

Entering the Spiritual Life

Christian Contribution by Philip Sheldrake

Text 2. Anon., *The Cloud of Unknowing*

My spiritual friend in God, you are to understand thatthere are four degrees and forms of the Christian life. They are: ordinary, special, singular and perfect. Three of these can be begun and ended in this life; and one may begin the fourth by grace here below, which is to last without end in the happiness of heaven (Chapter 1).

For when you first begin to undertake [this exercise], all that you find is a darkness, a sort of cloud of unknowing; you cannot tell what it is, except that you experience in your will a simple reaching out to God. This darkness and cloud is always between you and your God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, and from experiencing him in sweetness of love in your affection. So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can, always crying out after him whom you love. For if you are to experience him or to see him at all, insofar as it is possible here, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness. So, if you labour at it with all your attention as I bid you, I trust, in his mercy, that you will reach this point (Chapter 3).

It is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love that thing that I cannot think. Because [God] can certainly be loved but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought.....With a devout, pleasing, impulsive love strive to pierce that darkness above you. You are to smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love (Chapter 6).

Commentary

This anonymous mystical text [also] comes from late-14th century England. The original audience for *The Cloud* was probably monastic and explicitly contemplative. Yet over the last hundred years the book has achieved wide popularity as a primer in contemplative prayer for all kinds of people even beyond Christianity. In terms of the spiritual path, the author would have assumed that his audience (and it is certainly a “he” who writes) was ready to enter into the way of contemplation. Yet, in another sense, this is nevertheless a work for contemplative *beginners*. The author would have seen this readiness for contemplation as the *real* entry-point into an authentic spiritual life beyond a mere quest for conversion and moral virtue within our everyday existence. Again, unlike Julian, there are Neo-Platonic elements in the emphasis on stilling the senses, on imagelessness and on moving beyond our rationality and will-power in the spiritual life. Hence the author refers to a cloud of unknowing or a cloud of forgetting. Whoever and whatever God “is” is beyond concepts, language, and definition – and certainly beyond our powers to compel or control. To reach towards God, we are simply to learn how to “rest” in the darkness and “cloud of unknowing” as the first step. This resting in darkness cultivates our desire and longing. Our understanding cannot break through the cloud that separates us from the deep reality of God. We have to learn to let go of such attempts. Rather, it is our love alone that can reach God by piercing the darkness. “You are to smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love”.

Response 1 – Buddhist response by Ruben Habito

“It is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love that thing that I cannot think.” This reminds me of the title of a book: “Buddhism is not What You Think.” This clever use of words by this contemporary authors also refers to the hallowed understanding that what is important, what is decide, what is ultimate for us human beings is *beyond thought*. How do we arrive at that which is beyond thought? The Buddha’s prescription was to “stop and see.” Stop the workings of the discursive mind, and allow your heart and mind to be still, and you will see. “Be still, and know, that I AM (God).

Response 2 – Hindu response by Anant Rambachan

The teaching that God cannot be grasped by thought resonates with my Advaita tradition. One Upanishad text describes God as that reality which the human mind cannot think of but because of which it is capable of thinking. God is not an object in time and space. Is love of God and the quest for understanding through reason incompatible? What is the kind of “reaching” of God that is proposed here through love?

Response 3 – Hindu response by Shrivatsa Goswami

1. In the Bhagavata Purana Krishna tells his philosopher friend that those who see the Divine presence in every living being and lovingly serve them are devotees of the highest order.
2. The path to spirituality is via ‘negativia’. The seeker, under the guidance of a teacher, sees the worthlessness of the transitory wealth, life etc. and this realisation is the revelation of the spiritual domain. Stepping upon the death and ignorance one enters into the life of immortality and wisdom--says Upanishads.
3. This entry however is not the result of pure discursive knowledge and sophistry, but dawns out of an intimate and intuitive experience of the truth. Bhagavata Purana says: intense and passionate devotion is enough for the spiritual realisation.