

DISCERNMENT

BY

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IN entering a dark and strange room we have to depend upon external direction to find our way about it. We need some other person to speak and tell us where we are, or someone to lead us by the hand. We can rely only very meagrely upon our own powers of discretion. On entering the *Cloud of Unknowing* the soul needs the clear voice of some spirit other than its own to tell it where it is and whither going. There must be some interpreter near at hand to declare what the darkness means and to read the signs which appear in the experience of the soul. The minor works of the author of the *Cloud* are mainly concerned with the discernment of spirits, for it is the Spirit of God who is the principal interpreter while a director, such as the author, is needed to assure the soul when the Paraclete interprets and when the human or the evil spirit deceives. 'The angel of darkness', writes Abbé Saudreau (*Degrees of the Spiritual Life*, i. 213), 'may transform himself into an angel of light, and the creations of our imagination are not always distinguishable at first sight from the holy thoughts inspired by the Spirit of God'. For this reason it is very important to discover where we are in entering a period of darkness and to be able to distinguish the voice of the Spirit as our guide.

The author of *The Cloud*, writing only for those who in the hidden inner life are 'graciously disposed', begs that the reader through the help of God's grace 'stand stiffly against all the subtle assaults of the bodily and ghostly enemies' (p. 6). We must therefore learn to ascertain the true spirit of this work and of the cloud lest we be led astray and cease to grow in grace. It is for example easy to take the words of this book too subjectively or even too actively—two tendencies which appear in an otherwise discerning and balanced introduction to the original text by Dr P. Hodgson.¹ Dr Hodgson says that the highest form of contemplative life here described is not an objective knowledge of God, but a way of knowing God subjectively 'as a divine force working in and through the soul'. She is evidently taking care to distinguish this writing from what might be called 'pure' theology; but it would be dangerous to consider it as a purely subjective experience at which the contemplative is aiming. In the *Epistle of Privy Counsel* the author is certainly presenting a most

¹ Cf. E.E.T.S edition pp. lii and liii.

objective, though super-rational and unanalytical, knowledge of God.

And look that nothing remain in thy working mind but a naked intent stretching unto God, not clothed in any special thought of God in himself, how he is in himself, or in any of his works, but only *that he is as he is* (c. 1 p. 180).²

Again the constant insistence throughout the book on the notion of 'work' may lead some readers to think of it as a particular form of spiritual exercise. Dr Hodgson outlines the theme in somewhat 'active' terms when she writes: 'The hardest discipline of the contemplative is to persevere in this darkness with faith, keeping the reason and their senses from their usual activities by placing a "cloud of forgetting" between himself and the thoughts and images of all creatures' (op. cit. p. liii). This is true enough, and she goes on to quote a passage where *The Cloud* speaks of the divine activity coming to enlighten this darkness; but the interpretation would seem to limit the 'work' to an asceticism which is more or less purely purgative and which of itself is not contemplative. For a world like today's which can only understand action this emphasis carries a danger of misinterpretation, suggesting even that it is attainable by human power, by spiritual exercises.

We are presented, therefore, with two problems of discernment: first, in reading *The Cloud* what are we to make of the book itself, secondly, in the concrete life of prayer what are we to make of the darkness and 'the cloud of unknowing' when it comes upon us. The solution of the first will in fact help to guide the uncertain step in the second, for the subject matter of *The Cloud* is a definite stage and experience in the life of prayer.

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Quite a number of readers have concluded that *The Cloud* does not reach the heights of the unitive way, but that it describes a type of prayer which can be identified with the 'Prayer of Simplicity', a prayer which precedes the prayer of Quiet and falls under the category of the 'acquired' types. Among the interpreters in this sense some have thought that Fr Augustine Baker, who held the book in great respect and was much influenced by it, was describing the same type of prayer when he wrote of the 'Prayer of Interior Silence'. This, he describes as 'the prayer of forced acts of the will, a certain exercise of internal prayer . . . there is no meditation at all . . . being rather a kind of virtual and habitual attention to God than a formal and direct tendence to him' (*Sancta Sophia*; III c. 7. i). This, he says, is very inferior to the prayer of Quiet of which St Teresa speaks

² Italics mine. The quotations are from Dom Justin McCann's Edition.

and which is true contemplation; and it would seem to be a type of what is now known as 'acquired contemplation'. The 'naked intent' to which *The Cloud* leads the reader might be interpreted in this acquired sense. Fr Baker describes the soul as appearing as a petitioner but without any specific image of what he seeks and without acts.³ And this would seem to bear a close resemblance to *The Cloud's* advice to 'hide from God the desire of thy heart' which means the suppression of any outward imaginative specification of one's needs.

It seemeth that the whiles our desire is mingled with any manner of bodiliness—as it is when we stress and strain us in spirit and in body together—so long it is farther from God than it should be, if it were done more devoutly and more listily in soberness and purity and in depth of spirit. (c. 47, p. 113).

Fr Baker maintains that this active quietening of desire and the suppressing of meditation will lead the proficient soul to the threshold of the prayer of Quiet and to true contemplation. Here Fr Baker seems to be following St Teresa who called this prayer that of 'Recollection', *active* recollection for it is acquired and depends on the free choice of, and on the method adopted by, the will. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit prayer becomes simpler and simpler until it is gradually changed into passive recollection, the first stages of infused contemplation and of the prayer of quiet. This mixed form of prayer, a recent writer has remarked, was fully understood by St Teresa but it was not defined and studied in itself until the 17th century by the Spanish Carmelites when it was first established by name as 'acquired contemplation'.⁴

Undoubtedly, since *The Cloud* deals so consistently with 'the work' which the soul must undertake, there are elements of an acquired form of contemplation, an acquired simplicity and recollection in which the soul actively expels all thoughts and imaginings, all prayers even, except the most simple and most direct. But the author is concerned to guard himself against misinterpretation by insisting that he is to be taken 'ghostly' and not 'bodily' as to his meaning:

And therefore when they (young disciples) hear spoken or read of ghostly working, and in particular of this word, how a man shall *draw all his wits within himself*, or how he shall *climb above him-*

³ He relies for his description of this type of prayer on the work of Antonio de Rojas, whose book was later placed on the Index on account of its Quietist tendencies. For this reason Abbot Sweeney, who edited the modern edition of *Sancta Sophia*, was on tenterhooks lest Fr Baker be misunderstood.

⁴ Cf. Paul Philippe, O.P., 'L'Oraison dans l'Histoire', in the Cahier de la Vie Spirituelle 'L'Oraison', p. 53.

self—as fast for blindness in soul, and for ~~fleshliness~~ and curiosity of natural wit, they misunderstand these words, and ween, because they find in themselves a natural desire for hid things, that they therefore be called to that work by grace. . . . They leave meek prayer and penance oversoon. . . . And (shortly to say) it is a working against nature, and the devil is the chief worker thereof. And it is the readiest way to death of body and of soul, for it is a madness and no wisdom and leadeth a man even to madness (c. 51. pp. 122-3 and cf. in particular c. 4. pp. 19-20).

In all that concerns the acquisition of a state of soul there is evident need of discernment, and the work of the *Cloud* in so far as it is thus active needs the utmost discretion to prevent dabblers in mysticism, for example, from losing their minds by trying to practise in a 'bodily' manner this way of negation and simplicity in the 'cloud of forgetting'. As a *method* the book presents us with a specialised way of approaching the higher forms of prayer. *The Epistle of Privy Counsel* insists on this method of active silence, in which the senses are as far as possible overcome and the mind fixed upon the single point of God's being. The second chapter in particular describes the method:

Take good, gracious God as he is, plat and plain as a plaster, and lay it to thy sick self as thou art. . . . Bear up thy sick self as thou art unto gracious God as he is, without any curious or special beholding to any of all the qualities that belong to the being of thyself or of God, whether they be clean or wretched, gracious or natural, godly or manly. It mattereth not now to thee, but that thy blind beholding of thy naked being be gladly borne up in lustiness of love to be united and oned in grace and in spirit to the precious Being of God in himself only as he is, without more. And although thy wanton seeking wits can find no meat unto them in this manner of doing, and therefore grumblingly they will bid thee always to leave off that work and do some good on their curious manner . . . yet I would love it the better. (pp. 186-7).

This is typical of the 'work' which the author urges the disciple to take upon himself. As it stands it closely resembles Fr Baker's 'Prayer of Interior Silence' which is derived in part from St Teresa, as we have seen, but in part also from Antonio de Rojas whose book was subsequently prohibited as suspect of Quietism. If we compare the passages in Fr Baker's *Sancta Sophia* with its parallel in St Teresa's writing⁵ we find that the latter recommends this active repression of meditation only to a very limited extent and for special people. She suggests that she has always advocated meditation as a

⁵ *Sancta Sophia* sect. III, c. 7. Compare especially pp. 493-4 with St Teresa's *Interior Castle* IV c. 3. Peers's edition II, 242.

rule lest a man drive himself silly by trying to think of nothing at all—the selfsame danger against which *The Cloud* warns his reader who might take it ‘bodily’.

As an active method then *The Cloud* and *The Epistle* would have a very limited appeal and would need to be undertaken very cautiously for fear of inducing a passive state before God had begun to take over, for it is always safer to remain active in prayer until such time as he determines to lead the soul captive, and indeed an induced blankness and passivity might well be a species of Quietism. Without doubt discretion and discernment are required in this work, as the author frequently demands. But is this all *The Cloud* has to teach? Is it simply outlining a very restricted type of what may be called ‘acquired contemplation’? It would be an act of folly to say so, for it would waste the choice fruit which these books have to offer. They describe a way to union; but they are more intent on the nature of that union which at the least must be a settled form of the prayer of Quiet. Later we shall consider in detail the nature of the contemplative union of which they write, but we may here give an example of the fact that they are principally concerned with a divinely induced passivity.

The fruit of this working is high ghostly wisdom, suddenly and freely raised of the spirit inwardly and itself and unformed full far from fantasy, impossible to be strained or to fall under the working of natural wit. (*Ep. Priv. Couns.* c. 5. p. 197).

And the work although so often described in an active ‘acquired’ sense is all the time to be regarded as God’s work. The naked intent cannot be achieved simply by method, and a great deal of what is said about the repressing of the natural wits must be interpreted in terms of an advice not to cling on to meditation when God is himself leading the soul into more passive ways; for we read:

Know thou right well, and all like unto thee that this writing shall either read or hear, that although I bid thee thus plainly and thus boldly set thee to this work, nevertheless yet I feel verily without error or doubt that Almighty God with his grace must always be the chief stirrer and worker, either with means or without, and thou only, or any other like unto thee, but the consentor and the sufferer. (*Privy Counsel*, c. 7. p. 212, cf. c. 10. p. 222).

The method which is here inculcated can only be regarded as partially a human activity; for the rest *The Cloud* is rather describing the method which God uses to call the soul up to the heights of union. And we must not forget that like other spiritual writers⁶ the

⁶ For example, St Lewis Grignon de Montfort in his *True Devotion*—an important factor in understanding the book.

author demands that his book be read and considered as a whole and not individually in its separate parts—'Wherefore, if a man saw one matter and not another, peradventure he might lightly be led into error' (*Cloud* Prologue, and cf. c. 74). In justice to the writer and lest the reader be misguided in too actively adopting a method akin to the prayer of silence, these books must be read with great spiritual discernment and taken in their totality.

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We cannot, however, leave the method of *The Cloud* under suspicion of any error or of being out of reach of all but a few strange and peculiar people. We have already suggested that 'the method', if it can be called a method, must be taken as a whole and that it is concerned as much with the method which God uses upon the soul constrained to be passive as with the active denial of discursive meditation. The author, it must be constantly remembered, is a fourteenth-century priest; he knows nothing of the later analytical precisions of mystical writers who would divide and subdivide to the *n*th degree to discover exactly when the soul ceases to be active and when God takes over full control. He knows nothing of the discussion about acquired and infused contemplation which is largely due to too great a speculative precision. *The Cloud* and its companion works are written in the more direct and objective spirit of the age, and written evidently for those who have made considerable progress in the spiritual life and are on the threshold of a more permanent contemplative prayer in which the 'naked intent' is held by God in himself alone, outside, as it were, even his attributes. He and his contemporaries, like St Thomas a century before them, were in this stage of the spiritual life greatly helped by the pseudo-Dionysian writings. So we find St Thomas also setting forth a similar simplification of prayer and the spiritual life when he discusses what St Denis meant by the 'circular' form of prayer. 'The *circular* movements of the angels—their intuition of God is uniform and unceasing. . . . But on the part of the soul, ere it arrive at this uniformity, its twofold lack of uniformity needs to be removed. First, that which arises from the variety of external things: this is removed by the soul's withdrawing from externals, and so the first thing Dionysius mentions is *the soul's withdrawal into itself from external objects*. Secondly, another lack of uniformity requires to be removed from the soul, and this is owing to the discoursing of reason. This is done by directing all the soul's operations to the simple contemplation of the intelligible truth, and this is indicated by his saying in the second place that *the soul's intellectual powers must be uniformly concen-*

trated, in other words, that discoursing must be laid aside and the soul's gaze fixed on the contemplation of the one simple truth. . . . Thirdly . . . then all things being laid aside, the soul continues in the contemplation of God alone'. (II-II, 180, 6 ad 2).

We have quoted St Thomas at some length because his words describe almost exactly the theme and meaning of *The Cloud* taken in its entirety, as a movement towards the contemplation of God in himself and alone. And if we would know the structure of this movement, as to how far it depends on man's activity and how far on God's, it would be well to turn to the Doctor of the experience of contemplation to see what he says of the abandonment of discursive prayer and meditation. In the *Ascent* St John of the Cross deals carefully with this transition period when the soul is being drawn into simplicity. He says that discursive meditation should not be laid aside until the Holy Spirit demands it. And he gives some signs by which to discern when the time has come: first when it becomes difficult and without pleasure to meditate, secondly when the soul realises that it has no desire to fix its power on anything other than God, and thirdly when the soul takes pleasure in being alone, i.e., without having to pass from one thing to another remaining silently before God (*Ascent*: bk II cc. 13 sqq.). We need go no further than St Thomas and St John of the Cross to seek for guides in reading *The Cloud* and its sister treatises. The movement towards unity can be clearly discerned by those who are thus being drawn to it.

One final point must be made in trying to discern the approach to contemplative prayer and true union, namely the point of the elasticity of God's work. We have drawn up a scheme of the progress of the soul as it enters into the prayer of Quiet and so comes to the threshold of unity, but God himself is not tied to a scheme, nor does he indulge, like us, in analysis. In the matter of meditation, for example, it has been noted that some people can hardly meditate even at the beginning of their christian life. They seem to begin with a prayer of simplicity and pass thence to the passive prayer of quiet, especially if their outward life is organised as a contemplative life. It has been pointed out, too, by those who have had experience with contemplative people, that a passive form of prayer is often given to a *weak* soul quite early when it is still falling from time to time into more or less serious sins; and that it seems to be given as a comfort and strength to overcome the natural debility of the soul. Sometimes this infused form of prayer is given in the early stages and then apparently gradually withdrawn, leaving the soul for the rest of its life in a state of faithful aridity without evidence of the grace of union and struggling with discursive prayers and remaining

thus in an active state.

The author of *The Cloud* is himself writing for a *young* disciple and he does not consider that he will not be ready for the work until many years of struggling asceticism have passed. 'This work asketh no long time ere it be once truly done, as some men ween; for it is the shortest work of all that man may imagine' (c. 4. p. 13). It may, therefore, be the lot of almost anyone so long as he have the true dispositions which make him ready to accept the working of God's grace. All this is clear from the prologues to *The Cloud* and *Privy Counsel*; and in the former the author suggests that there are two types of contemplatives who should be so disposed. Either the one wholly drawn to contemplation and seeking nothing else, or those who are engaged in active work, 'yet by inward stirring under the privy spirit of God be full graciously disposed', and 'now and then' reach the height of contemplation. It is clear that temperament and the outward circumstance of life must be here taken into consideration. For those who are of an active frame of mind would not be able even to understand what the writer was about. Such as these are not likely to receive any consciousness of contemplative prayer. God works supernaturally according to nature and he will sanctify such actives by other means more in accord with their characters. But to those who are endowed with a naturally contemplative outlook he will sometimes give direct touches of his presence before they have attempted even a consistent form of active prayer. They will have passed through the initial stages of the spiritual life rapidly on account of their generosity and natural lack of distractions; their vocal prayers, morning and evening, *Paters* and *Aves*, will have taken the place of constructive mental, discursive prayer; and they will have been early given graces suited to their temper of mind.

Theologically speaking this apparently irregular operation of divine grace is easily understood in terms of the gifts of the Spirit. As the gifts are present at the first infusion of grace into the soul, they can act upon the soul at any time when no positive obstacle in the nature of false attachments obstructs their activity. In this way a man apt to go to extremes may be truly contrite and wholly given to the service of God for a time and yet later sin quite seriously, being given to great deeds either good or bad. In such a person the gifts might work when he was truly contrite. If so they would suspend his discursive reasoning and give him the intuition springing from love and faith. He would find it impossible for a period to meditate and his prayer would be contemplative. But the gifts work 'unreasonably'; the Spirit breathes where he wishes; and so these graces may come at any moment and perhaps never again or not for a long period

even though the soul has not formed new earthly attachments or fallen into deliberate sins.

But fast after each striving, through the corruption of the flesh, it falleth down again to some thought, or to some done or undone deed. But what matter? For fast after, it riseth again as suddenly as it did before (c. 4. p. 19).

The analyses and schemes of all spiritual writing can give the principles, but none can map out the actual working of God. We are not dealing with a mechanical engine constructed to climb funicularly the Mount of Carmel. This ascent depends on two free wills of which the free will of God is unpredictable, though it can be appreciated with great understanding at every single instant.

ERRATUM: In the article in this series in July LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, through a printer's error, five lines were repeated out of place. On page 13 delete the first five lines from 'Of these works . . .' to ' . . . and partly to'.

SUFFERING IN ISRAEL¹

BY

J. STEINMANN



IT may fairly be said that in ancient Hebrew poetry suffering holds the place reserved for love in the lyrical compositions of the literature of the West. It is, moreover, under the pressure of tragic events that suffering has become the *leitmotiv* of the latter part of the Bible in which the book of Job occurs.

It is true that there is very little mention of suffering in the accounts of the Thorah. Not a few massacres are there related—without any pity for the victims. The reason is that at the time of the conquest of Palestine and during the beginnings of the Monarchy the Hebrews were still an insensitive and uncivilised people. They were a young and conquering race. Their will to power was intact. The sages of the court of Solomon or of Jeroboam II were the diplomats or poets of a tiny nation possessed with the certitude that it would endure and conquer.

From the eighth century onwards the two monarchies begin to totter. Suffering now becomes the teacher of the Hebrew people. She finds her poets in the great Prophets. They create the hallucinatory picture of the ruins which presage the final political catastrophe.

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