

THE SUBSTANCE OF ALL GOOD LIVING

The Practice of Contemplative Prayer in 'The Cloud of Unknowing'

The Cloud of Unknowing was written between 1349 and 1395 by an English mystic living in the East Midlands, for a young man - 'a special friend in God' (Ch. 47) embarking on the contemplative life. Not much is known about him: the novice has moved from a cenobitic - 'a special degree and way of living' - to a more solitary life in the way that the Rule of St Benedict approves. The author's assumption that this is a normal progression in the spiritual life seems to imply that he had made the same transition himself, and even that he had a Benedictine background, but this is as far as we can go.¹

The language of the book is strong, supple, colloquial and vigorous; it is the style of a popular communicator rather than an academic but we cannot therefore assume a disregard for responsible theology or contempt for learning. On the contrary, in spite of the scarcity of references to other authors in this text, it has been established from evidence in his other works, that the author was well grounded in theology and in touch with contemporary developments in mystical teaching. It is not the study of dogma he appears to discourage, but abuses of learning such as name-dropping, careerism and intellectual arrogance.

The purpose of the book is to introduce the novice to the 'contemplative life'. This notion of a very specialised life within the religious vocation is something rather new and almost unique to this author² and he spends a long time discussing it (see especially chapters 18 - 23). The particular responsibility of this life is to 'lift up your heart unto God with a humble impulse of love' (Ch 3). The heart of a contemplative is centred on God, whatever he is thinking, feeling or doing, rather like a mother with a baby in the house. When it is sleeping she may be working, relaxing, taking a bath or even sleeping herself, but she will always be aware of the baby's presence and ready to respond immediately to the cry of the child who needs her. Just so the contemplative is constantly on the alert for the operation of grace which is:

'a sudden impulse, without any warning, swiftly springing up to God like a spark from a coal . . . in one of those impulses he may have forgotten every created thing. Soon after each impulse, because of the frailty of the flesh, it returns to some thought, or some deed it has done, or not done. But so what? Soon after it rises as quickly as it did before.' (Ch 4)

This state of constant readiness is developed through times of more focused recollection in which the novice creates a 'cloud of forgetting' between himself and all created things and becomes aware of a 'cloud of unknowing' between himself and God. In this cloud the contemplative is to pay attention to nothing but a 'naked intent towards God' (Ch. 3).

This intent is an active, wholehearted direction of the will towards God. The author stresses that progress in this type of prayer is entirely the work of grace, and cannot be achieved by any effort on the part of man (Ch. 26 - 34). Indeed he goes out of his way to stress the harm, both spiritual and psychological, that may befall anyone who tries to achieve contemplation through inappropriate efforts, overstraining the intellect, the emotions or the imagination. The contemplative is to be passive and receptive:

¹ From other texts, I would now say that the evidence of Benedictine formation is very strong. Although the book seems to have been very special to Carthusians, who translated it into Latin, and owned most of the Manuscript copies, I don't believe he was one, and probably not a Cistercian. He is very learned indeed, and part of a network of people seriously interested in the theory as well as the practice of contemplative living.

² Actually no. He got this from Richard of St Victor, whose *Benjamin* he translated for the benefit of this particular directee.

'let that impulse deal with you, and lead you as it likes. Let it work, and do you suffer; just watch and leave it alone. Don't interfere, or try to help in case you spoil it all, but be the tree and let it be the carpenter; be the house and let it be the householder living in it.' (Ch. 34)

He is not however to be idle and inert. This is work; this is 'travail' (with its links to the word 'travel' and to the 'travail' and 'labour' of giving birth). The book is full of injunctions to 'work hard', 'go on', 'set to', 'keep working', 'beat upon the cloud' or to 'tread down' a distraction. The effort is constant and unending, and 'hereby you may see that there is no genuine security and no true rest in this life'. The sense of urgency, of readiness for hard work, that there is no time to waste which we pick up from the second chapter, is very close to the tone of the prologue to the Rule of Benedict. It echoes Benedict's references to the 'toil of obedience', 'perseverance in good works', 'arouse ourselves', 'run while you have the light', 'hurry', 'run towards (the Kingdom) by good deeds'.

The particular human element of this work is the 'cloud of forgetting', the abandonment of thoughts about all created things. The author is clear that we are not to abandon the things themselves, nor to give up loving them; on the contrary this work of contemplation is of great, though mysterious help to everyone we love (Ch. 3). But we are not to allow thoughts about them to distract us from this direct and simple seeking of God. More importantly, we are not to be distracted by thoughts, images and concepts of God. These are certainly true and valid, but they are only 'knowledge about' God not the 'knowledge of' God himself that we are seeking now. We are not dealing only with the differences between reading about someone and meeting him, but also with the fact that the human mind cannot possibly comprehend God. The result is that when we try to draw nearer to God, our senses, imagination and intellect feel themselves baffled. We are in the 'cloud of unknowing' between ourselves and God.

The author expresses no contempt for the work of the senses, intellect and imagination in bringing us to the point where we are ready for contemplation. Indeed, without long preparation in reading and meditating on the scriptures and the teachings of the Church, we will never have the maturity to cope with the demands of the cloud. The author's proposition is simply that it is time to move beyond them as we realise that God cannot be encountered by thought but only by love.

The 'naked intent' then, is not merely the exercise of will power, but a humble, gentle yearning of love:

'You must understand charity to be nothing else but the love of God for His own sake above all creatures, and of humans for God's sake, just as much as you love yourself. It is obvious that God is loved in Himself, in this work, because as I said before, this work is nothing else but a naked intent reaching up directly to God as He is in Himself. I call it a 'naked' intent because in this work an apprentice asks neither for an end to suffering nor an increase of reward, - in short, nothing else but God Himself; in so much as he neither cares nor inquires if he is in agony or ecstasy so long as the will of his Beloved is fulfilled'. (Ch. 24)

The intent is articulated through the repetition of a short simple word like 'God' or 'love' expressing the urgency of the soul's desire for God. The author likens this prayer to a man in an emergency shouting 'Fire!' or 'Help'. This type of prayer was adopted by Thomas Merton, and in terms of a consistent method has been developed by John Main under the name of Christian meditation, and by Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating under the name of Centering Prayer. The approaches of these three authors are very different, and which may be most useful depends largely on individual temperament and experience. All three authors are to be recommended and therefore I do not intend to discuss this aspect of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' any further.

The effects of this type of prayer on the contemplative are profound. It is not the author's

intention to go into this in any detail, as he stresses over and over again that the only aim of the contemplative is to carry out God's will by drawing closer to Him, and no secondary consequences are of any importance. However, he does not believe that the contemplative is somehow special, one of a spiritual elite whose destiny is superior to that of other men. His attitude is that the contemplative is called upon to work in this life towards the experience we shall all have in Heaven; the restoration of the original nature and relationship with God that we had before the Fall.

This involves the re-integration of our 'scattered' personality. At the moment we are driven by the passions which our physical senses, our unruly imagination, and our rapacious intellect stir up in us. All those powers were meant to be governed by reason:

'If you were reformed by grace to the original state of man's soul, as it was before sin, you would be by the help of grace, in constant control of that desire, or all those impulses so that none would go astray, but all would be directed towards the most desirable and the most excellent choice, which is God'. (Ch. 4)

This is not easy. When we try to focus on the presence of God in this cloud, our senses, imagination and intellect are so baffled that they are likely to throw up distractions of all sorts. The labour of treading them down in the 'cloud of forgetting' is constant and grinding drudgery. Then, we are tempted to be overwhelmed by our inadequacy, failures and sin to the point where we believe we are in hell (or ought to be). Yet we must not give up, or wallow in self-hatred, but learn through humility to appreciate the mercy of God, and trust and love Him the more. Finally we are likely to be aware of our own self-consciousness, the sort of watchfulness that is always assessing how we are doing, or what we are getting out of the situation. This is the worst trial of all; we feel we want to belong totally to God, and give ourselves only to Him, and always there is this chattering ego, indefatigably busy about its own affairs, keeping us apart and trying to assert its own individuality:

'All other sorrows in comparison to this, are just playing at it. For he may grieve in earnest who knows and is made aware, not only of his nature but of his existence. The one who never felt this sorrow should grieve, for he has never yet felt perfect sorrow.

This sorrow, when it is experienced, cleanses the soul not only of sin, but of the punishment due to sin, and so it makes a soul able to receive that joy which takes from a man all that consciousness and awareness of himself'. (Ch. 41)

Thus it is this very embarrassment at the way our self-importance obtrudes itself between us and God that will free us of our self-consciousness. This is not just in times of prayer. The author has a lot of entertaining things to say about would-be contemplatives who betray themselves by self-assertion, pious affectations, and many other kinds of attention-seeking behaviour. Real contemplation does not do this. On the contrary, it frees the contemplative from nervous restlessness, neurotic tics and the kind of defensive postures undue shyness or vanity inculcates. Indeed in a rather extreme statement, which I have not seen supported by other authorities, but which I see no reason to doubt, he says that such a person, completely unselfconscious and putting up no barriers to the operation of the Spirit, becomes attractive:

'This work should guide whoever achieved it so appropriately in body, as well as soul that it would endear him to any man or woman that looked at him, so much so that the worst-looking man or woman that ever lived who had the grace to work in this work, should find their appearance suddenly and graciously changed, so that every good person that saw them should desire and be glad to be in their company and should strongly believe that they are spiritually refreshed in their presence and helped towards God by grace'. (Ch. 54)

(NB: the word 'favour' which the original uses throughout and which I have translated as 'appearance', does not mean mere physical appearance but something more like 'demeanour', 'attitude'. He is not claiming that grace gives us a facelift.)

This is, however, no more than a side-effect, and I think I have probably spent more time on it than the author has. For him the only important thing is desire for God which keeps us in the cloud of unknowing. 'We must mean God Himself and none of His gifts' (Ch. 3), and most of our experience will be frustration, confusion and sorrow. We must often be content to remain without consolation, letting God give us as much or as little as He pleases. This may at times be awful, as we feel cut off from earth by the cloud of forgetting, cut off from heaven by the cloud of unknowing. Apparently we are 'nothing and nowhere'. But in time we will see that this 'nothingness', as it appears to our senses, while we are 'working busily with our active desire to have God', is nevertheless everything, and we would rather have this 'nothing that is everything' than any worldly pleasure.

At this high point which sounds so like St John of the Cross in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* it is appropriate to close with our authors farewell prayer

'Farewell spiritual friend, with God's blessing and mine. And I pray to Almighty God that the peace, sound guidance and spiritual comfort in God may always be with you, and with all our lovers of God on earth. Amen.'

The translations in this article are my own, based on the EETS text edited by Phyllis Hodgson. The best translation generally available is by Clifton Wolters (Penguin 1961) which also has a helpful introduction.

Also recommended are:

The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing: William Johnstone: pub. Anthony Clarke 1974

Contemplative Prayer: Thomas Merton: DLT 1973

Centering Prayer: Basil Pennington

Word into Silence: John Main: DLT 1980

Open Mind Open Heart: Thomas Keating: Wellspring 1986