that the ‘logic’ of created being unfolds: a specular ontology, according to which creation is constituted as simply another inflection of an infinite light, receiving God’s effulgence as that primordial gift that completes itself in summoning its own return into existence. Creation is only as the answer of light to light, a created participation in the self-donating movement of the Trinity, existing solely as the manifestation—the reflection—of the splendor of a God whose own being is manifestation: recognition and delight,” David Bentley Hart, “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the _Vestigia Trinitatis_,” in _Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa_, ed. Sarah Coakley (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 117–118. The use of mirror symbolism for didactic purposes such as teaching morality occurred throughout the Middle Ages; however, “in the late […] fourteenth and fifteenth century…Mirrors and Specula enjoyed an extraordinarily great popularity, especially the works that are mentioned above as exemplaristic,” Petronella Bange, _Spiegels der christenen: Zelfreflectie en ideaalbeeld in laat-middeleeuwse moralistisch-didactische traktaten_ (Middeleeuwse studies) (Utrecht, NLD: Centrum voor Middeleeuwse Studies, 1986), 14. Quoted in Mommaers, “Introduction,” 19, n. 12.
We can also be confident that he knew two significant examples of medieval usage of this symbolism, namely, *The Mirror of Faith* (*Speculum Fidei*) by William of Saint-Thierry (who certainly had a significant influence on Ruusbroec’s thought) and *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (*Mirouer des simples ames*) by Marguerite Porete (who may have influenced Ruusbroec as well).\(^{114}\)

James Wiseman helpfully points out that

> Although many medieval authors make prominent use of the image of a mirror in their writings, they often develop this imagery in the moralistic or devotional sense of offering their readers a means of seeing how they ought to live. Ruusbroec’s use of the image is more strictly theological, being really but a corollary of that exemplarism which was discussed earlier... in fact, the *Mirror* probably contains Ruusbroec’s most lucid presentation of that doctrine. He writes that the image of God which we have received in the depth of our being is God’s Son, in whom we all live and are eternally imaged forth.\(^{115}\)

This points to the “essential unity” of humanity, which we discussed in chapter two. In this unity our soul, in the ground of the spiritual unity, is non-distinctly united to our eternal idea in the Son/Exemplar due to God’s radical transcendence, which enables Him to be “more interior to us than we are to ourselves.” Therefore our existence lies in the living relation of the union of our created being with its eternal being as idea in the Son, in the Trinity. Wiseman points to this when he notes, “so intimate is this union that God’s image ‘fills the mirror of our soul to overflowing, so that no other light or image can enter there’ (3,B). But the mystic immediately adds that, however intimate the union, there is nevertheless no strict identity: ‘The image is not the mirror, for God does not become a creature.’”\(^{116}\)

We will discuss this aspect of Ruusbroec’s teaching of the soul as living mirror in the *Spieghel* more in the next section of this chapter.

\(^{114}\) Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 75.


\(^{116}\) Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 27. The quotations from the *Spieghel* within this quotation are from Wiseman’s translation of the document later in this same book by Wiseman (indicated by Wiseman’s in-text citation of “3,B”), which is found on page 239 of the Wiseman text. In the critical edition the passage is found in *Spieghel*, 1844–1851.
Ruusbroec composes the *Spieghel* with an inner structure of his common threefold schema of the active (virtuous working), inner, and contemplative lives. Notwithstanding, the work contains a sizable excursus in which the canon engages in an extensive discussion on the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{117} “The excursus is intended…to clarify how Christian spiritual life fundamentally consists of life communion with the person of Christ, who is a living mirror of eternal blessedness.”\textsuperscript{118} Due to this extensive probing into the Eucharist the work has at times been referred to as *The Blessed Sacrament*. Today however the work is typically called *The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* in reference to the later section of the book, which we referred to in the previous paragraph above, in which Ruusbroec discusses the soul as a living mirror.\textsuperscript{119}

In terms of the content of the *Spieghel* within this overarching structure, Ruusbroec begins the work with a doxology and an urging of his readers to submit to God and Christ and the way of love and holiness.\textsuperscript{120} Then, as mentioned above, “under partially different terminology (the life of virtue, the interior life, and the living life) Ruusbroec follows in this treatise the same threefold division used in *The Spiritual Espousals*.”\textsuperscript{121} According to Ruusbroec each element of this division describes three groups of people, though, as we have seen, these “groups” or dimensions of the spiritual, mystical life are not stages in which the earlier “stages” are left behind. Rather, they are three concomitant dimensions of the life of a flourishing

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 75.
  \item \textsuperscript{118} Arblaster and Faesen, “John of Ruusbroec’s Life and Works,” 75–76. See *Spieghel*, 1786–1863.
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 26.
  \item \textsuperscript{120} *Spieghel*, 1–98. For my description and outline of the contents I have been helped by both the critical edition of the *Spieghel* as well as the description in the section headings of the text interposed by Wiseman in Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 187–248.
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 189, n. 1.
\end{itemize}
contemplative, with the ultimate goal being the living of the “common life” (*dat ghemeyne leven*). Thus Ruusbroec describes the groups in this way, ending with a bit of spiritual direction, which serves as the reason for Ruusbroec’s writing the treatise:

The first group consists of virtuous persons of good will who are always overcoming sin and dying to it. The second group is made up of interior persons, rich and full of life, who practice all the virtues to a high degree of perfection. The third group consists of exalted, enlightened persons who are always dying in love and coming to nought in unity with God. These are the three states or orders in which all the ways of holiness are practiced. When all three coalesce in one and the same person, then he is living according to God’s most holy will. Now note well these states or lives together with what distinguishes them one from another. I will show and explain them to you, so that you might know yourself better and not think you are better or holier than you are.¹²²

We may take the sentence stating “when all three coalesce in one and the same person, then he is living according to God’s most holy will” to be a description of “the common life.”

The first section of the work, on the group of people who live the life of virtue, is the shortest of the three sections of the treatise.¹²³ Ruusbroec introduces this section by describing this life as a responsiveness to God’s grace when he states: “the Holy Spirit shows His grace in a person’s heart: if then this person wants to receive the grace of God, he opens his heart and his will to God and receives the grace and inworking of God with a joyful heart.”¹²⁴ Following this

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¹²⁴ *Spieghel*, 114–117: “¶ De heileghe gheest vertooent sine ghenade in des menschen herte. Eest dan alsoe dat de mensche de gratie goods onthaen wilt, soe opent hi gode sijn herte ende sinen wille, ende ontfeet die ghenade ende dat inwerken goods met bliden moede.” I have slightly altered the translation in the critical edition.
quotation he points to the vital necessity of divine intention, or the theocentric stance, if one is to live this life when he states: “for this reason, if you wish to begin a good life and remain in it forever, you must sincerely (ongheveinsdelec) intend and love God above all things. This intension (meininghe) will always lead you toward what you love, and in love you will practice, embrace, and possess what you love.”

The canon then goes on to discuss four ways or dimensions of loving, the life of prayer, recollection and a desire and prayer for wisdom, and interior focus upon God when speaking with other people in order to control the senses. At this point Ruusbroec discusses ways of resisting unchaste inclinations and desires and how to confess sin. He then describes how one should conduct oneself in the midst of desolation, consolation during such periods and, finally Christ as God’s gift, mirror and image who serves as our example to follow during times of desolation.

Ruusbroec now moves to the second group of people in order to illuminate the interior life. This second section is by far the largest of the three for it contains Ruusbroec’s sizable excursus on the Eucharist. As with the Sloten, the Eucharist plays a central role in the mystical journey in the Spieghel. This portion of the second section sees the canon reflecting upon our

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126 *Spieghel*, 114–236.


128 *Spieghel*, 293–356.

129 *Spieghel*, 357–1700.

130 *Spieghel*, 491–1700.
living the life of the beatitudes.\textsuperscript{131} This life is rooted in the fact that God, as both our creator and redeemer, has a claim on us. “The Father and Son, with the Holy Spirit, have loved us from all eternity and have taken possession of us through their love, so it is altogether right that we love them in return. The three Persons are one God, one substance, and one nature, which is why we serve them in common [\textit{ghemeine}]…”\textsuperscript{132} If our will is united to his will we follow Christ and live into the beatitudes. It is at this point in Ruusbroec’s text that he transitions into his lengthy divergence upon the Eucharist.

Paul Mommaers argues, rightly, that this section is one of exaggerated proportions due to the fact that it appears to be an independent treatise.\textsuperscript{133} Given our exploration of the \textit{Tabernakel} and Ruusbroec’s penchant for combining multiple texts in that document, along with the disproportionate size of this excursion on the Eucharist, it seems more than reasonable to see the excursion as having a life predating its placement in the \textit{Mirror}. In discussing the role of the Eucharist in the spiritual life Ruusbroec introduces the section by informing his readers that in the Eucharist we receive the body and blood of Christ which is “living food that makes us alive and strengthens us in all suffering and makes us overcome all our enemies and all that can harm us.”\textsuperscript{134} Working from the sixth chapter of John’s gospel, Ruusbroec describes our sharing in the flesh and blood of Christ as a mutual indwelling of us in Christ and Christ in us.\textsuperscript{135} This is food for our spiritual struggle in this life “that can strengthen us so that we can in struggling

\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Spieghel}, 358–490.
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Spieghel}, 369–373.
\textsuperscript{133} Mommaers, “Introduction,”
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Spieghel}, 491–493.
\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Spieghel}, 491–502.
overcome, and in overcoming struggle. And that is hidden heavenly bread, that is given to no one except the one who overcomes in struggling; and that no one knows than the one who tastes and receives it."\textsuperscript{136} Mary then serves as a fourfold example of the characteristics that will enable one to receive the Eucharist in a way that is redemptively beneficial and glorifying to God.\textsuperscript{137}

Ruusbroec then spends the remainder of the excursus, which is a considerable amount of material, unfolding five points he deems vital for the understanding of his readers as they journey along in their lifelong contemplative pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{138} These points include:

1. The institution of the sacrament as the fulfillment of the Paschal Lamb and the Manna that God provided for the Israelites in their journey through the Wilderness.\textsuperscript{139}
2. The matter and form of the elements of the sacrament.\textsuperscript{140}
3. The mode or means of Christ’s self-giving in the sacrament.\textsuperscript{141}
4. The hidden nature of the presence of Christ in the blessed sacrament.\textsuperscript{142}
5. The various groups of people who receive the blessed sacrament.\textsuperscript{143}

Given the fact that much of the spiritual direction given by Ruusbroec in the \textit{Spieghel} is found in this large excursus on the Eucharist I will not tarry here by giving copious amounts of

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Spieghel}, 499–502.
\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Spieghel}, 503–580.
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Spieghel}, 581–1700.
\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Spieghel}, 599–657.
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Spieghel}, 658–715.
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Spieghel}, 716–880.
\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Spieghel}, 1040–1121.
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Spieghel}, 1122–1700.
introductory material on these five points. There will be significant attention given to this
Eucharistic excursus in the next section of the present chapter. That being said, a few remarks are
in order. It is interesting to observe that, as pointed out by Mommaers, in the first two points the
Brabantine follows the same pattern as Thomas Aquinas in the Summa Theologiae.¹⁴⁴
Mommaers believes Ruusbroec follows not only the same pattern but actually follows Aquinas
in the Summa Theologiae here. He may be correct. Nevertheless we must remember that

Although other authors [than Aquinas] put forward variants of more or less significance,
there were no major disagreements on the subject [the Eucharist and other sacraments] among the Scholastic masters. Those who received and commented on their work,
however, often concentrated on the more metaphysical subtleties of the teachings of the
masters, and the technical discussions they introduced tended to distort the biblical and
patristic shape that the masters had given their sacramental theology.¹⁴⁵

Thomas inherits a tradition of sacramental theology that was largely shared amongst the great
masters of theology in his time and shared in the significant sacramental theology articulated
during the “long twelfth century,” between the death of Gregory VII in 1085 and the Fourth
Lateran Council (1215), which sees the rise of magisterial voices such as Peter Lombard,
Abelard, and the Victorines (particularly the sacramental theology of Hugh of St. Victor).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Mommaers, “Introduction,” 32. Thomas discusses the sacraments in the Tertia Pars of
his Summa Theologiae. For his discussion of the Eucharist in particular see ST III.73–83. For a
translation see the version by the Brothers of the Dominican Province.

¹⁴⁵ Liam G. Walsh, O.P., “Sacraments,” in The Theology of Thomas Aquinas, eds. Rik
van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press,
2010), 328.

¹⁴⁶ I am working here from the illuminating and learned work of Boyd Taylor Coolman
where he treats the sacramental theology of the “long twelfth century” in Boyd Taylor Coolman,
“The Christo-Pneumatic-Ecclesial Character of Twelfth Century Sacramental Theology,” in The
Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology, eds. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford,
from this period but Hugh of St. Victor’s sacramental theology often provides a helpful
framework for Coolman to express what is found in a number theologians of this period
regarding the sacraments (though he is by no means the only source consulted by Coolman). He
deals with all the sacraments, which are described as mediators of grace, which draw believers
Boyd Taylor Coolman is worth quoting at length from his illuminating description of the broad consensus of the sacramental theology of the “long twelfth-century.” Coolman states:

…twelfth-century writers consistently construed the sacraments as salvific mediations of the saving power of Jesus Christ and of the mysteries of his human life. The sacraments were means of grace—that was universally affirmed—but grace understood not as some static “thing,” as a quantifiable commodity, produced and purveyed mechanistically to individual consumers through an efficient distribution system. Rather, the very life of Jesus was communicated to embodied believers by the active power of the Holy Spirit, who joined believers to Christ in and through the sacraments. Precisely as conjoined to Christ by the Spirit through sacraments, finally, believers constituted the church. In short, twelfth-century theologians conceived of the sacraments within a highly integrated, organic, and dynamic conception of Christian existence. Arguably, the deep theological intuition operative here is that the sacraments mediate divine action directed toward humanity that reaches its terminus, not when grace is communicated to individual believers, but rather when that communication individual humans are drawn together more deeply and integrated more fully into the mysterious union of Christ and his Church.  

into union with Christ and one another, but notes that in this tradition the Eucharist becomes the “center of gravity,” the sacramental center point, in relation to which all other sacraments are conceived and oriented. The foundation is thus here laid for what will emerge in the following century, for example, in the sacramental theology of Thomas Aquinas, namely, that the sacrament of the Eucharist “perfects or consummates the other six,” Coolman, “Twelfth-Century Sacramental Theology,” 206. For how scholastic theology in the Middle Ages provides a theological foundation for Ruusbroec’s spiritual theology see Pyong-Gwan Pak, “The Vernacular, Mystical Theology of Jan van Ruusbroec: Exploring Sources, Contexts, and Theological Practices” (PhD Diss., Boston College, 2008), 200–322. Pak’s work is important for the present work in that he also locates Ruusbroec’s mystical or spiritual theology within the context of the Western theological tradition and notes the importance of Ruusbroec’s thought as a counterposition to the heretical tendencies toward mystical union with God such as the sensibility of the Free Spirit. The present work is in harmony with these two interpretive moves made by Pak. Additionally, like the present work as well, Pak sees Ruusbroec’s thought as an integration of his rootedness in the tradition of Christian monastic, scholastic, and vernacular theology and his own journey and experience of the spiritual life. Pak sees Ruusbroec’s concern as ultimately practical in that his work has, in Loet Swart’s description of Pak’s interpretation, “fundamentally mystagogical intent as a spiritual guide, that offers both a mystical perspective as well as practical, ascetic-contemplative wisdom. Ruusbroec is not concerned merely with the description of experiences; rather, he interweaves experiential and interpretive elements in order to create a coherent and convincing vision of spiritual life,” Loet Swart, “Overview of Ruusbroec Research,” in A Companion to John of Ruusbroec, John Arblaster and Rob Faesen, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 333. I am largely in agreement with Pak. If Ruusbroec’s work is mystagogical and he is a spiritual guide then the present work looks at one significant dimension of the mystagogy, namely, Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction.

Thomas and later figures such as Ruusbroec inherit this rich and largely agreed upon sacramental tradition. This quotation brings to mind our discussion in the previous chapter of the present work of the unity of the Ark or Body of Christ in the Tabernakel. There we found Ruusbroec describing the perichoretic, ecclesio-cosmic harmony of all life by sharing in the triune embrace of the unity of the Holy Spirit. At the center of this reflection was the Eucharistic Mass. Ruusbroec’s sacramental theology is entirely in harmony with the twelfth-century, overarching consensus described by Coolman. So while Ruusbroec may have drawn his teaching on the institution of the Eucharist and the matter and form of the sacrament from Thomas, he may also have drawn it from various elements of this larger tradition of sacramental thought, which culminates in the Scholastic Masters such as Thomas and Bonaventure. Therefore, while Thomas may be Ruusbroec’s source for the first two of the five points (the institution of the Eucharist and the matter and form of the sacrament) we cannot be sure about this.

Mommaers does a helpful job in connecting Ruusbroec’s sacramental thought with the broad themes of the aforementioned sacramental, Western Christian tradition, with its rooting in the church fathers, when he states:

Ruusbroec the mystic is firmly convinced about the ex opere operato working of the sacraments. As active signs, they pour out the grace of God on each one who receives them with the correct disposition. Just as the presence of Christ in the Sacrament does not depend on the state of grace of the consecrating priest, so also the fruitfulness of the Sacrament is not determined by the way the recipient feels. This sense of the “objective” character of the sacraments does not alter the fact that communion is always a spiritual event. ‘Spiritual,’ in the first place, means that the one who communes also believes in Christ and loves Him.\(^{148}\)

Here we see that Ruusbroec’s sacramental theology would seem to be in agreement with Hugh of St. Victor when he states that, through union with Christ, the head of the Church and source of

\(^{148}\) Mommaers, “Introduction,” 34.
all spiritual life, we share in an “invisible and spiritual participation with Jesus, which is being accomplished within the heart through faith and love.” This does not mean for Ruusbroec or for Hugh that this is a union of spirit as opposed to matter. Neither does it mean that the sacrament is efficacious only when the believer feels a certain way, emotionally or otherwise. It does however mean that, through the work of the Spirit who draws us into participation in Christ’s divine-humanity (and thus the union of the Church) there is a disposition of reception that, when vivified by the Spirit, mysteriously “draws us” deeper into the divine-humanity of Christ and thus the unity of his body.

Ruusbroec notes that our bodily dimension and spiritual dimension (and here we must remember that the human is one “kingdom of the soul”) share in the life of Christ’s body and blood through the sacrament when he teaches:

> And therefore those are stupid people who want to bring eternal life and the glory of God into time, or to bring time into eternity; for those are both impossible. For if we would see our Lord as He is in heaven, then it would be impossible to us and also inhuman that we would eat His body and drink His blood. But now we eat the Sacrament with our teeth, and in the Sacrament we eat His flesh and drink His blood in our soul through faith and love. And so we are united in Him and He in us. And Christ, the wisdom of God, has conceived of this loving union in His spirit and then acted to bring it to perfection in his works of truth, in the same way that it had been practiced before in figures and in likenesses, from the beginning of the world.150

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150 *Spieghel*, 1080–1091: “Ende hier omme sijn dat doore meschen die eewegh leven ende de glorie gods willen bringhen in tijdt, ochte tiijd bringhen in eewegheit, want dat es beide onmoghelec. Want sahen wi ons en heere alsoe hi es in den hemel, soe waert ons onmoghelec ende oec onmenschelecc dat wi sinen lichame souden eten ende sijn bloed drinken. Maer nu eten wi dat sacrament met onsen tanden ende in den sacramente eten | wi sijn vleesch ende drinken sijn bloed in onser zielen overmids ghelooeve ende minne. Ende alsoe werden wi in heme gheenecht ende hi in ons. Ende dese minleke eeninghe heeft Cristus, de wijsheit gods, ghedicht in sinen gheeste ende volbracht met den werken in den werke der waerheit, gheliker wijs dat si vore gheufent was in figueren ende in ghelikenessen van beginhine der werlt.” Emphasis added. I have predominantly used the critical edition translation here but have also consulted Wiseman’s translation in Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 218. However, I have slightly departed from both in
This holistic or twofold way of receiving and participating in the sacrament, bodily (“with our teeth”) and spiritually (feeding on Christ’s flesh and blood “in our soul through faith and love”), and thus the life of the fully divine and fully human Christ, has deep roots in the church fathers and continued to develop through the scholastic masters. This dimension of the tradition is inherited by Ruusbroec and, as the above quotation shows, shapes Ruusbroec’s Eucharistic theology. To fully partake of the body and blood “in our soul through faith and love” includes the bodily partaking of the sacrament. It is also important to be aware that, for Ruusbroec, “Communion, which is meant for every ‘good person’ and which can also have its effect without there being any special experience linked to it, is always a personal, ‘spiritual’ occurrence. One believes and loves with one’s spiritual faculties [i.e. through the spiritual unity, one of the three

my translation of the sentence “En de dese minleke eeninghe heeft Cristus, de wijsheit gods, ghedicht in sinen gheeste ende volbracht met den werken in den werke der waerheit, gheliker wijs dat si vore gheufent was in figueren ende in ghelijkenessen van beghinne der werlt.”

151 Relying on the reading of some early Greek and Latin Fathers, such as Hiliary of Poitiers (†367) and Cyril of Alexandria (†444) and scholastic figures such as Aquinas (†1274), by Emile Mersch, Mommaers shows that this twofold (bodily and spiritual) eating of Christ which is used by Ruusbroec, is a tradition going back to the patristic era. See Mommaers, “Introduction,” 34, n. 65. Mommaers draws on Emile Mersch, Le corps mystique du Christ, études de théologie historique, 2 vols. (Louvain: Museum Lessianum, 1933). Mommaers goes on to state that “all in all, the tradition [patristic to high Middle Ages] clearly states that the influence proceeding from Christ’s body in communion is of a spiritual nature, since this body is assumed by the Word…regarding the partaking of Christ’s body in communion, a distinction is made between the ‘sacramental eating’ and the ‘spiritual eating.’ This concept that is quite current from Origen (†254) and Augustine (†430) up to William of Saint-Thierry (†1148)—an important source for Ruusbroec—and Thomas Aquinas, is perhaps the most clearly summarized by the latter. In his Summa [Theologiae] he comes to the following ‘conclusion’: ‘There are two manners of eating the Sacrament: the one is sacramental, and thereby one receives only the Sacrament; the other is spiritual, and thereby one receives the effect of the Sacrament into oneself,—in this way, a person is spiritually united with Christ.’ Later, he goes on to say that ‘when the sacramental eating extends to spiritual eating (sacramentalis manducatio, quae pertingit ad spiritualem), it is not placed in opposition to the spiritual but is included by it (non dividitur contra spiritualem, sed includitur ab ea)” (III, q. 80, a. 1 Conclusio and Ad secundum),” Mommaers, “Introduction,” 34–35, n. 65.
unities which make up the ‘kingdom of the soul’], and that is pertinent in every instance.” In other words, Ruusbroec fully agrees with Augustine’s notion (contra the Donatists) that the efficacy of the sacrament does not depend on the righteousness of the priest. He also does not teach that a special mystical or experiential state for feeling is required on the part of the recipient. However, the reception of the Eucharist is always personal and a disposition of faith in and love of Christ, enabled by the Spirit, is also held as necessary by Ruusbroec in order for the recipient to benefit most fully from the sacrament.

Though Ruusbroec’s understanding of the soul as mirror of the Image of God (Christ) will be described more below, it is important to note that within the third of the five points of his Eucharistic doctrine the canon has a second excursus within the larger Eucharistic excursus. This smaller excursus discusses the human as created to God’s image and likeness and how this is connected to the incarnation and the gift of the Eucharist. Ruusbroec then ends his excursus on the Eucharist by describing, in the last of his five points of Eucharistic doctrine, ten groups of people who receive the sacrament of the Eucharist.

At this point Ruusbroec turns to the third section (and group of people) of the Spieghel to teach his readers about the contemplative or “living life” (levende leven). As we noted earlier,

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152 Mommaers, “Introduction,” 34.

153 Spieghel, 881–1039. Here we will not delve into the Brabantine contemplative theologian’s articulation of humanity as created in the image and likeness of God in this secondary excursus within the larger Eucharistic excursus because we explored this passage to some degree in the section on Ruusbroec’s exemplarist, relational anthropology in chapter two of the present work.

154 Spieghel, 1122–1700.

155 Spieghel, 1701–2165. James Wiseman notes that “the term ‘living life’ (levende leven) may derive from St. Bernard’s distinction between a vita vitalis and a vita mortalis at the beginning of his seventeenth sermon on Psalm 91 (Qui habitat),” Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 235.
The *Spieghel* contains perhaps Ruusbroec’s richest reflections on the soul as a living mirror and this is a central feature for his teaching on the living life. So he begins this section of the work with an introduction, which grounds this teaching within his understanding of the Son as the Image of God who is impressed upon the created soul. Without this essential feature of trinitarian grounding one cannot, for Ruusbroec, correctly understand or seek the living life. He states:

> Now there are some people who, above all practice of virtues, become aware of and find within themselves a living life which joins together created and uncreated, God and creature. You are to know that we have an eternal life in the image of the wisdom of God. This life always remains in the Father, and flows out with the Son and is curved back into the same nature with the Holy Spirit; and thus we live eternally in our image of the Holy Trinity and of the fatherly unity. And from this we have a created life, flowing from the same wisdom of God; and therein God knows His power, His wisdom, and His goodness, and that is His image with which He lives in us.\(^{156}\)

Here Ruusbroec makes the familiar move of emphasizing that we have an eternal life in the Son (“the image of the wisdom of God”) and that we have our created life from this eternal life in God (though he does not here take time to articulate our non-distinct, essential union with our exemplar in the Son, in which we subsist). The Augustinian canon mines the riches of this truth on a deeper level, however, when he writes that “this life always remains in the Father, and flows out with the Son and is curved back into the same nature with the Holy Spirit” and further notes that we have eternal life in the Image (Son) of the *trinity* and the *paternal nature*. This truth helps us avoid any temptation to tritheism, on the one hand, or christomonism, on the other, by

\(^{156}\) *Spieghel*, 1701–1711: “Nu sijn selke menschen die boven alle ufeninghe van dooghden in hen ghevoelen ende bevenden een levende leven, dat te gadere ghevoeght es, ghescapen ende onghescapen, god ende creature. Ghi selt weten dat wi hebben een eewegh leven in den beelde der wijsheit gods. Dat leven blijft altoes in den vader, ende vloeyt ute met den sone, ende es wederboeogh in die selve natuere met den heileghen gheeste. | Ende aldus leven wi eewelec in onsen beelde der heilegher driheit ende der vaderleker eenheit. Ende hier ute hebben wi i. ghescapen leven, vloeyende ute der selver wijsheit gods; ende daer in bekint god sine macht, sine wijsheit ende sine goedheit; ende dat es sijn beelde, daer hi mede leeft in ons.” I have primarily used the critical edition translation while also consulting the translation in Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 235. However, at points I have departed from both.
reminding us that our eternal idea in the Son is from and always in the Father and reflected back to the Father from the Son in the Love of the Spirit. In other words, the Person of the Son, who is the eternal Exemplar within whom the eternal ideas lie, is only so by His eternal relation with the Father, in the Spirit. The Trinity is one God and while we live “in” this Image as eternal idea, it is through this image that He lives in us.

Nevertheless, a temptation toward tritheism or christomonism does not seem to be Ruusbroec’s primary concern in emphasizing the triune nature of the eternal ideas. We will see why momentarily. He goes on to describe our life in the Son, and thus in the Trinity, by stating:

And from this image of God our life acquires three properties, through which we become like the image of God which we have received; these are the properties of being, seeing, and tending toward the source of our creatureliness. There we live out of God and toward God, God in us and we in him. This is a living life (levende leven), which is in all of us essentially, in our bare nature, for it is above hope and faith, above grace and all virtuous exercises. This is why its being, its life, and its works are all one. This life is hidden in God and in the substance of our soul.\textsuperscript{157}

Ruusbroec seems here to subtly shift from speaking primarily of the Son as Image to the human as image. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he makes this shift without a level of clarity we would wish in discussing the essential union of the soul with the Image. Though we could wish for more clarity here on the Brabantine mystical theologian’s part, he does cue the reader in to his referring to the mysterious essential unity (the non-distinct union of the soul with its eternal idea in the Trinity more generally and the Son more specifically, based upon the radical transcendence of God) when he states, “there we live out of God and toward God, and God in us and we in him” (emphasis added). This “there” seems to be the essential unity. And this essential unity, whose primary cause is God, is “a living life” above all virtuous exercise, “in our bare nature.” With the last two sentences, which state the oneness of this life and its hiddenness in

\textsuperscript{157}Spieghel, 1711–1719.
God and the essence of the soul, Ruusbroec confirms that this living life is the essential union of the soul with its eternal idea in the Son. Put differently, the essential union makes us participants in the living life of the Son. Yet we must remember that this union is not a union between two entities that were once separate and are now united. It is a union that has always existed for the creature in order for it to be held in being. Again, this is a paradoxical, non-distinct union based upon the Creator-creature distinction in which the Creator, the Trinity, is so utterly transcendent that he is mysteriously and paradoxically “closer to the soul than it is to itself.” Here we see a perfect example of Ruusbroec’s fusion of Dionysian and Augustinian mystical theology.

The phrase “living life” here describes the union of the soul with our eternal idea in the Trinity. The trinitarian nature of the living life, which is in the Father, goes out with the Son, and is arched, curved, or turned back toward the Fatherly nature in the Love of the Spirit, and its union with the ground of the higher faculties, while useful for avoiding tritheism and christomonism, is not primarily focused on these types of heresy. Rather, at least a part of why Ruusbroec focuses upon this teaching is in order to help his readers/spiritual directees avoid the pitfalls of the Free Spirit sensibility and tendencies. This is brought into bold relief when the contemplative emphatically states:

But because it is in us all by nature, therefore some people can understand it without grace, and without faith, or any practice of virtues. And those are empty, inturned people above sensory images in the bare onefoldedness of their essence. There it seems to them that they are holy and blessed. And some think they are God. And they consider nothing good or evil, if only they can rid themselves of images and find and possess their own essence in bare emptiness. These are false, unbelieving people that I spoke of before, in the seventh group, to whom one should not give the holy Sacrament; for in all things they are deceitful and cursed by God and by holy Church. 158

As we saw in chapter one and two and at various points in other of Ruusbroec’s writings, much of his mystical theological teaching, and therefore his written spiritual direction, is directly or

158 Spieghel, 1719–1729. I have only slightly changed the critical edition translation.
indirectly used to address the problem of the Free Spirit tendency. However, as we claimed in chapter one, this does not mean that describing Ruusbroec as a “heresy hunter” would be accurate either, though his criticism of heresy does seem to grow in intensity in his later works.\textsuperscript{159}

This first portion of the section on the living life is important for grasping what Ruusbroec then has to say about the soul as “a living mirror” (eenen levenden spieghel).\textsuperscript{160} In his teaching on the soul as living mirror he begins, as he did in the previous section, by grounding the teaching in God’s trinitarian nature. He then elucidates his understanding of the soul as spieghel and further roots its life in participation in the trinitarian life of God. The Brabantine states:

In the beginning of the world, when God wanted to make the first human being in our nature, then He spoke in [the] Trinity of Persons: ‘Let us make humankind to our image and to our likeness.’ God is a spirit: His speaking is His knowing; His working is His willing. And He can do all that He wants. And all His working is gracious and well ordered. And He has created each person’s soul as a living mirror (eenen levenden spieghel), whereupon He has impressed the image of His nature. And so He lives imaged in us, and we in Him; for our created life is one, without intermediary, with the image and with the life that we have eternally in God. And the life that we have in God is, without intermediary, one in God. For it lives with the Son unborn in the Father, and it is born with the Son out of the Father, and flows out of them both with the Holy Spirit. And thus we live eternally in God and God in us. For our createdness lives in our eternal image that we have in the Son of God. And our eternal image is one with the wisdom of God, and lives in our createdness. And for this the eternal birth and the flowing out of the Holy Spirit in the emptiness of our soul are always renewed without cessation. For God has eternally known and loved us, called and chosen us.\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{159} See for instance Van den XII beghinen, 25. Here Ruusbroec contrasts true love with possible heresies in the pursuit of contemplative life.

\textsuperscript{160} Spieghel, 1786–1863.

In this passage Ruusbroec further roots the living life in the trinitarian relations and then describes the soul as a living mirror (it is primarily because of this section that the work is most often now called *The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*). The mirror of the soul lies in the highest part of the mind or the uppermost part of our mind, what he sometimes calls the ‘ground of the higher faculties’ or “the highest part of our mind.”

This way of describing the soul in its essential union with its image in God’s wisdom (the Son) also allows Ruusbroec to describe the union as a mutual indwelling of God in the soul and the soul in God (and the grace that gives us deepening mystical awareness of God is an intensification and transformation of the mirror ever more deeply into its image in the Son).

While the deepening of our understanding of the optics of light through modern scientific inquiry undoubtedly enriches our understanding of this symbol in helpful ways, we must also remember the medieval understanding of optics with which Ruusbroec is working. The active eye emits light that connects with the light presented by the object (*species*), thus there is a kind of mutual indwelling. Again, this is true at the level of existence and in the transformation by grace. By the primary cause of God’s light there is a seeing and being seen and thus a mutual indwelling of the Trinity and the mirror of the soul. Ruusbroec of course realizes that this is not between two objects as if God were a creature. Rather, through our sharing in the trinitarian relations of the

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middel een in gode. Want het leeft met den sone ongheboren in den vader, ende het wert gheboren met den sone ute den vader, ende vloeyt ute hen beiden met den heileghen gheeste. Ende aldus leven wi eewelec in gode ende god in ons. Want onse ghesca|penheit leeft in onsen eewe|eghen beele dat wi hebben in den sone gods. Ende onse eewe|egh beele es een met der wije|ght gods ende leeft in onse ghesca|penheit. Ende hier omme vernu|vet die eewe|eghe geboort ende dat uutvloeyen des heile|ghs gheests in de leedegheit onser zielen altoes sonder onderlaet. Want god heeft ons eewe|elec bek|indt ende ghe|indt, gheroepen ende vecoren.” While I have used the translation from the critical edition for this passage, I have departed from it at particular points.

162 *Spieghel*, 1809–1810.
Persons, “in light we see light.” He expresses this when he states: “But the onefold eye [the mirror of the soul illuminated by the Mirror of the Son] above reason, in the ground of understanding, is always open, and contemplates, and gazes with bare sight on the light with the same light.”\textsuperscript{163} This is true of the essential union of existence and the grace of deification. However, Ruusbroec reminds his readers, one must live into the grace of deification to be called holy and blessed, beyond the passive gift of existence. “If we want to know, love, and choose Him in return, \textit{then} we are holy, and blessed, and eternally chosen. And our heavenly Father shall show to us, in the highest (part) of our soul, His divine resplendence; for we are His realm and He dwells and reigns in us.”\textsuperscript{164}

Ruusbroec now delves deeper into “the living life” by articulating the conditions for this life,\textsuperscript{165} namely self-renunciation and the following of God’s “grace in what they do and leave undone and in their practice of the virtues, and who through faith, hope and love are raised above all their words to their soul’s bare act of seeing.”\textsuperscript{166} It is here that the resplendence of the eternal wisdom is revealed to “that simple eye which is always open in the ground of our


\textsuperscript{164} \textit{Spieghel}, 1804–1807.

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{Spieghel}, 1864–1888.

understanding." Ruusbroec describes this life as one in which we undergo the transformation of God’s action. “We then become simple and unified, for all our powers fall short as regards their own activity, melting and flowing away to nothingness before the face of God’s eternal love. That is why this life is called a life of annihilation in love.” This then leads the canon to discuss the union and unity with God in the living life while, in a tone now familiar to us, maintaining that the Creator and creature always remain ontologically distinct. This discussion is followed by focus upon the indispensable role played by Christ, the true Mirror of the Trinity, in allowing us to share in the living life. Ruusbroec then finishes out this third part of the work, on the living life, with four points on this life. He first explores the nature and the practice of this life. He then teaches his readers/directees about the essential and superessential


169 Spieghel, 1889–1953.

170 Spieghel, 1954–2018. In Ruusbroec’s understanding the incarnation of Christ, his life, passion, death and resurrection are salvific because of who Christ is. Because he is the incarnation of the Son, the true Mirror/Image of the Father, he can, by the Spirit’s inflowing, draw our whole human life into alignment with the fundamental ground of our higher faculties, namely, our soul as living mirror of the Mirror. In describing Christ Ruusbroec says: “And the Holy Spirit rested in His soul and in His human nature with all His gifts, and made Him rich, generous overflowing into all those who had need of Him and desired Him. He was humble, patient, meek and merciful, full of grace and full of faith, obedient, resigned in will, and innocent. And He gave Himself, scorned and cast out, below all people. He bent His knees and adored His God and Father. And He gave Himself up in death, that we might be blessed and live eternally with Him. He is our rule and our mirror, according to which we should live. His humanity is a lantern of the resplendence of God, that has illumined heaven and earth, and shall illuminate them eternally,” Spieghel, 1964–1974. Emphasis added.

171 Spieghel, 2019–2165.

172 Spieghel, 2030–2101.
being of the this life. 173 Finally, the entire treatise is ended by Ruusbroec through offering a prayer for a share in the heavenly life of the blessed in glory. 174

Now that we have sufficiently examined the areas of the date and occasion of Ruusbroec’s treatise as well as issues of structure and the content of the work, we are in a position to immerse ourselves in some of the key passages in which we find the canon giving spiritual direction to his readers/directees. The Spieghel offers some of Ruusbroec’s most important examples of spiritual direction in his oeuvre.

**B. Spiritual Direction in the Spieghel**

For an illuminating passage of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction given in the Spieghel we need look no further than the introductory section of the document. Here Ruusbroec speaks affectionately to his readers/directees with loving language (“Dearly beloved in our Lord”), which means that he likely had a more or less intimate and loving relationship with his readers and undoubtedly a relationship of spiritual mentoring or spiritual direction. The passage nicely summarizes the primary points of the call and pilgrimage into the contemplative/mystical life of union with God that Ruusbroec will develop throughout the Spieghel. The first portion of the quotation affirms his relation with the readers/directees and his confidence in the call of God upon their lives when he states:

*Dearly beloved in our Lord, I hope and I trust in Him without doubt that He has foreseen, called, chosen, and loved you in eternity. Not only you, but also all those who make their profession truly before His glorious countenance in His convent. And they are all those who freely and unfeignedly choose to serve, to praise and to love Him for ever. And this*


is for them a true witness and a certain sign that God has in eternity foreseen, chosen, and called them out of free goodness with His beloved friends into His convent. Ruusbroec’s use of “convent” here may or not to be limited to the cloistered life of physical enclosure. He may be using it in an analogous sense in which it means perhaps “holy church” or “body of Christ” or at least a metaphor for the pursuit of mystical awareness and union with God. His use here may not necessarily denote only an audience of ones who had or are considering taking religious vows, though it may do so. Perhaps we can be confident that at least some of Ruusbroec’s audience was religious and those in the novitiate and we must be open to the possibility that the original audience was male or female religious. Again, while the original audience may be in question, it seems to the present writer that, whether the original recipients were a community of Clares or a male religious abbey, it is highly likely that they were some type of community of religious. Following this affectionate greeting and theological affirmation Ruusbroec then summarizes some of the primary themes in the work and couches it in a piece of spiritual direction when he says:

But if you are still a novice, then take on the religious state and make profession in love and in true holiness. Choose unfeignedly and with a free heart and then you shall be consciously aware (ghevoelen) that you have been chosen by God from eternity. Because for His chosen beloved He has sent His only Son, who is one with Him in substance and one with us in our nature; and He has lived for us and taught us and loved us unto death, and He has redeemed us and freed us of all our enemies and of all our sins. And this He has done for all of us in common (ghemeine), and for all in common (ghemeine) He has given and left all His sacraments. And therefore, if you are willing to choose in love, let that be a sign to you that you have been chosen from all eternity. And so that you believe Him in this and trust well in Him, He has given you and left you His flesh and His blood

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175 Spieghel, 19–26: “Lieve gheminde in onsen heere, ic hope ende ic ghetrouwe hem sonder twivel dat hi u voorsien, gheroepen, vercoren ende ghemindt heeft in der eewecheit; niet alleene u maer oec alle die ghene die professie doen ghewarechlec vore sijn gloriose anschijn in sijn convent. Ende dat sijn alle die ghene die vrilc ende ongehevensdelec verkiesen ewelee hem te dienenne, te lovene ende te minnenne. Ende dit es hen een ghewaregh ghetughe ende een seker teeken datse god in der eewecheit voorsien, vercoren ende gheroepen heeft van vrier goethet met sinen gheminden vrienden in sijn convent.”
in food and in drink, in a taste that goes through your whole nature. And that taste
(smaec) shall feed and nourish you until eternal life.\(^\text{176}\)

Ruusbroec’s guidance to choose to take the religious state in love and holiness alludes to his
theme of the necessity of a single intention or theocentric focus (eenvuldighe meyninghe) for
growing in godlikeness and intimacy with the Trinity. This interpretation is confirmed when but
a few lines later, in speaking of the way of eternal life, he directs his readers to “live and praise,
intend (meindt) and love and serve to His eternal glory…”\(^\text{177}\) This is, as we have seen, always
fundamental for Ruusbroec’s understanding of the mystical life of deification or becoming
godlike (god gelike/godformich). This, however, is not the most fundamental element, for our
intention of God in all things is a response to the most fundamental element that we “have been
chosen by God from eternity.”

This then leads Ruusbroec to articulate how this eternal choice by God is expressed
salvifically in that the Father has sent the Son for His beloved whom the Son has lived for,
taught, and loved unto death. This brief discussion of the work of Christ, as we saw in the
previous section of this chapter, will expand in the treatise to include the further discussion of the

\(^{176}\) Spieghel, 26–40: “Maer sidi noch novicia, soe nemt de ordene ane ende doet professie
in minnen ende in ghewaregher heilecheit. Verkiest ongheveisdelec met vrier herten, ende dan
seldi ghevoelen dat ghi van gode eeweche vercoren sijt. Want omme sine uutvercoorne gheminde
heeft hi ghesendt sinen eeneghen sone, die met hem .i. es in der substantien ende met ons een in
onser natuaren. Ende hi heeft ons gheleeft ende gheleert ende ghemint tote der dooet, ende hi
heeft ons verloooest ende ghevrijd van alle onsen vianden ende van al onsen sunden. Ende dit
heeft hi ons allen ghemeine ghedaen, ende ghemeine ghegheven ende ghelaten alle sine
sacramente. Ende hier omme, wildi in minnen verkiesen, dat si u een teeken dat ghi van
eeweche vercoren sijt. Ende op dat ghi hem des ghelooeft ende wale betrout, soe heeft hi u
ghegheven ende ghelaten sijn vleesch ende sijn bloed in spisen ende in dranke, in eenen
doorgaenden smake al uwer natuaren. Ende die smaec sal u voeden ende spisen tote in dat
eewege leven.” I have departed from the critical edition translation here only in my rendering of
ghelaten. As noted in the previous chapter of the present work, “feeling” is an inadequate
translation in terms of English for it says too little. There is more going on in the notion than
what contemporary English language typically refers to with the word “feeling.”

\(^{177}\) Spieghel, 46–47.
work of Christ and of the fact that the Son, incarnate in Christ, is the Mirror or Image of the Father and thus of the Trinity. This notion, so fundamental for Ruusbroec’s exemplaristic anthropology, is discussed in some depth in the *Spieghel* and, as explored in the previous section of the present chapter, leads the canon to describe the human soul as “mirror of the Mirror,” in whom is pressed the image of the soul’s eternal idea in the Mirror/Son. Ruusbroec then describes for his directees the common love of Christ in his sacrifice and how he has left the sacraments of his body and blood in common as well. As we have seen, this points to the extensive importance of the Eucharist and the role it will play in Ruusbroec’s spiritual guidance given in the *Spieghel*. Eucharistic participation is central to developing the “taste” (*smaec*) for God. Thus the Fleming’s urging of his readers to choose the religious state in love is connected to his teaching on theocentric focus and rests upon his christology and soteriology. His christology and soteriology open out to, and are fundamental for, his exemplaristic anthropology and his sacramental theology, which will both play a vital role in the remainder of the *Spieghel*.

Another poignant example of spiritual guidance in this treatise comes in the beginning of part one in which the Augustinian canon teaches his readers/directees about the life of virtue. Here Ruusbroec orients his readers to the beginning of a holy life when he states:

> The Holy Spirit shows His grace in a person’s heart: if then this person wants to receive the grace of God, [she] opens [her] heart and [her] will to God and receives the grace and the inworking of God with a joyful heart. And the affection for God at once outweighs and overcomes the disordered affection for all creatures, but not all disordered inclination or desire of nature. For holy life is a knightly service in which one must hold fast in the battle.

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Ruusbroec here again points to the gracious activity of God, which is always prior to and undergirds the human response to that grace. The result of this response to grace is a fundamental change in the human’s central orientation and yet there is growth and transformation that will continue to take place during one’s earthly sojourn. Ruusbroec then elucidates for his readers the characteristics necessary in order for one to continually submit to the Spirit’s transformative work when he states:

And therefore, if you want to begin a good life and stay therein without end, then you must intend (meinen) and love God unfeignedly above all things. This intention (meininghe) will always lead you toward what you love, and in love you will practice, embrace, and possess what you love. You will base your entire life on this and always be occupied with your Beloved with great desire. You will thus savor and be aware (ghevoelen) of God’s goodness each time you turn within, and so you will love God purely for his eternal glory, so that you might love him for all eternity. This is the root of a holy life and of that genuine love which is imperishable and which you will always practice through forgetting and renouncing yourself. Therefore hold yourself above all things so as not to seek your own advantage in love—seek neither savor nor consolation nor anything else which God can give you for your own comfort in time or in eternity, for that is contrary to charity and is a tendency of our nature which makes genuine love wither away...you should know that everything you can desire—and much more besides—will be given you by love without your having to do anything, for if you truly have divine love, you have all that you can desire. Having such love is nothing other than always and eternally loving God without ceasing. In this way you will die to all self-centeredness, and love will be your life.179

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179 Spieghel, 120–138: “Ende hier omme, wildi .i. goet leven beghinnen ende daer in bliven sonder inde, so moetti gode ongheveisdelec boven alle ding meinen ende minnen. De meininghe sal u leiden altoes daer ghi mindt, ende met minnen seldi ufenen, behelsen ende besitten dat ghi mindt. Ende hier in seldi funderen al uwe leven ende uws liefs altoes met loste pleghen, soe seldi in elken inkeere smaken ende ghevoelen de goedheit gods. Ende alsoe seldi gode puerlec minnen te sijnre eewegher eeren, op dat ghi eewelec minnen, die onvergankelec es, die ghi altoes ufenen selt in verghetene ende in vertyene uws selfs. Ende hier omme, huedt u boven all ding dat ghi niet en suect in minnen uws selfs orbore, smaec noch trooest ochte eeneh ding dat u god gheven mach na u gherief in tijd ochte in eewegheit. Want dat es contrarie der caritaten, ende ordene der natureren, die gherechte minne verdrooeghen doet...nochtan seldi weten: al dat ghi beghereen mooght ende vele meer daer toe, dat sal u minne gheven sonder uwe toeden. | Want hebdi ghewareghe, godleke minne, soe hebdi al dat ghi begheeren mooght. Ende dat en es anders niet dan altooes ende eewelec sonder cesseren gode minnen.” Emphasis added. I have drawn from both the critical edition translation and the translation in Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 190–191 for the rendering which I give here. However, I have departed from both the critical edition and Wiseman at points.
This extraordinary passage of spiritual guidance leaves one with no doubt as to the deep impulse of Ruusbroec’s Augustinianism. We are what we love.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, the affirmative response to the grace of the Holy Spirit leads one to a clear theocentric focus that places one within the triune flow of divine love (minne). And this, for Ruusbroec, is that which allows his readers/directees to grow in the mystical life of savoring (smaken) God’s love and loving fellow humans and all creatures in a non-egoistic or idolatrous fashion (the “genuine love” of which he speaks). Indeed, divine love and the intension of God is “the root of a holy life.” Ruusbroec’s trinitarian exemplarism is assumed here as well, for to truly love other creatures is to see their being as arising from their union with their eternal idea or exemplar in the Son. To love other creatures in an egoistic way would be to challenge the sovereignty of God, seeking to make them “cardboard characters” in one’s own story rather than beloved characters in God’s story. Loving creatures in an idolatrous fashion means a lack of awareness that they are not ends in themselves but rather gifts whose being is constantly sustained by the donation of their being out of the triune life of God.

To desire God is to be granted more than one could ever desire, for the beauty that makes us love creatures is rooted in God as their source. And yet God is, in the Dionysian mode, ever and always infinitely more than creation (the “much more besides”). Beyond the gift of creation, the Trinity is boundless Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. This awareness allows the love of the

¹⁸⁰ The human as a living love or desire who is ordered or disordered, depending of the whether God is one’s central love or not is found throughout Augustine’s writings such as On Christian Doctrine and his Confessions and is the central motif for The City of God. For a helpful example of a contemporary North American philosophical theologian who makes extensive use of Augustine’s theology of ordered and disordered love see James K.A. Smith, Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation (Cultural Liturgies) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009). See also James K.A. Smith, You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).
Spirit to flow through the human to all people and creatures in common, for God’s love is common. This is the “love beyond comprehension” Ruusbroec speaks of, in the sentences directly following the quotation above, when he states: “For love beyond your comprehension, that is the Spirit of our Lord. Therein you shall be elevated, rest and dwell in unity with God beyond the understanding of your reason.” ¹⁸¹ That Ruusbroec is also alluding to the common life (dat ghemeyne leven), the sharing in the paradoxical life of essential love (weselijcke minne) that is the Trinity, in this passage also cannot be doubted, though the actual words “dat ghemeyne leven” are not used in this context. This is seen when, very soon after the passage, the mystical theologian continues to instruct his directees by stating:

And therefore, be free of images and in control of yourself and have your soul in your hands: thus you can, whenever you wish, lift your eyes and your heart into heaven where your treasure is and your Beloved, and so you keep one life with Him. And let the grace of God not be idle in you, but devote yourself to right affection, upward in the praise of God and downward in all ways of virtues and of good works. And in all outer works be unconcerned and empty of heart so that, if you wish, you can behold the one whom you love through all and above all. ¹⁸²

We see here the harmony of unitive rest and outgoing love. In these two, closely linked, passages of spiritual direction Ruusbroec relies upon his teachings of theocentric focus, exemplarism, and the paradoxical triune life of essential love which, when participated in by the human, results in a common person living a common life. And though Ruusbroec cannot fully speak of the common person until the active, interior, and contemplative life work in mature harmony through resting

¹⁸¹ Spieghel, 139–142.

¹⁸² Spieghel, 158–166: “Ende hier ommen, syt overbeeltd ende selfs gheweldegh, ende hebt uwe ziele in uwe hande, soe mooghdi, aloes alse ghi wilt, verheffen uwe ooeoghe ende uwe herte in den hemel, daer uwe scat es ende uwe lief. Ende alsoe behouddi .i. leven met heme. Ende en laetd de gratie gods in u niet ledegh sijen, maer ufent u in rechter liefden, opweert in den love gods ende nederweert in allen wisen van dooghden ende van goeden werken. Ende in allen werken van buiten sijt onbecommert ende ledegh van herten, alsoe dat ghi, alse ghi wilt, dore al ende boven al aensien mooght den ghenen dien ghi mindt.”
in the unity of the divine embrace and going out to the other in virtuous love with and in the Son and Spirit, his allusion to essential love points to the common life as the ultimate form of the perfect Christian life.

After these passages and a brief reflection on the four ways of loving, we find Ruusbroec giving spiritual guidance that certainly sounds as if his readers/directees are persons who live in the community of a religious order. In this passage the Brabantine guides his readers in terms of “attentiveness at prayer.” With the wisdom of one who has lived life as a canon priest and monastic in community, with all the gifts and challenges this brings, Ruusbroec offers both direction, which helps his readers practice faithful prayer, and mercy and comfort in such endeavors for the times when one encounters distractions which draw away one’s attention. He states:

In addition, whenever you are reading, singing, or praying, if you are able to understand the words, then pay attention to their sense and meaning, for you are serving in God’s presence. But if you do not understand the words, or if you are raised to a higher state, then remain in it and keep your gaze fixed simply on God as long as you can, always intending and loving God’s glory. And if during a period of choral prayer or during your other exercises distracting thoughts or images come into your mind—no matter from where they come—do not get upset over this, for we are all unstable; when you come back to yourself and become aware of all this, quickly direct your attention (meininghen) and your love back to God. Even though the enemy shows you his booths and his wares, if you do not buy anything with affection, nothing of all that remains with you.

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183 Spieghel, 180–190. “Attentiveness at prayer” is Wiseman’s description of this passage in Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 192.

184 Spieghel, 180–190: “Vooert meer alse ghi leest ochte singt ochte beedt, eest alsoe dat ghi die warde verstaen mooght, soe merct den sen ende de sententie van den warden, want ghi dient vore dat anschijn gods. Ende verstadi oec der warde niet ochte sidi in een hooeghere verhaven, soe blijft daer bi ende houdt uwe eenvuldeghe ghesichte soe ghi langst mooght te gode, ende meint ende mindt altoes de eere gods. Eest oec dat u in uwe ghetyden ochte in uwe ufeninghe vreemde ghpeinside ende vreemde beelden invallen, waer ave dadt si dat es al eens, alse ghi dies gheware wert ende te u selven comt, en ontsiet u niet, want wi sijn onghestadegh, maer keert u weder haestelec met meininghen ende met minnen te gode. Want al tooent u de viand sine krame ende sine meerce, en coeptdijs niet met liefden, soe en blives u niet.” Translation from Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 192.
If one is a reader of Ruusbroec’s corpus, particularly someone who is seeking guidance in the life of prayer and holiness, this is a refreshing passage. This is the case for, as we have seen, the Brabantine contemplative theologian talks much of the divine intention and following the way of seeking after union with God the Trinity in a way that often pushes for and assumes that the one seeking is consistently striving for embrace through theocentric focus (keeping one’s “gaze fixed simply on God”).

In this passage Ruusbroec does indeed encourage his directees toward always intending God but also reminds them that if they experience distracting thoughts and images in their mind they should “not get upset over this, for we are all unstable.” In everyday, contemporary North American English, Ruusbroec seems to be basically say something like “don’t take yourself so seriously! Take God seriously, but remember that he is merciful and that you are on the way, are finite, and fallen like the rest of us. When you are distracted and become aware of this do not spend unnecessary energy in self-flagellation. Simply return your loving attention to God.” This is a reminder that while Ruusbroec does in fact teach that one must give oneself to a disciplined living of the life of prayer, contemplation, and service, this begins, is sustained by, and ends in God’s grace, by God’s “inworking” (inwerken) at the most interior level of our being to transform us into the image of Christ. We see this in the beginning of the second section of the Spieghel where he notes: “For we cannot redeem ourselves. But if we follow Christ in the way I have shown before with all that we can do, then our works are at one with His works and ennobled through His grace. And so He has redeemed us not through our works, but through His works; and through His merits He has made us free and redeemed us.”185 This passage also shows, like the earlier passage we quoted, that Ruusbroec’s audience is at least partially made up

185 Spieghel, 399–404.
of novices in the religious life. Thus a level of gentle encouragement is needed in urging his directees.

In the remainder of this first section of the *Spieghel* there are more instances of the canon giving spiritual direction to his readers in areas such as “recolletion and a desire for wisdom,” “restraining the senses,” “resisting temptation and confessing one’s sins,” and “spiritual abandonment and consolation.”\(^{186}\) However, there are also a number of important examples in the second section of the *Spieghel*, which contains the large excursus on the Eucharist. It is to this section and the spiritual direction therein that we now turn.

As we discussed in the previous section of the present chapter, in the second section of the work Ruusbroec deals with the interior life. He launches the section by rooting our life and redemption in the fact that God has created us from nothing and redeemed us through the sacrifice of Christ.\(^ {187}\) Thus we are God’s whether we are “blessed in heaven or damned in hell.”\(^ {188}\) He then guides his readers/directees into the notion of submitting our will to the will of Christ and, with our will united with his, submitting our will, through his will, to the Father. In this we become followers of Christ. Interestingly, Ruusbroec then describes the deepening of our following to the level of the interior life by using the typology of faithful servants, friends, and sons which he used in *Vanden Blinkenden Steen* when he states:

> If we want to follow Him, then, we must deny our own will and live for His will. And so His purchase is confirmed in us. We also must control our senses and overcome our nature and bear our cross and follow Christ; and so we pay back to Him the debt that He paid for us. And through His death and our willing penance we are united with Him and become His faithful servants, and belong to His realm. But where we die to our own will in His

\(^ {186}\) These descriptions in quotation marks are the ways in which Wiseman defines the passages in Wiseman, *John Ruusbroec*, 193–195.

\(^ {187}\) *Spieghel*, 358–378.

\(^ {188}\) *Spieghel*, 366.
will, and His will becomes ours, there we are His disciples and His chosen friends. Furthermore, where we are elevated through love, and our mind stands bare and imageless as it has been created by God, there we are wrought by the Spirit of God and there we are the sons of God. Note the words and their sense, and live accordingly.\textsuperscript{189}

The first three sentences of this quotation see Ruusbroec describing and calling for the familiar notion of desiring only God and God’s will (“we must deny our own will and live for His will”) or a theocentric focus in the lives of his readers. In addition he describes the mortifying of the flesh and bearing of one’s cross in response to the debt paid in Christ’s sacrifice that comprise significant dimensions of the “active” or “virtuous life.” So here Ruusbroec’s christology also comes to the fore in terms of atonement and our sharing in Christ’s redemption by sinking our will deeply into his.\textsuperscript{190} This participation in the work of Christ resonates with ideas and images


\textsuperscript{190} I have not chosen to delve deeply into Ruusbroec’s theology of the atonement in the present work and this is not the place in which to do so. However, this is an important aspect to his thought. Language about satisfaction of a debt points to the fact that Anselm’s theology of the atonement seems to have influenced Ruusbroec. It is important to have a sound assessment of Anselm’s understanding of the atonement and this is severely lacking in much of the common criticism leveled at him in the contemporary scene. Rather than discussing this here I would point the reader to an important discussion of Anselm and Ruusbroec’s respective atonement theologies, which clarifies a proper understanding of the atonement theologies of both thinkers in Rik Van Nieuwenhove, \textit{Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian of the Trinity} (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 139–156. For a helpful refutation of much misguided criticism of Anselm’s thought as well as his continuation of themes that are actually present in patristic thinking see the rich discussion in David Bentley Hart, \textit{The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth} (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 360–372. The section is found in Bentley Hart’s book in part two, chapter three and is entitled, “A Gift Exceeding Every Debt.” While Anselm is not above criticism, his understanding of “satisfaction” and “honor” do not seem to be adequately understood by contemporary critics.
similar to those in Ruusbroec’s rendering, in the *Tabernakel*, of the fulfillment of the figure of the Old Testament Tabernacle candelabrum in Christ and our participation in his person and work, signified by the various components of the candelabrum, as the path of growth in union with the Trinity.\footnote{For this discussion see section B in the third chapter of the present work entitled “Spiritual Direction in the *Tabernakel*.”}

This then leads Ruusbroec to instruct his readers in the way of growth into the interior life using the typology found in the *Steen*. Through death and our turning from our own way we become Christ’s “faithful servants” through union with him. The canon then notes that we become Christ’s “disciples and chosen friends” through dying to our own will and being united to his. Finally, Ruusbroec arrives at his description of the interior life through the typology when he says to his directees: “where we are elevated through love, and our mind stands bare and imageless as it has been created by God, there we are wrought by the Spirit of God and there we are the sons of God.” Here Ruusbroec draws upon his christology and his pneumatology, for it is through the incarnation and work of Christ and the work of the Spirit that we are drawn into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in his Body (holy Church) and thus “elevated through love” into the imageless and bare, interior stance of mind and wrought as children of God. Not only are Ruusbroec’s christology and pneumatology at work shaping his teaching of his directees but within this work of Christ and the Spirit the Brabantine Augustinian is also describing, in microcosmic form, what I have called, in chapter two of the present work, “The True Contemplative/Mystical Path,” or at least an important part of this path. The canon’s use of the typology of “servants, friends, sons” from the *Steen* also alludes to the fact that he is guiding his directees ultimately toward the “common life,” which he discusses in the third section of the
**Spieghel** (on “The Living Life”), the most mature stage on the endless journey of sharing, through Christ, by the Spirit, in the paradoxical life of the essential love of the Trinity. While the current portion we are presently discussing does not have anything like a fully developed description of the common life, Ruusbroec’s teaching on the seventh and eighth beatitudes is perhaps at least a foreshadowing of the paradoxical simultaneity of the restful bliss and loving activity that constitute the common/living life which participates in the essential love of the Trinity.

This reading is borne out in the material that follows. Ruusbroec here fleshes out and further develops for his directees his understanding of the deepening of the spiritual life unto the interior dimension or life through the *Steen* typology. He does this first by exploring more deeply the love and sacrifice of Christ in handing over his will to the Father out of love and thus opening the way for us, through him, to do so. He then delves more deeply into the stages of servants, friends, and sons through the eight beatitudes. However, as in the *Steen*, the stage of sons, signified by the seventh beatitude, is not the pinnacle (though, when compared to the living or common life, the eighth beatitude is not the *ultimate* pinnacle either). We may perceive this when the canon tells his readers/directees that the sixth beatitude is received by “those who receive the grace and the gifts of God with a pure heart rid of images, and therewith stand

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192 In the section on the living life Ruusbroec does not actually use the language of “the common life” or “the common person” but he undoubtedly refers to the same reality at points throughout the section.

upright in thankful praise: those [the pure in heart] are they who contemplate God.” Ruusbroec continues:

From this contemplation then waxes the seventh way of blessedness, that is: a loving turning inward to God and divine peace, following heart and senses, body and soul, with all one’s powers and with all those who are blessed or want to become blessed: all this is cleaving to and following the loving turning-inward to God and the sight of divine peace. Those who find this way in themselves are blessed and they are peacemakers: for they have peace with God, and with themselves and with all creatures; and for this they are called the sons of God.¹⁹⁵

This state of blessedness in peace through turning inward to gaze into the abyss of Triune love is at least somewhat similar to the way Ruusbroec describes the contemplative life in the Brulocht and the stage of the “hidden sons” in the Steen. Certainly there are differences in that, again, we do not have a discussion of the “common life” (dat ghemeyne leven) here, but in a way similar to the Steen and its description of the common life as the harmonious integration of the best of the faithful servants, secret friends, hidden sons, Ruusbroec here pushes beyond the peace of the seventh beatitude toward an integration of it with the eighth, “perfecting,” beatitude when he says to his directees:

But he [the prophet/psalmist] at once goes on to say thus: ‘Ye shall die like men and ye shall fall down like one of the princes.’ And in this you understand the last way that perfects our blessedness. For in the same way that we rise in the power of our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of divine peace where we are sons of God, so must we also go down with Him in poverty, in wretchedness, in temptations; in struggling against our flesh, against the devil and against the world; and in struggling we must live and die like poor

¹⁹⁴ Spieghel, 436–438: “…dat sijn de ghene die met reinre onver beeldere herten de gratie ende de gaven gods | ontfaen ende daer mede opgherecht staen in dancbaren love: die sijnt die gode scouwen.”

¹⁹⁵ Spieghel, 438–446: “Ute desen scouwene soe wast de sevende wise der salechiet, dat es .i. minlec inkeer in gode ende in godleken vrede, navolghende herte ende sen, lijf ende ziele met alle den crachten ende met alle den ghenen die salegh sijn ochte salegh moghen werden: dat es al ane hanghende ende navolghende den minleken inkeere in gode ende in dat ghesichte goleecs vreden. Die dese wise in hen bevenden, die sijn salegh ende dat sijn peysmakeren, want si hebben peys met gode ende met hen selven ende met allen creatueren. Ende hier omme heeten si de sonen gods.”
people, in the same way that Christ the living Son of God did, who is a Prince above all creatures.\textsuperscript{196}

The action of struggling for holiness against the flesh, the devil, and the world, bound together with the peaceful contemplation of God, which leads to peace with all creatures, seems to foreshadow the maturing into the living/common life of both contemplation and active love. With this Ruusbroec once again urges his directees toward the paradoxical life of action and blissful rest which both reflects and shares in the Triune life of essential love (\textit{weselijcke minne}).

Ruusbroec then begins his long excursus on the Eucharist and the spiritual life by using the last beatitude of suffering for the sake of the Kingdom of God as a bridge into this excursus. In a way similar to the \textit{Sloten}, this move by the Brabantine contemplative theologian grounds the guidance on the spiritual life he has been giving his readers/directees in the sacramental and liturgical life of the church and thus into the work of the Spirit and the Divine-Humanity of Christ which draw us ever more deeply into sharing the fellowship of love shared between the Father, Son, and Spirit. This, at least implicitly, means that the blessed life of the beatitudes and the spiritual/mystical life in general, contra the sensibility of the Free Spirit, is not separate from participation in the sacramental mysteries of “holy Church.” Rather, at the core of growth in union with God is sharing in the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharistic celebration.

Ruusbroec constructs his literary-theological bridge between the last beatitude and the Eucharist by teaching his directees that “it is better to be with Christ in tribulations and in suffering, than to

\textsuperscript{196} \textit{Spieghel}, 447–455: “Maer hi sprect vooert te hans aldus: ‘Ghi selt sterven alse meschen ende ghi selt neder vallen alse .i. van den princen.’ Ende hier mede versteet men de leste wise die onse salecheit volmaect. Want gheliker wijs dat wi in de cracht ons heeren Jhesu Cristi opgaen in dat ghesichte godlecs vreden, daer wi sonen gods sijn, alsoe moeten wi oec met heme nedergaen in armuede, in elenden, in becoringhen; in stride jeghen onse vleesch, jeghen den duvel ende jeghen de werelt. Ende in stride moeten wi leven ende sterven alse arme menschen, ghlier wijs dat Cristus, de levende gods sone, dede die .i. prince es boven alle creaturen.”
be without Him in joy and in bliss...”¹⁹⁷ This bridge is supported by a quotation from Psalm 91 regarding God’s presence in the suffering of the one who has placed his trust in him.¹⁹⁸ Ruusbroec follows this with a creative use of Psalm 23, which serves as the last plank or step off the bridge into the excursus on the Eucharist and the spiritual life. Here Ruusbroec notes: “And in another place the same Prophet David says: ‘Lord, Thou hast prepared a table for us in the presence of all those who inflict tribulation and suffering on us.’”¹⁹⁹ Walking off the bridge into the sacramental land Ruusbroec then teaches and guides his directees when he states:

\textit{That table} is the altar of God, where we receive living food that makes us alive and strengthens us in all suffering and makes us overcome our enemies and all that can harm us. And therefore Christ Himself speaks to all human beings: “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have not life in you.” He goes on to say: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, for he lives in me and I in him.” This mutual indwelling is eternal life. Since here on earth we have to live in a condition of spiritual struggle, \textit{we need the food} which has the power to strengthen us, so that we might win the victory in our struggle and might keep struggling even as we are winning the victory. This food is the hidden bread of heaven which is given only to those who are victorious in the struggle and which is known only by those who receive and savor (\textit{ghesmaect}) it. Listen now to my words and note their sense and meaning.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Spieghel, 482–484.

¹⁹⁸ Spieghel, 484–488.

¹⁹⁹ Spieghel, 488–490.

As we have now come to see in Ruusbroec’s passages of spiritual direction throughout his works, this passage articulates and works from the assumptions of a number of aspects of his trinitarian mystical theology.

Ruusbroec’s chalcedonian christology and pneumatology are at work here. Christ, as the God-Human who is animated and empowered by the Spirit, is the one who, by that same Spirit’s mediation, encounters Ruusbroec’s directees in the Eucharistic meal and draws us into his humanity through the bread and wine whose substance or essence has been changed to the body and blood of Christ. Through the *regyratio/wederboechde* of the Holy Spirit the human is drawn, by means of the Eucharistic elements, into the divine-humancy of Christ and the transformational journey of becoming like God. Since this journey of transformation often involves struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, Ruusbroec teaches his directees that eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood of Christ gives one spiritual nourishment and strength for the journey.

This transforming food helps us that we might “win the victory in our struggle and might keep struggling even as we are winning the victory.” Ruusbroec’s language here perhaps alludes to our sharing in the triune paradox of essential love and the simultaneity of outgoing love and restful unity of being embraced by the Father and Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. More surely it alludes to the kind of *epektasis* he teaches, which is ultimately made possible because of the paradoxical reality of essential love. Just as he calls his directees to “run while obtaining and obtain while running” in the *Tabernakel*, here the canon calls and encourages his directees to

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“struggle while winning the victory and win the victory while struggling.” Just as the trinitarian life of God is a paradoxical mystery, the journey of transformation into the image of Christ is a paradoxical journey of the simultaneity of struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, and winning the victory over these foes. And the nourishment of spiritual δύναμις (power) for this pilgrimage into the life of the triune God is the body and blood of Christ given in the Eucharist.

When Ruusbroec teaches his readers that “this food is the hidden bread of heaven which is given only to those who are victorious in the struggle and which is known only by those who receive and savor (ghesmaect) it,” he is pointing to an important dimension of his Eucharistic theology, discussed in the previous section of the present chapter. The reception of the Eucharist is always personal, and a disposition of faith in and love of Christ, enabled by the Spirit, is also held as necessary by Ruusbroec in order for the recipient to benefit most fully from the sacrament. This sentence also contains the familiar Ruusbroecian theme of the “spiritual senses,” which is intricately connected to the proper reception of the elements just noted. We must be ones who “receive and savor (ghesmaect)” the meal in order to receive the “hidden bread of heaven (verborghen hemelsch brooed)” and be victorious. Developing the savor for the true body and blood of Christ seems here to be for Ruusbroec an ongoing, growing capacity, for the life of Christ must nourish us on our way of struggle and victory. Finally, the contemplative theologian and spiritual director takes a moment to enjoin his directees to “now listen to my words and note their meaning and sense.” Ruusbroec undoubtedly is referring here to the guidance he has just given but also seems to be referring to the direction he will subsequently give in the coming passages in which he will mine the riches of the Eucharist and its place in the mystical/spiritual life. This passage and the ensuing passages on the Eucharist and the spiritual life show his

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directees that the true spiritual path, contra the sensibility of the Free Spirit, runs directly through the sacramental, liturgical life of the church, which mediates the salvific grace of God.

Immediately following this passage (briefly alluded to in our summary of the contents of the *Spieghel*), before launching into his five points of Eucharistic doctrine, Ruusbroec draws an analogy between his directees’ reception of the sacrament and Mary’s characteristics she displayed when she conceived Christ. Like Mary, they must possess purity, true knowledge of God, humility, and desire, which comes from their free will. It is in his discussion of the first of these characteristics, purity, that Ruusbroec shows himself to be a wise, sound, and judicious spiritual director when dealing with an issue that can be a stumbling block for those seeking the depths of the contemplative/mystical life. That stumbling block is the habitual state of mind indicated by the term *scrupulosity*.

Ruusbroec instructs his directees to be pure in the way of Mary, free from venial and mortal sin. Being pure in the way of the mother of Jesus involves examining one’s conscience and confessing all sins to one’s confessor, especially the significant sins that weigh heavily upon the conscience. Indeed, he states: “But you should have deep sorrow and heartfelt contrition for all your sins and have the good intention of always doing what is right and avoiding every sin, both venial and mortal.” At this point Ruusbroec exercises wisdom that undoubtedly

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204 I am using the translation of these four characteristics by Wiseman in Wiseman, *John of Ruusbroec*, 202.

205 Many thanks to my doctoral dissertation adviser, Father James Wiseman, O.S.B, for his helpful comments on this passage through an email conversation, which took place on 6/2/2016.

206 *Spieghel*, 520–525.

comes from years of experience in giving spiritual direction to the faithful at St. Gudula’s, the monks at Groenendaal, and others who sought his wisdom over the years. Perhaps sensing that there are those among his readers who struggle, or will struggle, with scrupulosity, the Augustinian declares: “Above everything else, have great faith and loving trust in God, for these are the things which forgive sins, just as our Lord says at many places in the Gospels: ‘Your faith has saved you’ (Mt 9:22 par.; Mk 10:52 par.; Lk 7:50, 17:19).”

This statement communicates to the reader that the center of purity, as seen in Mary, is “great faith and loving trust in God.” However, this statement alone is not enough, for Ruusbroec deems it necessary to delve deeper by elucidating the scrupulous habit of mind, which is contrary to this loving trust. He states:

But above all else you should avoid long confessions with many words, for they would rob you of peace and lead you into error and scrupulosity. If you speak much in the confessional when there is no need of that—as in the case of venial sins—and if you try to set your mind at rest through your own doing rather than through trust in God, then you will always remain unenlightened and uninstructed by God and will not be able to discern the difference between what is great and small, weighty and light in your transgressions. Moreover, if it should happen that you omit something which you are accustomed to confess but which it was not necessary to confess, you will then become troubled, oppressed, and grieved as though you had not been to confession or perhaps even worse, because instead of the faith, hope and love of God which should rightly fill your conscience there is found there instead anxiety, fear, and a natural self-love. You must avoid all that if you wish to be pure and to remain with Mary in her chamber.

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208 Spieghel, 530–533. Translation from Wiseman, John of Ruusbroec, 203.

209 Spieghel, 534–547: “Maer boven alle ding seldi u hueden van langher biechten met vele waerden, want dat soude u ontkusten ende dolende ende scrupeloos maken. Want hebdi vele waerde in der biechten diere gheene nooed en es, alse van dagheleeschen sonden, ende wildi u selven kusten met uwen doene meer dan met betrouwene in gode, soe blijfdi altoes onverlicht ende ongheleert van gode, ende soo en condi niet bekinnen onderscheed tuschen grooet ende cleine, tusschen meerre ende mendere uwer ghebreke. Ende alse u iet ontblijft dat ghi pleeght te biechtene na uwer costumen, dies nochtan en gheene nooed en es, soo sidi verbeeldt, bedruct ende bedruedt, alse ochte ghi niet ghebiecht en waert, ende lichte vele meer. Want in uwe conscientie, daer met rechte in sijn soude ghlooeve, hope ende minne te gode, daer es in anxt ende vreese ende eighene natuerleke minne uws selfs. Hier vore moetti u hueden, wildi reine sijn ende met Marien bliven in hare camere.” Translation from Wiseman, John of Ruusbroec, 203.
The scrupulous person, Ruusbroec seems to be saying, refuses the gift of God’s grace and forgiveness by not trusting in the love of God. They are unlike Mary, who was open to the gift of God through loving trust. The Brabantine contemplative theologian and spiritual director shows an awareness of this condition which betrays the fact that he likely has given counsel to those afflicted with this malady. He realizes that obsessive compulsion to confess sins that are really not sins and to trust in one’s own lengthy confessions of the most minute details would seem to be a holy seeking after mystical union with God but is in fact a false parody of the true contemplative life. One is only able to be aware of and repent of sin because of the gift of God’s gracious activity in the Son and Spirit in which, through the Son, the “inflowing” of the Spirit draws us out of the perspective of sin and into awareness of our immersion in the Triune life of God.

It seems that Ruusbroec understands scrupulosity as way of “tying a millstone around one’s neck” so to speak and anchoring one’s self to the ground, resistant to the loving flow of the Spirit, which would draw one into the embrace of the Father and Son in the Unity of the Holy Spirit, thus giving one the “faith, hope and love of God which should rightly fill your conscience.” So experience in giving spiritual direction and the paradox of the outflow and inflow of the Persons in their perichoretic unity seem, together, to perhaps be the unspoken compass guiding Ruusbroec in this wise and judicious piece of spiritual guidance. It is perhaps also his exemplaristic anthropology which orients his counsel as well, for, as we saw in the Spieghel, we as humans have the image of God whole and undivided in us and amongst all humanity (reflecting the essence of the Trinity) and personally (reflecting the triune Persons).210

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210 Spieghel, 847–882. See the discussion of this passage in chapter two of the present work, in the section on Ruusbroec’s exemplaristic anthropology.
Perhaps we cannot expect Ruusbroec to be as attuned to the particularity of personalities of persons to the degree that Ignatius of Loyola and Francis de Sales were. Nevertheless, the personalization of the image of God in particular human beings is also perhaps part of what undergirds the Brabantine’s guidance in this passage, for he is sensitive to the need of those who may be susceptible to the affliction of scrupulosity. Ruusbroec seems to realize that there are certain, possibly sensitive, souls who will find themselves under the sway of the illusion that they are constantly in sin and that only their obsessive and excessive confession of sin, in just the right way, can assure they are not damned. The canon realizes that this is a counterfeit of true growth in the mystical life. And, though it is admittedly somewhat speculative on our part, we may legitimately surmise that it is a combination of (at least) his experience, his theology of the paradoxical nature of triune love, and his exemplaristic anthropology that orient this passage of prudent, wise, and judicious spiritual direction.

While there are a number of other passages in the Spieghel, which see Ruusbroec offering spiritual direction to his readers/directees, the pieces of guidance we have explored give an informative set of examples, which reveal the Brabantine master as a wise and mature spiritual director. Furthermore, just as with the Tabernakel and the Sloten, the particular wisdom and directives given by the Augustinian canon are shaped, through and through, by the various, interwoven dimensions of his trinitarian mystical theology. Of particular importance for Ruusbroec’s spiritual guidance given in the Spieghel is his notion of theocentric focus or single intention for growth in the mystical life of evermore deeply being united with the Father, through the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. As with the Tabernakel and the Sloten, we have found that the Brabantine mystic’s spiritual direction is trinitarian through and through. The unending sharing in the paradoxical life of essential love (weselijcke minne), the eternal simultaneity of
outgoing love and blissful unity that is the trinitarian life of God, is, as in all of Ruusbroec’s
teaching, central. We have also seen that the mature sharing in this paradoxical life, through the
Son, by the Spirit, called the “common life” (dat ghemeyne leven) as the goal of the mystical
path plays an important role in his spiritual direction in the Spieghel, even if he does not use the
particular words “dat ghemeyne leven.”

This all assumes the Brabantine’s exemplaristic, relational anthropology, and Ruusbroec
explores this at length in the third section on the “living life” (another way of referring, at least in
part, to the reality of the common life), as described in the previous section of the present
chapter. Our growth in the mystical life means we must become aware that our essential
existence depends on our soul’s union with its eternal idea in the Son (the soul which is the
“living mirror”). By allowing our life to be shaped by this union we become the likeness of the
Son who is the true Image of the Trinity. This brings us to the importance of Ruusbroec’s
soteriology, Christology, Pneumatology, and sacramental theology for his guidance offered in
this work. Redemption occurs through God’s grace given in the salvific missions of the Son and
Spirit. We are drawn into being recreated in the Son by the lure and empowerment of the Holy
Spirit. According to the spiritual direction of the canon, central to the journey of transformation
in which we are drawn into union with God is the enlivening grace given in the Eucharist. In this
meal Ruusbroec’s directees will find strength for the ongoing mystical journey and its struggles
through the gifts of the bread and wine, transformed by the Holy Spirit into the body and blood
of Christ. Finally, the Augustinian canon’s focus on the Eucharist in the spiritual life, among
other things, serves, as in the Sloten, to counteract any temptation on the part of his
readers/directees to succumb to the erroneous Free Spirit tendency to deny the need of the
mediation of the church’s sacraments and broader liturgical life for advancement in the mystical journey.

Conclusion

The two works from Ruusbroec’s oeuvre considered in this chapter, the *Sloten* and the *Spieghel*, share perhaps more commonalities with one another than either of them do with the *Tabernakel*. They both seem to be written for religious communities whereas the *Tabernakel* seems to be made up of multiple texts written for various occasions throughout Ruusbroec’s life. Therefore the *Tabernakel* has multiple publics or audiences throughout the work. However, where the *Sloten* and *Spieghel* are not different in relation to the *Tabernakel* is that they contain important passages of the Brabantine mystical theologian’s written spiritual direction. Like the *Tabernakel*, these passages of spiritual guidance for Ruusbroec’s sundry directees are suffused with the various interwoven elements of the canon’s trinitarian mystical theology. The selections from the *Sloten* and the *Spieghel* most fundamentally are formed and shaped by Ruusbroec’s trinitarian understanding of God, particularly his central notion of the paradoxical simultaneity of the blissful unity of the persons in their shared embrace in the unity of the Holy Spirit and the active, outgoing love of the Father in the Persons of the Son and Spirit. This is the *cantus firmus* which undergirds the Brabantine’s guidance for his readers/directees in every respect, whether he emphasizes, under particular circumstances, one or more other elements or *harmonies* of his symphony of trinitarian thought such as his exemplaristic anthropology, christology, pneumatology, soteriology, sacramental theology, or ecclesiology in instructing his directees along the way of the “pathless mystical path.” We now turn to our final chapter, in which we will review the central elements of our journey through Ruusbroec’s biographical and historical context, how he is most fruitfully read as a mystical theologian, and the vital elements of his
trinitarian mystical theology. We will then review and draw overall conclusions in regard to what we have found in Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction given in the *Tabernakel*, the *Sloten*, and the *Spieghel* and its thorough shaping in accordance with his trinitarian mystical theology. Finally, we shall note what the findings of the present work contribute to Ruusbroec studies and further research paths that may be taken in light of these findings.
Chapter 5: Swimming in the Flowing, Ebbing Sea Under Ruusbroec’s Direction: Concluding Summary, Contribution, and Paths for Future Research

Introduction

On what shores has this pilgrimage through the mystical theology and spiritual direction in the work of the late-medieval Brabantine mystical theologian Jan van Ruusbroec landed us? We began this study with the question, “what is the relationship between Jan van Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and his written spiritual direction given to communities and individuals in his later writings in Groenendaal?” In answering this question it was necessary to gain footing in a proper understanding of Ruusbroec’s historical and biographical context, how one should approach his thought hermeneutically in order to understand most fruitfully his theology, and what the core or primary elements of his trinitarian mystical theology are. Chapters one and two of this study developed organically through coming to an understanding of these facets of the Brabantine’s life and thought (which readily yields itself to our comprehension when we read Ruusbroec as the mystical theologian he was).

With these elements of the Augustinian canon’s life and thought in mind, and for us to answer finally our initial question, it was necessary then to engage in the task of reading and interpreting some of the most pertinent texts of Ruusbroec’s later life in which he served as the prior of the Groenendaal monastery. These texts, The Spiritual Tabernacle, The Seven Enclosures, and The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness, contain copious amounts of spiritual direction given by the contemplative theologian to his readers or, as we have often called them in this work, his “directees.” This exploration by way of answering the question of the relationship between Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and his written spiritual direction has led us to the shores of the realization that the relationship is akin to the symphonic relation between the
harmonies and the *cantus firmus* (firm melody) of a polyphonic musical composition.

Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction is orientated toward and shaped by its harmonization with the fundamental melody (*cantus firmus*) of his trinitarian mystical theology.¹

In this relatively brief concluding chapter we will attempt to give a judicious summary of the essential features of the journey that we have taken throughout this work. This will be composed of a brief synopsis of the essential elements of the first two chapters on the life and overarching thought of Ruusbroec, followed by a summation of the primary features of our deeper reading and interpretation of the canon’s spiritual direction (the harmony) and its relation to the firm melody (his trinitarian mystical theology). This summary of what we have found to be the case in this relation will be followed by a statement of what our research and conclusions contribute to Ruusbroec studies. Finally, we will point to a couple of possible paths of research that may be taken in light of what this project has illuminated.

**I. Concluding Summary**

Our query as to the nature of the relationship between Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and his written spiritual direction in his later writings in Groenendaal has led us along a path with various signposts or vital elements. Firstly, in order to understand Ruusbroec as trinitarian mystical theologian and spiritual director, we had to look backward, “over the shoulder” so to speak, of the mature Brabantine contemplative. What was the historical, cultural,

¹ One could easily add to the complexity of this analogy by describing the intra-trinitarian life of the Godhead as the *cantus firmus* of Ruusbroec’s mystical theology with the other elements such as christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, anthropology, etc. as the harmonies along with his spiritual direction (or his spiritual direction could be seen as a dimension or element of one of the harmonies). However, this would perhaps, staying with the musical analogy, give an unnecessarily Baroque amount of ornamentation to the analogy when the more simple arrangement meets the need for comprehension of the relationship between Ruusbroec’s theology and written spiritual direction.
and biographical background through which the Prior of Groenendaal came to bloom? Our research has shown us that Ruusbroec’s story is one of being plucked from a life of poverty outside the walls of Brussels. The hospitality practiced by Jan Hinckaert in welcoming the young child from the village of Ruisbroek into his patrician family set Ruusbroec on a path of education and formation reserved for those seeking the life of a canon priest. While this formative education at the chapter school was rich and rooted Ruusbroec in the liturgy, scriptures, and trinitarian theology of the church, his writings evince one whose knowledge of the depths of theology surpasses what the chapter school would have been able to provide. This necessitated us making an educated conjecture that Ruusbroec must have received continuing theological formation after the chapter school and perhaps on into his time as a chaplain priest in the cathedral of St. Gudula.

As chaplain priest Ruusbroec seems to have encountered the two interrelated factors in the life of the larger church that would animate his ministry, teaching, and writing for the rest of his life. These issues were the lax spiritual life of the clergy, prelates, and religious, which led to the same lack of “taste” for God among the laity. These two factors were, in Ruusbroec’s mind it seems, what led to a third element that continually occupied the writings of the canon, namely, the rise of the sensibility of the “Heresy of the Free Spirit” and the vulnerability of the laity to such false teaching. It appears that these dynamics were part and parcel of what led the trio of Ruusbroec, Hinckaert, and Coudenberg to Groenendaal to start a chapel where proper liturgy and priesthood for the laity could be practiced. In the midst of the Flemish mystic’s time as chaplain priest in Brussels and the transition to Groenendaal, Ruusbroec not only began to grow and mature in the life of contemplation; he also began to become a spiritual guide or director to not only novices in the contemplative life but also to those further along in the journey. This is
evidenced by the mystical theologian’s penning of *The Sparkling Stone* and the occasion that caused it to be penned, namely, Ruusbroec’s conversation with a hermit.

The transition of the chapel at Groenendaal to an Augustinian priory rooted Ruusbroec firmly into his ever-deepening identity as a spiritual director, for he became the prior and spiritual center of the community, undoubtedly offering a myriad of instances of spiritual direction to the members of the priory and the priory as a whole. Our reading of the *Tabernakel*, the *Sloten*, and the *Spieghel* bears this out. The presence of so many examples of spiritual direction offered by the Brabantine to his readers/directees in such works is surely but a small selection of a vast amount of spiritual guidance offered to his brethren in the Groenendaal priory during this period (not to mention the guidance offered to those such as Geert Grote who visited Groenendaal to seek out Ruusbroec’s wisdom, as well as writings from the canon’s hand which perhaps have not survived). Yet, as we have seen, the fact that Ruusbroec was a spiritual director whose guidance comes out in his writings most certainly *does not mean* that he was a “spiritual writer” as opposed to a theologian. Ruusbroec, as with all the great contemplative theological figures from the history of the church, would have known no such distinction and his writings show no such division. The canon was a *mystical theologian* whose work exhibits the integrity of spirituality and theology that is always concerned with the central teachings of the Christian faith regarding God’s triune nature, the missions of the Son and Spirit, and, through the work of the Father in the Son and Spirit, how humans may become participants in the divine nature. Ruusbroec’s mystical theology is written in order to give real assistance to believers in their relation with the divine as they grow in union with God. Therefore, we found that his written spiritual direction operates within this nexus of spirituality and theology. It is but an element of
his mystical theology. As a result, this direction is integrally related to and shaped by this same trinitarian mystical theology.  

In order to comprehend the relationship between the Brabantine’s trinitarian mystical theology and his written spiritual direction it was first necessary to understand the nature of his mystical theology and its vital elements. To this end, chapter two introduced the reader to his historical-theological context, his mystical theology and its trinitarian character or cantus firmus (firm melody), and the theological harmonies, which orbit around this trinitarian center. In order to do this we heard from a number of pertinent passages from Ruusbroec’s oeuvre but we paid particularly close attention to two of his works. These were The Spiritual Espousals and The Sparkling Stone.

Ruusbroec was a vernacular mystical theologian whose work shows the influence of a number of monastic theologians, vernacular theologians (such as Hadewijch and Eckhart), and even, to a lesser extent, the influence of scholastic theology. However, the two figures that loom largest in his theological imaginary (who also inspire all of the later theologians who impact Ruusbroec’s thought) are the church Fathers Augustine of Hippo and Denys the Areopagite. In fact Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology can, at its root, be described as an integration of Augustinian and Dionysian Neoplatonic mystical theology. Without grasping Ruusbroec’s embeddedness within these large streams of Christian Neoplatonist mystical theology one’s interpretation of the Brabantine’s writings will have a number of blind spots and misunderstandings.

The center of Ruusbroec’s mystical theology, permeating and orienting its every dimension, is his understanding of the Trinity. The Augustinian canon’s vision of the Triune God

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2 What we have covered in the summary of the present work thus far in this chapter is drawn from chapter one.
sees God’s life as the paradoxical reality of essential love. This holy paradox is the perfect, eternal simultaneity of the outflowing and inflowing love (the “flowing, ebbing sea”) of the trinitarian Persons with their fruitful, blissful enjoyment of their perichoretic embrace in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Of particular importance here is the role of the Spirit as the principle of rygiratio in which the triune Persons, and creation with them, flow back into the perichoretic unity. From this paradoxical fountain flow all other dimensions of Ruusbroec’s theology, such as his christology, pneumatology, anthropology, soteriology, sacramental theology, ecclesiology, and mystical itineraries.³

Ruusbroec’s anthropology is intricately and essentially interwoven with his trinitarian theology. The human is created not only in the Image of God but also to the Image. We capitalize “Image” here because the primary “image” of the Father, and thus of the Trinity, is the Son. Humanity and humans in particular are created to the Image of the Son. Consequently, the human is image of God in a secondary or derivative sense, for the true Exemplar and Wisdom of the Father is the Son. In the Son are all the eternal exemplars or ideas of all creatures, including humans. Ruusbroec’s anthropology is thus exemplaristic and relational in that we exist and live through and from our “essential unity” in which the ground of our soul, the ground of the “active unity” of the higher faculties, is ever in union with our eternal idea in God, which constantly sustains it in being, creating it “out of nothing” at every moment. The union of the soul with its eternal idea in the Son, the Wisdom of the Father, makes the soul’s very essence a living participation in the triune life of God. Due to the influence of Dionysian Christian Neoplatonism upon Ruusbroec’s thought, the union, which the soul has with God, is an indistinct union.

³ Though it would take us too far afield in our present discussion, one could argue, particularly from Ruusbroec’s teaching on the contemplative or mystical way/path (which is of course a “wayless way” or “pathless path”), that the canon’s paradoxical trinitarian theology points logically to an underlying or implied eschatology.
However, rather than falling into the error of the Free Spirit tendency, this does not mean that the soul’s status as creation is lost. The soul is not absorbed into God in some type of monism. Rather, God’s radical transcendence from creatures means that precisely because of the creator/creature distinction, the Trinity is not other to creatures the way creatures are other to one another or to their creator. Apophatic language becomes important here because language is bent to the breaking point to describe this union that is ultimately beyond circumscribing by the human intellect due to the radical transcendence of God.

As we have seen, Ruusbroec does not count this essential union between the soul and its eternal exemplar as meriting righteousness, for it is, as he describes it in the Spieghel, passively received, as the soul is the living mirror who receives the image of its exemplar passively and at every moment. We become righteous as the soul attunes itself, by the work of Christ and gifts of the Spirit (in which we share through the sacraments, virtuous living, and the practice of contemplation), to its identity as a living participation in its eternal exemplar. Thus the active unity of the higher faculties and the unity of heart develop and grow into the likeness of the Son and thus to the likeness of the Trinity. This is the eternal destiny of the human. It is here that the single intention (eenvuldighe meyninghe) becomes and remains crucial, for in the ground of the single intention, or theocentric focus, we meet God in the ground of our soul. Remaining in the single intention, by grace, enables the growth and transformation of the soul into the likeness of God in both resting in the enjoyable union of the Trinity and participation in the active love of the Triune Persons. Maturation into the active life of virtue (mirroring and sharing in the outflowing of the Persons), the inner life of inward practice (mirroring and sharing in the inflowing of the Persons), the contemplative life of melting away in enjoyable love (sharing in the perichoretic unity of the triune Persons) constitutes the contemplative pathless path or way-
less way. The endless summit of the mystical life is participation in the paradoxical life of essential love, the eternal simultaneity of the outflowing and inflowing love of the Persons and their fruitful enjoyment of their perichoretic embrace in the unity of the Holy Spirit. This is what Ruusbroec calls the common life, harmonious integration of the active, inner, and contemplative lives. Ruusbroec’s teaching on the mystical life gives what he understood to be a true mystical/contemplative path, in counter position to the sensibility of the Free Spirit and its striving for the ultimate goal of formless being, where all otherness, in God and creatures, is lost.

As we then turned to the constructive portion of the present work, chapters three and four, we became aware of just how much Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction was formed and shaped by his trinitarian mystical theology. In other words, the harmonies of his spiritual direction given in written form in some of his most important writings from his Groenendaal period were harmonized by and to the *cantus firmus* (firm melody) of the Brabantine’s mystical theology. This was accomplished by exploring *The Spiritual Tabernacle*, *The Seven Enclosures*, and *The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*. We immersed ourselves in the *Tabernakel* in chapter three. There we investigated and interpreted some of the key passages of spiritual direction in the work and found that through Ruusbroec’s figural reading of Israel’s tabernacle the canon gives spiritual direction to multiple publics or groups of people which are porous to and suffused with the various dimensions of his trinitarian mystical theology. At various points in these passages multiple elements of the canon’s mystical theology of the trinitarian paradox of essential love shine through with its attendant pneumatology, christology, soteriology, exemplaristic anthropology, sacramental theology, ecclesiology, cosmology, and theology of the single intention (theocentric focus). In the passages of spiritual direction explored, some of these dimensions are more prominent than others, depending on the public being addressed and the
topic Ruusbroec is discussing. Nevertheless, even when the Augustinian canon is not explicitly discussing the trinitarian paradox of eternally simultaneous outflowing and inflowing love of the Persons and their blissful, fruitive rest in their perichoretic unity, it is always assumed, as are the multiple elements that flow from this theology of essential love (christology, pneumatology, etc.).

We found this to be the case through our attempt to give deep readings of passages in which Ruusbroec gives spiritual guidance, such as Ruusbroec’s figural readings of the artisan Oliab, the golden candelabrum, the vestments of the high priest, and the ark of the covenant. In the direction explored in the portion of the work dedicated to the golden candelabrum our research found almost all of the elements of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian theology shining through. The golden candelabrum is interpreted by the canon as a figure of the humanity of Christ united with his divinity. Christ’s faculties, the “higher” and “lower” faculties (of the bodily sensations, the unity of heart), were united to his divinity in the Person of the Son and thus the Spirit rested upon him with all the Spirit’s gifts, pervading all his faculties with love for the Father. Therefore, in Christ all the virtues are brought to perfection. Ruusbroec teaches his directees that through the divine-human Christ, whose faculties are always lifted to and intent on the honor of the Father and filled with the gifts of the Spirit, we are enabled to raise our faculties to the Father and be filled with the gifts of the Spirit and thus are empowered to always be intent on God (eenvuldinghe meyninghe). Ruusbroec encourages his directees to give themselves to this endeavor, for thus we may rest in the perichoretic embrace of the unity of the Holy Spirit while always being ready to go out, with Christ in the power of the Spirit, to others in virtuous love. This sets us on the path toward perfect participation in the paradoxical simultaneity of trinitarian essential love, which, through the harmonious integration of the active, inner, and contemplative
lives, makes us *common people*. Our reading of this section showed that the canon takes his readers/directees even further into how to live into triune essential love through his allegorical reading of the components of the lamp of the candelabrum.

Our examination of Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction given in the *Tabernakel* to the, more particular, priestly public found more practical examples of guidance given by the Brabantine. Yet these passages of direction are equally formed and shaped by his theology, for his trinitarian mystical thought is always the theological horizon against which these harmonic articulations are “played” or “sung” by the mystical master. As noted in chapter one and in our reading of the *Tabernakel*, Ruusbroec deemed the role of priests to be vital due to their roles of mediation in the Eucharist and shepherds guiding the faithful into the “taste” for the “savor” of God. This kind of savor, which should be found amongst clergy, religious, and laity, was the key to a church that truly lives as the Body of Christ, the spiritual tabernacle of God. Ruusbroec’s guidance to this priestly public takes place through his figural reading of the adornment of the high priest of the tabernacle. The assorted items of priestly adornment signify elements of the contemplative theologian’s teachings on the mystical path and other features of his theology, such as a significant emphasis on theocentric focus/single intention, the radical transcendence of God, and various ways of describing “melting in love” and “dying to nature” (i.e. sharing in the *unity* of the Trinity) as the origin of living the virtues to perfection, which sends the person out in Christ and the Spirit in virtuous love. Thus Ruusbroec leads the priestly public to share in the essential love of the Trinity in order to lead the faithful of the church into this same reality. In this we found Ruusbroec particularly emphasizing how this sharing in essential love should form priests and prelates to live upright and honorable lives as shining examples for the faithful to follow in
order that the faithful would be drawn, through teaching, example, and Eucharist, into the divine life.

As our examination continued, we found the instances of spiritual direction given by Ruusbroec in the last stages of the *Tabernakel* to be primarily addressed to the broadest public of “us humans.” One could say quite accurately that these passages of guidance exemplify the canon’s “ecclesio-cosmic” vision of the common life and are some of the most beautiful mystical renderings in all of his writings. In them Ruusbroec urges his directees to intend God in all things, resting inwardly in the perichoretic unity of God and going out to others in the good works of virtuous love, always renewing our intention of loving God in being breathed out and in by the Spirit and resting in the abyss of God’s unity. In these passages the master teaches his directees that sharing in the essential love of the Triune God brings us into harmonious fellowship with others and all the good done in the world. We are even brought into companionship with the angelic. Like the visions of his forerunners and teachers, Denys and Augustine, his vision is cosmic. To share in the paradoxical reality of essential love (*weselijke minne*) of the Trinity is to share in the “re-harmonizing” of the cosmos. This is both a personal and cosmic symphonic dance.

To share in this dance Ruusbroec teaches his readers that they must have the correct intention of the love and glory of God in all things, which will mean they will intend a life with others in holy Church that is always characterized by mutual love and fidelity to one another. In this the Father, through Christ, in the love of the Spirit, recreates the world such that all are caught up in and play a part in sharing in the triune essential love, from the priest who offers Eucharist, to the farmer who works the fields, to the sailor who sails the seas in trade. All offer their gifts of service for the common good in this divine, gift-giving economy. The mystical,
common life is neither an individualistic affair nor, contrary to the sensibility of the Free Spirit, is it a reality in which all otherness is lost in formless being. Rather, as we saw in Ruusbroec’s reflection on the ark, the Body of Christ is a reality in which our participation in the triune life of essential love makes us to be indwelled by God as we indwell God. Furthermore, this mutual indwelling means that we mysteriously indwell one another with God. Ruusbroec calls his directees to a vision of continued otherness amongst the members of the tabernacle of holy Church. And yet this otherness, in the tri-unity of God, is united in the love of the Spirit. The members of the tabernacle are united in the triune life of essential love through Christ as the Spirit’s inflowing draws all into the perichoretic, triune embrace. This mysterious unity is such that we are indwelled by God as we dwell in God and, by this mutual indwelling, we, with and in God, indwell one another. This mystery is rooted in the radical transcendence of God and our common, exemplaristic existence in the Son, reconstituted anew in our created life by the work of Christ, in the love of the Spirit. This mysterious vision of becoming a spiritual tabernacle within the larger spiritual tabernacle of Christ’s Body is, according to Ruusbroec, the goal toward which his directees should run. In running they will ultimately attain, and in attaining will continue to run, for this goal is nothing other than the ever-deeper sharing in the triune life of the paradox of essential love. This crescendo of the Tabernakel is, as much as any of the passages of spiritual direction explored therein, luminously porous to Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology of essential love and its dimensions of pneumatology, christology, exemplaristic anthropology, and his teaching of theocentric focus.

In chapter four we investigated a number of pertinent passages of spiritual direction in two works written in the Groenendaal period during the years following Ruusbroec’s composition of The Spiritual Tabernacle. These were The Seven Enclosures and The Mirror of
Eternal Blessedness. With these two works we found the Augustinian canon writing to recipients who were members of religious communities (though the identity of the community addressed in the Spieghel is not known with certainty). With these more particular audiences in mind, Ruusbroec shows himself to be not only a master of mystical theology but also a spiritual sage caring for the souls of his intended audience through spiritual direction given in the written word. The direction given in these writings is much more practical in regard to the concrete details one would encounter in the daily horarium of the monastic life, as compared with the guidance in the Tabernakel. His years spent as chaplain priest at St. Gudula’s, priest in Groenendaal, and as prior and spiritual center of the monastery in Groenendaal had enabled him to blossom forth as a sought-after guide in the ways of the mystical life of contemplation and spiritual maturity. Nevertheless, like the spiritual direction given by Ruusbroec in the Tabernakel, the guidance given in the Sloten and Spieghel is thoroughly shaped by its harmonic relation with his trinitarian mystical theology of the Trinity’s paradoxical life of essential love.

In our analysis of the Sloten we found that, writing to Margriet van Meerbeke’s community of Clares in Brussels, Ruusbroec gives guidance that addresses the common components of the daily horarium in a way that seeks to bring the nuns to an awareness of the truth that these concrete, day-to-day activities are never banal. Rather, if one has the spiritual senses to perceive, all of these commonplace moments are porous to the light of triune life and union with God in that same triune love. We found this to be the case in such instances as the spiritual direction offered by the canon in regard to the nuns’ engagement in the practices of Matins and Eucharist, serving fellow members of the community, caring for the ill (and receiving that same care), behavior towards fellow sisters, the community’s dress, diet and meals, and Vespers. Furthermore, we found that if one considers the very structural mingling together of this
assortment of ways of prayer and active service, one can discern the centrality to the work of Ruusbroec’s understanding of the call to share in the paradoxical simultaneity of the action and rest of essential love. Ruusbroec’s guidance in these passages often shows him illuminating for his directees these active and enjoying dimensions.

To highlight but a couple of the elements of the horarium addressed by Ruusbroec, we saw that his spiritual direction of the nuns concerning the proper participation in the Mass involved the deployment of virtually all the major elements of his trinitarian mystical theology. The Clares were to have a single intention or focus upon Christ and his work of redemption in his incarnation, suffering, and death. In this single intention, by the work of the inflowing of the Spirit, they were to partake in the elements of the Eucharist. In this they ingest Christ as they are ingested by Christ and unified, through him, to the Father, in the love of the Spirit. Being drawn into the union of Christ with the Father in the Spirit means that they go, in and with Christ, into the fulfillment of all inner and outer virtue as they cultivate the hunger inwardly for God and virtuously reach out to fellow humans in love, for the life of Christ is the trinitarian life of essential love and its eternal, paradoxical simultaneity of blissful union and outflowing and inflowing love. Ruusbroec’s guidance in this area, which he ends with the analogy of the golden penny, involves the canon in leading the nuns into inwardly loving and desiring God through their essential union with God in the Son, which grows them evermore into Christlikeness and, thus, likeness to the Trinity. The bare side of their coin, imprinted by the image of the Trinity, transforms their minted side into Christlikeness. Therefore, in this section on the Mass, Ruusbroec spiritually directs the Clares through utilizing his teaching on essential love and its related teaching on christology, soteriology, pneumatology, sacramental theology, exemplaristic anthropology, and theocentric focus. And these dimensions of the mystical theologian’s theology
continue to be utilized in the spiritual guidance he offers in the other elements of the daily horarium.

In *The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* we discovered that Ruusbroec, at least at significant points, continues to explore how the concrete elements of the enclosed life of the monastery continually open out to the mystical depths of union with God. Our reading showed us that, while all the elements of the Brabantine contemplative’s trinitarian mystical thought are assumed and at work in the *Spieghel*, Ruusbroec’s exemplarist anthropology, christology, and sacramental theology play particularly prominent roles in the spiritual direction offered in the treatise. The spiritual senses also come into play in terms of learning the grace-filled art of savoring (*smaken*) God’s love. We found this to be the case from the very beginning, where he roots the choosing of the novice to enter the religious state within God’s choosing of the novice in the Son from all eternity. The Son, in whom the novice is chosen, is the one who also came to offer his life for the redemption of the novice. The Son, incarnate in Christ, is the Mirror or Image of the Father and thus of the Trinity. The deployment of these elements of Ruusbroec’s mystical theology, along with the other elements where appropriate, continue to be used by the canon as he gives his directees/readers spiritual guidance on living the life of virtue, being attentive at prayer, countering the unhealthy tendency of scrupulosity, and participating most beneficially in the Eucharist. As is the case with the other treatises we have explored, Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction given in the *Spieghel* always has the goal of guiding his readers/directees into the mystical depths of a mature sharing in the triune life of essential love, thus becoming a common person, living the common life and so becoming the likeness of Christ and thus the likeness of the Trinity.
Our research in the present volume has sought to give an answer to the question of the relationship between Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction and his trinitarian mystical theology. By way of answering this question, our examination of some of Ruusbroec’s texts from his Groenendaal monastic period have shown us that the relationship is akin to the symphonic relation between the harmonies and the *cantus firmus* of a polyphonic, orchestral work of music. Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction is orientated toward and shaped by its harmonization with the fundamental melody of his trinitarian mystical theology. It is only by this realization that one can begin to fully understand the tenor and dynamism of the canon’s written spiritual direction.

**II. Contribution**

What contribution does the present work make to Ruusbroec studies? Ruusbroec scholars largely agree that his description of the intra-trinitarian life of God - the perfect, eternal harmony and simultaneity of activity and rest in the Trinity - is the heart of his mystical theology. However, before the present work, there have been no sustained studies of Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction and its relation to his trinitarian mystical theology. Our project has examined the relationship between Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology and some of his most important post-Brussels written spiritual direction, in which the Brabantine mystical theologian offers guidance to specific communities in their pursuit of mystical union with God through the life of prayer and service. Our research has shown that Ruusbroec’s spiritual direction is fundamentally shaped and orchestrated by his trinitarian mystical theology. His spiritual direction is intricately harmonized by the *cantus firmus* (firm melody) of his trinitarian theology of *essential love*. If what we have argued for in the present work is true, then one cannot, on the one hand, correctly interpret the meaning and ramifications of Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction without taking the manner in which this direction is shaped by his trinitarian mystical
theology with utmost seriousness. On the other hand, one cannot hope to give an adequate account of the purpose and message of *The Spiritual Tabernacle*, *The Seven Enclosures*, or *The Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* without taking into consideration the fact that significant portions of the treatises are actually spiritual direction offered to the recipients of the works. And this spiritual direction is formed by Ruusbroec’s trinitarian mystical theology.

**III. Possible Paths for Future Research**

Given what our research in this project has shown us, what are possible avenues for future research in Ruusbroec studies in particular and theology and spirituality in general? Here I will note only a couple of possibilities. One possible path for future research regards the continuing scholarship on the integrity of spirituality and theology and its current recovery in contemporary Christian theology. Ruusbroec’s thought could be explored as a shining historical example of one whose thought exhibits this integrity. One could also place Ruusbroec’s mystical theology alongside that of William of St. Thierry, Hadewijch, and other medieval mystical theologians from the Low Countries to show how they, as a group, tend to exhibit this integrity of spirituality and theology. Utilizing this methodology, one could leverage the theology of these mystical theologians in order to give further momentum to the contemporary recovery of this integrity. Along with Ruusbroec, these other Low Country figures could serve as exemplars guiding the contemporary theologian as she paints her particular theological vision and its recovery of this integrity. Our research in this project could help such theologians navigate their way through important texts in Ruusbroec’s corpus as they appropriate the Brabantine’s trinitarian mystical theology.

A second avenue of future research is related to the one just articulated. Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction and its rooting within his trinitarian mystical theology lies within the
larger context of the Christian theological tradition of the integrity of spirituality and theology. Contemporary research and writing that seek to ground the current practice of spiritual formation in general, and spiritual direction in particular, within sound trinitarian theology will find a rich historical resource and exemplar for this endeavor in the thought of the late medieval Augustinian canon. While attempting to draw cues from the canon, the contemporary scholar or practitioner could use the present work to immerse herself in some of Ruusbroec’s most important examples of written spiritual direction and its harmonic relation to the firm melody of his trinitarian mystical theology.

Finally, the present project could serve as a vital resource for understanding Ruusbroec as one example of the numerous theologians from the Middle Ages who sought to integrate the insights of both Augustinian and Dionysian mystical theology within their own theological visions. As discussed at various points in the present work, particularly in chapter two, Augustine and Denys the Areopagite were figures whose writings exercised an enormous influence upon succeeding generations of Western theologians. While there has been recent, fruitful work done on the reception of Dionysius in the West by so called “affective” and “intellectual” Dionysians, more scholarly work needs to be engaged in the task of examining how the great medieval theological masters of the West sought to integrate within their own work the theologies of these two giants of early Christian thought. In such work of future scholarship, the present volume would serve as a helpful entryway into Ruusbroec’s thought as one helpful example of a significant medieval mystical theologian who sought to integrate Augustinian and Dionysian mystical theology within his own theology. While this small handful of possible paths for future research based upon the present work is certainly not exhaustive, it
does note three such paths that could be fruitful and enriching for future historical and theological scholarship.

**Conclusion**

In this concluding chapter we have sought to offer a judicious and illuminating review of the primary components of the preceding elements of the present volume. We have also sought to offer three possible roads for further theological and historical scholarly research in the future. The project has found a most intimate linkage between the Augustinian canon’s theology and spiritual direction in some of his important writings from his Groenendaal period.

Like particular sections of the movements of a great orchestral symphony where specific sections of instruments come to the fore while others recede into the background, some examples of Ruusbroec’s written spiritual direction have certain elements of his trinitarian mystical theology coming to the fore while others recede into the background. At one moment his christology and anthropology rise in volume only to recede as his pneumatology and sacramental theology take their place in prominence. This all depends on the precise guidance that the Brabantine contemplative theologian is seeking to communicate to his readers/directees in the specific context. Nevertheless, all of the elements, particularly that of triune essential love, are always assumed and mutually support one another. These elements together form the trinitarian mystical theology of Jan van Ruusbroec, and it is this trinitarian mystical theology that ever provides the melody from which the harmony of his written spiritual direction takes its cue.
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