

Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

Penance in *The cloud of unknowing*

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'To those who love much, much is forgiven.'

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CARTHUSIANS Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte on the author of *The cloud of unknowing* is well established today.¹

Their treatises were familiar to the *Cloud* author.² They wrote out of a tradition that viewed the movement from speculative to mystical contemplation as the proper course of prayerful penance for monastic souls who had put their lives in order. The ascent of the soul to God in prayer was considered to be a progression in which one was first purified and then illumined and finally perfected (the *triplices viae*).³ It was generally presumed by the *Cloud* author and subsequent commentators that deliberate conscious sin was no longer the practice of the monk that they addressed.⁴

For this reason, the *Cloud* author treated the notion of penance under the rubrics of purgative prayer, and the examination of conscience or the enumeration of sins was not the central concern of this monastic spiritual writer. While it was presumed that sacramental confession had its place in all stages of conversion, the process of purgation through prayer was given more emphasis to those whose conscience and counsel permitted (*CU* XV:152).⁵

Love which destroys the root of sin

In the Carthusian tradition familiar to Hugh, Guigo and the *Cloud* author, prayer is a process that undoes 'the root of sin' or removes the underlying attachments that frustrate the experience of God's love (*CU* XII:145). For the *Cloud* author, the primary mode of penance besides sacramental confession was the following of a spiritual exercise – a reaching out with naked intent in a process of forgetting that frees the loving power or will. Such a simple exercise undid the very root of sin which robbed the will of 'agility'.⁶

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Hugh of Balma tells us that purification through 'burning love is more efficacious than sorrow'.⁷ The *Cloud* author drew upon the same Carthusian context in maintaining that blind impulses of love 'destroyed the very root of sin' (*CU* XII:146). Both authors are concerned less with the forgiveness of actual sins and more with undoing deeper psychological and moral scarring which restricted the soul's abilities. They were concerned with 'reforming' the soul's fallenness or 'reordering' its attachments.

Purification was thus the work of a spiritual exercise, grounded in the yearning or longing of the human person. This desire for God indicated a 'prevenience' of the divine. As Augustine taught: 'Grace goes before us (*praevenit*) that we might live a holy life and it follows that we might live with him forever'.⁸ Aquinas interprets the same words: 'God works that we might desire: and when we desire, he co-operates with us that we might bring the desire to perfection'.⁹ The *Cloud* author puts it similarly: '... the soul is helped by grace in this felt desire ...' (*CU* III:120).

By the twelfth century, the 'ordering' function of our yearning for God received great attention in the Cistercian and Victorine traditions, which were fascinated with the *ordo caritatis*, or order of charity.¹⁰ These traditions were familiar to the *Cloud* author who drew heavily on Richard of St Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux.¹¹ The incorporation of the purifying power of love into the simple exercise he counselled was natural to his belief that the human person was endowed with an uplifting affection that ordered our lives toward mystery. This chastening dynamism lay within our grasp. If it were harnessed, according to the *Cloud* author, the lifting of the heart was geared to carry one beyond self-concern and beyond connections that depress or sadden us (*CU* III:119).

Because its roots were Dionysian and apophatic, the *Cloud* author's simple reaching out undid mental constrictions, thus rendering the soul more able to love as it divested itself of ruminations, whether upon sin or virtue, both of which were more our creations than they were God's. Often they had an obsessive, restrictive content that stood in the face of mystery. As William of St Thierry had written, thoughts (even theological thoughts) were largely an attempt to make God like us while, on the contrary, movements of love carried us toward a mystery that was not of our own making.¹² The point of Carthusian prayer was not so much to know God, but to allow oneself to be known, held, influenced by God's mystery. As

Karl Rahner reminds us, the concept of God is not a 'grasp of God, but rather a letting ourselves be grasped by divine mystery'.¹³

The experience of longing love

Prayer thus followed upon the heels of desire, magnifying its prompting again and again. The result was increased desire and mental *oblivio*, a state in which rumination is eclipsed by immediate experience of loving. The self-emptying aspect of such prayer in the Holy Spirit freed the soul by shearing away morbidity or anxiety, since it magnified the power of a sustaining sigh (*suspirium*) which raged on within one despite a mental void. Fastenings of the imagination and memory were thus worked loose by the nakedness of our blind intent, and the soul was sustained by the power of desire.

Like Hugh of Balma, Thomas Gallus, the Victorine commentator with whom the *Cloud* author was very familiar, assures us that purification and penance are 'more powerfully effected by longing love', i.e. by 'sighs of love' (*per suspirium amoris*).¹⁴ For Balma and Gallus, it is the impulses of love that undo the very 'root of sin'. Paraphrasing St Paul, the *Cloud* author puts it similarly:

No matter how much you were to weep and sorrow for your sins or for the passion of Christ, or be ever so mindful of the joys of heaven, what would it profit you? Certainly it would be of great good, great gain and great grace. But in comparison with that blind impulse of love, there is little it can or may do . . . Not only does it destroy the root and ground of sin, as far as that is possible here below, but it also acquires the virtues. (*CU XII:146*)

The Carthusian charism is concerned with a deep change in the person. This involves the creation of a consciousness in which the fantasies of the memory and imagination are purged of a symbolic content. The groaning of the Holy Spirit, sighing within us, becomes for Carthusians the chastening anchor of penance. To those who love much, much illusion and guilt are undone in the very prayer of self-forgetfulness. The result of such purification is described in *The cloud's* chapter XXIV which maintains that the practitioner of a *ghostly* work gains unusual mildness or equanimity. The author tells us:

. . . he [the practitioner] considers all men alike his kinsmen and none his foes. So much so that he considers all those that cause him pain and do him mischief in this life to be his very special friends, and he

considers that he is being moved to wish them as much good as he would to the dearest friend he has. (CU XXIV:170)

Such purification or chaste love is the direct result of love's naked intent acting upon the root of sin. The result of following love's longing sigh is thus a remarkable balance and compassion. Purifying sighs of love undo the rust of sin, bringing the soul a detached love that avoids aggression, evoking a rare mildness reminiscent of parts of Jesus' own teaching.

Mary the penitent: metanoia rising from love

Perhaps no figure in *The cloud* illustrates the power of longing love more poignantly than the woman Mary of Bethany who, together with Mary of Magdala and the sinful woman of Luke 7:36, forms a composite figure in the *Cloud* author's mind.¹⁵ From earliest centuries in the West, Mary Magdalen is closely linked and ultimately conflated with the two other figures, remaining so intertwined with them that one often discovers an identification of the three women as one in medieval writing.¹⁶ When our author speaks of Mary, he employs literary licence to create a figure that is at once penitent and contemplative. In a style typical of his time, he treats the sinful woman of Luke 7:36, Mary of Bethany (Lk 10:38; Jn 11—12) and Mary Magdalen (Lk 8:2; Mk 15:40, Jn 20) as one person. If there is obvious distortion and perhaps sexism in this destruction of three biblical women as unique, there is also a desire to illustrate the polarities of the human predicament as sin and contemplation.

Such a woman represents all of us who, though sinful, are called to be contemplative (CU XVI:153). She 'stands for all habitual sinners truly converted and called to the grace of contemplation' (CU XXII:166). Throughout *The cloud*, she appears as an exemplar who lives a life of longing love rather than of focusing on past sin. She appears sometimes as the witness of the resurrection (Mary of Magdala), whose love for Jesus will not permit her to leave his tomb (CU XXII:165); sometimes as Mary of Bethany who sits adoringly at his feet (CU XVII:156); and sometimes as the sinful woman of Luke 7:36 who is forgiven much because she loved much (CU XVI:153). Always the reader is presented with a single person referred to as Mary.

The author of *The cloud* thus introduces us to an allegorical Mary who is passionately involved with Christ. He loves her so strongly

that he intercedes for her at the house of Simon the leper (Lk 7:36; *CU* XXII:166). 'Sweet was that love between Our Lord and Mary' (*CU* XXII:165). The author thus gives his contemplative instruction a romantic flavour and enshrines 'Mary, the penitent contemplative' as a beloved disciple and role model for those he would guide. The author assumes always that he is speaking of the same person, since all three women were anointers of Christ's body (*myrrhophores*).¹⁷ Imagination thus does violence to history in the cause of contemplation. Like Gregory the Great, our author was more interested in creating images to explain the 'three ways' (*triplices viae*) than in determining the distinctive contributions of women. Henceforth we shall refer to 'Mary' as Mary the penitent contemplative.

For our author, the penitent woman of Luke 7 was forgiven much because she loved much (*CU* XVI:153–154). A century after *The cloud*, the Carthusian Richard Methley expanded on *The cloud*'s meaning by remarking in his commentary that 'God forgave her many sins, not only nor chiefly for great sorrow, etc., but because she loved much . . .'.¹⁸ As Luke's Gospel puts it, 'I tell you, her sins are forgiven, for she loved much . . .' (Lk 7:47).

'Sighs of love' in the contemplative tradition

It is necessary to mention here that I am referring to those who are called by grace and counsel to the contemplative life. For these people the first conversion of sorrow is presumed to have already occurred. Sorrow does play a role in their lives, but at an earlier stage.

It becomes clear to any reader of *The cloud* that the *suspiria* or sighs of love that so influenced Jesus to forgive the woman of Luke 7, become in contemplative tradition the determining factor that purifies and sustains the soul. Always it is the loving power moved by the sighs of the Holy Spirit that feeds the soul as it divests itself of the obsessive content of past grumbling and delight. For our author the power of love to sustain the soul far surpasses even the first conversion of contrition, and we are likened to Christ by grace to the degree that we love; not necessarily to the degree that we sorrow (*CU* XVI:153–154).

Our author insists in chapter XIV of *The cloud* that the imperfect awareness of our sinfulness ought to precede any contemplative exercise (*CU* XIV:150). Without such awareness, our sense of crea-

turehood would be incomplete. Still the author goes on to insist that the *ghoostly* exercise he recommends surpasses the awareness of sin or the awareness of virtue.

Just as Christ did not rely on sorrow to be made perfect, neither was the contemplative to become overly involved with a sense of sin that derived from human reason. The true path of purification lay through 'longing love' or affection which taught one to be sustained by a naked intent, letting go even of that severe truth that rested on human concepts of one's own vileness (*CU XIV:151*). Our author asks:

... if there were no more perfect cause of humility than to see and experience one's wretchedness ... under what cause were they humbled who never saw nor experienced wretchedness ... as it is of our Lord, Jesus Christ, Our Lady Saint Mary ... ? (*CU XV:153*)

Our author is asking here how Jesus was perfected if not through the power of love (perfect humility) that was his through nature. Certainly Jesus and his mother Mary did not achieve perfection through a reasoned sense of their own vileness. He goes on to point out that Mary the penitent contemplative herself would have accomplished little had she paid too much attention to the 'bundle of sorrow' she carried in her heart (*CU XVI:154*). Following the common teaching of Cistercians and Carthusians, our author reminds us that Mary the penitent would accomplish little by coming down from the heights of her desire 'to the depths of her sinful life ... to search about in the foul malodorous bog and dunghill of her sins, dragging them up one by one with all their circumstances' (*CU XV:155*).¹⁹

The languishing that she experienced was not a matter of sorrow for sin but, on the contrary, a longing love, 'sighing' for mystery. Sorrow would harden the obsessive content of past misdeeds, while naked longing unfastened the will to receive greater forgiveness. Here we are reminded of Bernard of Clairvaux, who warns that a person too constrained by a sense of sin lacks fervour and is too caught up in self-interest.²⁰ Such a person loses all spontaneity. Mary the penitent thus avoided such severe constraint of sorrow and freed herself from the very tendency to adhere to past memories. This woman opened her consciousness, moving dramatically away from notions of sin and virtue, cultivating instead a spirituality in which the significance of sinful memory loses its prestige as the

motive of penitence. As our author tells us, 'she learned to love what she could not see clearly in this life' (*CU XVI:155f*), forgetting the vileness she was long accustomed to. Thus she hung up her love in a cloud of unknowing, moving away from the bog of sin while she was sustained or 'held' by love. She 'learned to love what she could not see clearly in this life by the light of understanding of her reason . . . so much so that often enough she paid but little attention to whether she had been a sinner or not' (*CU XVI:155*). The content of sin was thus 'less fastened' to her heart and her memory less plagued by self-loathing. Gradually, she was sustained not by mental designations but inner longing. Mary's longing love is actually the very prevenient presence through which God communicates the divine being to her. On this point, we are reminded of Karl Rahner's words:

God's word of forgiveness is not only the consequence, but also and ultimately the presupposition of the conversion in which a guilty person turns to God and surrenders in faith, trust and contrition, and it can be heard in the depths of conscience. For as the ground upon which conversion is based, this word of forgiveness dwells within the trusting and loving return of a person to God.²¹

Loving impulse and forgiveness

There is then a hidden, inarticulate prompting which is part of everyone's history of conscience. In the quiet depths, it may appear as dissatisfaction, incompleteness, sorrow or longing, but this stirring is already the very self-communion of God.²² The gift of God's sustaining sigh is thus found within the trusting and loving return of the subject to God. Forgiveness is not only a final realization of relief, but the entire experience which moves us in that direction.

The Carthusian tradition is thus correct to insist that 'she who loves much is forgiven much'. This is true since the experience of being in love or returning to God is the very locus in which the 'word of forgiveness' dwells. The person who begins to 'sigh for' God or 'to reach out to God' with loving intent already experiences God's mercy. Thus the Church has always insisted that 'perfect love' of God is to be equated with forgiveness. Such love is already a sign of God's prevenient presence which is the indication of divine mercy. One cannot return to God without experiencing the prompting of God's love. Thus she who loves much is already the recipient

of an active, forgiving mercy. In this sense, no one reaches out to God with longing, unless God has already found them.

It is clear from our author's writing that for contemplatives forgiveness is more the result of a loving impulse than it is the result of concepts of sin and virtue. Love sustains us as our hearts become less fastened to the obsessive content of being a sinner or a saint. Mary the penitent thus comes closer to her own identity as a person to the extent that she moves beyond an awareness of her sin, becoming more taken with the value she perceives in Christ. To the extent that she longs for God, she experiences forgiveness as a deeper sharing in loving mercies. When love has done its work, when we are no longer aware whether we are sinners or not, there comes a new sustaining strength: the wonderful compassion in which every person, kinsman and foe is considered the same. The unusual balance seen here is the reformed image of humans no longer rooted in a disordered sense of self, but sustained by a love that defies categories.

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NOTES

1 See Introduction to *The cloud of unknowing*, edited with an introduction by James Walsh, preface by Simon Tugwell (New York: Paulist, 1981), pp 19–26 (hereafter referred to as *CU*). See also Kent Emery, 'The cloud of unknowing and *Mystica theologica*' in *The roots of modern Christian tradition*, introduction by Jean Leclercq, edited by E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), pp 46–70.

2 The treatises referred to are Guigo's *De contemplatione* and Hugh's *Mystica theologia* (*Via Sion lugent*). They appear today in *Carthusian spirituality: the writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo De Ponte*, translated and introduced by Dennis D. Martin, preface by John Van Engen (New York: Paulist, 1997).

3 See Bernard McGinn, *The growth of mysticism* vol II, *The presence of God: a history of western Christian mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p 183. See Thomas D. McGonigle, 'Three ways' in *The new dictionary of spirituality*, ed Michael Downey (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1970), pp 963–965.

4 See *CU*:151, note 127.

5 See Introduction to *CU*, p 66.

- 6 See Hugh of Balma, MS Douce 262: ff 119r–127r in *The pursuit of wisdom and other works by the author of The cloud of unknowing*, translated, edited and annotated by James Walsh, preface by George Maloney (New York: Paulist, 1988), pp 308–309.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p 308.
- 8 St Augustine 'Latin' in Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and freedom: operative grace in the thought of St Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Herder, 1970), p 30.
- 9 Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I–2, q.III, a.2, in 'Latin' in Lonergan, *Grace and freedom*, pp 128–129.
- 10 See McGinn, *The growth of mysticism*, pp 149–157; John C. Moore, *Love in twelfth century France* (Philadelphia: University of Penn. Press, 1972), p 60.
- 11 See James Walsh, Introduction to *CU*, pp. 1–51; Emery, 'The cloud of unknowing', pp 46ff; J. P. H. Clark, 'Sources and theology in *The cloud of unknowing*', *Downside Review* 98/331 (April 1980).
- 12 'For by the natural understanding the soul grasps the object which it penetrates, but by the spiritual understanding, instead of grasping, it is itself grasped', William of St Thierry, *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, trans Mother Columba Hart, intro J. M. Déchanet (Spencer: Cistercian Publications, 1970), vol I, 7, p 66.
- 13 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of the Christian faith: an introduction to the idea of Christianity*, trans William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p 54.
- 14 See Thomas Gallus, *Paraphrase of Mystica theologia* in *CU*, p 146, note 112.
- 15 For a critique of this conflation, see Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The women around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp 82–83; and Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: myth and metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), pp 25–26.
- 16 See Galen C. Knutson, 'The Feast of St Mary Magdalen', *Worship* 71/3 (May 97), pp. 205ff.
- 17 See Knutson, 'St Mary Magdalen', p 211.
- 18 Richard Methley in *CU*, p 154, note 134. See also 'Richard Methley' in *CU*, pp 14ff.
- 19 See Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs I* in *The works of Bernard of Clairvaux* vol II, trans Kilian Walsh, intro M. C. Halfants (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), *Sermon* 11: I, p 70. See Hugh of Balma, *The roads to Zion mourn* in *Carthusian spirituality*, p 75.
- 20 Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs II* vol III, trans Kilian Walsh, intro Jean Leclercq (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976); *Sermon* 34:3, p 162.
- 21 Rahner, *Foundations*, p 421.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p 5.