

2. *Intro to The Cloud of Unknowing*

The Mystic Way

[Excerpted and adapted from Cliff Wolter's intro to *The Cloud of Unknowing*]

[An] untold host of Christian people of every degree of ability, culture, and temperament ... have practiced ... the threefold way of purgation, illumination, and (if so privileged) union. These devout and disciplined souls in their longing for God have always 'pressed towards the prize of his high calling in Christ Jesus.'

It will not be without value to set down in broad outlines the life of prayer as many see it today.... It will not only help us to see how *The Cloud* writings fit into the modern picture, but will also help us to see more clearly when prayer ceases to be ordinary and becomes mystical. But grasp these, and the whole scheme becomes both profound and simple. They are these:

- God is essentially indescribable, being beyond our power of comprehension
- He is not unknowable, however, for he can be reached, known, and 'oned with', by love
- That we are able to approach him is due to his grace or free gift

Prayer: vocal or mental

Mental prayer: meditation or contemplation

Meditation: deliberate, systematic reflection upon some truth or passage of scripture, to instruct the mind, to move the will, and to warm the heart for prayer. This is a fundamental step in the life of prayer.

Once the mind is sufficiently instructed in the things of God, and the heart turns easily toward him, meditation becomes less urgent, and indeed, unnecessary. It can even be a hindrance. For the soul who is getting to know God experimentally no longer depends upon this preliminary exercise, but can enter communion straight away. In this more intimate knowledge the freedom of the earlier stages tends to dry up, and it is sufficient to converse with God in simple phrases, sometimes often repeated.... The soul is now in love with God, and more tongue-tied. This stage of prayer is called *Affective*.

The time may come when the soul will feel its love to have dried up completely, and will be bewildered that it should be so. This stage is normally regarded as the beginning of Mystical Prayer. What is happening is that the soul in its generosity is giving everything it knows to God, and seeking him primarily. And he is responding and has come so near that the normal apparatus of the mind cannot interpret the experience until it is adjusted.... The result is that there is very real suffering on the part of the soul, who wants nothing but God, but can only feel desolation and dismay. For though the soul might think that it has given all over to God, it has still to learn that there is much yet to be surrendered. God must be loved not merely primarily, but for himself alone; all between has to go. This *night of the senses*, as some call it, is due to the loving action of God, for ... God is now more obviously taking the initiative, and assuming control.

This 'night' lasts for just so long as God wills, and ... for all the time that the soul needs such purging. It is sometimes accompanied by, and sometimes followed by a *night of the spirit* in which the soul undergoes further purification, becoming aware of its own utter worthlessness and nothingness, till it is clearly resolved to serve God wholly and solely for himself, and not for his consolations.

However long delayed, there is the inevitable outcome: to the dimly perceived presence of God there is an unreserved yielding and the soul begins to experience the touch of God such as it has never known before, quite indescribable, and absolutely ravishing.... All the soul can do in preparation is to be as wholly at God's disposal as it knows how, and to rejoice that whether it has bliss or darkness, such is the will of God for it and is best. Some theologians call this the *Prayer of Quiet*.

It is possible for these experiences to become more intense and frequent. *Full union* describes the awareness of union so deep that the powers of the mind are held captive, enraptured. In *Ecstatic union* the body is also held captive. (Almost all the spiritual masters warn against making ecstasy a sign of spirituality, and they say it should not be sought, and if experience, discounted.)

Spiritual marriage is the acme of mystical experience in this life, and very few reach this stage in which the soul becomes ready for the closest union with God possible on earth.

Who is this book for?

- Those who are really and wholly determined to follow Christ perfectly
- Not only in the active life, but to the utmost height of the contemplative life
- And who have been doing for a long time all that they can to come to the contemplative life.
- Else this book will mean nothing to them.
- [Although there is an exception for those in the active life who are called to contemplation and may experience it occasionally]

Currently, the book is used more broadly, as a more general guide to the spiritual life, and more widely, for all sorts of Christians.

Key ideas

The key to understanding the book is found in the first three chapters, and all the rest is comment and extension. God in his love is calling his young disciple to a higher stage of the spiritual life.

- His attitude must be one of longing desire and love for God
- He must have spiritual watchfulness
- He must forget the past
- He must have a dedicated will and determined desire to reach out for God in the intellectual darkness of the *Cloud of Unknowing*

The work of contemplation is initially God's, and ours is that of a responsive will.

This work of grace can be effected in a very brief time.

The intellect is not able to reach God. Thoughts and memories have to be put away under the 'Cloud of Forgetting.' Love is the way of union with God.