The Role of Passivity in the Prayer of The Cloud of Unknowing

The fourteenth-century Cloud author's concept of passivity as applied to the contemplative prayer described in his works is a fine distinction between, on the one hand, divinely inspired human effort and, on the other, the direct action of God in the soul, unimpeded by human activity of any sort. Perhaps it is the subtlety of the relationship between the respective functions of the human and the divine in this definition of passivity that has led two twentieth-century scholars, Ira Progoff and Robert Llewelyn, to misinterpret the nature of the prayer depicted in the Cloud author's works. For while Progoff overemphasizes man's part in contemplative prayer, virtually eliminating God's role altogether, Llewelyn underestimates man's function to the extent of presuming upon God's. And particularly interesting is the fact that both of these misreadings result from disregard of important contextual considerations as comparisons are drawn between the prayer of the Cloud author's corpus and methods of Zen meditation. That is, both critics compromise aspects of the Cloud author's teaching in order to discover similarities between it and principles of Zen Buddhism.

Turning to the views of our first critic, we find that psychologist Ira Progoff emphasizes the active, self-willed aspects of the type of prayer described by the Cloud author, at the expense of the insistence of the Cloud author himself that this prayer is "a gift of [God's] grace" (Cloud, Ch. 39). While Progoff does point out that in the Cloud author's view of contemplation "grace and the spontaneous love of God are more important than any of the physical conditions of life" (20), Progoff does not apply the concepts of divine grace and christological love directly to his own explication of the Cloud author's prayer. Instead, by dismissing the significance of the sacraments to this form of prayer—"the individual who wishes to reach God as He is in Himself must overcome his attachment to all... [conventionally religious] beliefs, even the most hallowed. The [Cloud] author specifically extends this to the Sacraments" (26)—Progoff shows his disregard for what constitutes, according to the Cloud author, the source of the soul's supernatural life of grace, and the only means through which union with God can be actualized. Furthermore, in undercutting the sacramental foundation of the
Cloud author’s prayer, Progoff precludes the centrality of Christ’s sacrificial act of love on the Cross to this form of prayer, and reduces Christian contemplation to a self-willed psychological process that he likens to Zen meditation. In the introduction to his translation of The Cloud of Unknowing into modern English, Progoff describes contemplative prayer as depicted by the Cloud author strictly in terms of human effort:

The Contemplative was a person who undertook, either within a monastery or in secular living, to control his thoughts and feelings by means of special disciplines in order to become capable of a closer relationship with God. Far from being passive, then, the contemplative life is decidedly active, for it involves a most ambitious spiritual enterprise. (21)

Later, Progoff portrays union with God as an experience which “is psychologically exceedingly difficult to achieve; but . . . is nonetheless held to be attainable by man in principle with practice as The Cloud of Unknowing describes” (25). Yet Progoff’s emphasis on self-control, discipline and practice in prayer seems closer to principles of Zen meditation than to the prayer of love of which the Cloud author speaks. In a comparison of prayer in the Buddhist and Christian traditions, Ichiro Okumura writes, “In Buddhism, ‘prayer as practice’ leading to enlightenment by self-training is valued; in Christianity, prayer as the association of love based on faith in God or Christ is of importance” (19). Although Progoff is right in his analysis of the prayer of The Cloud of Unknowing to emphasize the need for the contemplative to try to dispose himself to the possibility of God’s working within his soul, what he fails to recognize is the Cloud author’s insistence that even the desire for contemplative prayer can only occur if God gives the gift of grace. The Cloud author explains that

Contemplative prayer is God’s gift, wholly gratuitous. No one can earn it. It is in the nature of this gift that one who receives it receives also the aptitude for it. No one can have the aptitude without the gift itself. The aptitude for this work is one with the work: they are identical. . . . For without God’s grace a person would be so completely insensitive to the reality of contemplative prayer that he would be unable to desire or long for it. (Cloud, Ch. 34)

As this passage indicates, a person cannot, in the Cloud author’s view, engage in contemplative prayer, or even desire to engage in it, except through God’s grace. Therefore, the soul’s union with God through love, which is the pinnacle of contemplative prayer, cannot be attained merely through the self-determined “practice” of certain “disciplines,” no matter how severe. For it is wholly dependent on the good will of God.
Furthermore, while Progoff underscores the "practice" of "special disciplines" as necessary to attain union with God, the Cloud author stresses the fact "that techniques and methods are ultimately useless for awakening contemplative love" (Cloud, Ch. 34), because God "needs no techniques himself nor the assistance of [the contemplative's]" (Cloud, Ch. 34). Granted, Progoff rightly points out that the Cloud author "never recommends that a given technique be taken over as a whole and applied in a fixed form, but rather that it be tested by the individual and adapted to meet the needs of his special case" (25). Nevertheless, he wrongly assumes that one of the Cloud author's "special" aims is to teach his disciple how to manipulate "various techniques" in order to achieve the extraordinary state of consciousness required for union with God (27). In the Cloud author's opinion, only God can prepare man for union with himself. Thus, the fourteenth-century spiritual director declares:

I am certain, without doubt or fear of error, that Almighty God himself, independently of all techniques, must always be the chief worker in contemplation. It is he who must always awaken this gift in you by his grace. And what you (and others like you) must do is make yourselves completely receptive, consenting and suffering his divine action in the depths of your spirit. (Privy Counsel, Ch. 11)

The Cloud author characterizes this passivity as a form of activity when he says: "the passive consent and endurance you bring to this work is really a distinctively active attitude; for by the singleness of your desire ever reaching up to your Lord, you continually open yourself to his action" (Privy Counsel, Ch. 11). But whereas Progoff contends that the "activity" of passive contemplative prayer lies in the "practice" of "special disciplines" as a means to union with God, the Cloud author eschews the use of any prayer method which does not acknowledge the soul's utter dependence on God's love, grace, and will, and instead advocates the effort of "suffering" God's work within the soul and continuously raising oneself up to God in loving desire.

Characteristically, the Cloud author's teaching here is firmly rooted in the traditional theology of the church. As John Clark points out, the Cloud author's theology of grace is solidly based on that of St. Thomas Aquinas (284–85). The following passage in The Book of Privy Counseling follows closely St. Thomas's teaching on cooperant and operant grace:

In every other good work [besides contemplation] man acts in partnership with God, using his natural wit and knowledge to the best advantage. [Through cooperant grace] God is fully active here also, but in a different capacity, as it were. Here he consents to the act and assists man through secondary means: the light of Scripture, reliable counsel, and the dictates of com-
mon sense. . . . But in all that touches contemplation, even the loftiest human wisdom must be rejected. For here God alone is the chief worker [through operant grace], and he alone takes the initiative, while man consents and suffers his divine action. (Ch. 17)

Discussing the *Cloud* author’s teaching on grace in the light of St. Thomas’s theology, Clark writes:

Thomas Aquinas had distinguished between two manners in the operation of grace: between “co-operant” grace, and “operant” grace. While all grace is the unmerited gift of God, there is a progressive spontaneity in our response to grace as the obstacles in our will to its free operation are removed. . . . The *Cloud* author distinguishes on the basis of Thomas’s teaching between the movement of our will towards God “with means” (by “co-operant grace”) and “without means” (by “operant grace”). The first entails the formation of distinct, mental concepts, through the exercise of meditation or through images impressed upon the mind by God; in the second, meditation as a deliberate exercise has given place to a simpler and more direct receptiveness to God’s inspiration. We are made humble by God, as we are shown that though we may by grace dispose ourselves to receive the gift of the “work” that the *Cloud* describes—the “work” which opens our wills to God’s service—yet it remains an utterly unmerited gift. (284–85)

According to the *Cloud* author, one of the ways in which God shows that contemplative prayer is an unmerited gift of grace is by bestowing it on people who seem not to deserve it. The *Cloud* author writes:

I believe . . . that often our Lord deliberately chooses to work in those who have been habitual sinners rather than in those who, by comparison, have never grieved him at all. Yes, he seems to do this very often. For I think he wants us to realize that he is all-merciful and almighty, and that he is perfectly free to work as he pleases, and when he pleases. . . . For this grace is a gift, and it is not given for innocence nor withheld for sin. (*Cloud*, Ch. 34)

But it is vitally important that we not misunderstand the *Cloud* author’s words here. While he teaches that the gift of contemplative grace may not be withheld for sin, he does not teach that for this reason the sinner may continue in the way of sin. Not only does the *Cloud* author assume that the person who engages in contemplative prayer has already availed himself of the sacrament of Confession (i.e. *Cloud*, Chs. 28, 75), but that in most cases he has prepared for this special prayer through years of introspective activity and active meditation on the life of Christ and the word of God (i.e. *Cloud*, Ch. 35; *Privy Counsel*, Ch. 5). Never, therefore, does the *Cloud* author condone sinfulness because God in his mercy grants the gift of contemplative prayer to sinners. To the contrary, this medieval spiritual director expects
nothing less than the most vigilant of efforts on the part of the contemplative in his personal battle against sin. Chapters Nine through Eleven of *The Cloud of Unknowing* give the contemplative detailed directions on how to analyze his thoughts in order to determine whether or not such thoughts are sinful, and whether or not those that are sinful are serious or venial. In this painstaking and comprehensive analysis, the *Cloud* author determines the degree of sinfulness of a particular type of thought with special consideration of the contemplative vocation of the individual. Thus, while underscoring the fact that the gift of contemplative prayer is entirely unmerited, the *Cloud* author also suggests that the contemplative should, out of gratitude to God for his special gift of grace, strive to an even greater degree than the active Christian not to displease God through sin (*Cloud*, Ch. 2).

As we have seen, in disregarding the fact that the *Cloud* author views contemplative prayer as an unmerited gift of grace from God, Progoff emphasizes the effort required of the contemplative to the near exclusion of God's role in this form of prayer, which he likens to Zen meditation. Robert Llewelyn, on the other hand, in his attempt to synthesize the divergent approaches of the *Cloud* author and twentieth-century practitioners of Zen meditation, underestimates the importance of the contemplative's work, that is "the unrelenting struggle to banish the countless distracting thoughts that plague" one's mind in order to prepare oneself for God's action in the soul (*Cloud*, Ch. 26). From the outset, Llewelyn expresses his difficulty with the language of the *Cloud* author's teaching on distractions (64–65), and acknowledges his personal preference for the following instructions of his Zen director on this point—"Let your mind settle down of its own accord; do not try to think; and do not try not to think" (67). Nevertheless, Llewelyn also claims that the medieval author's advice to his disciple to "cower down before [the distractions] like some cringing captive ... [and] surrender yourself to God" (73) indicates an attitude of indifference to distracting thoughts during contemplative prayer that resembles the Zen position. Elaborating further, Llewelyn states: "I think the [Cloud author's] illustration means that we are to accept the inevitable; we are to be content to let our thoughts be present as long as may be; we are not to struggle, but rather to abandon ourselves to God" (73). Yet in view of Llewelyn's own opinion that "involuntary distractions ... as agents of healing" ought to be welcomed in prayer (62), one wonders to what extent the critic's reading here is actually based on the *Cloud* author's teaching. For how are we to reconcile Llewelyn's interpretation with the *Cloud* author's insistence that the contemplative battle unremittingly against distractions until he can do no other than yield himself up to God (*Cloud*, Ch. 32)? The degree of urgency required in such an act of abandonment clearly distinguishes the *Cloud*.
author's approach from that of Llewelyn, who claims that the Zen practi-
tioner is instructed not to suppress unintentional thoughts which pass
through his mind during meditation.

If one assumes, however, that the Cloud author does indeed advocate the
facile acceptance of distractions during contemplative prayer, one may also
find it difficult to differentiate his teaching from that of seventeenth-century
Quietists. Michael de Molinos, the central propagator of Quietist doctrine,
taught all who came to him that the ideal of the mystical life was to attain com-
plete silence and inaction in the interior powers, and to wait for the divine
influence to come upon the soul. Later, he spread the more dangerous teaching
that the would-be contemplative should establish himself in a state of passiv-
ity, making no attempt to repel evil thoughts or desires. When such a resolve of
passivity had been taken, no action could be imputed as evil, however appar-
ently sinful. (Knowles 117)

Likewise, if one were to suppose that the Cloud author's alleged indifference
with respect to distractions extended to other aspects of his teaching on con-
templative prayer, one might imagine similarities between the fourteenth-
century writer's doctrines and those of seventeenth-century Semiquietists,
who held that contemplation "resulted in a kind of annihilation of all personal
interest or thought for one's salvation" (Knowles 117). For as we see in the case
of Zen Buddhism, the attitude of indifference proper to the Zen treatment of
distractions constitutes one specific application of a broad doctrine best
summed up in the words of Zen master Rinzai:4 "So long as the man intent
on doing the [Zen] practices still has any aims at all, he becomes bound again
by those aims, and in the end cannot attain what is in fact easily attainable. In
my own view there is nothing at all to be sought" (Zen Reader 188).

A close examination of the Cloud author's teaching, however, precludes
comparison between it and any of the aforementioned doctrines. In stark
contrast to Quietism, which assumes that a complete lack of effort on the
part of the contemplative signifies the "state of passivity" in contemplative
prayer, the Cloud author emphasizes the arduousness of contemplative
"work," as we see in the following passages of The Cloud of Unknowing:

I tell you frankly that anyone who really desires to be a contemplative will
know the pain of arduous toil (unless God should intervene with special grace);
he will feel keenly the cost of constant effort until he is long accustomed to this
work. . . . Why is this work so toilsome? The labor, of course, is in the unrelent-
ing struggle to banish the countless distracting thoughts that plague our minds
and to restrain them beneath the cloud of forgetting. . . . This is the suffering. All
the struggle is on man's side in the effort he must make to prepare himself for
God's action, which is the awakening of love and which he alone can do. (Ch. 26)
And in direct opposition to Semiquietist and Zen views that forbid approaching prayer or meditation with specific goals in mind, whether these be attaining salvation or repressing distracting thoughts, the Cloud author teaches that the central aim of contemplative prayer is an all-consuming desire to be united with God himself in love. All of the Cloud author’s instructions to his disciple with regard to stripping oneself of every thought and desire for what is not God himself are offered with the hope that through these forms of self-denial, the gift of love bestowed by God upon the contemplative might be fanned from a tiny spark into a soul-consuming fire. To this end, the Cloud author directs his disciple as follows: “Leave your thought quite naked, your affection uninvolved, and your self simply as you are, so that grace may touch and nourish you with the experimental knowledge of God as he really is. In this life, this experience will always remain dark and partial so that your longing desire for him be ever newly enkindled” (Privy Counsel, Ch. 1). Obviously, the aim of the Cloud author’s teaching here is not to destroy desire, but rather to withdraw it from any object except God himself. If directed toward many objects, the degree of desire toward each one of the many is, necessarily, less than the degree of many desires united toward one object. The prayer of love described by the Cloud author attempts to focus all the desires of the contemplative solely upon God himself. And as the following passage illustrates, the Cloud author exalts personal, contemplative desire for God as the highest of human activities:

I tell you this, one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do. And you are more blessed to experience the interior affection of this love within the darkness of the cloud of unknowing than to contemplate the angels and saints or to hear the mirth and melody of their heavenly festival. . . . [Therefore,] let God awaken your longing and draw you to himself in this cloud while you strive with the help of his grace to forget everything else. (Cloud, Ch. 9)

Clearly, careful investigation of the Cloud author’s doctrine in all of the above cases indicates that no logical basis exists for comparison of the fourteenth-century writer’s teaching on passivity in contemplative prayer with Quietist, Semiquietist or Zen Buddhist concepts of passivity.

Returning, once again, to our two twentieth-century critics, we discover that their respective interpretations of contemplative prayer both betray an attachment to things that are ancillary to God himself. For while Progoff regards the practice of techniques as indispensable to contemplative experience, Llewelyn is reluctant to dispense entirely with distractions that occur
during contemplation. Consequently, both of these commentators' positions conflict with one of the Cloud author's most basic teachings, which states that a person must sacrifice attachment to everything but God himself during contemplative prayer (Cloud, Ch. 5). This sort of radical detachment, according to the Cloud author, leaves one open to receive God's grace, which may urge the contemplative on to active battle with distractions, or require him passively to suffer God's direct action in his soul. Either way, ultimately God, not man, adjusts the finely tuned relationship between human and divine activity that defines passivity as applied to the prayer of the Cloud author's corpus.

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Notes

1. William Johnston's translation of the Cloud will be used throughout.

2. For example, see Chapters Twenty-eight and Seventy-five in the Cloud for the author's teaching on the necessity of sacramental confession for contemplative prayer. In addition, in Chapters Four of both the Cloud and Privy Counsel, the Cloud author bases his entire doctrine on Christ's redemptive grace, made available to man through the sacraments of the church.

3. While Llewelyn concedes that not all "distractive images or thoughts... are to be seen as friends" (71), he does not explain how the contemplative, who is advised not to reason discursively during contemplation, is to distinguish between distractions that are agents of healing, and those that are not.

4. A prominent Zen master of the T'ang dynasty (618–905) who established a school of Zen which "bears his name" (Suzuki, The Awakening of Zen 62).

Works Cited


