

The Cloud of Unknowing

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*The Cloud of Unknowing*¹ is a book of spiritual advice written in Middle English by an anonymous author towards the end of the 14th century. This was during a golden period for English religious writing, which resulted in a number of works still read today. Writings by Walter Hilton (d.1396) and Richard Rolle (d.1349) have been translated into modern English and are available in the Classics of Western Spirituality series.² Two female religious authors of the time are even better known, and have had a wide influence. Julian of Norwich (c.1342–after 1416) was an anchoress who wrote two accounts of the revelations that she experienced.³ Margery Kempe (c.1373–c.1440) was a married woman, who had many mystical experiences and travelled widely, even making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. She dictated the story of her life in a book which was rediscovered by chance in the 1930s, and has since enjoyed great popularity.⁴

The author of *The Cloud* lived in this context of religious fervour and hunger for spiritual experience. Little is known about his life. From the details of his dialect he is thought to have come from the East Midlands of England. The blessing with which he closes the book implies that he was a priest. He is often thought to have been a Carthusian monk, due to the solitary lifestyle that he promotes and the close association of the manuscript tradition of his works with monasteries of that order.

The Cloud takes its title from an image the author uses to underline the impossibility of knowing God through reason. There is a cloud which prevents the contemplative from seeing God directly: “. . . you will find only a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing, you do not know what, except that you feel in your will a naked purpose towards God” (3). He describes an apophatic experience of God, with nothing concrete to cling to.⁵ It is worth interrogating both of the images used here, to try to understand what they might have meant in his context. When the author speaks of darkness, he draws his image from his own reality, from a time without electric lighting. Darkness is a barrier to knowledge, but not an absolute one: we can imagine him sitting, aware of the presence of another person in the room, conscious of their movements.

Similarly, the image of the cloud comes out of his experience as a man from the East Midlands. The cloud present between the contemplative and God is like one between us and the sun on an overcast day — as the UK Meteorological Office puts it: “a featureless, dark layer which is capable of producing drizzle.” It prevents us from seeing the sun directly, it blocks off the bright cleanness of a sunny day and stops much of the warmth of the sun from reaching us. Yet, we are still aware of the sun: even the mungeyest day with low grey

¹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, A.C. SPEARING (tr.), 2001.

² *The Scale of Perfection*, WALTER HILTON, 1990; *Richard Rolle: The English Works*, RICHARD ROLLE, 1988.

³ *Revelations of Divine Love*, JULIAN OF NORWICH, ELIZABETH SPEARING (tr.), 1998.

⁴ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, MARGERY KEMPE, B.A. WINDEATT (tr.), 2000.

⁵ An apophatic theology is one that recognises human language and thought as being unable to properly describe or fully understand God.



cloud covering the whole sky can't be mistaken for night-time.⁶ This well describes the experience of God that the *Cloud*-author is discussing, one of awareness but an absence of detail, clarity and sharp lines. Descriptions of God are necessarily vague and lacking in precision. God is permanently out of the reach of human knowledge, and can only be grasped by love.

In the *Cloud*, the author is writing for a specific audience. He wants readers in tune with his way of thinking, who will be able to understand him, those who “have undertaken truly and without reservation to be a perfect follower of Christ” (Prologue), and he appeals to all others to put the book aside — in fact, throughout the book he is constantly alert to the dangers posed by misunderstanding. He assumes that the reader is already engaged in a solitary form of life (1), and spends little time attempting to convince the reader of the benefits of contemplation, clearly taking this motivation for granted. This is not true for humility though, in which he does encourage us, and he also urges a single-minded attitude: “Your whole life must now always consist of desire, if you are to make progress on the level of perfection. . .”(2).

For this progress, the prospective contemplative must genuinely be seeking the purest possible understanding of God, not any gifts or other good things to be gained from him. This is analogous to the way Bernard of Clairvaux categorises motivations in his *On Loving God*,⁷ where the third gradation of his four types of love is “Loving God for God’s sake”. This also involves a forgetfulness of any other gains to be made, but there is a crucial difference: for Bernard, there is a further, higher type of love that involves “Loving Man for God’s sake”. This is a connection with God through loving the things that God loves: the awareness of the image of God in oneself and in other people, that leads to loving them, simply because they are loved by God. This element is entirely absent from the *Cloud*: references to other people are scarce (apart from a good spiritual advisor), other people being regarded almost purely as distractions from the spiritual life. We can see this as an artefact of the author’s solitary way of life: the atmosphere of the book is very different to that of, say, Teresa of Avila, whose writings draw from an experience so deeply nourished by the reality of community life.

In beginning contemplation, the *Cloud*-author tells us to push away all thoughts of created things, placing a “cloud of forgetting” below us, so that we are not only unconscious of all created things, but also “all they do and all their attributes”. The author holds that any thoughts of these things unavoidably form a barrier between us and God (5). He takes this view to an extreme, denying any value to thoughts of “the saints and angels in heaven”, or even Mary herself. This is a very strong contrast to the religious culture of his time, which was saturated with visual images, and laid such stress on the cult of the saints.⁸ He goes even further than this, encouraging his readers to not even think of “God’s kindness or excellence . . . or even the joys of heaven” (5). In one sense, this is a straightforward reminder of the need for a pure love of God, not motivated by the hope of reward. However on another level, it is slightly troubling, implying that God’s being is somehow separable from God’s actions.

The role that Jesus plays in the *Cloud* is interesting and difficult to characterise. On the one hand, the author is sceptical about the value of meditating on the events of Jesus’ life, even his Passion. He outlines his ideas on this in chapter 12, which opens with the need to

⁶ Mungey: moist, damp, close (East Midlands dialect). *The Lost Words*, ROBERT MACFARLANE, 2017.

⁷ *On Loving God*, BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, ROBERT WALTON (tr.), 1995.

⁸ See, for example, *The Late Medieval English Church*, G.W. BERNARD, 2012.



“beat continually on this cloud of unknowing that is between you and your God with a sharp dart of longing love.” He considers this activity to be far more important than meditation on the Passion.

But the author’s view isn’t anything as simple as rejecting the importance of Jesus’ physical nature and incarnation. We can see this since it lies embedded within an extended consideration (chapters 16-23) of Jesus’ visit to the house of Martha and Mary and the role of Mary Magdalene in the gospels.⁹ The author speaks of the love that Mary Magdalene showed towards Jesus, and uses that as a model. He looks at Jesus’ praise of Mary of Bethany for having chosen “the better part”, and sees her too as a model for contemplatives. So it is clear that he sees careful reading of the Gospels, and meditating on their contents as a praiseworthy and valuable thing to do, but not as actual contemplation.

The way to resolve this seeming contradiction appears much later in the book, where the author outlines his underlying model of the make-up of the human person (63-67). Here he divides the mental operations (he uses the word *mynde*, which Spearing translates as consciousness) into two primary faculties, reason and will, and two secondary ones, the imagination and sense perception. For him, reason is “the faculty by which we separate bad from good” and make evaluative operations. When we read scripture, and involve ourselves in trying to understand its message, it is this faculty that is being engaged. In contrast, he sees the will as the faculty “by which we love God, desire God and finally rest in God with complete joy and consent” (64). We can now understand the *Cloud*-author’s view of contemplation much more clearly. He sees it as an act of the will, and sees the other faculties as providing distractions. In general, the use of reason is to be encouraged, since it provides information about God’s work, helps us to understand what God has done for us and provides motivation. He does not recommend the contemplative to refrain from this permanently, but only during the “work of contemplation”, which he sees as a relatively brief process (38).

Similarly, his idea of placing a “cloud of forgetting” between the contemplative and all created beings does not end in an indifference to humanity. He describes the virtue of charity as a combination of loving God for himself and loving one’s enemies, so that “All seem his friends and none his enemies, so that for him all those who torment him and cause him distress on earth are his particular friends. . .” (24).

Contemplation is a complicated dynamic act for the *Cloud*-author, in which both the human and divine sides are important, and it is never quite clear who has the initiative.

On the one hand, it seems as though God should be taking the initiative. This is the more doctrinal answer, and there is plenty of evidence throughout the book to support it. God has called the contemplative to this way of life (7), and the author is clear that salvation comes only “through virtue of Christ’s Passion” (25). In chapter 29, he discusses the rapidity with which some people who have been habitual sinners can make progress in contemplation, through “a merciful miracle of our Lord, who thus grants his special grace to arouse the whole world’s wonder.” Two chapters later, he speaks of how the way to forget created things is something “learned from God by experience”, and reiterates this in chapter 34, saying that “without God’s work, no saint or angel can think of desiring [contemplation].”

However, despite these examples, and others beside, our author places great importance on the human side of contemplation. This seems to involve more than just preparing our-

⁹ As was common at the time, the *Cloud*-author conflates the figures of Mary of Magdala and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus.



selves to be receptive to God. Instead he talks of the contemplative as having a positive role in the process. He speaks of the work involved in forgetting all other created beings as needing many attempts and much labour, even though it can only be done by grace. He frequently uses images of effort and hard work. For example, at the beginning of chapter 9 (I have emphasised each of these images with italics):

And so the sharp stirring of your understanding, which keeps on thrusting itself on you when you *apply yourself* to this *blind work* of contemplation, must always be *forced down*; and unless you *force it down*, it will force you down. . .

In the end though, he tries to strike a balance between these two tendencies: both God and the contemplative are involved in this process. This is most clear when he speaks of his own experience of contemplation as desire of something that he does not know (34). He advises us to submit to God's transformation "simply be the wood and let it be the carpenter". All the effort that he speaks of is activity needed to retain an attitude of passivity in front of God. Later, he speaks of the need to show patience, and to wait for the will of God (46) and the work necessary to maintain this attentive waiting.

This complicated relationship between God and the contemplative contrasts with the clear, vivid images used by his contemporary Julian of Norwich. Julian's God is "courteous", and "condescends" to give her the visions that she describes and interprets in her writings. For her, the initiative clearly lies with God, and she sees herself as purely a recipient, not a partner in the exchange.

The *Cloud* needs to be looked at within its context, and interpreted as a document written for a readership whose faith had been formed within that context. Understanding this can help to illuminate some of the strongly apophatic attitudes taken by the author. His opposition to any role for the physical and the bodily within the spiritual life needs to be balanced against the widespread medieval spirituality which placed great emphasis on physicality. There was a cultural focus on images of saints and of the life of Jesus in churches, on the practice of pilgrimage, on the great programme of renewing church buildings that was taking place at the time in his native East Midlands.¹⁰ His emphasis on solitude is opposed to the crowded sociality of the medieval towns, and the guild system, which gathered people together so much in their spiritual life.¹¹ One very curious aspect of this attitude is the total absence of liturgy from his worldview. There is no mention of the Mass, of the Eucharist, of the recitation of Psalms in either a positive or a negative sense.

Finally, I wish to contrast this with another contemplative writing which was growing in popularity at the time, the *Ignea Sagitta* by Nicholas of Narbonne. Nicholas was writing to reprimand his fellow Carmelites for their attachment to life in towns and cities and their neglect of contemplation. He describes the distractions associated with the noise and busyness of a medieval town as obstacles, but shows a much more balanced and less dualistic attitude towards the bodily and the created when he speaks of his ideal view of eremitical life. Here, he speaks of the contemplative hearing birdsong as hymns of praise to God, and of the way that the fertility of the land can recall God's creativity.¹² Nicholas has a more positive view of the physical world than that present in the *Cloud*. His more sacramental attitude sees that the physical may sometimes be a signpost for the spiritual, so that the connection between the exterior and the interior man need not always be negative, but the experience of creation moves "the interior man to give praise to the Creator".

The *Cloud*-author's heavily apophatic attitude was opposed to the cataphatic excess of

¹⁰ *Churches in the Landscape*, RICHARD MORRIS, 1997.

¹¹ *The Late Medieval English Church*, G.W. BERNARD, 2012.

¹² *Ignea Sagitta*, NICHOLAS THE FRENCHMAN, BEDE EDWARDS (tr.), 1985, p.50-51.



medieval Christianity, in a way that refused to acknowledge the value of the bodily and the physical. His was an entirely inward route to God, but he does not view this as the right route for everyone. For him God cannot be known by reason, but only by love. But if we follow his recommendations, if we cut ourselves off from the knowledge of God's loving acts towards us, how can we ever know that love?

