Demythologizing Metaphor in
the Cloud of Unknowing

The fact that the author of the Cloud of Unknowing at once criticizes and applies figurative language has produced a diversity of scholarly opinion on his attitude toward and treatment of such language. "In his rejection of conceptualization," says William Johnston, in the introduction to his 1973 edition of the work, the Cloud author "is as radical as any Zen Buddhist" (8–9). An important feature of this rejection, as Johnston summarizes, is that "all images must be buried beneath a cloud of forgetting" (9). J. A. Burrow, by contrast, in a 1977 article catalogues a sampling of what he calls the "homely," or 'physical,' or 'concrete' imagery of the Cloud, claiming that "metaphors abound throughout" (294). At the same time, he concedes that such imagery "occurs in practically all Middle English writings," so that "one may well wonder whether an English author of the period could possibly have avoided using it, even if he had wanted to" (294). Burrow concludes that "the author's deep concern to uphold the spiritual character of 'goostly thinges' serves also to guarantee the physical character of the 'bodely thinges'" (295). In his 1981 study The Middle English Mystics, Wolfgang Riehle more than once expresses surprise that the Cloud author, "despite his scepticism towards the use of metaphors in mysticism," still applies them with some apparent freedom (74, also 72, 79).

In theological terms, the Cloud author seems remarkably modern in his reservations about the use of metaphor with reference to God and spiritual experience. In his fifty-seventh chapter, for instance, he complains that many "young presumptuous ghostly disciples misunderstand this other word up" (77; 105).* These literalists, the author claims, when they either read, or hear read or spoken, how that men should lift up their hearts unto God; at once they stare in the stars as if they would be above the moon, and hearken if they shall hear any angels sing out of heaven. (77; 105)

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* Note on editions: Quotations from the Cloud of Unknowing are from McCann's conservative modernization. Page numbers for McCann's edition, followed by those for Hodgson's Middle English edition, are cited in the parentheses.
Such a materialist attitude toward the spiritual, the author believes, yields occasion for serious error:

Some of these men the devil will deceive full wonderfully. For he will send a manner of dews—angels' food they ween it—as it were coming out of the air, and softly and sweetly falling into their mouths; and therefore they have it in custom to sit gaping as though they would catch flies. (78;106)

This kind of error leads to unchristian attitudes, which in turn produce even further error:

Much vanity and falsehood is in their hearts, caused of their curious working. Insomuch, that oftentimes the devil feigneth quaint sounds in their ears, quaint lights and shining in their eyes, and wonderful smells in their noses; and all is but falsehood. And yet they ween not so... (78;105–106)

Reading this poignantly, and rather humorously, diatribe cannot but make the modern student of theology think of Rudolph Bultmann's classic (1941) essay "New Testament and Mythology," which opens: "the world picture of the New Testament is a mythical world picture. The world is a three-story structure, with earth in the middle, heaven above it, and hell below it" (1). Bultmann explains that myth represents "the powers that we think we experience as the ground and limit of our own action and passion... in such a way... as to bring them within the circle of human life, its affections, motives, and possibilities" (9). Mythologizing, by this definition, is exactly what the young tyros whom the Cloud author frowns upon are doing in referring to God as being literally above us. Richard Rolle, in speaking of a "fire of love" burning in his heart, is doing much the same, which is no doubt why the Cloud author writes disparagingly of such fires (75;102).

Although I don't mean to suggest that our fourteenth-century mystic would agree with our modernist theologian on all points concerning the treatment of metaphor in Scripture, the Cloud author states implicitly what Bultmann here affirms explicitly:

the motive for criticizing myth, that is, its objectifying representations, is present in myth itself, insofar as its real intention to talk about a transcendent power to which both we and the world are subject is hampered and obscured by the objectifying character of its assertions. (10)

Using the objectifying spatial metaphor "up" with reference to God, according to the Cloud author, prevents one from a true understanding of him. "Our work," he says, "should be ghostly, not bodily, nor on a bodily manner wrought" (78;106).

What the author is striving for, then, is a hermeneutic that will avoid the pitfalls of confusing the objectifying metaphor with the spiritual reality
behind it. This is essentially the goal which Bultmann states in his later (1952) essay, “On the Problem of Demythologizing”:

Demythologizing interpretation seeks through its criticism to bring out the real intention of the biblical writings. It seeks that we cannot talk about God or what transcends the world as it is “in itself,” because in doing so we would objectify God or the transcendent into an immanent, worldly phenomenon. (99)

According to this modern definition, demythologizing is precisely what the Cloud author is doing, although, of course, he never uses the term. He meticulously demonstrates his own method in a discussion of St. Martin and St. Stephen’s visions of Christ ‘up’ in heaven, and of Christ’s bodily ascension and the Holy Spirit’s descent. He explains:

Since it so was that Christ should ascend bodily, and thereafter send the Holy Ghost bodily, therefore it was more seemly that it was upwards and from above than either downwards and from beneath, behind, or before, on one side or on other. But else than for this seemliness, he needed never the more to have gone upwards than downwards; I mean for nearness of the way. For heaven ghostly is as near down as up, and up as down . . . . Insomuch, that whose had a true desire for to be at heaven, then that same time he were in heaven ghostly. (82–83,112)

While Bultmann’s main objective in demythologizing is to render New Testament theology more congruous with the modern world view, the Cloud author’s aim is twofold. First, as already noted, he wants to avoid the dangerous errors to which a literal view of a mythologized God will lead. Second, as not yet discussed, he believes that all mythologized conceptions of God constitute a crutch which the contemplative will use to attempt envisioning God in the mind. This attempt will prove a hindrance to any genuine knowing of God, since he is beyond all that can be mentally conceived. Therefore, by pulling away all metaphorical and mythological crutches, the author closes the novice in to the one way in which he can truly know God: “Let be this everywhere and this aught, in comparison of this nowhere and this nought. Reck thee never if thy wits cannot understand this nought, for surely I love it much the better” (91;122).

He restates this idea in the words of pseudo-Dionysius, from whom he draws much of his inspiration as an advocate of the via negativa: “The most godly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing” (93;125). Early in his treatise the author posits two features of God’s image in man: a knowing might and a loving might. He explains: “to the first, which is a knowing power [ME, ‘might’]; God . . . is evermore incomprehensible; but to the second, which is the loving power, he is, in every man diversely, all comprehensible to the full” (10;19).
The *Cloud* author, however, like Bultmann centuries later, encounters a critical problem in demythologizing his theology. Without mythologizing metaphor, what can one say about God? A negative, imageless theology may suffice in the hermit’s cell, but what happens when one must talk about God with a fellow human? Already, in the second chapter, we find the author resorting to a spate of anthropomorphic imagery surrounding God. The author counsels the prospective contemplative:

> And insomuch thou shouldst be more meek and loving to thy ghostly Spouse, in that he, that is the Almighty God, King of kings and Lord of lords, would meek himself so low unto thee, and, among all the flock of his sheep, so graciously would choose thee to be one of his specials, and then set thee in the place of pasture . . . (6–7;15)

One who has already read the author’s warnings against such mythologized conceptions of God might well attribute this passage to some other writer, particularly an affective mystic such as Rolle. In the same chapter the author calls God “a jealous lover” and warns the neophyte: “keep thou the windows and the door from flies and enemies assailing” (7;15).

Nowhere else in the work can we find such a flurry of metaphor. It seems as though the author is purposely referring to God and Christian experience in mythologizing language which the novice can grasp, in order to bring him up to more rarefied heights where he can throw away his crutches. After all, the entire book is based on the premise that there are four stages of Christian living: common, special, singular, and perfect. Only in “step[ping] towards the state and degree of living that is perfect” (6;14) is the disciple required to push all created things under “a cloud of forgetting” and to think on nothing but the “naked being” of God (13–14, 39–40, 50;24–25, 58–59, 70).

This requirement of the final stage brings us to an even stickier problem, however. Not only does the author discourage the use of metaphor for contemplating or discussing God, but he encourages forgetting about all things under God. This forgetting would preclude the employment of metaphor for any purpose, since its vehicle is almost always material. The author seems to realize this difficulty when he chooses the cloud as a metaphor for both unknowing and forgetting, since a cloud is amorphous, gaseous, and therefore as close to the immaterial as any natural phenomenon in the author’s experience. He uses other subtle physical metaphors in the same way. Light and darkness recur. For instance, one of the most memorable sentences in the book reads: “This darkness and this cloud, howsoever thou dost, is betwixt thee and thy God, and hindereth thee, so that thou mayest neither see him clearly by light of understanding in thy reason, nor feel him in sweetness of love in thine affection” (8;17). In the very next chapter (4),

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the author uses the atom (ME, 'athomus'), the smallest measurement of both
time and of matter, to indicate the infinitesimal fineness of God's working in
the soul (17). As a minimal unit of measure and a rarefied element, the atom,
like the cloud, light, and darkness, serves as a quasi-spiritual metaphor that
sids the author in staying away from the danger zone of the grossly physical.

At this point, we think that we see what the author is about. He has con-
descended to the neophyte by using anthropomorphic metaphor, and is now
raising him to new, more spiritual heights by using rarefied imagery. We do
find in the pages of the Cloud a general avoidance of highly developed con-
crete metaphor, which renders it different in flavor from, for instance, Julian
of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love. In fact, we are not confronted with
a single developed image of Christ's passion, so common in the devotional
and mystical literature of the time. Moreover, he admonishes: "beware in
this work, and travail not in thy wits nor in thy imagination in nowise"
(12;23). Here, I think we could safely say, the author means "imagination" in
the very literal sense of "making images."

It comes as a surprise, therefore, a few pages later, to encounter such an
exhortation as "lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love"
(16;28), which employs both anatomical and spatial metaphor. It also seems
out of place for the author to state, "For Christ is our head, and we be the
limbs" (41;60), or to talk about "the hand of Almighty God" (42;61); though
all of these are biblical anthropomorphisms. Finally, in the thirty-second
chapter, we stumble upon a spate of metaphor second in density only to that
in chapter two:

And this meekness meriteth to have God himself mightily descending, to
venge thee of thine enemies, so as to take thee up and cherishingly dry thy
ghostly eyes, as the father doth his child that is on the point to perish under the
mouths of wild swine or mad biting bears. (47;67)

By now it appears that although the author in principle eschews the use
of physical metaphor in talking about God and spiritual experience, he finds
that it cannot be avoided altogether, and therefore uses it as sparingly and
judiciously as possible. As we can see from the last example cited, his appli-
cation of it is as fine as that of any of the affective mystics who were his con-
temporaries. But at the same time, it is plain that he purposefully avoids any
human or animal imagery that could be labeled lurid or manipulative, such
as the common gorily detailed descriptions of Christ's passion intended to
move the reader to devotion. In addition to simply using metaphor as spar-
ingly and judiciously as possible, he also takes pains to neutralize its poten-
tially harmful effects. He makes clear, for instance, early in his description
of the cloud of unknowing, that this metaphor is not to be taken literally:

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And ween not, because I call it a darkness or a cloud, that, it is any cloud con-
gealed of the vapours that fly in the air, or any darkness such as is in thine
house on nights, when thy candle is out. For such a darkness and such a cloud
mayest thou imagine with curiosity of wit. ... Let be such falsehoods; I mean
not thus. For when I say darkness, I mean a lacking of knowing; as all thing
that thou knowest not, or hast forgotten, is dark to thee; for thou seest it not
with thy ghostly eye. And for this reason it is called, not a cloud of the air, but a
cloud of unknown; which is betwixt thee and thy God. (12-13;23)

Elsewhere, the author stresses the importance of construing his physical
and spatial metaphors in spiritual terms. After speaking figuratively of the
heart, he clarifies: “I mean not in thy bodily heart, but in thy ghostly heart,
the which is thy will.” He then admonishes: “And beware that thou conceive
not bodily that which is said ghostly. For truly I tell thee, that the bodily and
fleshly conceits of them that have curious and imaginative wits be cause of
much error” (69;94).

The Cloud author knows that to dismiss the application of metaphor
altogether, even if it were possible, would be to dismiss Scripture, which
makes ample use of it. Therefore, although he prefers to avoid figurative lan-
guage, on account of its distracting qualities and its proneness to miscon-
strual, in discussing contemplation of the bare essence of God, he goes so far
as to present an apology for its manifestation in the Bible, in spiritual reve-
lutions, and in miracles:

All the revelations that ever saw any man here in bodily likeness in this life,
they have ghostly meanings. And I trow that if they unto whom they were
showed, or we for whom they were showed, had been so ghostly, or could have
conceived their meanings ghostly, that then they had never been showed bod-
ily. And therefore let us pick off the rough bark, and feed us with the sweet
kernel. (79;107)

He advocates that we honor not just the kernel of spiritual meaning, but its
husk and the tree that bears it. For to do otherwise would be to abrogate
Scripture and other established revelations, which would open the flood-
gates to heresy: “For we shall not so feed us on the fruit that we shall despise
the tree; nor so drink that we shall break the cup when we have drunken”
(79;107).

Metaphor is not to be disdained, then, but it is to be transcended. In the
earlier stages of the Christian life the concepts of God and spiritual experi-
ence must all undergo a continuous process of demythologizing if one is to
avoid serious error and make spiritual progress. At the highest stage of the
via negativa, however, dwelling on God and spiritual experience in meta-
phorical terms is a crutch and a positive distraction that must be avoided as
much as possible. Interestingly, our mystic’s contemplative purposes have
led him to a considerably more radical approach than that of our modernist. For Bultmann writes that the "criticism of the biblical writings" implicit in demythologizing "lies not in eliminating mythological statements but in interpreting them: it is not a process of subtraction but a hermeneutical method" (99). The Cloud author, on the other hand, prefers to eliminate mythologizing language; but where he cannot, he is careful not to let it occlude his spiritual meaning. We sense that, had it been achievable, he would have written in some angelic or pre-lapsarian tongue that would have communicated not mere spiritual concepts, but experience itself.

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Works Cited


