

Mystics of the Church

English and Dutch Mystics of the 14th Century

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- The 14th century launched the Renaissance in Europe, but the Renaissance did not have much impact in England. English mystics—Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich—exhibited most of the same perspective earlier mystics of the *Brautmystik* tradition featured. The author of a work entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*, however, diverged from his contemporaries in replicating the apophatic tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius. Indeed, he translated *The Mystical Theology* into English under the title *Hid Divinity*. Dutch mystics, by contrast, displayed more of a Renaissance outlook.

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- I. Julian of Norwich
 - Julian of Norwich did not gain the popularity of Richard Rolle or Walter Hilton in her own day, but she has outshined them in ours. Her *Showings* are the subject of classes and seminars in colleges and seminaries all over the world. Scholars have studied her biography and theology extensively. Why was she not immediately popular, and why has she captured a growing audience today, six centuries later? The answer to the second question will be easier than that to the first one. She addressed a lot of issues important to a burgeoning number of people interested in spirituality—sin and suffering, experience of God, spiritual direction, the feminine aspect of God, *et al.* Above all, however, we have been drawn to her by her hopefulness. “Sin is necessary [i.e., inevitable], but all

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- will be well and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well,” she wrote (225). Why she didn’t appeal equally to her contemporaries may mystify us? Was it because of some daring theological convictions—God our Mother, Jesus our Mother, the “fall” of the Second Adam in the First Adam? The motherhood of God had a long history, but it could have sounded errant in that day of inquisitors. Her view that Christ fell in Adam, moreover, could have caused offense and gotten the axe from the censors. More likely, her neglect was the fault of a misogynistic age and the fact that she was an anchoress, sealed away from the public. Her writing was also more profound and difficult than Rolle’s and Hilton’s.

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– A. Life

- Julian dated her revelation May 13, 1373 (177), when she was thirty-and-a-half (127). That would place her birth late in 1342 or early in 1343, quite close to Walter Hilton's. She spoke of herself as "a simple, unlettered creature," but the *Showings* negates that quite decisively. She not only wrote good English, comparable to Chaucer's, but she displayed a wide range of sources, including the Latin Vulgate and William of St. Thierry's writings, not translated at the time. She evidently entered a religious order when she was young and acquired her academic training there. In 1394 she elected the life of an anchoress and was sealed into an anchorhold at the rear of the Church of St. Julian, from which her name derives. She was still alive in 1413, as the opening chapter of the Short Text of the *Showings* noted (125).

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– B. *Showings*

- 1. Julian's *Showings* consists of two meditations, a Short and a Long one, on a series of sixteen "revelations" that she experienced on the fourth day after three days and nights of "bodily sickness" from which she was expected to die (127). A priest administered last rites as her body failed from the waist down. Just as she reached the point of death, the pain left her (128). The sudden change in her mortal state prompted her to desire "to suffer with him, living in my mortal body, as God would give me grace." (129) A vision of Christ with crown of thorns thrust down on his head followed. She was sure it was from Christ.

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- 2. The Short and the Long texts diverge somewhat, but both arrive at essentially the same conviction—that God loves with infinite compassion. The crux of her “revelations” appears in a vision of a hazelnut in the palm of her hand. The explanation concerned Christ’s “familiar love.” When she asked the meaning of the hazelnut, this understanding came to her: “It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.” (130, 183) In the hazelnut she saw three properties—that God made it, loves it, and preserves it. The insight from this: “God is the Creator and the Lover and the Protector.” (131)

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- C. The Sixteen Revelations
 - 1. At the outset of the Long text Julian listed the sixteen “showings”: (1) “about his precious crowning of thorns” in which she perceived the Trinity and the Incarnation and union of God with the human soul (175); (2) “about the discoloration of his fair face, to signify his precious Passion”; (3) “that our Lord God almighty, all wisdom and all love, just as truly he has made everything which is, so truly he does and performs all things which are done”; (4) “the scourging of his tender body, with copious shedding of his precious blood”; (5) “that the fiend is overcome by the precious Passion of Christ”; (6) “of the honorable thanks with which our Lord God rewards all his blessed servants in heaven”; (7) “of the frequent experiences of well-being and of woe,” well-being as grace and woe as testing; (8) “of Christ’s last sufferings and of his cruel death”; (9) “of the delight which the blessed Trinity has in the cruel Passion of Christ”; (10) “how our Lord

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- Jesus displays his heart split in two for love"; (11) "an exalted spiritual showing concerning his dear mother"; (12) "that our Lord God wishes us to have great regard for all the deeds which he has performed in the most noble work of creating all things," etc.; (14) "that our Lord God is the foundation of our beseeching," that is, prayer; (15) "that suddenly we shall be taken from all our pain and from all our woe, and in his goodness we shall come up above"; (16) "that the blessed Trinity our Creator dwells eternally in our soul in Jesus Christ our Saviour, honorably ruling and commanding all things, powerfully and wisely saving and preserving us out of love; and that we shall not be overcome by our enemy." (175-177) Julian organized the Long Text as a revelation by revelation commentary.

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- 2. The meaning of the "revelations" came to Julian fifteen or more years later. "What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love." (342) Julian took care to defend the visions. She was a "wretched worm," but God willed it. "I am not good because of the revelation, but only if I love God better; and so can and so should every man [or woman] do who sees it and hears it with good will and proper intention." (134) She is not a teacher but a woman "ignorant, weak, and frail" and "in everything I believe as Holy Church teaches." (135)

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– D. Notable Insights

- 1. **Salvation.** It is comforting to know that our Lord is “so familiar and so courteous.” (136) “God wishes us to know that [God] keeps us safe all the time, in joy and in sorrow, and that [God] loves us as much in sorrow as in joy.” (140, 205) “Sin is necessary [inevitable], but all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well.” “. . . for the Passion of our Lord is a comfort to us against all this and that is his blessed will. And because of his tender love which our good Lord has for all who will be saved, he comforts readily and sweetly, meaning this: It is true that sin is the cause of all this pain, but all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well.” (225=147; 331=149) Atonement in Christ is greater than our sin (150, 228). Five words: God will, shall, may, can and you will see that all things will be well (151, 229, 305). All will sin, but all will be well (153, 241). Sin is nothing, for God is everything (166).

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- 2. **Prayer.** Prayer pleases God, unites the soul to God, and makes the soul like God (153, 253). There is no need to pray when at ease with God, but when not (159). We should expect dryness in prayer (162, 250). Regarding the 14th Revelation, Julian saw two conditions in Jesus’ intentions: “rightful prayer” and “confident trust.” God wants us to beseech God. “Beseeching is a true and gracious, enduring will of the soul, united and joined to our Lord’s will by the sweet, secret operation of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord himself is the first receiver of our prayer, . . .” (249). He is glad because of our prayer and expects and wants it. “God accepts the good will and the labor of his servants, however we may feel, and therefore it pleases him that we work in prayer and in good living by his help and his grace, reasonably and with discretion, preserving our powers

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- for him until we have in the fullness of joy him whom we seek, who is Jesus." (250) Thanksgiving is also prayer. "And sometimes the soul is so full of this that it breaks out in words and says: Good Lord, great thanks, blessed may you be. . . . And so the power of our Lord's word enters the soul and enlivens the heart and it begins by his grace faithful exercise, and makes the soul to pray most blessedly, and truly rejoices in our Lord. This is a most loving thanksgiving in his sight." (250) Our Lord wants us to understand three things about prayer: (1) with whom and how it originates with him, (2) in what manner and how to perform prayers, and (3) to know the fruit and end of our prayer, i.e., to be united and like our Lord (250-251). "Prayer unites the soul to God, . . ." (253) The whole reason for prayer is "to be united into the vision and contemplation of him to whom we pray, . . ." (254).

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- **3. God.** Julian was Trinitarian. "For all the attributes of the blessed Trinity, it is God's will that we have most confidence in his delight and in his love." (168) "Everything which our Lord does is righteous, and all which he tolerates is honorable; and in these two are good and evil comprehended. For our Lord does everything which is good, and our Lord tolerates what is evil." (237) God's love and mercy are greater than our sin (246). God indwells our souls (285). It is easier to know God than our own souls (288). "God is closer to us than our own soul, for [God] is the foundation on which our soul stands, . . . (288f.). "We can never come to full knowledge of God until we first clearly know our own soul." (289)

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- **4. God and Jesus as Our Mother.** “As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother, . . .” (295f.) “And so in our making, God almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord. . . I contemplated the work of all the blessed Trinity, in which contemplation I saw and understood these three properties: the property of the fatherhood, and the property of the motherhood, and the property of the lordship in one God.” (293) “As to the first [nature], I saw and understood that the high might of the Trinity is our Father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our Lord; and all these we have in nature and in our substantial creation. And furthermore, I saw that the

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- second person, who is our Mother, substantially the same beloved person, has now become our mother sensually, because we are double by God’s creating, that is to say substantial and sensual.” (294) “The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life; . . . The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show us there a part of the godhead and of the joys of heaven, with inner certainty of endless bliss.” (298)

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- 5. **Humankind.** “When Adam fell, God’s Son fell; because of the true union which was made in heaven, God’s Son could not be separated from Adam, for by Adam I understand all [hu]mankind. . . For in all this our good Lord showed his own Son and Adam as only one man. The strength and the goodness that we have is from Jesus Christ, the weakness and blindness that we have is from Adam, which two were shown in the servant. And so has our good Lord Jesus taken up on him all our blame; . . .” (274-5).
 “Therefore he wants us to know that the noblest thing which he ever made is [hu]mankind, and the fullest substance and the highest power is the blessed soul of Christ. And furthermore, he wants us to know that this beloved soul was preciousy knitted to him in the making, by a knot so subtle and so mighty that it is united to God. In this uniting it is made endlessly holy. Furthermore, he wants us to know that all the souls which will be saved in heaven without end are knit in this knot, and united in this union, and made holy in this holiness.” (284)

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- E. Julian as Spiritual Director
 - 1. One window of Julian’s anchorhold faced the outside and allowed her to counsel. We know of her direction especially through Margery Kempe, who is often classified among the English mystics. Julian gained a reputation as a worthy guide. She composed the *Showings* for “such men and women as for the love of God hate sin and dispose themselves to God’s will,” according to Julian Gatta (*Three Spiritual Directors*, 73). She envision two kinds of sin or sickness needing help: (1) impatience and sloth and (2) despair or doubtful fear. The latter type comes from “ignorance of love.” The answer to both is love. “Love was our Lord’s meaning,” she wrote. In the Parable of the Lord and the Servant she sees Christ suffering both for and with humanity.

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- 2. Julia Gatta has characterized Julian's approach as theodicy as a pastoral art. She focused on the problem of evil that beset people in the pain-filled 14th century. "Why does God permit moral evil?" She asked. She believed that God causes everything, but sin is not anything, so God does not cause it. Her optimism rested on the love of God, our Mother as well as our Father. On the last day God will perform a great deed to keep God's Word that "all will be well."
- [The 14th century experienced a pandemic very much like the one that has plagued the world in the past year and a half. Sadly, the medicine of that day could not stay the hand of death as our medicine has.]

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- 3. God assigns no blame. Yet the Church considers sin blameworthy, and Julian herself had a deep sense of sin. How can these be reconciled? Julian found the answer in Christ, Lord and Servant (Long Text, Ch 51), which came to her after twenty years of meditation. Christ combines the First and Second Adams. The "Fall" of Christ is the self-emptying of Philippians 2. However, Julian merges the Parable of the Loving Father (Luke 15:11-32) with Paul's provocative conviction in 2 Cor 5:21: "God made the one who did not know sin to be sin on our behalf in order that we might become God's righteousness in him." Gatta comments: "To counter despondency, the Parable offers a firm ground of hope in something beyond our sense of personal weakness: the final perfection of human nature in Christ." (Gatta 68)

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- 4. The Parable of the Lord and the Servant reflects on Christ crucified as the vision of sacrificial love. God is *pro nobis*. From the sight of Christ's bloody head, she said, "in the same revelation, suddenly the Trinity filled my heart full of the greatest joy." The Crucified embodies the kenotic Christ, the union of God and humankind. God stoops as nothing, even human excretion, to demonstrate divine love. Christ's pain is not limited to the crucifixion, but what we need could happen in no other way. Julian here qualifies the traditional understanding of divine impassibility. As "our head, he is glorious and impassible," but in his humanity he is passible. "For as truly as there is in God a quality of pity and compassion, so truly is there in God a quality of thirst and longing."

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- 5. Julian addressed the issue of prayer and desolation. We must keep God's ubiquity in mind. We are one with Christ in his human suffering in prayer. Moments of divine illumination are fleeting, but God draws us forward by fulfilling only partially our hunger for God. It may not seem so, but God is always near. God is even under the ocean. We see God continually though our sight is partial. A sense of God's absence may be a way of seeing God. Moral evil is not necessarily a cause of desolation. God may permit despondency for our growth. Delight in God is a grace. A sense of interior desolation is a result of incarnation according to the Parable of the Lord and Servant.

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- 6. God's compassion should not permit us to give up. God reveals God's self as afflicted love. Those who love more suffer more. God's compassion has issued in Christ's passion. Humanity is, as it were, clothed in the rags of the Servant. Though God allows evil, God wills only good. God does not cause sin, though God may cause pain. But "pain is passing." We know Christ in his pain and in his glory.
- 7. Julian appealed to both mind and heart in her use of the image of Jesus as our Mother. She envisioned motherhood in three ways: (1) In God's creation of us, Christ is "mother" of our substantial nature. (2) In God's assuming our nature in the incarnation, the object is "deification" and not simply union. (3) In our "Mother" at work as a pregnant woman Christ carries us and brings us to birth.

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- II. The Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*
 - A. The Author?
 - In some contrast to the other English mystics the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* shows a strong fascination with Pseudo-Dionysius. Not many would argue today for Walter Hilton as the author of *The Cloud*. The chief debate concerns the unknown writer's religious connection—whether a secular priest, a Carthusian, or a Cistercian. We can say for sure only that he lived as a solitary. That would not require a connection to a particular monastic tradition. He possessed a good theological education.

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– B. Writings

- Besides *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Hid Divinity* this writer composed *The Book of Privy Counseling*, a major work on mystical union; *The Epistle of Prayer*; *The Epistle of Discretion*; a treatise *Of Discerning Spirits*; and did an adaptation of Richard of St Victor's *Benjamin Minor*.

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– C. The Author as Spiritual Director

- 1. The author of *The Cloud* took the Dionysian tradition and shaped it into a style of spiritual guidance. He addressed this work to a young man pursuing the contemplative life under monastic obedience. He wrote letters to give spiritual direction on different aspects of the spiritual life. In *The Cloud of Unknowing* he issued a call to contemplative prayer. He warned that no one should undertake contemplative prayer without a spiritual guide. He laid out the following guidelines: (1) Pay close attention to daily experience of prayer and expect periods of dryness. (2) The "call" is evidenced by (a) long practice in the affirmative way and (b) a desire which is persistent and overwhelming.

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- (3) Contemplatives should ground themselves thoroughly in Christian piety and the sacramental life. The author forbids meditation or the use of imagination.
- 2. The author agreed with Hilton and Julian regarding the force of desire. Prayer is “to stand in desire.” He reduced the exercise of prayer to the essence of desire. We should direct love to God alone; “have [Godself] as your aim, not any of [God’s] goods.” The “cloud,” however, blocks the way. Therefore, we have to “smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love” and never give up. God is incomprehensible to the intellect but not to the “loving power.” We can “love” God, but we can’t “think” God.

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- 3. Practitioners must drop meditations on their sinfulness, not because they are sinless but because God’s hidden work in the soul overcomes it. Our work is “forgetting.” God’s work is love. This is why sacramental confession precedes contemplation. Only so can we forget. Mary Magdalene is our example par excellence. “So she hung up her love and her longing desire in this cloud of unknowing, and learned to love what she could not see clearly in this life by the light of understanding in her reason, or yet truly experience in sweetness of love in her affection, so much so that often enough she paid but little attention to whether she was a sinner or not.” (*Cloud 16*; *Classics of Western Spirituality*, 155.)

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- 4. One is not to think of anything in particular during prayer. This is the self-emptying way of the Cross. As Christ divested himself, so also do we. In this kind of prayer we experience a remarkable change of attitude toward others. This happens because of our linkage to the Cross. Entrance into the Godhead is through Christ's humanity. The negative way is full of paradox.

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- D. Mystical Theology
 - 1. The author's Dionysian thought came to him by way of Thomas Gallus, referred to in connection with Bonaventure, and the Carthusian Hugh of Balma (d. 1340). This form reinterpreted the language concerning the limitations of reason in terms of the superiority of love to all forms of knowing in the ascent to God. Although the cloud of unknowing can never be dispersed, it does not prevent loving union with God in this life. The earnest Christian must follow the dark road of unknowing and inner suffering. Although the author did not discourage preparatory exercises such as reading, reflecting, and praying (35), he did not expect them to penetrate the cloud. Humility or meekness is the key. "In itself, humility is nothing else but a [person's] true awareness and understanding of himself [or herself] as he [or she] really is" (13). We make real

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- progress only in the higher stages of contemplation. This requires two things: (1) We must invoke the “cloud of forgetting” and put it between ourselves and all creation (5, 43). (2) We must “smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love” (6). The “sharp dart of longing love” is at the heart of the author’s mystical theology. Short, ejaculatory prayers are more effective than long ones; they break through directly to God (37). The union with God that such prayer leads to is a consequence of God’s operative grace, which is entirely of God and not of ourselves (26, 34). Such an understanding places the author in line with Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of grace.

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- 2. An important by-product of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is Centering Prayer. The author outlined his method in Chapter 7. Choose one word, fix it in your heart, and beat upon the cloud with it. If distractions pull you away from this endeavor, repeat the word and “strike down every kind of thought under the cloud of forgetting.”
- 3. In *The Book of Privy Counseling* the author reflected some of the language used by the Rhineland mystics, but he avoided abstract terminology they sometimes used. This book added to the teaching of *The Cloud* a detailed reflection on the cloud of forgetting as the means through which we negate our own being in order to center on God. Love’s work is total forgetfulness of self. Although readers

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- must take care not to make too much of the distinction between Hilton's christocentric and this author's theocentric mysticism, the latter's language and tone about Christ did differ from those of the other English mystics. Hilton seems to have criticized his emphasis on "naked intent" in *The Book of Privy Counseling*. The author of *The Cloud*, however, did teach an "eminently orthodox" notion of union with God and avoided any suggestion of union of identity or indistinction that authorities condemned in Eckhart's thought. He adhered to the traditional formula of "unity of Spirit" found in 1 Corinthians 6:17. Moses' experience of union as he entered into the dark cloud was "to feel in experience the presence of Him that is above all things." (*Hid Divinity*, ed. Hodgson, 123.)

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- III. John Ruusbroec
 - The Rhineland produced a luxuriant crop of mystics in the 14th century and laid the groundwork for the Protestant Reformation. None played a more influential role than John Ruusbroec (1293-1381) as a transitional figure. He bridged the gulf between Tauler, Suso, and the Friends of God and the Brothers of the Common Life founded by Gerhard de Groote (1340-1384) and Florentius Radewyns (1350-1400). Evelyn Underhill (148) called him "one of the greatest—perhaps the very greatest—of the mystics of the Church."

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– A. Life

- We know little about Ruusbroec's early life. A native of Ruusbroec, at age eleven he moved to Brussels, where he lived in the house of his uncle, John Hinckaert, canon of St Gudule, a collegiate church. He served as a chaplain at St Gudule after his ordination around 1317. We know that he undertook his first writing to refute a woman named Bloemardinne, perhaps an adherent of the Brethren of the Free Spirit. At age fifty, however, judging that the clergy needed renewal and reform, he retired from his chaplaincy with Hinkaert and another priest to a hermitage at Groenendael, near Brussels, where others joined them. A succession of hermits had lived there from 1304 on. In 1349 the group became a community of Canons Regular under the Rule of St Augustine with Ruusbroec serving as prior until his death. Groenendael played a prominent role in

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- the religious movement later known as *devotio moderna*, with which the Brothers of the Common Life and the Canons Regular of Windesheim also associated. Groote visited Groenendael in 1377 to meet Ruusbroec. Ruusbroec died December 2, 1381, after a period of serious illness. He was beatified in 1908.
- ### – B. Writings
- According to an early biographer, Ruusbroec started writing in order to refute the Brethren of the Free Spirit, and many of his writings contain critical comments about them. His first book, composed in the early 1330's, was *The Kingdom of the Lovers of God*, in the longer section of which he discussed the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. He got some criticism for his explanation of the "gift of counsel" and had some misgivings about the book. He felt much more positive about his second work, *The Spiritual Espousals*, widely read in his own lifetime and regarded as a masterpiece ever since. Most subsequent writing adapted and

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- clarified what he said in this book. After his move to Groenendael he wrote *The Seven Enclosures*, evidently for a member of the Poor Clares as they opened a new convent in 1346. He also penned *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* for a Poor Clare, finished in 1359. Shortly after this, he composed *The Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love*. The rungs are: good will, voluntary poverty, purity, humility, zeal in God's service, contemplative union with the Trinity, and contemplative immersion in the simple being of the Godhead. *The Little Book of Clarification* followed next to explain his views of "the gift of counsel" to critics. Others included: *The Book of Supreme Truth*, *The Mirror of Eternal Salvation*, *The Sparkling Stone* (also known as *The Treatise of Perfection of the Sons of God*), and *The Book of the Spiritual Tabernacle*. The last of his eleven treatises was called *The Twelve Beguines*, in which twelve Beguines speak in turn. Significant of the respect in which Ruusbroec was held, several of these works were translated into Latin in the 14th century.

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- C. Influences Shaping His Thought
 - Ruusbroec's writings reflect influence of the Rhineland mystics in numerous ways: Augustine's image of the Trinity in the highest part of the soul; the spark of the soul as natural as well as divine; the eternal procession of the idea of creation from the Son; the configured distinction between God and Godhead analogous to the meeting of humans with God in concomitant experiential phenomena and in the union of love beyond all understanding; mirror ontology; exemplarity; the suddenness of the breaking through to the divine ground; and other things. However, he differed from them in style, form and thought patterns. He identified much more readily with the older tradition of contemplative mysticism of the Cistercians, Victorines, and Franciscans as represented by Bonaventure. There is debate

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- as to whether he owed some of his thought to Eckhart or went back to some of Eckhart's sources such as Hadewijch. Ruusbroec offered an independent variant of the mystical path—the active life, the interior (God-seeking) life, and the “God-gazing life.”
- D. Mystical Theology
 - 1. Despite his Eckhartian connection, Ruusbroec took care not to differentiate the essence of God from the Trinity. Instead, he identified the ground of divine unity with the Father, thus keeping the unity of the essence of God and the unity of persons in the Trinity together. The love of Father, Son, and Spirit for one another seals the identity of the divine essence. Humans may participate in the divine process only by grace and the imitation of Christ. Ruusbroec was at pains also to repudiate the “natural” methods of

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- meditation—sitting still and desiring to be emptied—espoused by the Brethren of the Free Spirit. He emphasized instead the Christian following of the way of the Cross and the use of the means of grace made available by the Church, especially the Eucharist. God has revealed the nature of union in the Godhead through the incarnation of the Son. From God's side this involves a lasting “contact.” From the human side it arises from a hunger and an eager desire for God which can lead, in the language of the Song of Songs, to a “wounding” by love and a “fury of love.” As Ruusbroec conceived it, the “common” or “comprehensive” life involves at the same time active works and passive enjoyment of both intellect and affect. Mystical union may be both mediated and immediate, often at the same time; it involves a process of being drawn into God and being blown back out again. “The spirit of God blows us outside so that we may practice love and virtuous

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- deeds. But it draws us into itself as well so that we may give ourselves over to rest and enjoyment; and this is the divine life itself given graciously to human beings, principally in the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.” (Cited by Alois Maria Haas, “Schools of Late Medieval Mysticism,” in *Christian Mysticism*, edited by Jill Raitt, II: 165.)
- 2. *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec’s most comprehensive work, illustrates the three-step mystical path and merits summary. The work is laid out as a comment on Matthew 25:6: “See, the bridegroom is coming. Go out to meet him.” In this text Christ teaches four things: (1) He commands that we “see.” (2) He reveals what we should see—the Bridegroom. (3) He tells what we are to do—“go out.” (4) He reveals the reward we will have for our entire life and activity—a loving meeting with the bridegroom. At each of the three stages—active, inner, and unitive—these four issues will test how well we are complying.

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- **The active life** (Book I). (1) Just as physical sight requires light, willingness to look, and healthy eyes, **spiritual sight** necessitates the light of God’s grace, a will freely turned toward God, and a conscience free of mortal sin. Seeing demands both prevenient grace that touches us without and within and cooperative grace whereby the “fathomless goodness of God” comes in to help us in our weakness and completes the work. “Supernatural light” begins here as we yield to God. (2) **Jesus comes** as the bridegroom in the incarnation, daily in diverse ways in every loving heart, and on the Day of Judgment or at the hour of death. The reason why Christ did what he did on earth was because of his divine love, his created love called charity, human need, and his honor of the Father. In the incarnation he modeled three virtues which lie at the root of all perfection: humility, charity, and patient endurance of suffering both physically and spiritually. By practicing these throughout his life he redeemed us. Daily the bridegroom showers us with graces because of God’s mercy and

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- our need, God's generosity and our desire. Because of these the humble heart "becomes brighter and more radiant of graces, and warmer in charity, and more fruitful in perfect virtues and good works." (*John Ruusbroec, The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, translated by James A. Wiseman, OSB. Classics of Western Spirituality, 52.) At the Judgment or when we die, he comes because that is the appropriate time, a trial is right, and the Judge is just. He will judge five kinds of persons: those who die in mortal sin (the worst), unbelievers, good Christians who have not fully atoned for sins through penance, those who keep God's commandments, and those whose citizenship is in heaven and "are united and immersed in God and God in them." (54) (3) "We must **go out** to God and to ourselves and to our neighbor, and this must be done in charity and righteousness." (55) The foundation for charity and

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- righteousness is humility, the mother of all virtues." Humility is "an interior bowing of the heart and mind before the transcendent majesty of God." (55) Humility will give rise to obedience, "a humble, submissive, docile attitude of mind and an openness of the will to all good things." (56) It includes obedience to the Church, sacraments, and prelates. Obedience will lead to renunciation of self-will, renunciation of self-will to patience, patience to meekness and kindness, kindness to compassion and a general sympathy for everyone. Compassion is "an interior movement of a heart filled with pity for the material and spiritual needs of all persons." (59) Compassion will foster generosity, "the bountiful flowing forth of a heart which is moved by charity and compassion." (60) Generosity will inspire "a supernatural zeal and devotion to every kind of virtuous and proper behavior." Zeal produces moderation and sobriety, both interior and exterior.

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- Sobriety keeps us from wanting to know forbidden things. “The incomprehensible nature of God transcends all creatures in heaven and on earth, for everything that a creature can comprehend is creaturely; because God is above all creatures and is both without and within them, every created concept is too narrow to comprehend him.” (62) Nature and scriptures testify *that* God is, but they do not tell us *what* God is. We have to believe. Sobriety gives rise to purity of body and soul, spirit, and heart. Righteousness is a weapon in the practice of virtues to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh. Whoever wants to obtain and preserve these virtues, free by nature and still more by grace, must order the soul as if it were a kingdom under the crown of charity. Knowledge and discretion, enlightened by God’s grace, must rule. (4) In **meeting with Christ** lies our salvation. We meet him in directing our minds to God in all things, neither thinking

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- about nor loving anything more than God or as much as God, and resting in God with great ardor above all creatures, above all of God’s gifts, above all virtuous activities, and above all feelings that God may infuse into the soul. “Directing one’s mind to God is the same as seeing God in a spiritual way.” (67)
 - When the soul thus inclines toward God with love and intent above all that it understands, then it abides in God and God in it. When the soul ascends with desire above the multiplicity of the created order, above the activity of the senses and above all natural light, then it meets Christ in the light of faith; it becomes enlightened and confesses that God is unknowable and incomprehensible. When the soul inclines with desire toward this incomprehensible God, then it meets Christ and is filled with his gifts. When it loves and is at rest above all gifts, above itself, and above all creatures, then it abides in God and God in it. This is how we are to meet Christ at the highest level of the active life.

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– If you possess righteousness in charity, if you have laid down humility as a foundation and built upon it a dwelling, namely, the virtues which have here been described, and if you have met Christ through faith and through directing your mind and your love to him, then you abide in God and God in you, and you have come into possession of the active life. (70)

- **The interior life** (Book 2). Moving to the level of the interior life, Ruusbroec shifts his application of the theme upward a notch. (1) To “see” is to have “our understanding to be enlightened with a supernatural brightness.” (2) What we are to see is “the interior coming of our Bridegroom, the eternal truth.” (3) To go out to meet the bridegroom is “to go out in interior exercises practiced in the way righteousness requires.” (4) To meet him is to meet with Christ our Bridegroom “in the blissful Unity of the Godhead.” (71)

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- (1) **Seeing** necessitates three things: (a) “the light of God’s grace in a higher way than that which can be experienced in a life of exterior works without fervent interior zeal” (71); (b) ‘stripping of all strange images and solicitude from the heart, so that a person may be free and imageless, delivered from attachments and empty of all creatures” (72); (c) “a free turning of the will and a gathering together of all the bodily and spiritual powers in such a way that the will, unencumbered by any inordinate affection, might flow into the Unity of God and of the mind.” (72) **Interiorly** we possess a threefold unity: one we have from God, a unity of the spirit or of the mind that we possess naturally, and the unity of the heart, the source of our physical life. We can adorn and possess these unities through moral virtues practiced in charity in the active life, but we can do so still more nobly “when fervent interior exercises are added to those of the active life.” (74)

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- When our unity of spirit is united with God without intermediary, “grace and all gifts flow forth.” (74) The Holy Spirit “drives our own spirit from within and urges it out toward all the virtues. This grace flows from within, not from without, for God is more interior to us than we are to ourselves, and his interior urging and working in us, whether done naturally or supernaturally, is nearer and more intimate to us than are our own works.” (75) Three things make it possible for us to see interiorly: (a) the illumination of divine grace, (b) gathering together of all our powers, from within and from without, “in the unity of the spirit and the bond of love,” and (c) “freedom, so that without hindrance from sensible images a person can turn within as often as he wishes and as often as he thinks of his God.” (75)

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- (2, 3) At the level of the interior life **Christ comes** in three different manners: (a) “in interior exercises [he] drives and urges on a person sensibly from within, drawing him with all his powers upward to heaven and pressing him to attain unity with God”; (b) “in an influx of the riches of divine gifts into the higher powers of the soul, and these gifts strengthen, enlighten, and enrich the spirit in many different ways”; and (c) “an interior stirring or touch in the unity of the spirit, where the higher powers of the soul have their abode. From here they flow forth, to her they return, and here they constantly remain, united by the bond of love and the natural unity of the spirit.” (76-77) Ruusbroec dwells as some length on each of these, indicating how important they were.

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- (a) **The first coming, into the heart**, occurs in four different modes:
 - (i) *Sensible fervor and consolation*. “The first coming of Christ in exercises full of desire is an interiorly felt impulse of the Holy Spirit which urges and impels us toward all the virtues.” (77) “In his interior coming and through the power of his Spirit, Christ, the glorious sun and divine resplendence, enlightens, shines through, and enkindles the heart which is free, together with all the powers of the soul.” (78) “This heat gives rise to unity in our heart, for we can attain true unity only if the Spirit of God enkindles his fire in our heart.” (78) Unity produces interior fervor, interior fervor felt affection, felt affection devotion to God and God’s glory, fervent devotion to thanksgiving and praise, and thanksgiving and praise to a twofold pain of heart of not doing enough and torment of desire to do more.
 - (ii) *A superabundance of consolation*. “A person is hereby raised to a higher state than

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- he [or she] possessed earlier. In this sweetness Christ says, “Go out, in accordance with the mode of this coming.” (82) Sweetness gives rise to a feeling of delight in the heart and delight to “spiritual inebriation.” These may be too strong fare for some, so they should follow the example of the bee, which does not remain on the flowers too long. (iii) *A powerful attraction to God*. “Here the heart opens wide in joy and desire, all the veins dilate, and the powers of the soul stand ready in their desire to fulfill what is called for by God and by the invitation to unity with [God]. This invitation consists in the shining of Christ, the eternal sun, upon the heart. This causes so much pleasure and joy within the heart and makes the heart open so wide that it can scarcely be closed again. . . . A person is thereby wounded in his heart from within and feels the wound of love.” (85) This

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- may lead to a powerful restlessness, for the soul cannot attain God or do without God. It is ready to suffer anything to obtain what it loves. In this state we should give ourselves to various reflections and particular exercises so as to preserve our strength and live long in virtue. Sometimes people are caught up in revelations and visions, raptures. "Sometimes God flows with great sweetness into a heart which is undergoing this transport. Then the heart swims in a state of bliss, just like a fish in water. . . . To remain long in this condition ravages the body." (89) (iv) *A state of abandonment*. "This hiding of Christ and this withdrawal of the radiance of his light and heat comprise his first activity and a new manner of his coming in this fourth mode. Christ now says spiritually within such a person, 'Go out, in accordance with the way I am now showing you.'" (91) This person now goes out poor, wretched, and forsaken. Such a person should share his misery with others and ask for the prayers of the Church, the saints, and

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- all who are good. Such trials do not mean that one is not advancing toward perfection. Great courage is needed. Sometimes persons in this state experience four kinds of fevers: daily fever "when the heart is ensnared by manifold attachments," fickleness that occurs every other day, quartan fever consisting in estrangement from God and from oneself, and double-quartan fever, a state of indifference. When such things happen, we should fix our eyes on Christ. He remained in unity when he faced such challenges.

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- (b) **The second coming, into the higher powers.** Ruusbroec likened this to a spring from which flow three streams. (i) The first stream unifies the memory, and Christ now calls a person to go out in accordance with this light and with this coming. (ii) The second stream enlightens the understanding. It infuses its light into the understanding, and Christ wills such persons to go out and walk in the light. “The sublime nature of the Godhead will be seen and beheld as simplicity and unicity, inaccessible height and unfathomable depth, incomprehensible breadth and eternal length, a dark stillness and a wild desert, a repose for all the saints in unity and a bliss common to itself and all the saints for eternity.” (100) Such enlightened persons will know the attributes of the Father, Son, and Spirit. (iii) The third stream enflames the will in love. “Like a fire, this stream enkindles the will and devours and consumes all things, reducing them to a unity.” (102)

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- A person enlightened in this way is called and invited to go out in four different ways—to God and to all God’s holy ones, to sinners and all who are going astray, to those who are in purgatory, and to himself and to all good persons. As God flows out and then back, so too do the enlightened. Ruusbroec paused here to issue a word of caution about distinguishing people who deviate from this path: (1) The enlightened are simple, stable, and free of curious reflections while the deviants are complex, unstable, and full of subtle reasonings. (2) The enlightened know the truth distinctly and effortlessly because of divine wisdom, the deviants have neither depth nor liberality in teaching based on their own reason. (3) The enlightened teach with charity for all, whereas the deviants set themselves apart from all. Once again, he insisted, Christ is the model for giving ourselves to all in common, particularly in the Lord’s Supper. Here Ruusbroec had harsh words for some in the Church who set the opposite example.

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- (c) **The third coming, into the unity of the Spirit.** Ruusbroec likened this to a vein of water feeding a spring. “Now beneath this essential being of the soul, in which God reigns, there is found the unity of our spirit; this can be likened to the *primum mobile*, for in this unity the spirit is moved from above by the power of God, both naturally and supernaturally—it must be by his power, since of ourselves we possess nothing, neither in nature nor above nature. When this divine motion is supernatural, it is the first and principal cause of all virtue. . . . This is the way in which God possesses the essential unity of our spirit as his kingdom and in which he works and flows forth with gifts into that unity which is the source of all our powers and into all these powers themselves.” (111) How are we made ready for this unity? By adorning ourselves with moral virtues

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- through interior exercises. This third coming is one in which “God’s grace flows into the higher powers like streams and thereby urges a person on and makes him [or her] ardent for the practice of all the virtues.” (112) Christ’s touch draws and invites our spirit to engage in interior exercises. “Those who, through the practice of virtue and interior exercises, have fathomed the depths. Of their being to its source, which is the door to eternal life, are able to experience the touch.” (114) From this stems an eternal hunger that can never be satisfied. From this time we never are separated from God. “In this storm of love two spirits struggle—the Spirit of God and our spirit. God, by means of the Holy Spirit, inclines himself toward 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. . . . This makes the two spirits incessantly strive after one

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- another in love. . . . This makes these loving spirits lose themselves in one another. . . . This flux and reflux make the spring of love overflow, so that God's touch and our striving in love become a single love. Here a person becomes so possessed by love that he must forget both himself and God and know nothing but love." (115)
- (4) **To meet him.** The meeting with Christ takes place in two ways—with intermediary and without intermediary. In the highest part of our spirit, we can meet God, who is present in everything and in whom everything is present, without intermediary. "This essential unity of our spirit with God does not subsist in itself but remains in God, flows forth from God, depends upon God, and turns back to God as to its eternal cause. Accordingly it has never been separated from God and never will be, for this unity exists within us in our bare nature, and if a creature were to be separated from

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- God in this respect it would fall into pure nothingness." (118) God's grace is absolutely essential with or without intermediary. (a) *With intermediary* we meet God in every good work through pure intention. Persons who become like God through purity of intention God will give the seven virtues of fear of the Lord, kindness, knowledge, fortitude, counsel, understanding, and wisdom. (b) *Without intermediary* we may meet God in three different modes: emptiness, active desire, and both resting and working in accord with righteousness. Some deviate from these modes in false emptiness, active self-seeking, and living contrary to righteousness. Ruusbroec summarized and refuted the errors of those "who are to be avoided as much as the enemy from hell." (141) Christ and the saints are our models in the interior life.

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- **The Contemplative Life** (Book 3). This is by far the briefest of the three books—only seven pages long. Ruusbroec hints at the reason: “Few persons can attain this divine contemplation because of their own incapacity and because of the hidden, mysterious nature of the light in which one contemplates.” (146) (1) **To see** God without intermediary one must do three things: (a) “be exteriorly well ordered, interiorly unhindered, and as empty of all his exterior works as if he were not even performing them”; (b) “interiorly cleave to God with devoted intention and love, just as if he [or she] were a burning, glowing fire which can never be extinguished”; and (c) “lose himself [or herself] in a state devoid of particular form or measure, a state of darkness in which all contemplatives blissfully lose their way and are never again able to find themselves in a creaturely

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- way.” (146-147) (2) **The coming of the bridegroom** “is a new birth and a new illumination which knows no interruption, for the ground out of which the resplendence shines forth and which is the resplendence itself is both living and fruitful.” (147) (3) **Going out** refers to our eternal being in God before our creation in time. “Since the almighty Father has perfectly comprehended himself in the ground of his fruitfulness, the Son, who is the Father’s eternal Word, goes forth as another Person within the Godhead. Through this eternal birth all creatures have gone forth eternally before their creation in time. . . . This eternal going forth and this eternal life which we eternally have and are in God apart from ourselves is a cause of our created being in time.” (149) God wishes us to attain our eternal image in the contemplative life. “All persons who have been raised above their creaturely state into the contemplative life are

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- one with this divine resplendence and are this resplendence itself. . . . It is in this way that contemplatives pursue the eternal image to which they have been created; they contemplate God and all things without distinction in a simple act of seeing in the divine resplendence.” (150) (4) **To meet him:** “This is the active meeting of the Father and the Son, in which we are lovingly embraced by means of the Holy Spirit in eternal love. . . . Now this active meeting and this loving embrace are in their ground blissful and devoid of particular form, for the fathomless, modeless being of God is so dark and so devoid of particular form that it encompasses within itself all the divine modes and the activity and properties of the Persons in the rich embrace of the essential Unity; it thereby produces a divine state of blissful enjoyment in this abyss of the ineffable.” (152)