

KNOWING AND NOT KNOWING

The Cloud of Unknowing

Wednesday, January 29th, 2020

God, it seems, cannot really be known, but only related to. Or, as the mystics would assert, we know God by loving God, by trusting God, by placing our hope in God. It is a non-possessive, non-objectified way of knowing. It is always I-Thou and never I-It, to use Martin Buber's wonderfully insightful phrases. God allows us to know God only by loving God. God, in that sense, cannot be "thought" at all. [1]

The anonymous, 14th-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* conveys the fathomless mystery of God and that God can only be known by loving presence—contemplation. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is the inspiration for practices such as Centering Prayer and Christian meditation. Today I will share some of my favorite excerpts from Carmen Acevedo Butcher's translation of this Middle English text. The italicized words in brackets are my own. Lift up your heart to God with a gentle stirring of love. . . .

The first time you practice contemplation, you'll only experience a darkness, like a cloud of unknowing [which now happily envelops you]. You won't know what this is [and will have to learn how to live there by "forgetting" your previous methods of knowing]. You'll only know that in your will you feel a simple reaching out to God. You must also know that this darkness and this cloud will always be between you and your God, whatever you do. They will always keep you from seeing God clearly by the light of understanding in your intellect and will block you from feeling God fully in the sweetness of love in your emotions. So, be sure you make your home in this darkness. Stay there as long as you can, crying out to God over and over again, because you love God. It's the closest you can get to God here on earth, by waiting in this darkness and in this cloud. Work at this diligently, as I've asked you to, and I know God's mercy will lead you there. . . .

God is incomprehensible to the intellect. . .
. Nobody's mind is powerful enough to grasp who God is. We can only know God by experiencing God's love. . . .

God can be loved, but not thought. [John of the Cross (1542–1591) and many other mystics say the same thing. Christians could have saved ourselves so much fighting and division if we had just taught this one truth!]

By love, God can be embraced and held, but not by thinking. . . .

No matter how sacred, no thought can ever promise to help you in the work of contemplative prayer, because only love—not knowledge—can help us reach God. . . .

When we reach the end of what we know, that's where we find God. That's why St. Dionysius said that the best, most divine knowledge of God is that which is known by not-knowing.

References:

[1] Adapted from Richard Rohr, [What the Mystics Know: Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self](#) (The Crossroad Publishing Company: 2015), 103. *The Cloud of Unknowing* with the Book of Privy Counsel, trans. Carmen Acevedo Butcher (Shambhala: 2009), 11, 12, 14, 21, 28-29, 156. In place of masculine pronouns used in the original, I simply use "God."

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