SECTION 4

PRAYER DURING THE FOURTEENTH TO FIFTEENTH CENTURIES
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JAN VAN RUUSBROEC ON THE TRINITY, PRAYER,
AND THE NATURE OF CONTEMPLATION

Rik Van Nieuwenhove

INTRODUCTION

The end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries represent a watershed in the history of Western spirituality: it is at this time that we find the origin of a modern understanding of spirituality—an understanding in which mysticism and theology have become separate; and in which mysticism is all too often understood in terms of an immediate, private, unmediated experience of the divine.¹

Some authors writing in the fourteenth century display an awareness of major changes in the religious climate, including specific changes in the ways meditation and mysticism are understood. One of these authors is Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381).² During his lifetime references to Neoplatonic discourse gradually disappear; a further severance of theology and spirituality takes place; and a more experiential, more subjectivist approach to spirituality becomes popular. Whereas Bonaventure, for instance, considered himself a “mystical theologian,” a scholastic and mystical author, deeply influenced by the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus that had been relatively recently revived in the West,

¹ The work of William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published in 1902, both chronicles and further reinforces this modern approach to mysticism. It is an approach that appeals to those who have grown disenchanted with the institutional Church and its religion. After all, James explicitly downplays the doctrinal elements, opening the door for what in the eyes of its critics at least seems nothing else but a solipsistic pursuit of religious self-gratification, strangely insensitive to the apophaticism that characterises traditional patristic and medieval theology. For a brilliant overview of the changing nature of mystical theology and the causes of this change, the reader should consult Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God. A Study in the Negativity of Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1996).

² For a more in-depth overview of his thought, see my study *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (Notre Dame, 2003).