

THE MYSTICISM OF THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

— A modern interpretation by William Johnston. Foreword by Thomas Merton

"We can be grateful to Father Johnston for presenting the first extended and coherent theological treatment of all the works by the author of *The Cloud*, seen in the light of a conscious comparison with Oriental ways of contemplation.... His book is a most welcome and valuable contribution to mystical theology." Thomas Merton in the Preface.

There are few spiritual works that survive their generations; there are fewer writers whose labors and insights merit the consideration of later centuries. But for almost six hundred years men in search of God have turned to the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. His identity evades us; but his mystical writings, graced with simple literary beauty, coax us to seek light in darkness, to seek the unknown God and find ourselves.

The unknown English author left seven treatises, of which *The Cloud of Unknowing* is the best known. He lived in Chaucer's England, in a century which produced a galaxy of mystics: Rolle, Hilton, Tauler, Suso, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena.... These we remember; but we should not forget that his, like ours, was a terrible and turbulent age, torn by war and hunger and Christian unconcern. Such things we, in this generation, can grasp. And making our way in a confused and confusing path we can profit from the calm and challenge proffered to us by the fourteenth-century mystic whose work is the basis of this book.

There is a wave of contemporary interest in mystical phenomena: maybe a symptom of utopian search, anxiety, if not despair. For mysticism is an abused and overworked term, covering a range of experiences stretching from the spurious to the authentic. The West is confronting the East; and in a very real sense it is discovering it and attempting to probe its cultures and religions. It has encountered Eastern mysticism, which is in danger of being misunderstood or explained away—unless we fathom the meaning and mystery of Christian mysticism. That is but one reason why this wise and absorbing book is so timely, so needed.

In explaining what mysticism is, and what it is not, one treads gently. The experience of the mystic reaches beyond language, beyond the light of reason, beyond human knowledge. The mystical theologian walks

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on quick sands, groping to describe the indescribable. The author of *The Cloud* followed the tradition of Gregory of Nyssa and pseudo-Dionysius—as many before and after him did—in adopting the apophatic approach which emphasizes that God is best known by negation, describing transcendent loving experiences of Him as a "knowing by unknowing": rising above thoughts and images, entering a superconceptual, mystical world where—in faith, love and darkness—man sees God. In the words of Dionysius: "The most godly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing."

This work places the author of *The Cloud* in his historical milieu; elucidates the philosophical, semantic and theological tradition which shaped him; and offers a key to the timeless work of a medieval mystic. It makes mysticism less awesome, reminding us that knowing by unknowing is a mystical form of knowledge, which leads to a way of prayer which is "no more than an intensification of ordinary Christian living."

This lucid and critical work reflects the author's rare and erudite familiarity with mystical literature and problems. His work is far more than a significant contribution to Christian mystical theology. It is for a wide audience: those interested in Zen, Hinduism, modern atheism... will also find in its pages an openness and an ecumenical clarity which sheds light on their problems of unknowing. Father Johnston has written a sensitive work on a fourteenth-century mystic because he is concerned with the problems of twentieth-century man.

THE AUTHOR

William JOHNSTON, S.J. was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1925 and joined the Society of Jesus in 1943. He graduated from the National University of Ireland and the Queen's University, Belfast, and went to Japan in 1951 where he was ordained to the priesthood and took his doctorate in mystical theology at Sophia University. Father Johnston has published two books in Japanese and has contributed to *Monumenta Nipponica*, *Theological Studies* and *Thought*; He has also written "The Mysticism of T.S. Eliot" in *T.S. Eliot: A Tribute from Japan*. He is currently associate professor in Sophia University and lecturer in Tokyo University. He is also a research member of Sophia University's *Institute of Oriental Religions*.



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WILLIAM JOHNSTON

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WITH A FOREWORD BY
THOMAS MERTON



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TO MY MOTHER

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FOREWORD

by

Thomas Merton

Mysticism will probably always be a disturbing subject. First of all, the concept of mystical experience is easily misunderstood. Aberrations have been palmed off as true mysticism. Or the word has been defined so loosely and with so little respect for truth that mystical experience has been confused with every kind of emotional, pseudo-religious, aesthetic or supposedly extra-sensory perception. Even when properly understood, and treated with perfect orthodoxy—as in this present book—mysticism tends to inspire apprehension even in religious minds. Why? Because the mystic must surrender to a power of love that is greater than human and advance toward God in a darkness that goes beyond the light of reason and of human conceptual knowledge. Furthermore, there is no infallible way of guaranteeing the mystic against every mistake: he can never be perfectly sure of any human technique. Only the grace of God can protect him and guide him. In other words, when we speak of mysticism, we speak of an area in which man is no longer completely in command of his own life, his own mind, and of his own will. Yet at the same time his surrender is to a God who is “more intimate to him than his own self” (intimior intimo meo, in St. Augustine’s words) and therefore mysticism precludes real alienation. In mystical union God and man, while remaining no doubt metaphysically distinct, are practically and experientially “one Spirit” in the words of St. Paul (1 Cor 6, 16) quoted in this sense by Christian mystics down the centuries. But because there are also other “spirits” and because man does not possess within himself a natural faculty which can by its own powers pass final judgment on the transcendent experiences taking place within him, a counterfeit mysticism is not only possible but relatively common.

Mystical theology seeks to understand the highest union of man with God (outside of the beatific vision) and to help us to distinguish between experience that is truly supernatural and that which is not "from God." Note that what is not supernatural and therefore not strictly mystical, is not necessarily evil. There is a natural metaphysical intuition of being, even of Absolute Being, or of the metaphysical ground of being. This intuition is certainly found in all the great world religions and in certain philosophies. Aristotle believed it to be the highest achievement possible to man, and the root of his true happiness. There is no difficulty in relating this metaphysical intuition to the Satori of Zen.

Whether there is in non-Christian religions a truly mystical or supernatural vision of God may still be debated, but the best theologians have admitted its possibility. Nor is there any real difficulty about this, in theory, since we know that men of good will in all religions, who follow the dictates of an upright conscience, can certainly attain to holiness and union with God because they receive grace from Him to do so. Union with God in love also implies a profound and existential grasp of His presence: indeed it should normally imply some such intuition, however vague this might be. Nor is this intuition, even when supernatural, necessarily "mystical" in the full sense of the word. The experience of living faith, the "sense of the presence of God" which many faithful Christians enjoy without being mystics, is a supernatural intuition of God's loving presence and care, granted with the gift of a mature faith.

One of the chief problems of mystical theology is to account for a loving, unitive and supernatural love of God that is beyond concepts, and to do so in language that does not in one way or other become completely misleading. The mystical theologian faces the problem of saying what cannot really be said. One of the ways of attacking this problem has been opened up by so called apophatic theology, the theology of "unknowing," which describes the transcendent experience of God in love as a "knowing by unknowing" and a "seeing that is not seeing." The language of apophatism is not peculiar to Christianity, and it had currency in Asia long before Christian times (for instance in Lao-tzu and in the Upanishads). But it is also familiar in the

Bible, in spite of the fact that in the Bible God is spoken of in poetic and concrete language which presents Him not as "formless" but as having very definite natural and even at times human "forms" together with human feelings. Yet the great theophanies of Moses and Elias are apophatic, and on Sinai Moses is enveloped in a dense cloud, in which he talks to God as to his friend, without seeing Him.

Mystical theology is negative in the sense that every positive statement is immediately qualified with: "but that is not it." One cannot grasp the idea of "unknowing" as long as one clings to the notion of God conceived as a definite, that is to say "defined" or "limited"—therefore "finite"—object. Any experience of God as possessing some finite form or idea which we can grasp is an experience not of God but only of something that remotely resembles Him in an analogical way. There is nothing whatever in existence that even remotely resembles God as He is in Himself. And yet the "knowing" of God in "unknowing," far from being unreal and uncertain, possesses the highest reality and certainty of any experience accessible to man. How is this possible? How can it be explained?

For centuries, mystics have groped for words in which to account for the supreme reality of this experience which not only illuminates a man's mind and fills his heart with new strength, but even radically transforms his whole life. But also they have warned men that the easiest way to be deluded and led into error is to seek experience for its own sake, and to want to possess and use what can never become our own private possession. The root of false mysticism is the yearning to "have experiences." Spiritual ambition is an obstacle to mystic union. All this is said in classic and unforgettable pages by The Cloud of Unknowing, the work of an anonymous fourteenth century English writer in the apophatic tradition, closely related to the Rheinland mystics. He is calmer, more prudent and more orthodox than the brilliant Meister Eckhart, as homely and humorous as Tauler, much more a man of solid common sense than Suso or any of them. Indeed, there has never been a book on mysticism that showed such realistic common sense as The Cloud—and the other writings of the same author. And yet, alas, The Cloud too must remain a closed book, mysterious and frightening, or simply confusing

and inaccessible, to those who do not have the gift of appreciating such things.

Nevertheless, there is a particular timeliness about a careful theological study of *The Cloud* today. First of all we witness the meeting, or perhaps better the collision, of Zen and the West. The Cloud, as Father Johnston shows, has points in common with Zen, but the similarities must not be pushed too far. Certainly *The Cloud* provides a solid basis for dialogue between Christian and Eastern ways of contemplation.

Then there is the current furor about the "death of God." This must be seen as a professedly religious concern, and indeed we are exhorted by some of the new theologians to embrace "Christian atheism" on the grounds that a truly contemporary man cannot be anything other than an atheist. It is clear that a lot of this supposedly new and radical theology sounds a great deal less strange and less new when it is seen against the background of apophatism. When the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich a few years ago discovered that God was not "out there" in the Milky Way somewhere, he was only discovering Christian theodicy. God never was "out there" or "up there" or anywhere in a particular place. In fact anyone who is acquainted with theological tradition is well aware that the God who has supposedly died in the minds of these new men is a god who never lived in the first place. Like the god demolished by atheism, he is a shadow and a contradiction. It is quite possible that the teaching of *The Cloud of Unknowing* may help some Christian "atheists" to sort out a few simple ideas and recover their faith.

Certainly *The Cloud* is appropriate for an era which has become wary of religious clichés and of grossly inadequate imagery. Furthermore, the simplicity of *The Cloud* and of the way of prayer it teaches, will be a boon to those who can no longer cope with complicated and sentimental methods of meditating which appealed to an earlier age. Let us also frankly face the fact that for many Christians, some of the new liturgical experiments with all their unquestionable advantages, are often too noisy and too busy. *The Cloud* is an admirable antidote for a rather hectic and disordered communal piety which does not always quite come off. For that reason it will meet with a special kind of opposition, and will be condemned as quietism, illuminism, subjectivism, and

so on. Never mind. That is an old, well-worn refrain and Father Johnston's book should take care of these routine objections.

Next, and this is more serious still, there is the current rather massive trend toward the easy pseudo-mysticism of psychedelic drugs. This is not the place to discuss this trend or to pass final judgment in the crucial questions it raises. But *The Cloud*, like all the great documents in the apophatic tradition, warns us that the appetite for experiences—or, more crudely, for kicks—is the greatest danger to the development of an authentic mystical life. Whether or not the use of such drugs is harmless in itself, and whether or not a positive human contribution is to be expected from them, it would seem that their use should not be recommended in the true mystical life. A sample quotation from St. John of the Cross should suffice, here, to show why:

In order to come to this essential union of love in God the soul must have a care not to lean upon imaginary visions nor upon forms or figures or particular objects of the understanding; for these cannot serve it as a proportionate and proximate means to such an end; rather they would disturb it and for this reason the soul must renounce them and strive never to have them. (Ascent of Mount Carmel, II, xvi, 10)

Here St. John of the Cross is speaking not only of illusory visions but of authentic spiritual experiences, supernatural and mystical ones included. He is teaching that one who seeks "essential union of love in God" which he describes as a "naked union of pure essences" will only be hindered by a desire for visions and experiences. This essential union is beyond all experience. Hence the desire and need for experiences will inevitably lead to an attachment to forms and objects, or to mental states and conditions, which are incompatible with perfect union. Obviously one cannot effectively "prevent" a true mystical experience which takes place with no initiative of our own. But even these must not, says St. John of the Cross, be desired or sought by one who is called by God to the most perfect union. If they happen, they are of course accepted. But one would do better not to desire them, and any effort to bring them on would

end in illusion or frustration. As the present book shows, The Cloud concurs perfectly with this traditional teaching.

A final objection against apophatic mysticism will come from those who are suspicious of "introversion." This term was used by mystics before it was appropriated by modern clinical psychology. The introversion of the mystics is metaphysical rather than psychological, and rightly understood it has nothing to do with the introversion of narcissistic withdrawal. However the term is a bit misleading, and we must admit that there does exist a real danger of silent and passive contemplation becoming a mere exercise in narcissistic self-indulgence. One must not rest in the simple pleasure of one's own being and become disinterested in other things, or in one's necessary work. This too The Cloud explains sufficiently well. There is all the difference in the world between true contemplation and narcissistic repose in one's own self. True contemplation results in greater freedom of action and indeed makes action more spontaneous, more loving, and more effective. Narcissistic withdrawal ends in confusion, laziness, self-concern, sensitivity and other such morbid effects. By their fruits you shall know them.

We can be grateful to Father Johnston for presenting the first extended and coherent theological treatment of all the works by the author of The Cloud, seen in the light of a conscious comparison with Oriental ways of contemplation. He is in a good position to do this, as he is at Sophia University in Tokyo together with other Catholic authorities on Zen, Fr. H. Dumoulin and Fr. Enomiya Lassalle. His book is a most welcome and valuable contribution to mystical theology.