

The Cloud of Unknowing

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Personal spiritual guidance, in the form of direction of one person by another by way of a series of conversations over a period of weeks or months, remains relatively rare and, some would say, an expensive luxury. Many people would not acknowledge its value; others would modestly and wrongly think their own efforts at Christian living too lowly to merit such attention; some shirk the self-revelation that seems to be implied; the vast majority, unfortunately, simply lack opportunity, though the practice of spiritual direction as a ministry open to lay people as well as clergy is beginning to gain ground in some countries. The present proliferation of books on prayer, meditation and the Christian life shows that very many people search the shelves of bookshops and libraries to find spiritual guidance and encouragement. The medieval *Cloud of unknowing* has become part of that trend. One popular paperback translation alone of *The cloud* has been reprinted fourteen times since it was first published in 1961.

The author's intention was quite particular: to write a long letter of guidance in prayer and contemplation to a young friend who was probably an enclosed monk or nun with inclinations towards a solitary form of life. Naturally he also foresaw that if the book proved helpful it might be passed on to others, and while he was sure that it would be useful to some he was also clear about the people for whom he was not writing: 'the worldly chatterboxes . . . the rumour-mongers, the gossips, the tittle-tattlers and the fault-finders of every sort' as well as those, 'however excellent they may be', who are absorbed in the 'active life' (Prologue). Nowadays, commercial publishing means that in suburban homes and tropical

ashrams, in colleges and railway stations, Christians and non-Christians, agnostics and unbelievers look to *The cloud* for guidance and encouragement. Here I want to examine, in the light of some questions thrown up by present-day experience, aspects of what *The cloud* has to say about spiritual direction.

In what has been called 'educative spiritual direction' an experienced director guides a comparative neophyte in prayer or other aspects of the Christian life by giving appropriate theological, moral or spiritual information, encouragement and advice. *The cloud* seems to fall into this category. Not everything that is in a book is helpful to all, and the writer of *The cloud* is aware of that. Spiritual direction by means of a book, while enabling the direction to be systematic and ordered, misses the give-and-take and continuing discernment of a series of conversations. The author of *The cloud* knows that his friend is meeting a spiritual director regularly, and he would like his own recommendations to be discussed in these meetings, which become a way of determining whether the book's guidance is truly for the individual's good at a particular time. Of course, since the readership of *The cloud* has widened immensely, this kind of check would not now be available to most of its readers.

Spiritual directors approach their task with a theoretical framework of beliefs about how the human person is structured and operates and about how God relates to this human reality. This framework may be more or less implicit and unconscious or explicitly articulated. The author of *The cloud* naturally uses the psychology current in his own time, with the theory of the various powers of the soul (chapters 62-66), and the belief that the right ordering of the person is for the body-spirit unity to be governed and led by the Spirit. In locating contemplation so firmly in the will, as a response of love to God in the affective rather than the cognitive dimension of a person, *The cloud* is a helpful corrective to those who would make contemplation a matter of the mind's knowledge of God, an intellectual vision. Contemplation here is also primarily grace, a movement originated by God in the depths of the person: 'the impulse of love, this is the work of God alone' (chapter 26). Our part is to dispose ourselves as far as possible for this gift and to allow it to happen: 'Be the tree: let it

be the carpenter. Be the house and let it be the householder who lives there' (chapter 34).

Prayer

One of the persistent questions that requires skill on the part of a spiritual director is the point at which it is right for a directee to move into a simpler, more passive and 'contemplative' form of prayer. Sometimes the transition takes place naturally and smoothly; sometimes the directee is afraid to move into what may seem comparatively arid, empty and formless. This transition is not merely a question of changing one's way of praying, a matter of method or technique. The movement into a more passive, contemplative form of prayer indicates an invitation to a more complete surrender to God not only in prayer but also in everyday living; an invitation to allow God increasingly to lead. To block this transition is to impede growth, and that is why John of the Cross, for example, takes it very seriously.

The cloud offers various signs by which a person's readiness for contemplation can be known. A basic condition is a serious attempt over a period of time to live the Christian life, arising out of and accompanying sorrow for sin, repentance and confession. Beyond this, the author also presupposes that the readers will not be absolute beginners in a life of prayer, but will already have spent time in the regular practice of 'many sweet meditations . . . on their own wretched state, on the passion, the kindness and the great goodness and the worthiness of God' (chapter 7). They will also be spending time regularly in the threefold occupation proper to the contemplative apprentice: reading, reflecting and praying (chapter 35).

A further sign of readiness will be the experience of a persistent 'leash of longing' for contemplative life and prayer (chapter 1), and a 'true affinity for the effect of this exercise'. Not all those who have a congenial feeling for this form of prayer, however, are necessarily called by God to be contemplatives or ready to move into contemplation. The feeling must be tested, and a more reliable indication is a persistent

desire that 'is always pressing on their minds more regularly than is so with any other exercise' so that nothing else seems of any value in comparison with this 'little secret love' (chapter 75). Even so this impulse is unlikely to remain continuously. For various reasons it is sometimes withdrawn for one's own good (chapter 75). So when the withdrawal of the desire for this contemplation causes great pain and then the return of the desire gives even greater joy, this is a most authentic sign that the person is being drawn by God into this way of contemplation (chapter 75). It is a common experience in spiritual direction that a change into a new way of praying that seems to have been indicated by such signs as these brings a new taste for prayer and revives the joy of praying.

It is rare to meet a book that is as committed as *The cloud* to an apophatic approach to prayer. Contemplation means loving rather than knowing: 'because (God) can certainly be loved but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought' (chapter 6). Because God is not accessible to thought, this kind of contemplation is experienced as darkness for the mind and imagination. All thoughts, even 'good and holy thoughts' about God and his creatures, are to be hidden in a 'cloud of forgetting', as one reaches out with a 'dart of longing love' in darkness to God (chapter 7). Even so, it would be inaccurate to think that *The cloud* is recommending an entirely imageless and wordless form of prayer. The use of a short word or image such as 'God' or 'love' is advised. This word, as it were, arises from within the praying person and sums up in a very expressive way the love and the longing. But discursive thought and the active use of imagination in dwelling on images are seen as a waste of time in contemplation and even a positive hindrance to growth.

Discernment

One difficulty about writing a book designed to guide others in prayer is the fact that what suits one person may be wrong for another, and what is right for a person at one time may not be right at another. Discernment of these things does not work

by rule. Of silence and strict fasting and retiring into solitude the same author writes in another place:

they are sometimes good, sometimes bad; sometimes for you, sometimes against; sometimes a help, sometimes a hindrance. It could be that were you always to follow the particular urge that would bind you to silence, strict fasting and solitude, you would often be dumb when you ought to be speaking, fasting when you ought to be eating, and on your own when you should be with others.¹

And so of other choices and activities in all walks of life besides the monastic. What *The cloud* offers are some guidelines towards a method of discernment, based on such classic teaching as the following:

And do not be afraid of the devil, for he cannot come so close. He can never come to move a man's will except very rarely, and very indirectly, no matter how clever he is. Nor can a good angel move your will effectively without an intermediary. In short, nothing can move it except God. (chapter 34)

But the consolations . . . which come suddenly from outside, even though you do not know whence, I beseech you hold all these suspect. For they can be either good or evil. If they are good, they are produced by a good angel, and if bad, then by an evil angel. (chapter 48)

For the actual practical application of *The cloud's* teaching on discernment it is not necessary to adopt the author's theoretical framework of the activities of good angels and bad angels. But the 'sharp, two-edged, awesome sword of discretion' (chapter 33) is a necessary gift. One particularly interesting insight of *The cloud* is that contemplation itself teaches discernment. By giving her/himself 'immoderately' (chapters 41, 42) to loving God in this contemplation, which is 'the one thing necessary' chosen by Mary,² a person increasingly knows with growing certainty which options, courses of action and styles of life are in harmony with this love and which are not.

Then that very thing you are experiencing will know how to tell you when to speak and when to be silent. It will govern your whole life with discretion and certainty, and will teach you mystically how to begin and how to cease in all these natural matters with great and supreme wisdom.³

The human heart ordinarily runs after many things in the course of even a short span of time and experiences many different desires and fears, attractions and revulsions. In prayer as in the rest of life we become aware of various levels of affective experience ranging from surface emotion to profound feeling. In this complexity, our tradition holds that there are fundamentally two kinds of feeling that are important for discernment of spirits: what might be called positive feeling towards God and his will ('consolation'), and negative feeling towards God and his will ('desolation'). At root, both of these are states of personal being which manifest themselves in our affective experience. Consolation includes such experiences as a felt love for God, a profound sense of peace and joy, of being in harmony with oneself and one's own most authentic truth. Desolation is the opposite of this, and can include experiences of darkness, stress, anxiety, inner conflict and turmoil, as well as an attraction to what is likely to draw one away from God. Both consolation and desolation, it should be remembered, can be productive of growth. Only sin is truly evil and God brings good even from that.

The author of *The cloud* naturally wants to help his friend to interpret the different 'stirrings' that he is likely to experience in the course of learning contemplation, and to discriminate between helpful and unhelpful attractions, desires and other kinds of feeling. He suggests that in order to know which kinds of pleasurable feeling, superficial or profound, can be trusted and acted upon, one should look at their origin. The true wellspring of contemplation is a 'devout stirring of love which dwells in pure spirit'. This love will sometimes be felt pleasurably in the emotions and 'bodily senses'. This kind of consolation can be welcomed as a gift because of its origin in the 'stirring of love'. Felt consolations, however, sometimes have another origin: 'sounds, gladness and sweetness which

come suddenly from outside' (chapter 48). Here *The cloud* advises the contemplative to 'hold all these suspect' because they can be either aids or hindrances to growth and need further discernment. This further discernment is learned through consultation with a spiritual director and the practice of contemplation itself (chapter 48). The author of *The cloud* also hands on the traditional teaching about what our attitude of contemplation itself (chapter 48). The author of *The cloud* also hands on the traditional teaching about what our attitude to pleasant feelings towards God should be. Their presence is not in itself a sign of the quality of holiness. What is important is to be as God wishes, to welcome pleasant and positive feelings towards God when they are given and not to be dependent on them (chapter 50).

The writer of *The cloud* is also concerned to warn his pupil of likely pitfalls and misleading experiences that he might encounter in his future growth. Some of these seem to be part of a kind of popular mysticism of the time, experiences on which people in the current contemplative world tended mistakenly to set great value, perhaps partly under the influence of the spread of the writings of Richard Rolle. These pitfalls include a tendency to strain after certain kinds of feelings and emotional states, believing that these are somehow 'mystical' or signs of growth in holiness. Rather than straining 'like a greedy greyhound', the true contemplative will 'wait patiently on the will of our Lord with courtesy and humility' and 'learn to love God with quiet, eager joy, at rest in body as in soul' (chapter 46).

Other possible dangers are due to misunderstanding the language of spirituality. This misunderstanding, which may be intentional or simply naive, consists of giving a 'physical' meaning to what is intended 'spiritually' (chapter 51), thus emphasizing superficial emotion and some physical phenomena associated with piety at the expense of genuine contemplation. Further dangers mentioned include exhibitionism, hypocrisy, obduracy, self-righteousness and extreme moral zeal which leads to a constant habit of condemning others. *The cloud* helpfully shows how external behaviour in these cases is indicative of a person's deeper attitudes. These false paths are also examples of evil's well known tendency to appear disguised as good. The disguises are suited to the person and the age in which they occur, and our own current ones are prob-

ably not the same as those noted in fourteenth-century England. But the spiritual direction principle remains the same: religious experiences are to be evaluated by the results they produce in terms of how a person actually lives. *The cloud's* chief touchstone for this evaluation is the fact that genuine contemplation springs from and engenders Christian love. So the signs to look for are those of love (chapter 24), following the guidance of St Paul (1 Cor 13:1-8).

Evaluations

The charm, the wisdom and the appealing literary gifts of the author go a long way towards explaining the continuing popularity of *The cloud*. Its spiritual guidance is profound and encouraging and is especially valued at the present time because its apophatic approach to prayer seems to provide points of contact with Eastern Christian and some non-Christian mystical traditions which have been enjoying a revival of interest in the West.

Some of the limitations of *The cloud* are those of the apophatic tradition in general. In downplaying the role of knowledge and imagination in prayer, this tradition sometimes seems to imply that these are inimical to true contemplation and do not really enter into a person's profound relationship with God. This is clearly an unacceptable position to hold. Genuine contemplation implies a personal response to God in which the different 'faculties' eventually come into harmony and have a part to play. Neither understanding nor imagination is irrelevant to prayer, though even the kataphatic traditions insist, as does *The cloud*, that they are to be ruled and guided by love. Another limitation, too, of the style of contemplation advocated by *The cloud*, as of any form of prayer, is that it probably suits certain temperaments and types of person rather than others. Some are happy with a prayer that is relatively non-conceptual and free from images; others ask for more scope for understanding and especially imagination. We need both the apophatic and the kataphatic approaches, and it is important for a modern spiritual director to appreciate the

value of both and to be able to assist different kinds of people to find their true path of prayer.

Most people who take prayer seriously experience some form of darkness at different stages in their growth. This may be associated with experiences like bereavement and grieving, illness, loss of confidence in oneself and/or God, conflict and turmoil within or in relation to others or periods of intellectual, moral and spiritual doubt. The times when accustomed ways of praying and of relating to God no longer seem valid can also be very dark indeed. At such times *The cloud* can be both a very informative guide and a real encouragement. It shows clearly that darkness and forms of 'unknowing' are to be expected in a life of prayer and that they can in fact be welcomed as a positive if painful invitation to deepen and integrate more fully one's love for God and people.

The cloud belongs to a monastic tradition which holds solitude and contemplation in special esteem. There is a real danger, however, that behind some forms of spiritual advice about treading all creatures underfoot and placing them in a 'cloud of forgetting' there lies an unhealthy disparagement of God's creation. Withdrawing from 'creatures' in order to find God, whether physically into a monastery or desert or in a 'cloud of forgetting' in prayer, can imply a mistaken, world-denying view that God cannot really be found in the midst of his creation. Though this is not necessarily the outlook of the writer of *The cloud*, it is not uncommon in some forms of Christian spirituality, and needs to be balanced by another strand of the Christian tradition which emphasizes that created reality itself is sacramental, the primary revelation of God to humanity. This would mean that living in 'the world' and contemplating God's creation and human history as they evolve are also recognized as a valid pathway to God. Creation and history mediate the presence and nature of God to the contemplative person. *The cloud* focuses almost exclusively on the individual's person-to-person, contemplative relationship with God. This is no doubt largely due to the circumstances and the age in which it was written. It would be unfortunate, however, if modern readers assumed that this is the only relationship to be considered in spiritual direction, and that interpersonal and social-structural issues are unimportant or

even irrelevant. The author of *The cloud* is clearly aware of the interpersonal dimensions of his guidance; this is obvious from what he writes about charity. But the modern attention to the social, structural and political dimensions of spirituality is a sign of a more recent maturing of the Christian consciousness. Once again, therefore, the teaching of *The cloud* has to be supplemented and rounded off by an approach to spiritual direction which seriously takes account of the social and political structures of the world and of current issues of social justice.

Notes

- ¹ 'The discernment of stirrings', in *A study of wisdom*, trans. and ed. Clifton Wolters (Oxford: SLG Press), pp. 27-28. Cf. 'The assessment of inward stirrings', in *The pursuit of wisdom*, trans. and ed. James A. Walsh SJ, preface by George A. Maloney SJ (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988).
- ² *A study of wisdom*, p. 35.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

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