

THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT
ON READING THE MYSTICS

By

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

The Early English Text Society have presented the public with a critical edition of the original text of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Epistle of Privy Counsel*.⁽¹⁾ The work is that of Dr Phyllis Hodgson. Dr. Hodgson has done her work thoroughly with a description and discussion of the MSS, an elaborate analysis of the language, all in the best traditions of the Society. To this she has added a discussion of the subject-matter, the sources and the author of these two mystical writings, which are the most important in the English language. There is little fresh light to be thrown on the authorship, which remains as unknown as before in spite of much research. But Dr. Hodgson has been more rewarded in her exploration of the sources, for she has established in particular the direct influence of the treatise *De Adhaerendo Deo*, upon *The Cloud* and *The Epistle of Privy Counsel*. This work was formerly attributed simply to S. Albert the Great, but is now regarded as having been amplified by a Benedictine at a later date; it teaches the same doctrine as *The Cloud* in very much the same style—a guarantee, if one were needed, that the English work is no esoteric, over-spiritualised attempt to short-cut the way of Christ which is the way of the Church. Then there are the direct borrowings from Richard of S. Victor's *Benjamin Major* which shows how the author of *The Cloud* swam in the full stream of mystical doctrine, beginning with the Pseudo-Aropagite whom he specifically acknowledges as his master, and proceeding through the Victorines to the great movement of the 14th century.

This is very valuable work and it is important that the remaining English Mystics be treated in like manner. In order to understand the exact nuance of some of the more abstruse statements we need the originals, though in this case Dom Justin McCann's modernised edition meets all the practical needs of the "spiritual reader". We need the critical edition and the historical background in order to avoid many fantastic interpretations, for only thus can we realise that the works were written for fourteenth rather than twentieth century readers. But this "material" preparation for reading the mystics will not necessarily take us beyond the history schools, and it is a strange fact that many people are only acquainted with the 14th century English Mystics as middle English texts set for historical study—for such study an edition of this nature provides everything to

(1) *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling*, edited from the Manuscripts with Introduction, Notes and Glossary by Phyllis Hodgson, M.A., B.Litt., D. Phil. (Oxford University Press for E.E.T.S.; 35s.).

be desired. If, however, we approach Dante or Shakespeare with the critical apparatus for establishing the exact text and historical context, it is likely that the poetry of the words disappears behind their "literal meaning". For many *The Cloud* and *The Epistle* can be merely interesting documents of a past age with no significance except as witnesses of the Faith and Customs of the Middle Ages. Alone such a study is esoteric, for the historical connoisseurs rather than for the seekers of the way, the truth and the life. But for these latter historical accuracy can and should provide a solid groundwork to their reading, enabling them to build higher and more securely on the heights of the spiritual life, for it establishes them more thoroughly in tradition.

We should, however, approach the study of Mysticism, and in particular of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, with extreme caution, with humility, and with a desire to savour the things of the spirit. With caution, because the author of *The Cloud* himself insists that what he is saying is not intended for all but only for those who are very specially called to a high life of contemplation. We cannot therefore pick up a work on the Mystical States of Prayer such as *The Cloud* in the way we pick up S. Thomas's treatises on Religion in the *Summa*. This latter is minced and mashed and sorted out for the benefit of the 'novice' so that the least may begin to understand. But the spiritual preparation for reading Mystical Treatises is far more exacting, and it limits considerably the possible number of readers. There are many who read the treatises with thoughts which have not been attuned to the realities of divine life as experienced in prayer. The most accomplished readers may miss the point; it would seem that even Miss Hodgson has not understood all the doctrine of *The Cloud*, or uses language liable to confuse.

It is, for instance, misleading to speak of the awareness of God in mystical knowledge as "subjective". Miss Hodgson writes: "Perfect oneness with God, which is the aim of the contemplative, is to know God, not objectively as a being to be analysed and understood in all His parts, but subjectively, as a divine force working in and through the soul, the soul moving only in God". (p. lii). What she means is true enough, but the term "subjective" is misplaced and dangerous in these days of subjective religion based on religious experience, divorced from the dogmatic laws of absolute truth. The distinction lies between two types of objective knowledge. The knowledge proceeding from a love of the object, rather than from an analysis of it, possesses almost more objectivity than the analytic, scientific knowledge; for the will goes out to the object and is possessed by it; self is forgotten and the being of the beloved object is measured by itself, by its own standards. The quasi-instinctive knowledge

of the Gifts of the Holy Ghost is more objective than the rationalised judgment of the Schoolman who tends to measure the object he knows by the standards of his own mind and capacities. The gifts of knowledge and wisdom share in the supreme certainty of the Faith upon which they are based; and those who enjoy them are given a surety of judgment upon divine things quite beyond the reach of human powers. Walter Hilton shows this God-given conviction at work in the understanding of the Scriptures which remain a closed book until the light of the gifts begins to shine on the pages of the Bible.

The true idea of objectivity is of the utmost importance in the modern reader's approach to the English Mystics and in particular to *The Cloud*. For what the modern reader requires more than anything else in the intellectual sphere is a standard of judgment outside himself. In general he refuses authority in intellectual matters, and having refused authority he is not in a position to be moved thus by the intellectual gifts, which are the perfection of knowledge by authority where the standard has grown to be internal as well as external. Without this objective preparation of mind it is impossible to understand the mystical writers who use such subjective terms precisely because they write for those who have begun to identify their own judgments with the external norms laid down from the beginning by authority. The inner awareness of the naked being of God of which *The Cloud* speaks is an experience founded upon the conviction of God's presence in the soul given by faith (not by philosophy). This awareness therefore shares in the objectivity of the first submissive act of the intellect and will before the revelation of the First Truth.

In this introduction the summary of *The Cloud* has an activist air which is foreign to the passive form of prayer insisted on by the unknown author. It can hardly be that Miss Hodgson misunderstood the word 'work' so often used in a passive sense—"For whi that is the werk of only God, specyaly wrought in what soule that hym likith . . ." Yet she emphasises the active work of "simplifying the consciousness by excluding from it all creatures" (p. liii), which is the preparatory "work" not regarded by the author as essential in the act of prayer he describes.

To interpret *The Cloud* in this almost exclusively ascetic way leads to the conclusion that it describes the Purgative and Illuminative ways alone. If this were true it is not likely that the author would have been so insistent that no one should read it but he only who wished to be a perfect follower of Christ "in the souereinest pointe of contemplatife leuing". If it dealt with the first stage of the Scale of perfection in the Purgative way it would be open to any really serious contemplative to read it. But, as we have said, the author intends his work for the

very few who feel called to the highest states of union. It is difficult indeed to imagine a higher state of prayer in this life than the passive one here described, devoid of concrete thoughts of any creature and even of any divine property, but occupied alone with the 'nakid beynge' of God. The Illuminative way is generally supposed to be specially occupied with the central mysteries of our Lord's life (cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life*, p. 78 sq). Certainly this "way" is characterised by simple and infused contemplation devoid of sensible consolation; but it remains centred in the manhood of Christ. *The Cloud* would have the soul, at least for a time, leave all contemplation of the Passion and even the humanity of Christ to concentrate on the single word GOD. Thus Mary Magdalen, though appreciating our Lord's manhood, was rather occupied by the 'souereynest wisdom of his Godheed lappid in the derk wonder of his Manheed' (c 17).

S. John of the Cross describes the first heights of the life of grace as one of betrothal in which there is "a consent by agreement and a unity of will between the two parties", but he distinguishes this sharply from the final transforming union of marriage (*Living Flame*, 2nd redaction, iii 24 sq). This compares remarkably with *The Cloud's* distinction between the travail of man disposing his will for union and the stirring of love which is God's work; the first is hard and straight in the beginning but may be made full restful and full light (c. 26). Though the author of *The Cloud* places both the simple will and the transforming union in the same state of the soul he does in fact make a distinction between the two when he describes the heights of this prayer—"to be knit to God in spirite and in oneheed of love and acordaunce of wile" (c. 8). The state described in *The Cloud* approximates closely to S. John of the Cross's description of the life of union with its "touch of the Divinity in the Soul, without any form or figure whether intellectual or imaginary" (*Living Flame*, 2nd redaction ii, 8). Again a little later in the same book S. John describes this substantial touch by which the Word touches the soul in the final state of union; "it is a touch of the Substance of God in the substance of the soul . . . in this way the soul in such a state tastes of the things of God, and there are communicated to it fortitude, wisdom, love, beauty, grace and goodness; for as God is all these things, the soul tastes them in one single touch of God, and thus the soul has fruition of him according to its faculties and its substance" (*Living Flame*, ii, 19.22). It may safely be asserted that the 'stirring' or 'feeling' of God's naked being which lies at the centre of the type of prayer described in *The Cloud*, belongs to this category of substantial touch. This fact should be always born in mind in considering the English Mystics since the word

“feeling” had a far wider connotation then; it does not necessarily include any sensible emotion, but may be translated simply by ‘awareness’ in the most general sense. This deep awareness, proper to the highest forms of prayer, is a substantial touch beyond expression and statement, of its nature ineffable.

When we are presented with such excellent editions of the English Mystics as is given us in this edition of *The Cloud*, we seem to hear the call very clearly TOLLE, LEGE. We should certainly seize upon these sources of our traditional spirituality. But we must not mistake the word TOLLE. It is not a command to perform a merely physical act of acquiring the true texts of the masters of the spiritual life, of taking hold of the book thus presented by the blessed enterprise of editors, societies and publishers, of opening the book at page one. To take the book means far more than that. We cannot take the book in the true sense of the word without these preparations. To take up books such as *The Cloud*, we must have the arms of the objective knowledge of the faith and the hands of a spiritual life skilled in the ways of prayer. These arms can stretch out to the naked being of God hid within the soul, these hands can deftly disentangle the skein of the normal way to sanctity. And having taken the books with these hands and these arms we can read the words of this middle English writer who makes it clear in the first chapter that he is writing only for those whose minds are attuned to the truths he desires to set forth;

“Fleshy janglers, open praisers and blamers of them-self or of any other, tiding tellers, rouners and tutilers of tales, and all manner of pinchers; kept I never that they saw this book. For myn entent was never to write soche thing unto them; and therefore I wolde that thei medel not therwith, neither thei ne any of thees corious letted or lewed men”.

A TREATISE ON THE INEFFABLE MYSTERY OF OUR REDEMPTION

By

LUIS OF GRANADA, O.P.

(Translated by a nun of Stanbrook).

CHAPTER VI (cont.)

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Three reasons for the intensity of the sufferings of Christ our Lord.

I said that the reason why the Saviour redeemed us with such intense suffering was that inestimable and priceless fruit that would result to us from this special remedy. I will speak of this later on. At present let us dwell upon three of the chief ones. To understand the first it should be understood, as Saint Maximus says, that the Christian life, if led conformably with the