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Two Medieval Mystics and their Writings: Author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and Walter Hilton

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In this paper, the writings of two authors from the medieval period are noted: the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and Walter Hilton. Specifically, a brief overview of the content, style, and significance of their main writings are presented.

Author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*

Minimal external evidence exists about the author.¹ No name, nor religious order, has been successfully attributed to him.² He may, however, have been a Carthusian monk.³ Historians have concluded that he wrote in the late fourteenth century.⁴

This paper focuses on the anonymous author's work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Six related works apply *The Cloud's* teaching to different situations.⁵ First, *Privy Counsel* emphasizes the longing, determination, and love which prepare the soul for any touch that God might provide. Second, *Benjamin* shows, using the analogy of Jacob and his sons, how the virtues which lead to contemplation are developed. Third, *Hid Divinity* is a précis of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*. Finally, *Epistle of Prayer*, the *Discernment of Stirrings*, and the *Discerning of Spirits* all deal with the spiritual life.

Content

The Cloud of Unknowing teaches that understanding and approaching God through knowledge and rational thought is limited. By contrast, the Divine can be approached and reached through love.

The author argues that since God is infinite, and human beings are finite (and fallen), any understanding of God is limited. God cannot be comprehended by human reasoning. Consequently, the contemplative, in his quest for God remains in a “cloud of unknowing”. Additionally, since earthly matters can distract a person from their pursuit of God, a contemplative must place between themselves and the world a “cloud of forgetting”.⁶

Furthermore, the author draws on the story of Mary and Martha, where Mary is an example of one who experiences the “cloud of unknowing” between her and God, and the “cloud of forgetting” between her and the world’s distractions.

Finally, Appendix A gives a further overview of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Style

The literary genre of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a treatise, seen from its organized, systematic, and didactic style of presenting specific principles for a contemplative life. It has been suggested that the author kept his identity a secret in order to direct the reader’s attention to God, rather than himself.

A relatively short text (seventy-five brief chapters), *The Cloud* is remarkably readable for a modern reader, “in spite of the convoluted phraseology”.⁷ This may be because the author wrote in the vernacular. Additionally, the style of writing varies from encouragement of the reader to a stricter tone.

Finally, *The Cloud of Unknowing* represents the apophatic tradition of the *via negativa*, also commonly known as the “way of negation”. This is understandable in view of the fact that *The Cloud* has been deeply affected by Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology* (which was also influencing the Western Church).⁸

Significance

Russell attests to the significance of *The Cloud of Unknowing* by describing it as “one of the most complete and eloquent medieval statements of apophatic mysticism.”⁹

The Cloud has influenced many works in the apophatic tradition. C. S. Lewis called it the “most striking representative in English” of the “negative Theology” (*Discarded Image*, 70).¹⁰ In turn, as McGinn notes, “Eckhart’s critique of the language of experience . . . was also taken up by later Christian mystics, including the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (c. 1380).”¹¹ In other words, *The Cloud* stands as part of the “powerful tradition of anti-experientialism”.¹²

Finally, based on *The Cloud of Unknowing*, some modern theologians and some Trappist monks have developed the idea of “centring prayer” (see Appendix B entitled “The Cloud of Unknowing and Centring Prayer”).

Walter Hilton

(c. 1343 to 24 March, 1396)

Walter Hilton, after taking a degree at Cambridge and a short period as a hermit, became an Augustinian friar in northern England (a canon of Thurgarton Priory, Nottinghamshire).¹³ He was a contemporary of both Julian of Norwich and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

This paper focuses on *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection* (his best known work).¹⁴

Other writings by Hilton are an *Epistle to a Devout Man* and the *Song of Angels*.

Additionally, in Latin, he wrote expositions of the *Benedictus*, *Qui Habitat*, and *Bonum Est*.¹⁵

Content

In Hilton’s two-book treatise, *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection*, he guides the reader through stages of spiritual development, leading to the renewal of one’s divinity as a being formed in the image of likeness of God.¹⁶ The first book explains the difference between an active and a contemplative life and gives substantial detail about the latter. The second book describes the pilgrim’s long and difficult journey on the way to heaven. An overview of the book is given in Table 1 below:

Table 1: An Outline of *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection*

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| An Essay on the Spiritual Life of Medieval England by Father Dalgairns | |
| <i>The First Book</i> (35 chapters) | |
| Part I (18 chapters) | The contemplative life |
| Part II (3 chapters) | Prayer and meditation |
| Part III (14 chapters) | The seven deadly sins |
| <i>The Second Book</i> (38 chapters) | |
| Part I (12 chapters) | Restoring the image of God in man |
| Part II (11 chapters) | Reforming in faith <i>and</i> feeling |
| Part III (15 chapters) | Jesus and the gift of love |
| Treatise Written to a Devout Man (16 chapters) | |

Source: Table is based on Walter Hilton, *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection*, with an introduction by Father Dalgairns on the "Spiritual Life of Mediaeval England", ed. Serenus Cressy (1659), scanned and edited by Harry Plantinga (1995), <http://www.jesus.org.uk/vault/library/hilton_ladder.pdf> (10 December 2010).

In sum, *The Scale* describes how the human soul ascends from sin to perfection. Only through the grace of God is the process of reforming a soul possible. The metaphor of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem is often used to represent the process (for example, see Appendix C entitled “The Christian Life as a Pilgrimage to Jerusalem”).

Style

Hilton's two-book work is a treatise in genre. Didactic in style, *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection* is systematically organized, and presents a comprehensive vision of the spiritual life.

Although *The Scale* displays depth in its spirituality, it also presents practical guidance. Moreover, while the book is characterized by beauty of thought with effective imagery, it retains simplicity of expression.¹⁷

Significance

Hilton's masterpiece, *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection*, is the first comprehensive work of ascetic and mystical theology produced in the English language.¹⁸ In it he provides a systematic theology of the contemplative life and describes the dynamics of the mystical life.¹⁹

Thornton suggests that *The Scale of Perfection* was possibly the most influential spiritual guide during the fourteenth century.²⁰ Its popularity is attested by the large number of manuscripts that have survived. Moreover, Hilton's spiritual writings were also widely influential during the fifteenth century in England.²¹

Finally, in the twentieth century (since the 1970s), there has been a major resurgence of interest among scholars in Hilton's work.

Appendix A

An Overview of the Cloud of Unknowing

The teaching of *The Cloud of Unknowing* has been summed up by the author in his cognate work, *Discernment of Stirrings*, as follows:

For silence is not God, nor speaking; fasting is not God, nor eating; solitude is not God, nor company; nor any other pair of opposites. He is hidden between them, and cannot be found by anything your soul does, but only by the love of your heart. He cannot be known by reason, he cannot be thought, caught, or sought by understanding. But he can be loved and chosen by the true, loving will of your heart . . . If God is your love and your purpose, the chief aim of your heart, it is all you need in this life, although you never see more of him with the eye of reason your whole life long. Such a blind shot with the sharp dart of longing love will never miss its mark, which is God.²²

Moreover, Wolters concludes that most of *The Cloud of Unknowing* expounds and develops the following basic premise (supporting references from *The Cloud* have been substituted with quotations from the version edited by William Johnston [1973]):

At the very outset of the book, the original recipient (who has already embraced the religious life) is reminded that his whole life must be one of longing for God; he has to think only of God, all things else forgotten. This longing is fundamental and is expressed in prayer and love: “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. Centre all your attention and desire on him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart” (chap. 3). Yet this “naked intent” is no guarantee that God will reveal himself; it is but the necessary preliminary, for “if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud.” This intellectual darkness is the *cloud of unknowing*.

Yet such is God’s grace that the soul “is enabled to embrace him by love” (chap. 4). Our intellect, however, “is too small to comprehend God as he is in himself”. But not to our love: “by love he may be touched and embraced, never by thought” (chap. 6). Perhaps the most difficult of all the preliminary exercises is to put all thought, however edifying, into a “cloud of forgetting” (chap. 5). Nothing must be allowed to distract the soul’s attention to God, for “of course, it is laudable to reflect upon God’s kindness and to love and praise him for it; yet is it far better to let your mind rest in the awareness of him in his naked existence and to love and praise him for what he is in himself” (chap. 5).²³

Appendix B

The Cloud of Unknowing and Centring Prayer

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, according to Russell, “counsels his pupil to pray by focusing on one single word such as ‘God’ or ‘love’, suggesting that by repeating this word one’s heart can develop a love for God without the interference of our conscious rationality.”²⁴ This technique has been adapted by some modern theologians and some Trappist monks in the idea of *centring prayer*, “through which a single word becomes the entire prayer”.²⁵

Freeman also equates the 14th-century English treatise, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, with Christian meditation.²⁶ He states that the author of *The Cloud* teaches that the continuous recitation of a Christian word leads to peace beyond both distraction and the self-centred consciousness of the ego.²⁷

The Cloud of Unknowing states that “if you want to gather all your desire into one simple word that the mind can easily retain, choose a short word rather than a long one. A one-syllable word such as ‘God’ or ‘love’ is best. But choose one that is meaningful to you. Then fix it in your mind so that it will remain there come what may. This word will be your defence in conflict and in peace” (chap. 7).

Mascetti further describes centring prayer:

Centring Prayer is a method that was developed from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous mystical text from the fourteenth century, that prepares us to be in the presence of God, opening the door for the spark to be lit that is the flame of our individual contact with God. Centring Prayer is rooted in God’s life within us – by praying in this way we allow God to arise within us, to become manifest in everything we do, and to infuse our whole being. We become vessels for the divine. The theological basis of centring prayer is in the renewal of our intimacy with God. In ordinary life, Christians renew their bond with God in the sacraments . . . So it is with Centring Prayer: we open a possibility of God flowing into us every time we sit for our time of intimacy with Him.²⁸

Thomas Keating is a Cisterian monk and former abbot of Saint Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, and is the founder of the Centring Prayer movement, and these are his instructions for our daily sitting in contemplative prayer: Guidelines for Centring Prayer.

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently, introducing the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence for a couple of minutes.²⁹

From Centring Prayer, Russell understands how some modern writers see a connection between *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Eastern religion (such as in Zen Buddhism and the meditational practices of Hindu gurus).³⁰

Appendix C

The Christian Life as a Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection has been described as a guide-book for the journey to the spiritual Jerusalem (“contemplation in perfect love of God”). In the process, the believer’s soul is reformed to the image and likeness of God – first, only in faith; then in faith and in feeling.³¹

The following section, excerpted from *The Scale of Perfection*, is an example of the Christian life being likened to a pilgrimage:

A real pilgrim going to Jerusalem leaves his house and land, wife and children; he divests himself of all that he possesses in order to travel light and without encumbrances. Similarly, if you wish to be a spiritual pilgrim, you must divest yourself of all that you possess; that is, both of good deeds and bad, and leave them all behind you. Recognize your own poverty, so that you will not place any confidence in your own work; instead, always be desiring the grace of deeper love, and seeking the spiritual presence of Jesus. If you do this, you will be setting your heart wholly on reaching Jerusalem, and on nothing else. In other words, set your heart wholly on obtaining the love of Jesus and whatever spiritual vision of himself that he is willing to grant, for it is to this end alone that you have been created and redeemed; this is your beginning and your end, your joy and your bliss. Therefore, whatever you may possess, and however fruitful your activities, regard them all as worthless without the inward certainty and experience of this love. Keep this intention constantly in mind and hold to it firmly; it will sustain you among all the perils of your pilgrimage.³²

Endnotes

¹ *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling*, with a foreword by Huston Smith, edited with an introduction by William Johnston (London: Doubleday, 1973), 27.

² *Ibid.*, 27-28.

³ James T. Russell, *Spiritual Classics: The Thinking Person's Guide to Great Spiritual Books* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2009), 15; J. R. Root, "Cloud of Unknowing, The", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 273. Root states that "the blessing conferred on his readers, in the final paragraph, may indicate he was a priest."

⁴ Johnston, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 28. According to Johnston, the late fourteenth century is based on the fact that "the author seems to have known the work of Richard Rolle and since Walter Hilton seems to have known *him* . . . This is corroborated by his style, which, moreover, indicates that the treatises were written in the northeast Midlands."

⁵ Clifton Wolters, "The English Mystics", in *The Study of Spirituality*, eds. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainbright, and Edward Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1994), 333-334.

⁶ Root, "Cloud of Unknowing, The", 273.

⁷ Russell, *Spiritual Classics*, 15.

⁸ Wolters, "The English Mystics", 333. Wolters adds that "the message of Dionysius . . . is that God is so wonderful that it is better and safer to describe him in negative rather than in positive terms, because whatever is postulated of him will not be wholly true, for he, being God, by definition is so infinitely more."

⁹ Russell, *Spiritual Classics*, 16.

¹⁰ Root, "Cloud of Unknowing, The", 273.

¹¹ Bernard McGinn, "The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism", in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (London: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 147.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Wolters, "The English Mystics", 334; Website of Unknowing [Celtic, contemplative, emergent, and mystical spirituality, and assorted other topics], "Walter Hilton", <<http://anamchara.com/mystics/hilton/>> (December 6, 2010).

¹⁴ <http://anamchara.com/mystics/hilton/> *The Scale* appears to have been written in English although at some point it was translated into Latin.

¹⁵ Wolters, "The English Mystics", 334.

¹⁶ <http://anamchara.com/mystics/hilton/>

¹⁷ Catholic Encyclopedia, "Walter Hilton", <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07355a.htm>> (December 6, 2010).

¹⁸ Elizabeth G. Melillo, "Walter Hilton and his Scale of Perfection", <http://www.gloriana.nu/hilton.html> (December 6, 2010).

¹⁹ <http://anamchara.com/mystics/hilton/>; Wolters, "The English Mystics", 334. Wolters notes that Hilton "is commonly regarded as the theologian of the four [Richard Rolle, author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Julian of Norwich, and Walter Hilton]".

²⁰ Martin Thornton, "The Caroline Divines and the Cambridge Platonists", in *The Study of Spirituality*, eds. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainbright, and Edward Yarnold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 432. Thornton adds that *The Scale* "was reprinted five times between 1494 and 1679, the last three editions within twenty years."

²¹ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07355a.htm>; <http://anamchara.com/mystics/hilton/> Additionally, before the Protestant Reformation, *The Scale of Perfection* was widely read in Catholic Europe — a testimony to its value as a manual for spiritual development.

²² Wolters, "The English Mystics", 334. Wolters quotes from *Discernment of Stirrings*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 333. This section is adapted from the article by Wolters; Johnston, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

²⁴ Russell, *Spiritual Classics*, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Laurence Freeman, "Meditation", in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 649.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Manuela Dunn Mascetti, *Christian Mysticism*, with an introduction by Peter Roche de Coppens (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 175-176.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁰ Russell, *Spiritual Classics*, 17.

³¹ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07355a.htm>

³² Wolters, "The English Mystics", 335; *The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection*, Part 2, Chapter 3.

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