

3. The Cloud of Unknowing – The Anonymous Author

This lecture examines the anonymous work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Because of his mystical depth, theological acumen, psychological shrewdness, and soundness of spiritual direction, its author has been called the English equivalent of John of the Cross - whom not a few scholars consider to be Christianity's greatest mystic and mystical writer. However, because of the monk's unique way of contemplating God, his teachings have struck and still strike some Christians in our day as odd and even as unchristian.

I. The Cloud of Unknowing: Just as the cloud of unknowing lies above you, between you and your God, so you must fashion a cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and every created thing. - James Walsh, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), Chapter V, para 1.

The Cloud of Unknowing: The mystical masterpiece, the one work I would unhesitatingly recommend to those who know nothing of the Christian mystical life. Perhaps the greatest English-writing mystic. Controversial because of his "apophatic mysticism" that stresses love alone and what God is not. Four types of Christian life: ordinary, special, singular, perfect, it.

II. The Nature of the Work: The anonymous author wrote his treatises specifically - but not exclusively - for a young Carthusian. Emphasis on dark, silent, mystical contemplation. Little about the pre-mystical stages of prayer. Does praise the intelligent savoring of scripture and "sweet meditations" as the safest way of mystical contemplation. Fidelity to one's daily devotions will result in "spiritual insight" and "blind desire." Leads to "active" or "acquired" contemplation because it can be reached through human effort and God's "ordinary" grace. Mystical contemplation is superior and requires a "special" grace.

Offered to people from all walks and stations of life, strictly God's exceptional gift. "God alone is the chief worker and he alone takes the initiative, while the person consents and suffers his divine action." - Anonymous in Harvey D. Egan, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition*, 86. Four signs (exterior and interior) that indicate the need to move from "ordinary" meditations to mystical contemplation.

III. Apophatic Contemplation: To enkindle the "tiny flame of love" arising at the core of the contemplative's being, one must firmly reject everything that comes into the mind in order to create a "cloud of forgetting" between oneself and all created things. A "cloud of unknowing," that is, the absence of knowledge, will then arise between the contemplative and God. Pray with a blind "dart of desire."

Selecting a short meaningful word - such as "God," "love," or "sin"- fixing it in one's mind, but not pondering its meaning. Pray with naked love. Dangerous period: filled with "great storms" and "temptations." All the sins of one's life arise. Experience that one is a "lump of sin." The self as a cross. Agony of not being able to love as much as one is loved. Ecstatic revelations. Union with - yet difference from - God.

Although emphatically theocentric and apophatic, this mysticism remains inextricably linked to the person of Jesus Christ. Mary Magdalene as the ideal contemplative.

IV. True and False Contemplatives: The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* distinguishes between true or genuine contemplatives and false contemplatives whom he refers to as "the devil's contemplatives." The devil's contemplatives: Listen only to themselves. Bypass the signs. Eccentric mannerism, strain. Rage against Church teaching.

Genuine contemplatives: Naked love may sometimes manifest itself ecstatically, more often as a gentle, peaceful, silent love permeating all the contemplative's daily activities. Contemplation in daily life as apostolic, the best form of love we can give. Discernment of spirits: tiny dart of love as a needle in heart. Summary: "This little love is the essence of a good life and without it no good work is possible." - James Walsh, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), Chapter 49, para 1.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you find the focus on darkness, forgetting, etc., in apophatic mysticism difficult or helpful?
2. How does the distinction between true and false contemplatives help temper some of the "dangers of apophatic mysticism?"