

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

PARACLETE ESSENTIALS

THE CLOUD OF
UNKNOWING



Foreword by Robert Benson

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION
BY BERNARD BANGLEY



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FOREWORD

As the anonymous writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, we are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. One of them is another unknown writer, the one who wrote this little book that you hold in your hands.

The writer was a part of that great river of christian prayer that has been offered down through the centuries, prayed by thousands upon thousands of saints, both known and unknown, sustaining the life of the church itself. It is a great river of prayer that we are called to join when we hear the call to pray without ceasing. It is a great river of prayer that is made up of different streams of prayer, different ways to pray.

We moderns tend to make our prayers verbally for the most part. These days more and more of us practice the tradition of the daily office, the saying of collects in our worship services, and the praying of the psalms in the same settings. Extemporaneous conversational prayer, both public and private—“our ongoing dialogue with Christ,” as Brother Roger of Taizé called it—has long been a part of prayer practice for most of us.

The Cloud of Unknowing offers us a glimpse into another way of prayer, contemplative prayer. It is prayer that is centered around listening rather than speaking, being rather than doing, searching for God’s presence rather than searching for answers or blessings or mercies. It is a way of prayer that has deep roots in the Christian tradition and yet has not been commonly practiced by us moderns.

The anonymous author offers straightforward talk about the joys and the obstacles, the consolations and the doubts, the practicalities and the possibilities that are a part of this way of prayer. He also offers us way of infusing our actions in the world with light that comes from contemplative prayer.

“When there is a crisis in the Church,” writes Carlo Carretto, “it is always here: a crisis of contemplation.”

In the noise and the rush of the modern world in which we live, our need for contemplative prayer is increased, not decreased. Our unknowing of this way of prayer does not diminish its importance.

The unknown writer, one of the unknown saints, part of that great cloud of witnesses, invites you to join in this way of prayer.

And so do I.

—*Robert Benson*

INTRODUCTION

If you are serious about your prayer life, this book is for you. The writer offers helpful spiritual instruction for those who are learning to pray, guiding them logically and clearly toward ideal prayer—what he calls “perfect” prayer. This anonymous fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* originally prepared this book for cloistered English monks. A keen observer of human behavior, he laughed down the violations of good common sense that he saw religious communities employing.

Though scholars have struggled for centuries to discover the writer’s identity and to place him in a particular religious order, the humble guide stubbornly remains unknown.

He is not interested in telling us how profound his own prayer life is, though we can clearly see that it is substantial. Instead, his intent is to extend a helping hand to the rest of us. He communicates, as Jesus did in the Gospels, with ordinary, everyday language. No doubt he would have been astonished to discover how many would find his little book a key spiritual guide down through the centuries.

In his time, England and much of Europe were immersed in mystical religions. Practitioners of necromancy and sorcery experimented widely. The whole culture was intensely religious. Into this context Christian mystics, addressing the devout life, introduced a healthier spiritual tone and wrote what were to become timeless works. Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, John Tauler, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, Catherine of Siena, Thomas à Kempis, and others wrote during this period.

The fourteenth century was also a time of social, artistic, and political revolution. The unknown writer of *The Cloud* gives that century and following centuries something genuine, something worth our aspiration. He does so with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. He is attractive to readers in the way that Jesus Christ is attractive: He is serious without being stuffy. He talks about important religious issues, but he does so without becoming haughty.

The anonymous author is intelligent, but he avoids and criticizes convoluted academic style. A master of hyperbole, he employs colorful language to emphasize the spiritual hazards of formal education. He does not come across as anti-intellectual, but simply observes that theological erudition offers little service to one's prayer life. What we find in these pages is a healthy mysticism simply based in growing toward God. It is not a book of spiritual tricks that lead to a quick jolt of spiritual fireworks, but offer little for the remaining journey.

The Cloud of Unknowing contains seventy-five chapters (*chapitres*). For such a slim book, that equals about one chapter per page. While they may seem more like section breaks than new chapters, they are markers along the way of sustained and developing thought. Although he briefly digresses a time or two, he otherwise sticks tenaciously to his subject, and at the end of the book he returns the reader to the place he began.

The author sometimes struggles to express himself clearly, fearing that his readers will only take his words at face value. He knows that, if readers do not keep in mind the overall

direction of the book, they may wind up in seemingly contradictory theological dead ends. For example, when the writer mentions that the idea of God, being spirit, is more compatible with a purely spiritual desire (one not based on emotional human desires), some may read that and come to an erroneous conclusion. Rather than leading the reader into a trap, he points out that the purer our spirituality, the more it is in harmony with God's spirit.

Some modern readers may have difficulty with the concept of the devil, or Satan, who is often mentioned in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The author attributes many religious mistakes to the devil's work. I have included these passages as the author originally expressed them. As you read these sections, remind yourself that religious thought in this period of our history includes the active influence of a personal devil. In Wartburg Castle, where Martin Luther worked on his translation of the Bible, tourists are shown a spot on the wall where Luther threw an inkbottle at the devil in 1521. His hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," assures us that devils, who threaten to undo us, fill our world:

*For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great;
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.*

Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Theologiae*, writing in the thirteenth century, points out that Holy Scripture describes

the properties of intelligible things with natural images. Following Aquinas, the anonymous author contends that angels and demons can take on the bodily appearance congruent with the content of their business among us.

As you read *The Cloud*, you may detect the influences of other writers. Thomas Aquinas and Anselm were certainly on his bookshelf, but many other authors also influenced him. In chapter 35, the author recommends an unnamed book, likely *Ladder* by Guigo II, as it contains the same four devotional steps he discusses in *The Cloud*: reading, reflecting, praying, and contemplation. The writer mentions other unnamed books, but likely refers to Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* and Denis's *Mystical Theology*, from which the closing chapters gain their tone.

When I read two modern versions of *The Cloud of Unknowing* back in 1983, I kept my red "reading pencil" busy, underlining and commenting to myself in the margins. As a matter of interest, I pulled these books from my shelf to see what I had done. Curiously, the red marks diminish sharply at chapter 62 and do not pick up again until chapter 68. The book's character changes dramatically in this passage. Where the author has been spiritually arcane, he now becomes philosophically abstract, following the writings of St. Augustine regarding the dynamics of human consciousness. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine distinguishes between *ratio superior* and *ratio inferior*. Our unknown author incorporates these valuable ideas into his work, and I have attempted to retain the distinctly different style and tone of these sections.

Repetition of ideas is characteristic of the classical writing style of the period. While this may help to drive a point into memory, it seems like wheel-spinning to modern readers. Our anonymous author avoids this hazard. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, already a brief book, does not cry out for condensation, as do other spiritual classics. I omitted only a few repetitious sentences and paragraphs in this modernized version.

I am not attempting to present the definitive edition of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Our generation already has several good ones. Instead, my desire has been to prepare a clean, smooth, easily read modernization that avoids antique syntax while remaining faithful to the teaching of the original. I do not attempt to explain ideas with my own amended comments. What is esoteric in the original remains esoteric in this version.

A comparison of texts demonstrates the uniqueness of this book.

ORIGINAL TEXT

Goostly freende in God, thou schalt wel understonde that I fynde, in my boistous beholdyng, foure degrees and fourmes of Cristen mens levyng; and ben theese: Comoun, Special, Singuler, and Parfite. Thre of theese mow be bigonnen and eendid in this liif; and the ferthe may bi grace be bigonnen here, bot it schal ever laste with outen eende in the blis of heven.

MODERN ENGLISH EDITION BY JOHN WATKINS

Ghostly friend in God, thou shalt well understand that I find, in my boisterous beholding, four degrees and forms of Christian men's living; and they be these, Common, Special, Singular, and Perfect. Three of these may be begun and ended in this life; and the fourth may by grace be begun here, but it shall ever last without end in the bliss of Heaven.

THIS VERSION

My spiritual friend in God, this book is an attempt to pass along to you some important lessons learned from experience.

There are four degrees of Christian living: *ordinary*, *extraordinary*, *unique*, and *ideal*. We can experience the first three in this life, but the fourth is heavenly. Yet by the grace of God, we may begin the ideal here and see it continue for all eternity.

HERE BYGYNNITH
A BOOK OF CONTEMPLACYON,
THE WHICHE IS CLEPYD
THE CLOWDE OF UNKNOWYNG,
IN WHICHE A SOULE IS ONYD WITH GOD.



*Here begins a book of contemplation,
which is called The Cloud of Unknowing,
in which a soul is united with God.*

PRAYER

*O God, all hearts are open to you.
You perceive my desire.
Nothing is hidden from you.
Purify the thoughts of my heart
with the gift of your Spirit, that I may love you with a
perfect love and give you the praise you deserve.
Amen.*

❧ P R E F A C E ❧

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Here is a message for the unidentified person who is holding this book. Whether you own it or have borrowed it, whether you are taking it to someone else or intend to read it yourself, please respect the special nature of its contents. This book is for devout followers of Christ. Those who have not already learned to pray and who desire a life in service to Christ should read it. If such a person does read this book, or hear it read aloud, it may not make any sense. Therefore, when you read it, be sure to read the entire book. As the text develops, you will find that a question you had on an earlier page will find an answer on a later page. To read only a section means that you will be taking a passage out of context, and this could be misleading.

I do not intend this book for everyone. I do not want clever clerics and self-appointed critics discussing it. I would prefer they never see it. I did not write this book for them and do not want them involved with it. I prepared this book for souls inclined to contemplative prayer. Perhaps, by God's grace, this book may be a helpful source of guidance.

My book contains seventy-five sections arranged in progressive order. By the time you read and ponder all of them, the final section will help you determine if you are being directed toward contemplative prayer.

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

CHAPTER 1
Four degrees of Christian living

My spiritual friend in God, this book is an attempt to pass along to you some important lessons learned from experience.

There are four degrees of Christian living: *ordinary*, *extraordinary*, *unique*, and *ideal*. We can experience the first three in this life, but the fourth is heavenly. Yet by the grace of God, we may begin the ideal here and see it continue for all eternity. I list these four degrees as stages in ascending order. If you make progress through these stages, the merciful Lord has called you and is leading you to himself by these same degrees.

Early in your life, you lived in an ordinary manner with your worldly friends. The everlasting love of God created and redeemed you. God also inspired your desire for him. It was as though God attached to you a leash of longing and led you to himself. God brought you to the place where you can be a servant among his special servants. You have an opportunity now to discover a deeper spirituality. New possibilities await you.

Consider your own life. Notice God's love drawing you carefully, almost imperceptibly, to the unique third degree of the Christian life. You stand on a steppingstone, the starting place of the road to ideal spirituality. You may begin living on this level now, *before* you die, as well as for eternity.

CHAPTER 2
Spiritual preparation

Take a good look at yourself. Who are you? What makes you worthy of your call from God? (Probably, God is now disturbing the sleep of a lazy person.) Never forget your spiritual vulnerability. God's invitation into a unique relationship does not make you better or holier than others. Instead of feeling proud of yourself, exercise humility. Christ emptied himself of equality with God when he was born in human form, humbling himself even to the point of death on a cross.

Now Christ has graciously selected you from his large flock of sheep to be one of his special followers. He brought you to this place of pasture that you may graze on his love. This kingdom of heaven is your heritage, and God asks you to claim it.

Do not hesitate to make that claim. Forget the past and press on to the future. Remember your spiritual needs rather than your spiritual achievements. If you want to progress to the ideal, you must hunger for it. Strong desire must direct your will. It will become yours by the power of God and with your consent.

Let me remind you that God loves you as a jealous lover loves. The distraction of other desires interferes with your progress. God accomplishes this work in you only in privacy. He wants to be your only love. Look toward God and let him act beyond your ability. Your job is to keep the windows and doors of your soul open, but screened against insects

and vermin. If you will do this, your humble prayer will be attractive to God. Call upon God and notice his warm response. God waits for your cooperation.

You ask, “How do I continue? What shall I do next?”

CHAPTER 3
A superior discipline

Let modest love prompt you to lift up your heart to God. Seek only God. Think of nothing else other than God. Keep your mind free of other thoughts. Give no attention to the things of this world.

These pages describe spiritual contemplation that is pleasing to God. When the saints and angels observe you in this state, they rush to help you. Devils will be disturbed when you begin, and they will use all their tricks to discourage you. In a mysterious way, your contemplation of God helps others even as it helps you.

Contemplation is not difficult or complex. Enthusiastic desire will accomplish much. With God's gift of spiritual hunger, you will make steady progress. Continue until your prayer life becomes enjoyable.

When you begin, you will experience a darkness, a *cloud of unknowing*. You cannot interpret this darkness. You will only comprehend a basic reaching out toward God. None of your efforts will remove the cloud that obscures God from your understanding. Darkness will remain between you and the love of God. You will feel nothing.

Accept this dark cloud. Learn to live with it, but keep looking, praying, and crying out to the one you love. Any insight you ever gain of God while you live in this world will be in this cloud and in this darkness. If you will continue in the manner I describe, I believe that God, in his good pleasure, will grant you an instant of profound religious experience.

CHAPTER 4
Knowledge and imagination

I do not want you to have misconceptions regarding the contemplative work of the soul. Therefore, let me describe in detail what I have learned about this plain and simple practice.

Many think contemplative prayer takes a long time to achieve. On the contrary, results may be instantaneous. Only an atom of time, as we perceive it, may pass. In this fraction of a second, something profoundly significant happens. You only need a tiny scrap of time to move toward God. This brief moment produces the stirring that embodies the greatest work of your soul. How many desires can fill an hour? You may have as many desires as there are indivisible fractions of time in an hour.

If you were as sinless as Adam was before the fall, you would be in total control of each instant. You would respond to every divine impulse. Everything about you would reach toward God all the time, because God created us in his image. In the Incarnation, Christ emptied himself, becoming one of us, accommodating himself to our limitations. Only God satisfies our spiritual hunger. Nothing else suffices. After God graciously transforms our soul, we begin perceiving what is ordinarily beyond our comprehension. Angels don't have the mental capacity, nor do we, to grasp the total reality of God, but what cannot be ours by intelligence can be ours as we embrace love.

Every rational creature has both the power of knowing and the power of loving. Our Creator endows us with both, but

God will forever remain incomprehensible to the knowing power. Through loving power, however, each of us may know God. Love is everlastingly miraculous. May God help you to understand what I mean, because endless joy waits for you.

If God were to bless you with absolute control of your will, you would have a constant awareness of heavenly bliss. My enthusiasm should not surprise you. God designed us for this. God created us to love, and everything else in God's creation helps you love. The exercise explained in this book will restore our spiritual consciousness, but if we neglect prayerful contemplation, we sink ever deeper into unawareness.

Pay attention, then, to how you spend your time. You have nothing more precious than time. In one tiny moment of time, heaven may be gained or lost. God gives us time in sequence, one instant after another and never simultaneously. We only experience the present moment. God never reverses the orderly progression of time. God does not ask for more than we can handle in one moment.

I can almost hear you expressing regret. "What can I do? If what you say is true, how can I account for each moment God has already given me? I am now twenty-four years old and I haven't paid any attention to how I used my time. Even if I wanted to, I could not repair any past moment. The past remains as far beyond my reach as the future. Will tomorrow be any different? My own spiritual slowness traps me. For the love of Jesus, please help me."

You used the correct expression when you said "for the love of Jesus." The love of Jesus is the source of the help you need. Love's power brings everything together. Love Jesus,

and everything of his becomes yours. As God made time, so God judges our use of time. Tie yourself to him with love and faith, knitting your relationship together. This way you may become a part of the larger fellowship of those fastened to God by love. You will have friends among the saints and angels who do not waste any time.

Pay attention and you will discover strength here. Try to understand what I am saying. But I offer one caution. You will not arrive at this relationship passively. God demands your personal involvement and dedication. Apply yourself diligently to both prayer and community responsibilities.

Notice, then, how contemplation affects your own soul. Genuine contemplation comes as a spontaneous, unexpected moment, a sudden springing toward God that shoots like a spark swirling up from a burning coal. A remarkable number of such moments may occur in an hour when the person in contemplation prepares properly and becomes familiar with this work. Any one of these sparkling moments may take on a unique quality resulting in a total detachment from the things of this world. On the other hand, earthly responsibilities and intrusions may tear you away from prayer. The thoughts of frail humans distract attention. Accept this as a natural experience. Your spiritual life receives no harm because of it. With practice, you may return immediately to profound prayer as another spark springs from the fire.

I have briefly summarized this experience of contemplation. Clearly, I report something quite different from fantasy, imagination, or subtle reasoning. Daydreaming is not the result of humble, devout love. A proud, speculative, and

hyper-imaginative mind results in religious pretense. Control and subdue such elaborate notions.

Whoever reads or hears the directions given in this book may conclude that I am describing mental effort. But taxing your brain in an attempt to figure ways to achieve this produces nothing. Intellectual curiosity will lead you to dangerous self-deception. Unless God mercifully pulls you away from such a course, you may quickly fall into harmful frenzies and other spiritual sins that are works of the devil. May God lead you to an experienced, competent spiritual director who can guide you. For the love of God, be careful when you attempt contemplative prayer. Leave your senses and your imagination at rest, because there is no function for them here.

When I refer to this exercise as “darkness” or a “cloud,” do not compare it with the darkness in your house when the candle burns out, or with a cloud in the sky that is composed of water vapor. Anyone can imaginatively conceive of that kind of darkness and cloud, even in broad daylight. I am not talking about such things.

Darkness results from a lack of knowledge, something unknown to you. What obscures God from you is not a cloud in the sky, but the *cloud of unknowing*.

CHAPTER 5

The cloud of forgetting

If you want to enter, live, and work in this *cloud of unknowing*, you will need a *cloud of forgetting* between you and the things of this earth. Consider the problem carefully and you will understand that you are farthest from God when you do not ignore for a moment the creatures and circumstances of the physical world. Attempt to blank out everything but God.

Even valuable thoughts of some special creatures are of little use for this exercise. Memory is a kind of spiritual light that the eye of the soul focuses upon, similar to the way an archer fixes his gaze upon a target. I tell you, whatever you think about looms above you while you are thinking about it, and it stands between you and God. To the extent that anything other than God is in your mind, you are that much farther from God.

I will also say, with reverence and respect, that regarding this exercise, even thinking about the kindness and worthiness of God, of any other spiritual being, or of the joys of heaven contributes nothing. These are uplifting and worthy subjects, but you are far better off contemplating God's pure and simple being, separated from all his divine attributes.

CHAPTER 6

A brief dialogue

You ask me, “How can I think about God in this elemental way?”

I reply, “I don’t know. Your question has wrapped me in the same darkness, that *cloud of unknowing*, I wish you were in. It is possible for us to have extensive knowledge of many subjects, even theology. We have no difficulty thinking about such things. But we are incapable of thinking of God himself with our inadequate minds. Let us abandon everything within the scope of our thoughts and determine to love what is beyond comprehension. We touch and hold God by love alone.

“Therefore, while thinking about God’s kindness and holiness may sometimes be worthwhile, these thoughts must be subdued (covered with a *cloud of forgetting*) in your time of contemplation. Have the courage to step above such ideas with loving devotion. Pierce that thick *cloud of unknowing* with a sharp dart of longing love. Do not turn away no matter what happens.”

Suppose a thought nags your mind, placing itself between you and that darkness, asking you, “What do you want? Who do you seek?” Give this answer: “I want God. I am looking for God, only God.”

And if the thought persists, asking you, “Who is the God you seek?” answer saying, “The God who made me, redeemed me, and led me to this moment.” Speak to your mind, “Thoughts, you cannot contain God. You have limited skill and you offer no assistance. Be silent!” Ignore the activity of your mind by devoutly turning to Jesus, even if your thoughts appear to be holy thoughts.

Quite likely, you will imagine your ideas are helpful. Many excellent and wonderful aspects of Christ’s kindness, graciousness, and mercy spring up in your mind. They appear positive and worthy of your consideration, but as the mental chatter continues, it drags you down lower and lower, diverting your attention. Remember the Passion of Christ. This will lead you to recall your sinful past life. Memories of earlier times and places will flood into your awareness, scattering you in many directions; your concentration will be lost. This happened because you deliberately listened, responded, accepted, and allowed the thought to continue.

Still, these may be good and holy thoughts, essential elements as you begin meditation. You need to ponder frequently your own wretchedness, the Passion of Christ, and the kindness, extraordinary goodness, and dignity of God. Unless

you do this, frustration will disturb your contemplation. With experience, you will learn to let distracting thoughts rest under a *cloud of forgetting* and attempt to penetrate the *cloud of unknowing* separating you from God.

Therefore, when God leads you to engage in the exercise described here, gently lift up your heart to God with love. Rest your thoughts only on the God who created you, redeemed you, and led you to this moment. Avoid any other thoughts of God. Direct a naked desire toward God.

You may wish to reach out to God with one simple word that expresses your desire. A single syllable is better than a word with two or more. “God” and “love” provide excellent examples of such words. Once you have selected the word you prefer, permanently bind this word to your heart. This word becomes your shield and spear in combat and in peace. Use this word to beat upon the cloudy darkness above you and to force every stray thought down under a *cloud of forgetting*. If a nagging thought pesters you, strike it with this monosyllabic word. If your mind begins to analyze the intellectual ramifications of your chosen word, remember that the value of this word is its simplicity. Do not allow the word to become fragmented. If you keep it intact, I can assure you distractions will soon diminish.

Regarding uncertainties

Now you ask, “How do I evaluate these ideas that intrude upon my meditation? Are they good or evil? I doubt that they are evil, because they serve ordinary devotion so well. These thoughts bring pleasure. I have wept bitterly in sympathy with Christ and sometimes because of my awareness of my own wretched condition; this is a sacred and worthwhile experience. I can’t consider such self-knowledge evil. If these thoughts do so much good for me, then why do you instruct me to press them down until they are out of sight beneath a *cloud of forgetting?*”

You ask an excellent question that I will try to answer. You want me to identify and label the thoughts that engage your mind in this exercise. You are thinking clearly, and each idea seems inherently good because you are reflecting the image of God.

Your use of each thought is critically important. The idea becomes good or evil in the application. Good results when God’s grace enlightens you, enabling you to perceive your spiritual hunger and the wonderful kindness of God’s activity. Your devotion increases. But if the thought makes you proud and arrogant, evil results follow. When you attempt subtle, theological speculation and vainly seek recognition as a scholar, rather than seeking devout humility, then you have lost thinking’s most valuable aspect. Anyone who wants to appear clever and knowledgeable in any academic discipline, religious or secular, merely seeks flattery.

You also ask about the value of a *cloud of forgetting*. If such good thoughts assist a spiritual experience, why abandon them? The explanation lies in the difference between active and contemplative Christian living. Both activity and contemplation are essential and interrelated. You cannot fully experience one without the other, even though they have differences in character. The effectively active person is also contemplative. A contemplative person engages in Christian activity. The distinction between the two is that the active life begins and ends in this world, while the contemplative life begins here and continues eternally. Jesus told Martha, who was busy in the kitchen, that her sister, Mary, had chosen what is better, and she would never lose it. Active Martha is troubled and anxious about many things, but contemplative Mary sits in peace, intent only upon him.

At an elemental level, the active life engages in good and honest works of love and mercy. When the active life reaches higher expression, it shares good, spiritual meditation with the lower part of the contemplative life. But the higher part of the contemplative life, to the limited degree it may be experienced here, consists entirely in this darkness and this *cloud of unknowing*. It is an impulse of love, a dark gazing into the pure being of God.

In the beginning of the active life, we look beyond ourselves and work for others. As we progress in Christian activity, we begin to ponder the things of the spirit, but we remain within ourselves. But in the higher degree of the contemplative life, we rise above ourselves. We arrive by grace where we cannot

go by nature. We unite with God in spirit, sharing his love, and we are in harmony with God's will.

As we cannot come to the higher part of the active life without pausing our business in the lower part, so we cannot come to the higher degree of the contemplative life without moving away from the elementary stages. Even holy works interfere with meditation. Similarly, you will find it inappropriate and cumbersome to think profound holy thoughts while working in this darkness of the *cloud of unknowing*.

For this reason, I advise you to suppress such pleasant thoughts, covering them with a thick *cloud of forgetting*, regardless of the apparent high quality of your ideas. In this life, love is the only way to reach God. Knowledge does not assist us. As long as the soul lives in this mortal body, the clarity of our understanding in the contemplation of spiritual things, particularly of God, mingles with imagination, tainting the experience and leading us into great error.

CHAPTER 9
Contemplative prayer

Resist intense mental activity when seeking this dark contemplation. Intellectual activity will hinder you. When you want to be alone with God, the conceptualizations of your mind will sneak into play. Rather than this darkness, our intellectual ability prefers a clear picture of something less than God. Such mental images, as pleasant as they may be, stand between you and God. Resist them.

For the health of your soul, pleasing God, and helping others, engage in a blind impulse of love toward God alone, a secret love beating on this *cloud of unknowing*. Seeking God this way is superior to seeing all the angels and saints in heaven, or hearing the laughter and music of those in bliss.

If you experience divine contemplation once on this level, you will agree I am not exaggerating. There is no way you will ever have a clear vision of God in this life, but you can have the gracious feeling I describe, if God grants it. Therefore, lift up your love to that cloud. More accurately, let God draw your love up to that cloud. Let God's grace help you to forget everything other than God. If all you are seeking is God, you will not be content with anything else.

CHAPTER 10

Discernment

When you are contemplating, thoughts about others fall into another category. Distractions may arrive unconsciously, beyond your control. Such thoughts may result in pleasure or grief. Human nature is frail. Quickly reject these thoughts; otherwise you will begin to experience positive or negative emotional responses and lose your stability. A memory of some pleasant past experience may trigger delight. A painful thought may make you angry.

If you have forsaken the world and committed yourself to a devout life, a temporary lapse does no harm. Root your intentions in God. Lingering with other thoughts allows them to intrude upon your spiritual experience. Consenting to them exposes you to the risk of falling into one of the seven deadly sins. For instance, if you willingly think of someone who has troubled you and you begin to conceive of ways to get even, *wrath* may result. *Envy* follows when you rashly develop a loathing contempt for another person. Or maybe you become weary of a good occupation and want to avoid it. *Sloth* then traps you. If you enjoy thinking about yourself, your achievements and attractiveness, *pride* waits at your elbow. Dwelling on material possessions you wish were yours becomes *covetousness*. If you cannot get your mind off delightful food and drink, you experience *gluttony*. When your thoughts concern the pleasures of love and flattery, or the seduction of another person, you *lust*.

CHAPTER 11
Evaluating thoughts

The purpose of my comments is not to place a burden of guilt on you. I want you to evaluate carefully each thought that stirs in your mind when you contemplate God. If an idea leads to sin, put a stop to it immediately. If you become careless about your early thoughts, you will have greater difficulty later. Everyone sins, but watch out for increasing sinfulness. True disciples can always avoid carelessness. Neglecting simple things prepares you for worse sins.