

Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology in *The Cloud of Unknowing*

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In this essay, I will describe and critically analyse the author's use of apophatic and cataphatic theology in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, commenting on the relationship between revelation, reason and mystery.

Apophatic and cataphatic

The Cloud is paradigmatically a method of apophatic contemplation. Hillary Kelleher offers us the words of Aquinas in the preface to his *Summa Theologiae*, "We cannot know what God is, but only what he is not."¹ This is the undercurrent that runs through *The Cloud*. However, it must be observed that the anonymous author also makes recourse to cataphatic methods throughout. Harvey Egan writes, "Despite the apophatic emphasis of the *Cloud*, its kataphatic basis and moments stand out in bold relief."²

The cloud

Somewhat simplistically, the author categorises people into four degrees of Christian living: "ordinary, extraordinary, unique, and ideal."³ Those transitioning from *extraordinary* to *unique* are led by the author down a path of spiritual contemplation reserved for the spiritually mature.⁴ Here, the contemplator will "experience a darkness, a *cloud of unknowing*."⁵ This process is reminiscent of moving from 'unconscious incompetence' to 'conscious incompetence' as defined in the realm of psychology. Mary Frohlich reflects, "The more one knows God, the less one knows

¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1st Part, Q. 3., cited by Hillary Kelleher, "'Light thy Darknes is": George Herbert and Negative Theology," *George Herbert Journal* 28 (Fall 2004/Spring 2005)

² Harvey D. Egan, "Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism," *Theological Studies* 39 (1978): 399–426, p. 409.

³ Bernard Bangle, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2006), 3.

⁴ Bangle, *The Cloud*, xix.

⁵ Bangle, *The Cloud*, 6.

what one knows. The more one abandons oneself to God, the more one is 'in the dark' about what God is up to."⁶

Ascent

Father William Meninger, pioneer of the 'centering prayer movement', summarises:

The third chapter is the heart of the book. The rest is just a commentary on Chapter 3. The first two lines in this chapter say, 'This is what you are to do. Lift your heart up to the Lord with a gentle stirring of love, desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts.' The rest of the book just unpacks that.⁷

Meninger also underlines the author's encouragement to use a word of one syllable, such as "God" or "love", and to "let that be the expression of your love for God in this contemplative prayer."⁸

Meninger's explanation fuses the practices of meditation and contemplation, whereas the author is keen to keep them distinct. Wolfgang Riehle observes how the author draws upon the long mystical tradition of the *triplex via* in introducing his reader to the stages of spiritual ascent. Riehle writes, "Instead of falling back on the Latin terms *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio*, he favors 'reding,' 'thinkyng,' and 'preiing.'"⁹ These stages, for the novice student, precede contemplation. Riehle explains, "the three stages combined do not yet come close to the true contemplation that prepares human beings for the encounter with God."¹⁰

Apophatic

Dionysius offers the seemingly contradictory statement, "The most godly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing."¹¹ Joshua Knabb explains:

⁶ Mary Frohlich, "What I Know and Don't Know: A Christian Reflects on Buddhist Practice," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 21 (2001): 37–41, p. 41.

⁷ Anonymous, "Sit down and be quiet," *U.S. Catholic* 78 (2013): 18–22, p. 19.

⁸ Anonymous, "Sit down and be quiet," *U.S. Catholic* 19.

⁹ Wolfgang Riehle, *The Secret Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 154.

¹⁰ Riehle, *The Secret Within*, 154.

¹¹ Joshua J. Knabb, "Centering Prayer as an Alternative to Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression Relapse Prevention," *Journal of Religion and Health* 51 (2012): 908–924, p. 914.

The Cloud author sets up a sort of dichotomy between knowledge and love in the pursuit of God: “Every rational creature has both the power of knowing and the power of loving. Our creator endows us with both, but God will forever remain incomprehensible to the knowing power” (Banglely 2006, p. 8).¹²

To engage with the cloud of *unknowing*, the contemplator is directed to establish a cloud of *forgetting*. All distracting thoughts should be cast into this cloud. The author warns, “whatever you think about looms above you while you are thinking about it, and it stands between you and God.”¹³ Knabb reflects further, “Even memories of others...are to be discarded: ‘Perfect contemplation does not allow space for special regard to anyone alive, whether friend or foe, family or stranger. ...’”¹⁴ Even thoughts that focus on Christ, the author describes as “mental chatter”, which must rest under the cloud of forgetting.¹⁵ God, in the apophatic, resists any label. Kelleher proposes:

In contrast to cataphatic...theology, which leads to...an overabundance of imagery in which all manner of discourses are scoured for their analogical potential, the *via negativa* negates all description. He who, in the cataphatic mode, receives an infinite number of names, here remains unnameable.¹⁶

This approach may lead to an ambiguous Christology. If the contemplator views Jesus as the full and exact revelation of God (Heb 1:3), then he may struggle with the practice of unknowing, which Kelleher describes as “a letting go of any concept of the divine as rationally apprehensible.”¹⁷ The apophatic places such emphasis on the unknowable Father that it can resemble subordinationism. Dionysius writes that “The Father is the only source of that godhead which in fact is beyond being ... the Son and the Spirit are, so to speak, divine offshoots...”¹⁸ David Loy implies that the author follows this influence. He writes, “*The Cloud* contains few references to Christ; the goal of the method described is to attain ‘with a loving stirring and a blind beholding unto the naked being of God himself only.’”¹⁹

¹² Knabb, “Centering Prayer,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 914.

¹³ Banglely, *The Cloud*, 11.

¹⁴ Knabb, “Centering Prayer,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 915.

¹⁵ Banglely, *The Cloud*, 13,14.

¹⁶ Kelleher, ““Light thy Darknes is,”” *George Herbert Journal* 52.

¹⁷ Kelleher, ““Light thy Darknes is,”” *George Herbert Journal* 49.

¹⁸ Kelleher, ““Light thy Darknes is,”” *George Herbert Journal* 49.

¹⁹ David Loy, “A Zen Cloud? Comparing Zen Koan Practice with The Cloud of Unknowing,” *Budhi* 2–37 (1997): 15, p. 22.

Loy identifies some striking parallels between the apophatic approach, and the techniques employed in Buddhist practice. In Zen Buddhism, Master Po Shan writes:

When working on Zen, one does not see the sky when he lifts his head, nor the earth when he lowers it. To him a mountain is not a mountain and water is not water. While walking or sitting he is not aware of doing so. Though among a hundred thousand people, he sees no one. Without and within his body and mind nothing exists but the burden of his doubt-sensation. This feeling can be described as “turning the whole world into a muddy vortex.”²⁰

Loy finds a resemblance between the Buddhist ‘doubt-sensation’ and the cloud of forgetting, and the feeling of ‘turning the world into a muddy vortex’ with ‘wrapping oneself in a cloud of unknowing’.²¹

A second noteworthy similarity exists. In the Buddhist tradition, the word “mu” holds significance. Loy explains that *Joshu’s Mu* is probably the best known of all *koan*—an anecdote where the meaning of Zen Master Joshu’s utterances must be understood not through logical analysis but by “attaining the state of mind that Joshu was in when he made his remark; that is, by also having an enlightenment experience.”²² Students are instructed to use the utterance “mu” as a mantram. Loy remarks, “The thought, or rather the internal sound of ‘mu,’ is used to eliminate all other thoughts.”²³ In exact comparison, *The Cloud* instructs the contemplator to select a short, monosyllabic word not to be interpreted or analysed, but used to extinguish other thoughts. Knabb offers, “the practitioner should not make any effort to either repeat...or not repeat the prayer word. Rather, the word should simply ‘hover in the mind,’ like white noise.”²⁴

The author of *The Cloud* places Christ in our *meditations*, but our *contemplations* are directed to be without conscious focus. Frohlich argues that Christ should be at the centre of healthy Christian spiritual practice, which is the obvious and central difference to Buddhist practice. The use of “mu”, Frohlich notes, works the same on one level as a single intention towards Christ, “because both

²⁰ Loy, “A Zen Cloud?,” *Budhi* 24–25.

²¹ Loy, “A Zen Cloud?,” *Budhi* 25.

²² Loy, “A Zen Cloud?,” *Budhi* 18.

²³ Loy, “A Zen Cloud?,” *Budhi* 20.

²⁴ Knabb, “Centering Prayer,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 916.

entail continually letting go of whatever else captures the attention. Yet the entire atmosphere is different, since the field in which one does the practice is simply one's own consciousness rather than a personal relationship of love and trust."²⁵

Cataphatic

Egan disagrees with Loy's assertion that Christ is minimised in *The Cloud*. Rather, because the author warns against allowing the book to fall into the hands of anyone other than a mature Christian, Egan proposes that the book's apophatic mysticism has an undeniable Christocentric dimension.²⁶ He writes, "Because the grace of Christ supports all contemplation, the true contemplative must rely on Christ's help, love, and grace."²⁷ Moreover, alluding that there is an unsafe way to pursue mystical ascent, Egan expresses:

The only safe way to advance into the dark, silent love which pierces the cloud of unknowing is through meditation, especially on Christ's passion. His humanity remains the correct passageway to the higher levels of apophatic contemplation and so the contemplative must wait patiently at the door of Christ's humanity.²⁸

Interestingly, *cataphatic* elements can be identified which continue to resonate with the Buddhist tradition. Robert Hale highlights how "the author employs a series of concrete images, archetypal in their depth, that are also shared by Buddhism."²⁹ Hale draws comparisons between the sacred tree, reminiscent of the tree of life and the cross of Christ in Christianity, and various trees in the Buddhist tradition; he draws attention to the use of the sacred mountain, of which many feature in Christian history, and which also features in Buddhism; thirdly, a cloud itself holds significance throughout Christian scripture, appearing also in Buddhist texts as a 'thick fog'.³⁰ One might argue that Hale is 'grasping at straws' with these inter-faith parallels, as any historic tradition may have drawn from the same real-world inspiration in its

²⁵ Frohlich, "What I Know and Don't Know," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 39.

²⁶ Egan, "Christian Mysticism," *Theological Studies* 411.

²⁷ Egan, "Christian Mysticism," *Theological Studies* 411.

²⁸ Egan, "Christian Mysticism," *Theological Studies* 412.

²⁹ Robert Hale, "The Author of the Cloud of Unknowing as Teacher and Disciple," *Religion East & West* (2006): 53–60, p. 55.

³⁰ Hale, "Teacher and Disciple," *Religion East & West* 55–6.

culture—therefore I leave my comparison with Buddhism at this point. Nevertheless, Hale’s analysis highlights *The Cloud’s* inclusion of cataphatic archetypal symbols.

In guiding our meditation, the author leads us to ponder frequently and cataphatically our sinful nature, Christ’s Passion, and the attributes of God, warning that “unless you do this, frustration will disturb your contemplation.”³¹ So too, does the author often speak of scripture, insisting on its authority, and exemplifying his teachings through scripture.³² For example, in chapter 8, the author uses the story of Mary and Martha to distinguish “active and contemplative Christian living.”³³

Indeed, the author has stipulated a mature Christian foundation for the contemplator. Therefore, while one must engage with the cloud of forgetting, he does so against a backdrop of a scripturally-grounded life. Egan reflects:

“The true contemplative has the highest esteem for the liturgy and is careful and exact in celebrating it. ...” Nowhere does the *Cloud* teach a renunciation of the sacramental, liturgical, and scriptural life ... The contemplative lives, therefore, in a kataphatic atmosphere...permeated with Christian art, music, architecture, customs, and devotions.³⁴

Egan draws our attention further to two significant cataphatic “moments” for the author of *The Cloud*. The first is simply that the author wrote down his experiences. So moved by the mysterious, dark love of the cloud, the author felt compelled to articulate the indescribable so that others could experience it for themselves. Egan communicates this idea splendidly: “The mystical paradox is that there is a metadiscursive way to express and incarnate the ineffable.”³⁵

Additionally, our attention is drawn to the author’s transformed life. The invisible love becomes visible when we are ourselves joined in union with the source of love. The author has become “the living symbol and icon of the Love which transformed him and to which he is now united.”³⁶

³¹ Bangley, *The Cloud*, 13.

³² Egan, “Christian Mysticism,” *Theological Studies* 409.

³³ Bangley, *The Cloud*, 16.

³⁴ Egan, “Christian Mysticism,” *Theological Studies* 409.

³⁵ Egan, “Christian Mysticism,” *Theological Studies* 411.

³⁶ Egan, “Christian Mysticism,” *Theological Studies* 411.

Revelation, Reason and Mystery

The concepts of revelation, reason and mystery are woven inextricably throughout *The Cloud* as the author touches upon scripture, meditation and the unknowable. I propose that there is one which binds these three in relationship: Christ Jesus.

We have stated that the author affirms the authority of, and meditation upon, scripture. Let us not consider scripture itself to be the *revelation*, but rather the *documentation* of the divine revelation, the Logos. Citing Emil Brunner, S. Paul Schilling concurs:

“Divine revelation,” writes Brunner, “is not a book or a doctrine; the revelation is God Himself in His self-manifestation within history. Revelation is something that *happens*, the living history of God in His dealings with the human race.” The Scriptures, on the other hand, are “the incarnation in written form of the living personal revelation of the living God.”³⁷

As the apostle Paul asserts that “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16), it might be reasonable to engage it. Egan explains the function of *reason*:

The author does not minimize reason’s role, for “intelligence is a reflection of the divine intelligence.” The contemplative beginner, therefore, must read, think, and pray; for “God’s word, written or spoken, is like a mirror. Reason is your spiritual eye, and conscience your spiritual reflection.” In fact, common sense, advice from the spiritual father, rational critique, and Scripture remain the solid anchors in all of man’s activities, except those in which God alone is the principal agent.³⁸

How do these relate? Dionysius offers that there are only two ways that humans can know God—*mystical contemplation*, and *reason*.³⁹ Apophatic theology affords a Christian the opportunity to explore the mystery of God. Schilling argues that *reason* and *revelation* are inseparable:

Reason must be integrally related to revelation if the unity and integrity of personality are to be maintained. It is the whole self that receives whatever

³⁷ S. Paul Schilling, “Revelation and Reason,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 16 (1948): 13–20+72, p. 14.

³⁸ Egan, “Christian Mysticism,” *Theological Studies* 405–6.

³⁹ Knabb, “Centering Prayer,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 914.

revelation is vouchsafed to man; it is the whole self that worships God; and it is the whole self that thinks about God, the world, and human destiny.⁴⁰

Conclusion

So then, we find mystery, revelation and reason interwoven like a cord of three strands, presenting a trinitarian means by which one can encounter God. Perhaps our trinitarian model reaches further into the Godhead—we find God the Father in the *mystery*, God the Son as the *revelation*, and God the Holy Spirit illuminating our *reason*. I would conclude that seeking the very essence of God through the apophatic cannot happen in isolation from the cataphatic. It is the very revelation of Christ that anchors us, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that centres us, that allows a contemplator to pierce *the cloud of unknowing* and touch the divine.

⁴⁰ Schilling, "Revelation and Reason," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 20.

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