



Turning to the Mystics

The Cloud of Unknowing

The Cloud of Unknowing: Session 1
with James Finley

- James Finley: Greetings I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to The Mystics. Greetings everyone, and welcome to our time here together turning for guidance, to the teachings of the Christian mystic, the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing.
- James Finley: In our first introductory session with Kirsten, we saw how in the first chapter, the author of The Cloud, marks out the territory that we'll be exploring here, as four stages, or four phases of living the Christian life. Each of these phases, is the quality, or the degree, of our experience and response to God's presence in our life. So in the common way of life, our faith is seen as a source of moral guidance. It's seen as a feeling of belonging to a community of people, or perhaps to one's own lineage, or one's own heritage of one's own faith tradition. It's also a community devoted to service to the world, and so on.
- James Finley: And the special way of life is where God becomes personally real to you, or to follow Christ in all things becomes personal to you. It's heartfelt, this life of devotional sincerity, and you seek to live it with your friends. As you seek to gather with like-minded people, who's also been anteriorly awakened through Bible study, or prayer, or service, and so on. Now, all this efficacious under holiness, is how we walk our walk through our passage through time, and in the midst of God on our way to God. The singular way of life we said, it's where God, through the cloud, really starts to focus because he's saying that this person who's coming to him for spiritual direction, he feels that he discerns that she's come to this singular place. And likewise, he also has in mind, all of us. He's clearly writing this with a contemplative spiritual direction of discerning, as we listen to what the author is saying, to the extent that we have come to this singular way.
- James Finley: And what is the singular way? Is in the last paragraph of the foreword, he speaks a blind stirring of love, that we're going along living our life in prayer and life. And there's a stirring of God's spirit within us, not stirring in our reflective ego illumined by faith, it's a consolation. We're not stirring in our finite mind as an insight into God as revealed in scripture and so on, but it's innermost. It's a stirring in the hidden center of yourself and reverberations of that stirring, you're moved by it. In a moment of unexplainable communion with God, it might be very intense. He's very often extremely subtle, very subtle, but there is this taste, this sense of oneness.
- James Finley: And he's saying that what the singular way of life is, it isn't just that these fleeting moments, that they're stirring, that they illumine and energize the special way of life. They give vibrancy to your devotional sincerity and to your life, but within your heart, is a growing desire to abide in the depths of feeding [inaudible 00:03:56] glimpse, you long to live an habituated of this stirring, which is perpetually going on within you all the time. But you long to abide in conscious communion with that stirring of God's love with you, and for you forever and ever like this.
- James Finley: And he said, it isn't just that you... It's true, you don't feel this stirring, as he said, as experienced contemplatives do. And we assume you're the author of The Cloud. We sense that he is such an experienced contemplative. Now, as there are people who have come to this habituated state of the divinity of every breath and heartbeat. And sensing that's true in this person, we turn to this person for guidance. So that what happened to them, through the grace of God might happen to us.

- James Finley: See, how do we... Help me with this? And so, the author of *The Cloud* then says, that the thing is to realize at the singular state then, is to realize you've come to this place of a certain longing, that you don't understand, for a oneness with God, you don't understand, but you know, it's real because you've fleetingly experienced it. And so how can you then consummate? How can I consummate, you consummate, the desire to consummate that longing, by abiding in that union and underlying habitual state as we go through our day? And this is the guidance, this is what you are to do. This is chapter three.
- James Finley: 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, center all your attention and desire on him, and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart. Do all in your power to forget everything else, keeping your thoughts and desires free from involvement with any of God's creatures, or their affairs, or their in general, or in particular. Perhaps this will seem like an irresponsible attitude, but I tell you, let them all be, pay no attention to them.
- James Finley: What's he saying here really? He's saying that in our day by day consciousness, of course, we're concerned in the day by day realities of our life. And, and while we should, how can I be an awake, engaged, loving, responsible, vulnerable, present person through my day, and respond to God in the midst of that? And he's assuming we've done our homework in that, we're continuing to do that. He said, but now in terms of consummating, this sweet unexplainable desire, it's the willingness to gently move beyond that in your intention, and move beyond it by giving yourself to God in love for God's sake, as God is in himself and not for the gifts of God, for St. Bernard of Clairvaux disinterested love. We're seeking to give ourself in love to this infinite love of God, which is infinitely giving itself to us. And so in this reciprocity of love, it's circling back around and we're giving ourself to God, the gift of ourself to God for God's sake.
- James Finley: And that's the work. Essentially that's it, that's the practice. And he says that it's in this intention, that we can learn to stabilize in a more habituated state, this union with God we long for is to be found in this infidelity to this state, this subtle state, this way to pray, be in the world. And then he says in the second paragraph, he says, "Diligently persevere until you feel joy in it."
- James Finley: That is sitting in this simplicity of the self donating love, without regard for loving God for God's gift to you, but just loving God for God's sake. For in the beginning, it is usual to feel nothing, but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, a cloud of unknowing. You'll seem to know nothing, and feel nothing, except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being. And so what you're doing, is because there is this longing, but you're still habitually established in your internalized thoughts about God, your internalized reflections upon God... But you're not rejecting any of it, but you're just quietly carrying forward into this love for God beyond all your thoughts about God.
- James Finley: Likewise, you're also still accustomed to your consolations of God. The felt sense of God's presence. You're not rejecting that, but rather now, you're anteriorly engaged in this mysterious process of moving beyond that, and giving yourself to the infinite love of God, for God's sake and not for the sake of God's circling back to console you, these finite feelings of love and your reflective ego illumined by faith. But what he says here, as you sit in this obscurity, the whole first paragraph is an encouraging word about what's so extraordinary

about this simple way to pray.

James Finley: And I'd like to reflect with you on this. He says, "What I'm describing here, that is a pure intention of giving yourself to God, and love for God's sake. What I'm describing here is the contemplative work of the spirit." And then he's going to start describing the blessings that come from this simple act. And here's what I want to reflect on, here to appreciate this. When I went to the monastery, I would say one of the graces for me there was, I was introduced to, and I was immersed in, the spiritual wisdom of a contemplative Christianity, in concert with the contemplative traditions of all the world's great religions.

James Finley: And these mystics that we're sitting with receiving guidance, they're infused with that spiritual worldview. And so, one of the benefits from sitting in the teachings of this mystic, is that we can step into the richness of that spiritual worldview. And I'd like to reflect on this for you, poetically to get a sense, and then to walk through this paragraph, because it's this worldview I'm about to share, that creates the context for the meaning of this prayer. So here's the vision, here's the worldview. God's revealed to us, that in God we live and move, and have our being, the scripture says. And so we're living our lives in the vast interiority of God, in whom we subsist our presence, subsist like lights subsists in flame. Here we are.

James Finley: Now, The Cloud of Unknowing, is inviting us to consider, what happens to us when we die? That's what really I think is the key question here. He's saying that understood from a standpoint of faith, that when we die, we don't go anywhere when we die.

James Finley: What happens when we die? When we pass through the veil of death, we cross over out of the veiled ways of experiencing and understanding God mediated to us through faith. It has mediated to us that this infinite presence of God, is granted to us, and awakens our finite minds, illumined by faith to of the infinite mystery of God. So when we hear God loves us, the power of the spirit who dwells in our hearts, we're empowered to know that God really does love us, with an obscure certainty in our heart, primitive, inner assurance, as Gabriel Marcel says. And likewise, this love of God moves and stirs, in our finite capacity for emotions for affect. We feel in a sense in the consolations, the infinite presence of God in our finite love, that stirs reverberates with that presence, and so on.

James Finley: So when we die, we don't go anywhere, but rather, we cross over into unmediated, infinite union with God. That is, we cross over into loving God, with God's own love for God, which is the holy spirit. And we cross over into knowing God, with God's own knowledge of God, which is Christ. And we cross over into being God, as much as God is God, in our eternal nothingness without God. That is, we are not God. We do not become God, but in the order of grace and love, the infinite generosity of God, is God being God given away to us completely, as fully as it is to God and given to us an eternity in a full light of glory as our destiny in blessedness.

James Finley: So seeing in this way, then it isn't just that we're here living in the vast anteriority of God, but all the saints are here with us. One with us and the anteriority of God. It's a non spatial communion of saints. All the angels are here. All the saints are here

with us. All our loved ones that have crossed over from these mediated oneness, and unmediated oneness, they're here with us. We're interwoven with them, they're interwoven with us. And there is this oneness, this reciprocity between our mediated ways of experiencing God on this earth, illumined by faith, and this unmediated full light of glory.

James Finley: Remember what the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says, about the phases of Christian life. He says the first three begin and end on this earth. That is, on this earth, the common way, that the special way, and the singular way, namely this desire, which we're now speaking of and grounded in this prayer, they begin and they end here on this earth.

James Finley: But the perfect way begins here, but it goes on forever. In other words, even though you're still here on earth in time and space, you're just a human being. In the simplicity and sincerity of your heart, there's a boundary crossing, and you're already beginning to... It's the gate of heaven you're already passing through into the perfect way. Be perfect even as your heavenly father is perfect. Be infinite, even as God is infinite. Be boundary-less, even as God is boundary-less, this is our destiny. So that, even though we're still here, the celestial eternal destiny is already mysteriously unfolding in our heart, in the quiet mystery and simplicity of this prayer.

James Finley: It is in this context then, that *The Cloud of Unknowing*, we find the meaning for these words that he's going to share with us. Now, in other words, he says, "It is true, you need to be very patient with this, because as you start out with this, we tend to feel nothing but a darkness about our mind.", and so on. But he's saying, "Understand something, that even though you don't realize it yet, realize what's happening to you, realize the divine dimensions of what's happening to you." And I would like to go through this. I think this also, I feel for me, we don't see the dead, for the same reason we don't see God, because it's hard to see past the closed horizon, what our finite eyes can see, what our finite mind can grasp, and so on.

James Finley: But in deep meditative consciousness, that is in states of sustained attentiveness, infused with love. We begin in very subtle, but real ways to sense this inner penetration of time and eternity. The oneness of the saints and the angels and God, and the concreteness of sitting in our own living room, of listening to these words, and me speaking these words like this. And so now he is giving witness to this sense of things. What I'm describing here is a contemplative work of the spirit that is sitting in this act of love, moving past your consideration, thoughts and love, giving yourself in love. What I'm describing here is the contemplative work of the spirit, is this which gives God the greatest delight. Why? Because even though you're still on earth in time, you're already tasting your eternal destiny in God. That's why. See, it's a foreshadowing of destiny, intimately unfolding, and being realized in your heart in a very obscure, subtle, delicate, but real and deep way. For when you fix your love on him, for getting all else, the saints and angels rejoice, and hasten to assist you in every way.

James Finley: That is to say, there's this image here... Is when we sit this way, the angels and saints turn and look at you, like someone while still on earth, is loving God for God's sake,

which is the essence of heaven, of destiny. There's a heavenly rush hour, like they're circling around you, fanning you, encouraging you to just keep loving this gift of the assistance of saints and angels, helping us in the work and our interconnectedness. Your fellow men, excuse the sex, your fellow men and women, your fellow human beings, are marvelously enriched by this work of yours, even though you do not fully understand how. Out of all the helpful things you can do for others, and should do for others, as best you can day by day, in terms of service or ministry, or helping those you can, as best you can, all of that.

- James Finley: Knowing that when you give yourself to God in this way, that act of self donating love permeates out, and helps everyone throughout the whole world, in ways we don't understand. It's like the mystery of Christ, crucified on the cross, that the love radiating out from that timeless love, transforms the world to this day. There's a quote I gave in the reflections on Thomas Merton, where he has insomnia. He's lying there in the middle of the night and he's reflecting on it in his journal, he said, "And suddenly the bed becomes an altar. And in a distant city, somewhere, someone is suddenly able to pray." He says, "Perhaps the people whose lives we will touch the most deeply, are people we will not meet until after we are dead." So it isn't just that our life is interwoven with the life of the blessed, and the angels, and the saints, and God. But our lives are interwoven with all of humanity. We're all woven into each other in the love of God. And this unseen ministry of fidelity to prayer, mysteriously touches the world, even though we don't understand how.
- James Finley: The souls in purgatory are touched, for their suffering is eased by the effects of this work. What is purgatory? What is this intuition of purgatory? The prayers for the faithful departed. And what does that mean? I think there's an analogous insight here in Buddhism and Hinduism to reincarnation. The intuition is this, let's say in the way we're looking at life right now, is that God exhales us onto the earthly plane. This infinite love exhales us onto the earth plane for a very short time, basically to learn how to love. And then in God's good time, God inhales and draws us back into the love, the circularity of homecoming like this.
- James Finley: And during this path of love, the [inaudible 00:22:05] or the purification, is you're purified by the habits of the mind and heart that do violence, or compromised love. We're learning from love, how to be ever more faithful and surrendered over to, and one with love. Love for our body, the gift of our mind for the present moment for this person, this situation, the sun moving across the sky, that we would be liberated from all that hinders us from seeing God loving us concretely in all these things.
- James Finley: And we're being moved to live lovingly in the midst of all these things, but it's not easy. We're trauma dramatically bonded to these compromises. And so we do love's work. Now, the question is this then, is it possible that this purifying process does not end with biological death? But is it possible, that being purified, learning to die of love until there's nothing left of you but love, that process of being released from the hindrances to that, might continue on after biological death? And therefore, this love when we love God, it crosses over and touches those, and it eases, their work of love in their interconnectedness through grace, of a process of liberation.
- James Finley: And of course, your spirit is purified and strengthened by this contemplative work more than any others put together. You go to the bookstore, or library, there's a lot of self-help books. A lot of them are very good too, by the way, of accessing inner resources, applying

them to your daily life, to be more present, more effective, more, et cetera. It's good. A lot of psychology is self-help. You want to do yourself a huge favor? Love God for God's sake. When you love God for God's sake, you're actualizing your infinite potential for your homeland in this love like this. So that in prayer, in this sweet communion, it'll radiate out and permeate down into every aspect of your day. The author of *The Cloud's* going to say, when you're engaging in the work, what kind of moderation should we use?

James Finley: He said, "None at all." But all throughout the day, you should always be at it playfully. It permeates, and habituated sensitivities to how you respond, and face, and work through what the day has asked you to work through. Yet, for all of this, for all these blessings, when God's grace arouses you to enthusiasm, it becomes the lightest sort of work there is. And one most willingly done without his grace. However, it is very difficult and almost, I should say quite impossible. People say this often, maybe years over, they picked up *The Cloud*, and it didn't make any sense to them, and they pick it up now and it rings true. And so we're here to do God's will, and God's will is discerned in the residences of our intentions. And so if we sit this way, but it doesn't make us as contrived, or doesn't fit, it's not your way yet.

James Finley: The goal here is holiness, and holiness is to do God's will, and give yourself to that. But if it is your way, you'll know it, because it does ring true to you. But here's the point that even though it rings true, it's not easy. Why? Because, we're still entangled in habituated patterns of identified with our internalized ideas about God, that no idea of God is God, every idea of God is infinitely less than God. But even so, there is reverberations of the truth of God in those ideas. And so now we're trying to move beyond the ideas of God, into God, beyond all ideas of God, but we're still bound to those. And we're trying to practice a mystical sobriety here, not being addicted to thoughts of God. Likewise, the same has to do with love. We're moving beyond the consolations of God's love.

James Finley: Not that we're not grateful for those, our hearts strangely warmed, and so on. We're leaning beyond that, because no finite consolation of God is the infinite love of God, but we're still bound up with that. We're just human beings. And so we need to be courageously patient, and understand, just keep leaning into it day, by day, by day, by day, trusting that little by little in God's good time, this habituated state begins to become clearer and clearer. Learn to be at home in this darkness. Why? Because what you're looking for is hidden in it, but what is the darkness? The darkness is what you're thinking. Self can't grasp, because the only thing you're thinking self can grasp is more thoughts about God. And you're moving beyond your thinking self in all that it thinks. You're moving beyond your feeling self in all that it feels, you're remembering self in all that it remembers. All this will return back full circle as the divinity of your thinking self, the divinity of your desiring self, and so on.

James Finley: It all goes around, comes around, but for now the midst of this strange process, this path. For if in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself. It must be within this darkness and in this cloud. But if you strive to fix your love on him for getting all else, which is the work of contemplation emerging you to begin, I'm confident that God and his goodness will bring you to a deep experience of himself, and I would say too.

James Finley: So far, as you're touched by the tonal quality of the language of these sessions on the mystics, your own heart bears witness, that you're already being drawn into this way and that God has begun this work, and will so bring it to completion. And so with that, then let's end in

meditation. At the end of each of these meditations for this session, at the end of the prayer, I'm going to end with author The Cloud of Unknowing, pray for us. And I'm also going to say Julian of Norwich, pray for us, because she's the other 14th century English mystic we'll be turning to next. So instead of Theresa Avila, or John of the Cross, we'll be moving now into the author of The Cloud, and Julian.

James Finley: So I'll invite you to sit straight, and fold your hands and bow. Repeat after me. Be still to know that I am God. Be still to know I am. Be still to know. Be still. Be...

James Finley: Then bow. Our father who art in heaven, hallowed to be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory now and forever. Amen. Mary mother of contemplatives. Pray for us. The author of The Cloud of Unknowing, pray for us. Julian of knowledge, pray for us. Blessings, until next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics. A podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. So if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org, or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.