

5-4-2023

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

O'Neil-Smith, Carrie. 2023. The Role of Darkness and Trial in Spiritual Growth as Described in The Cloud of Unknowing. *Obsculta* 16, (1) : 118-123. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol16/iss1/11>.

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ABSTRACT:

This article was written in Professor Michael Rubbelke's class "Growing into God: Spiritual Development in the Christian Tradition." The article looks at darkness and trial and three resulting fruits of spiritual growth: humility, knowledge of one's true nature, and an experience of God's pure love as described in the fourteenth century work *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

The Role of Darkness and Trial in Spiritual Growth as Described in *The Cloud of Unknowing*

by Carrie O'Neil-Smith

Contemporary interest in *The Cloud of Unknowing* signals a collective movement among Christians to reclaim the abstract wisdom of the early church.¹ Written in the fourteenth century, likely by a Carthusian monk, *The Cloud* is a guide to the practice of contemplation: a wordless, imageless,

1 Steven Chase, "Anonymous (fourteenth century) *The Cloud of Unknowing*," in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, ed. Arthur Holder (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 166.



and relational form of prayer. Contemplative prayer is not connected to the intellectual, thinking mind.² It is apophatic and experiential, meaning it is outside of the concrete, dualistic world of the five senses. This non-linear, non-dualistic approach to prayer is unitive and holistic in nature, meaning every part of the individual participates: the sinful and the virtuous, the weak and the strong, the dark and the light. As such, because of its relational nature, contemplative prayer requires the commitment of the *whole person* as much as self-awareness will allow. In *The Cloud*, contemplative prayer provides the context in which darkness and trial are encountered and spiritual growth happens. The darkness in the cloud itself represents the unknowability of God; this is where union with God is possible. This paper will look at how *The Cloud* author describes three fruits of spiritual growth that emerge as a result of darkness and trial: humility, knowledge of one's true nature, and an experience of God's pure love.

The Cloud teaches that the humility gained through the darkness and trial of sin is a fruit of spiritual growth. *The Cloud* author describes two types of humility resulting from sin: perfect humility, which is the result of original sin; and imperfect humility, which is the result of individual sin.³ Because of original sin, perfect humility is an enduring part of human nature; it will never end. Perfect humility is a darkness required for spiritual growth because it creates awareness of one's complete dependence on God for salvation.⁴ Individual sin, or self-inflicted suffering, is the source of imperfect humility. Unlike perfect humility, imperfect humility will grow strong and weaken again due to our imperfect human nature. To face individual sin, one must consistently make an effort to, "beat [temptations] back with the awesome, sharp, double-edged sword of discernment." *The Cloud* author does not recommend focusing on the *size* of a sin, because "even the smallest sin separates us from God."⁵ By reason of the incomprehensibility of God's

2 *The Cloud of Unknowing with the Book of Privy Counsel* Translated by Carmen Acevedo Butcher (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications), chapter 4.

3 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 13.

4 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 64.

5 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 40.

merciful nature,⁶ the *type* of sin, venial or mortal, *also* does not matter.⁷ The remedy is to ardently reach out to God in contemplation using a one syllable word: “sin,” for example.⁸ When expressed in contemplation, a single short word overflows with love and deep desire for God’s mercy.⁹ In this way the darkness of everything that separates a human being from God, dissipates through contemplation.¹⁰ Perfection in this practice does not make one more worthy than another because even a significant sinner is granted the same mercy when he or she prays in this manner.¹¹ The humility gained by facing darkness and trial in contemplative prayer is foundational for all other virtues.¹²

The knowledge of one’s true nature is gained through the darkness of “godly sorrow”¹³ or “perfect spiritual sorrow.”¹⁴ This darkness is necessary for spiritual growth because it reveals one’s genuinely imperfect nature making one open to receiving God’s grace.¹⁵ Godly sorrow comes from knowing not “*who* you are but *that* you are.”¹⁶ To know “*that you are*” means you have stripped away all feelings, thoughts, and emotions and hid them under a “cloud of forgetting.”¹⁷ Everyone and everything in God’s creation, even thoughts of Christ and his passion, which are helpful at first,¹⁸ must be removed from the mind and hidden away under the cloud of forgetting. By removing everything from the egoic, thinking mind, only one’s undisguised true nature remains. Genuine self-knowledge allows one to love God and experience His love more completely, from a place of authenticity. This experience of our true nature is transformative: it enables us to love

6 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 38.

7 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 40.

8 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 7.

9 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 38.

10 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 33.

11 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 29.

12 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 12.

13 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 44.

14 Bernard McGinn, “Two Mystical Masters of Late Medieval England,” in *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism 1350-1500* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012), 413.

15 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 44.

16 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 44.

17 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapters 5 and 26.

18 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 7.

unselfishly. As *The Cloud* author describes it, “You’ll discover that you love your slanderer as much as your friend, and that you love any stranger as much as a relative.”¹⁹ With the help of God’s grace and “that joyful stirring of love,”²⁰ [desire], the true self pierces the darkness of the cloud of unknowing to rest in God. Knowledge of one’s true self, revealed through the darkness of godly sorrow, is a foundational fruit of spiritual growth; it allows for a more authentic relationship with God and others, making further spiritual growth possible.

The cloud of unknowing is the darkness where the whole self experiences God’s pure love. Darkness here represents God’s unknowability. The cloud of unknowing is entered by the whole self when lifted up by love and desire, not by intellect. God wants to be loved for his sake alone, not for anything he does or does not do.²¹ This experience of pure love in the cloud is the fruit of the “highest” spiritual growth.²² The cloud author uses the word *union* to describe this pure love; “achieving by grace what you can’t do on your own - *union* with the God of love and freedom.”²³ This pure love, experienced in the darkness of the cloud of unknowing, is the heart of contemplative prayer.²⁴

Darkness and trial as presented in *The Cloud* are fundamental to spiritual growth because they lead to humility, knowledge of one’s true nature, and an experience of God’s pure love. To face darkness and trial with humility leads to knowledge of the true self and greater dependence on God for His grace.²⁵ It is to be a tree and to let God be the carpenter.²⁶ Everything created by God is placed under the cloud of forgetting because only love and desire will pierce the darkness of the cloud of unknowing; not the intellect. Darkness and trial are necessary for spiritual growth because they are the root of the humility that

19 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 25.

20 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 6.

21 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 20.

22 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 17.

23 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 4.

24 McGinn, 409.

25 McGinn, 410.

26 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 34.

informs *genuine* self-knowledge. Genuine self-knowledge allows the *whole self* to be in relationship with God and others. In the darkness of the cloud of unknowing one's whole self can love God, and experience His love, authentically and completely. This experience of pure love, given and received, represents the highest spiritual growth a human being can attain; it brings one's whole, true self into union with God.



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