SUMMARY

The fourteenth century was an age of tumult with wars, famine and plagues the order of the day. The Church was beset with political and religious strife. In the midst of this dire situation, many deeply spiritual women and men chose to live a life of simplicity, following gospel values which reflected the true nature of Christianity. Mystical movements flourished, and some of the great Western mystics came to the fore, instilling a sense of purpose and meaning into the troubled lives of ordinary people. One of these leading figures, Jan van Ruusbroec, a profound thinker and a dedicated pastor, is renowned for his deep insight into the mystery of the Trinity. In this new millennium the perennial truths of this central mystery, which is at the heart of Christianity, are needed more than ever in our secularised society. Jan van Ruusbroec is a mystic for our own time, and his writings bring illumination, comfort and joy to a society which for the most part has neglected the inner life.

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1 This article was published in E.A. Mare (Ed.), *Quests for humanity*. Proceedings of the
Jan van Ruusbroec, born in 1293, in the city of the same name, lived until the age of eighty-eight – his long life spanning almost the entire fourteenth century. This was a century of political and religious uprising, famine and plagues, together with the dire situation of the Church – which saw the so-called ‘Babylon captivity’ in which the pope was in Avignon, from 1309 until 1377, and thereafter the schism between Urban VI in Rome and Clement VII in Avignon. Many diverse and often heterodox movements flourished, including the Flagellantes, the Dancers, and the Brethren of the Free Spirit – many of which were considered heretical by the establishment. During this turbulent and difficult period many of the great Western mystics arose, and in addition individual communities of women and men tried to live a Christian life outside the usual monastic tradition, namely the Beguines and Beghards. Many of these were considered by a large number of ordinary Christians as true followers of the Christian way, as opposed to the luxurious and often immoral lives of some of the clerics of this time. Of course, such groups were a cause of great concern to ecclesiastical authorities.

Ruusbroec’s life was divided into two major periods,² the first in Brussels as a pastor, from 1317-1343; and the second, in the hermitage of Groenendal, in the forest of Sogines, from 1343-1381, where with his uncle, Jan Hinckaert, Francis van Coudenberg and other followers, the small community eventually adopted the Rule of

² Although somewhat hagiographical, the major source for the life and work of Ruusbroec is the extensive work, De origine monasterii Viridisvallis, dated between 1414 and 1421, written by
St Augustine as a way of life, with Ruusbroec as prior. Eleven of Ruusbroec’s works survived in various manuscript collections, five of which were written in his period in Brussels and the remainder in his time at Groendendal. Described by some as a ‘simple, quiet, rather shabby-looking person, who went about the streets of Brussels, with his mind lifted up to God’, Ruusbroec was a gentle pastor, who was nevertheless a strong and independent thinker. This quiet contemplative was outspoken in his condemnation both of the laxity of the clergy and religious of his day, and also of the heresy of the Free Spirit. The latter taught autotheism, namely the belief in the person’s total identification with God on earth and freedom from ecclesial obligations. They disparaged the sacraments and lived an antinomian existence. In The Little Book of Clarification, Ruusbroec, in no uncertain terms, castigates this heresy:

These persons have gone astray into the empty and blind simplicity of their own being and are trying to become blessed in their bare nature (...) They take this undifferentiated simplicity which they possess to be God himself, because they find natural rest in it (...) The divine


The eleven works of Ruusbroec are as follows – from the Brussels period: The Kingdom of Lovers (Dat rijke der ghelieven); The Spiritual Espousals (Die gheestelike bruolcht); The Sparkling Stone (Vanden blinckenden steen); The Four Temptations (Vanden vier becoringhen); and The Christian Faith (Vanden kersten ghelove). From the Groenendaal period: The Spiritual Tabernacle (Van den gheesteliken tabernakel) – which Ruusbroec began while still in Brussels and completed in Groenendaal; The Seven Enclosures (Vanden seven sloten); the Mirror of Eternal Blessedness (Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit); Seven Rungs of the Ladder of Spiritual Love (Vanden seven trappen in den graed der gheesteleker minnen); the Book of Clarification (Dat boecksen der verclaringhe); and The Twelve Beguines (Vanden twaelf Beghinen). In the sixteenth century the Carthusian monk, Laurentius Surius, translated the works of Ruusbroec into Latin.
light has not revealed itself in their darkness because they have not sought it through active love and supernatural freedom. 4

Ruusbroec taught not only the intellectual aspects of the Christian faith, but more importantly, the depths of his own experience. He was nevertheless indebted to various influences which shaped his mystical theology. First of all, the mysticism of the Low Countries in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was characterised by a strong trinitarian emphasis together with the bridal mysticism redolent of the late medieval period. Other sources to be discerned in Ruusbroec’s writings include, inter alia, Plotinus, particularly the Plotinian concept of the One as the origin and the end of reality; Augustine; Dionysius the Areopagite; and Meister Eckhart. Ruusbroec’s writings clearly show his delight and wonder in nature and also his fascination with the sun – clearly seen in the comparison of the God-ground with the illuminating radiance of the sun. 5

Well versed in matters of cosmology, social structure and biology, Ruusbroec expresses his thoughts with clarity of exposition in carefully constructed compositions. However, due to the nature of his presentation, namely the mystical experience, there are times when Ruusbroec fails to meet the demands of strict linguistic order. As one who is trying to put into words what is essentially ineffable, he ‘... is simply not able to

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4 J. Wiseman (Ed.), John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousals and other works, New York: Paulist Press, 1985, 254-255. A. Bancroft (The luminous vision, London: Allen & Unwin, 1982, 38) draws an interesting parallel between the quietists and the insight of Dogen, the thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist, who went to China to study under the master, Ju Ching. Dogen realised that mere ‘zazen’ (sitting meditation) can also deteriorate into quietism, and even sleep!
constrain his description of mystical experience to the demands of systematic presentation, (...) he has no choice but to forfeit linear, logical order for a spiraling, repetitive one. In other words, the very disruption of the style signals a struggle with a phenomenon that refuses to cater to the demands of a rational framework’.6

In order to obtain greater clarity, as far as this is possible, regarding the mystery of the Trinity, a brief survey of certain features of this mystery will be dealt with, before leading into Ruusbroec’s unique contribution to trinitarian mysticism. Clearly, within the confines of this paper it is only possible to touch on a few aspects of this august mystery.

THE MYSTERY OF THE TRINITY

Although the doctrine of the Trinity has been the subject of scholarly discussion and debate throughout the history of the Christian Church, nevertheless it is an unfortunate fact that this doctrine, which is in essence the nucleus of Christian theology, is largely considered mysterious and unattainable. Consequently, it has been left mainly to the intellectual speculation of theologians to plumb the depths of this mystery. This has resulted in a dichotomy between mysticism and the doctrine of the Trinity, since the intellectual endeavours of theologians are usually far removed from the average Christian. Whereas

5 Bancroft, The luminous vision, 20.
prominent theologians in the past, such as Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and of course Ruusbroec himself, to name but a few, gave considerable attention to this profound mystery, many theologians manifest a certain ‘anti-trinitarian timidity’ which serves to isolate even further this central doctrine of the Christian faith. This results in a profound lacuna in contemporary religious thought, and although theological statements regarding the Trinity are made, ‘... the reality itself has (...) almost nothing to do with ourselves’.\(^7\)

The general neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity was most pronounced in the west, where metaphysical abstractions led to the theory of one God, and only later added the trinitarian distinctions. The trinitarian structure of the mind as the imprint of a divine Archetype, found in Augustine’s work, *De Trinitate* was only recognised at a later stage in the tradition of the west. In fact, a genuine trinitarian spirituality in the west emerged only in the twelfth century. Factors militating against the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity include inter alia, recent New Testament research on the humanity of Jesus and a christology from below; the anthropological shift in theological thought; the popularization of the idea Jesus as the man for others and the liberator of the oppressed; and the growth of Marxist Christianity. Although such approaches are not without merit, nevertheless, if they are considered in isolation from the total structure of the Christian faith they result in a one-sided view of Christianity. A vague deism is the result, which owes more to the rationalism of the

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Aufklärung than to the thought of the New Testament. The Trinity is more often than not relegated to the realm of speculation; God, if it is acknowledged that God exists, is seen as Father, but not as a Trinity of persons, revealing Itself as Love, and as a model of the relations between human beings in their personal and social responsibilities. Fortunately as we move into the twenty-first century there is a renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity – which will hopefully help locate this central doctrine in its rightful place.  

Doctrinal foundation of the mystery of the Trinity

Myths and religions throughout the course of history are replete with schemata of triads and ternaries. The number three was considered the simplest and most perfect form of plurality, and therefore, according to Aristotle, the number of completeness. Such examples as the following illustrate this point: Greek mythology divides the regions of the world among the three sons of Chronos, namely, Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades; divine personages are often three-headed or three-bodied; rhythms based on the number three are found in cultic rituals, music and architecture; threefold repetition of oaths are common; trigemination or triplication in literature and language is an important literary device; and the Pythagoreans considered the triangle not only

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as a geometrical and arithmetical principle, but also as a cosmic principle.\(^9\)

Although both the *Old* and *New Testament* portray evidence of triadic formulations, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not derived from such symbols and speculations.\(^10\) In contrast to mythological concepts, ‘... unity in trinity according to Christianity is not a cosmological problem that embraces both God and the world, but a strictly theological and even intradivine problem. For this reason the bible nowhere justifies the Christian doctrine of the Trinity with the aid of such cosmological speculations’.\(^12\) The foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity is to be found in the ‘historical self-revelation of the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit’.\(^13\) It is not without significance, however, that Christianity maintains the unity and trinity of the ultimate primordial ground in a way analogous to that of mythology and philosophy, and the trinitarian confession can be seen as an answer to the primordial question of humanity:

> [T]he question of unity in multiplicity, of unity that does not absorb multiplicity but turns it into a unified whole, a unity that is not impoverishment but fullness and completion. The distinguishing element in Christianity is ultimately this: that the ultimate ground of the unity and wholeness of reality is not a scheme, a structure, a triadic

\(^10\) As a symbol of the Trinity, the triangle was not used until the fifteenth century, since the triangle was originally a sexual symbol, containing reference to the primordial, maternal ground of all being (Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 237).
\(^12\) Ibidem.
\(^13\) Ibidem.
law or abstract principle; according to the Christian faith the ultimate ground and meaning of all reality is personal: one God in three persons.\textsuperscript{14}

Without falling into the trap of a naive biblicist fundamentalism, which relies on isolated \textit{dicta probantia} in order to locate a particular doctrine, it is evident from a careful reading of the New Testament that the confession of the Trinity is no additional speculative doctrine superimposed on to the original message of faith in Christ. It is an integral, rather than superfluous, element of salvation history.\textsuperscript{15}

In essence, the witness of the New Testament proclaims Jesus Christ as the Son of God, ‘... the eternal Thou of the Father, and that in the Holy Spirit we human beings are accepted into the communion of love that exists between Father and Son’.\textsuperscript{16} The trinitarian description of the salvation event in Christ is found in all major strands of the New Testament tradition. Of particular significance is the baptismal scene at the river Jordan where the voice of the Father is heard, and the Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove (Lk 3:22); and the post-resurrection command in Matthew 28:19, ‘\textit{Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit}’ (RSV). The striking feature about the baptismal formula is the fact that the three Persons are brought together in a single name, and thus are placed on an equal

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\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 238.
\textsuperscript{16} Kasper, \textit{The God of Jesus Christ}, 244.
\end{flushright}
footing without any restriction. Hence this formula is most probably the most important single reference to the Trinity in the synoptic gospels. In the Johannine witness there is also incipient trinitarian reflection. This can be discerned in the structure of the gospel of John itself, the first half of which (ch 1-12) reflect the relation of the Son to the Father; and the second half (chs 14-17) deal with the role of the Spirit. The trinitarian unity of these two themes is clearly elucidated in Jn 14:26: ‘But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you’ (RSV). It is above all the in the priestly prayer of Jesus (Jn 17) that trinitarian reflection comes to its zenith. The glorification of the Father by the Son has as its aim the participation of the disciples in this very glorification and in eternal life. Jesus’ prayer of praise to the Father leads to a prayer of petition: doxology leads to epiclesis. The leitmotif of this prayer of Jesus is the glorification of the Father and the Son. Contained within the concept of glory is the notion of salvation or life, which consists of knowledge of God and of his Son, Jesus. Such knowledge transcends intellectual cognition; it is experiential knowledge that includes acknowledgement of the lordship of God and also the glorification of God. ‘Those who know God as God and acknowledge and glorify him are in the light; they have discovered the meaning of their life and the light that shines in all reality (…) Doxology is thus as the same time

17 A. Ryder, The spirituality of the Trinity, Dublin: Carmelite Centre of Spirituality, 1985, 94.
18 Kasper, The God of Jesus Christ, 248.
soteriology’. The trinitarian confession of the New Testament makes possible the christological confession.

The gospel of John contains several passages that imply that the Father, Son and Spirit are distinct persons (cf Jn 1:29-35; 14:16; 14:26; 16:15) and in the writings of Paul there are often references to the three persons of the Trinity in a single sentence (2 Cor 13:14; 1 Cor 12:4-6; cf 2 Thess 2:13-14; Gal 4:6; Rom 15:30). However, John never states unequivocally that there are three co-equal divine persons; and although Paul speaks of the roles of the Father, Son and Spirit in the work of salvation, he does not deal with the question of the inter-relationship between the three persons, nor does he attempt to offer any solution to the mystery of the Trinity. His prime concern is the manifestation of the divine persons in the economy of grace (cf Tit 3:5-6).

Therefore, although metaphysical questions are not addressed with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, nevertheless the ontic ground of the mystery is present in the New Testament. Furthermore, while it is acknowledge that Father, Son and Spirit are not so much proper names, with the connotations of personhood as understood in current psychological terms, yet they are symbols of God resulting from religious experience that in its tripartite character is essentially Christian. Triadic thinking and language prevails; there is no

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19 Ibid., 247.
collapsing of trinitarian into unitarian or binitarian speech. In incipient fashion the New Testament witnesses to the fact that ‘... the uncreated divine plurality wishes to have the human and created plurality enter into its own sphere, and it reveals itself to the latter in a disclosure of its intimate life that in no way diminishes its transcendence’. Thus human beatitude is to be found in the loving knowledge of the inner life of the Trinity; and the source and origin of this mystery is to be found in the New Testament, upon which all further development and articulation is grounded.

Although, clearly, the mystery of the Trinity defies exact categorisation and is in fact beyond the grasp of intellectual knowledge and understanding, nevertheless by means of certain analogies, reason, aided by grace, can obtain a certain light on this mystery. Therefore, in order to penetrate further into the mystery of the Trinity, analogies with the natural world were used early in the history of Christianity. Examples include the classical comparison with fire which is not lessened when another fire is lit from it; the comparison between the source of light, the light and the radiance of the light, favoured in particular by Athanasius; and Tertullian’s use of root and fruit, source and stream, sun and ray of the sun. The discovery of such vestigia trinitatis comes to its apex in the work of Augustine. Taking as his base the concept of men and women as image of God (Gen 1:28), Augustine’s psychological analogy of the

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21 Ibid., 28.
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Trinity encompasses the human soul as the imprint of the divine Archetype. Within the human person ever new ternaries are to be found, for example, memory, understanding and will. This psychological analogy has influenced the course of theological reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity in subsequent western thought, although it is not without its opponents.23

Augustine’s psychological analogy for the Trinity owes its predominance in western theology largely due to its incorporation in the thought of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas transposed the psychological analogy of Augustine into metaphysics of faith and worked out an intricate metaphysical system by which the inner trinitarian life could be explored on the basis of human intelligence and will. Influenced by Dionysius the Areopagite, Thomas absorbed aspects of apophatic theology, in which the unknowability of God is emphasised and also the need for silence before the divine. True to the teaching of the church, Thomas Aquinas maintains that it is only by faith in the Trinity, that the central truths of Christianity can be grasped: ‘Without faith in the Trinity there can be no belief in the Incarnation. For the mystery of the Incarnation involves the truths that the Son of God took flesh, and that he renewed the face of the earth through the grace of the Holy Spirit, and again, that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit.24

The *vestigia trinitatis* have been criticised on the ground that they lead away from revelation, and attempt to try and come to some understanding of the mystery of the Trinity on the basis of humanity’s understanding of the world and itself. The principal spokesman for this view in the twentieth century is Karl Barth, who sees in the Augustinian model a dangerous tendency towards anthropocentrism. However, such criticism neglects to give credit to the faculty of reason, by which men and women try to explicate as far as is possible the deep truths of the Christian faith. Images of the Trinity are an attempt to situate the mystery in the language of the present world. As such, they move in a hermeneutical circle, since they not only interpret the Trinity in terms of the world, and more particularly of the human person, but conversely they interpret the world and humanity in the light of the Trinity. Having said this, however, it is acknowledged that the *vestigia trinitatis* are but analogies, and cannot fathom the depths of the mystery of the Trinity. The revelation of God in Christ remains the prime source of knowledge of the Trinity, and the real *vestigium trinitatis* is Jesus Christ himself.

However intellectually stimulating and satisfying, scholastic argumentation and theological speculation are of limited scope when trying to understand, albeit in a limited fashion, the trinitarian nature of God. Rational discourse and conceptualisation are but attempts to

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articulate a vision of the Truth, which, when apprehended needs no other justification than itself. True knowledge of the Trinity therefore comes by way of experience which leads the believer into the life of God, without implying complete understanding and knowledge of God. Thus, it is to the mystics and to Jan van Ruusbroec in particular that attention should be given in order to learn about the three persons of the Trinity.

THE TRINITARIAN MYSTICISM OF JAN VAN RUUSBROEC

Godhead and Trinity

Ruusbroec’s mysticism integrates both western and eastern approaches to the Trinity. As in the New Testament, the Trinity, for Ruusbroec is the first datum with respect to the Christian God.27 The simple essence of God is distinguished from the three Persons; it is an abyss without a name, a darkness without light, a silence without words, in which there is no longer distinction of persons and diverse operations. It is a profound and yet simple unity, which Ruusbroec calls overwesen or superessential. However, this deepest hidden reality, the unity of essence, is not conceived in a purely philosophical manner, but theologically – within the Trinity.

Utilising Eckhartian terminology, Ruusbroec describes this ground of the Trinity as ‘... a dark silence and a vast desert; the

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everlasting rest of the saints (...) a boundless sea’.\textsuperscript{28} This incomprehensible abyss could be called the ‘contemplative center of God’s being, where he (sic) dwells in the stillness of his eternal self-sufficiency’.\textsuperscript{29} The godhead is divine unity and thus the source of the Trinity and all things, a ‘nameless rest’ in unity. The superessential nature of the godhead means that

[W]e can speak no more of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, nor of any creature; but only of one Being, which is the very substance of the Divine Persons. There were we all one before our creation; for this is our superessence (...) There the Godhead is, in simple essence, without activity, Eternal Rest, Unconditioned Dark, the Nameless Being, the Superessence of all created things and the simple and infinite Bliss of God and of all the saints.\textsuperscript{30}

Transcending all conditions, the superessential godhead cannot be approached by discursive thought. It is the realm of ‘... the measureless solitude of the Godhead where God possesses Himself in joy’.\textsuperscript{31} It is onwise – wayless, dark and naked. Whilst the divine essence cannot be comprehended, yet it can be experienced by means of participation and mystical identification. Although expressed in terms of ‘darkness’ this unity of God is not negative; it is on the contrary a blissful ‘embrace’ of itself. This pure delectation, delight in unity is what Ruusbroec calls ghebruken, fruition. This frutive love is the model of divine affection in the Unity of Essence; it is the pure joy

\textsuperscript{29} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibidem.
of being consumed in the absolute oneness of the godhead. The
delectation is itself the essential rest of the divine essence, described
poetically as ‘... a delectable passing over and a flowing-away and a
sinking-down into the essential nakedness (...) for here there is
nothing but an eternal resting in a delectable embrace of the flowing-
out of love’.32

Whilst this state comprises unity without distinction, Ruusbroec
does not mean to imply that God’s being is total darkness, absolute
oneness, into which all comes to a final rest. There is movement
beyond this point, since God is unity and trinity. Consequently, there
is a paradox of stillness/active love at the heart of the godhead, in
which the former is repose in unity, and the latter the fecund result of
God’s eternal contemplation of his essence. The flowing-out into
action is the Trinity. Therefore, the ascending movement towards
divine unity is not the apex; there is ebb and flow in God. Having
moved into unity, the Trinity then expresses itself in the distinctness
of Persons, and within that expression, of the whole creation.33 This
mutual dialectic of give and take, comprising God’s unity, the
godhead proper, and God’s activity, the Trinity, comprises the eternal,
dynamic inner life of God. Both dimensions are essential; the one is
not primary, and the other, secondary. Both are principal poles of the

31 Ibidem.
32 Ibid., 89.
33 L. Dupré, The common life: The origins of Trinitarian mysticism and its development by Jan
one reality.\textsuperscript{34} This is cogently stated by Ruusbroec, ‘... for God in his exalted nature, of which we bear a likeness, rests in an eternal delectation according to His essential unity, and is eternally active according to His Trinity, and each is the perfection of the other, for rest consists in unity and action in trinity. And so both remain to all eternity’.\textsuperscript{35}

This reciprocal pattern can be more precisely described as a threefold circular movement: from \textit{rest}, fruition, or delectation, into \textit{flow}, or action, which is the trinitarian life, and \textit{ebb}, or the return to rest, the godhead. This pattern is characteristic of all reality, both within the divine life and \textit{ad extra}. An important observation is worthy of inclusion at this juncture, namely, Ruusbroec is at pains to point out that this distinction between godhead and Trinity, or rest and action, is a \textit{human} distinction, made according to its discursive nature, and hence of reason. As Teasdale states:

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Although there is differentiation in God, for the Trinity is the self-differentiating unity in the godhead, it does not trespass his essential Unity, nor overcome his simplicity. The Unity is undifferentiated but has a tendency to action in the Trinity, which is the differentiated plane of his nature. In a sense, differentiation – the work of active love in the Trinity – is a tendency towards self-comprehension of the divine nature and all it contains in the way of knowledge and love.\textsuperscript{36}
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\textsuperscript{34} Teasdale, ‘Ruysbroeck’s mystical theology’, 91.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 90-91.
The influence of neo-Platonism, particularly that of Dionysius the Areopagite is evident in the description of the ebb and flow. The Dionysian emanative pattern of **immutability**, **procession** and **return** to the source, is the underlying basis of Ruusbroec’s trinitarian theology, although he does not explicitly use Dionysian terminology. The abiding rest of the divine Unity is equivalent to the immutability of the One; the activity of the Trinity, the excursus, is similar to the procession, in particular with respect to creation; and finally, the return to the divine Unity, is seen as the ebbing of the persons into the Unity of Essence. The return to the source comprises the **regiratio**, the ‘circular movement’. It is important to remember that whilst Ruusbroec’s trinitarian structure is built on this framework and although his metaphysics owes much to Dionysius, his mystical insight is uniquely and pellucidly his own.

In contrast to Eckhart, who speaks of the godhead **behind** God, or the Absolute **beyond** the Trinity, Ruusbroec stresses that the unity of the divine nature, namely God’s being as activity, is identified with the Father. The Father, therefore is the origin of the godhead, both personally and essentially. Whilst in paradoxical fashion the godhead is essential unity above all distinctions, nevertheless, the unity of the divine nature breaks into the fertility of the Father, who unceasingly generates the eternal Word. The Word, through the Spirit, returns to the original unity. The Father knows the Son in all things, and likewise the Son knows the Father in all things, being as they are one
simple nature.⁷⁷ Therefore, instead of God being seen as a vague, primordial ground existing behind the Persons of the Trinity, Ruusbroec teaches that the personal level and the level of the essential being of the Godhead are situated within each other. The limitations of human language are such that this sublime teaching of Ruusbroec can only be expressed in paradoxical fashion.

**Mystical ascent of the soul**

In line with other classical authors of mysticism, Ruusbroec sees the spiritual life as a process of gradual simplification and unification, leading to union of the person with God. In the divine Unity, humanity also has its origin, namely in the ‘bosom of the Father’. In essence, the soul has its being in God’s eternal Image. Receiving the impress of the divine Archetype, it is a dwelling-place of God’s presence. In profound language Ruusbroec describes the divine ground of all created nature, the ontological basis of the mystical life:

> The spirit in its essence possesses God in the nakedness of its nature, as God does the spirit: for it lives in God and God in it. And it is able, in its highest part, to receive, without intermediary, the Brightness of God, and all that God can fulfil (…) and it flows forth again, through the eternal birth of the Son, together with all the other creatures, and is set in its created being by the free will of

the Holy Trinity (...) And in its created being, it incessantly receives the impress of its Eternal Archetype, like a flawless mirror, in which the image remains steadfast, and in which the reflection is renewed without interruption by its ever-new reception in new light.38

As with many other mystical theologians of his era, Ruusbroec is intrigued with the Pauline simile of the mirror. With respect to the essence of the human, he states: ‘And with respect to its created being, it undergoes without cease the impress of its eternal image, just like an un tarnished mirror in which the image is constantly dwelling’.39

The mirror, for Ruusbroec is not only the dim earthly vision of God by humanity, but also God’s clear perception of men and women as they were first begotten and made to be like God and to be one with God in the essential unity of the godhead. Thus the admonition to ‘live toward the image’, that is the image of the Son of God which is imprinted in the human person. It is through the Son as Logos, the clærheit, that humanity comes forth, ‘... out of our own deepness, that is out of the Father and out of all that lives in Him, there shines an eternal clarity, which is the birth of the Son. And in this clarity, that is in the Son, the Father and all that lives in Him is made manifest to Himself. And (...) all that lives in the Father, concealed in unity, lives in the Son, flowing out and made manifest’.40 The image of God in the depths of the human being is God’s Son, in whom all live and are eternally ‘imaged forth’. This intimate union is such that God’s image

38 Ibid., 39-40.
39 Mommaers & Van Bragt, Mysticism, 117.
40 Teasdale, ‘Ruysbroeck’s mystical theology’, 93.
‘fills the mirror of our soul to overflowing, so that no other light or image can enter there, yet the image is not the mirror, for God does not become a creature’.  

An interesting parallel with respect to the mirror occurs in the writings of the Taoist mystic, Chuang-tzu, who uses the mirror symbol to represent the calm, empty mind of the wise person, ‘The sage’s mind in stillness is the mirror of Heaven and Earth, the glass of ten thousand things’. The mind has to be kept clear and empty of distraction, ‘If a mirror is bright, no dust settles on it; if dust settles, it isn’t really bright’.  

In the mysticism of Ruusbroec it is in Christ, who is the flawless mirror and radiance of the glory of God, that the individual and all creation is drawn out of the essential implicitness in the divine Unity and are distinguished in the Father’s knowledge. Thus God’s own being is the axis around which the inner self moves and has its being. The birth of the Son is not an event in the past, but a dynamic process which involves each Person of the Trinity. This process of generation includes the whole of creation, which according to Christian teaching is included in the return to the Father. In the terminology of the poet, scientist, paleontologist and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, ‘anthropogenesis’ is intimately connected with ‘cosmogenesis’, and both only occur as the result of ‘Christogenesis’. In other words, in and through Christ the vast fabric of creation from its material origins 

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41 Wiseman, John Ruusbroec, 27.
to the highest manifestations of spirit is in a process of evolution towards ever-greater energy, life and consciousness, culminating in a transcendent cosmic awareness, which Teilhard calls the ‘Omega Point’, the telos of all evolutionary history.43

The final end – *telos* – of humanity, therefore, is to return to the Triune God, the Source of all being. The *ontological* reality of this sublime mystery has to become an *existential* reality in the life of the individual. By progressive *deification* the individual is drawn into the very life of the Trinity, the dynamic ebb and flow of love. Entering into the movement between repose, or fruition in contemplation of the divine Unity, and the activity of the Trinity in the flowing-out of the divine Persons, the individual participates in the *regiratio*, in which all return to the godhead. This takes place in the Spirit, who as Love is the very energy of God’s being. This Love, according to Ruusbroec, is like a great ‘flood’ or ‘storm’ or ‘raging fire’ which consumes the soul in unity. As a divine, immense fury, Love is forever calling the individual to return to the Source in an eternal *now*.

And the coming of the Bridegroom is so swift that he has always come and is always dwelling within us with all his riches; and ceaselessly and ever again he is coming in his own person with new clarity, just as if he had never come before. For to have come consists in an eternal now, without time, which is constantly received in new joy and new delight.44

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A clarificatory comment is in order at this stage. As with all major mystical thought, the mystic does not remain in a state of insular bliss, far removed from everyday life. On the contrary, the highest state of union leads to service and apostolic fruition. The ebb and flow of trinitarian life according to Ruusbroec leads the mystic from rest to action. A refusal to follow the movement beyond unity is indicative of a selfish desire to rest in one’s own spiritual satisfaction. Such unitarian mysticism was trenchantly and ruthlessly criticised by Ruusbroec. The true life of God knows no rest. On the contrary, it is a life of movement with the divine persons of the Trinity to those in need: ‘This flowing of God demands always a flowing back; for God is a sea that ebbs and flows, pouring without ceasing into all his beloved according to the needs and merits of each, and ebbing back again with all those who have been thus endowed in heaven and earth ...

The cyclical nature of the mystical life is clearly evident. Thus a state of quiet which does not lead to service of neighbour is not true mysticism, and the exclusive pursuit of rest is an indication of a desire to remain within one’s own psychic limits, which in turn can obstruct God’s operation. The systolic and diastolic combination of expansion and contraction that comprises the life of God in Unity and Trinity is described by Ruusbroec as *dat ghemeyne leven* ‘the common life’. The common life denotes both the highest mutual communion of the three divine Persons; the incorporation of the individual into this

45 Dupré, *The common life*, 32.
divine sphere; and the sharing of the fruits of this eminent experience in ordinary life. The paradigm par excellence of the common life is Christ himself. The ‘divine fecundity’ of the highest states of mysticism is the ‘return to the market place’:

The man (sic) who is sent by God down from these heights, into the world, is full of truth and rich in all virtues. And he seeks nothing for himself but only the honour of the one who sent him, and therefore he is just and true in all his actions. And he has a rich, mild foundation which is founded in the wealth of God, and therefore, he must always flow into all those who need him (...) And therefore, he has a common life, for contemplation and action come just as readily to him and he is perfect in both. For no can have this common life unless he is a contemplative man.46

The world to which the mystic now returns in a spirit of service is no longer the one which he or she had left. It has now become utterly transformed – creation is now perceived in its essence – as permeated with the divine radiance and possessing a harmonious completeness which was not noticed previously.

The trinitarian mysticism of Ruusbroec is eminently practical. His conceptual-experiential focus leads the adherent to respond to the call to union with divinity and a participation in the circumincessional relations of the Trinity. Such a perichoretic existence flows out to service of neighbour – the only true test of authentic mysticism. Ruusbroec’s mysticism points to the ultimate beatitude for women and

46 Mommaers & Van Bragt, Mysticism, 176-177.
CONCLUSION

It may well be asked, what relevance does the foregoing have for humanity at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Are such medieval metaphysical utterances and teachings of any value in an age of technological and scientific enterprise, where basically, in many cases, the senses are the sole determinants of reality? My answer to this is an unqualified ‘yes’. The growing interest in spirituality and mystical thought evident in the last decades of the previous millennium and at the beginning of this millennium is an indication that women and men are searching for meaning and purpose in life, and for the deeper realities of the Christian message. The teaching of Jan van Ruusbroec and his illuminating discourse regarding the Trinity, a mystery that can never be fully understood, can be a vital and vibrant reminder of the pristine purity of the gospel message. Such interior trinitarian mysticism counteracts a purely external, dissipated and alienated existence, and effectively argues against the tyranny of scientific materialism so prevalent in the frenetic and secularist world of today. Contemplation and action, as illustrated in Ruusbroec’s thought are seen not as opposites, but rather as aspects of a unified and simplified life, the psychotherapeutic value of which can be seen in an increased zest for living and service of others. It is time
to return to the mystics and regain our heritage, as so powerfully and
magnificently portrayed in the thought of this gentle, but strong man.

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