

BOOK REVIEWS

MYSTICISM BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec. Paul Mommaers & Jan Van Bragt. Crossroad, New York, pp. 302. ISBN 0 8245 1455 6 (cloth)

NO BRIEF REVIEW could do justice to this important, very demanding, yet eminently readable study on the 14th century Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec, 1298–1381, in relation to fundamental aspects of Mahayana spirituality, a book that is as challenging as it is profoundly moving and enriching.

Its authors are two Flemings, Jan Van Bragt, until recently director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya, where for many years he taught philosophy at Nanzan University. He is also the translator of Nishitani Keiji's epoch-making *Religion and Nothingness* (University of California Press, 1982). His co-author Paul Mommaers is a professor at Antwerp University, a specialist in medieval mysticism and in particular on the commanding figure of Jan van Ruusbroec.

Although less known internationally than other mystical writers who graced the 14th century—Tauler, Suso, Catherine of Sienna, Bridget of Sweden, Julian of Norwich and above all Meister Eckhart—Jan van Ruusbroec was known as “The Admirable.” Cuthbert Butler in his *Western Mysticism* states that “in all probability there is no greater contemplative and certainly no greater mystical writer.” Ruusbroec's masterpiece *The Spiritual Espousals* spread his fame throughout the Low Lands, Germany and France and after, in 1553, its superb translation from Flemish into Latin was published, it exerted considerable influence on the Spanish and French schools of mysticism and greatly affected French literature as is manifest in the works of Claudel, Valéry, Maeterlinck, Gide and Barthès. Thomas à Kempis' classic *The Imitation of Christ* is unthinkable without Ruusbroec's influence.

He was ordained at nineteen, served for the next twenty-six years as a chaplain of the Saint Gudule Cathedral in Brussels, until in 1343 he withdrew with two of his colleagues to the little “ashram” they founded in the forest South of Brussels and where he continued his contemplation until his death at eighty-eight. The body of his writings consists in responses to the needs of those to whom he had given spiritual guidance, but include his passionate denunciation of the unorthodox spiritual fashions of the period which he con-

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sidered decadent, and among which "natural mysticism" was his main target.

Apart from its aim to introduce Ruusbroec's mystical doctrines to the English-speaking public, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian* constitutes both an intra-religious and an inter-religious dialogue between its authors, both Christians, and between Ruusbroec's Christian mysticism and Buddhist contemplation, which is of particular significance in the context of the lively Christian-Buddhist dialogue that marks our time. Jan Van Bragt, after thirty-two years in Japan, has taken up the challenging paradoxes in Buddhist-Christian relationships, which he confesses he carried around with him as a koan: "How can such a natural affinity in religiosity coexist with such an incurable disjunction in doctrines?" It is fascinating to watch his wrestling with his koan, finally "becoming" it, in his encounter with 14th century love-mysticism of Ruusbroec the Buddhist path with which he became intimately familiar, and confronting Ruusbroec's pet hatred of "natural contemplation" which the latter went through great lengths to thrash mercilessly. It consisted in the heterodox claim by some of his Christian contemporaries of having experienced God without having sought the imperative aid of divine grace and the required leap of faith. At his milder moments Ruusbroec did not deny that "God wishes to save all and to lose none, and that God is a universal radiance and a universal Light which enlightens heaven and earth and each person according to his worthiness." But in a less loving mood his intolerance towards those contemplatives he considered heretical, made him fulminate that they "should rightly be burned at the stake, for in God's eyes they are damned and belong in the pit of hell, far beneath all devils." He does not feel more loving toward those "pagans even if they live in 'natural justice', and toward Jews who, even though they live according to God's commandments, are damned."

Apart from being a taint on the escutcheon of what is known as "love mysticism," it may be characteristic for an era as barbaric as our own, it may however be symptomatic of that chronic inquisitorial distemper which has marred Christianity throughout its history, antipodal as it is to its Founder's Spirit.

At other moments Ruusbroec is less judgemental and recognizes his adversary's efforts as being basically positive as constituting a "genuine" path to God. It is characteristic of the fairness of this book that these embarrassingly negative features of its protagonist are honestly faced.

Similarities, isomorphisms, contrasts between the qualities, attitudes and reasonings of Western "natural mysticism" and Eastern contemplation are evident throughout these three hundred pages. Professor Van Bragt modestly admits to write about Buddhism as an outsider, but one can not be but deeply impressed by his profound knowledge of, and respect for, Buddhism, his

extraordinary breadth of understanding of the essential features of both Christian mysticism and Buddhist spirituality, and of the role of doctrine in mysticism. He is fully aware of the impact of Eastern spiritual movements on contemporary Western religiosity and culture, and hence the book is likely to provoke vivid reactions from "those attracted, whether academically or existentially, to the borderland of Buddhism and Christianity." As a long-time inhabitant of this borderland I venture to focus, be it all too briefly, on a few points in this work, particularly stimulating to reflection. One of these is the human image as it emerges from Ruusbroec's writings in its juxtaposition with the Buddhist view of what is specifically human.

For Ruusbroec all creatures "hang," are suspended, in the unity of their being in God. Cut off from God they would at once fall into nothingness. The essence of being human for him is the irrevocable *fact* of the human spirit. In its essence we humans are, for Ruusbroec, far from isolated monads: we are bonded as an absolute unity of soul, spirit and essence to the Divine, the Other, in a ceaseless relatedness. Whatever this may mean, we are here much closer to contemporary musings about the I, the "deep," "true Self," than to the Cartesian "cogito" that is not only primordially anthropocentric but also embodies the logical error that is at the origin of those models of the human Self that are showing their hollowness so dramatically in our time. To place Ruusbroec's love mysticism in its historical context one must take into account the preoccupation of 12th century troubadours, poets, theologians with human love as a single powerful force, without any dichotomy between carnal and spiritual, regardless of its egocentric or altruistic aspects. Eros and agape are seen as one, there is no question of some miraculous mutation of the one into the other.

Van Bragt points out that the phenomenon of mysticism as it is found in extremely different religious and cultural contexts and conditions is one of the strongest indications of the unity of human nature, despite and beyond all cultural differentiation. The Buddhist human image is not isolated in itself, it is always placed in a cosmic context. In Buddhist religious speculation it amounts to the "explaining away" of things, even of Being itself, to unmask the falsity of the deluded experience of the ordinary person, and to deconstruct both its unity and its continuity. Buddhism, however, points to the accessibility and the human potential for complete exploration of the Structure of Reality, that Enlightenment which demands the radical deconstruction of the empirical ego's deluded consciousness. *Anatta* implies the total negation of subject, object and "soul."

Buddhism does not so much reflect on the "why," on the origin of the world and what sustains it, as it does on what we, and indeed all beings, ultimately are, and comes to the conclusion that it amounts to a profoundly

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experienced . . . Nothing. The Augustinian maxim "going inward, I am drawn upward," is juxtaposed with the Buddhist "going inward, I am drawn outward," that is: towards unity with all things in their delusional separateness, their impermanence. Both Christian and Buddhist contemplatives concur, however, on the need to deconstruct the empirical ego as an isolated substance, although Christianity still insists on the immortal soul in its relation to God, while Buddhism proclaims: I am nothing but the relatedness to all things.

And yet, there is something left akin to verticality in later Mahayana, even though this verticality is directed instead of upward, downward to the "Ground" of the Buddha Nature, the Cosmic Buddha present in each one of us, as our innermost Self. Mahayana's inwardness is focused on an awakening in which the cognitive, "gnostic" aspect has full priority over the conative aspect. In Christianity: the volitional, the sensual, the emotional, and above all, love have priority over the cognitive, while in Buddhist speculative perspective these are precisely what is to be eliminated by "right knowledge." Here the inter-personal is abolished by the erasure of the demarcation lines between all things and beings. Hence in Buddhist contemplation all this love-mysticism, all *bhakti* to a personal God, with the duality they imply, are at best granted usefulness as *upaya* for the unawakened mind.

Here we find ourselves indeed at the opposite pole of Ruusbroec's mysticism in its bitter conflict with what he called "natural contemplation." Often Buddhism is still seen—from without—as being more a philosophical system than a religion, and indeed in some of its manifestations, the "religious" aspects are obscured. This, however, may be only apparent, for in contrast with the sophisticated intellectuality of academic Buddhist literature, in the spirituality of the East-Asian *hoi polloi* it is the religious aspect that prevails.

I have been wondering whether the Ten Oxherding Pictures and what they stand for would be censured, by a Ruusbroec among our contemporaries, as being "natural mysticism." Are the ingredients of grace and faith really and cavalierly ignored here? I do not think so. The oldest known version of six or eight episodes were followed in the 11th century by Kakuan's ten scenes, a series in which the last two show indeed the transformed, awakened Self which, after the oxherd and his ox have "disappeared" in the eighth picture—that is: after having attained the peak of realization of Emptiness, the story is not finished, and the oxherd starts on his descent back into the world of forms as the Bodhisattva—mercy personified—who descends into the marketplace to guide those still erring in pain and delusion to their awakening.

Reflecting on this morality play of grace and faith I remember the story—I can only quote it from memory—in which the Master, Butsugen, rebukes his monks: "You fellows debating uninterruptedly your understanding of

Zen. . . . Why don't you see, why don't you realize that not only Zen, but literally every single thing is beyond understanding?"

Indeed, the self-centered consciousness lacks access to the Mystery. The negation of the self-nature of things once it is turned into dogma can only lead to further our reifying and dichotomizing tendencies.

Ruusbroec's fierce condemnation of a turning inward as a search for quietude, for "rest," as a mere sitting in immobility, denying the mind's built-in mobility, sends me back to Hui-neng, Zen's Sixth Patriarch's denunciation of the Northern School of Shen-hsiu who propagated sitting meditation as the observation of inner purity. "Should you find true immobility, there is immobility within activity," says Hui-neng, who also stresses that as far as Buddha Nature is concerned there is no other difference between an enlightened and an ignorant person than that the one realizes it, the other does not.

Hui-neng, Ruusbroec's senior by some five hundred years might also have wagged a finger at him: "If you find fault with others, you too are in the wrong," and "when neither love nor hatred disturb our mind, serenely we sleep."

It is a remarkable feast, this conversation at the end of the 20th century, uniting a fourteenth century Flemish mystic, two Flemish Christian savants and a borderland artist, somewhere in Japan. Still, I wish we could have been joined on the Buddhist side by Fa-t'sang whose *jiji muge hokkai* predated us by thirteen hundred years with Kegon's "unimpeded mutual interpenetration of all the phenomena in the universe," that macro-ecological awareness without which all the perennial Wisdom ever gathered by our species seems destined to perish without leaving a trace.

Mysticism Buddhist and Christian is an unconditional must.

FREDERICK FRANCK

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IN MARCH OF 1994 near Santa Fe, New Mexico, a symposium was held to discuss the question of whether or to what extent parts of the intellectual legacy of Japan from the early twentieth century were "implicated" in or actively supported the Japanese war effort. Sixteen scholars from Japan, the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Belgium participated. There were no par-