



Meditatio
TALKS SERIES 2016 C · JUL - SEP

REVD GRAEME WATSON

TALKS ON

The Cloud of Unknowing

*God can well be loved,
but he cannot be thought.*

Transcript of talks at Meditatio Centre, London, UK, 2016

© The World Community for Christian Meditation, 2016

THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION
www.wccm.org welcome@wccm.org

CONTENTS

1. Introduction and Title	5
2. One Little Word	9
3. The Cloud of Unknowing	12
4. The Cloud of Forgetting	15
5. The Two Sisters	18
6. Sin	21
7. The First Essential Virtue: Humility	24
8. The Second Essential Virtue: Charity	28



It is through the gift of love, that we come nearest to God. Because God is beyond all human understanding, those who seek God must go 'outside the box'.

1

The Cloud of Unknowing: A Book of Contemplation

John Main described *The Cloud of Unknowing* as ‘the most succinct, practical and balanced guide to meditation in the English mystical tradition’. My edition is *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, edited by A C Spearing, Penguin Books, London, 2001.

In these 8 talks I am going to explore some of the leading themes of this spiritual classic, written in medieval English by an anonymous writer, probably a monk and a priest in a contemplative community. He sums up the essentials of what we know today as Christian meditation.

In this first talk, I am going to make some comments about the title page:

*Here Begins a Book of Contemplation called
The Cloud of Unknowing,
in the which a soul is made one with God.*

As all these words are important, I will read them again: ‘Here begins a book of contemplation, called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in the which a soul is *made one with God*. Let’s first think about the meaning of the word ‘Contemplation’.

Contemplation

For most people living today ‘contemplation’ very often means an exercise of the brain, using your powers of observation followed by thought and reflection. It is an intellectual activity in which intelligence and *thinking* play the leading parts. In modern terms it is a left-hand side of the brain exercise. So in a religious context, it is *thinking* about God, studying the Bible, listening to a sermon, or reading theological books and so on.

In its origin the meaning of the word contemplation is quite different. It is not concerned only, or even mainly, with thinking at

all. It is a *spiritual* and *religious* practice, relating to the whole personality – body, mind and spirit.

The root word in contemplation is *temple*. A *temple* is a sacred place, a place where human beings seek to make connection with the Divine, the Unseen Power or Powers that transcend all that we see, hear and touch in the world around us. Now it’s significant that for the most part temples are sacred places open to *all* people, regardless of their gender, intellectual ability, education, race, nationality or ethnicity. The Jewish Temple, for example, had its special holy spaces for women and for those who were not Jews. Jesus himself was insistent that the Kingdom of God is open to the ‘little ones’ – those with little or no status in society, not least, young children. So contemplation is an activity which is available to everybody. It is essentially inclusive, simple and direct.

So too *The Cloud of Unknowing* is *not*, definitely not an esoteric book, accessible only to specialists in prayer, priests, monks and nuns, living in enclosed quarters. Though originally addressed to a young novice monk aged 24, it is a book that has always been valued by anyone who wants to understand what contemplative prayer is and how to practise it.

The Cloud of Unknowing

In a later talk we shall come on to talk in more detail about this key phrase, the *cloud of unknowing*. For the present, the important thing to be clear about, as the author reminds us, is that God is invisible, and not only is God invisible, God is beyond all human understanding, and reasoning. So the only way in which God can be approached is through a relationship of love. This is his central message. As St John says:

*God is love; those who dwell in
love are dwelling in God,
and God is in them.* (1 John 4:16)

It is through the gift of love, that we come nearest to God. Because God is beyond all human understanding, literally incomprehensible, those who seek God must go ‘outside the box’, their brain box – their ideas, their thought processes, their memories, even their ideas of God – and be prepared to enter a dark unseen world, where there are no familiar landmarks. It is like entering into a

tunnel, a dark cave, or into an unfamiliar room in total darkness. To enter into what the author calls,

the darkness of unknowing, darkness which is truly hidden, and in which all intelligible knowledge is shut up.

The author likens this experience of God's presence to the experience of Moses in the Arabian desert. Moses was invited by God to climb Mt Sinai, and there, the Scriptures tell us, he entered the dark cloud on the top of the sacred mountain, and there – note these words:

in singleness of love, having neither feeling nor thought of any existing thing, nor yet of himself, was made to experience in every way the presence of him who is above all things. (The Cloud Ch 1)

The key to the experience of God then is 'singleness of love', in other words, single-hearted love. It is when you approach God, like Moses, with no preconditions and no expectations, but with a completely open mind and heart, that you can experience, be aware of, the presence of God – the 'still small voice'.

Soul made one with God

For some people the thought of being 'oned', that is being united, with God raises some awkward questions. They say: 'Isn't the gap between us finite, sinful and deficient human beings, and the infinite Holy God simply too great to be bridged? How can we be made one? This is indeed a question that the author of *The Cloud* himself faced and answered. Here I simply want to point out that, as far as Christians are concerned, this question has been completely answered in the life, death and, above all else, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is both utterly human and absolutely divine.

From the first generation of Christians, the Risen Christ was a present reality in their lives. So they said, 'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.' (Gal 2.20) These powerful words of St Paul aren't just catch-phrases, or slogans. They represent the actual daily experience of all those millions of people, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, Jew and non-Jew, male and female, who were, and are still being drawn

into the community of faith in Jesus Christ.

To be a Christian is to be 'in Christ', to be a member of Christ's Body, incorporated into the life of the Triune God through Christ in the power of God's Spirit, now dwelling in our hearts. This is a profound experience of unity, not only with other human beings in all their diversity, but ultimately a unity with all of God's creation, and with the Giver of the gift of all life. And the best way I know to realise this tremendous truth in my everyday life is to sit down twice a day for between 20 and 30 minutes and say my prayer word without ceasing, in singleness of body, heart and mind



2

One Little Word

With this [one little] word you are to beat on the cloud and the darkness above you. (The Cloud Ch 7)

Listen to these words from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 37:

If a man or woman is frightened by some sudden occurrence of fire, or [news of] someone's death... he is driven by haste and necessity to shout or beg for help. So how does he do it? Certainly not in many words... . And why is that? Because it seems too long a delay to express the urgency and agitation of his spirit. And so he bursts out violently, and in great emotion, and shouts just a short word of one syllable... FIRE! or OUT! Just as this short word FIRE! soon arouses the ears of his listeners, and pierces them more rapidly, so does a short word of one syllable, when it is not just spoken or thought but secretly intended in the depth of the spirit. It pierces the ears of almighty God sooner than any long Psalm mindlessly mumbled in the mouth. That is why it is written 'short prayers pierce heaven.'

'Short prayers pierce heaven.' To illustrate his teaching our author uses thoroughly down-to-earth incidents or pictures from everyday life, as real today as they ever were.

So our author teaches his readers to be as simple and direct in their approach to God as they might be to their parents, family or neighbours. He suggests addressing God in words of one syllable: LOVE! or GOD! No undue deference. Address God as you would your nearest and dearest! Keep it short. Keep it simple. We are reminded of Jesus' own teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases, as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven...'. (Mt 6:7-9)

Our author is not of course suggesting for a moment that God hears us only when we cry or shout, and he certainly doesn't mean that God hears only those who cry loudest. Nor is he saying that God can be addressed only in words of one syllable. He means rather: *be simple, be direct!*

The important thing is to use a word or phrase that is brief and memorable. John Cassian, deriving his teaching from the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th century, taught the well-known prayer phrase from the Psalms:

*O God, make speed to save us:
O Lord, make haste to help us. (Ps 70)*

Others may be drawn to use the Jesus Prayer from the Eastern Orthodox tradition:

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,
have mercy upon me, a sinner.*

The phrase word that John Main taught his followers to use is one that seems to work well for many of us: *maranatha*, meaning 'Lord, come.' It is short and simple, just four syllables, thus: *ma-ra-na-tha*. It is an Aramaic prayer that we find in the New Testament. We know that when we say it, we are praying in the exact same way as the first Christians.

So it's a prayer word that's deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. But when we meditate there is no need to think about its meaning. We are not 'thinking' at all. We are simply being aware of the present moment. Whatever prayer word or mantra we use, it should be said silently, interiorly, and contemplatively, in whatever way best suits our breathing. And also it is important to 'listen' to our mantra in order to aid our concentration, and to keep our focus.

'Say your mantra' was always John Main's simple and straightforward advice to anyone who asked him questions about the practice of Christian meditation. When people start meditating, they often assume that the practice will be easy once they have mastered the 'technique'. But the technique is so simple that a young child can do it. What we have to master is not a technique, but a discipline, and that is a hundred times more challenging. One of the problems we have today is that we live in a world in which we are valued mainly for our skills. A set of skills is marketable. So we find it hard

to believe that anything so simple as sitting and saying our mantra could be useful or valuable. Meditating is first and foremost a discipline that needs motivation, perseverance and application.

Because he knows from his own personal experience that the practice of contemplative prayer is not easy, *The Cloud* author is very quick to suggest three considerations that may help his readers, in chapter 3. The first is that we are never alone. We have the unseen saints and angels on our side. The second thing to remember is not to let ourselves ever be discouraged by self-doubt, by our failures in discipline, or by the mockery of others. These are simply the work of the devil, he says, or if you like, our personal demons or nagging doubts about our own self-worth. The third thing to remember is that, though of course we may have little awareness of how much our faithful and regular daily practice helps others, like a stone thrown into a pond, it sends out ripples and waves in all directions. Other people benefit, not least those who live closest to us.

Although he is the first to admit that the practice of meditation is, again in his words, 'extraordinarily difficult', yet he also insists that when we are given the help and grace of God it is, in his own words, 'the easiest work of all and soonest completed'. Like any human art or skill it requires regular committed practice. John Main gave a good example from his own experience. He once went to a concert given by the great violinist, Yehudi Menuhin. His playing was so sublime and so relaxed, he made it look easy. But of course Main knew very well that the secret of his skill was Menuhin's concentrated hours of practice every day. We do need to practise regularly, preferably every morning and evening for between 20 and 30 minutes. Remember that all over the world, every hour of the day and night, thousands of others are also doing it, your unseen companions.

Like most love affairs our relationship with God inevitably has its ups and downs. There are times when we find it difficult to make the space for prayer, or we feel unmotivated. And there are times, perhaps quite often, when we feel that God just isn't there for us. This is normal too. Don't worry about it. By its very nature, meditating is making an act of faith in the belief that the practice is self-authenticating. It is what you are called to do. Many would say from their own experience that it is the key to life and love.



3

The Cloud of Unknowing

Beat on that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love. (The Cloud ch 6)

In my first talk, I gave a brief explanation of the phrase 'the cloud of unknowing'. Now let's explore these key words a little further.

This is what our author says: everyone who tries to be a contemplative experiences at first 'only a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing'. 'This cloud,' he says, 'is felt as something between you and your God.'

What you must do then is to 'prepare to remain in this darkness as long as you can'. 'If you are ever to feel or see him, so far as is possible in this life, it must always be in this cloud and this darkness.'

In other words, do not enter into contemplative prayer expecting immediate enlightenment or peace of heart. Do not expect *anything*. You are entering into a space in which all familiar landmarks have been obliterated, where all your previous knowledge is of no help to you. You are groping in the dark. It's like entering into a cave or tunnel where there is no light of any kind. Everything that is known to you has been discarded, put on one side. You are entering into the 'cloud of unknowing'. And this is where you will find God, or rather you will experience God's loving presence. And what is God like?

In chapter 6, the author of *The Cloud* teases his readers with the same question: 'But now you ask me, 'How am I to *think* of God himself, and what is he?'' And to this question, he replies simply: 'I do not know.' Does that mean that he was an agnostic in the modern sense? Someone who is sceptical about God's existence? Not at all! He is absolutely clear that God has been revealed to us through creation, and uniquely in the person of Jesus, who is both human and divine.

What he means is this, and here I paraphrase: It is possible to

have complete knowledge of God's creation, and indeed to know all that God has done through the study of astronomy, physics, geology, biology, all the natural and human sciences, and the history of the world, and to think clearly and systematically about them. But the one thing we *cannot* do is to grasp or comprehend God. God is utterly beyond the range of all human thought. Theologians can work away, but after many years of struggle they all have to admit that they can do little more than some preliminary digging on the surface of things.

This story is told of the great 5th century theologian St Augustine. While writing one of his great theological works, he had a dream. He saw a small boy on the seashore. The boy had a spade with which he was digging a hole in the sand. Carrying a small bucket, the boy kept going down to the sea, filling the bucket with water, and returning to empty it into the hole. In his dream, Augustine stopped the boy, and asked, 'What are you doing?' The boy replied, 'I am emptying the sea into my hole.' In his dream Augustine laughed, and said: 'Oh, you'll never do that. Your hole is too small, and the sea is so vast.' Whereupon, the boy turned into an angel and said: 'Nor will you ever fill your small brain with the vastness of God.' J B Phillips, one of the first scholars to translate the New Testament into contemporary English, wrote a brilliant little book called: *Your God is too Small*.

We too can laugh but, of course, let's face it, most of us grow up with some idea or image of what God is like. Sooner or later, we find that image is totally inadequate, and we either give up our faith, or we dig deeper. God is far, far greater and more mysterious than we thought. The important point to grasp is that we cannot become united with God by thinking *about* God, or thinking *of* God. We can be united with God only by accepting God's love and then responding to it with love. As our author says:

And so I wish to give up everything I can think, and choose as my love the one thing I cannot think. For God can well be loved, but he cannot be thought.'

There are times, of course, as our author himself says, when it is very good to think about God's love, or God's excellence, or God's beauty. We do this when we reflect on, for example, the mystery of the Incarnation, or hear a sermon, read a devotional book, or study

the life of someone admirable, saintly or heroic. In that sense, he says, 'this may be a light and even part of contemplation'. But for our actual time practising contemplative prayer, he says, 'we need to step above it stoutly but deftly, with a devout and delightful stirring of love, and struggle to pierce that darkness above you; and beat on that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love, and do not give up whatever happens.' (ch.6)

*Beat on that thick cloud of unknowing
with a sharp dart of longing love.*

This is one of our author's most memorable sayings. It is one to ponder on deeply until it is ingrained into the fabric of our being. As I have said before, our author has the wonderful gift of being able to use images from everyday life to illustrate his wisdom about the life of the spirit. Contemplative prayer is not sitting in a passive stance until you hear a divine message, or until you see lights, or have visions, or experience speaking in tongues. It is found in giving God one's total attention. It is a positive *action* arising out of a deep and unremitting desire to be united to God, the desire to respond to God's unconditional love with an act of sincere and wholehearted love. It is the saying of a prayer phrase, or mantra, a saying which involves no physical movement of the lips, not even a whisper, but which is done interiorly, silently, simply as a movement of the heart. No physical movement, but a spiritual movement. So the body is to remain still, yet there must be an inner sense of alertness, a dynamic movement that takes one to the centre, the core of one's being.

*Beat on that thick cloud of unknowing
with a sharp dart of longing love.*



4

The Cloud of Forgetting

....so you will need to put a cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and everything that was ever created. (The Cloud ch 5)

Forgetting things is a common problem for us as we grow older. That's certainly beginning to be a bit of a problem for me. I forget people's names; when I arrive upstairs I forget what I came to fetch; what I ate for my main meal yesterday. But when our author talks about a *cloud of forgetting*, he's not talking about experiencing a lapse of memory, or a mental blackout or anything of that kind. He means a conscious *intention* to put aside everything we know, or could be imagined, all thoughts, ideas, memories, hopes, fears, fantasies, whatever occupies our mind.

He is of course tackling the problem of mental distractions. Now, for anyone who tries to pray, any kind of prayer at all, mental distractions are always a problem.

Neuroscientists tell us that even when we are asleep our minds never switch off. Thousands of neurons are buzzing away. Even when we are asleep our unconscious minds are far from idle. And when we are conscious, awake, our minds are extremely active – observing, sensing, hearing things, and then processing all these data, relating them to our experience, our memories, our fears and hopes. This is life. But when we wish to pray, we need to reduce that volume of mental activity, in order to free up our minds, so that we can focus on God.

Now if mental distractions are a problem for anyone who prays, you can be sure that when we try to practise contemplative prayer, they are an even greater problem. For now we are deliberately leaving aside all our thoughts, even our holy thoughts, our godly aspirations, in order to come entirely naked before God.

You must, our author tells us, 'put a thick cloud of forgetting between you and everything that has ever existed. You must

tread them down, trample them under your feet, hide them, cover them with a thick cloud of forgetting.

During the time of our contemplative prayer, we must treat them as if they did not exist. In other words make a deliberate act and intention of putting out of reach, of shelving, all thoughts, calculations, plans, hopes, fears, imaginings, dreams and all the rest of your normal daily mental activity. In a word, you are to become totally focused on God and God's presence with you, whether you are actually aware of God's presence or not, whether God 'seems' present or 'seems' absent.

The *Cloud* author has an acute understanding of the human psyche. He is very well aware of just how almost impossible is this intention to drop everything else, except the intention to be with God, into the 'cloud of forgetting'. So first he points out how easy it is to mistake the way to approach God. He says:

Perhaps it will seem to you that you are far distant from God because the Cloud of Unknowing is between you and him, but in fact, rightly understood, you are much further from God when you have no Cloud of Forgetting between you and everything that was created.' (ch 5)

The cloud of unknowing is really no problem to us, once we have grasped that *thinking* our way to God doesn't work. Love, and only Love will take us to God. It's thoughts which are the obstacle to finding God. So just drop all your mental activity into the cloud of forgetting.

So this is how our author advises his readers about intrusive thoughts.

If any thought rises up and keeps wanting to force itself above you, between you and the darkness [that is, the Cloud of Unknowing], and asks you, 'What are you seek-ing...? Say that it is God you would have; 'I want him, I seek him, and nothing but God.'and therefore say 'Get back down', and tread the thought down firmly with a stirring of love, even though it seems to you most holy, and as though it would help you to seek God.

He goes on to explain how such thoughts do not help you, no matter how good and holy they may be, because once we succumb

to the *thinking* part of our brain, we become in his word 'scattered', that is, fragmented, uncentred, pursuing random paths. Notice carefully, he is in no way rejecting reflection, what he calls 'sweet', reflections on the love of God, the Passion of Christ. Far from it. In fact, he acknowledges their desirability and indeed great importance in *preparing* ourselves for contemplative prayer. But when we have made such spiritual preparations, he says,

we must always leave them, and push them and hold them down, far beneath the cloud of forgetting, if ever we are to pierce the cloud of unknowing between us and our God.' (ch 7)

Once again we recall that the key to his teaching is that it is only by '*beating on the thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love*' that we find our oneness with God.

The Cloud of Unknowing constantly returns to this theme of the impossibility of thoughts, however good, holy or promising, being able to lead us into unity with God. Our mental images of God are always too limited, too distorted, too small, and therefore imperfect. They get in the way of simply resting in God's loving presence.

Years ago, a classmate of mine at our theological college where I trained to be a priest, asked one of our teachers, an experienced priest and monk, 'What is your personal image of God?' He replied 'A beam of brilliant light.' Is that image helpful to you? What is *your* image of God? Is it the same as it was when you were a child, an adolescent, or even 10 years ago? Is it possible for any of us, however wise we are, to have a fully mature image of God?

...so you will need to put a cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and everything that was ever created.



5 The Two Sisters

And so Mary hung her love and her longing desire on this cloud of unknowing. (*The Cloud* ch 16)

Listen to this reading from Luke's Gospel 10:38-42:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked: 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

It's an interesting and instructive story. How do you read it? Some people see Martha as the practical hostess, eager to make her guest welcome, and give him all he needs, while Mary is seen as useless, impractical, and uncooperative, ignoring the basic human needs of the visitor, self-centredly intent on her own spiritual progress.

This is not how the author of *The Cloud* understood the story. He saw it as showing very clearly how Jesus taught that time spent in stillness and silence in the Lord's presence is better than time spent in active service of others, even of himself. But he goes into the story in some depth to draw out some points that he believes are important.

First, he is very clear that Jesus loved both sisters equally. There is no indication that he did not appreciate Martha's loving service. The Gospels elsewhere make it abundantly clear that Jesus enjoyed many such social occasions, eating with a great range and variety of

people, reputable and disreputable, religious and unreligious, saints and sinners, friends and enemies. Martha and Mary are both saints, he insists, and humble and practical service is one way in which his disciples can show their love for one another.

The point at issue for him is that Martha is heard and observed by Jesus to be so distracted that she puts her own desire to be a 'good' hostess above all other considerations, such as courtesy and good manners towards both her sister and her guest. In her fussiness, she has failed to recognise the opportunity she had for putting aside practical tasks for a quiet time of listening.

Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me!

Jesus wisely refuses to do what she tells him to do! He doesn't take sides in a family dispute. He offers instead some friendly advice, some spiritual direction, we might call it.

Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.

But what is that better part which Jesus commends? That is left for the reader's imagination. Our *Cloud* author has his own interpretation, which we shall now explore.

For him the essence of what Mary is doing is exactly what his original reader, his novice monk, is being instructed to do when he attempts contemplative prayer. In a beautiful phrase, our author writes:

She is hanging her love and her longing desire on this cloud of unknowing.

Even though she may appear to be sitting quite still in her 'rest and ease' as he puts it elsewhere, she is far from idle. She is actively doing her work of prayer. It is a job requiring constant attention not so much to Jesus' physical human presence, he says, as to his Divine presence, a Divine presence, which cannot be seen or intellectually comprehended, but can be embraced only by love and longing desire, by loving darts of love, as he puts it. So she has to discard all unwanted thoughts, all superficial emotions, even all devotional prayers, any ideas, any images. In our author's words:

[Mary is] teaching herself to love something in this life she could not see clearly in her reason by the light of understanding, nor yet feel truly in her emotions in the sweetness of love. (The Cloud ch 16)

So the Mary of this story, our author suggests, may not yet fully know God, for God remains always beyond the grasp of all human knowledge, but her work of contemplative prayer is nevertheless 'the better part'. This is because she is teaching herself to love something which she cannot see clearly with her mind, only with her heart. Notice those two words: 'teaching herself.' Our *Cloud* author clearly sees how spiritual progress comes about when we come to *recognise for ourselves* a profound spiritual truth. Here speaks a master of spiritual direction. Mary, he says, is looking towards God with little silent words arising out of her heart. So the *Cloud* author writes:

She attended with all the love of her heart. From that she would not be diverted by anything she saw or heard spoken or done around her but sat with her body quite still, with many secret and eager thrusts of love into that high cloud of unknowing between her and her God.

Now how do we interpret this Gospel story in today's world? Perhaps we may think that the two sisters represent two different personality types, extrovert Martha, and introvert Mary. But it seems to me to be more insightful to think of the two sisters as representing two aspects of one personality, and two essential aspects of the Church. Whoever we are, all of us (as Jesus himself did) need to take regular time 'off' to engage in deep reflection, and indeed in this prayer of the heart called contemplative prayer, or silent meditation. Otherwise, like Martha in the story, we will lose our way, become fragmented, without harmony in ourselves and with others. At the same time, health-giving Churches need to be both active in society, and also offer resources for reflection, retreats, and contemplative prayer. As the great 20th century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner prophesied,

In the days to come you will either be a mystic (that is, one who has experienced God for real in your heart by regular contemplative prayer) or nothing at all.



6 Sin

*Contemplative prayer is the only work that
by itself destroys the root and ground of sin.*

In the Gospel of John 8:7 we read:

*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to
throw a stone at her.*

Challenged by Jesus to carry out the Law by stoning an adulterous woman to death, his opponents find themselves unable to accept Jesus' test. Their shame and hypocrisy had been exposed and they quietly retreated. 'Who among you is without sin?' asks Jesus of us too. 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us', St John says. (1 John 1:8)

But what is sin? Breaking the commandments? Trespassing over the boundary of acceptable behaviour? Erring and straying? Missing the mark? Rebellion against God? Failure of conscience? Embracing evil? Many such words and phrases come to mind; they may all be found in Scripture.

We need first to recognise that sin cannot be understood by the secular mind. Sin is not just a moral but a *religious* and spiritual concept. Our sins and moral failures are particular instances or symptoms of our *spiritual* sickness, our spiritual disease. For religious people throughout history, sin is the greatest barrier to be overcome if we are to find God, and true peace of mind. Christian teaching is that Christ died for our sins because he was innocent and without sin, and therefore could be the perfect and unique mediator between the Holy and Righteous God and sinful humanity.

The *Cloud* author takes sin utterly seriously but, like all good spiritual directors then and now, he treats it in a balanced way. He is not excessively moralistic, but on the other hand he is not lax or permissive. So he advises his young contemplative novice: 'Fill your spirit with the spiritual import of the word SIN' (he writes the word here in capital letters). 'But,' he continues to say, (1 paraphrase) 'don't

concern yourself with thinking whether you have committed a serious deadly sin or a pardonable sin.' For to contemplatives, he says, 'all sins seem equally great'. Even the smallest sins separate us from God, and hold us back from spiritual peace. So here is the significance of sin. Sin is the chief obstacle between erring humanity and the holy and righteous God. It is what stunts our spiritual growth, what prevents us from becoming the people by God's grace we have the potential to be.

So what is the remedy for sin? In a memorable phrase, the author tells his readers 'to feel sin like a lump'. (*The Cloud* ch 36) What does he mean by this word 'lump'? The word 'lump' may perhaps suggest an unwanted tumour or growth in the body. Whether benign or malignant, small or great, the lump or tumour needs to be removed, cut out. So it is with sin. It is like a lump in the soul, preventing healthy growth. Our author urges his readers, as they become aware of their sin, to shout continuously in spirit 'sin, sin, sin! Out, out, out.' This 'shout' from the heart, he says, is best 'learned by experience than from any human being by word'.

So he advises his readers not to waste time focusing their attention on their particular shortcomings, but to look upwards and constantly to recall God's love and grace. Once again his essential point is that *thinking about* God, or *thinking about our sins* cannot bring us an inch closer to God. Only one action can do that – only the offering of a humble stirring of love can break through the cloud of unknowing to bring us to oneness with God. For always we need to bear in mind this central truth: 'God cannot be grasped by thought, only by love.'

Once again, we turn to our author's favourite bit of the Bible: and his model saint, Mary of Bethany, whom (as was common in the Middle Ages) he mistakenly identified as Mary Magdalene, and also as the unnamed woman who came off the streets to wash Jesus' feet with her hair. He saw Jesus' disciple Mary as the very best example of a forgiven sinner, one who had in his words a 'deep heartfelt sorrow for her sins' yet one whose deepest sorrow was not for her sins, but, as she felt, for her 'lack of love' for God, although in fact, as our author remarks, '*she had an abundance of love*'. So, with a profound insight he says: 'It is the nature of a true lover that the more he loves, the more he longs to love.'

*It is the nature of a true lover that the more he loves,
the more he longs to love.*

So he appeals to our human experience. The way in which, as we yearn to give and to receive love more deeply, love grows and grows.

He then puts his finger on the futility and absurdity of getting agitated by morbidly and introspectively thinking about our sins. He asks this pointed question: ‘

Did Mary come down from the height of her yearning to love God into the depth of her sinful life and search in the stinking fen and dunghill of her sins, sorting them one by one in every detail, and sorrowing and weeping for each of them separately? No, [he says] she certainly did not. For in that way, [he says] she was more likely to have aroused in herself the possibility of sinning again than to have obtained complete forgiveness of her sins.

In other words he is saying: Obsessive attention to our sins is counter-productive. It may simply stimulate the imagination and so increase the temptation.

Now we come to *The Cloud's* what I think most liberating teaching on sin:

Contemplative prayer [he says] is the only work, the only activity, that by itself destroys the root and ground of sin.

Do not, he says, imagine for a moment that by taking up a self-denying life-style, – getting up very early, staying awake late into the night, sleeping on the floor, wearing a hair-shirt – by none of these things, admirable though they may be, will you ever be brought into union with God. Even your prayerful devotions, centred as they may be on Christ's Passion, though good and beneficial, will not achieve that goal.

No, [he says] there is only one thing, and one thing only that will bring you into unity with God, and this is that blind movement of love.

Without that insistent and regular impulse of love, none of these acts of self-denial will bring you any benefit. The important thing to grasp is this: it is only in the continuing practice of contemplative prayer that God works through us to bring healing to our fragmented, sick and damaged selves.

Contemplative prayer is the only work that by itself destroys the root and ground of sin.



7

The First Essential Virtue: Humility

Certainly anyone who could truly see and feel themselves as they truly are would be truly humble.

Right from the very first page of *The Cloud of Unknowing* we are told that the art of contemplative prayer is impossible without the virtue of humility. This is something that is amply confirmed for us by our own experience. Who is able to meditate without soon becoming aware how hard it is to keep their body physically still for more than a few minutes? As for mental and emotional distractions, who can meditate even for a few seconds without becoming aware how easily distractions can take over?

My own personal experience, having been meditating twice a day for more than 15 years, is that I don't make 'progress' in the normal sense of 'progress', that is, gradually getting better at resisting distractions, and being more attentive to my prayer-word. What happens is that I become more aware of my own weakness and limitations, and in that sense more ready to admit that I have no power to help myself, but must rely more and more on God's grace and compassion, in order to be present to God. So if (and that's a very big IF) I have great humility, that is nothing to be proud of. Once again it's all God's gift.

In the opening sentence of *The Cloud's* second chapter, our teacher addresses his novice meditator:

Look up now, weak wretch, and see what you are. What are you, and what have you deserved, to be called [to be called a meditator] like this by our Lord?

These are of course two very good questions for us also to ask ourselves? What or who am I? And again what have I done to deserve to be called to this practice of meditation?

In his very first chapter, the *Cloud* author holds up before his

disciple the nature of the high calling to which he has been invited by God. What a great privilege, he reminds him, it is to be called to be a contemplative! But in this second chapter, he warns him

not to think of yourself any holier or better because of this calling, because this calling is so noble...but think of yourself all the more wretched and accursed unless you do the best you can to live in accordance with your calling.

With great privileges come equally great responsibilities.

Moving on now to chapters 13, 14 and 15, we shall find here *The Cloud's* fullest treatment of the virtue of humility. Here our author explains:

humility is nothing else but one's knowledge and feeling of oneself as one is in the eyes of God; for certainly anyone who could truly see and feel themselves as they truly are would be truly humble.

So true humility is the virtue of being unassuming, not presumptuous, not expecting favourable treatment because of one's birth, position in society, or achievements, but rather accepting oneself as one really stands, in the sight of God, without illusion or fantasy. It is the quality that leads those who have it to share in the blessings of God's Kingdom: 'Blessed are the humble for they shall inherit the earth.' (Mt 5:5)

Another way of describing humility, which our author also uses, is to speak of 'knowing oneself': the ability to appreciate equally two things – what is within our capability, which is sometimes far greater than we suppose, under God's grace, and what on the other hand are the weaknesses and habitual sins that prevent us from reaching our full capability. In his spiritual autobiography, entitled *The Confessions*, St Augustine lamented that it took him so long to find God, because he was, as he put it, 'outside himself', in other words, not yet grounded and centred. So Augustine said:

Man must first be restored to himself, so that, making himself as it were a stepping-stone, he may rise from thence and be carried up to God.

I'll read that again:

Man must first be restored to himself, so that, making himself as it were a stepping-stone, he may rise from thence and be carried up to God.'

Knowing oneself is a lifelong task. Our author repeatedly links such self-knowledge with 'feeling oneself', that is, in modern language, 'being self-aware'. Using the language of contemporary neurological science, this is the self-knowledge that comes from both sides of the brain, the right side and the left side, the intuitive just as much as the reflective. So humility is a gift and grace that belongs to the whole personality, the heart as well as the head, as we say in popular speech. To give an example from my own experience, I was once asked by my bishop to go and visit a parish with a view to seeing whether it might be the right next posting for me. On paper it looked very suitable. It offered both a welcome environment and a challenge in terms of its congregation and the parish as a whole. But when my wife and I had a look at it, I became conscious of what might be called a negative 'gut' feeling. 'This parish just doesn't feel the right place for us'. It was hard to put it into words. I explained to the bishop what I felt. Wisely, I believe, he did not try to persuade me to think again. He was ready to recognise that my intuitive brain was doing a good job, or rather perhaps, as I came to see, the Holy Spirit was guiding me correctly.

Before we leave the topic of humility, there is something else that the author of *The Cloud* wants to teach us, which is worth thinking about. It is the difference between what he calls Perfect Humility and Imperfect Humility.

Let me explain why he made this distinction. There are two reasons, *The Cloud* says, why we need to be humble. The first reason is the obvious fact that we are sinful, morally weak and fallible. It is notable that the saints, being more self-aware than most of us, are able to see more clearly their own weaknesses and moral imperfections, rather than project their failings on to others. 'There, but for the grace of God, go I,' they say. They do not fall into the trap of seeing the speck of dust in someone else's eye, while unable to see the beam of wood in their own eye.

The second reason why we need to be humble is that there is an unbridgeable gap in one sense between the Creator and the Created; between the human and the divine; between the finite and the infinite; between that which might not have existed, and that which is pure Being and pure Love. Or, as *The Cloud* describes it, far more poetically:

the superabundant love and excellence of God in himself, at

*the sight of which all nature trembles, all scholars are fools,
and all saints and angels are blind.*

The point is this. In this life, we can rarely attain to perfect humility, a condition in which all thoughts of self disappear. Practising our regular times of meditation, we may perhaps experience brief moments of ecstasy, But such moments are but a foretaste or pledge of the final bliss to come, when in St Paul's well known words (1 Cor 13:12) 'I shall know God fully, even as I have been fully known' – a condition of perfect humility. But, do not be discouraged, the *Cloud* author urges us. Imperfect humility is quite sufficient for us, and is more than sufficient for our Loving God.



8

The Second Essential Virtue: Charity

*Charity means nothing but to love God himself
above all created things, and to love other humans
beings equally with yourself for God's sake.*

Charity: to Love God

Charity is the queen of all virtues, without which we are, in St Paul's hymn to Love, mere 'noisy gongs or clanging cymbals' (1 Cor.13:1).

*Charity means nothing but to love God himself above all
created things, and to love other human beings equally with
yourself for God's sake.*

This is what the author of *The cloud* says. There are two points I want you to notice here.

First, his definition of charity is of course based on the Gospel summary of the ancient Jewish law of God (Lk 11.27):

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with
all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your
mind; and your neighbour as yourself.*

Secondly, he introduces a unique explanatory note on that Gospel summary of the Law of God: we are to love God, he says, 'above all created things'. In this way, he reminds us of the crucial principle in the practice of contemplative prayer. We focus on God alone, and drop everything else into the 'cloud of forgetting'. All our thoughts, hopes, fears, and yes, even our heartfelt prayers for those we love must be put on one side. The essence of contemplative prayer is, as he reminds us, 'nothing but a naked intention directed towards God himself', in which there is no request or intercession

for anything else, no prayer, for example, in his words: 'for release from pain nor increase of reward, nor, in a word, anything but God himself'. We are not to waste the precious time we have for silent meditation in thinking about, or remembering, anything else or anyone else. Nothing must be allowed to distract us from the 'the work, the task' of contemplating God. Only so can we begin to fulfil the first commandment, in all its fullness and in its fourfold repeated emphasis: 'with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind.' In short, with every ounce of our being.

Charity towards Others

What does *The Cloud* have to say about charity towards others? Again, his teaching relates closely to contemplative practice, and it is startling in its radical simplicity. The gift of contemplative prayer, he says, enables us to develop an attitude of *equal regard* for everyone, whether the person we meet is a relative, a friend, a total stranger, or even someone we dislike or know as hostile. He says; 'for all alike seem kin to him, and none seems a stranger'. And it is perfectly clear that he states this not as an ideal, achievable only by those who are saints, but as something that is based on his own experience. So he says:

All seem his friends, and none his enemies, so that for him all those who torment him and cause him distress ...are his particular friends, and he feels moved to desire for them as he would for the closest friend he has.

In the next chapter (*The Cloud* ch 25), he goes on to say that contemplative prayer may lead one to pray for a stranger or an enemy as much as for a friend or relative; indeed one's prayer may sometimes be even *greater* for an enemy or stranger than for one's friend!

His advice is of course based on Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy, but I say unto you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.' (Mt 5:43-44)

Our author is confident that such prayer for others may, and indeed should, happen when our contemplative prayer is truly

centred on God, not on ourselves, nor on our own needs, nor on any egotistic desires or self-justification. Anyone who lives in close company with others who were not of their choosing knows very well that living in community is a very great test of charity. As one monk once said with a humorous twinkle in his eye: 'Life together in a religious community is wonderful. The only problem is the other monks!'

As our author himself explains charity is closely connected to humility. Both virtues are contained within 'this little blind thrust of love when it is beating upon the dark cloud of unknowing with everything else thrust down and forgotten'. (*The Cloud* ch 24)

But we need to be clear. Such all-embracing charity is never something we should make our goal in the actual practice of meditation. This would defeat the purpose of focusing our attention entirely on God. So our author neatly turns what might feel like a burdensome commandment into a fruit of the Spirit. As we persevere in our meditation, as everyone, from young children to mature adults usually discovers, it becomes evident (often more noticeable to others than to ourselves) that we become more kind, more patient, more loving, more gentle, more persevering, and so on. See Galatians 5:22-23.

I should like to finish this final talk with some amazing and encouraging words from our author, from chapter 54. It's again on the effects, the fruits, of contemplative prayer. He says confidently, drawing again on his experience:

The work of contemplation will have a favourable effect on the body as well as the soul of anyone who practises it, and make him agreeable to everyone, man or woman, who sees him.' [So much so, he says, that the] 'least handsome or beautiful person would be suddenly transformed into graciousness', [and] 'Thus all good people who saw them would be glad and joyful to have their company, and would find that in their presence they were very greatly comforted in spirit and helped by grace towards God.

So there you have it! Genuinely contemplative people, he promises, become both spiritually and physically more attractive. They are a pleasure to know. Their company is enjoyable. And they have the power to draw others towards the same way of prayer.

That's the Good News!

So go for it! Say your mantra, and meditate for between 20 and 30 minutes every morning and every evening, and you may prove the ancient wisdom of *The Cloud of Unknowing* to be as right now as it was when it written.



*Thinking our way to God doesn't work.
Love, and only Love will take us to God.
It's thoughts which are the obstacle to
finding God. So just drop all your mental
activity into the cloud of forgetting.*



REVD GRAEME WATSON is an Anglican priest based in the UK. He has served in pastoral posts and in training men and women for ordained and lay ministries. In 2003 he co-founded an ecumenical weekly Christian meditation group in North London. A spiritual director, he leads poetry workshops and retreats, and teaches meditation in the WCCM. He is the author of *Strike the Cloud: Understanding and Practising the Teaching of The Cloud of Unknowing*, and *The Song of Songs: A Contemplative Guide*.

Revd Graeme Watson presents the teaching of the 14th century spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* in a contemporary form. He explains the significance of approaching God through a one-word prayer, explains the significance of 'the cloud of unknowing' and 'the cloud of forgetting', reflects on humility and charity as virtues fundamental to human living and to contemporary prayer, and explains how contemplative prayer deals with the roots of sin. These talks will be of interest to those practising contemplative prayer and to those seeking to know more about it.

