



Contemplation and “Non-doing” in the Christian Tradition: The Case of John of Ruusbroec

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ABSTRACT A recurrent theme in many forms of contemplative practice is the need to come to a state of outward solitude (i.e., being without distractions); this provides a framework for contemplation, which ultimately can give way to a suspension of all efforts, opening up a state of inner letting-be. This contribution explores these elements in the Christian tradition following the Biblical typology of Martha and Mary (Lk 10:38–42) with some leading authors (Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, John Cassian and Gregory the Great). A specific aspect of the Christian interpretation is that the state of ‘non-doing’ is essentially relational. This relational dimension, in which contemplation and the state of ‘letting-be’ are understood as a response to the initiative of the divine Other who is ‘the origin’ (Lat. *principium*), provides John of Ruusbroec with the basis to explain how action and non-doing (i.e., contemplation) can coalesce perfectly.

KEYWORDS Christian contemplation, John of Ruusbroec, action and non-doing

Introduction

It has been observed that in various religions, traditions of contemplative practice emphasize the need to purify everything that leads towards outer and inner forms of distraction. Consequently, this leads the human person to a state of (outward) solitude, which can offer a framework for actual contemplation. This can ultimately give way to a suspension of all efforts and a state of inner letting-be. In general, we might say that the above description is very similar to a classic sketch of the dynamics in the Christian tradition of *via purgativa* (purifying the various forms of distractions), *via illuminativa* (i.e., contemplation) and the *via unitiva* (the state of letting-be, i.e. the surrender to God). This three-step structure—which in the Christian tradition goes back to the Alexandrian author Origen (185–253), e.g., in the prologue of his commentary on the *Song of Songs* (Arnou 1953, 1769–70)—has undoubtedly had an impact, even in the concrete design of Christian monasticism and the eremitical tradition.

In this contribution, however, I would like to explore a further aspect. The Christian mys- [2]

tical tradition has extensive reflections on the aspects of ‘action’ and ‘contemplation.’ This is often understood as though contemplation were a moment chronologically distinct from action. In the writings of the late medieval author John of Ruusbroec (1293–1381 CE), we see a different model. He develops the idea (and ideal) that contemplation (as non-doing) is present *in* action. The reality of the life of the spiritual person is thus, in his view, a complex reality that ‘simultaneously’ contains activities and non-doing. This view had an important impact on the development of the Christian reflection on non-doing in later centuries.

Biblical Typology Related to Contemplation: Martha (Activity) and Mary (Non-doing)

As mentioned, the contemplative dimension is present in Christian reflection from the beginning. Several passages in the Bible have been used to clarify this point. The most popular is probably the brief history related in the Gospel of Luke 10:38–42: [3]

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” [4]

Allusions and references to this passage are prominent in Christian literature, as well as in Christian iconography, throughout the ages (see Solignac and Donnat 1980). The symbolism is obvious: while Martha is the one who works and is active, Mary represents the one who is not active, but listens and receives. In the story, the problem of non-doing is also explicitly addressed because Martha asks Jesus to redress this—in her view incorrect—situation. Wouldn’t it be better if Mary were also to be active? The answer that Jesus gives is crucial for the topic in Christian culture. He does not reject non-doing; on the contrary, He approves of it. [5]

Consequently, this theme became prominent in Christian reflection. The aspect of non-doing and contemplation is so abundantly present in Christian culture that it is impossible to give even a brief overview in the short space of the present article—for example, its treatment in the multi-authored article in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* covers more than five hundred columns (Arnou 1953, 1643–2193). I will simply point out some important characteristics of the combination of action and non-doing that, in my view, seem useful for understanding the Christian approaches. [6]

No Uniform Way to Understand the Combination of Action and Contemplation

A first and important element to highlight is that the Christian tradition has no uniform way of understanding the conjunction of contemplation and action (Castellano 2003). Different approaches are in evidence from the early centuries of Christian thought. Some examples may serve to illustrate this. [7]

One of the earliest Christian theologians, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215 CE) (Mees 1992), refers to this issue, but without really problematizing it. He exhorts the Christian, like Martha’s sister, to cling to Christ as ‘the one necessity,’ pointing out that this corresponds to the advice that Christ, on another occasion, gave to a rich man: [8]

Such also was what the Lord said to Martha, who was occupied with many things, and distracted and troubled with serving; while she blamed her sister, because, leaving serving, she set herself at His feet, devoting her time to learning: “Thou art troubled about many things, but Mary hath chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” So also He bade him [i.e., the rich man, see Mc 10, 17–22] leave his busy life, and cleave to One and adhere to the grace of Him who offered everlasting life.¹ [*Quis dives salvetur* 10] [9]

So the important point for Clement is that activity is insufficient; there is another dimension to which the Christian must also attend, namely the contemplative one. It is clear that in this contemplative dimension Clement emphasizes the relational aspect of Mary’s attitude. Thus, the issue is not simply to leave the multiplicity of the mind’s distraction as such, but primarily to cling to the One—i.e., to be fundamentally open to the Other and receptive; leaving the multiplicity of the inner dispersion is a correlate thereof and a consequence. It follows that for Clement this dimension is concerned more with relational fact than spiritual ‘methodology.’ [10]

In the same line, Bishop Ambrose of Milan (339–397) (Mara 1992), in his commentary on the relevant passage of Luke, simply indicates the importance of the contemplative dimension, urging his listeners to have the same openness, attention, and receptivity as Mary had to the Word of God embodied in the person of Jesus Christ: [11]

But there is not just one way to be virtuous. It is then shown, by the example of Martha and Mary, in the works of one, active devotion, in the other the religious attention of the soul to the word of God; if it conforms to faith, it passes before the works themselves, as it is written: “Mary has chosen the best part, which will not be taken from her.” Let us study, then, too, in possessing what no one can take away from us, by listening not to distracted, but attentive [...]. Be, like Mary, animated by the desire for wisdom: this is a greater, more perfect work. May the care of the ministry not prevent the knowledge of the heavenly word. Do not rebuke and do not judge idle those whom you will see occupied with wisdom [...]. Yet no one reproaches Martha for her good offices; but Mary has the preference, for having chosen a better part. [...] For the body of the Church is one, if the members are diverse; they need each other.² (*Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, VII, 85–86) [12]

Another example of early Christian reflection on this theme can be found in Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354–430) (Trapè 1992), who was extremely influential as a thinker of the [13]

1 Translation by William Wilson: <http://www.logoslibrary.org/clement/rich/10.html> (accessed January 20, 2023). Greek original: ... ὁποῖόν τι καὶ πρὸς τὴν Μάρθαν εἶπεν ὁ σωτὴρ ἀσχολουμένην περὶ πολλὰ καὶ περιελκομένην καὶ ταρασσομένην διακονικῶς, τὴν δὲ ἀδελφὴν αἰτιωμένην ὅτι τὸ ὑπερετεῖν ἀπολιπούσα τοῖς ποσὶν αὐτοῦ παρακάθηται μαθητικὴν ἄγουσα σχολὴν · “σὺ περὶ πολλὰ τάρασση· Μαρία δὲ τὴν ἀγαθὴν μερίδα ἐξελέξατο, καὶ οὐκ ἀφαιρεθήσεται αὐτῆς.” οὕτως καὶ τοῦτον ἐκέλευε τῆς πολυπραγμοσύνης ἀφέμενον ἐνὶ προστετηκέναι καὶ προσκαθέζεσθαι, τῇ χάριτι τοῦ ζωὴν αἰώνιον προστιθέντος (Clemens Alexandrinus 1970, 166).

2 Translation from <http://latinhymns.blogspot.com/2020/07/st-ambrose-luke-x-38-42-mary-and-martha.html> (July 28, 2020). Original: *Non una est forma virtutis. Subicitur Marthae exemplo et Mariae alterius operibus actiosa devotion, alterius religiosa mentis intentio dei verbo, quae si cum fide congruat, etiam ipsa*

following centuries. His interpretation of the theme in these texts is somewhat different from what we have read in Clement and Ambrose, and it can be summed up with two fundamental insights.

First, Jesus' statement should not be understood as indicating that activity is less important than contemplation or non-doing. On the contrary, activity includes the works of charity, the care for one's neighbor, which is indispensable to the Christian life. So we see here that Augustine corrects a possible misunderstanding, namely that the Christian would regard activity as unimportant on the basis of Jesus' statement about non-doing or contemplation. [14]

Second, in order to clarify the above, Augustine says that in the present life, works of charity are of crucial importance to the Christian. These activities can only be dispensed with in the eschatological future, in eternal life. Only then does actual non-doing come into play. Augustine argues this as follows: [15]

Service is needed by those who wish to restore their tissues. Why is this? Because people get hungry, because they get thirsty. Distress calls for compassion. You break your bread to the hungry, because you have found them hungry. Abolish hunger, whom will you break your bread to? Abolish travelling; to whom will you offer hospitality? Abolish nakedness; for whom will you find clothes? Let sickness be no more; whom will you visit? No more captivity; whom will you redeem? No more quarreling; whom will you reconcile? No more death; whom will you bury? In that age, that world to come none of those evils will exist, and therefore none of these services.³ (*Sermo* 104, II, 3) [16]

In short, in the opinion of Augustine, the *present* is active (Martha), and non-doing (Mary) is situated in the *future* (see Bruning 2001). [17]

This view is also found in the Christian monastic tradition. A good example of this is found in the work of the important author John Cassian (ca. 360–433) (Bordonali 1992), who passed on much of the spirituality of the Syrian and Egyptian monks to the Latin West. In his representation, the contemplative dimension is the completion of the active. This has been of great importance for the evolution of monastic life in Christianity. After all, monastic life as 'contemplative life' here on earth is, in this perspective, regarded as a prefiguration and foreshadowing of future completion. [18]

John Cassian elaborates on this in his *Collationes*. The work is a collection of conversations he had with monks from the Egyptian desert. The extent to which these are literary constructions is not entirely clear, but that is of no importance to our subject. The subject is dealt with in the first conversation with Abbot Moses, who Cassian says describes the situation as follows: [19]

We have an excellent illustration of this state of mind and condition in the gospel [20]

operibus antefertur iuxta quod scriptum est: "Maria optimam partem sibi legeit, quae non auferetur illi." Studiamus igitur et nos ahbere quod nemo nobis possit auferre, non ut perfunctoria, sed diligens audientia deferatur [...] Agat te sicut Mariam desiderium sapientiae, hoc enim maius, hoc perfectius opus, nec ministerii cura cognitionem verbi caelestis auertat nec arguas eos et otiosos iudices, quos videas studere sapientiae [...]. Nec Martha tamen in bono ministerio reprehenditur, sed Maria, quod meliorem partem sibi elegerit, antefertur. [...] Unum enim corpus ecclesiae, etsi diversa membra; alterum altero eget (Milan 1958, 36–37).

3 Translated in Hill (1992) (82). Latin Original: *Necessarium est ministerium corpora refecturis. Quare hoc? Quia esuritur, quia sititur. Misericordia miseris necessaria est. Frangis panem esurienti, quia invenisti esurientem: tolle famem, cui frangis panem? Tolle peregrinationem, cui exhibes hospitalitatem? Tolle nuditatem, cui praeparas vestem? Non sit aegritudo, quem visitas? Non sit captivitas, quem redimis? Non sit rixa, quem concordas? Non sit mors, quem sepelis? In illo saeculo futuro non erunt ista mala, nec ergo ista ministeria (Augustinus 1841, 617).*

in the case of Martha and Mary: for when Martha was performing a service that was certainly a sacred one, since she was ministering to the Lord and His disciples, and Mary being intent only on spiritual instruction was clinging close to the feet of Jesus which she kissed and anointed with the ointment of a good confession, she is shown by the Lord to have chosen the better part, and one which should not be taken away from her: for when Martha was toiling with pious care, and was cumbered about her service, seeing that of herself alone she was insufficient for such service, she asks for the help of her sister from the Lord, saying: “Do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone: bid her therefore that she help me”— certainly it was to no unworthy work, but to a praiseworthy service that she summoned her: and yet what does she hear from the Lord? “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things: but few things are needful, or only one. Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”⁴ (*Conlatio abbatis Moysi prima*, VIII)

Firstly, it is noticeable that abbot Moses (in the representation of John Cassian) also gives a very positive interpretation to the active life symbolized by Martha. Her question to Jesus is obviously justified, he suggests. Therefore, the statement Jesus makes in response comes as a surprise. To understand the latter properly, the abbot gives a specific interpretation: [21]

You see then that the Lord makes the chief good consist in *theoria*; i.e. in divine contemplation: whence we see that all other virtues should be put in the second place, even though we admit that they are necessary, and useful, and excellent, because they are all performed for the sake of this one thing. For when the Lord says: You are careful and troubled about many things, but few things are needful or only one, He makes the chief good consist not in practical work, however praiseworthy and rich in fruits it may be, but in contemplation of Him, which indeed is simple and but one; declaring that few things are needful for perfect bliss [...]. Mary therefore chose the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.⁵ (*Conlatio abbatis Moysi prima*, VIII) [22]

Even though the active life is good and useful, the abbot insists that the highest good consists in contemplation, namely the contemplation of God as the One, since this implies ultimate [23]

4 Translation from <https://ccel.org/ccel/cassian/conferences/conferences.ii.ii.viii.html> (accessed January 20, 2023). Latin original: *Huius mentis uel actus figura etiam euangelio per Martham et Mariam pulcherrime designatur. Cum enim Martha sancto utique ministerio deseruiret, utpote quae ipsi domino eiusque discipulis ministrabat, et Maria spiritali tantummodo intenta doctrinae Iesu pedibus inhaereret, quos osculans bonae confessionis liniebat unguento, praefertur tamen a domino, quod et meliorem elegerit partem et eam quae ab ea non possit auferri. Nam cum laboratet Martha pia sollicitudine ac dispensatione distensa, solam se uidens ad tantum ministerium non posse sufficere adiutorium sororis a domino postulat dicens: “non tibi sedet quia soror mea reliquit me solam ministrare? Dic ergo ei ut me adiuuet.” Utique non ad uile opus, sed ad laudabile eam ministerium prouocabat. Et tamen quid audit a domino? “Martha, Martha, sollicita es et turbaris erga plurima; paucis uero opus est aut etiam uno. Maria bonam partem elegit, quae non auferretur ab ea”* (Pichery 1955, 86).

5 Translation from <https://ccel.org/ccel/cassian/conferences/conferences.ii.ii.viii.html> (accessed January 20, 2023). Latin Original: *Uidetis ergo principale bonum in theoria sola, id est in contemplatione divina dominum posuisse. Unde ceteras uirtutes, licet necessarias et utiles bonasque pronuntiemus, secundo tamen gradu censendas esse decernimus, quia uniuersae huius unius patrantur obtentu. Dicens enim dominus: “sollicita es et turbaris erga plurima; paucis uero opus est aut etiam uno,” summum bonum non in actuali quamuis laudabili opere et in multis fructibus abundantanti, sed in sua contemplatione quae uere simplex et una est collocauit, paucis opus esse pronuntians ad perfectam beatitudinem [...]. “Maria bonam partem elegit, quae non auferretur ab ea”* (Pichery 1955, 86).

happiness. And he concludes with the consideration that the contemplative has enduring significance, while the active—however good and useful—is not permanent:

And this must be more carefully considered. For when He says that Mary chose the good part, although He says nothing of Martha, and certainly does not appear to blame her, yet in praising the one, He implies that the other is inferior. Again when He says “which shall not be taken away from her,” He shows that from the other her portion can be taken away (for a bodily ministry cannot last forever with a man), but teaches that this one’s desire can never have an end.⁶ (*Conlatio abbatis Moysi prima*, VIII) [24]

For a final example of the variety of interpretations of this theme of ‘doing’ and ‘non-doing’ using the biblical example of Martha and Mary, we can look to Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) (Recchia 1992). In line with earlier authors already considered, he defines the active life as concrete care for one’s neighbor, in the broadest sense of the word: giving bread to the hungry, teaching the ignorant, setting the lost on the right path, caring for the sick, etc. He understands non-doing (i.e., the contemplative dimension) as: [25]

keeping with all his soul the love of God and of neighbor, but also, leaving the external action, to rest, to be attached to the only desire of his Creator, so that all desire to act ceases, and that, all concern rejected, the heart flames, impatient to see the face of the One who made it.⁷ (*Homiliae in Hiezechihelam prophetam liber II, Homilia 2*, 8) [26]

Martha and Mary are a symbol of this, he continues. The relational dimension of the contemplative is strikingly explicit in his description. In line with the earlier authors, he is convinced that Jesus does not reject the active life, but suggests the inactive, contemplative life as ‘better.’ [27]

Why is Mary’s share better? The following word explains it: “which shall not be taken from her.” Active life, in fact, ends with the body. Who could give bread to a hungry man in the Eternal Fatherland, where no one goes hungry?⁸ (*Homiliae in Hiezechihelam prophetam liber II, Homilia 2*, 8) [28]

We recognize the thought of Augustine here. However, for Gregory this does not mean that contemplative non-doing can only be situated in the eschatological future (as Augustine affirmed). On the contrary, the contemplative begins here in the present life, time, and space: [29]

The active life is therefore taken away with the present world; contemplative life [30]

6 Translation from <https://ccel.org/ccel/cassian/conferences/conferences.ii.ii.viii.html> (accessed January 20, 2023). Latin original: *Et hoc dilligentius intuendum est. Nam cum dicit “Maria bonam partem elegit,” licet taceat de Martha et nequaquam eam uituperare uideatur, illam tamens laudans hanc inferiorem pronuntiat. Rursum cum dicit “quae non auferetur ab ea,” ostendit quod ab hac sua portio possit auferri (nec enim ministerium corporale cum homine poterit iugiter permanere), illius uero studium nullo prorsus aeuo docet posse finiri* (Pichery 1955, 87).

7 Translated by the author. Latin original: *Contemplatiua uero uita est caritatem quidem Dei proximi tota mente retinere, sed ab exterior actione quiescere, soli desiderio Conditoris inhaerere, ut nil iam agere libeat, sed, calcatis curis omnibus, ad uidendam faciem sui Creatoris animus inardescat* (Grégoire le Grand 1990, 2:106).

8 Translated by the author. Latin original: *Quare autem pars Mariae sit optima, subinfertur cum dicitur “quae non auferetur ab ea.” Actiua etenim uita cum corpore deficit. Quis enim in aeterna patria panem esurienti porrigat, ubi nemo esurit?* (Grégoire le Grand 1990, 2:108).

begins here below, to be perfected in the heavenly homeland, for the fire of love begins to take hold here below, but when we see the One we love, it will ignite more, this fire! The contemplative life is therefore not taken away, because when the light is subtracted from the present world, it is perfected.⁹ (*Homiliae in Hiezechihelam prophetam liber II, Homilia 2, 8*)

This point, namely that the active and the inactive are two aspects that can exist simultaneously—even though they are not identical—is important for our consideration. This is precisely what the medieval author John of Ruusbroec will later analyse in detail, as we shall discuss below. [31]

Before doing so, we need to highlight two more aspects in Gregory the Great's presentation. After all, shortly after the connection with the story of Martha and Mary, he makes another biblical connection, namely with the two wives of the patriarch Jacob, Lia and Rachel (Gen. 29:16–17). Lia is—through the meaning of her name (according to Jerome's *Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum*, Hieronymus 1959, 68)—understood as 'laborious' (Lat. *laboriosa*) and thus as the active life, while the second is understood as contemplation, namely contemplation of the origin of everything (Lat. *principium*) (Hieronymus 1959, 70). [32]

Once more, we see here the relational dimension already noted in the work of earlier authors, and made explicit by Gregory. Indeed, Gregory connects it with the statement of Jesus in the Gospel of John: "*ego sum principium, propter quod et loquor vobis*" ("I am the origin, and therefore I speak to you," Jn 8, 25 Vulg.). The non-doing of the human person corresponds to the activity of the divine Other, who is the origin of everything and who actively addresses the human person. The human person is open to the activity of the Other, 'hears' and receives it. [33]

Finally, Gregory discusses the inherent order of the active and the inactive: [34]

The normal order is to move from the active life to the contemplative, but it should be known that there is often great benefit in moving from the contemplative life to the active life; the warm soul, thanks to contemplation, will live the active life more perfectly.¹⁰ (*Homiliae in Hiezechihelam prophetam liber II, Homilia 2, 8*) [35]

In line with this conviction, the ideal is developed, in the following centuries of Christian reflection, of the person who is 'ambidextrous'—whose left hand is as handy as his right—that is, the one in whom the active dimension and the contemplative dimension are equally well developed, and who feels at home in both. We find a striking description of this in the famous *Epistola Aurea* of William of Saint-Thierry (1075–1148) (Verdeyen 1989, i–lxiv). [36]

Meanwhile, discover the people who far surpass you in courage and admire their fame. Those who, like Ehud of old, that famous judge in Israel who was equally dexterous and powerful on the left and on the right (Iud. 3:15), know how to use their left as dexterously as their right. As long as they are allowed to, they desire to remain within (Lat. *intus*) and to devote their time with great devotion to the [37]

9 Translated by the author. Latin original: *Cum praesenti ergo saeculo uita aufertur actiua, contemplatiua autem hic incititur, ut in caelesti patria perficiatur, quia amoris ignis qui hic ardere inchoat, cum ipsum quem amat uiderit, in amore ipsius amplius ignescet. Contemplatiua ergo uita minime aufertur, quia subtracta praesentis saeculi luce perficitur* (Grégoire le Grand 1990, 2:108–10).

10 Translated by the author. Latin original: *Sed sciendum est quia sicut bonus ordo uiuendi est ut ab actiua in contemplatiuam tendatur, ita plerumque utiliter a contemplatiua animus ad actiuam reflectitur, ut per hoc quod contemplatiua mentem accederit, perfectius actiua teneatur* (Grégoire le Grand 1990, 2:112).

love of the truth. But when necessity calls them or their office asks, they rush out (Lat. *foris*) promptly to put the truth of their love into action.¹¹ (*Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei*, 18)

The ideal of an ‘ambidextrous’ life has also inspired the concrete forms of life of Canons Regular, such as those of Prémontré or those of Saint-Victor, who live the *vita mixta*, that is, a combination of contemplative and active life (Castellano 2003). [38]

Thinking Action and Contemplation Together

This brings us to reflect on how action and non-doing can go together. Some later authors have discussed this, but Origen had already laid the foundation; he indicated that one cannot exist without the other: [39]

We can assume with certainty that Martha symbolizes action, Mary contemplation. The mystery of charity is ‘taken away’ from active life if teaching and moral exhortation [= action] are not aimed at contemplation: for action and contemplation do not exist without each other.¹² (*Homilies on Luke, Greek Fragment 72*) [40]

Something similar can be seen in connection to a passage in the influential *Regula Pastoralis* by Pope Gregory the Great. In chapter II, 5 on the ‘shepherd’ (Lat. *pastor*), he writes that the *pastor* must be inspired by singular compassion for his neighbour and must also be contemplative. He then refers to Moses as an ideal example: [41]

Therefore, Moses often enters and exits the tabernacle: within he is raptured in contemplation and outside, the needs of the weak allow him no rest. Within he reflects on the secrets of God, outside he bears the burden of physical concerns.¹³ (*Regula Pastoralis* II, 5) [42]

If we read this reference to Moses on a first, literal level, the combination is simple: Moses is sometimes inside (Lat. *intus*) the sanctuary, while at other times he is outside (Lat. *foris*). The former refers to contemplation; the latter to action. The coincidence of the two simply means that the same person experiences both dimensions, though not simultaneously. When we read this passage allegorically, however, and the ‘tabernacle’ (Lat. *tabernaculum*) is understood as the sanctuary ‘of’ the soul, or ‘in’ the soul, the perspective changes. Then, *foris* and *intus* are no longer indications of a change of place, but an inner change ‘in’ the person. [43]

John of Ruusbroec (1293–1381) has elaborated upon this in great detail (Arblaster and Faesen 2014). Although this is a central point in his oeuvre, it has rarely been studied as such (Swart 2014). Rather, it is usually noted in passing, as exemplified in Paul Mommaers’ introduction to the critical edition of Ruusbroec’s main work *Die geestelike brulocht* [The Spiritual Espousals]: [44]

11 Translated by the author. Latin original: *Longe supra uos uirtutem eorum suspicientes, et gloriam admirantes, qui ambidextri fortissimi, sicut Aoth ille iudex Israel, qui utraque manu utebatur pro dextera, quamdiu licet deuotissime intus uacare amant caritati contemplandae ueritatis, et cum necessitas uocat, vel officium trahit, promptissime se foras mutant pro ueritate adimplendae caritatis* (Guilelmus a Sancto Theoderico 2003, 231).

12 Translated by the author. Greek original: Εικότως γούν ἐκλάβοις Μάρθαν μὲν εἰς τὴν πράξιν, Μαρίαν δὲ εἰς τὴν θεωρίαν· συμπεριαιρεῖται γὰρ τῷ πρακτικῷ τὸ τῆς ἀγάπης μυστήριον, εἰ μὴ πρὸς τὸ θεωρεῖν ἔλται τις τὸ διδάσκειν καὶ προτρέπειν ἐπὶ πράξιν· οὔτε γὰρ πράξις οὔτε θεωρία ἄνευ θατέρου (Origen 1962, 520–22).

13 Translated by the author. Latin original: *Hinc Moyses crebro tabernaculum intrat et exit; et qui intus in contemplationem rapitur, foris infirmantium negotiis urgetur. Intus Dei arcana considerat, foris onera carnalium portat* (Grégoire le Grand 1992, 198).

Ruusbroec contends that two such contrary interior states as ‘activity’ and ‘enjoyment’ can be experienced together by the same person at the same time. Not only they do not hinder each other, the one produces the other. This is an extremely paradoxical experience, which constitutes the high point [of the unitive experience of the human person with God]. (1988, 41) [45]

In fact, the term ‘activity’ has already taken on a broader meaning. It is no longer just about concrete care for one’s neighbor, but also about all kinds of mental activity, such as intellectual religious exercises. Non-doing—in Ruusbroec’s terminology ‘enjoyment’—therefore also concerns this mental or intellectual dimension. [46]

To understand Ruusbroec’s position in this regard, we must see how he understands the inner ‘structure’ of the human person. [47]

We find a triple unity in all people naturally, and in good people also supernaturally. The first and the highest unity is in God; for all creatures hang in this unity with their being, life and subsistence; and if they should be cut off in this way from God, they would fall into nothingness and be annihilated. This unity is in us essentially by nature, whether we are good or evil, and it renders us neither holy nor blessed without our effort. We possess this unity in ourselves, and in fact, above ourselves, as a principle and support of our being and our life. A second union, or unity, is also in us by nature, that is, the unity of the higher faculties [memory, intellect and will], where they take their natural origin as to their activity: in the unity of the spirit or of the mind. This is the same unity which is hanging in God, but in the latter instance we understand it as active, and in the former as essential. Nevertheless, the spirit is totally within each unity, according to the entirety of its substance. We possess this unity in ourselves, above sensory perception, and from it come memory and intellect and will and every faculty of spiritual activity. [...] The third unity which is in us by nature is the domain of the bodily faculties in the unity of the heart, the beginning and origin of bodily life. The soul possesses this unity in the body and in the natural vigor of the heart; and from it flow all bodily activity and the five senses. [...] And this is natural in all mankind.¹⁴ (*Die geestelike brulocht*, b41–b68) [48]

For our subject, the first and second ‘unity’ are the most important. This concerns the same ‘unity’ which Ruusbroec distinguishes as having two aspects. Indeed, this unity is on the one hand the basic principle of all inner and outer activities, but on the other, it is also the [49]

14 Translated by Helen Rolfson in Ruusbroec (1988). Middle Dutch original: *Nu merket met ernste: drierhande eenicheit vintmen in allen menschen natuerlijcke, ende daer toe overnatuerlijcke in goeden menschen. Die eerste ende die hoogste eenicheit es in gode, want alle creatueren hanghen in deser eenicheit met wesene, met levende ende met onthoude; ende scieden si in deser wijs van gode, si vielen in niet ende worden te niete. Dese eenicheit es weselijc in ons van natueren, weder wij sijn goet ochte quaet, ende si en maect ons sonder ons toedoen noch heylich noch salich. Dese eenicheit besitten wi in ons selven ende doch boven ons, als een beghin ende een onthout ons wesens ende ons levens. Eene andere eninghe ochte eenicheit es oec in ons van natueren, dat es eenicheit der overster crachten, daer si haren natuerlijcken oerspronc nemen werkelijcker wijs: in eenicheit dies gheests ochte der ghedachten. Dit es die selve eenicheit die in gode hanghet, maer men neemse hier werkelijcke ende daer weselijcke; nochtans es die gheest in elcke eenicheit gheheel, na alheit sire substancien. Dese eenicheit besitten wij in ons selven boven senlijcheit; ende hier ute comt memorie ende verstantnisse ende wille, ende alle die macht gheestelijcker werke. [...] Die derde eenicheit die in ons is van natueren, dat is eyghendoem der lijflijcker crachte in eenicheit des herten, beghin ende oerspronc des lijflijcs levens. Dese eenicheit besit die ziele inden live ende inde levendicheit dies herten; ende hier ute vloeyen alle lijflijcke werke ende die .v. zinnen. [...] Ende dit es natuerlijcke in allen menschen* (Ruusbroec 1988, 286–88).

ontological principle of human existence, which constantly has its origin in the creative God. In other words, the same point (namely the fact that ‘I exist’) is at once the principle of activity and complete passivity. The human person is a self-acting, autonomous being, capable of action only because this person really exists—and existence is received continuously, without any effort or activity. This means that ‘in’ every activity of the human person there is an aspect of non-doing, namely the fact that the human person as a creature is continuously created by God and receives existence.

From this, it may become clear how action and contemplation relate, and how it is possible for both to be present simultaneously. Contemplation concerns the human person’s awareness of God as a creative origin. The interior of the human person is like a sanctuary in which God (the creative metaphysical origin, the *principium*) is permanently present, even though a human person is not experientially aware of it. The human person can be active *foris*, at the level of the outer or inner faculties, and the human person can be inactive, at the level of the deepest ‘unity,’ *intus*, God’s creative contact with His creature. This contemplative dimension (i.e., when the human person becomes aware of it) can therefore perfectly coexist with human actions, since the autonomy of the acting person in no way precludes that this person is continuously created by God. [50]

How Does Ruusbroec Interpret the Combination of Action and Contemplation?

The entire oeuvre of Ruusbroec can be seen as an exploration and interpretation of the contemplative dimension—as it is present ‘in’ action (Faesen 2020). I take one passage as an example: [51]

And for this reason we must lay the foundations of our life in an unfathomable abyss and so we shall be able to sink into love forever and sink away from ourselves in those unfathomable depths, and with the same love we shall raise and transcend ourselves onto those incomprehensible heights and in that love we shall wander without manner and it shall lead us and lose us in the measureless width of God’s love. In it we shall flow, and flow beyond ourselves in that unknown luxury that is the wealth and goodness of God and in it we shall melt and be melted down, we shall whirl and be whirled away in the glory of God forever. Look, in all these likenesses I show his own being and his own practice to a contemplative person. But no one else will be able to understand this, since no one can teach others the contemplative life.¹⁵ (*Vanden blinckenden steen*, 125–136) [52]

We can highlight some elements from this short, poetic description that may be relevant to our subject. [53]

Ruusbroec uses metaphors to describe the experience to a contemplative. His purpose is not to provide instructions that can bring the reader to contemplation. His only concern is a [54]

15 Translated by André Lefevere in Ruusbroec (1991). Middle Dutch original: *Ende hier omme soe moeten wij al onse leven fondeeren op een grondeloes abis, soe moghe wij eewelijc in minnen sincken ende ontsincken ons selven in die grondelose diepheit; ende metter selver minnen sele wij hoghen ende onthoghen ons selven in die ombegripelijcke hoocheit, ende in die minne sonder wise sele wij dolen. Ende si sal ons verleiden in die onghemetene wijtheit der minnen gods. Ende daer inne sele wij vlieten ende ons selven ontvlieten in die ombekinde welde der rijcheit ende der goetheit gods; ende daer inne selen wij smelten ende versmelten, wielen ende verwielen eewelijc in die glorie gods. Siet, in yghewelc ghelijckenisse van allen desen, soe toene ic eenen scouwenden mensche sijn*

clarification of what the contemplative reader is already experiencing. From various aspects of Ruusbroec's oeuvre, it appears that he has a very limited group of readers in mind, whom he assumes to be contemplatives. In fact, Ruusbroec here explicitly says that contemplation cannot be taught. In his understanding, there is no method to achieve it. This is not so surprising. After all, as we have seen, contemplation is essentially a relational event. In this relational event, the human being is inactive, receptive, and the divine Other is active. There is no method that would oblige the divine Other to be active.

A crucial sentence in this perspective is “we must lay the foundations of our life in an unfathomable abyss.” This abyss is God as infinite relationship, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, an absolute and eternal relationship which is the permanent origin of the human person's existence. The relationality of the contemplative dimension corresponds to the most fundamental relationality that is God. [55]

Ruusbroec then uses a series of metaphors to clarify what the contemplative is experiencing. With these metaphors Ruusbroec describes a remarkable dynamic. The metaphors indicate special dimensions: depth (“sink”), height (“raise”), length and width (“wander,” “flow and melt and whirl”). In each of the different dimensions, he indicates an active, controllable aspect *and* a passive, uncontrollable one. The human person goes down, ascends, etc. (actively), *and* is taken further (passively) by the Other, beyond the limits of the ‘I.’ [56]

This implies a far-reaching form of surrender, of letting-be, namely losing oneself in the life of God (see “measureless width of God's love,” “that unknown luxury that is the wealth and goodness of God,” etc.). Precisely because this is described as a *happy* event, it is clear that it does not imply an ontological diminution of the person. Indeed, it only makes sense if there is no ontological reduction of the person, as Ruusbroec points out in the same treatise: [57]

We cannot become God at all and lose our createdness: that is impossible. But if we remained in ourselves completely, separated from God, we would be wretched and beyond bliss. Therefore, we should feel ourselves completely in God and completely in ourselves.¹⁶ (*Vanden blinckenden steen*, 585–589) [58]

Later Impact

This notion had a lot of impact in the following centuries. The development of Christian culture in the Latin West is strongly colored by the movement of the *Devotio Moderna*, which is a spiritual movement that arose in the Low Countries around the end of the fourteenth century. The movement was clearly influenced by the spiritual teachings of John of Ruusbroec. Leading early figures of the movement include the scholar Geert Grote (1340–1384), who greatly admired the work of Ruusbroec, and his friend Florens Radewijns (1350–1400). Later authors such as Gerard Zerbolt (1367–1398), Johannes Mombaer (1460–1501) and especially Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380–1471) had a major impact on the international spread of the movement. [59]

The intention of the *Devotio Moderna* was to valorise the ideal of the *Devotio Antiqua* and [60]

wesen ende sine oefeninghe. Maer niemen anders en maecht verstaen, want scouwende leven en mach niemen anderen leeren (Ruusbroec 1991, 112–13).

16 Translated by André Lefevere in Ruusbroec (1991). Middle Dutch original: *Want wij en moghen te male niet god werden ende onse ghescapenheit verliesen; dat es ommoghelijc. Blevem wij oec te male in ons selven ghesondert van gode, soe moesten wij sijn elendich ende onsalich. Ende hier omme selen wij ons gheheel in gode ghevoelen ende gheheel in ons selven* (Ruusbroec 1991, 151).

to let it take shape in one's own time (Faesen 2019, 69–89). *Devotio* should be understood as 'dedication,' that is, a personal relationship with God as the inner core of all aspects of religion. In the perception of these prominent figures, this relationship determined the faith life of the *antiqui* (the first centuries of Christianity), and was lost in the modern era—where 'modern' evidently must be understood in the sense of 'present-day' or 'recent' and not in the sense that this word would acquire later.

What is important is that, in their interpretation, this personal relationality includes both the active and the contemplative dimension. For example, Geert Grote refers to the increasingly simple and interior prayer that becomes a fundamental orientation: [61]

[...] a certain spiritual harmony so that the interior man as well as the exterior, the one coming in as well as the one going out—as Christ says—will find pasture. [...] Thus, for those deeply loving the law of Christ and of God, there is great peace within and without and there is no scandal (Ps 118/119, 165). For there is in them a spiritual abundance owing to an infusion and plenitude of forces from on high, like the precious oil pouring down from the head to the beard and all the way down to the last limb of our carnal garment.¹⁷ (*De quattuor generibus meditabilium*) [62]

As indicated in the quote, the ideal that Geert Grote envisions is a life in which the interior and exterior person are in harmony; a life of spiritual abundance that flows from the contemplative contact with God and that finds its fulfilment in the active exteriorization of this interior life. [63]

Whilst the inner life includes meditative exercises, ultimately it implies a contemplative non-doing, in line with Ruusbroec's thought. That is why contemporary, secondary literature gives the following description as a definition of this spiritual experience: *tentamen vitae contemplativae in actione* ("an attempt to live contemplatively in action") (Deblaere 1964, 11). [64]

The renewed interest in the contemplative dimension found in the *Devotio Moderna* has spread through an important 'disciple' of this movement, Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) (Maryks 2014). The spiritual profile of the Jesuit order he founded is strongly marked by his own charism. That charism was shaped by the spirit of the *Devotio Moderna*, through various contacts with places and institutions strongly influenced by this movement. These include the Abbey of Montserrat, where he stayed at the beginning of his spiritual development, and the Collège de Montaigu in Paris, where he stayed during his studies. He also had several contacts with the Low Countries in the same period. In 1557, Jerome Nadal (1507–1580), a close associate of Ignatius of Loyola and a man who is often considered the 'theologian of Ignatian spirituality' (Ruiz Jurado 2001, 2793), wrote that Ignatius had received the grace to be 'contemplative in action' (Lat. *In actione contemplativus*): [65]

Father Ignatius received this way of praying [= with respect to the Trinity] from an exceptionally great privilege, and particularly: that in all things, actions, and conversations, he felt the presence of God and the consciousness of spiritual [66]

17 Translated by Engen (1988) (116–117). Latin original: (*transformantur*) in spiritualem quandam armoniam, ut tam homo interior quam exterior, tam ingrediens quam egrediens, ut ait Christus pasqua inveniet (Jo 10, 9) [...] Sic diligentibus legem Christi et dei pax multa est intus et extra et non est illis scandalum; nam in illis per refusionem et redundantiam supremarum virium spiritualis abundantia, sicut unguentum pretiosum descendit de capite in barbam, barbam Aaron, et usque in ultimam oram vestis carnae (Groote 1975, 112–14).

reality—a contemplative in action, something he usually explained by saying that God ought to be found in everything.¹⁸ (*In examen annotationes*)

It is notable that Nadal assumed that the same grace was bestowed on the entire Jesuit Order: [67]

We know that this privilege was given to Father Ignatius, and we believe that it was granted to the entire Society, and we trust that the grace of this prayer and contemplation in the Society is prepared for us all, and we confess that this grace is united to our vocation.¹⁹ (*In examen annotationes*) [68]

We can also see the importance of non-doing and contemplation, in the lines of the *Devotio Moderna*, in painting, viz., in the Early Netherlandish religious painters, such as Rogier van der Weyden (1400–1464), Dieric Bouts (ca. 1415–1475), Hans Memling (ca. 1430–1494), and Hugo van der Goes (ca. 1430–1482), who pay great attention to internalization in their paintings and who try to promote a contemplative attitude in the viewer. [69]

Conclusion

What has our exploration of this theme taught us? Let us return to the observation that served as our starting point: Many traditions of contemplative practice—in various religions—emphasize the need to purify the tendencies towards outer and inner forms of distraction. This leads to a state of (outward) solitude, which can provide a framework for actual contemplation, ultimately giving way to a suspension of all efforts, an opening up to a state of inner letting-be. We can highlight three elements in this observation: (1) a state of solitude, as a purification of outward distractions; (2) contemplation proper; (3) the suspension of efforts and the state of ‘letting-be,’ i.e., non-doing. [70]

As we have seen, these elements are undoubtedly present in the Christian tradition. Important Christian authors reflected on the theme based on the Biblical typology of Martha and Mary (Lk 10:38–42). They show a specific aspect of the Christian interpretation, namely that the state of non-doing is interpreted as being fundamentally relational. Mary (unlike her sister Martha) is not active, but that is because she focused her attention on the person of Jesus Christ. Her ‘letting-be’ is essentially a surrender to the person of Jesus Christ. The reflections of Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo and John Cassian have shown us that these authors emphasized the importance of this relational state of ‘letting-be’—although they also emphasized the vital necessity of activity. [71]

This relational dimension was made explicit by Gregory the Great, who pointed out that Mary surrenders to Jesus, who speaks to her as ‘the origin’ (*principium*). The non-doing of Mary corresponds to the activity of the divine Other. The state of ‘non-doing’ and ‘letting-be’ is thus not a general or abstract state, but is essentially relational: it is the surrender of the human person in response to the divine Person, in response to his initiative. From [72]

18 Translated by the author. Latin original: *Hanc rationem orationis concepit Pater Ignatius magno privilegio selectissime; tum illud praeterea: in omnibus rebus, actionibus, colloquiis, ut Dei praesentiam rerumque spiritualium affectum sentiret atque contempleretur, simul in actione contemplativus (quod ita solebat explicare: Deum esse in omnibus inveniendum)* (Hieronymus Nadal 1962, 162; see also Witwer 2007).

19 Translated by the author. Latin original: *Quod igitur privilegium Patri Ignatio factum intelligimus, idem toti Societati concessum esse credimus, et gratiam orationis illius et contemplationis in Societate omnibus nobis paratam esse confidimus, eamque cum vocatione nostra coniunctam esse confitemur* (Hieronymus Nadal 1962, 163).

this perspective, contemplation itself—the second element of our initial observation—is not something that the human person can achieve, but is essentially an initiative of the divine Other, who reveals himself to the human person. Human contemplation comes about only because God self-discloses himself. The first element from our initial observation, namely the state of solitude as purification of outward distractions, can therefore be fully understood in this context. The example of Moses entering the tabernacle cited by Gregory the Great makes this clear: In the tabernacle, Moses is alone with God, undisturbed by the multitude of concerns outside the tabernacle.

Contemplation and the state of ‘letting-be’ are understood as a response to the initiative of the divine Other who is ‘the origin.’ This relational dimension provides John of Ruusbroec with the basis to explain how action and non-doing (i.e., contemplation) can go together perfectly. The relational link with the *principium* and the activities of the human person are by no means mutually exclusive—quite the contrary. After all, God is the metaphysical principle of human existence. At no time is the human being without or apart from this ontological *principium*. This is both the principle of the real existence of the human, and also the basis of his or her activities. [73]

Moreover, as mentioned, this ‘origin’ is not an abstract principle, but a real person, namely God who takes the initiative to reveal himself. Contemplation and the state of letting-be on the one hand and action (the care for one’s neighbor) on the other are not mutually exclusive, but are situated on two different levels that can go together perfectly. This combination of action and non-doing—not as a juxtaposition, but as internally connected on two different levels—is then something that was further developed in the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period in the context of the *Devotio Moderna*, and the early Jesuit Order inspired by Ignatius of Loyola. [74]

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