

The Cloud of Unknowing

There are these days many excellent books about Christian contemplation that would enrich and greatly help anyone wondering whether this discipline might be a part of their life. Why, then, bother to read something written in the fourteenth century?

Because it is modern; it is alive, it deals with things that we want to know about today. Relationship with God is our big issue as Christians, and the big issues hardly change at all down the long centuries of change and upheaval in our Churches. Modern books may say more than the Cloud, they may say things in a different way, but the key planks of what the anonymous author wants to tell his readers, then and now, are startlingly similar.

You will love the Cloud of Unknowing for its directness, its enthusiasm, its concern that the original 24-year-old target reader may come to share the wonder of contemplation.

You will love the concept of the Cloud, 'in which cloud' the sub-title tells us 'a soul is united with God', and also of the Cloud of Forgetting, smothering distractions.

You will love the understanding of the subject that you cannot avoid reaching in so clearly written a work. It is not neatly sequential, but flows around, and repeats, and so makes it's meaning abundantly clear. And it can be very funny; a huge bonus in spiritual writing.

What are you going to find?

It might be as well to begin with this reassurance: 'the whole of mankind is wonderfully helped by what you are doing in ways you do not understand'. So, in case you were feeling that contemplation is maybe selfish, or precious, know that it is beneficial to the world where you are.

The key to contemplation, says the author, is very simple. It is to know God by love. Not by intellect, not by searching and evaluating, not by researching, but by love alone. It doesn't help to think of God's kindness or his worth, of Our Lady, or of saints and angels. Although contemplation is likely to follow serious times of meditation, it is not meditation. It is just doing what Mary, sister of Martha did; sitting at the feet of Jesus, and the author is, thankfully, firm that it was indeed Mary who had the 'best part,' although Martha is to be forgiven and exonerated.

Contemplation is shooting one word arrows of love at this cloud of unknowing – which is not actual darkness, not an actual cloud. 'Strike that

cloud of unknowing with the sharp dart of longing and on no account think of giving up'.

Your word is preferably a word of just one syllable, to sum up (we might say 'represent') the naked intention directed to God – 'fix this word to your heart'. The author uses a sound analogy here; it is like when someone is an emergency; they will just cry 'help' or 'fire' – that one word is so important.

Somewhat more alien to a modern sensibility is much advice on sin, which the author feels as a lump: 'this filthy and nauseating lump of sin, part and parcel of yourself'. We speak about it differently, but, realistically, it is a sense of our own unworthiness that very often prevents from coming as near to God as we ideally wish to. The wise advice of the cloud is not to analyse sin, not to break it down into a big list of where we've gone wrong, but to treat it just as one lump, and if it hinders contemplation, keep on saying 'sin, sin, sin' as the little word.

It is notoriously difficult to explain what is the result of contemplation, and the Cloud doesn't give one answer, but by hints and allusion makes it clear that unmediated contact with God is the most wonderful state a Christian can hope for. (Although the author, as others do, makes clear that not everyone is a natural contemplative.) He likens the search as to a search for no thing, for nothing, but 'this 'nothing' is so worthwhile... 'it is overwhelming spiritual light that blinds the soul that is experiencing it.'

And there are more earthly rewards: 'I cannot believe that a soul who goes on with this work will make mistakes in mundane matters'.

Most comfortingly, we are assured that a real sign that contemplation is so worthwhile is that when there is a long inability to contemplate, if it comes back suddenly, the contemplative has a burning desire and deeper passion.

Even better, maybe: 'It is not what you are, or have been, that God looks at with his merciful eyes, but what you can be'.

So you will be engaged, and encouraged, heartened and not made to feel a hopeless amateur at this most perplexing, but uniquely valuable aspect of your life in Christ. You will see that this great work in which we try to take a little part has not changed in its essence since the Cloud of Unknowing was written six centuries ago. And the essence is still more ancient; the author takes us back to Dionysius and Augustine. The cloud of Unknowing stands in a mighty line of quiet wisdom

By Penny Hughes

