

THE NAKED INTENT

BY

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IN general the higher reaches of the spiritual life are characterised by a method in prayer of praying without a method. Human methods are human activities. In the passive type of prayer the activity is divine so that the method is God's method, the plan of which the soul can only guess. At the same time spiritual guides must give some indication as to the best way of co-operating in this divine method, and *The Cloud of Unknowing* as well as teaching the soul how to 'nought' itself in order to allow God to work freely, also suggests the type of human co-operation which is least likely to hinder the divine work. This may be called the method of prayer inculcated by *The Cloud*. It amounts to the reduction of all prayers to the most comprehensive and the least articulated. The long ex tempore monologues in which some people indulge while on their knees, a monologue which considers all the various attributes of God and his wonderful deeds and activities, has to be undertaken for the sake of instruction in faith. Such means are required to lead the soul before God's face; indeed it forms the core of the liturgy since the Canon of the Mass originated in an elaborate review of the great things God had done through his Son made man. But once drawn close to God and praying for God's sake or rather allowing him to 'pray' within the soul, there is no need for such elaboration. The mind gives up the struggle of trying to comprehend in words the incomprehensible. Prayer at this period therefore should be short and syllabic.

The Cloud speaks of *meaning* God, apparently as opposed to expressing in a sentence judgments about God.

When thou purposeth thee to this work, and feelest by grace that thou art called by God, lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love. And *mean* God that made thee, and bought thee, and that graciously hath called thee to thy degree: and receive none other thought of God. (c. 7, p. 26; italics mine).

In this way the soul rises above the limitations of human language and at the same time prepares itself for that manner of prayer which the author of the book describes as 'a naked intent directed unto God' (id). As this is the most important feature of the 'method without method' of *The Cloud* an analysis is called for to distinguish it from any false quietistic explanation. In such states of prayer it is not easy to determine the extent of the soul's activity. The state is

predominantly passive and yet to insist that it was wholly passive would be to run grave risks of hindering God's grace by falling into a serious error. Thus many spiritual writers require that the mind should rid itself of images and raise *itself* above 'understanding' as well as imagination in order to be united to this 'naked intent' with God. On the other hand the experience of many people, supported by such authorities as St Teresa, leads to the conclusion that the mind cannot strip itself of images and species in this way, but that this is something which can be done to the soul by God alone. It would certainly be dangerous to attempt any sort of 'mindless' prayer on one's own account; so that the second attitude by which the soul leaves the stripping process to God is nearer the truth as well as safer. But if we consider the teaching of *The Cloud* on this naked intent we shall find that the stripping of the mind of images and understanding should be taken in a wider context in which the soul is called upon to undertake a considerable work on its own part.

The naked intent is not to be understood as a special kind of mental gymnastics, for it is first of all a question of the will which is led on into the cloud of unknowing until it has a blind love of God in himself. It is firstly a question of developing what is often called by spiritual writers 'a holy indifference'. The love must be of God for himself irrespective of any pain it may cause the subject or any reward he might gain from God.

A *naked intent* I call it. Because in this work a perfect prentice asketh neither releasing of pain, nor increasing of reward, nor (shortly to say) nought but himself. Insomuch that he neither recketh nor regardeth whether he be in pain or in bliss, but only that his will be fulfilled whom he loveth. (c. 24, p. 58-9).

Following this guide the soul itself must attempt in some way to be detached indeed from 'the holiest creature that ever God made to share with him' (id.). Of course this blind love of God does not cancel out the second part of the evangelical commandment to love the neighbour as oneself, but it purifies it, in a sense, of all individual content. The 'worker' in this work will have no special regard to any individual man 'whether he be kin or stranger, friend or foe'. The love is so strong as to knock down all barriers, so that far from making a man indifferent to his neighbour, callous or remote, his divine love becomes undifferentiated because he loves *all* men.

For all men seem alike kin to him, and no man stranger. All men, he thinketh, be his friends and none his foes. (id.).

'Holy indifference' therefore must be taken primarily in the sense of 'undifferentiated' love and understanding. That is why attachments limit and prevent the work. From the supernatural height of blind love and naked intent attachments to one person rather than another

as well as separation of one aspect of God from another lessen the universality and wholeness of the soul's embrace of God in himself and of mankind in God. Natural affections for others and even the supernatural duties towards those who are closest to a man may vary in intensity and yet not interrupt the universality of this love. Such bonds are not broken by 'holy indifference'; God does not destroy what he has made good. (cf. c. 25).

But this aspect of 'indifferentiation' does not give an entire explanation of indifference, for in a later chapter the author makes clear what he means by the *cloud of forgetting*. The reader is encouraged to forget all other people and their deeds, in fact he is to push down beneath him every created thing and every created image, even of his own being and his own deeds. Everything else but God alone if it appear in mind or will is to be regarded with weariness. The perfect lover hates self and loathes all but God, because God is goodness and is truth, and once this divine beauty has been glimpsed all else must appear distasteful.

And therefore break down all knowing and feeling of all manner of creatures; but most busily of thyself. For on the knowing and feeling of thyself hangeth the knowing and feeling of all other creatures. (c. 43, p. 104).

This 'self' is the last barrier, the innermost garment as it were, which must be stripped away in order that the intent may be completely naked.

Thou shalt find, when thou hast forgotten all other creatures and all their works—yea! and also all thine own works—that there shall remain yet after, betwixt thee and thy God, a naked knowing and a feeling of thine own being. (id.).

This process is evidently active and to be undertaken strenuously by the subject himself in such a way as to endeavour to become entirely objective leaving if it were possible even subjective awareness behind.

But as we have already suggested such an activity taken by itself would be extremely dangerous and no one is advised even to consider such a purification without consulting a very experienced man of prayer. This 'naked intent' which may be regarded as the perfect example of a 'chaste love' of God can in fact be prepared for but not acquired. In the *Epistle of Privy Counsel* the author likens the 'work' to a sleep.

The wanton questions of the wild ghostly wits and all imaginative reasons be fast bound and utterly voided, so that the silly soul may softly sleep and rest in the lovely beholding of God as he is. (*Ep. Priv. Couns.* a. 6, p. 207).

In sleep the activity of the sleeper is reduced to the minimum and what he does he does unconsciously. But in order to induce sleep

a man must quieten a lively imagination or intellect. Sleep is prepared for rather than practised; so too for the naked intent.

The work, therefore, is essentially 'the work of only God, specially wrought in whatever soul he liketh' (c. 34); so that the soul can at best only co-operate in this process of removing all means which stand in the way of the End. As far as may be, decision as to what means lead most effectively to God must be left entirely on one side and God himself sought directly. A correspondent had written to the author of *The Cloud* for advice as to the best means of reaching God—should he fast or live alone, should he speak or hold his tongue. In the *Epistle of Discretion* the author replies that he is not to bother about such means. None of such things is God.

He may not be known by reason. He may not be gotten by thought, nor concluded by understanding; but he may be loved and chosen with the true lovely will of thine heart. . . . If God be thy love and thy meaning, the choice and the point of thine heart, it sufficeth to thee in this life (*Cell of Self Knowledge*, p. 107-8).

And he goes on to say that he should act as though there were no such means to come to God by, but only God himself. The work is itself in a certain sense God himself, for in God there is no distinction between Work and Worker and in the divine activity there is no means. God works by his creative will directly without having to use other things in order to attain his end. The soul must emulate this divine activity in co-operating with the effects of that activity in its very self. So unified has the soul become in its proximity to God himself that there ceases to be a distinction between the real capacity for the work and the work itself. It is as if a good eye with full power of sight were held open and darkness and obstacles removed so that its very capacity to see meant that it saw. This work is in a sense the end, God working.

The condition of this work is such that the presence thereof enableth a soul to have it and to feel it. And that ableness may no soul have without it. The ableness to this work is oned with the work itself; without separation, so that whoso feeleth this work is able thereto, and none else. (c. 34).

At the conclusion of this chapter he reaffirms the need to abandon all active means to God. Indeed 'all good means' hang upon this work. And as the devil, in contradiction to God, in order to tempt the soul and lead it into error, has to use means, one is safeguarded from all snares by this drastic stripping of all that is not God. *The Epistle of Prayer* repeats the same doctrine and explains 'without means' as 'without messenger of any thought in special causing that stirring' (*Cell*, p. 87).

Were this explanation of the 'naked intent' expressed in terms of

the mind alone it would suggest a presumptuous claim to the state of Beatific Vision in which all intellectual means between the soul and God are finally removed so that in place of the *verbum mentis*, the idea of God, the *Verbum Divinum*, second person of the Blessed Trinity, reigns. But it is fundamentally a question of the will which having stripped itself of all created things can leap ahead into the depths of divinity. As a consequence, however, the mind seems to get as near as anything could be on this earth to the state of Vision. For a better understanding of this we must turn to the *Epistle of Privy Counsel* where the author adopts a more metaphysical tone and uses a rather different type of imagery.

The work of keeping 'the mind's eye' on God is principally that of disclosing the being of self to the touch of the infinite Being of God. This is the healing touch of God who uses no means, but himself comes directly in touch with the soul.

Take good, gracious God as he is, plat and plain as a plaster, and lay it to thy sick self as thou art. . . . 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 knitted and oned in grace and in spirit to the precious Being of God in himself only as he is, without more. (*Ep. Priv. Couns.* c. 2, p. 186).

From the human point of view, therefore, the first step in this union of being with Being lies in undistinguished self-knowledge, or possibly merely self-awareness, 'the blind beholding of thy naked being'. A man must ignore all the qualities of his being, for these depend simply on his essential being—that he is; and by thus excluding all the wonderful and admirable variety of human experiences he will come to the subjective centre of things—'the first point and the prick of thy beholding, whatever it be, is thy naked being' (c. 3, p. 190). We find here what is very much like an application of the 'Cogito, ergo sum' to the way of reaching God, but by prayer rather than by philosophy. In all my experience the fundamental part is simply that I *am*—'the first of all thy fruits'—and it is upon this alone that I should look when approaching God. To think of what I have done, good or bad, to tot up the number of activities in which I am engaged, to review my friendships and contacts with others, all such things provide 'acts', realities, which are in themselves not God but which are determining and occupying my soul. If I am to touch being to Being I must forget all determinations and specifications and approach him as an infinite capacity, an empty space ready to be filled by the divine presence, a pure potency of a being ready to be qualified and determined by the infinite being of God. Those other realities will be there but if I do not reflect on them they will not provide a barrier to the direct presence of God. Thus I approach

God with my substance, with my naked being, in order that this being may be knitted to the Being of God.

When we come to consider the object from which all reality proceeds and which itself actuates the naked soul by a touch or contact, the same principle of indifferentiation applies. The qualities or attributes of God are one with himself, but if we consider them separately, each one on its own, the perfect and infinite Being of God becomes limited and qualified as far as our constricting human mind is concerned. 'Thou shalt have no more beholding to the qualities of the being of thyself' (c. 4, p. 193). For although in metaphysics philosophers have often been misled by identifying the most general idea of being with God himself, we are here dealing with the supra-rational approach to God beyond the reach of human concepts and in that most objective realm the Being of God is most general, unspecified, unqualified. The attributes of God are God himself, so that in considering anything about him one is always thrust back on the fact that his being comprises *all*. The *Epistle* itself makes this perfectly clear and we must be forgiven for quoting at length:

There is no name, nor feeling, nor beholding more, nor so much, according unto everlastingness (the which is God), as is that the which may be had, seen, and felt in the blind and the lovely beholding of this word *is*. For if thou say: 'Good' or 'Fair Lord' or 'Sweet', 'Merciful' or 'Righteous', 'Wise' or 'All-witting', 'Mighty' or 'All-mighty', 'Wit' or 'Wisdom', 'Might' or 'Strength', 'Love' or 'Charity', or what other such thing that thou say of God: all of it is hid and enstored in this little word *is*. For that same is to him only to be, that is all these for to be. And if thou put a hundred thousand such sweet words as be these: good, fair, and all these other, yet went thou not from this little word *is*. And if thou say them all, thou puttest not to it. And if thou say right none, thou takest not from it. (c. 4, p. 194).

In this IS of God we find united not only the spiritual teaching of *The Cloud* but also the theology of St Thomas's *Prima Pars* and the heart of the Scriptures too. God announced himself in the most proper and complete way when he told Moses his name 'I am who am', or 'He who is'. This proper name of God was recognised by the Jews when our Lord said suddenly, 'Before Abraham was, *I am*'; and they knew that he thus claimed to be identified in *Being* with God. St Thomas has an article in his question on the names of God in which he concludes that 'He who is' is the most proper of all God's names. It does not stop at any form or quality but goes straight to the very reality of God whose essence is his being. 'Our intellect', he says, 'cannot in this life know the essence of God itself, as it is in itself, and yet whatever mode is taken to determine our

idea of God falls short of the mode of what God is in himself. Therefore the less determined the names are, and the more absolute and common they are, the more properly are they applied to God'. (I. 13, 11).

And in seeking confirmation of this doctrine of *The Cloud* we turn also to St John of the Cross whose *Spiritual Cantic* describes the touches of God on the substance of the soul. These touches have a special effect on the understanding. 'This most subtle and delicate knowledge enters with marvellous sweetness and delight into the inmost substance of the soul, which is a far greater delight than any other. The reason is that substance of the understanding is given to it stripped of accidents and imaginary forms'. (stanzas XIV and XV, Peers, ii, 266). And he goes on to speak of the 'naked truths' which are thus manifested to the understanding, and of how the soul understands 'naked substance', all of which of course is taken from the same source as that of *The Cloud's* inspiration, namely the Dionysian teaching about the 'ray of darkness' which penetrates to the very marrow of a man's being yet without giving him the clarity of vision which is reserved for heaven. In heaven St Paul says that we shall know even as we are known, substance to substance in the clear light of vision. Now in the height of prayer the soul approaches as near as possible but always in darkness—'all that thou art as thou art unto him that is as he is'.

And so the capacity of the soul emptied, both by self and principally by God, of all other things created or limited is filled up, so to speak, with the being of God. St John of the Cross has a beautiful passage on the nature of the approach of being to Being. 'He (God) communicates himself after a manner most high and likewise most gentle. The voice is infinite, for, as we have said, it is God himself who communicates himself, speaking in the soul: but he limits himself by the capacity of each soul, uttering a voice of such strength as befits its limitations'. (loc. cit. Peers ii, 264).

The soul therefore which has reached temporarily, or perhaps more permanently, this sweet state of union must suit its prayers to this general perception of the whole being of God. Long discourses and such 'naming' of God would be out of place, and therefore the author of *The Cloud* often returns to the need for prayer to be by means of one word and one syllable, 'for the shorter the word the better it accordeth with the work of the spirit' (c. 7, p. 26). Just as sin was to be unspecified in the examination of conscience and simply presented in the general sense of guilt under the title of the 'lump of sin', so the whole of a man's positive prayer may be expressed by the word 'God' or 'Love'. *The Cloud* is careful to point out that the

prayers of the Church with all their diversity and multiplicity form the groundwork of all prayers; but those who are caught up into this work in their special prayers will include everything in the smallest compass. When a house catches fire, in the author's vivid metaphor, a man will not make a long rigmarole to explain what has happened, but will simply cry 'Fire' or 'Out'. The power of such a short syllable is far more effective than a long speech. 'So short prayer pierceth heaven'. (cf. cc. 37-38).

It is prayed with full spirit, in the height and in the depth, in the length and in the breadth of his spirit that prayeth it. (c. 38, p. 94).

And he thus encompasses according to his mode the length, breadth, height and depths of God. These single words are suited to the 'naked intent' of the soul. They cause the minimum of mediation between God and the soul so that many words do not interrupt the divine touch. But they must be 'secretly meant in the depths of the spirit'; they must be put forth 'in full spirit' like the word 'Fire' for the man horrified by the conflagration. Indeed

it is best when it is in pure spirit without special thought or any pronouncing of words; unless it be seldom, when for abundance of spirit it bursteth up into word. (c. 40, p. 99).

The author tells his reader not to study words, for this work is only reached by grace, not by study. God as he comes to touch the soul, substance to substance, will stir the soul so that from its abundance these short syllables will come forth. And yet as the entire character of the work is one of co-operation of the soul with God, often a single word like this will bring the soul to the threshold of the presence of the naked Being of God and so prepare the way for 'the naked intent'.

Lo! here may be words and little matter. Nevertheless, all this I have said to let thee know in which things thou shalt use the works of thy wits, and in which not; and how that God is with thee in one work, and how in another. (*Ep. Priv. Couns.* 10, p. 226).

A PRAYER BEFORE SAYING OFFICE

'Omnipotens et misericors Deus clementiam tuam suppliciter deprecor ut me famulum tuum N. . . tibi servire fideliter concedas et perseverentiam bonam et felicem consummationem mihi largire digneris, et hoc Psalterium quia in conspectu tuo cantavi ad salutem et ad remedium animae meae proficiat sempiternum. Amen'. (c. A.D. 1140).—By Eadwin, copyist of the famous *Psalterium triplex* (see Wanley, *Catalogus MSS. Septentrionalium*, 1704, pp. 268-9).