



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

As the rain hides the stars,

As the autumn mist hides the hills,

As the clouds veil the blue of the sky,

So the dark happenings of my lot hide the shining of thy face from me.

Yet, if I may hold thy hand in the darkness, it is enough.

Since I know that, though I may stumble in my going,

thou dost not fall.

--Gaelic (tr. Alistair MacLean)

Week #12a: God's Hiddenness and Self-Revelation in *The Cloud of Unknowing*

Background: The Breakdown of Scholastic Rationalism in the Late Medieval Period

In the late medieval period, there is a growing tension between

(a) the older scholastic (Christian Aristotelian) rationalism

- as represented by Anselm and Thomas Aquinas
- which held that there was a certain objective order within the world and knowable by the mind
 - Because all normative order within the world is derived from and depends upon the eternal law (=Word/reason) of the Father and this order is similarly reflected in the moral law written upon our hearts and knowable by the mind/conscience (though this knowing was impaired by the Fall), the mind can grasp and understand the objective order existing within the world.
- faith, out of love of the truth, should desire to understand not only *that* things were so, but *how* and *why* things were so.

and

(b) the late medieval traditions of Augustinian voluntarism (e.g. Duns Scotus) and Franciscan Nominalism (William of Ockham)

- Augustinian voluntarism emphasized the will (as effective power and love) as being the reason why things are so. Instead of faith seeking understanding, perhaps faith will simply have to
 - accept that certain things are so by the will of God and
 - strive to accept and relate to God (with the help of divine grace) by loving God and surrendering/submitting to the will of God. This would be typical of late medieval Augustinian mystics like Walter Hilton, whom we studied last week.

- Franciscan Nominalism
 - denied the objective intelligibility (i.e. understanding by the mind of the order) of creation and of the moral law
 - emphasized that properly construing situations may involve looking at unique features which derive from the absolute will of God (discernment of God's particular providence within this particular situation) rather than universal normative patterns (the eternal law of God and God's general providence).
- Could the repudiation of images in Lollardy have arisen from similar background beliefs? (See the *Twelve Conclusions*, in Spearing, p. xxxvii.)

This is one of the reasons why there was a sympathy among some late medieval mystics for accepting a more negative account of what can be rationally known about God and meaning or significance of particular events. Something other than reason was necessary as the key to unlock the doors leading to spiritual realities. There is thus an increasing separation of religious faith from universal reason and reason/intellectual activity was seen as playing a less direct and vital role than the will/love/affections in the Christian's attainment of final blessedness and union with God. This also shapes the way that Christian meditation is understood, i.e. negatively as experiencing the otherness of God (the *Cloud of Unknowing*) and positively as affective meditation upon Christ's humanity in its weakness and suffering, esp. the Passion (Julian of Norwich).

The *Cloud of Unknowing*: Its Author and His Other Works

The identity of the author of this work is unknown, but there are several other works attributed to him with a reasonable degree of probability, most notably

- the *Book of Privy Counselling* (well worth reading, perhaps even more so than the *Cloud* itself)
- the *Epistle on Discretion of Stirrings*
- the *Epistle of Prayer*
- translations of the works of Ps.-Dionysius and others

The author is generally assumed to have been a Carthusian (a religious order which emphasized the solitary life of prayer, was quite popular in England at this time and played an important role in the transmission of the author's works).

The work is addressed to a disciple aged 24 (ch. 4), who requires instruction on the contemplative life, presumably having previously passed through the requirements of the active life (see quotation from ch. 15 in Spearing, pp. xx).

Moving Beyond All Affirmations About What God Is Like

Assumptions:

- It is of greater importance to know God as he is than to know merely what he has done in creation (see the quotation from ch. 5 in Davies, pp. 170-171).
- We had this knowledge before the Fall.
- The purification we now need to undergo to once again have this knowledge is thus a cognitive one:
 - All affirmations made of God that begin from created realities must be brought to nought (eliminated/transcended) if we are to turn our attention from the created world to the uncreated God.

- The greatest human virtue is humility, which is a right sense of oneself before the majesty of God and leads to a reverent humbling of the self, which is a prelude to receiving the further graces of purification, knowledge of God and experiencing the “love of God for Himself above all creatures” (see quotation from Underhill, p. 17).

The Method:

The author, following ps.-Dionysius, advocates apophatic prayer (proceeds by denying the propriety of ascribing to God attributes or properties which are conceived at least in part by reference to created realities. None of these affirmations (it is argued) are satisfactory in representing God's nature and character and each therefore must be denied as one ascends to a more accurate contemplation/grasp of the divine nature, so that the divine nature remains beyond the grasp of discursive reason.)

- This is opposed to kataphatic prayer (which proceeds by making positive affirmations about God which can be held to communicate something true about God without radical negative qualification).
- The kataphatic and apophatic ways can also be correlated, respectively, with a more sacramental emphasis (external ritual in which created realities image divine realities and can function as channels of divine grace) vs. an emphasis upon silent prayer and inner communion (interior, transcendental experience as the only means to grasp or relate to divine realities, which intellectual reflection and moral and liturgical practice cannot adequately comprehend).

Moving Beyond Images in Prayer

The author is critical not only of the propriety of theological affirmations, but also of the use of images in affective prayer (see quotations from ch. 26 and 43 in Davies, p. 171). While the author accepts the need to read the Scriptures and meditate in an affective way upon our sinfulness and Christ's suffering to redeem us from sin, we must move on to a superior stage of discarding every image which exists in our imagination because all of these concern bodily realities and are therefore inappropriate in contemplating divine realities (since God does not have a body nor is God subject to any of the limitations or constraints of bodily existence).

- Roots for this in the Desert Fathers (Evagrius) and early monasticism (John Cassian), but perhaps also a reaction to crude attempts in popular vernacular literature to transfer the language of courtly love into religious settings see quotations from the early thirteenth century *Wooing of our Lord* and Margery Kempe in Spearing, pp. xiii, xv).

In purging our mind of all bodily images pertaining to created things so that we may avoid error and love and praise God for himself (not for his benefits or his creatures), we find ourselves left in a kind of darkness, a state of unknowing in which, by reforming grace, we find that we can offer only a "blind stirring of love" to the God whom our minds cannot grasp by thinking (i.e. the discursive, concept- and image-based, rational thought of a created mind). All use of metaphors to build a bridge so that the mind can pass over from knowing creatures to knowing God is pointless and destined to failure, since it fails to understand the real and profound differences which separate God's existence from that of creatures. Thus, for example, Rolle's idea of experiencing God with the senses in ways that are conformable to and extensions of our ordinary sense-experience of the created world (e.g., hearing angel-song) are simply wrong-headed (see

the quotation on the top of Tugwell, p. 174). Lacking bodily limits does not mean that one cannot exist or be present, only that what these things mean for God is something completely different than what it is for creatures and this difference should be appreciated.

Furthermore, the recourse to images (imagination) distracts the soul from singleminded prayer and draws it downward to the multiplicity of creatures (including our intrusive sense of self-awareness; cf. ch. 44 and 53), rather than upward to the one true God (see quotation from ch. 7 in Spearing, p. xix).

Divine Grace and Divine Consolations

One other point is that it is not that we direct our will to God and command it to love God. The "blind stirring of love" is instead something that arises in the will of its own accord, being produced in us by God himself, and it cannot be produced or extended in the soul any human effort (we cannot force ourselves to *feel* the love of God in the required sense). What can do is seek by petition and grace to put our preoccupation with our self and our sinful, self-serving desires out of view of our consciousness so that our attention might be focused in an undivided, undistracted way upon God alone, that we might love "God for himself above all creatures" (cf. quotations from ch. 12 and 28 in Davies, pp. 171-172). In this state, the spiritual consolations of the soul that occur as an effect of divine love (as emphasized by Rolle) *may* occur but are not necessary (as Hilton also concluded).

Even the upward motions of the will (by love drawn toward God) may have an intermittent character (cf. quotation from ch. 4 in Davies, pp. 174-175), although it is possible through the contemplative life to arrive at a singlemindedness in looking to God that allows one to experience the love of God more continuously even in this life.

Reason and Will (Love)

Note that here the way to pursue God is not by knowing but by the will through love; God cannot be comprehended by the reason of finite minds but he can be grasped through the longing and "blind stirring of love" in the will by which God draws the created soul up to himself (cf. quotation from ch. 7 in Davies, p. 176 with quotations in Underhill, p. 24 [first sentence] and Spearing, p. xliii n.26). (All the while the soul suffers itself to remain in the darkness, being conscious that God exists and is present, yet being unable to see or comprehend him [ch. 4]. By this means the soul is purged of its errors of desiring to associate God with creatures and of ascribing worth to God and loving God for his association with creatures (rather than loving God for himself apart from his connection with anything else.)

- Knowing "that God is" (experience of God's being) thus becomes more important than knowing "what God is" (experience of qualities/images)

Darkness as an Obstacle to Knowing God

Note one point of commonality between the *Cloud* and Walter Hilton: the obstacle that prevents us from attaining the undivided love of God is the inner darkness of our own limitations as sinful creatures who are inappropriately self-focused and distracted by sinful urges and impulses and memories of our past sins (for which we have already sought forgiveness). Within the *Cloud*, however, the darkness seems to be more external

to the self and to have a more metaphysical cast that has more to do with our finiteness as creatures than with our fallen will (although there is a conception of sin and moral purgation associated with love in the *Cloud*).

Evaluating the Arguments Advanced in the *Cloud*

- (1) Is this project (apophatic mysticism) based on a valid assumption?
 - Must we go beyond how God acts in creation to know God himself in a way that truly reflects who he is?
 - For example, to know from God's actions that he is merciful is already to have true knowledge of who God really, fundamentally is.
- (2) Can one really go *beyond* or *above* Christ's humanity to arrive at a higher, superior vision of God and union with God?
 - But see *Privy Counselling*, where the author qualifies his view.
- (3) Is the distinction posited between the capacity of the mind to know and the capacity of the will to love overdrawn and potentially misleading?
 - (a) Can one love what one does not know?
 - (b) Can we play off "that it is" against "what it is" (valuing the former but denigrating the latter)?
 - (c) Although all metaphors (including scriptural metaphors) will eventually break down, is it really true that these can communicate to us nothing beyond the bare fact of God's existence, so that he can be loved only by the will and only when God moves the latter to love him?
- (4) Does the *Cloud's* author devote sufficient attention to the way in which, being conformed to God by love, we become charitable toward all people?

Supplemental Bibliography:

See the recent studies listed in Spearing, pp. xlv ff. and Gatta, p. 124 n.8.