

Paul MOMMAERS and Jan VAN BRAGT, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec*. New York: Crossroad, 1995. 302 pp. ISBN 0-8245-1455-6.

PAUL MOMMAERS, ONE OF the editors of Ruusbroec's collected works and a leading scholar of Hadewijch, here presents the Flemish mystic's teaching to a larger public. Jan Van Bragt adds intercalary chapters that comment on Ruusbroec's significance in an interreligious horizon. The resulting dialogue does for Ruusbroec what Otto, Suzuki, and Ueda Shizuteru did for Eckhart. It also consolidates the opening to Buddhism that has affected Catholic theology so deeply since Vatican II, opening corridors of mutually enriching communication between the study of Christian spirituality and the dialogue with Buddhism.

I had feared that Ruusbroec's critique of the "natural mystics" of his day was too recondite to serve as the subject of a Buddhist/Christian comparative study. In fact, however, this precisely defined topic prompts Van Bragt to discover analogous critiques within Buddhism of a mysticism deracinated from tradition, and to derive from this parallel some general insights into the place of mysticism within religion.

Ever since Luther denounced Pseudo-Dionysius as more a Platonist than a Christian (*magis Platonizans quam Christianizans*), the status of mysticism has been a matter of some controversy between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Both Mommaers and Van Bragt, in the spirit of Vatican II, want to integrate the mystical path within the structure of Christianity as a religion of revelation and faith, but they may underestimate the tension between Ruusbroec's late medieval world of thought and the post-Reformation sensitivity to biblical priorities. Consider Ruusbroec's definition of grace as "the effective intervention in one's spiritual life of divine forces that one becomes particularly aware of in contemplative prayer and in the mystical state" (p. 145). This belongs to the tradition of Origen and Augustine, for whom grace is spiritualized as a purely interior event, so that Scripture and the incarnation of the Word in Christ become external signs that can be left behind by those who have experienced the inward visitation (see GRESHAKE 1972). The resulting attitude to Scripture is patronizing: "images that religion provides for ordinary 'good

people’”; “images, however mediate, are helpful for knowing God” (p. 59). Similarly, the articles of the creed that speak of “God’s humanity” are for Ruusbroec “the lowest ones,” while the highest matter is “that He, according to His divinity, is incommensurable and incomprehensible, and inaccessible and unfathomable” (p. 148). There is a displacement of emphasis here from the biblical God, who comes to us in a concrete revelation of grace, to the transcendent goal of Platonic eros attained by an interior ascent. If the authors of the present work developed more fully their uneasy sense of this displacement it would not damage Ruusbroec, but would further enable a demystified retrieval of his witness.

To talk of prayer as a “sustained effort at making contact with God,” or to note that “the most selfless and concentrated practice one is capable of generates new sentiments and insights into the interior life but fails to produce the ‘presence’ of the Other,” is to speak the language of Neoplatonism (as in Augustine, *Confessions* VII 23). In the Christian dispensation one does not seek to make contact with God; that contact is already established when one hears the word of revelation in faith (as in *Confessions* VIII). Whether that hearing produces a contemplative dimension of presence is of secondary importance. Ruusbroec defended biblical faith against a “natural” mysticism that would override it, but his defence is couched in terms that are lacking in precise evangelical impact. Mommaers’s remark that faith and grace “belong to us all in the form of the common and normally functioning spiritual ability to say yes or no to the Christian message” (p. 219) also leaves me unhappy, for it suggests that faith is a low-level attainment rather than the trusting acceptance of a concrete word of gracious liberation. Van Bragt insists more strongly that “Christian mysticism sees itself as carried by an act of faith that is not part of the contemplative praxis” (p. 237), but even he seems to conceive of this act of faith as too much of an inward, spiritual event.

Mommaers works with the medieval synthesis of eros and agapē: “Human love is a single force, with no dichotomy for natural or supernatural...aims. Eros and agapē are one and there is no question of a miraculous mutation of one into the other”; he refers to M. C. D’Arcy’s “impressive and balanced treatment of the question of the two loves” (p. 116). There may be a lack of balance in the theses of Nygren, the Lutheran theologian whom D’Arcy refutes, but phenomenologically it is unsatisfactory to describe biblical agapē as that which “brings the original, innate force of desire to the realization of all its potential” (p. 117). One cannot bring into a systematic mapping of love the concept of agapē as an interior event of grace, a principle of *caritas*. This misses the concrete quality of God’s love toward humankind as declared in Scripture—a revealed event of covenantal communion, not primarily an inner principle of spiritual perfection. When Van Bragt treats the Johannine “God is love” as a metaphysical definition of God’s nature, with the implication that “the most basic character of being is intersubjectivity” (p. 79), one wonders again if this does justice to the specific outlines of the biblical situation.

Karl Rahner’s oft-quoted claim that Christianity must become mystical is misleading insofar as it distracts from the concrete contours of biblical faith. Even in Buddhism, as Van Bragt points out (p. 238), the focus on mystical

experience can cause one to miss the total economy of the Buddhist path; in Zen, for example, the basic concern is not mystical immediacy but the general cultivation of discriminating wisdom (see HORI). A secularized Zen aiming at self-enhancement through the production of peak experiences is exactly the kind of truncated mysticism Ruusbroec attacks (p. 247).

Ruusbroec's way of talking about nature and grace can be an obstacle to grasping the import of his writings, especially in relation to Buddhism. "To receive what is supernatural, people 'have to bring nature to the highest that nature is able to accomplish'" and thus discover "nature's failure in the face of God" (pp. 216–17). Although this could carry Semi-Pelagian implications that unaided human effort is capable of triggering the process of salvation—especially in view of claims that natural mystics "achieve, without the intervention of grace, a genuine experience of God" (p. 229)—Mommaers's wider conception of grace allows him to interpret these statements existentially, accepting that what Ruusbroec calls "natural" contemplation also relies on grace. The two styles of contemplation project "alternative descriptions of ultimate reality or the awareness of God" (p. 218).

Van Bragt in turn sees a consciousness of grace in the Buddhist's conviction that "enlightenment is certainly not the result of one's own efforts" (p. 234). But he finds the categories of nature and grace unhelpful for distinguishing between authentic and defective mysticism. The problem with Ruusbroec's natural mystics was that they artificially suspended their Christian faith. Within Hinduism and Buddhism one finds similar criticisms of "forms of contemplation that are considered to be truncated" (p. 235). Van Bragt, by proposing that Mommaers's original analogy between natural mysticism and Buddhism should be replaced with one between natural mysticism and truncated *forms* of Buddhism (e.g., Hinayāna as seen from the Mahāyāna point of view), appears to have prompted a conversion experience in his colleague, who now admits that Buddhism "takes sides with Ruusbroec against the limitation of natural mysticism" (p. 289), and that the realities of grace, the supernatural, and faith are unmistakably present in Buddhist tradition.

Both authors end with a certain dissatisfaction, a feeling that the riddles have not been fully clarified, much less solved. The main reason for this may be that certain of the categories governing the debate (e.g., immanence and transcendence, personal and impersonal God, Creator and creature) have reached the limits of their usefulness. For a breakthrough in interreligious thinking these categories must be historicized and deconstructed as Christianity opens itself to the critical impact of Buddhist epistemology and ontology at the level of its most basic self-understanding. Only slight beginnings have been made in this daunting task, but it is sure to be a major project of Christian thought in the next century. A ground-breaking contribution is John P. Keenan's study of Buddhist and Christian mysticism (regrettably not mentioned in the present work). Keenan's argument that "all theological models (even a Mahāyāna model) are valid only within their contextuality in terms of the particular conditions in virtue of which they arise" (KEENAN 1989, p. 225) could counter a certain tendency to lend undue stability to doctrinal categories.

Van Bragt dwells on the danger of absolutizing emptiness as the be-all and

end-all of Buddhist contemplation: “Buddhism does not stop there, it essentially goes a step further, by which it becomes much more dialectical, complex, alive, and geared to everyday reality” (p. 131). He claims that Buddhism usually “stops at emptiness as undifferentiated totality” (pp. 191–92) and that it does not go on to develop its own best insights to give bodhisattva compassion the same status as transcendent wisdom. He regards as “untenable” Buddhism’s exclusive emphasis on the cognitive and its exclusion of love at the highest spiritual level (p. 203). In Ruusbroec there is a comparable tension between the mystical peak of perfect undifferentiated unity and the aspiration to go beyond this unity to a loving communion of persons, but Ruusbroec holds both sides of his vision together even at the cost of apparent contradiction. Van Bragt offers a Hegelian resolution for the contradiction: “A unity *an sich* must ‘express’ itself, that is, create the other of itself, in order to find a higher form of unity, unity *für sich*” (p. 194). Such logic seems intrusive here; there is no substitute for letting the contemplative vision exhibit its own inner logic or want of it. Even the general contrast between Buddhist wisdom and a mysticism of love may be too massive and general to deal with the texture of the divergent styles of mysticism; again one suspects that new categories will have to be found.

Van Bragt contrasts Christian transcendence “upward” toward the single Creator with Buddhist transcendence “outward” to the whole of the dependently co-arising universe, and suggests that a neutral dependent co-arising is a poor substitute for a personal Creator (p. 80). However, if dependent co-arising “has become a functional replacement of the idea of God in Buddhism” (p. 74), it is only insofar as God is viewed as explaining the origin of the universe. Dependent co-arising has no direct relevance to the nature of God as such unless one drags in the idea of “the total relationality and mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) of the ‘Persons’ of the Trinity” (p. 76). That, however, is a highly speculative theologoumenon that needs to be deconstructed and put back in historical and phenomenological perspective before being presented in a dialogue with Buddhism. Surely the Buddhist analogue for God should be sought rather on the side of the unconditioned, *nirvāṇa*? KEENAN, who sees all concepts of God as culture-bound constructs prone to delusive substantialism, offers advice that might be helpful here: “Attend not to an absentee gardener, but to the garden itself in all its immediacy and empty transparency” (1989, p. 247); “The very arising of all things in interdependency is itself directly and immediately the presence of Abba” (1989, p. 244). This points to a reconciliation of Buddhist ontology with the Christian sense of God. As insight into *samsāra* yields a nirvanic vision of emptiness, so to grasp the creation as dependently co-arisen is to come into the presence of the infinite love sustaining it.

REFERENCES

GRESHAKE, Gisbert

1972 *Gnade als konkrete Freiheit: Eine Untersuchung zur Gnadenlehre des Pelagius*. Mainz, Grünewald.

HORI, Victor Sogen

n.d. To see a kōan: Insight and interpretation. Unpublished.

KEENAN, John P.

1989 *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press.

Joseph S. O'Leary
Sophia University