

**Mysticism Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec,  
by PAUL MOMMAERS, JAN VAN BRAGT**

**Reviewed by Roger Corless**

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MOMMAERS, PAUL, and VAN BRAGT, JAN. Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture. New York: Crossroad, 1995.

During his many years in Japan, Jan Van Bragt, the former director of the Nanzan institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya, has tried to solve the koan, "How can such a natural affinity in religiosity [between Buddhism and Christianity] result in such an incurable disjunction in doctrine?" (p. 3). This volume is an invitation to enter into that koan. It began as a series of seminars at Nanzan, and, although the style is impeccably literary, it retains something of the flavor of a conversation. Seven chapters on Ruusbroec by Paul Mommaers (professor of theology at the University of Antwerp and the University of Louvain) are "braided" p. 3) with six chapters on Buddhist spirituality.

Mommaers's contribution is focused and detailed. He has given us a major study of this important but (in the English-speaking world) much neglected Christian mystic. Van Bragt ranges more widely, concentrating on Japanese Zen but offering remarks on other forms of Buddhism, Buddhism as a whole, Hinduism, and even "Eastern" spirituality and mysticism (passim). This makes the "braiding" somewhat less neat than it might have been but opens the book up to a wider readership. The concern of both authors is similar, although it is more muted in Mommaers and more explicit in Van Bragt--they both speak explicitly as Christians sympathetic to Buddhism and curious about how Ruusbroec and Buddhism can illuminate each other. Van Bragt appears to have begun the seminars with the notion that this was possible: Mommaers admits that he came around to Van Bragt's view only after finishing the seminars. The discussion of mutuality centers on the definition of mysticism (chaps. 1-4) and the phenomenon of what Ruusbroec calls "natural mysticism" (chaps. 10-13).

The authors know well the literature on mysticism published in the West and in Japan, and they summarize it topically as it relates to Ruusbroec and Buddhism. It is at first taken for granted that Ruusbroec is a mystic, and it is then asked whether Buddhism is mystical. The objections of some Catholic and some Japanese Buddhist scholars, that Christianity is intrinsically mystical but that mysticism is alien to Buddhism, are considered, and the tables are turned: Van Bragt argues that mysticism is "the true factor of salvation [in Buddhism], while in Christianity salvation is a question of faith" (p. 42). By this, he does not mean that faith is absent in, or unimportant for, Buddhism--he devotes several pages to the discussion of faith in Buddhism as a whole and in Pure Land Buddhism in particular--but that the tendency to Oneness, which is regarded as a key element in what is called mysticism, is more native to Buddhism than to Christianity, with its insistence on a transcendent Other called God. Therefore, mysticism is easily accepted by Buddhism but has often been regarded with suspicion in Christianity.

Natural mysticism is treated in the four last chapters of the book,

which are a kind of contrapuntal dance. Ruusbroec accepts that the human can, by "turning inward," experience God and experience him truly, and on that score he writes in praise of natural mysticism. However, he sees, at the same time, clear and present dangers in natural mysticism, which, if not enlivened and elevated by grace, sinks into quietism and places the mystic in peril of hell. He writes with passion, having in mind what he regards as the dire heresies of the Brethren of the Free Spirit, whose laissez-faire piety is redolent of present-day New Age spiritualities. (A reminder, if any were needed, never to call anything new or modern, since indeed Ruusbroec himself is recognized as the leader of the *Devotio Moderna*!) This conflict between a quietist spirituality, identified as bogus mysticism, and true mysticism, characterized as activity-in-quiescence, is found to have a close parallel in Buddhism, particularly in the Sudden and Gradual controversy, which has produced a tension in Mahayana for much of its history, and in the disputes in Japan between quiet sitting and "real" zazen. Van Bragt concludes by saying that the discussion of natural mysticism in Ruusbroec and Buddhism "provides a final nudge in the direction of a positive answer" as to whether "Ruusbroec's mysticism and Buddhist contemplation can really illuminate one another" (p. 286). Chapters 5-9 discuss the nature of the human in Ruusbroec and Buddhism. The sophisticated and nuanced argument can be summarized by a quote from Ruusbroec: "In each new now, God is born in us" (p. 173). Ruusbroec's Christian doctrine of soul is surprisingly resonant with Buddhist anatman.