

THE BACK OF BEYOND

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING CONCLUDED

BY

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NO ONE who has any acquaintance with modern 'mystical' writings which come from the pens of such as Aldous Huxley or Gerald Heard will be unaware of the existence of dangers in the doctrine put forward by *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This book has become so popular with people who are not specifically Christian and who think they find an identical teaching in Indian and Sufi writings that it is suspect by many devout Catholics who are yet seeking courageously for perfection and would find otherwise much assistance in its pages. It is easy to point to its strong Dionysian origins, reaching this East Anglian spiritual director through the Victorines and stretching back through the Pseudo-Dionysius to Neoplatonic philosophy. So with a careful choice of texts a student could work out a detailed parallelism between the pagan writings of Plotinus and Proclus and the Christian author of *The Cloud*. Thus Dean Inge, who has made Plotinus a living author for Englishmen, after outlining the Neoplatonist's division of the three forms of life according as a man lives below himself by the senses, even with himself by reason, or above himself by the spirit, notes the following passage from *The Cloud*:

In the lower part of the active life a man is without himself and beneath himself. In the higher part of active life and the lower part of contemplative life a man is within himself and even with himself. But in the higher part of contemplative life a man is above himself and under his God. (c. 8, pp. 31-2. cf. Inge. *Plotinus* i. 247). Such comparisons are not difficult to understand, and if we were here concerned with the historical aspect of English mysticism it would contribute greatly to the joy of the study to notice how such passages come so directly from Richard of St Victor and Vercellensis, and to trace the latter authority back to the Neoplatonists. But in considering the actual doctrine and practice of these leaders of spirituality we may become vaguely embarrassed when we find the comparison breaking into the deeper realities of the soul's approach to God. The Plotinian conception of God as 'super-essential' leads to something very like the 'noughting' and 'the naked intent' on the part of the soul. 'The Soul must remove from itself good and evil and everything else, that it may receive the One alone, as the One is alone. . . . The soul is no longer conscious of the body, and cannot tell whether it is a man or a living being or anything real at all; for the contemplation of such things would seem unworthy, and it

has no leisure for them; but when, after having sought the One, it finds itself in its presence, it goes to meet it and contemplates it instead of itself'. (Inge, op. cit. ii. 135). The chief characteristic of such philosophy is a one-sided insistence on the idea of divinity which, being beyond everything created, necessitates man's reaching out beyond and above to the supra-essential being of the One. *The Cloud* may give the same impression and a case could be made for its inculcating a movement beyond Christ to the deity and so leading us out of the Gospels back to the detached life of the pagan mystics of every age.

The difficulty is a deep one and much has already been written about it. We cannot here take up all its intricacies, but when we read in *The Cloud* that it is an unlawful thing and would hinder a man greatly in his 'affectuous striving of love to God'

were he to let any thought or any meditation of God's wonderful gifts, kindness, and works in any of his creatures, bodily or ghostly, rise upon him to press betwixt him and his God, although they be never so holy thoughts, nor so pleasing nor so comfortable (c. 8, p. 33),

we naturally wonder where the humanity of Christ, that most wonderful of God's gifts, can find a place. The author of *The Cloud* in fact seems explicitly to exclude meditation on the Passion of Christ, a meditation which has led so many thousands of saints to God, a meditation on the one creaturely act which has redeemed the whole human race and brought it back to union with God. The author is not unaware of the untraditional sound of such teaching, and he puts this question into the mouth of his correspondent:

Thou asketh me: '. . . Is it (the thought) a good thing or an evil? . . . For he (the thought) will sometime, methinks, make me weep full heartily for pity of the passion of Christ, sometime for my wretchedness, and for many other reasons that, methinks, be full holy and do me much good'. (c. 8, p. 28).

It must be remembered that the human nature and the suffering and death of that human nature are as such only means. They provide the way, the unique Way, to the pure and infinite spirit of the Godhead. As St Thomas says, commenting on our Lord's words about remaining only a little while with his disciples, 'Since the humanity of Christ is for us the way of proceeding towards God . . . we ought not to rest in it as in an end in itself, but through it we must reach out towards God. So lest the disciples' hearts physically captivated by Christ should rest in him as in a man [i.e., purely human love], Christ quickly removed from them his physical presence'. (*In Jn.* 7, 32). This is very true, but the disciples at that time were needing to learn distinctions, to discern the end from means, just as the beginner in the spiritual life must sort out different values and

realities in the Christian religion. But the chief feature of the period which we are now considering is one of synthesis. It would be very dangerous to approach intimate union with God with the sense that the distinction of our Lord's human nature from his divine should now develop into a separation of the means from the End. Christ is God; whoever sees him sees the Father, and there is no union with the Father except 'through him, with him and in him'. The idea of reaching *beyond* the humanity of Christ would lead to some sort of pantheism, as though by union with God we left our own humanity behind. Remaining always human beings we shall rest for ever 'oned' to the human nature of the Son of God. Adopted sons and joint heirs do not supersede the firstborn and heir.

To avoid misunderstanding on this very point of the abandonment of all sensible forms in memory and imagination (which is the subject of *The Cloud's* query regarding the cloud of forgetting), the editors of St John of the Cross in the *Editio princeps* of 1618 omitted a paragraph of this treatise on oblivión (*Ascent* iii, 2) and added: 'This care to forget and set aside knowledge and images is never applicable to Christ and his humanity. For, although occasionally, at the height of contemplation and simple regard of the Divinity, the soul may not remember this most sacred Humanity . . . yet it is in no wise seemly to study to forget it, since looking and meditating lovingly upon it will aid the soul to (attain) all that is good, and hereby will most readily rise to the most lofty state of union. And it is clear that, although other bodily and visible things are a hindrance and ought to be forgotten, we must not include among these him who became man for our salvation, and who is the truth, the door, the way, and the guide to all good things . . .' (Peers, i, 232, n. 3). The editors need not, perhaps, have been so anxious to insist upon the 'it' of the humanity for these Christian mystics have always found ultimately the *Person* in whom divinity and humanity are united. They may not at the time of rapturous union reflect upon the human nature which they themselves share with our Lord, but they know only that *he is* in the infinite perfection of the Trinity. The author of *The Cloud* makes no mistake about this. In *The Epistle of Privy Counsel*, writing of the prayer without discursive meditation, he goes on to treat of meditation on the Passion as the only door whereby to reach this union and to set aside as false mystics any who attempt to reach these pastures through another door—he is either 'a night thief' or 'a day skulker' (c. 9, p. 220). Christ remains the Way and the Truth.

For our Lord is not only porter himself, but also the door; the porter by his Godhead, and the door by his Manhood. Thus saith he himself in the Gospel: *Ego sum ostium* . . . as if he said thus according to our matter: 'I that am almighty by my Godhead

and may lawfully as a porter let in whom I will, yet, because I will that there be a common plain way and an open entry to all that will come . . . I have clothed me in the common nature of man and made me so open that I am the door by my Manhood, and whoso entereth by me shall be safe'. (c. 9, p. 119).

And he concludes this chapter by saying that the one common way for Christian men is 'the truest entry of contemplation that may be in this life'.

There is nothing esoteric or 'super-Christian' here. And bearing these words in mind we can begin to understand what he is talking about when he advises the reader not to bother about such meditations. He is writing of a very special period of prayer when everything is summed up in the shortest possible syllables and the widest possible terms, such as 'Being', so as to include all in the naked intent without consciously singling out any created thing, nor even the Passion of Christ, for direct consideration. For at such a time there is no need for these things and they are likely to lead off into picture-making or sermonising interiorly, and such things are not prayer but 'a sharp and clear beholding of thy natural wit, printed in thy reason within thy soul'. (p. 29). When the soul is quiet before the divinity, there would be danger of pretty literary and artistic conceits in breaking away to consider the pains of Christ. At other times a man will find that he no longer rests in the point of his spirit, that the naked intent is no longer vouchsafed him. Then he turns with avidity to the open door of Christ's wounds, through which he has perhaps often passed to quiet pastures.

With this constant background of Christ, we may find equally that of the Church; for the Church is Christ, and Christ is the Church. It is not likely that the great Christian masters of prayer would disown St Paul's teaching about the mystical body; and in fact the Church plays her part constantly in the movement of the soul towards holiness. For some, such as for Mother Julian, there is an initial paradox in the conflict between the authoritative teaching of the Church and their own private experience. But in reaching the synthesis of union, they feel that they have not moved out *beyond* the Church, but remain as the growing embryo in her womb. The author of *The Cloud* has frequent reference to 'the ordnance of Holy Church', particularly in the first steps towards perfection, and in her sacraments. Gerald Heard and other outsiders like him can only see the organisation of the Church, so that for them ecclesiasticism with its dogmas provides only a hindrance to the great spirits of the mystics.¹ This is the explanation for such a complete misapprehension of the vast treasures

¹ Should anyone feel it an injustice to call Heard an 'outsider' he should read an excellent review in the *Church Times* (for January 12th, 1949) of '*The Eternal Gospel*'—'Heard is still fundamentally outside the Christian ethos'.

of the English, the German, the Spanish Catholic mystics expressed in such absurdities as: 'No human beings have worked harder than the Catholic mystics to amass a wealth of ordered knowledge in this field of prayer. The material, however, is either mainly inaccessible or expressed in such strict conventions of theological language that it is not merely unacceptable but often inapprehensible'. (Heard, *Preface to Prayer*, pp. 18-9). But *The Cloud* and its companion works are written by an insider who finds the naked intent in the depth of the mystical body of Christ and who expressed this fulfilment of Catholic teaching neither inaccessibly, unacceptably, nor inapprehensibly. For the insider lives in the organism the life of which is Christ himself. We will let the author of *The Cloud* speak for himself on this matter.

Some there be that . . . for pride and curiosity of natural wit and letterly knowledge leave the common doctrine and counsel of Holy Church. And these with all their favourers lean over much to their own knowing. And because they were never grounded in meek blind feeling and virtuous living, therefore they merit to have a false feeling, feigned and wrought by the ghostly enemy. Insomuch that at the last they burst up and blaspheme all the saints, sacraments, statutes, and ordinances of Holy Church. Fleshly living men of the world, the which think the statutes of Holy Church over hard for them to amend their lives by, they lean to these heretics full soon and full lightly, and stalwartly maintain them, and all because they think that they lead them a softer way than is ordained by Holy Church. (*The Cloud*, c. 56, pp. 133-4).

It should be remembered that the man who wrote this was almost certainly as assiduous at offering the holy Sacrifice of the Mass as he was in partaking of 'the highest point of this contemplative act'. (cf. p. 5).

Even within the bosom of the Church and in complete conformity with Christ, it may yet be argued that we find here a teaching as 'super-intellectual' and 'super-volitional' as anything in Plotinus. The author does seem to go beyond intellect and even in a sense beyond love. He seems to suggest that the activity of the mind is proper only to the active life and that for the contemplative it is bad to think. When he is asked how a man can know God and how he can learn that the 'work' of contemplation is from God, the author replies that 'of God himself can no man think', and goes on to advise his correspondent to leave all that thing that he can think, since God cannot be gotten by thought. (c. 6, p. 23). We find in these treatises a certain reaction against the learning of 'clerks' which is characteristic of many spiritual writings of the period. Langland would fully agree with the denunciation of the pride of intellect of the clerks who 'with curiosity of much learning and letterly know-

ledge' become 'proud scholars of the devil and masters of vanity and of falsehood'. (c. 7, p. 29).

But we must remember that these works were written at a time when the heights of scholasticism had been scaled and the army of true theologians had left the host of their camp followers to tramp and tumble down the other side slippery with the glaciers of unreal distinctions. It is remarkable indeed that such simple men as Hilton and the author of *The Cloud* did not go to an extreme in their antipathy to this soul-destructive 'learning', but Dom Justin McCann has shown in his Introduction to *The Cloud* that if we read it attentively we shall not accuse the author of anti-intellectualism (p. xxix). He is in fact not over-anxious about the abuses of his times and is happily devoid of the unbalanced reforming spirit which so easily possesses the 'spirituals'. But he was anxious to avoid two great stumbling blocks in the way of full development of the prayer of union—on the one hand the conceits of intellectual pride and on the other the vacuity of the self-emptied mind of the anti-intellectual 'spiritual'. People who are fond of 'working things out for themselves' in their own minds run some risk of thinking they can discover God if they are given a certain time of silence in which to consider him. But they must beware of their 'proud, curious and imaginative wit' which easily misleads.

For whoso heareth this work either read or spoken, and weeneth that it may or should be come to by travail in their wits and therefore sit and seek in their wits how it may be: in this curiosity they travail their imagination peradventure against the course of nature. and they feign a manner of working the which is neither bodily nor ghostly (c. 4, p. 19).

It is possible for such people with their minds full of purely natural images and reasonings to take literally what is only set down as a metaphor vainly trying to convey to the reader the ineffable heights of union. The author therefore begs his correspondent not to take the darkness or the cloud in his description in any material way ('congealed of the vapours that fly in the air', 'darkness such as in thine house on nights when thy candle is out', c. 4, p. 20), and later devotes two or three chapters to the evils which arise from taking such words as 'in' or 'up' in a literal sense, as though *Sursum corda* meant that the body had to be raised and the eyes fixed on the sky. Such errors are not unheard of, for the present writer himself remembers being asked in all seriousness by a man who was anxious to learn more about prayer how one was to pray 'upwards', indicating by gesture as well as explanation that he meant some physical action which approached in nature that of an anti-aircraft battery! Such aberrations are often the result of a little learning or a little reading

in mystical literature. Walter Hilton, too, found it necessary to warn against this literalism in a passage which is very similar in tone and language to that of *The Cloud*. (Compare *Scale of Perfection*, bk. ii, c. 33 with *The Cloud*, cc. 51-7). And in an age such as ours which has devoted so much study to the historical and the literal in theology as well as to the material in science, it is more than ever necessary to be on our guard against the snares of intellectual pride. The mind has 'a natural desire for hid things' (p. 122) and if it is not trained and directed by the teaching of the Church, her sacraments and her ministers, it will go running after the occult and the esoteric to an extent which today is strangely paradoxical *vis-a-vis* the materialism of the age.

But such stupidities and dangers are more often associated with the lack of intellectual powers, and the author of *The Cloud* is as keenly aware of the possibility of an anti-intellectual abuse of his teaching as of that of the proud learning of the clerks. There are those, he tells us, who learn that they must forsake the outward working of their wits. They are impatient to experience the sweets of contemplative union with God, they refuse to follow the common doctrine of the Church, they consider that their confessors or directors do not understand them when they counsel them to keep to the normal way of prayer, penance and the sacraments. And so they turn stupidly in upon themselves in reality seeking all kinds of sensible experiences. In this way they open themselves to the power of the devil, for 'the devil hath his contemplatives as God has his' (p. 109), and *The Cloud* describes with unusual vividness and almost with animosity the condition of the neurotics who get involved in such practices and are led on literally to madness, to strange gestures and postures, to curious facial expressions and piping tones of voice. Although he would almost make a joke of it in order to laugh people out of such stupidities, he evidently regards it, as it is indeed, a very serious danger which might lead to a complete breakdown both physical and moral. (cf. c. 51-3).

The cure for such spiritual neurosis as suggested by *The Cloud* is good psychology as well as good theology. It is necessary to accept the authority of the Church and to use her healing sacraments—not merely as an outward formality or as a sop to the social nature of man, but as part and parcel of the life of perfection.² Obedience to

² Fr Victor White, O.P., in *Blackfriars* for June 1944, showed how the Catholic with his true conception of the purpose of human nature, implying immortality and the resurrection, together with the true use of the sacraments, has the answer to all the problems of an integral human psychology such as Jung's seeks to be. But if the Catholic misses the opportunities now set before him the re-awakened need for such an integration will turn aside and use these modern psychologies 'in sectarian -isms and -sophies of a more or less Gnostic hue'.

the fundamental laws of Christian living, to the authority of Holy Church, and thence obedience to the Scriptures, to the advice of a prudent confessor and finally obedience to an open and healthy conscience, such is the sure foundation which guarantees the heights of the soul's temple (cf. *Privy Counsel*, c. 12). The Church urges the soul to frequent the sacraments, and that alone properly fulfilled will prevent a sophisticated curiosity of wit on the one hand and an empty-headedness on the other. The union of love which is the 'work' of these books is indeed beyond imagination and beyond natural reasoning but it takes place still within the dark womb of faith, and faith is fed by the authority of God's word and is itself an act of the intellect. Grace continues to work on the mind while the will is pre-occupied by its Beloved.

Nevertheless there is a hint in these writings that the divine Object so pre-occupies the will as to draw it out beyond love in the ordinary meaning of the word. In other words we must finally seek reassurance against the possibility of Quietism in this 'work'. For Quietism so emphasises the objective nature of the soul's union and its passivity under God's action as to require only a single act of love which would never turn back on itself and unless it be revoked by a deliberately reconsidered choice would proceed onwards in utter self-forgetfulness until the soul is completely and literally passive, ready indeed to go to hell if God so wish. So 'purified' does the love become in this view that the subject is quite indifferent as to his own salvation. This is not the place to launch into a long discussion of the Quietist controversy,³ but there are certain passages in *The Cloud* and the other books which need elucidation in this regard. Moreover, the false altruism which says that we ought not to desire our own perfection nor be seeking always our own salvation is not infrequent today when people accuse Catholics of being too interested in the matter of merit and to be always seeking their own rewards. There is in fact an attractive description in *The Epistle of Prayer* of the 'chaste love' for God which regards nothing but himself, without even considering his action on the soul.

A soul in affection by the sensible presence of God, as he is in himself, and in a perfect soul illumined in the reason, by the clear beam of everlasting light, the which is God, for to see and for to feel the loveliness of God in himself, hath for that time and for that moment lost all the mind of any good deed or of any kindness that ever God did to him in this life,—so that cause for to love God for feeleth he or seeth he none in that time, other than is God himself. (*Ep. of Prayer*, p. 85).

This 'chaste love' is characteristic of *The Cloud* where the reader is

³ cf. Garrigou Lagrange, *L'Amour de Dieu et Le Croix de Jesus*. i. 70 sq.

asked to 'look upon him (God) and let him alone' (p. 10) and the 'perfect prentice' is described as neither releasing of pain nor increase of reward (p. 68). This is true charity which seems to breed an almost quietistic indifference.

He neither recketh nor regardeth whether he be in pain or in bliss, but only that his will be fulfilled whom he loveth. (p. 68).

And such an indifference naturally induces a kind of sleep of the soul which has become purely passive in God's hands. The author suggests that his reader should 'sit full still' and adopt the 'sleeping device' (c. 44, p. 105-6) on which he enlarges in *The Epistle of Privy Counsel*:

So that for this noble noughting of itself (i.e. the soul) in very meekness, and this high alling of God in perfect charity, it deserveth to have God—in whose love it is deeply drenched in full and final forsaking of itself as nought and less, if less it might be—mightily, wisely and goodly succouring it, keeping it, and defending it from all adversities bodily and ghostly without business or travail, regard or care of itself. (c. 6, p. 203).

Is this, then, the perfect chaste love of charity going even beyond love as men know it, drowning self altogether in the ocean of divine goodness?

Richard of St Victor, who influenced the writer of these works so much, put forward a distinction between 'gratuitous love' and love that is due. Neither love is mercenary, and certainly there is here no question of loving God for anything other than himself; but the gratuitous love is one which God pours out upon us without cause, the love that is due is asked of us in return so that we may give all back to him with no reserve, not even the reserve of self. But St Thomas explains all this most carefully by showing that even apart from grace there is a natural love of God which is greater than the love of self—and this is true in its way of every creature which naturally returns to the *fons et origo* of all good. Then perfecting this creaturely love comes for the soul the love of friendship with God which recognises in him far more good than it could ever share—and therefore it loves God more for his own infinite goodness than for the amount of goodness which it can share with him in the unity of love (cf. II-II, 26, 3). Nevertheless by the self-same love of charity a man is bound also to love himself, as God's own handiwork, and moreover this friendship, even though it is predominantly self-forgetful, does not preclude or eliminate the lower forms of affection which desire good for self. The 'love of concupiscence' exists whenever there is a will, but it is never allowed to predominate in the true lover (cf. II-II, 25, 4). As we have said before in this state of union

distinctions are maintained but what might have seemed to be divisions are avoided. Both types of love exist in their right orders.⁴

We may therefore turn to *The Cloud* with confidence for the author is dealing with a union with God which has no suspicions of a *nirvana*, no complete self-annihilation. For we have already seen that although all specific sins are cast away into the cloud of forgetting, there remains the sense of the lump of sin. And even when this weighs less heavily its place is taken by the lump of self. The man is conscious that he is, and in comparison to the Is of God this realisation is itself the greatest sorrow. He cannot escape 'the knowing and feeling of hid being' and this means a sense of limitation which must always prevent any false ideas of getting to the back of beyond in some pantheistic absorption into God. And it is not his *being* that causes him pain, but only the sense of the *limitation* of his being.

Yet in all this sorrow he desireth not to un-be; for that were devil's madness and despite unto God. But he liketh right well to be. (*Cloud*, c. 44, p. 107. cf. the whole chapter and also c. 67).

The Epistle of Privy Counsel urges the man to go as far as possible and to forget even the feeling of his own being, 'utterly to spoil himself of himself', but the same metaphysical distinction is repeated.

And then when thou covetest so earnestly, not for to un-be, for that were madness and despite unto God, but to forego the knowing and the feeling of thy being. (c. 8, p. 215).

The author continues by saying that the naked feeling of his being will never leave him except possibly for a few brief instants when God pours upon him the 'abundance of love'.

There is therefore no 'pure' passivity and no 'pure' objectivity in this work of love. Nature is raised not destroyed. The natural love of self is purified and fitted into the love of God above all things. Entry then into the Cloud of Unknowing leads a man more deeply, more undistractedly into the heart of Christ our Lord, into the full light of the Wisdom of the Word, into the infinite love of divine charity. All the highest activities of man are perfected, not destroyed, by the union of love. Even the reason finds a place for its activity in the theological virtue of hope, and all powers and all being are gathered together into one within the loving circle of the Trinity.

Be ye, then, be ye reformed with virtues: the mind with belief, the reason with hope, and the will with charity. And so ye be like the Holy Trinity. . . . In this study should each true man be strained, and it is enough at the full. Amen.⁵

⁴ cf. Von Hugel, *Elements*, ii. 165 sq. where he shows that exclusiveness in regard to these distinctions is the source of trouble.

⁵ *How Man's Soul is Made to the Image and the Likeness of the Trinity*, by the same author and included in Dom Justin McCann's edition of *The Cloud*, pp. 243-6.